

FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S PROPHETIC VISION AND MORAL IMAGINATION

PROPHETIC VISION AND MORAL IMAGINATION
IN
FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT

A literary artist who has professed her religious understanding of reality provides an interesting challenge of interpretation. To what degree can the artist's religious views be considered relevant to the work of art, and how can the art be interpreted religiously without sacrificing its creative and artistic merits? While much of literary criticism seeks to distinguish the author (and the author's personal views) from his or her work, Flannery O'Connor's sacramental vision of reality is so embedded in her art that a separation between her religious understanding and her fiction leads to a misunderstanding of both. Instead of radically separating the artist's views from the artist's work, I have developed an interpretation of O'Connor that seeks to represent both her religious view of reality and her artistic exploration into the nature of reality through her fiction. This kind of analysis has two significant effects: it provides a corrective to many of the reductionistic accounts of the meaning and direction of O'Connor's religious vision, especially as it relates to her art; and it suggests an alternative approach to moral reflection through the medium of literature, whereby the concrete, embodied experiences of the characters illumine the nature of moral questions and choices.

This thesis establishes, through a careful consideration of the prose writings of O'Connor, the inherent connection between her theology and her art. The intellectual tradition that influenced O'Connor's understanding of art and theology, from her reading of Thomas Aquinas and Jacques Maritain, serves to clarify the orientation of her creative

art. O'Connor's theological artistry is most evident in her fiction, and my interpretation focuses on an exegesis of three of her major fictional works. The primary aim of this thesis is to elucidate O'Connor's sacramental vision and show how it is embodied in the fiction. Her prophetic vision, religious and artistic, is directed towards the drawing together of the physical and the spiritual, the concrete sensible world and the mysterious unseen reality that is eternally present.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- CW*** *Collected Works*. New York: Library of America, 1988.
- CS*** *The Complete Stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971.
- HB*** *The Habit of Being*. Sally Fitzgerald, Ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979.
- MM*** *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, Eds. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969.
- VBA*** *The Violent Bear It Away*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960.
- WB*** *Wise Blood*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1962.

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INTRODUCTION

Flannery O'Connor described herself as a prophetic novelist and understood her religious vision as tied to her artistic work. But what is the substance, or better, the *direction* of her prophetic art? Is its prophetic aspect primarily moral, or is it related to a yet more fundamental vision of reality, which then yields certain moral implications? When O'Connor defines prophecy as "seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus...seeing far things close up," (*MM* 44), she affirms the inherent *connection* between visible and invisible reality, suggesting that the prophetic eye will discern this connection with a careful observation of both "near things" (what is physical and sensible) and "far things" (what is spiritual and intangible) (*MM* 44), and will understand their meaning in relation to one another. O'Connor's prophetic vision, religious and artistic, is directed towards the drawing together of the physical and the spiritual, the concrete sensible world and the mysterious unseen reality that is eternally present. The principal religious question that animates O'Connor's art is "how can the novelist be true to time and eternity both?" (*MM* 177). The responsibility of the religious literary artist, according to O'Connor, is to write without denying the reality of either "time" or "eternity" and to acknowledge their meaningful relation in human life.

For O'Connor to raise the question of *how* one can be true to both time and

eternity--as a novelist and as a human being--is to intimate that this is not easily done.

Indeed, O'Connor's religious and artistic inclinations are thus directed because she understands that the Manichean separation of spirit and matter is also a problematic condition of the modern spirit (*MM* 68). The impulse to separate physical and spiritual reality is a problem she perceives both in fictional art and the religious imagination, and in response, she focuses her attention on writing fiction that is concrete, yet which also points towards the experience of mystery. This concern leads her to consider various tensions, in particular, the tension between the Catholic artist's vision and that of the church; O'Connor insists on the freedom of the artist to see and interpret reality as she experiences it, but she also admits to the Catholic artist's obligation towards the church's teaching about that same reality. What needs to be addressed, argues O'Connor, is the fact that the tension exists *because* the religious artist is always free to look at and observe reality for him or herself, and further, that the goal is not the removal of the tension:

"When the Catholic novelist closes his 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). The obvious problem with such a deference to the "eyes of the Church" is that the artist sacrifices concrete reality as it is known and seen through experience, in favour of a doctrinally formed vision that is--although not perhaps in itself abstract--to some extent abstracted from the artist's own experience. O'Connor's concern is not to dissolve this tension between what the church sees and what the artist sees, but rather, to understand the nature of the Catholic artist's responsibility to be aware of both

poles within the tension. O'Connor knows that "it would be foolish to say there is no conflict between these two set of eyes," and more to the point, she warns that this conflict "cannot be settled beforehand by theory or fiat or faith" (*MM* 180). The fact that the *eyes* are central to O'Connor's discussion of this suggests that the real task of the prophetic artist is to achieve and communicate a wholeness of vision, rather than to determine which side in the conflict is correct or more appropriate. This can only be done through the artist's willingness to look at what is there to see--and further, to what is not seen.

In O'Connor's view, to "resolve" the tension too easily is to do what has been done in the past, namely, to deny the reality of concrete experience in the service of spiritual ideals, or conversely, to ignore spiritual reality for the sake of being true to what is tangible and concrete. O'Connor's prophetic interest in seeing both the seen and unseen realms as they exist--in tension--together entails her attempt to explore the nature of the conflict between, and convergence of, physical and spiritual reality. According to O'Connor, this conflict/convergence is undermined in "the sorry religious novel," where "the writer supposes that because of his belief, he is somehow dispensed from the obligation to penetrate concrete reality" (*MM* 163).¹ The problem tends to be perpetuated in the interpretation of religious fiction, especially by religious interpreters, since "every

¹ O'Connor says further, identifying this approach as specifically Manichean: "He will think that the eyes of the Church or of the Bible or of his particular theology have already done the seeing for him, and that his business is to rearrange this essential vision into satisfying patterns, getting himself as little dirty in the process as possible. His feeling about this may have been made more definite by one of those Manichean-type theologies which sees the natural world as unworthy of penetration" (*MM* 163).

given circumstance of the writer is ignored except his Faith. No one taking part in these discussions seems to remember that the eye sees what it has been given to see by concrete circumstances, and the imagination reproduces what, by some related gift, it is able to make live" (*MM* 195). O'Connor describes the problem of faith understood as an "idea" disconnected from a humanly embodied vision, and her various accounts of her prophetic role clearly seek to counter this particular kind of "spiritualized" religiosity. She says that the prophetic vision is one that sees the spiritual through the physical, something that applies both to her fiction and her theological orientation: "the real novelist...knows that he cannot approach the infinite directly, that he must penetrate the natural human world as it is. The more sacramental his theology, the more encouragement he will get from it to do just that" (*MM* 163).

With these words, O'Connor identifies the essential link between her understanding of fiction and her sacramental theology. She calls fiction an "incarnational art," because it "operates through the senses" (*MM* 91). In calling it thus, she also points to the connection between the Incarnation of Christ and the work of the literary artist. Here it is important to stress that for her the nature of the connection is not primarily moral or doctrinal; rather, it has to do with the possibility of spiritual mystery being known and experienced in the flesh. She makes a direct reference to the Catholic church in this regard, and suggests that at its heart, this possibility is also its concern: "The Church has always been mindful of the relation between spirit and flesh; this has shown up in her definitions of the double nature of Christ..." (*HB* 365-6).

O'Connor defines her Catholic vision as sacramental, and she maintains that this is what gives her fiction depth: "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 to going to write fiction of any depth" (*MM* 152). What she means here is not simply that the "depth" of her fiction is provided by religious content; her comment is specifically related to the "sacramental view"--centred on the Incarnation of Christ--which holds the physical and the spiritual together. O'Connor is referring here to a properly *sacramental* Catholicism, as opposed to some of its distorted expressions, which resemble Manicheanism.² That this sacramentalism was part of her artistic impulse also is evidenced in her numerous references to Joseph Conrad and his articulation of the inherent connection between the visible and the invisible: "Conrad said that his aim as a fiction writer was to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe...It means that he subjected himself at all times to the limitations that reality imposed, but that reality for him was not simply coextensive with the visible. He was interested in rendering justice to the visible universe because it suggested an invisible one" (*MM* 80). O'Connor's fiction and essays demonstrate clearly her conviction that the storyteller's art is necessarily devoted to rendering such justice to the visible universe, and being true to time and eternity both.

Where O'Connor tends most often to be misunderstood as a Catholic artist is in her

² "If the average Catholic reader could be tracked down through the swamps of letters-to-the-editor and other places where he momentarily reveals himself, he would be found to be more of a Manichean than the Church permits. By separating nature and grace as much as possible, he has reduced his conception of the supernatural to a pious cliché..." (*MM* 147).

sacramental theology and its relation to her fiction. The primary aim of this thesis is to elucidate O'Connor's sacramental vision and show how it is embodied in her fiction. I argue that, as a prophetic artist, she is attempting to draw together the various separations--including and especially spirit and matter--that have impoverished both religious and artistic expression. This will involve a detailed exegesis of her prose writing and her fiction, in order to show how these two elements of her work provide evidence of the dialogue between her theological reflection and her art.

In Chapter One I will consider several of her essays collected in *Mystery and Manners*, and in particular, her formulations about art drawn from the aesthetic/theological teachings of writers like Jacques Maritain and Thomas Aquinas. This analysis will facilitate a better understanding of various modern reductions of reason, art and morality that O'Connor sought to correct in her writing, and will indicate how her theology and art were interconnected. This chapter will also include an examination of O'Connor's account of prophetic art, which will indicate how the more philosophical ideas expressed in her essays can be seen in conjunction with the biblically charged fictional works.

Chapter One will be followed by three chapters, each of which is devoted to the analysis of a fictional work: *Wise Blood*, *The Violent Bear it Away*, and the short story, "Revelation." The central theme that connects the representative fictional works in my analysis is the struggle engendered by human resistance to the divine, and correlatively, the connection between the physical and the spiritual in human existence. The exploration of

this theme in the fiction will have its basis in Chapter One, in that the resistance is usually rooted in reductive and misappropriated understandings of reason, the separation of nature from grace, and the separation of moral judgement from vision. Each of the main characters in the above fictional works resist God as though God were wholly outside of or external to themselves, and thus what they also resist is the reality of a connection to God *within* themselves and others. All of the main characters analyzed in the three fictional texts exhibit two levels of this resistance: first, the resistance to their particular religious "calling," and secondly and more profoundly, their resistance to understanding properly this "calling" in relation to God and to themselves.

While the human resistance to God is a unifying theme in these texts, the experience itself takes many forms, and is anything but formulaic; it becomes obvious through each of these fictional works that the response and the resistance to God is experienced in different ways, specific to the life of each character. In *Wise Blood*, the subject of Chapter Two, Hazel Motes, although coming from a religious family and a line of preachers, wants to resist the vocation of preaching especially because he rejects his family's severe religious life. Yet, in order effectively to renounce his religious past, he appropriates the life of a preacher to preach his own "Church without Christ." He resists the "calling" to be a preacher, but his natural ability and familiarity with its gestures and formulations force him to "preach" his resistance to religion. What he resists is the possibility of an unseen, spiritual reality--Hazel Motes limits human existence to the material realm.

Francis Tarwater in *The Violent Bear it Away*, the subject of Chapter Three, is "raised up" to be a prophet by his great uncle, and yet it is a call he violently resists. In fact, he does not resist *being* a prophet so much as he resists being *called* to be a prophet. The dramatic action centres on his one task as prophet, namely, to baptize an idiot child, his cousin Bishop. Tarwater resists on two levels: first, he does not want to accept any prophesied claim or "call" put upon him, whether it is by his uncle or God, and second, *if* Tarwater chooses to be a prophet, *he* wants to determine the nature of his prophetic vocation. As a prophet, Tarwater wants to be free of the incarnate world, preferring instead a disembodied spiritual experience that requires no communion with other human beings, especially not an idiot-child awaiting his baptism. To make good his refusal, Tarwater drowns, and yet at the same time inadvertently baptizes, Bishop. Like Motes, he does not escape his "calling," and in fact, it is with this forced encounter with Bishop that Tarwater begins to experience the embodied reality of human will, in himself and in others.

For Ruby Turpin in "Revelation," the subject of Chapter Four, the "calling," although religious, is not to a particular religious vocation; it is a call of judgement. Ruby perceives the indictment that she is a "wart hog from hell" to be a divine judgement. But Ruby resists the divine judgement in its negative assumption about her spiritual condition, even though her own religious orientation is motivated by external, hierarchical judgements of others. Ruby separates her righteousness from God's righteousness and ultimately demands God's justification of her judgement. In this, God resists Ruby, and the eventual revelation of the story comes when Ruby must purge or empty herself of her

own opinion of her righteousness, in order to be raised up in the ascent to God.

These three characters are led to face their calling as it pertains to the present orientation of their lives, but also to see themselves as human beings in relation (or not) to God. My investigations of the three fictional works will be undertaken in light of the theoretical questions that have been discussed in Chapter One, with the expectation that O'Connor's prophetic vision--to see what is distant and hidden beneath the surface of things--will emerge from within her fictional landscape. In my conclusion I will draw these analyses together with a view to suggesting that finally the progression and direction of O'Connor's writing is a movement towards a deeper understanding of love, and to reflecting on how this might afford us some insight into the sacramental orientation of her theological and artistic vision.

CHAPTER ONE

Theological Artistry: *Mystery and Manners*

"God is infinitely more lovable than art"

-Jacques Maritain

i) Religion and the Artist

Mystery and Manners, the collection of Flannery O'Connor's posthumously published essays and lectures, is often neglected as an interpretive guide for understanding her fiction. While it is a favourite source for memorable quotes, it has rarely been granted a thorough interpretation or analysis. These essays are used by scholars primarily to establish O'Connor's religious orientation, and they are often referenced in the service of proving a particular religious point in the fiction. It is clear that the theological concerns in O'Connor's thought, expressed in the essays, are explicitly linked and revealed through her art. The question remains how best to determine and clarify the nature of the relation. Simply put, to call O'Connor a theological artist is to suggest that the theological foundations of her thought can be ascertained through a careful study of her prose essays, and that her religious thought can be understood in conversation with her fictional art. The general dissatisfaction with this use of O'Connor's essays, on the part of scholars who are uninterested in her religious orientation, is rooted in the assumption that her stories can be interpreted and analyzed without the aid of her explicitly religious commentary. Often what these scholars find objectionable are religious interpretations of O'Connor's

work that use her essays as a religious template to determine or finalize the meaning of her fiction. While she does in her essays refer specifically to the religious meaning of certain gestures or actions within her stories, many of her comments about art and fiction generally can be read separately from her own artistic work. This tendency to emphasize the independent worth of her essays as theological commentary, in addition to the growing suspicion of authorial intention in literary theory, has led to the assumption that O'Connor's philosophical and theological reflections are not necessarily pertinent to an interpretation of her writing.¹ However, it seems possible, in my view, to affirm the connection between O'Connor's theological and artistic formulations--as they are theoretically addressed in the essays--and her fictional art. The conversation that I propose between O'Connor's essays and her fiction avoids the problem of denying the

¹ See Frederick Asals, "The Limits of Explanation," in *Critical Essays on Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Melvin Friedman and Beverly Lyon Clark (Boston: G.K. Hall and Company, 1985), 49-53. Asals emphasizes O'Connor's lack of formal theory in these essays to suggest that the inconsistencies in *Mystery and Manners* (of which he gives one rather undeveloped example) should not be held against O'Connor, but that more importantly, they should not be used to interpret the fiction. Clearly, there have been interpreters who have used O'Connor's comments and explanations quite unquestioningly and without discrimination, but Asals' near rejection of the significance of O'Connor's theoretical formulations about art, morality and religion is overly dismissive. The more general problem here is the separation between theory, as Asals understands it, and the fiction. While O'Connor makes some comments about her lack of *literary* theoretical training, her work is not devoid of theoretical insights. Asals limits theory in several ways, but most strikingly by identifying it as an activity of "the pure intellect, wrapped away in abstraction" (49). The equation of the intellect with abstraction is an issue that requires further elaboration in relation to O'Connor's thought, and will be discussed in section (iii) of this chapter.

inherent religious meaning in her fiction, but also avoids the suggestion that the religious ideas of the essays serve only as a theological template for the art.

In the discussion and interpretation of literature, and this could be extended to other artistic creations, it appears that the single greatest temptation facing literary critics and readers alike is the reduction of a fictional work, or even the author's consciousness, to the level of a "school," or ideology. While it is evident that a certain amount of critical apparatus is necessary for the interpretation of literary texts, and that some categorizations aid understanding, when the theory takes on a life of its own and becomes the object of interpretation more than the art itself, we limit or even risk losing our access to the meaning of the artistic work. Nowhere is this risk more apparent than in the interpretation of fiction writers who profess to be religious thinkers. Indeed, the added dimension of a religious claim often demands a more imperious theory on the part of critics, to separate the writer from his or her craft so as not to confuse the literary worth with the author's personal religious convictions.² However, it is nonetheless the case that the scholarship on

² Louis D. Rubin Jr., in his article "Flannery O'Connor's Company of Southerners: or, 'The Artificial Nigger' Read as Fiction Rather Than Theology" in *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, vol. 6 (1977): 47-71, argues, as the title of his article indicates, that the emphasis in the scholarship on O'Connor's theological views has interfered with the literary critical interpretations of her fiction. His position, therefore, is to interpret "O'Connor as a Southern writer rather than as a theologian." Rubin suggests that "[w]hat we need is criticism that will explore the complexity of the work, and not merely to seek to use it to make theological observations" (71). Although I do not accept Rubin's radical distinction between O'Connor's theological and literary concerns, his argument offers a valid criticism of some of the moralistic theological interpretations of O'Connor's work, wherein it is assumed that the moral or religious meaning can simply be "extracted" from the fiction using O'Connor's theological prose formulations.

O'Connor's writing is concerned centrally with the issue of her religious faith. Robert Golden, in the preface to his bibliographic reference guide on O'Connor, argues that the paramount issue in O'Connor scholarship is religion, and specifically, "the relation between O'Connor's stated religious intent and the realization of that intent within the fiction."³ Golden notes that this issue of the relation between O'Connor's religious views and her fiction has much to do with the publication of her prose essays: "[s]ince O'Connor, through her numerous essays and lectures on her fiction and on fiction in general, made her conscious intent probably as clear as any writer ever has, the issue is clear-cut and formidable."⁴ However, despite Golden's suggestion that the issue is "clear-cut," there has been considerable diversity in the interpretation of the relation between the essays and the fiction.

Golden notes this diversity in his summation of the four main schools of thought in O'Connor criticism on this particular issue. The fact that these four schools maintain different positions on the nature of the relation between O'Connor's religious intent and her fictional works means that there is no obvious agreement as to how O'Connor's theoretical formulations on fiction--including her own--pertain to her fictional writings. Yet, Sura Rath notes in his introduction to *New Perspectives* that in the field of O'Connor scholarship "very little critical work has been done on O'Connor's letters, some of which

³ See Robert E. Golden and Mary Sullivan, eds., *Flannery O'Connor and Caroline Gordon: A Reference Guide* (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall and Company, 1977), 5.

⁴ Golden, *A Reference Guide*, p. 5.

are brilliant essays in aesthetics and literary criticism; the same is true of her essays and occasional prose."⁵ If the foremost issue in O'Connor scholarship is the relation between O'Connor's "stated religious intent" and the realization of that intent within the fiction, how is it that "very little critical work has been done" on the essays/lectures and letters of O'Connor, whose theoretical discussions of theology and art afford us some of the clearest indications of her "religious intent?" Robert Golden gives a precise account of the four schools, but he does not indicate how these various schools of critics discuss the relation between the essays and the fiction, or the degree to which the theoretical ideas in the essays are analyzed and interpreted in their work on O'Connor.

Golden's categories--which other critics have appropriated and used for their own purposes⁶--are as follows: 1) O'Connor's religious intent is realized in the fiction, and her religious vision is true to human life; these critics praise her religious humanism (and her

⁵ Sura Rath, "Introduction," in *Flannery O'Connor: New Perspectives*, eds., Sura Rath and Mary Neff Shaw (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), p. 11.

⁶ See John R. May, "The Methodological Limits of Flannery O'Connor's Critics," *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 15 (1986): 16-28; and Marshall Bruce Gentry, *Flannery O'Connor's Religion of the Grotesque* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 3. Gentry modifies significantly Golden's categories, and in particular, their order of description. He makes his point by framing the four categories with the positions that deny the religious significance of O'Connor's thought for the fiction, mentioning in between them only briefly and without discussion, the two schools that suggest that religiously "her intent does manifest itself in the fiction." Gentry makes his own position clear by arguing that "the first of the four schools to appear denies the realization of theological intent," and that "a recent, thoughtful argument that 'nothing' in the works 'compels a theological reading' is by Carol Shloss." He concludes by saying that "the fourth school questions whether O'Connor's intent is actually religious."

attack on secularism); 2) The religious intent is realized in the fiction, but the vision is considered to be negative and anti-humanistic; 3) The religious intent has some relevance to the fiction; however, it is questioned whether or not this intent is actually realized in the work; for instance, John Hawkes suggests that O'Connor's religious vision was inherently demonic⁷; and finally, 4) The religious intent is denied completely; the interpretation of her work is situated instead within categories such as the "southern gothic."⁸

Within the borders of the four possibilities we can perceive, depending on the inclination of the critic, that either O'Connor's fiction works or it does not, in varying degrees, measured always in relation to the validity or worth of her religious intentions. The judgments of whether the religious intent is "realized" or not within the fiction appear to be secondary to the evaluative assumptions about the nature of that religious intent. The first and second school both accept that the religious intent is realized in the fiction, but the defining characteristic of each school is the appraisal of that religious intent. The third school questions the realization of the religious intent in the fiction by rejecting the validity of O'Connor's stated religious intent. The fourth school dismisses any possible connection between O'Connor's religious intent and the fiction simply because it rejects her religious intent.

The first problem with these four "schools," as Golden and others have named

⁷ John Hawkes, "Flannery O'Connor's Devil," *Sewanee Review* 70 (Summer 1962): 395-407.

⁸ Golden, *A Reference Guide*, p. 5-6.

them, is that, on principle, the artist's religious vision is categorically separated from the artistic creation. The religious intent is something which is "realized" in, or applied to, the fiction, rather than integral to the creative process itself. Viewed separately from the artistic creation, any religious or theological language may be reduced to static doctrinal formulations and its relevance determined solely by its ability to assimilate itself, unobtrusively, to the fiction.⁹ The second and more pressing problem is that the ordering of these schools suggests that the discussion of the relation between O'Connor's religious intent and her fiction tends to be centred primarily on the critics' (moral/aesthetic/secular) judgements (whether positive or negative) of her religious intent, rather than on a careful analysis of O'Connor's theoretical discussions of theology and fiction in the essays. It is perhaps for this reason that Sura Rath suggests the need for more critical work to be done on O'Connor's prose essays; while there is much presumed attention to the issue of O'Connor's religious ideas in relation to the fiction, there is little analysis of the essays themselves and discussion of their import for understanding O'Connor's religious vision.

Finally, Golden's description of O'Connor's "stated religious intent" suggests that there is an obvious intention on O'Connor's part to do or accomplish something with it in the fiction, and this language has biased the entire discussion of her religiosity in relation

⁹ John R. May says that to study "the realization of religious intent" in O'Connor's fiction only narrows the discussion of its meaning. He argues instead that "the interdisciplinary dialogue between theology and literature" is a better methodological approach to understanding both the fiction and the scholarship on the question of art and religion. See May, "The Methodological Limits," p. 16.

to the fiction as having a proselytizing aim, either for her characters or her readers. To overcome this assumption I will use the language of O'Connor's "religious vision," rather than "religious intent," which signifies a more congenial relation between her religious ideas, as they are understood and related in her theoretical writings, and her fiction. Of the four schools described in Golden's analysis, it can be said that at least the first one allows for some sense of connection between O'Connor's religious vision and the fiction, although the "religious intent" is considered "successful" only insofar as its religious humanism is deemed praiseworthy, and not necessarily because there is an intrinsic correlation between O'Connor's theoretical views on theology and art, and the art itself.

What these various problems indicate is the need for a careful investigation of O'Connor's theoretically formulated religious ideas as they relate to and inform the theological orientation of her fictional work. O'Connor's sacramental religious vision, evident in both her essays and her fiction, can be understood more fully when it is discussed in relation to both her thought and her art. In other words, rather than separating O'Connor's religious ideas from her fictional ones, it might be better to argue that her religious vision is not "realized" (in the sense of application) but envisioned sacramentally in the fiction. Such a claim is not based on an evaluative judgement of O'Connor's religious vision, but an interpretation of those theoretical insights regarding theology and art that she understood to be relevant to her fictional work. O'Connor suggests that her religious vision does not, in some programmed sense, determine what or how she sees and consequently how she writes, but instead it affects her writing primarily

by "guaranteeing [her] respect for mystery" (*MM* 31). This is not the guardianship of doctrine, but a recognition of and an openness to reality, which does not enshrine fact without mystery, or separate nature from grace, or spiritual reality from the physical world, but sees all of these as integral to the mystery of existence.

O'Connor did not separate her religious views as a Catholic from her artistic intentions, nor did she see one as simply in the service of the other. Instead, she acknowledged some of the difficulties of writing for Catholic audiences, whose desire for "positive literature" was rooted, according to O'Connor, in a "weak faith and possibly also from this general inability to read" (*MM* 188-9). O'Connor's response to the problems associated with writing religious fiction was to maintain a careful balance between her religious views and the demands of art. It is important to emphasize that being true to her artistic vocation was essential to her religious orientation. That this was her primary aim is reflected in the following observation:

There are those who maintain that you can't demand anything of the reader. They say the reader knows nothing about art, and that if you are going to reach him, you have to be humble enough to descend to his level. This supposes either that the aim of art is to teach, which it is not, or that to create anything which is simply a good-in-itself is a waste of time. Art never responds to the wish to make it democratic; it is not for everybody; it is only for those who are willing to undergo the effort needed to understand it. We hear a great deal about humility being required to lower oneself, but it requires an equal humility and a real love of the truth to raise oneself and by hard labour to acquire higher standards. And this is certainly the obligation of the Catholic (*MM* 189).

What O'Connor's comments here suggest is that the demands of art are not opposed to the demands of religion. For O'Connor, artistic pursuits, like religious ones, are not simply

intended to teach but require the effort of raising oneself to the perception of truth. And O'Connor identifies this love and pursuit of the truth, which is the work of artistic creation, with the religious obligation of the Catholic. To designate the religious artist as one who simply "humbles" oneself--in the sense of simplifying, or democratizing the art--to accommodate the readers' level of understanding is to force a narrowly defined religious idea on the artist. O'Connor acknowledges that the ascent to truth is a concern equally important to religion and art. In this sense, art and religious truth are more appropriately designated as being in dialogue. A more precise understanding of the relation between O'Connor's religious insights and her artistic motivations, however, needs to be achieved, in order to meet directly the countering claim that the former is a matter of personal opinion, while the latter is an object of literary interest alone. O'Connor takes seriously the relation between religious insight and artistic motivation, and her comments reveal their proximity: "We reflect the Church in everything we do, and those who can see clearly that our judgement is false in matters of art cannot be blamed for suspecting our judgement in matters of religion" (*MM* 190). With this statement, O'Connor addresses specifically those critics who separate her art from her religion, suggesting that if the measure and judgements of art are ignored (for the purposes of religious propaganda or evangelizing), there would be reason to suspect her religious motivations. Of course, this could also indicate the opposite; false religious motivations could produce artistic propaganda and ideology.

Other separations are evident in much of the interpretation of the fiction: grace and

nature are juxtaposed as two opposing forces at war, reason and imagination are perceived as diametrically opposed activities in human thought, and there is no room for the idea of judgement, on the part of the author and the reader, in relation to vision. In the following sections I will analyze these particular separations that O'Connor identified: first, between nature and grace; secondly, between reason and imagination (and the ways in which the meanings of both have been reduced); and thirdly, I will consider the issue of vision and judgement through a discussion of prophecy. Finally, as a transition to my analyses of the fictional texts, I will look at O'Connor's fiction as an incarnational art, in order to suggest that the tensions noted above are inherent in human experience, and that they are represented by O'Connor, not dogmatically, but mysteriously, through her understanding of the Incarnation and her sacramental vision of reality.

ii) Nature and Grace

It is my intention to discuss the nature of O'Connor's dependence on ancient and medieval philosophical and religious traditions, not as an exclusive guide for understanding her motives as a religious thinker, but in order to reconcile some of the more prevalent separations that persist--typically owing to her religious orientation--in the interpretation of her artistic work. I will argue that a closer investigation of O'Connor's essays and lectures, read with a view to one of her main influences, namely, Jacques Maritain, will help to clarify and in fact reconcile some of the various relations among

aesthetics, ethics, philosophy, theology and religion in her writing.¹⁰

The range of this discussion extends from the manner in which O'Connor's theoretical essays relate to their embodiment within the fiction, to her understanding of the relation between nature and grace, and ultimately, to her understanding of the relationship between the physical and spiritual in the context of her stories. In much O'Connor scholarship, the pairs in the above relations are separated, and ultimately opposed, whereas I am suggesting that their relations with each other need to be more firmly established in order to understand their reciprocal meanings. To silence the dialogue between the essays and the fiction inevitably reduces the possibilities for judging certain actions within the fiction; when the fiction is interpreted without reference to O'Connor's understanding of the relationship between nature and grace, for instance, any episode that describes the body with grotesque attributes is interpreted automatically as O'Connor's repulsion at the physical world.¹¹ The relation between nature and grace is central to

¹⁰ O'Connor requested of the Fitzgeralds her copy of Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism* in 1952, and she refers to it quite regularly in her letters: "It's the book I cut my aesthetic teeth on, though I think even some of the things he [Maritain] says get soft at times. He is a philosopher and not an artist but he does have great understanding of the nature of art, which he gets from St. Thomas" (HB 216). I am using *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*--also read by O'Connor and which bears many of her marginal markings--as it is more germane to our discussion of the connection between the creative and religious impulses.

¹¹ See Frederick Asals, *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982), pgs. 48-62; Mary Gordon, "Flannery O'Connor: *The Habit of Being*," in *Good Boys and Dead Girls*, (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991), p. 39; and Martha Stephens, *The Question of Flannery O'Connor* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), p. 9.

O'Connor's work because it provides the background for interpreting her characters' struggles with the sacramental and incarnate world, and the tensions inherent in spiritually embodied experiences. O'Connor's sacramental fiction addresses not only the Protestant view of the (lack of a) relation between nature and grace, but she also stresses in her writings how this relation has been nearly obliterated in the modern period, revealing a Manichean tendency that separates spirit and matter, and consequently the human and the divine.¹²

In some of her essays on the church O'Connor even goes so far as to suggest that most modern Catholics are no longer attentive to these distinctions, thus sharing more in common with her secular and Manichean audience than with the teachings of the church. She says:

If the average Catholic reader could be tracked down through the swamps of letters-to-the-editor and other places where he momentarily reveals himself, he would be found to be more of a Manichean than the Church permits. By separating nature and grace as much as possible, he has reduced his conception of the supernatural to pious cliché...(*MM* 147).

O'Connor specifies one of the immediate effects of the separation of nature and grace here: their separation ends up *reducing* the conception of the supernatural to "pious cliché." The separation of nature and grace makes the reality of grace irrelevant to the

¹² See Asals, *The Imagination of Extremity*, p. 58. Asals argues that O'Connor's early work was Manichean, especially given the negative view of the body and the physical world in *Wise Blood*. This kind of analysis is dependent on the identification of the protagonist's actions with the author's world view, rather than interpreting the fiction with a measure other than the story itself.

natural world, akin to a magical act rather than something inherent within creation,¹³ and makes nature simply dead matter to be acted upon; the separation of the physical and the spiritual divides our existence as embodied beings capable of spiritual experience and negates the meaning of our connection to a larger spiritual reality. The supernatural becomes nothing more than a cliché because its reality within the natural world is denied, relegating it to a matter of opinion or belief. The further consequence is that human beings are also reduced, in that they become nothing more than bodies, disconnected from any larger order of spiritual meaning.

The presumed separation between nature and grace is a pivotal issue for the fiction writer, according to O'Connor, and one that is central for religious fiction particularly. Whether or not the question is explicitly addressed, the effect of assuming human beings to be radically separated from God, cut off from grace and not naturally disposed to the experience of anything divine transcending human consciousness, is going to make itself apparent in the fictional work. O'Connor notes the shift in modern fiction that marks this type of separation: "In twentieth-century fiction it increasingly happens that a meaningless, absurd world impinges upon the sacred consciousness of author or character; author and character seldom now go out to explore and penetrate a world in which the sacred is reflected" (*MM* 158). The separation has two obvious outcomes. Either the spiritual experience is drawn wholly into the human, initiated and satisfied by human needs

¹³ See *Mystery and Manners*: "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" (165).

and ends, or an external, divine being is seen as separate from the human, but because of this separation is ultimately unable to penetrate human life and be known sacramentally in the world. These are two examples of what O'Connor calls "spiritually lopsided" modern types, and their significance for this discussion is related to O'Connor's insistence that the separation of nature from grace will inevitably result in art that is no longer true to reality. In fact, such art simply ends up mirroring the distorted image of human existence within this lopsided spiritual condition. One result of this trend in modern fiction, O'Connor sees, is evident in universities, where you find "departments of theology vigorously courting departments of English" (*MM* 158). The modern novel is of interest to religious or theological schools because it presents the plight of the modern unbeliever, who is nonetheless seeking out the possible meanings of his or her spiritual experience.

However, this separation between nature and grace was not affirmed by O'Connor either artistically, or in her prose writing about religion and art. Her artistic and religious preoccupations centred themselves within the firm conviction that human beings are not cut off from grace, and although human nature is imperfect, or "fallen," O'Connor maintained consistently the Catholic view that nature is perfected by grace.¹⁴ Her assumptions affirm that the world is not an absurd or meaningless one, but rather full of meaning that is larger and extends further than human knowledge; and the confrontation

¹⁴ Note her comment in a letter to John Hawkes: "Grace, to the Catholic way of thinking, can and does use as its medium the imperfect, purely human, and even hypocritical" (*HB* 389).

of the individual with this experience of the limits of human knowing is at the heart of her fiction. The more pressing question for O'Connor, therefore, is not whether her main characters are able to perceive this transcendence, but the nature of their response to it. For O'Connor, reality is divinely ordered, not subject to human will or changed by human belief. Human beings are not self-created or autonomous, and in the midst of their experiences within the world the meaning of their existence is found in something larger than themselves, namely, that power which created human beings and the world and holds everything together.¹⁵

Thus the significant drama of O'Connor's fiction is found within the human response to the encounter with spiritual reality, and, given the nature of that reality, what the consequences of differing responses might be. Her approach is not dogmatic, but rather, insightfully imagined, according to her understanding of human nature and the reality of a divinely ordered creation. O'Connor does not assume that because there is a connection between human beings and the divine, or nature and grace, that somehow this connection is "programmed" in a specific way. The workings of grace and the mystery of the human response to the divine are not determined or inevitable, and this is evident in O'Connor's insistence on human freedom: "the novelist does not write about general beliefs but about men with free will, and that there is nothing in our faith that implies a

¹⁵ See *Mystery and Manners* on the conjunction and shared traits of the novelist and the believer (whether or not they are the same person): "a distrust of the abstract, a respect for boundaries, a desire to penetrate the surface of reality and to find in each thing the spirit which makes it itself and holds the world together" (*MM* 168).

foregone optimism for man so free that with his last breath he can say *No*" (*MM* 182).

The most one can say is that there are patterns of response within spiritual experience that we see imaged in O'Connor's fiction. But patterns should not be confused with programmed responses, which is often at the root of O'Connor criticism regarding her portrayal of religious orientation: she is characterized as a "divine-like" controlling narrator¹⁶, who forces her characters into spiritual experiences against their own inclinations. Contrary to this view, and more in tune with O'Connor's own thinking, patterns suggest shared human experiences of reality that lead to a better understanding of both human nature and the spiritual reality in which that nature participates. O'Connor does not see her Catholic faith as somehow determining that free participation, serving as a "theological solution to mystery" (*MM* 184); instead she sees her religious faith as one of the few things in the modern world that guarantees a respect for mystery. The sacramental orientation of O'Connor's thought holds, in tension, the spiritual experience of mystery together with the lived order of life. However, O'Connor also recognizes that despite her conviction that the Catholic faith helps to guarantee a respect for mystery, there exists the further temptation (on the part of Catholics and writers with religious interests) to separate the facts of life from the mystery that abides in those facts by focusing on "mystery" to the exclusion of facts:

We Catholics are very much given to the Instant Answer. Fiction doesn't have any. It leaves us, like Job, with a renewed sense of mystery. St.

¹⁶ See Marshall Bruce Gentry, *Religion of the Grotesque*, p. 6-7.

Gregory wrote that every time the sacred text describes a fact, it reveals a mystery. This is what the fiction writer, on his lesser level, hopes to do. The danger for the writer who is spurred by the religious view of the world is that he will consider this to be two operations instead of one. He will try to enshrine the mystery without the fact, and there will follow a further set of separations which are inimical to art. Judgement will be separated from vision, nature from grace, and reason from imagination (*MM* 184).

O'Connor here recognizes the desire, stemming from the religious mindset, to "enshrine mystery" and thereby disregard fact, or the concrete experiences of life, in favour of a more spiritualized existence. The separation of fact and mystery is linked to those other separations that O'Connor considers "inimical to art": between nature and grace, reason and imagination, and judgement and vision.

O'Connor's point is an artistic one, but it is also religious, in that she makes it by indicating a particular religious view that interferes with art, namely, the separation of mystery from fact. Her comparison between sacred texts and fiction is an obvious indication of her sacramental vision and how it is embodied in her writing. Just as St. Gregory states that "every time the sacred text describes a fact, it reveals a mystery," O'Connor suggests that the fiction writer "begins--with the senses," in order to "go through it into an experience of mystery itself" (*MM* 41-2). O'Connor's artistic and religious vision is combined here in such a way that her religious sacramental view is seen as best represented fictionally, insofar as fiction, like the revelation of mystery in sacred texts, is rooted in the concrete world. The spiritual mystery of existence is revealed in and through that world.

It is important to note that, for O'Connor, art has its own demands that govern her

writing more so than the church does: "Our final standard for him [the novelist] will have to be the demands of art, which are a good deal more exacting than the demands of the Church. There are novels a writer might write, and remain a good Catholic, which his conscience as an artist would not allow him to perpetrate" (*MM* 183-4). O'Connor's comment here is revealing because, while she refers to the "more exacting demands of art" as the final standard for the novelist, she does so using also the religious language of conscience. There are some scholars who persist in claiming, despite O'Connor's suggestions to the contrary throughout *Mystery and Manners* and *The Habit of Being*, that her understanding of the relationship between nature and grace was not the traditional Catholic one, or more commonly, there are misunderstandings of what her Catholic position means. In her essay on O'Connor, for instance, Mary Gordon remarks that "[l]ike most contemporary Catholics, O'Connor found that nature didn't matter very much, and that although individual humans could achieve redemption, the race remained, in this world, unredeemed."¹⁷

Lorine Getz, whose entire study is devoted to the question of nature and grace in O'Connor's fiction, argues that O'Connor did not have a "single theology of grace," but instead her fiction offers "several theologies of grace."¹⁸ What Getz's analysis offers is a breakdown of the three "theologies of grace" that she perceives in O'Connor's fiction:

¹⁷ Mary Gordon, *Good Boys and Dead Girls*, p. 39.

¹⁸ Lorine Getz, *Nature and Grace in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), 4.

Thomistic, Augustinian and Jansenist. According to Getz, Thomistic grace affirms the natural and "perfects and expands the meaning of nature"; Augustinian grace reveals that the "natural meaning is shown to belong to the order of sin," so that "grace opposes nature"; and finally, in Jansenist grace, "the natural level is altogether displaced by the supernatural."¹⁹ Although O'Connor read St. Augustine, her thinking was influenced more obviously by Aquinas, especially on the issue of the relation between nature and grace, and Getz's Thomistic definition is the most consistent with O'Connor's own formulations on this topic. However, the application of Getz's model can be rigid, and tends to reduce the portrayal of the mystery of grace and nature to formulaic codes in O'Connor's fiction.

One helpful source for clarifying this issue is Baron Friedrich von Hugel, whose writings O'Connor read and reviewed. There are many convergences between von Hugel's thought and O'Connor's, and in her 1956 book review of his *Letters to a Niece*, her discussion is focused explicitly on his ideas of nature and grace.²⁰ In the letter from which O'Connor quotes in her review, von Hugel's warning to his niece mirrors precisely what O'Connor says concerning the separation of fact and mystery, which is often the consequence of a single-minded preoccupation with things religious. Von Hugel tells his niece to fight vigorously against the mentality that considers non-religious subjects boring

¹⁹ Lorine Getz, *Nature and Grace*, 32-37.

²⁰ For O'Connor's book review of von Hugel, see Leo Zuber, ed., *The Presence of Grace and Other Book Reviews by Flannery O'Connor* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983), 21-2.

and concludes: "If there is one danger for religion--if there is any one plausible, all-but-irresistible trend which, throughout its long rich history, has sapped its force, and prepared the most destructive counter-excesses, it is just that--that allowing the fascinations of Grace to deaden or to ignore the beauties and duties of Nature."²¹ An excessive concern with the spiritual will eventually, as O'Connor quotes, "lose the material for Grace to work in and on."²² What is central to this discussion is that for both O'Connor and Hugel the separation of the physical world, nature and bodily existence from spiritual reality, for the purposes of glorifying one or the other, is a separation that reduces the meaning and purpose of each. In O'Connor's Catholic, sacramental vision the physical and spiritual are inherently connected, and her fiction dramatically represents the tension of this human experience of living as embodied spiritual beings, not in order to exalt either the physical or the spiritual, but to reveal the meaning and nature of that union.

Let us now consider O'Connor's sacramental vision in relation to another, related tension--that between reason and imagination.

²¹ Gwendolen Greene, ed., *Letters from Baron Friedrich von Hugel to a Niece*, (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1955), 121. Related to this question is the question of immortality, and the preoccupation with what von Hugel calls "survival." See Greene's Introduction, p. 40.

²² Greene, *Letters*, p. 121.

iii) *Reason and Imagination*

"My philosophical notions don't derive from Kierkegaard but from St. Thomas Aquinas" (CW 897).

There are three critical terms that arise repeatedly in O'Connor's lectures and letters: reason, art and morality. In her discussions of these terms O'Connor assumes the Thomistic/Aristotelian division of the intellect into its speculative and practical orientations. Reason, art and morality have everything to do with this distinction for O'Connor, but it is a distinction not usually recognized. The Thomistic statement that O'Connor regularly uses--"art is a virtue of the practical intellect"--is often quoted by her interpreters,²³ but these references are rarely accompanied by a sustained discussion of the topic, especially in relation to O'Connor's other theoretical writings about art and theology.²⁴ How is art a virtue? What is the practical intellect? What the statement means for O'Connor is that art is a virtue, and thus inclined always toward the good; as a virtue of the *practical* intellect it is ordered by the reasoning power of the soul directed

²³ See (among others): Ralph Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption: Christian Faith and Comic Vision in Four American Novelists*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "Flannery O'Connor's Company of Southerners: or, 'The Artificial Nigger' Read as Fiction Rather Than Theology;" Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr., "Asceticism and the Imaginative Vision of Flannery O'Connor" in *Flannery O'Connor: New Perspectives*, eds. Sura Rath and Mary Neff Shaw (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 169-182; Arthur F. Kinney "Flannery O'Connor and the Art of the Holy," in *Virginia Quarterly Review* 64, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 217-230.

²⁴ For a more detailed and thoughtful analysis of these influences in O'Connor, see Marion Montgomery, "Flannery O'Connor's Sacramental Vision" *This World*, 4 (1983): 119-128.

towards action, or more specifically, the action of making. My concern in raising her oft-quoted statement here is to illustrate how her sometimes enigmatic comments are not merely occasional dabblings in medieval theology; they are careful articulations of a philosophical anthropology, informed by classical philosophy and medieval Christian traditions, which extend to and inform her fiction.

The following discussion will focus on explaining O'Connor's understanding of the relation between reason/intellect and art/imagination. To elaborate O'Connor's theoretical insights on this relation, I will discuss some of the theological/philosophical sources for her thinking, through a brief examination of the relevant ideas of reason and art in Jacques Maritain's *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. O'Connor's theology was largely influenced by Thomas Aquinas, but much of her knowledge of Thomas came through Jacques Maritain, a Thomistic philosopher.²⁵ Since O'Connor's essays were usually prepared as public lectures about her fiction writing, they do not constitute anything like systematic analyses of reason, art, imagination, morality or even sustained interpretations of Maritain/Aquinas. For this reason, my discussion will first outline O'Connor's understanding of reason and imagination as expressed in her essays, and then refer to

²⁵ There are numerous references to St. Thomas in O'Connor's letters, which indicate that she read both Aquinas and Maritain. Regarding the *Summa*, she writes: "I read for about twenty minutes every night before I go to bed" (HB 93), but it is also clear that she read Thomistic ideas in Maritain: "The novel is an art form and when you use it for anything other than art, you pervert it. I didn't make this up. I got it from St. Thomas (*via Maritain*) who allows that art is wholly concerned with the good of that which is made; it has no utilitarian end" (HB 157).

Maritain for further clarification where appropriate. Of course, this analysis of O'Connor's theological ideas comes from my reading of her fiction also, though somewhat more indirectly.

The main purpose of this section is to clarify O'Connor's understanding of reason, as well as to outline its role in both art and religious faith. A clarification such as this is necessary in our discussion of O'Connor because she recognized that the modern understanding of reason has tended to reduce it to the autonomous calculative workings of the human mind alone. One of the primary effects of this reduction is that reason has become divorced from the imagination--which she understood as the "imaging" faculty of the soul--not only as it pertains to art but also in its relation to religious faith and morality. O'Connor understood the general difference between ancient and modern accounts of reason, (an explicit subject of her review of Maritain's book *The Range of Reason*), an understanding evident in her concern with distinguishing between the participatory or revelatory experience of reason and an autonomous reasoning power located in the human mind.²⁶ Her specific concern with the modern, reductive conception of reason and its

²⁶ For this discussion and my analysis of reason in O'Connor's thought, I am assuming an important source on the ancient/modern distinctions of reason, to which my own understanding is indebted. See, Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol 12: Published Essays 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), p. 265-291. The use of Voegelin is relevant for this discussion of O'Connor, especially because O'Connor was familiar with Voegelin's work and she reviewed the first three volumes of his philosophy of history series, *Order and History*. These book reviews are found in Leo Zuber, ed., *The Presence of Grace and Other Book Reviews by Flannery O'Connor*.

separation from the imagination was that it inevitably reduced the experiences of art and religion/morality. If the processes of thought, or reason, are understood to be independent from the envisioning of the imagination, then creativity and belief are also affected, since, according to O'Connor, both reason and imagination are essential to art and religion.

In the quote from *Mystery and Manners* (184) in the previous section, O'Connor states that the separation between reason and imagination is one of the separations that is "inimical to art." For O'Connor, art is not simply a product of the human imagination; it is also a product of reason. The problem with making this connection, however, is that the general modern notion of reason is already reductionistic--reason is understood according to an abstract and autonomous definition of rationality. This is not what O'Connor means when she is speaking about reason, unless of course, she is using the term in a way critical of the modern reduction of the reasoning power of the soul. In fact, O'Connor is often critical of this modern type of rationality in her fictional characters, as scholars are quick to mention, but her criticism of their rationality is a criticism of the kind of reasoning they employ, not reason itself. What has transpired due to the lack of proper distinctions in the interpretation of O'Connor's understanding of reason is that she has been categorized as an "anti-intellectual," or as a religious (*i.e.*, "irrational") thinker, because her critical apparatus for distinguishing reductive accounts of reason from reason understood differently is not acknowledged by her interpreters. Hence, any character in her fiction who is presented as an "intellectual" is understood, by Asals for instance, to be "wrong" or misguided, not because of the so-called intellectual's self-understanding, but because it is

assumed that reason itself is opposed to faith, and therefore O'Connor is dismissing it completely.²⁷ But how is it that O'Connor calls art and what she does as a novelist "reason in making" (*MM* 82) if her fiction is entirely concerned with rejecting reason and the intellect?²⁸ The problematic meaning of O'Connor's "intellectual" characters provide one very important example of how an understanding of her philosophical and theological ideas can be crucial for a proper interpretation of her fiction. The "intellectual" Rayber, in

²⁷ See Frederick Asals, *Imagination of Extremity*, p.229. Asals describes the intellectuals in O'Connor's work as follows: "Again and again the revolt of her protagonists takes the form of an exaltation of consciousness, of the mind, as the seat of their illusory self-sufficiency" and then he immediately refers to this particular portrayal of her character's illusions as stemming from "the antiintellectual strain in her work." Asals' identification of the "illusory self-sufficiency" of O'Connor's characters with her "anti-intellectualism" reveals a typical problem in the interpretation of O'Connor's understanding of reason; while the description of the intellectual's autonomy and self-sufficiency rooted in the mind is partly the focus of O'Connor's criticism, it is not an "anti-intellectual" position. However, the apparent connection between this description of the intellectual's quest for autonomy and O'Connor's "anti-intellectualism" is inevitable only if we are limited to a reductionistic definition of the intellectual pursuit.

²⁸ Asals opposes these faculties of imagination and reason in his reading of O'Connor's work, and his discussion serves to establish the fact that the range of reason is narrowly defined in the interpretation of O'Connor's writing. He states: "But in her fiction the violence of the opposition between reason and imagination pushes the orthodox distinction between these faculties to its extreme limit. If the visions of her later work are a form of knowledge indeed, they are not only unavailable to but actively opposed by any motion of the discursive intellect. Reason leads not toward revelation but away from it: 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." See Asals, *Imagination of Extremity*, p. 213-14. Not only does this contradict what O'Connor and Maritain say about reason, it has the effect of pairing the experience of natural and the supernatural through the imagination and the senses alone, cutting off the intellect and the imagination from the spiritual movements of the soul.

The Violent Bear it Away, is not at odds with Mason Tarwater because Rayber lives according to reason and Mason lives according to faith; Rayber's problem lies in his idea that his reasoning powers are entirely human and autonomous without connection to any revelatory or spiritual insight.

O'Connor tries to restore the classical account of reason in her theoretical discussions of it, and to describe its imaginative relation to both art and religion/morality. What she wants to convey is reason's role in creative intuition, not as a faculty of the mind opposing the imaginative and sensible powers of the soul, but instead as one that needs to be distinguished from, and yet related to, these other powers.²⁹ Such a description indicates quite clearly that O'Connor speaks about reason in a profoundly un-modern way. In referring to Aquinas' definition of art as "reason in making" (*MM* 82), she describes it as "a very cold and very beautiful definition" and one that is likely to be an unpopular definition today. O'Connor's reference to the ancient Thomistic definition of reason, coupled with her recognition that its unpopularity rests in the fact that reason "has lost ground among us" in the modern period--especially in the realms of art and religious belief--suggests that her theoretical conceptions of reason are fundamentally indebted to the influence of Maritain/Aquinas. This type of theoretical discussion in her essays, coupled with the notorious back-woods type characters and abstract intellectuals of her

²⁹ This language is heavily influenced by Maritain/Aquinas, and will be explained in further detail presently. For now, my intention is to clarify what O'Connor means by her discussion of reason and imagination in the essays.

stories, often makes for considerable confusion on the role of reason in her thought. Her understanding that reason has been reduced in meaning to a narrow definition of calculative rationality, which as such is considered irrelevant to the artistic process, signals the importance of ascertaining her theoretical formulations about reason, art and morality in order to better appreciate her artistic endeavour.

In O'Connor's view, the emphasis on art fed solely by emotion and imagination, without due consideration for the role of reason, has produced an unbalanced vision of human nature, which has reduced the perception of mystery. The problem is that reason has not so much disappeared from modern discourse as the understanding of its function has changed.³⁰ Reason, in its reduced capacity, no longer relates to artistic creation, and O'Connor notes that instead of a recovery of the fuller meaning of reason and its relation to art, reason is effectively abandoned in artistic endeavour. O'Connor's discussions of art usually include combined references to both reason and imagination, primarily to establish their connection for artistic creation, but at the same time to expand the modern understanding of reason. She says, again in a discussion of Maritain and Aquinas on art, that "the person who aims after art in his work aims after truth, in an imaginative sense..." (*MM* 65). What O'Connor suggests here about art is that the pursuit of higher truth--

³⁰ O'Connor has little tolerance for the artist's desire to free him or herself from intellectual integrity: "If you have read the very vocal writers from San Francisco, you may have got the impression that the first thing you must do in order to be an artist is to loose yourself from the bonds of reason, and thereafter, anything that rolls off the top of your head will be of great value. Anyone's unrestrained feelings are considered worth listening to because they are unrestrained and because they are feelings" (*MM* 82).

which is the direction and goal of an ancient understanding of reason--is coupled with the imagination in the artistic creation.

The artist, according to O'Connor, "uses his reason to discover an answering reason in everything he sees. For him, to be reasonable is to find in the object, in the situation, in the sequence, the spirit which makes it itself" (*MM* 82). O'Connor's statement describes the participatory nature of reason and how this is crucial to the artist's work: reason is not simply the calculative workings of the mind alone, creating art out of the mental processes of the brain; it is a "spiritual" faculty that seeks and responds to things outside of the mind. As O'Connor characterizes it, reason discovers "an answering reason in everything" the artist sees. The action of reason is described both in terms of its pursuit or "seeking" and a dialogue, since what is discovered is the "answering reason" of a spiritually ordered universe.

Described in this way, it becomes clear how this account of reason is also not opposed to religious faith, because O'Connor does not see reason and revelation as opposite--unless reason is understood as rooted in the autonomous human mind--but rather, she sees reason as a spiritual faculty that can also be revelatory. The modern reduction of reason has affected the expression of religious experience by assigning all morality and religious knowing to an unthinking faith, or an inspired but unreasoned vision. As a religious artist, therefore, O'Connor was concerned with the reductionist view of reason and its effects equally on the religious and moral imagination. The human experiences of God are not understood by her to be unreasonable or without the active

role of both reason and imagination.³¹ Keeping in mind the reductionist account of reason in relation to art outlined above, it seems obvious that this reduction will have similar effects on the understanding of religious thought, and that O'Connor would have comparable objections. If reason is narrowly defined as calculative rationality, or even autonomous cogitation (something which is opposed to O'Connor's description of the dialogue of reasoning above), there is little that unites it with spiritual or religious experience: it is limited to logic or calculation, and centred on independent human thought processes. While the exile of reason from art results in an excess of feeling-oriented artistic expression, the exile of reason from religious faith has resulted, particularly in the realm of O'Connor scholarship, in a magic-oriented understanding of religion.³² The criticism of O'Connor's apparent anti-intellectualism, which is presumed to be a religious position, stems from the idea that reason is opposed to faith, but more decisively, it

³¹ In a letter to a college student who is confused about the connections between religious faith, reason/intellect and imagination, O'Connor writes: "One result of the stimulation of your intellectual life that takes place in college is usually a shrinking of the imaginative life. This sounds like a paradox, but I have often found it to be true. Students get so bound up with the difficulties such as reconciling the clashing of so many different faiths such as Buddhism, Mohamedanism, etc., that they cease to look for God in other ways" (*HB* 476).

³² A prime example of this mentality is found in Clare Kahane, "Flannery O'Connor's Rage of Vision," in *Critical Essays on Flannery O'Connor*, eds. Melvin Friedman and Beverly Lyon Clark (Boston: G.K. Hall and Company, 1985), 119-131. Kahane states: "Reason and speech are usually associated with potency, but O'Connor denies potency to her intellectuals...Not only is the power of reason shown up as a sham, but words themselves, when they are tools of the intellect *and not magical incantations*, are presented as worse than meaningless, a preparation for action never taken, a symbol of naivete if not cowardice" (*italics mine*), p. 128.

suggests that reason is being understood in a seriously limited way. According to this understanding, the only way to speak about religious experience is through the sacrifice of reason, leaving this experience open to interpretation as mere magic. When reason is reduced to logic, and religion to "magic" or "feelings," yet another division between human nature and the divine is fostered: human nature is unable to participate in, and is somehow severed from, the life-giving grace of the divine spirit, and religious questioning is not inherent to the soul's reasoning powers.³³

Even where O'Connor describes faith as a gift, she sees it as requiring reason and will. Given that O'Connor's sensibilities were attuned to the modern reductions of reason, and consequently the modern tendency to oppose reason to faith, her discussions about faith often focus on their relation.³⁴ The loss of faith, she says, is "basically a failure of appetite or will, assisted by a sterile intellect" (*HB* 452). In other words, faith is not something magically conferred or a vague feeling in the absence of reason; it requires the action of human will and intellect, and for this human beings are responsible. What O'Connor observes in modern religious discourse is not so much a religious sensibility

³³ Kahane makes the intellectual/religious division even more explicit by accusing O'Connor (and her theological commentators) of not only degrading her intellectuals, but at the same time denying any inherent value to the secular world. She explains: "She [O'Connor] was compelled to undercut the power of reason, making her intellectuals a limited, infantile lot; to deny to the secular world either dignity or value or the possibility of nourishing human involvement." See Clare Kahane, "Rage of Vision," p. 129.

³⁴ See her letter to Alfred Corn (May 1962): "If you want your faith, you have to work for it. It is a gift, but for very few it is a gift given without any demand for equal time devoted to its cultivation...Don't think that you have to abandon reason to be a Christian" (*HB* 477).

informed by magic, as critics like Claire Kahane assume, but one that lacks intellectual rigour and rational thought. The loss of reason is centrally connected to the loss of faith, because it inhibits the human experience and knowledge of God. She explains the shift:

One of the effects of modern liberal Protestantism has been gradually to turn religion into poetry and therapy, to make truth vaguer and vaguer and more and more relative, to banish intellectual distinctions, to depend on feeling instead of thought and gradually to come to believe that God has no power, that he cannot communicate with us, cannot reveal himself to us, indeed has not done so, and that religion is our own sweet invention (*HB* 479).

To limit the reasoning power of human beings to their own resources, as if it were autonomous, has negatively affected modern religious thinking, according to O'Connor, because it centres religious experience entirely in the human consciousness, as "our own sweet invention."

O'Connor addresses the significance of reason for her work as a religious artist, not only in the production of the work, but also in her desire to communicate her ideas to her readers. In "The Regional Writer" she says "[u]less the novelist has gone utterly out of his mind, his aim is still communication..." (*MM* 53). Despite this comment, O'Connor is often criticized for her religious vision because it is assumed that, as a Catholic artist, she is trying to force the reader to see what she sees, rather than "communicate," and so her fiction is perceived as lacking intellectual complexity.³⁵ O'Connor's critical intellectual

³⁵ See Ralph Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption*, who suggests that O'Connor's concerns are largely intended to convert modern apostasy, describing her approach as "theological aggression": "O'Connor contends that a modern secular audience needs prophetic confrontation rather than priestly comfort"(97), and further, "So great is the vehemence of

engagement with her Christian faith is evident throughout her essays and her fiction; and as an artist, she understands the centrality of reason, as a reflective and imaginative power of the soul, for her ability to write religious fiction. She makes it clear in several instances that her Catholic faith is inseparable from her critical reason and her perceptions as a novelist:

The novelist is required to open his eyes on the world around him and look. If what he sees is not highly edifying, he is still required to look. Then he is required to reproduce, with words, what he sees. Now this is the first point at which the novelist who is a Catholic may feel some friction between what he is supposed to do as a novelist and what he is supposed to do as a Catholic (*MM* 177).

O'Connor's description of the novelist's practice of "looking" or observing and reproducing what is seen is not just a reference to sight in a visual sense. Because O'Connor understands reason to be a visionary power (which will be further discussed in relation to Maritain below), she is describing also the novelist's role in perceiving and discovering what is true. What O'Connor wants to emphasize concerning this intellectual envisioning of truth is that it is not simply pre-determined by Catholic doctrine. The Catholic artist, she says, is free to pursue the truth and understand it in relation to, and sometimes in critical conversation with, his or her faith. O'Connor's primary point here, it seems, is that while the artist's experience of reason is not free from "friction" in relation to faith, the two are not mutually exclusive.

contemporary unbelief that it must be answered, in her view, with an equally vehement faith" (103).

Thus far, I have attempted to outline some of the ways in which reason is understood by O'Connor to play an active role in the discernment of spiritual reality, and the implications of this for both artistic creation and religious faith. My hope is that this might further a clearer understanding of how "religion" and "art" move in the same direction, rather than divergent ones, in her vision of reality. I will now turn to a brief discussion of Maritain's account of reason and its relation to the imaginative processes of art, insofar as this can clarify further O'Connor's view.

Maritain, as we have seen reflected in O'Connor, also affirms reason in its classical and Thomistic meaning, referring to the inherently spiritual and participatory nature of the soul's power of intellection. In a book review of Maritain's *The Range of Reason*, O'Connor signals the difference between the modern view of reason and Maritain's, as well as her own:

The age of Enlightenment substituted reason for revelation, with the result that confidence in reason has gradually decayed until in the present age, which doubts also fact and value, reason finds few supporters outside of Neo-Thomist philosophy. Maritain's has been one of the major voices in modern philosophy to reassert the primacy of reason...He puts it in the proper perspective, where it serves and not substitutes for revelation.³⁶

This book review by O'Connor makes explicit her dependence on Maritain's Thomistic philosophy for her integration of reason into her theoretical formulations about art and religious faith.

In his work, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, Jacques Maritain delineates the

³⁶ Zuber, *Presence of Grace*, p. 124.

mysterious process of the creative impulse, and how this manifests itself in the concrete productions of art. Neither art nor poetry can do without the other, and yet the words are not synonymous: by art he means "the creative or producing, work-making activity of the human mind" and by poetry, he does not mean the art of writing verse, but the more general and primary experience of "the intercommunication between the inner being of things and the inner being of the human Self which is a kind of divination."³⁷ What Maritain is describing as "poetry" is the spiritual discourse that is known in the soul through its connection to the spiritual world, and this discourse is characterized as "a kind of divination" because it can be a revelatory experience. The connection of the poetic to the divine was a common feature of the ancient world, the term *vates* in Latin describing both a poet and a diviner.

With this definition of poetry in mind, we can elaborate Maritain's claim that the activity of the intellect, or reason, plays an essential part in both art and poetry, and more significantly, that reason is part of the inspirational or intuitive experience of the artist. We might note Maritain's additional clarification, that what he means by reason here must be distinguished from most modern definitions.³⁸ Reason, says Maritain, as it relates to his

³⁷ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1953), 3. For the following discussion of this work by Maritain, references will be indicated in the text with the page number.

³⁸ It should be mentioned that Maritain uses the terms "intellect" and "reason" interchangeably and for this discussion I will follow this practice. He says: "I use the words intellect and reason as synonymous, in so far as they designate a single power or faculty in the human soul," p. 3.

account of poetry, "must be understood in a much deeper and larger sense than is usual. The intellect, as well as the imagination, is at the core of poetry. But reason, or the intellect, is not merely logical reason..."(4). Maritain quotes Aristotle for his description of God as the ordering source of reason: "As in the universe, so in the soul, God moves everything. The starting point of reasoning is not reasoning, but something greater. What, then, could be greater even than knowledge and intellect but God?"³⁹ Maritain raises Aristotle in his discussion in order to define reason as having its source and power in something beyond the reductive accounts of reason as calculation or logic. Furthermore, God is connected to the reasoning powers of the soul, as that which draws out and moves the intellectual pursuit. In Maritain's chapter entitled "Poetry and Beauty"--the section most heavily marked in O'Connor's copy--he discusses the importance of beauty and mystery in the soul's quest for meaning and the desire to create. Reason, understood as a desiring movement in the soul, rather than a calculative tool, moves towards what is beautiful and ultimately mysterious. This is the driving force of poetry.

Given both Maritain's and O'Connor's recognition of the limited modern understanding of reason, the question remaining is, what has led to the separation of reason and imagination? Maritain locates the modern shift away from the classical understanding, and ultimately the source of the reduced powers of reason, in Descartes, who "with his clear ideas, divorced intelligence from mystery...The Schoolmen, when they

³⁹ Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, p. 65.

defined beauty by the radiance of the form, in reality defined it by the radiance of a mystery."⁴⁰ As Maritain notes, for the Schoolmen, the intellect's perception of beauty was integral to the experience of mystery. He quotes Aquinas to suggest the transcendent measure of beauty and how human beings come to know it: "beauty of anything created is nothing else than a similarity of divine beauty participated in by things," so that, in the last analysis, "the existence of all things derives from divine beauty" (125). The language of participation is central to the question of beauty and the human experience of the divine. Maritain explains the participatory nature of the human relationship to beauty by making a distinction between aesthetic and transcendental beauty. He defines transcendental beauty as "the beauty that God beholds," whereas aesthetic beauty is the beauty that is perceived through the human senses (125). Maritain accounts for the relation between the two as follows:

I would say that aesthetic beauty, which is not all beauty for man but which is the beauty most naturally proportioned to the human mind, is a particular determination of transcendental beauty: it is transcendental beauty as confronting not simply the intellect, but the intellect and the sense acting together in one single act; say, it is transcendental beauty confronting the sense as imbued with intelligence, or intellection as engaged in sense perception (125).

For O'Connor, the separation of reason and imagination (which Maritain identifies as one of the effects of the Cartesian reduction of reason to the autonomy of the *cogito*) threatens "an end to art," because in the experience of aesthetic beauty it is the intellect,

⁴⁰ Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, p. 123.

combined with the powers of sense perception, that fuels the imagination (*MM* 82).

Reason is neither independent nor abstract, but integral to the soul's movement towards mystery. As Maritain states: "it is by virtue of this transcendental nature of beauty, even aesthetic beauty, that all great poetry awakes in us, one way or another, the sense of our mysterious identity, and draws us toward the sources of being."⁴¹ O'Connor makes a similar comment in regard to her fiction as *poesis*, or poetry: "The fiction writer presents mystery through manners, grace through nature, but when he finishes there always has to be left over that sense of Mystery which cannot be accounted for by any human formula" (*MM* 153).

Finally, since O'Connor says that "art is a virtue of the practical intellect" (*MM* 81), it is worth exploring some of Maritain's discussion of the meaning of this statement in his chapter of the same name. This exploration will serve to address more explicitly O'Connor's references to the relation between art and morality, since both are virtues of the practical intellect. It should also illustrate the debt of O'Connor's understanding to Maritain/Aquinas, as well as her assumption of these classical distinctions in her prose and fiction.

Maritain understands the main division of the activity of the intellect in terms of Aristotle's account of the speculative, or theoretical, intellect and the practical intellect. Maritain reiterates that this does not refer to two separate powers of the soul, but rather

⁴¹ Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, p. 127.

two different ways in which the same power works.⁴² The speculative intellect is the soul's desire to know what is, it is the conformity of the intellect with being itself; its end is knowledge and understanding first principles. This is what Maritain describes as knowing for the sake of knowledge alone. The practical intellect differs in that it tends more toward action, and something other than knowledge itself. Within the realm of the practical intellect there is a further distinction between making and doing. Art is the virtue of making, and prudence is the virtue of doing. The difference between these two lies in their ends: art inclines itself toward the good of the work done, whereas prudence is directed toward the good of the worker, namely, human beings themselves. One is an intellectual virtue (art) and the other is a moral virtue (prudence). One further consideration that Maritain addresses is the role of the will in relation to truth. The speculative intellect is driven by the will, or as Maritain suggests, the will as "man's energy of desire or love" is what "intervenes...to bring the intellect to the exercise of its own power" (33). Beyond this, however, the will is not part of the intellectual pursuit. The will plays a different, but more essential, role in the practical intellect. Since the practical intellect is oriented toward action, the will works with reason in order to make or perform some action. Truth, therefore, for speculative knowledge, is "the adequation or conformity of the intellect with Being, with what things are," whereas the concern with truth in practical knowing is the conformity of the reason and the will, whether in human

⁴² Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, p. 32.

doing or in the making of a work of art.

These distinctions are helpful not only because they recognize the different human experiences of contemplation and action, but also because they clarify the difference between art and morality, or between making and doing. It is a subtle difference because morality, like art, is a practical virtue; it is grounded in the concrete experiences of human action and thought. It is not magic, nor is it an abstract theory, but the reasoned working of the mind to discern and measure the good of concrete human acts in relation to their ultimate end, which is God. In order to appreciate O'Connor's approach to art, and also how her religious sense informs this approach, it is important to note that in the classical understanding morality and art are not opposed; they merely have different proximate ends. O'Connor thus draws the two together in her fiction: "There is no room for abstract expressions of compassion or piety or morality in the fiction itself. This means that the writer's moral sense must coincide with his dramatic sense" (*MM* 125). For this to happen, O'Connor says that the artist's "moral judgement is part of the very act of seeing" (*MM* 31), suggesting that the moral and artistic direction of her work cannot be separated from the reason's spiritual vision. In Maritain's discussion of reason's role in the creative act, at the preconscious level and through to the work of art, he is also presenting his view of the inherently visionary nature of reason:

...reason possesses a life both deeper and less conscious than its articulate logical life. For reason indeed does not only articulate, connect, and infer, it also *sees*; and reason's intuitive grasping, *intuitus rationis*, is the primary act and function of that one and single power which is called intellect or reason (55)

It is appropriate to close this discussion of reason with an account of what Maritain calls its intuitive, or visionary powers, as we move into the next section, pertaining to prophetic vision. O'Connor's language of prophetic vision is indicative of the artist's ability to "see." The notion of prophetic vision, which includes the visionary capacities of reason as well as the imagination, brings together O'Connor's biblically infused moral sense and her theoretical ideas about the making of fiction.

iv) Prophetic Vision

It is important to note that Maritain's language in *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* is more philosophical than theological, and Christ and Christian language are completely absent from his analysis. I mention this because O'Connor's language in *Mystery and Manners*, although also philosophical and dependent on Maritain, is heavily Christocentric.⁴³ Therefore, if the essays are indeed significantly related to O'Connor's fiction, as I am arguing, it seems a fruitful question to ask what this difference between O'Connor and Maritain reveals about the relation between O'Connor's theoretical ideas of art and her fiction. How are we to understand O'Connor's combined use of the classical/philosophical account of the intellect's role in the creation of art and her more biblical/prophetic and Christocentric images? The emphasis on action, judgement, vision,

⁴³ O'Connor's Christocentric analysis of her art is highly significant for a sacramental interpretation of her fiction. In the next section I will discuss this relation with reference to the Incarnation.

and prophecy, is biblical and grounds much of O'Connor's fictional work; yet, as we have seen in the preceding section, O'Connor's discussion of art in the essays is also formulated in relation to the philosophical influences of Maritain and Aquinas. I understand O'Connor's philosophical and biblical emphases to be related to and in conversation with each other, as is evident in both her theoretical discussions of art and in her fiction, and I would suggest that her description of the religious novelist as having "prophetic vision" is the interpretive key for drawing together her theoretical writings and her art. Through O'Connor's repeated discussions about the artist's prophetic vision, we can observe how her philosophical and biblical concerns are united in her thought.

A discussion of O'Connor's understanding of prophetic vision must incorporate both the spiritual nature of "vision" or insight, which Maritain attributes to reason's intuitive powers, and the "prophetic," a biblical term referring to the communication and ordering of relations between God and human beings. O'Connor understands the term "prophetic vision" as the reasoning discernment of spiritual reality, which is what enables her to write about the experiences of that reality dramatically. For this discussion, we will refer to Aquinas' account of prophecy in the *Summa Theologiae*, which O'Connor read and referred to in her essays and letters concerning prophecy. Unlike her understanding of reason and the imagination, O'Connor's Thomistic understanding of prophecy stems from her own reading of Aquinas, rather than a reading of Aquinas through Maritain. To focus on O'Connor's understanding of Aquinas in this section is also appropriate because of his use of biblical references, which are less common in Maritain. Aquinas' account of

prophecy combines philosophical discussions of the intellect--the knowing that accompanies prophecy--with images and examples from the biblical prophetic tradition, and in this way he provides a helpful model for understanding O'Connor's ability to blend together her philosophical, theological and biblical ideas.

Of course, Aquinas' ordering of the intellect is not occupied, like Maritain's, with countering modern, reductive assumptions about its role in either art or religious faith. While O'Connor shares Maritain's concern about modern reductions of reason and the philosophical implications of these reductions, she is primarily concerned, as a religious novelist who understands her work to be prophetic, with the perennial theological questions of human beings and their relations to God. For instance, the question of sin and human limitation is, according to O'Connor's sense of her artistic work, essential: "Drama usually bases itself on the bedrock of original sin...For this reason the greatest dramas naturally involve the salvation or loss of the soul" (*MM* 167). Maritain (at least in *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*) rarely addresses the limitation of human knowing in relation to sin, and when he does, he explains it positively as the confrontation with mystery.

What O'Connor wants to pursue dramatically in her fiction is not just the limitation of human knowing in the face of mystery, but the wilful refusal even to look at or consider that mystery. Aquinas and O'Connor speak more directly to the "defect" in human knowing, or human fallenness through sin brought about by the conscious choice of the

will.⁴⁴ The prophetic tradition, according to the sources with which O'Connor was familiar, is directed towards the human relationship with God, and the question of how that relationship between Creator and creature is best ordered.

O'Connor's understanding of the prophetic tradition is key in responding to those who attribute to her work a morally rigid or legalistic approach to justice. In Kathleen Feeley's book on O'Connor, our attention is helpfully drawn to the many theological texts and biblical studies that were influential for O'Connor's thought.⁴⁵ Feeley notes some of the various sources for O'Connor's study of prophecy: Bruce Vawter's *The Conscience of Israel*, Eric Voegelin's *Israel and Revelation*, and as already mentioned, Thomas Aquinas' *De Veritate* and parts of the *Summa*.⁴⁶ One of these texts, namely Voegelin's *Israel and Revelation*, is reproduced in part by Feeley and she indicates that this reproduced passage was marked by O'Connor in her own copy. The passage from Voegelin is significant for our discussion here, because it redirects the focus of the prophetic call away from a moralistically legal orientation, towards an account of existence ordered by love and

⁴⁴ In a letter concerning the relation between nature and grace O'Connor remarks that "[c]utting yourself off from Grace is a very decided matter, requiring a real choice, act of will, and affecting the very ground of the soul" (*HB* 389). This issue of the (negative) choice of the will is not a focal point in Maritain's work, whereas it is a recurring theme in O'Connor's fiction.

⁴⁵ Kathleen Feeley, *Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982).

⁴⁶ Karl Martin, in his essay "Flannery O'Connor's Prophetic Imagination," *Religion and Literature* 26.3 (1994): 33-58, analyzes O'Connor's prophetic ideas in the fiction through Walter Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination*.

humility under the creator. Voegelin says that it is the particular prophetic insight of Israelite history that "existence under God means love, humility and righteousness of action rather than legality of conduct."⁴⁷ This expression of the prophet's concern is also echoed in O'Connor's reading of Thomas Aquinas. In a succession of letters to "A," written in 1959/60, O'Connor makes her dependence on Aquinas apparent not only for her use of the prophetic voice as a novelist, but also for her portrayal of the prophet in *The Violent Bear it Away*. She says: "I have found a lucky find for me in St. Thomas' sections of the *Summa* and the *De Veritate* on prophecy... Thomas says that prophetic vision is dependent on the imagination of the prophet, not his moral life; and that there is a distinction that must be made between having prophetic vision and the proclamation of the same" (HB 367).⁴⁸

These references to Voegelin and Aquinas are important for interpreting O'Connor.⁴⁹ Prophecy is often misunderstood by modern interpreters, either because it is

⁴⁷ Feeley, *Voice of the Peacock*, p. 141.

⁴⁸ We will return to a further discussion of the relation between the imaginative and moral vision of the prophet presently.

⁴⁹ Another source for O'Connor's understanding of prophecy is Martin Buber. In her copy of Buber's *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy*, she has marked the following passage: "I have never in our time encountered on a high philosophical plane such a far-reaching misunderstanding of the prophets of Israel. The prophets of Israel have never announced a God upon whom their hearers' striving for security reckoned. They have always aimed to shatter all security and proclaim in the opened abyss of the final insecurity the unwished-for God who demands that His human creatures become real, they become human, and confounds all who imagine that they can take refuge in the certainty that the temple of God is in their midst...The primal reality of these prophecies does not allow

confused with sorcery and fortune telling, or because it is relegated to a primitive time when human beings were thought to be speaking for God and warning of his usually harsh judgements aimed at humankind. It is only with a closer examination of the prophetic tradition to which O'Connor was indebted that these reductive versions are seen as inadequate, not only in their general simplicity but also as the means for understanding the context and role of prophecy in her fiction. What requires some explanation, before we turn to some of the specific details of prophecy in Aquinas, are O'Connor's comments concerning the connection between vision and judgement. The connection between vision and judgement is relevant to O'Connor's understanding of prophetic vision because the vision of the prophetic novelist is not just about seeing aspects of reality, but also being able to judge what is seen.

The typical separations noted in sections (ii) and (iii) above between nature and grace and reason and imagination, include one more: that between vision and judgement (*MM* 184). The ultimate cause of these separations, O'Connor suggests, is the separation of fact from mystery. O'Connor's comments reveal that her prophetic vision is not simply directed toward a particular Christian end, but that prophetic vision is about looking at and discerning the nature of reality. She says in an interview with Harvey Breit in 1955

itself to be tossed into the attic of 'religions': it is as living and actual in this historical hour as ever." See Arthur F. Kinney, *Flannery O'Connor's Library: Resources of Being* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 26.

that "a serious novelist is in pursuit of reality."⁵⁰ Limitations in the artist's account of that reality are inevitable, according to O'Connor, and so critics who attempt to dismiss or categorize her thought by labelling it "Christian" not only miss the nuances of her philosophical Christian vision, but they also fail to understand how her vision of reality is something which extends beyond, and yet informs, her Christian faith: "I believe too that there is only one Reality and that that is the end of it, but the term 'Christian Realism' has become necessary for me, perhaps in a purely academic way, because I find myself in a world where everybody has his compartment, puts you in yours, shuts the door and departs" (*HB* 92). Here O'Connor suggests that the need to describe or interpret reality according to certain theological or philosophical ideas does not mean that those ideas entirely contain or encompass that reality. The fiction writer needs to be concerned with theological and philosophical ideas, says O'Connor, although her dramatic interests allow that "the meaning of his [the novelist's] story does not begin except at a depth where these things have been exhausted" (*MM* 153).

O'Connor's Christian faith is never absent in her account of her role as a prophetic novelist, certainly, but it is not explicit in her description of her ultimate aim as a writer:

All novelists are fundamentally seekers and describers of the real, but the realism of each novelist will depend on his view of the ultimate reaches of reality...if the writer believes that our life is and will remain essentially mysterious, if he looks upon us as beings existing in a created order to whose laws we freely respond, then what he sees on the surface will be of

⁵⁰ Rosemary Magee, *Conversations with Flannery O'Connor* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 8.

interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself (*MM* 41).

This is not to say that O'Connor's Christianity is irrelevant to her vision, since the quotation above is implicitly Christian; but it is important to stress that O'Connor's description of her prophetic vision is not narrowly Christian, and that she would use more general terms to insist that art is inseparable from the religious and moral dimensions of human experience. O'Connor says that the separation of vision from judgement is impossible in good fiction, and yet, this separation is often insisted upon in modern literary interpretation.⁵¹ However, to assume that O'Connor simply applies Christian judgements to her art from the "outside," as it were, is to underestimate the complexity of her view of prophetic vision and to overlook how she sees vision and moral judgement as working together in her fiction.

When O'Connor says that "in the greatest fiction, the writer's moral sense coincides with his dramatic sense" (*MM* 31), she is expressing her conviction that she intends the moral and religious ideas of her prose to be in line with her dramatic representations. The two are not independent, nor should they be, and O'Connor notes the growing tendency to exclude judgement, particularly moral judgement, from what the novelist is doing: "Many contend that the job of the novelist is to show us how man feels, and they say that this is an operation in which his own commitments intrude not at all. The novelist, we are told,

⁵¹ See the discussion in section *i*) of this chapter, and Louis D. Rubin, "'The Artificial Nigger' Read as Fiction Rather Than Theology," p. 49.

is looking for a symbol to express feeling, and whether he be Jew or Christian or Buddhist or whatever makes no difference to the aptness of the symbol" (*MM* 156). O'Connor disagrees with this emphasis on feeling at the expense of judgement, and she argues that judgement and vision must work together in the artist's mind. For the novelist "judgement is implicit in the act of seeing. His vision cannot be detached from his moral sense" (*MM* 130). Instead of simply presenting a range of human emotions and feelings, O'Connor understands the artistic challenge as one involving the critical reason of the artist, who must identify and understand the meaning and worth of the feelings he or she symbolizes, rather than simply "reporting" (in religious terms or not). She says:

Great fiction involves the whole range of human judgement; it is not simply an imitation of feeling. The good novelist not only finds a symbol for feeling, he finds a symbol and a way of lodging it which tells the intelligent reader whether this feeling is adequate or inadequate, whether it is moral or immoral, whether it is good or evil. And his theology, even in its most remote reaches, will have a direct bearing on this (*MM* 156).

To be able to judge and to see these things the novelist, according to O'Connor, needs more than good writing skills; the gift of prophetic vision is also needed. We will now consider some of O'Connor's references to Aquinas on prophetic vision, in order to clarify their relation to her own writing, and will then examine three central ideas in Aquinas' description of prophecy that are pertinent to the discussion of prophecy in O'Connor scholarship.

Given the confusions regarding the role of moral judgement in O'Connor's thought, an important distinction that O'Connor quotes from Aquinas should be repeated here,

namely, that prophetic vision is not primarily a moral faculty, but an imaginative one (*MM* 179). This means that the ends pursued in her fiction are not solely moral ones; the primary task is seeing the nature of reality so that the moral implications will be evident in the vision itself. O'Connor writes that "[t]he fiction writer should be characterized by his kind of vision. His kind of vision is prophetic vision," and she adds that "[p]rophecy, which is dependent on the imaginative and not the moral faculty, need not be a matter of predicting the future" (*MM* 179). When O'Connor adopts Aquinas' description of prophetic vision as imaginative rather than moral, her point is not to remove the moral dimension from seeing, but rather to deepen the mystery of moral order through our experience of sight. As O'Connor interprets this idea in Aquinas, what the artist sees in the world and how the artist sees that world as ordered is a matter of imaginative vision, which draws primarily upon the artist's sensed experience of the world.⁵² The moral implications, judgements and interpretations of what is seen are combined with the artist's imaginative expression and representation of the vision. O'Connor believes that with the artist's capacity to see--both the order of the world as it is experienced through the senses and the spiritual insight that is part of that vision--comes the need for moral discernment about the value of what is seen. Moral judgement is a central job of the novelist, according to O'Connor: "I think the novelist does more than just show us how a man

⁵² She says in her essay "Catholic Novelists and their Readers," that "every mystery that reaches the human mind, except in the final stages of contemplative prayer, does so by way of the senses" (*MM* 176).

feels. I think he also makes a judgement on the value of that feeling. It may not be an overt judgement, probably it will be sunk in the work but it is there because in the good novel, judgement is not separated from vision."⁵³

O'Connor's reference to Aquinas' distinction between the imaginative and the moral faculty of the artist's prophetic vision is essential to this discussion because O'Connor's Catholic beliefs are often interpreted simply as a projection determining the moral basis of her judgements in the fiction.⁵⁴ Instead, O'Connor distances herself from such assumptions, by rejecting the idea that she operates with some kind of theory concerning the moral basis of fiction:

The subject of the moral basis of fiction is one of the most complicated and I don't doubt that I contradict myself on it, for I have no foolproof aesthetic theory. However, I think we are talking about different things or mean different things here by moral basis. I continue to think that art doesn't require rectitude of the appetite but this is not to say that it does not have (fiction anyway) a moral basis. I identify this with James' *felt life* and not with any particular moral system (*HB* 124).

Although O'Connor does not identify her thinking in this regard with a moral system, her use of the Thomistic language (for instance, with her reference to the "rectitude of the appetite") offers some indication as to how she understood the artist's morality in relation

⁵³ Flannery O'Connor, unpublished manuscript, Special Collections, Georgia College and State University, Milledgeville, GA, (file 285).

⁵⁴ See Frederick Asals, *The Imagination of Extremity*, where he suggests that O'Connor appears to be a morally judgemental author and narrator: "Like God Himself, she seems to preside in her fiction as both creator and derisive judge" (131).

to the artist's creation.⁵⁵ The artist's personal moral status is unimportant for producing good art, but that fact does not alter the moral basis of the fiction itself, a reality that O'Connor affirms. O'Connor refers to the imagination and vision of the prophetic consciousness, not the prophet's moral life, quoting Aquinas again: "It is the imaginative vision itself that endorses the morality" (*HB* 365). The difference is that one approach to interpreting the moral basis of fiction is to see it rooted in the author's personality, while the other recognizes the author's search for and experience of a larger moral order that is then reflected in the fiction. O'Connor's lack of concern with the artist's personal morality is not a statement of modesty; she is attempting, using Aquinas, to relocate the order of moral experience as grounded in reality and perceived and intuited through the artist's vision of the world rather than through a projection of the artist's beliefs.⁵⁶ To dismiss the particular morality of the novelist does not mean that one need no longer contend with the moral implications of the art, and O'Connor insists repeatedly that the imaginative vision of the artist has moral significance.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ In a letter to "A" O'Connor simplifies "rectitude of the appetite": "St. Thomas' remark is plain enough: you don't have to be good to write well. Much to be thankful for..." (*HB* 103).

⁵⁶ O'Connor's prophetic vision, according to Asals, is determined primarily by her Catholic beliefs, "the general substance of which was transmitted to her through the church." See Asals, *The Imagination of Extremity*, p. 158.

⁵⁷ Asals, in the *Imagination of Extremity*, also refers to Aquinas' definition of prophetic vision as a quality of the imagination rather than a moral faculty, but he suggests that this means the moral question can be dismissed in favour of a more artistic discussion of imagination. He also indicates that O'Connor's use of this reference reveals her interest in

For O'Connor, the artist's vision, always tied to the power of intellection and directed to the "image of its source, the image of ultimate reality," is occupied with the good that is made, which reflects that image most perfectly (*MM* 157). Her prophetic vision should not be characterized as a religious projection that is morally prescriptive, nor as the product of an artistic imagination severed from moral relevance; as a novelist O'Connor understands her prophetic vision in such a way that the moral ends are crucial while remaining subordinate to the ultimate end of her fiction. But, given our earlier discussion, if the virtues of art and prudence are both within the order of the practical intellect, why would art be seen as not contributing specifically to moral instruction or inspiration? The decisive point is that any effects, moral or otherwise, of the artist's vision are grounded in the artist's focus on the source and "image of ultimate reality"; yet when art is understood as being intended for moral instruction, the focus is centred on human action. For O'Connor, this is best expressed by an understanding of art that transcends usefulness, even in a moral sense, in order that the good of what is made reflects the divine source of goodness, God. O'Connor's understanding of prophetic vision and its relation to art and morality explains why the separations between reason and imagination, or between religious belief and art, are not valid distinctions for her self-understanding as an artist. She makes this self-understanding clear in her reference to Aquinas, by reaffirming that her

their separation: "In the separation between the imaginative and the moral that she so eagerly seized upon in Aquinas...O'Connor articulated a justification for her own kind of fiction" (157-8).

purpose as an artist is to make something good in itself:

St. Thomas Aquinas says that art does not require rectitude of the appetite, that it is wholly concerned with the good of that which is made. He says that a work of art is a good in itself, and this is a truth that the modern world has largely forgotten. We are not content to stay within our limitations and make something that is simply a good in and by itself. Now we want to make something that will have some utilitarian value. Yet what is good in itself glorifies God because it reflects God. The artist has his hands full and does his duty if he attends to his art. He can safely leave evangelizing to the evangelists. He must first of all be aware of his limitations as an artist--for art transcends its limitations only by staying within them (*MM* 171).

Prophetic knowing, or revelation, according to Aquinas, is a manner of seeing things that not only relate to human beings, but also to God. In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas describes the substance of this kind of vision: "Prophetic revelation is about things pertaining to spiritual substances, by whom we are urged to good or evil; this pertains to the discernment of spirits."⁵⁸ But, for both O'Connor and Aquinas, the discernment of spirits is not a disembodied act, and our corporeal nature guarantees that the experience of sight, both spiritual and physical, is connected to our experience in the sensible world. The prophetic novelist is, as O'Connor puts it, "a realist of distances" (*MM* 44) who seeks to widen the view of the imagination to include and reveal the hidden

⁵⁸ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans., Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd, 1934), II-II, Q. 171, art.1.

spiritual realities that are present in the everyday of human experience.⁵⁹ Copleston suggests that Aquinas' account of the human dependence on sense-perception and the imagination does not thereby limit or "destroy its openness to reality in a wider sense than material reality"; instead "it means that in its present life the human mind can know spiritual or super-sensible reality only in so far as it is manifested in the material world."⁶⁰ As a prophetic novelist, O'Connor sees her writing as the discernment of spiritual order within the sensible, concrete experiences of her characters' lives.

Keeping in mind this discussion of prophetic vision and the way in which O'Connor draws upon Aquinas, let us now engage further some aspects of Aquinas' account of prophecy. I would like to focus on three specific questions regarding prophecy: 1) whether prophecy is only a matter of faith, or if it pertains also to knowledge; 2) whether prophecy is to be understood primarily as a means of forecasting the future; and 3) whether the prophet must be of a particular moral standing as a prerequisite for prophesying. The reasons for choosing these three questions pertain to the scholarly discussion of O'Connor's work, and particularly her religious thought in relation to the fiction. As I suggested at the beginning of this section (*iv*), O'Connor's understanding of prophetic vision, as well as her discussion of it in relation to Aquinas, is particularly

⁵⁹ She describes this title of being a "realist of distances" as follows: "prophecy is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up" (*MM* 44).

⁶⁰ F.C. Copleston, *Aquinas*, (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1955), 46.

germane to the discernment of the relation between her religious ideas and her fiction.

The above three questions concerning prophecy address some of the separations and misconceptions that prevail in the interpretation of O'Connor as a religious artist, owing to the fact that her philosophical approach to theology and her theological approach to art are often ignored: 1) the issue of whether prophecy is a matter of faith or knowledge raises the assumed separation of faith from knowledge, while Aquinas discusses prophecy as a term that includes different kinds of knowledge, including faith, spiritual insight and wisdom; 2) the discernment of degrees of knowledge is continued in the discussion of prophecy as it pertains to the future, where Aquinas clarifies more precisely how the prophetic knowledge of future events is about insight into spiritual reality, rather than making predictions; and finally, 3) the moral status of the prophet is not as important as what and how the prophet sees, according to Aquinas, thereby making for a less determinative relation between imaginative vision and moral judgement.

The first question to address, since it affects all of the others, is the relation of prophecy to knowledge and faith. Aquinas does not separate faith from knowledge, and in fact, he incorporates faith under prophetic knowing. Aquinas categorizes prophecy as the encompassing term for all kinds of knowing, including the spiritual vision of the mind, faith, and the pursuit of wisdom:

Now all things pertaining to knowledge may be comprised under *prophecy*, since prophetic revelation extends not only to future events relating to man, but also to things relating to God, both as to those which are to be believed by all and are matters of *faith*, and as to yet higher mysteries, which

concern the perfect and belong to *wisdom*.⁶¹

To set up the connection between prophecy and knowledge, and further, the nature of prophetic knowledge, we can look at the first article of Question 171, where Aquinas asks whether prophecy pertains to knowledge. His response begins with a quotation from I Kings 9:9, which suggests the connection between prophecy and vision because an older description of the prophet used the term "seer," referring to those who had spiritual insight or vision. Aquinas adds to the quotation from Kings by asserting the correlation among sight, knowledge and prophecy: "*For he that is now called a prophet, in time past was called a seer*. Now sight pertains to knowledge. Therefore prophecy pertains to knowledge" (II-II, Q. 171. Art 1). The vision of the "seer" or prophet is characterized by the knowledge of things unseen or invisible, and the language of "sight" in relation to what is unseen refers to spiritual vision, or insight, known through the intellect and otherwise hidden to common sight. As Aquinas states:

...prophets know things that are far removed from man's knowledge. Wherefore they may be said to take their name from *apparition*, because things appear to them from afar. Wherefore, as Isidore states (*Etym.*, vii. 8), *in the Old Testament, they were called Seers, because they saw what others saw not, and surveyed things hidden in mystery*"⁶² (II-II, Q. 171.

⁶¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa*, II-II, Q. 171. The references to the *Summa Theologiae* in the following discussion will be noted in the text.

⁶² Interestingly, immediately following this passage, Aquinas writes "Hence among the heathen nations they were known as *vates*, on account of their power of mind." (*Summa* II-II, Q. 171, A. 1). I mention this because in Jacques Maritain's *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, his initial descriptions of poetic knowing include a definition of the ancient *vates*, who was a diviner and thus, for Maritain, had a similar role to the poet, whose spiritual knowledge

Art 1).

To "[survey] things hidden in mystery" suggests that the seer or prophet can know, and hence convey, something about that mystery. The insight is not simply a vision that the prophet has uniquely; it is meant to be expressed and shared because the mystery that the prophet seeks to know is God ultimately.

Thus, the knowledge of the prophet is not without purpose or expression. Aquinas notes that "prophecy consists secondarily in speech" in order to instruct others with "the things they know through being taught of God." Prophetic knowledge, rather than being the prophet's own wisdom, is "taught by God" and therefore an important part of the prophet's task is to teach the knowledge of their vision. Prophetic knowledge, according to Aquinas, necessarily comes from God, in contrast to the knowledge of the false prophet who speaks for himself rather than God. Here Aquinas quotes from Jeremiah and Ezekiel in his account of the false prophets' error: "they speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the Lord" and "[w]oe to the foolish prophets, that follow their own spirit, and see nothing." The implication is that the source of all prophetic knowledge is God, but this should not be understood simply instrumentally, as though the prophet plays the role of a mouthpiece only.

The fourth objection in the first article addresses this issue with a discussion of inspiration, which questions the active role of the prophet's intellect. The objection states

of things is creatively translated through art and poetry.

that because inspiration, denoting motion, concerns the affections, and revelation concerns the intellect, if prophecy is characterized as inspired speech, then "it would seem that prophecy does not pertain to the intellect more than to the affections." Aquinas responds to this objection by suggesting that both inspiration and revelation are part of prophecy, insofar as "inspiration is requisite for prophecy, as regards the raising of the mind," and revelation is necessary, "as regards the very perception of Divine things, whereby prophecy is completed." (II-II, Q. 171. Art 1). What can be understood from this discussion is that the experience of the prophet is an intellectually active one, because, as Aquinas says, the mind of the prophet must be raised and receptive to the inspiration and revelation of divine things. It is a participatory action. The false prophet acts independently, without the intellectual ascent, by speaking his own truth and not participating in the truth of God. For both Aquinas and O'Connor, all knowledge of the mysteries of human beings and God are included in the activity of prophecy, to various degrees. The difference between true and false prophets is not simply that one has the knowledge of God and the other does not have it; the difference lies primarily in the orientation of their knowledge, the manner in which the mind is directed. The false prophet, says Aquinas, speaks out of a claim to his own knowledge, independently of divine revelation, whereas the true prophet understands that the knowledge revealed to him comes from his participation in the truth of God. This language of orientation fits with those lines from Aquinas above (II-II, Q. 171), where knowledge is described as something received in faith (acknowledging the limitations of human knowing) and as

something pursued in the ascent to wisdom (knowing as a participation in God's perfection, not as a human possession).

Aquinas' second point concerning prophecy addresses its identification with predicting the future. This is probably the most common assumption about prophecy, and although it does play a role in the biblical prophets and Aquinas' account, the purpose of prophecy is not limited to forecasting future events. It is important to distinguish another way in which prophetic knowing can be about seeing what is distant or hidden because such an understanding of prophetic vision is what concerned O'Connor most as a novelist.⁶³ The question of how prophecy is related to "seeing" what is distant, not with regard to time but with regard to spiritual reality, is at the heart of O'Connor's interest in the significance of what the spiritual insight of the prophet can reveal.

In the third article of Question 171, Aquinas asks whether prophecy is only about future contingencies, and he replies that prophecy is not limited to the future, but can refer to the past and the present also. Given this, he explains how the diversity of prophetic revelation extends to many things: "Now prophetic knowledge comes through a Divine light, whereby it is possible to know all things both Divine and human, both spiritual and corporeal; and consequently the prophetic revelation extends to them all." The reason,

⁶³ See O'Connor's description of the prophet as "a realist of distances" (*MM* 44-47). Another reason for clarifying why this question in Aquinas is significant for our interpretation of O'Connor is to avoid some of the simplistic assumptions about O'Connor's religiosity, where religion is reduced to "magical feats," and prophecy is something akin to sorcery. See Clare Kahane, "Rage of Vision," and the discussion of this question in section (*iii*) of this chapter.

however, that prophetic knowledge is more often associated with the future is because one of the prime characteristics of prophetic knowledge is that it concerns things "remote from our knowledge." Clearly, the future is remote temporally, but there are things remote from our knowledge spiritually and intellectually as well. Aquinas clarifies the various levels of remoteness and suggests that "the more remote things are from our knowledge the more pertinent they are to prophecy." There are three degrees of remoteness according to Aquinas: 1) one degree comprises things remote from the knowledge, either sensitive or intellective, of some particular man, but not from the knowledge of all men; 2) the second degree comprises those things which surpass the knowledge of all men without exception, not that they are in themselves unknowable, but on account of a defect in human knowledge; 3) the last degree comprises things remote from the knowledge of all men, through being in themselves unknowable; such are future contingencies, the truth of which is indeterminate (II-II, Q. 171, art. 3).

Given these varying degrees of human knowledge, the question of whether prophecy is natural to the soul arises as an issue of human-divine relations. How does the human mind perceive and know spiritually? O'Connor's discussion of the participatory experience of spiritual and intellectual knowing (see the discussion of reason in section (iii) of this chapter) is related to Aquinas' account, on the topic prophetic knowing, of what is natural to human knowledge and what is revealed through divine revelation. In the first article of the *Summa*, II-II Q. 172, Aquinas asks whether prophecy can be natural. The objections, in their positive responses, point to the powers of the soul to see

into the future, and to sometimes know what is to come. Aquinas' primary reply is that prophecy cannot be willed by man at any time, and that the source of prophetic knowledge comes not from nature, but "through the gift of the Holy Ghost." The language of the "gift" of her prophetic vision and her art is often used by O'Connor: "There is no excuse for anyone to write fiction for public consumption unless he has been called to do so by the presence of a gift" (*MM* 81); and "[f]or the Catholic novelist, the prophetic vision is not simply a matter of his personal imaginative gift..."(*MM* 179).

Prophetic knowledge, defined generally as that which is remote from human knowledge, always proceeds from a divine source. Aquinas elaborates his answer, however, by referring to the possibility of "prophetic foreknowledge" occurring in two ways, as befits divine and human knowing. It is proper to the Divine intellect, according to Aquinas, that future things are known "as they are in themselves," whereas "future things can be foreknown in their causes with a natural knowledge even by man: thus a physician foreknows future health or death in certain causes." From this, Aquinas explains that the natural foreknowledge proper to human beings can be experienced in two ways. First, he describes the way the soul knows, as understood by Plato, "who held that our souls have knowledge of all things by participating in the ideas; but that this knowledge is obscured in them by union with the body." He agrees more explicitly with Aristotle, however, and echoes the argument that "the soul acquires knowledge from sensibles." Aquinas suggests that instead of assuming that the body hinders the soul's knowing, it is through the body and sensible experience, joined with man's imaginative power, that he

can acquire some knowledge of the future. Above all, and this is Aquinas' final point, the prophetic foreknowledge that is natural to human beings is secondary to the prophetic foreknowledge of Divine revelation for two reasons: first, because Divine revelation can be about anything, and infallibly so, and secondly, because Divine prophecy is "according to the unchangeable truth" (II-II Q. 172, art. 1).

Finally, in addressing this issue of the distinction between human knowing (through natural reasoning) and divine communication through revelation, Aquinas asks whether the prophet always distinguishes the insight of his own spirit from his instruction by the prophetic spirit. He responds with the following clarification, arguing that "the prophet's mind is instructed by God in two ways: in one way by an express revelation, in another way by a most mysterious instinct" (II-II Q. 171, art. 5). In order to establish the different degrees of certainty in the prophet's knowledge, Aquinas describes two ways in which the prophet participates in the knowledge of God: by divine revelation, and by the knowledge gained through a "mysterious instinct." According to Aquinas, an express revelation of God would necessarily be known with certainty, because otherwise someone like Abraham would not have been willing to sacrifice his only son in response to the command. He contrasts this certainty with things known by a mysterious instinct, which sometimes, being mingled with the thoughts of one's own spirit, "are not all manifested with prophetic certitude, for this instinct is something imperfect in the genus of prophecy" (II-II Q. 171, art. 5). Such a distinction is echoed by O'Connor, who understood that the imperfection of human knowing alters the way human beings see reality, with a result that

is not blindness, but rather differing levels of perception. In response to those who wonder why she writes about violence and ugliness, when presumably she sees the good as ultimate reality, she says, "though the good is the ultimate reality, the ultimate reality has been weakened in human beings as a result of the Fall, and it is this weakened life that we see...What one sees is given by circumstances and by the nature of one's particular kind of perception" (*MM* 179). Here we have O'Connor's specific mention of the "defect" in human knowing to which Aquinas refers, voiced in the biblical language of the Fall, and we have also her awareness of the fact that, despite this weakened vision, she can affirm that "the good is the ultimate reality." The pivotal question for O'Connor is the responsive choice and the manner in which the human being approaches divine knowledge. The mysterious instinct is mysterious only insofar as it can be ignored, pursued or rejected, and O'Connor is aware of the fact that some seek its source and others do not; the issue is not a matter of knowing differently according to different natures, but the direction or orientation of one's knowledge.

The third and final question in our consideration of Aquinas' account of prophecy is whether the prophet must be morally good. This question is perhaps the one most often raised by O'Connor, especially concerning herself as a prophetic novelist, but it is also relevant to a discussion of the fiction. In *The Violent Bear it Away*, Tarwater's prophetic call begins after he has murdered an innocent child: does this preclude taking seriously O'Connor's claim that he has now understood and is ready to fulfill his prophetic calling? One objection makes the argument that moral purity is necessary for prophecy: "For it is

written (*Wis.* vii.27) that the wisdom of God through nations conveyeth herself into holy souls..." (II-II, Q. 172, art. 4). According to Aquinas, to focus on the prophet's individual or personal goodness is potentially to separate the prophet from the source of that goodness, whereas to address the goodness that the prophet sees or imagines in creation is to recognize its presence as a reality in which human beings can participate.

Aquinas makes a distinction between the good life in terms of the soul's inward root (which is sanctifying grace), the source of goodness, and the soul's passions and will (II-II, Q. 172, art. 4). Sanctifying grace is given so that "man's soul may be united to God by charity," and yet, according to Aquinas (quoting St. Paul), "prophecy can be without charity" because "prophecy pertains to the intellect, whose act precedes the act of the will, which power is perfected by charity." Aquinas concludes that since prophecy is not "directly intended to unite man's affection to God, which is the purpose of charity" then "prophecy can be without a good life, as regards the first root of this goodness." He does suggest further, however, that a consideration of the good life in terms of the soul's passions and external actions, would require him to say that an evil life from this point of view "is an obstacle to prophecy." He argues this because prophecy requires the mind to be raised up to the contemplation of spiritual things, which is hindered by strong passions (II-II, Q. 172, art. 4). The inward good life of the soul, rooted in God's grace, is not required for prophetic knowledge, since prophetic knowing is determined largely by the intellect, but the soul's passions and external habits can impede the prophetic life if they block the mind from spiritual ascent.

O'Connor's claim to be a prophetic novelist, who is not required to be morally pure, is directed to the former distinction that Aquinas makes about the inward root of the soul. She is not concerned with the issue of her passions or external habits, nor is she concerned with the passions or external habits of her characters who are struggling to become prophets. The primary issue regarding the prophet's vision, according to O'Connor, is the discernment of what is spiritual as it is seen and experienced in the natural world. To do this she is less occupied with questions of moral habits, choosing instead to address her audience prophetically, by making her spiritual vision apparent in an age peculiarly closed to spiritual reality as it can be perceived in the physical world:

The problem of the novelist who wishes to write about a man's encounter with this God is how he shall make the experience--which is both natural and supernatural--understandable, and credible, to his reader. In any age this would be a problem, but in our own, it is a well-nigh insurmountable one. Today's audience is one in which religious feeling has become, if not atrophied, at least vaporous and sentimental...When the physical fact is separated from the spiritual reality, the dissolution of belief is eventually inevitable (*MM* 161-2).

This remark returns our discussion to the separations between the physical and the spiritual, nature and grace, reason and imagination, and vision and judgement.

Separations such as these reveal what O'Connor refers to as a Manichean tendency in modernity, where spirit and matter are no longer seen in their connections, but are radically separated. Her response to this was her fiction, an art that she understood to be incarnational (*MM* 68). Her religious vision is often described as sacramental, but this sacramental vision reflects an understanding of her art itself as incarnational.

v) *Fiction as an Incarnational Art*

For O'Connor, the Catholic novel would be "one that represents reality adequately as we see it manifested in this world of things and human relationships. Only in and by these sense experiences does the fiction writer approach a contemplative knowledge of the mystery they embody" (*MM* 172). Fiction, according to O'Connor's definition, draws together mystery and manners. She says that "there are two qualities that make fiction. One is the sense of mystery and the other is the sense of manners. You get the manners from the texture of existence that surrounds you" (*MM* 103). O'Connor states that fiction is an incarnational art, because it offers a concrete representation of life and human existence in the facts of the story, but it can also reveal spiritual mysteries and meaning. Meaning is not disembodied in fiction, it is always incarnate: "The meaning of a story has to be embodied in it, has to be made concrete in it...The meaning of fiction is not abstract meaning but experienced meaning" (*MM* 96). O'Connor's description of art as incarnational is rooted in her understanding of the Incarnation of Christ and her vision is ordered by the images of creation and the Incarnation. The Incarnation is the climactic divine incursion into the drama of temporal creation and O'Connor models her fictional art from this understanding of the divine presence in the drama of everyday life. She says: "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centred in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that. I don't think that this is a position that can be taken halfway or one that is particularly easy in these times to make transparent in fiction" (*MM* 32). To interpret

O'Connor's fiction and theology sacramentally it should be stated that she understands the Incarnation as the perfect expression of spiritually embodied existence. I would argue that O'Connor understands the incarnation of Christ to be much more comprehensive than a statement of faith; and that it is related to all of the separations discussed in the preceding sections, but especially the separation of the physical from the spiritual, both within human beings themselves and in the world.

In an important passage from *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor writes that "Christ didn't redeem us by a direct intellectual act, but became incarnate in human form" (*MM* 176). The religious significance of this Incarnation is the subject of her Christian faith and her fiction: the Incarnation of Christ expresses the nature of the human experience of the divine, spiritual reality is experienced in concrete human existence, and God relates to human beings in the flesh. Christ represents the joining of the visible and the invisible, and this is the central Christian mystery for O'Connor, which human beings experience themselves as spiritually embodied beings. When O'Connor says that Christ did not redeem by an intellectual act, she specifically uses the word "direct," suggesting an experience of Christ that is entirely spiritual and/or intellectual without bodily significance or presence. Rather than a rejection of the intellect, O'Connor is demonstrating the connection of the spiritual/intellectual life with bodily existence. The Incarnation, therefore, represents the mystery of embodied spiritual life, both by mirroring the human condition of a simultaneous physical and spiritual existence, and by revealing the connection of human beings to God that is known and lived in body and soul.

As a prophetic novelist, O'Connor considered that "the main concern of the fiction writer is with mystery as it is incarnated in human life" (*MM* 176). She suggests the connection between writing fiction and theology with the following statement: "the real novelist...knows that he cannot approach the infinite directly, that he must penetrate the natural human world as it is. The more sacramental his theology, the more encouragement he will get from it to do just that" (*MM* 163). When O'Connor discusses her writing, she is often drawing parallels between fiction and human life, and this is apparent in the discussion of limitation especially. Instead of being taught "how to write," O'Connor argues that what needs to be taught in the art of writing are "the limits and possibilities of words and the respect due them" (*MM* 83). Her statement here is not simply a description of writing habits, it is also a religious and theological comment. Just as the writer needs to learn respect for words and their limitations, the human experience of mystery is fundamentally an experience of human limitation in the face of something transcendent: "If a writer is any good, what he makes will have its source in a realm much larger than that which his conscious mind can encompass..."(*MM* 83). The experience of limitation is related to another example that O'Connor uses to draw together the habits of the artist with her basic religious orientation: poverty.

O'Connor writes about being interested in the poor, not out of curiosity about their economic situation, but because poverty is also a human condition of soul.⁶⁴ "Even when

⁶⁴ She says further: "When anyone writes about the poor in order merely to reveal their material lack, then he is doing what the sociologist does, not what the artist does. The

he [the novelist] writes about the rich, he is more concerned with what they lack than with what they have," she says, attesting to the spiritual questions of need: "His concern with poverty is with a poverty fundamental to man. I believe that the basic experience of everyone is the experience of human limitation" (*MM* 131). The poor, therefore, symbolize the central spiritual condition of human life, and because they live "with less padding between them and the raw forces of life" O'Connor finds in them a revealing touchstone for the universal human experience of limitation and need. However, the novelist is also looking at himself, says O'Connor, and in seeing the depths of himself he comes to know "the bedrock of all human experience--the experience of limitation or, if you will, of poverty" (*MM* 132). O'Connor's artistic discussions of limitation and poverty communicate her religious understanding of the human experience of incompleteness, and the corresponding desire on the part of human beings to seek out and find completion for that experienced lack.

O'Connor, in her prose, is attempting to reveal that the religious questions of human limitation and the desire for completion or wholeness are also the questions of art. In her fiction, O'Connor takes up these ideas and incarnates them in the characters and their actions and experiences of life. Rather than interpreting her fiction separately from her theological views about moral meaning and purpose, O'Connor's views need to be reconsidered as reflections on art, which in fact are drawing art and theology together in

poverty he writes about is so essential that it needn't have anything at all to do with money" (*MM* 132).

several complex ways and with reference to specific traditions of thought. When interpreters ignore O'Connor's references--in her fiction as well as her essays-- to ancient biblical, theological and philosophical sources, their analyses tend to narrow the discussion of her art and its religious symbolism and lose sight of her vital theoretical accounts of art and theology.

O'Connor writes that "[w]hat St. Thomas did for the new learning of the 13th century we are in bad need of someone to do for the 20th" (*HB* 305), but this task is not O'Connor's. She is dependent on Aquinas because for her there is no comparable intellectual synthesis available in the modern era, and her prose essays are not an attempt to establish a new synthesis, they are simply O'Connor's theoretical acknowledgement of a tradition of interpretation and religious thought that has definitively informed her understanding of art and theology. O'Connor is primarily an artist and one who is writing in such a way that her fiction is an invitation to all to see what she sees, an experience that is possible even without reading about the Thomistic distinctions concerning art and prophecy in her theoretical essays. Certainly she is critical of the loss of certain intellectual distinctions and the ways in which the intellect has become sterile, but the "intellect" here is not the privilege of an educated elite--it is the human experience of the soul's ability to know its divine source, and to be confronted with mystery in the midst of concrete existence. O'Connor sees only a need for a certain openness on the part of her audience, a willingness to see what is being shown, and a willingness to be changed by it: "The type of mind that can understand good fiction is not necessarily the educated mind,

but it is at all times the kind of mind that is willing to have its sense of mystery deepened by contact with reality, and its sense of reality deepened by contact with mystery" (*MM* 79).

I have argued that it is necessary to see both O'Connor's essays and her fiction together, reflecting her basic insight that religious truth is both rational and fictionally incarnated. In the following three chapters I will analyze three of her fictional texts directly: *Wise Blood*, *The Violent Bear it Away* and "Revelation." I am using both of O'Connor's novels, partly because they are her most explicitly religious works and thus receive somewhat less attention by scholars than the short stories (on the assumption that the novels are more obviously religious, whereas the short stories can be interpreted with relatively little discussion of religious themes), but also in order to interpret some of her more sustained explorations of religious themes. I do not consider the religious vision of the stories to be any less connected to that of the novels, which is why I am also using one of O'Connor's short stories. Additionally, the two novels and "Revelation" cover the span of O'Connor's writing career, which permits some assessment of the consistency and direction of her religious thought. I will consider the dramatic episodes of these artistic works above all in regard to O'Connor's portrayal of the various movements and encounters involved in her understanding of the self in relation to God.

CHAPTER TWO

Moral Vision and the Grotesque: *Wise Blood*

i) Storytelling in the Bible Belt

In his book *Christian Ethics and Imagination*, Philip Keane has noted that since Vatican II, one of the significant changes in Catholic moral theology is that it has become more conversant with biblical themes.¹ In relation to this, there has been a shift away from discursive, logical and positivistic forms of moral argument towards a discussion of ethics as embodied in story, narrative and drama. The connection that Keane and others have recognized between the biblical stories and our modern moral discourse seems to be rooted in the need for a common mythic literature, or *mythos*, where new stories continue to resonate with the stories of old that are already shared, as some kind of measure.² Understood in this way, O'Connor's use of biblical images in her fiction is not so much owing to a religious preference--over her more systematic readings of classical philosophy--as it is a recognition of the inherent value of stories for illuminating the nature

¹ Philip S. Keane, S.S., *Christian Ethics and Imagination* (Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984), 3.

² By mythic, or *mythos*, O'Connor is referring to the stories that human communities share, which describe or account for the sacred and spiritual history of their lives. Myths are stories that speak to the aspects of existence that cannot be described literally, but rather suggest evocatively the spiritual dimension of human experience.

of moral choices. To discuss a shared measure for moral discourse, however, presumes a number of things, one of which is the fact that O'Connor is not speaking of a neutral universe where human beings create and project their moral concerns out of various individual motivations and needs. She is presuming a moral order that is present in creation, known and intuited in human experience, and ultimately, shared.

For many modern ears, however, the use of biblical stories presents a problem, because the common, biblical *mythos* is no longer necessarily "common." And when communities--the groups who hold such mythic stories in common--disperse, the common *mythos* is forgotten and soon abandoned. The consequence of this has been the impoverishment of the imagination in the realm of moral judgements; when moral reflections cannot be grounded in any common drama within creation, there is an increased dependence on the abstract rather than on concrete experience for moral reasoning. This is not to say that moral reflection is rooted only in the imagination, but O'Connor realized that the type of reasoning which often serves as its alternative is abstract, calculative reasoning. O'Connor sees abstract reasoning as an impediment to engaging in the sensual aspect of good fiction as well as good moral questioning. This issue of the relationship between a shared moral vision and a common sacred literature is notable because as a Southern writer in the fifties and early sixties, O'Connor stood in an interesting position. Her often repeated phrase, that while the South is not perhaps "Christ-centred" it is clearly "Christ haunted" (*MM* 44), points to the existence of a community that still recalls and remembers the images of its collective, religious past: "in

the South the Bible is known by the ignorant as well, and it is always that *mythos* which the poor hold in common that is most valuable to the fiction writer. When the poor hold sacred history in common, they have ties to the universal and the holy, which allows the meaning of their every action to be heightened and seen under the aspect of eternity" (*MM* 203). The biblical stories themselves are not necessarily prescriptive for those who remember them, but reflect the imaginative encounter of human beings with moral questions and choices. Nonetheless, while O'Connor saw the South as being unique in its continued familiarity with the biblical stories, she understood that even this remnant of communities with a shared biblical culture was diminishing.

O'Connor notes that "[i]t takes readers as well as writers to make literature" (*MM* 181); and this participatory nature--between writer and reader--of the experience of fiction means that the sacred stories of the past, which have shaped and defined human communities, require a continued life as the mythical measure that is held in common. Without this measure, O'Connor foresaw the degeneration of the life of fiction because of the inability to ground its meaning in anything greater than itself. On the level of stories, allusions or imbedded references to other stories make a new story resonate and reveal different layers of meaning, and this is paralleled on the level of moral choices, where each new thing that is done has some connection with past attempts to understand what must be done. To make fiction and moral choices entirely self-referential is to lose, not one meaning that determines everything, but the idea that our stories and our moral choices do not exist in a vacuum. When the value of something is defined simply by what is being

done, whether it is fiction or morality, there is no sense of a common or shared measure of what is good in that fiction or in those moral choices. As O'Connor notes "[y]ou can't indicate moral values when morality changes with what is being done, because there is no accepted basis of judgement" (*MM* 166).

But according to O'Connor, the fiction writer needs more than a moral code, and this is where storytelling and moral reflection are seen as intrinsically linked:

To be great storytellers, we need something to measure ourselves against, and this is what we conspicuously lack in this age. Men judge themselves now by what they find themselves doing. The Catholic has the natural law and the teachings of the Church to guide him, but for the writing of fiction, something more is necessary (*MM* 202).

Even as a Catholic, O'Connor sees church doctrine as insufficient for moral questioning in fiction, but her critical position here is not so much directed toward doctrines as it is toward the separation of fiction or stories from the moral life. In this quotation, O'Connor identifies the need for a measure, but she also suggests something unique about the nature of fiction itself, because in this realm she recognizes that the "teachings of the Church" are not enough. Something beyond such teaching is required to give life to the moral dimension of the drama. The distinction between the measure of the Church and the measure of the artist does not imply that there are two measures; rather, that the means of representing the measure in fiction must answer to the demands of art, the demands of both the intellect and the imagination. She clarifies this measure by saying:

For the purposes of fiction, these guides have to exist in a concrete form, known and held sacred by the whole community. They have to exist in the form of stories which affect our image and our judgement of ourselves.

Abstractions, formulas, laws will not serve here. We have to have stories in our background. It takes a story to make a story. It takes a story of mythic dimensions, one which belongs to everybody, one in which everybody is able to recognize the hand of God and its descent (*MM* 202).

The stories about which O'Connor is speaking are mythic in the sense that they address religious and spiritual realities that abstract formulas only serve to reduce in the process of "containing" their meaning. Stories in which "everybody is able to recognize the hand of God and its descent" require the participation of the reader's intellect and imagination as well as the author's, and this means that there must be sufficient space for interpretation and understanding, a space wherein the story can unfold and reveal itself in different ways. This is the good of art, according to O'Connor, who believes (like Aquinas) that art should be a good in itself, not forced into some utilitarian purpose. Her reasons for saying this are at the heart of her understanding of art, and, essentially of reality, because for O'Connor, "what is good in itself glorifies God because it reflects God" (*MM* 171).

O'Connor insists that fiction has to "have value on the *dramatic* level, the level of truth recognizable by anybody." She says further: "The fact that many people can't see anything *Christian* about my novel doesn't interfere with many of them seeing it as a novel which does not falsify reality."³ These comments raise two important points. O'Connor insists that the truth of reality transcends a particular Christian teaching, when she says that on the dramatic level, the truth can be recognized by anybody. Further, she argues that even if the Christian elements in her novels are not perceived by the reader, the novel

³ Rosemary Magee, *Conversations with Flannery O'Connor*, p. 87.

does not falsify reality. This would suggest that the truth of the story is not limited to its Christian images, or that reality is any less present in her stories when those images are not understood. That being said, however, the second point must be made that for O'Connor, the "truth of reality" is best understood and represented in Christian language and symbol, and that to do this is also not to falsify reality. Both the dramatic episodes of life and her Christian understanding of them share in reality, as well as account for it and describe it. While O'Connor acknowledges that her Christian symbolism does not contain all of reality, she does not separate the two in her fiction. When they are not seen together--and for the modern reader this is less a matter of not being a Christian, than of being unfamiliar with Christian traditions, scriptures and symbols--then appreciation of the depth of O'Connor's symbolic representation of reality is limited by the reader's level of perception. The result is usually that the Christian symbolization is considered irrelevant, or more often, that it does not even relate to reality.

Given this, O'Connor also recognized that while the South provided her with the religious landscape for her fiction, the perception of that religious history in the South was changing, and in fact diminishing. The common measure was disintegrating, and as a novelist she was confronted with the task of writing fiction for a community that held less and less in common in regard to religious/mythic stories. She says of this disjunction between the writer and his audience:

I am often told that the model of balance for the novelist should be Dante, who divided his territory up pretty evenly between hell, purgatory and paradise. There can be no objection to this, but also there can be no reason

to assume that the result of doing it in these times will give us the balanced picture that it gave in Dante's. Dante lived in the thirteenth century, when that balance was achieved in the faith of his age. We live now in an age which doubts both fact and value, which is swept this way and that by momentary convictions. Instead of reflecting a balance from the world around him, the novelist now has to achieve one from a felt balance inside himself (*MM* 49).

In saying this, O'Connor does not mean that she creates this balance, nor that it is hers alone. She expresses the larger dimension of this balance through her use of the word "felt;" the experience is not projected but intuited, and although it is no longer acknowledged publicly in shared symbols, it has not disappeared. The balance of which she speaks is an experience of the order of reality, but it is one that is noticeably absent in the context of modern, liberal culture, where order (moral or otherwise) is understood to be determined by individual opinions. Her comment suggests that as a novelist lacking the means from the age in which she lives, she must reflect this order of reality through her own perception and recognition of it. The result is often a conflict between reader and author, because when the vision of reality is not shared, it is rejected as being simply the imagination of the artist. This is especially true when the vision suggests a spiritual order of reality that is understood by the author to be more encompassing than personal opinion. For O'Connor, this precipitated the use of sometimes "violent literary means to get [her] vision across to a hostile audience" (*MM* 185). The name given to this moral vision in O'Connor's fiction is "the grotesque." I refer to O'Connor's use of the grotesque as part of her moral vision because the grotesque is O'Connor's response to the diminishing common perception of the divine measure of human life, not the loss of the divine measure itself;

still less does it imply the view that human life itself is grotesque, as is commonly argued. For O'Connor, the grotesque is both a means of countering the loss of a common vision of the Good that is the ground of all moral discussion, and a judgement on the fruits of this blindness. As John Desmond says in his book *Risen Sons*, "O'Connor saw her special problem as a writer to be rooted in the fact that the age speciously believed in its own capacity for achieving wholeness exclusive of the divine, a situation she found truly grotesque."⁴

ii) *The Moral of the Grotesque*

Desmond's comment about the spiritual condition of the modern age aptly summarizes the character of Hazel Motes in O'Connor's first novel *Wise Blood*, a novel considered to be her most grotesque work. There are several ways in which Hazel Motes' character might be interpreted as grotesque, but my analysis will focus on Motes' limited search for meaning within his self-constructed and autonomous vision of reality. Hazel Motes' belief in his ability to "achieve wholeness exclusive of the divine" is what O'Connor finds grotesque, because in constructing his own measure of meaning he fails to understand both himself as a human being and the nature of his relation to God and the order of reality. In her preface to the second edition of *Wise Blood*, O'Connor makes the

⁴ John Desmond, *Risen Sons: Flannery O'Connor's Vision of History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 53.

problem of human autonomy explicit, using the language of integrity (from *integrare*: to make whole). For most readers, says O'Connor, "Hazel Motes' integrity lies in his trying with such vigor to get rid of the ragged figure [Jesus] who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind. For the author Hazel's integrity lies in his not being able to" (*WB* preface). O'Connor's reference to integrity in this context is often interpreted as a vaguely moralistic comment, where the character of Motes only serves to show the inevitability of Jesus prevailing over human resistance. When integrity is simply equated with goodness, O'Connor's comment can even be regarded as praise for Motes' struggle against Christ and his perverse rebellion made into a virtue.⁵ Without suggesting that O'Connor's mention of integrity is devoid of moral significance, it is perhaps more to the point to reflect on the meaning of the word as wholeness. According to O'Connor, the general response to the novel has been to see Hazel's integrity, or wholeness as a human being, in his strength to be himself against the forces of the Jesus figure haunting him from his strict familial

⁵ For a thoughtful analysis of this issue of Hazel's transformation, see Richard Giannone, *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 8-9. Giannone considers Motes' conversion to be a foregone conclusion given O'Connor's comment that his integrity is rooted in his *inability* to resist Jesus: "*Wise Blood* shows that one can be driven to *virtue* by what one is not, by a power that is not one's own" (8-9 italics mine). I agree that what makes one virtuous comes from a power that is not one's own, but according to O'Connor, the movement towards virtue is not inevitable--human beings are always free to resist it (*MM* 182). It seems that the issue here is the *degree* to which Hazel resists the divine pull, and whether he actually overcomes his resistance in his final actions of the novel. Giannone suggests (with a helpful discussion of the scriptural usage of "sainthood") that Motes becomes virtuous, and he also says that Hazel, despite his resistance, is utterly transformed: "In the end, the would-be nihilist Hazel Motes becomes a saint for our unbelieving age" (9-10).

indoctrination. Yet O'Connor's theological anthropology is different, critical of both Motes' religious upbringing and his response to it. In declaring that Motes' integrity lies in his inability to resist the divine figure, O'Connor means that Motes' wholeness depends on something more than himself. His integrity requires divine completion, due to the lack in himself. If wholeness cannot be achieved exclusively of the divine, as Desmond suggests of O'Connor's vision, then it is true to say that Motes' integrity or wholeness lies in the fact that he cannot do it himself. O'Connor asks finally, "[d]oes one's integrity ever lie in what he is not able to do? I think it usually does..." (*WB* preface). Hazel Motes is unable to make himself whole independently of a divine source; and more importantly, he refuses to acknowledge this and instead seeks wholeness in his own creation of meaning.

A brief account of some of the different meanings of the grotesque as it is employed by O'Connor would be helpful at this point. Peter Hawkins, in his book *The Language of Grace*, offers a helpful description of the grotesque when he states that it "incarnates the illness of the human condition, the extent to which we have fallen from the image of God in which we were created," and yet it also "expresses the tension and discrepancies that arise when grace is at work in a nature that either resists it or is struggling to comply."⁶ These are certainly the central intentions of O'Connor's use of the grotesque. He also notes that the grotesque is a matter of writing style for O'Connor; the grotesque is her imaginative talent. Yet, to avoid reducing O'Connor's philosophical and

⁶ Peter S. Hawkins, *The Language of Grace: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and Iris Murdoch* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1983), 28.

religious insights, it is important to emphasize that she does not consider the grotesque to be indicative of the human condition in any complete sense, nor is it the sole expression of spiritual disorder or sickness. She is aware of her particular artistic ability with the grotesque, but she insists that the grotesque need not be understood as indicative of the writer's outlook on human life. In fact, it is the opposite, insofar as the novelist writing about the grotesque, especially with moral concerns, must be aware of the good by which the grotesque is measured:

There is one thing that I have learned as a writer that sounds very simple but that I think is a mystery of the first order. And that is that one writes what one can, that, after the maximum personal effort, the vision as well as the talent is something given and not chosen. I don't think that art proceeds from a diseased but from a healthy faculty of mind, and think therefore, that it must be trusted as a revelation nevertheless.⁷

O'Connor is not interested in the grotesque for its own sake. Despite some readers' assumptions, her fiction is not the result of a diseased mind with a penchant for ugly things. She is clear in her comment above that art proceeds from a healthy faculty of mind, and that by virtue of a healthy mind the order of spiritual reality is revealed.

O'Connor repeats Mauriac's advice to "purify the source," (*MM* 149), but not in some moralistic sense, whereby the author's sanctity is expected to protect all readers from scandal. Rather, O'Connor recognizes that the health of the mind is itself the ordering force for one's artistic vision. Her ability to see the nature of specifically modern, spiritual

⁷ Flannery O'Connor, unpublished letter to Rebekah Poller, Special Collections, Georgia College and State University, Milledgeville, GA.

perversions and name them as such requires a spiritually healthy mind that can know the difference between what is beautiful and what is ugly.

In one of her unpublished manuscripts on "The Freak in Modern Fiction," O'Connor refers to Sherwood Anderson as part of her introduction to a discussion of the grotesque. Anderson's account of what is grotesque in human beings likely influenced O'Connor's understanding of the grotesque, or at least she considers it analogous to her own articulation of it. O'Connor notes that Anderson was the first modern writer to apply the word "grotesque" to his characters with a conscious intent: "He saw them as grotesque because each one embraced a single truth to the exclusion of other truths. Being what we are, finite, no man is able to embrace all truth and every man can be seen as, in part, grotesque who embraces with passion any truth at all."⁸ From O'Connor's description, therefore, we can see how Anderson's point is related to the question of integrity or wholeness. Human nature is marked by finitude, and this finitude precludes any attempt to embrace truth in a comprehensive way. To try to do so is what Anderson categorizes as grotesque primarily because it disregards the limitations of human knowledge and experience. O'Connor adds an explicitly religious interpretation of the nature of human finitude to Anderson's account: the notion of sin. Anderson's recognition of finitude does not attend to the specifically willful occasions of the radical rejection of God and the impulse to "embrace all truth" autonomously. While it could be argued that

⁸ O'Connor, unpublished manuscript, file 249b.

human finitude is something for which human beings are not entirely responsible, O'Connor sees sin as a willful choice of offence against God. She suggests that both the natural limitations of human knowledge and sin contribute to the condition she calls grotesque: "if you add to our finite nature, original sin, or whatever reasonable facsimile you substitute for that doctrine, you have enough to account for the grotesque as a realistic factor in the human condition."⁹

The issue of limitation raises the same question asked in the preceding chapter. How does O'Connor understand human beings as limited? Maritain's analysis of the intellect acknowledged the limitations of human reason, but O'Connor (using Aquinas and the biblical texts) also addressed the willful rejection of God, and presumably, of human limitation itself. In *Wise Blood* the struggle of Hazel Motes is rooted in his willful rebellion against the reality of a divinely established order. Hazel wants to create an alternative order of reality and become his own measure for truth. One of the novel's symbolic expressions of Hazel's desire to be whole--independently of any divine source--is represented by his belief in a new kind of Jesus, who is "all man and ain't got any God in him" (*WB* 121). While the image of Christ relates to human limitation in O'Connor's fiction, it also reveals the need for the connection between what is physical and spiritual in human beings--another matter of wholeness. Both of these issues are raised with Hazel's new Jesus. The key to interpreting these questions of human limitation and spiritual

⁹ *Ibid.*, file 249b.

orientation is found in the novel's images of sight or vision. In Giannone's analysis of Hazel's name, he explains that *hazel* in Hebrew means "God sees;"¹⁰ in L. Gregory Jones' book, *Embodying Forgiveness*, Jones takes both names, Hazel and Motes, and suggests that the name Hazel Motes "indicates the problem of lack of vision and judgment."¹¹ Jones argues that in addition to Hazel being an eye colour, in the form of "Haze" it can suggest the lack of clear vision; "Motes" harkens back to the King James Version of Matthew 7:1-5, where Jesus criticizes those who see "motes" (*i.e.*, specks) in others eyes without seeing the "beams" in their own. Both of these etymologies of Hazel's name seem true and relevant to the discussion, although they are not precise about the nature of Hazel's specific problem of vision. What does it mean to say that Hazel's name means "God sees"? In what way does Hazel Motes lack clarity of vision? Jones' analysis of Hazel's last name might indicate that it has something to do with Hazel's judgements of others, but this does not appear to be the main preoccupation of Hazel Motes. If we take the two explanations together, however, the moral implications of the grotesque, and of the novel as a whole, begin to emerge. The name, Hazel Motes, could suggest simultaneously that God sees, and that Hazel does not see clearly, God's vision being the measure for Hazel's. However, it is *Hazel's* name that is the verb for God's seeing, and so

¹⁰ Giannone, *The Mystery of Love*, p. 9.

¹¹ L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 145.

there is still an implicit connection between the two--the measure is not independent of Hazel himself.

The "mote" described in Matthew 7:1-5, is essentially something which deflects from the more obvious and blinding "beam," signifying that part of Hazel's problem is precisely that he does not see his own condition as grotesque, that he is unaware of his limited or hazy vision. More specifically, to use the contrasting image of "God seeing," Hazel does not recognize the relation between God's vision and human vision, wherein God provides the light by which human beings see. The tension of the novel resides in Hazel's attempt to see like God sees, but through his own narrow vision and without any recognition of a divine source. But perhaps because of the beam, Haze never does see clearly in the novel; at least he does not see the problem inherent in his quest for spiritual autonomy. Even after blinding himself (and including his reasons for doing it) Hazel does not acknowledge his dependence on God for wholeness. There is no conversion or reorientation of his spiritual condition, and he continues to understand God as disconnected from his own intellect and imagination. Hazel's physical self-blinding does effect a kind of inward reflection or "seeing," however limited, and what he sees might only be the realization that "God sees." There is an unspecified sense of accountability in Hazel's desire to "pay," but he does not see it clearly enough to confess the nature of his connection to God as anything other than a debt/debtor relation. In fact, Hazel's final desire to be rid of any debt he might owe, which dominates his mindset throughout the novel, is directed almost entirely toward gaining his autonomy rather than acknowledging

his dependence.¹²

Given that O'Connor knew that most readers saw Hazel's integrity as rooted in himself and his resistance to any divine measure--rather than seeing his integrity as requiring divine completion--she also used the grotesque as a kind of literary technique that would bring home to the reader the perversity of his spiritual condition. Hazel's moral condition, his idea of complete self-sufficiency and what it does to him, needed to be presented in such a way that it would force the reader to consider the implications of his idea. The trick in doing this was to emphasize and reveal what is actually grotesque about Hazel's spiritual condition, without mistaking the grotesque for Hazel himself, or for the world, or reality. It takes some effort on the part of readers to see precisely what is grotesque in Hazel's self-understanding in relation to God. O'Connor's now famous and often quoted line about her use of the grotesque--"to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures" (*MM* 34)¹³--indicates a challenge to her readers' accustomed patterns of thinking. The grotesque is a technique which uses extreme images to illustrate how the lack of accurate understanding concerning what is

¹² See Romans 13:8: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." This passage suggests a corrective to Hazel's legalistic understanding of his debt. The only thing that should be considered "owing" to one's neighbour is love, which, instead of procuring individual autonomy, acknowledges and encourages inter-dependence through bonds of friendship and love.

¹³ This reference to lack of hearing and lack of sight is related to the passage in Isaiah 6:9-10 (also quoted by Jesus in Matthew 13:14-15). It is an important image in *Wise Blood*, and it is proclaimed by Asa Hawks to Hazel Motes, as will be discussed presently.

grotesque actually stems from a lack of understanding of the good.

The presence of what O'Connor refers to as the "order of the universe" is another factor for Hazel's rebellion, which continually measures his actions throughout the story. O'Connor's description of the sky at the beginning of chapter three implies a transcendent, spiritual reality to which human beings must respond or relate. When Hazel Motes first arrives in Taulkinham, the sky is described in this way:

The black sky was underpinned with long silver streaks that looked like scaffolding and depth on depth behind it were thousands of stars that all seemed to be moving very slowly as if they were about some vast construction work that involved the whole order of the universe and would take all time to complete. No one was paying any attention to the sky.
(*WB* 37)

The spiritual reality that hangs overhead and permeates creation is present, but it is ignored by everyone, including Hazel. This passage establishes the central importance of sight and the direction of one's vision in the story, because it suggests the human freedom of soul to choose to look where it will. If there is a connection between transcendent spiritual reality and the human soul--a possibility ignored, if not explicitly rejected, by Hazel--the process of understanding and perceiving the nature of that connection requires clarity of vision, and this presupposes a willingness to look at what is there to see.

Although Hazel Motes is free to choose or ignore any larger conception of reality, his vision is diminished by his refusal to consider what is unseen. With his willful self-blinding at the end of the story Hazel Motes follows his closed vision to its logical conclusion, and while he thus imitates Asa Hawks in order to see what Hawks claims to see, Haze does so

without any spiritual perception. His final observation of the sky before he blinds himself, and when he takes the time to look up at it, is dimmed and blank, still suggesting a depth upon depth, but because he has narrowed his vision so radically to physical objects and facts, he is unable to see beyond his own small universe (*WB* 209). No amount of blinding to the physical world around him will remedy his spiritual blindness at this point. Physical vision is not immediately replaced by the spiritual in its absence; spiritual vision must be cultivated, and Hazel Motes has only succeeded in rejecting its reality.

It is worth mentioning the narration concerning the sky and the implications of a transcendent order as they stand in relation to the characters' understanding of what they see. In the passage quoted above, the sky is represented as reflecting an eternal, transcendent order that goes completely unnoticed by the people in Taulkinham. It would seem that a complete interpretation of the symbols of sight and blindness in the novel would include these instances of the refusal to see something that is there. The theme of this willful blinding is crucial to the movement of Haze's rebellion and final act. Marshall Bruce Gentry argues that this passage about the sky, among others, are "ridiculous" and "fanciful" because the imposed set of standards that they represent go unnoticed by the characters.¹⁴ I would suggest to the contrary that this image of the sky reflects an experienced order of creation, fundamental to O'Connor's sacramental vision of the world, and that, specifically, Hazel's efforts to separate himself from this order—which is the

¹⁴ Gentry, *Religion of the Grotesque*, 122.

tension of the whole novel—are indicated by this early description of his particular kind of spiritual blindness. If we are to interpret the novel only through the actions and intentions of the characters' individual ideas and opinions, we would become subject to the same limiting features of Hazel Motes' positivism.

iii) Blind Seers and False Preachers

With the only precise date evident in her fiction, O'Connor sets the day of Asa Hawks' revival meeting and intended self-blinding on "the fourth of October" (*WB* 112). October 4th is the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi and the anniversary of his death in 1226.¹⁵ Richard Giannone characterizes the contrast between St. Francis and Hawks in the following manner: "Where Francis gives up great wealth to live by the will of God, Hawks tries to tell God what to do by imitating Paul for personal profit."¹⁶ This contrast serves as an appropriate analogy for the inner struggle of Hazel Motes, though, for Motes, the contrast has less to do with money than with the choice between submission or resistance to God. I suggest that Hazel Motes is not compelled by Asa Hawks' concern for economic gains, but rather, his interest in Hawks is sparked by Hawks' apparent spiritual authority and autonomy, which seems more mysterious because of his dark glasses and blindness. Motes' imitation of Asa Hawks, as opposed to someone like St.

¹⁵ This was brought to my attention by Richard Giannone, *The Mystery of Love*, p. 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Francis, suggests the pattern for his actions: a negative appropriation of God's will. As I mentioned in my introduction, the theme of human resistance to God runs through the three works of fiction studied in this thesis; however, the experience of resistance takes different forms. Generally, it could be said that the resistance to God--embodied by the protagonists in their particular situations--centres on the resistance to redemption, but how redemption is understood by each individual determines the focal struggle of the story.

What Hazel Motes resists in *Wise Blood* is symbolized by the frequent references to the blood sacrifice of Christ as the atonement for human sinfulness. Hazel rejects the need for atonement by rejecting the idea of sin. His first encounter with the preacher Asa Hawks solidifies this response in Hazel Motes, and establishes the order of his rejection. When Hawks tells Motes to repent, Hazel replies with "If I was in sin I was in it before I ever committed any. There's no change come in me... I don't believe in sin" (*WB* 53). Hazel Motes' rejection of sin rather than God reveals the particular nature of his religious rebellion, and it can be traced back to what he has understood from his family's religious ideas. The severe religious upbringing of his youth, which emphasized human sinfulness at the expense of human goodness (in a letter O'Connor calls Motes a "Protestant saint," (*CW* 919) recalling her critical remarks concerning the Protestant separation between nature and grace discussed in Chapter one, section *ii*), causes Hazel Motes to attempt to finalize the human/divine rupture by arguing for the elimination of the only thing (apparently) that makes the connection between human beings and God necessary: sin.

Hazel spurns his *family's* religious ideas of human beings and their relation to God, a severed relation at best, because he finds the idea of redemption meaningless without human participation (except in the external acts of sin). Hazel Motes rightly criticizes a relation to God that revolves solely around the passive acceptance of Christ's atonement for human sin. For Hazel, if the human experience of God is rooted solely in the debt of sinfulness without an experience of God's redeeming power, then there would be no compelling reason to desire redemption.¹⁷ The question remains, however, as to whether Hazel Motes is ever able to overcome his early religious indoctrination sufficiently to reach a more meaningful understanding of redemption through his rebellion. It should be noted that Hazel's resistance to redemption and atonement is framed and defined by his own narrow vision, inherited from his mother, and it is not therefore indicative of O'Connor's understanding of redemption. His resistance is necessarily limited in this regard, as I will demonstrate throughout my analysis.

The novel begins with Hazel Motes' train ride into the city to begin his new life of independence from his family life and the army. As the train moves forward, Hazel thinks back, and in his recollection we can observe the preoccupations of his past that will inform and shape his actions in the future. When his fellow traveller, Mrs. Hitchcock, asks Hazel if he is going home (*WB* 13) he emphatically replies, "no, I ain't," suggesting perhaps not

¹⁷ Consider Hazel's grandfather's preaching on the apparent lack of vitality and spirit in the soul: "They were like stones! he would shout. But Jesus had died to redeem them!...Did they understand that for each *stone soul*, He would have died ten million deaths...?" (*WB* 21, italics mine).

only a new location but a rejection of what "home" represents. Moreover, he insists on this rejection in religious terms to Mrs. Hitchcock: "Do you think I believe in Jesus?...Well I wouldn't even if He existed. Even if He was on this train" (*WB* 16). This outburst provokes Hazel to consider its source and history, and he reflects on his childhood, when he followed his grandfather around as he preached from the hood of his Ford automobile. The seeds of Hazel's religious rebellion are planted in his youth, and the decisive emphasis on sin in relation to Jesus makes Hazel wary of both. Watching his grandfather as a boy he recalls that "[t]here was already a deep black wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin" (*WB* 22). To ensure that he avert this as an adult, the only two things that Hazel Motes takes with him from Eastrod (home) into the army are a "black Bible and a pair of silver-rimmed spectacles that had belonged to his mother" (*WB* 23). Given his religious background, he presumes that the Bible will protect him from sin, and he reads it through his mother's glasses to remind himself of that fact. These references are suggestive of the kind of religious views Hazel's family espoused. The "wordless conviction" that Hazel has about religious matters indicates the religious education he would have experienced: "He had gone to a country school where he had learned to read and write but that it was wiser not to; the Bible was the only book he read. He didn't read it often but when he did he wore his mother's glasses. They tired his eyes so that after a short time he was always obliged to stop" (*WB* 23). Hazel Motes' religious instruction and education are severely limited; the only thing he reads is the Bible, but he reads it with his *mother's* glasses. The symbolic effects of home are significant: Haze

reads through his mother's prescription, distorting his reading of the Bible, which is considered, furthermore, to be the only thing worth reading. Another relevant detail concerning Hazel's limited religious understanding is that the fatigue from his blurred vision inevitably restricts how much Hazel can read and so he never actually reads much of the Bible nor does he read for a sustained period of time.

The army offers him an alternative vision to that of his family's religious strictures, an alternative which challenges the vestiges of meaning left in his understanding of sinful human nature. Hazel's comrades present him with the possibility that there is no moral significance to existence, and subsequently try to convince him that he has no soul. The introduction of this radically new idea suggests to Hazel that he can resist corruption (sin) by resisting the idea of any spiritual meaning to his existence. The development of his thought regarding religious matters moves one step further with this newly discovered alternative: he progresses beyond the avoidance of Jesus through the avoidance of sin, to the avoidance of both sin and Jesus by rejecting anything spiritual in himself that would connect him to either. For Hazel Motes, this meant "to be converted to nothing instead of to evil" (*WB* 24), and it becomes obvious that his thinking does not extend much further than this throughout the course of the novel, except that in his later preaching he does realize that he cannot effectively preach "nothing." The reason for this restricted development is that, despite Hazel's desire to transcend his religious upbringing, it has already decisively narrowed and semi-blinded his vision. Asa Hawks perceives this on their first meeting, echoing Isaiah 6:9-10 and saying, "you got eyes and see not, ears and

hear not, but you'll have to see some time" (*WB* 54). I will quote the full passage from Isaiah for this discussion: "And he said, 'Go, and say to this people: 'Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.'"¹⁸ What Hawks' reference to Isaiah suggests about his view of Hazel Motes,¹⁹ is that Motes' lack of vision stems from his refusal to acknowledge the ultimate source of spiritual vision. His vision is limited to external sense perceptions, and his sight and hearing are made blind and deaf because, fat and bloated with his own self-sufficiency and importance, he is unable to understand with his heart--the spiritual centre from which real understanding comes.²⁰ The implication in the Isaiah passage is that to be healed, or made whole, is to understand with the heart that God is, and that this is the only source of human completion. But Hazel Motes cannot get

¹⁸ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, Herbert May and Bruce Metzger, eds. Revised Standard Version. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962). All biblical references, unless otherwise noted, will use this version.

¹⁹ O'Connor herself also likely has Isaiah in mind in her comment that "to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures" (*MM* 34).

²⁰ The language of the "heart" here is used with reference to the passage from Isaiah. It should be noted however, that love, and the experience of the heart, are ideas that are virtually non-existent in *Wise Blood*. It is nonetheless true that O'Connor saw the heart as the source of charity, and the human locus for a sacramental understanding of the world. Part of Hazel Motes' problem is that his expression and interpretation of reality is entirely intellectual, without acknowledgement of the perception of the heart. It is for this reason that some interpreters consider his character "thin"--O'Connor would say it is because this dimension of experience is superseded by the intellect in Haze, and this absence of love is intended to be noticed.

beyond his own narrow vision, because he has nothing by which he can measure it other than his rejection of what has guided his own sight until now.

The two primary issues that are pivotal to Hazel's rebellion are his preoccupation with sin as a young boy, and--owing largely to the desire to escape the oppressive religious teaching of his youth--his later conviction that he is devoid of a soul. Thus, the impulses that dominate his escape in the city from his religious past are the refusal to accept sin as real, and the complete severance of human beings from any relationship to God, and in particular, to Christ. But even the most vehement rejection of the past cannot liberate one entirely from the influences of that past; and in this regard, Hazel, while contending with the religious influence of his mother and grandfather, remains firmly subject to the impact of that influence. The consequence of this is that Hazel Motes takes on the role of preaching an alternate view of reality, for which he seeks believers, but he cannot help defining his ideas in response to, or in negative proportion to, the religious ideas he rejects.

The significance of the familial influence on Hazel's actions is revealed in an external way by his relation to the profession of preaching, a profession he both rejects and embraces in his departure from his deserted family home and his entry into the city of Taulkinham. To be a preacher is to be tied to his religious past, and Hazel, by denying his religious heritage, feels compelled to deny also the profession that is expected of him, and

indeed, which his outward appearance suggests to everyone who sees him.²¹ Preaching is an integral part of his family's religious background--his grandfather was a preacher and Hazel remembers listening to him as a young boy, knowing at the age of twelve that he would be a preacher too (*WB* 22). But it is also the case that despite Hazel's resistance to his assumed place in a line of preachers, he is deeply affected by the actions and the lessons of his grandfather, whose power as a preacher made an impression on him: "Every fourth Saturday he [the grandfather] had driven into Eastrod as if he were just in time to save them all from Hell, and he was shouting before he had the car door open. People gathered around his Ford because he seemed to dare them to" (*WB* 21).

Hazel's encounter with the blinded preacher, Asa Hawks, presents a more compelling series of questions. Ironically, it is the possibility of spiritual sight or vision that Asa Hawks introduces to Hazel Motes. Haze is perplexed by a blind man who claims to see more than he can: how and what could a blind man see? There is little spiritual subtlety in Hazel Motes; he limits his perception of reality to the sensual world, and in particular, to what he can see with his physical eyes alone. Nonetheless, Asa Hawks' challenge to that sight gets his attention. The first few exchanges with Asa Hawks reveal the growing tension in Hazel's soul. Haze almost instinctively follows Asa, "keeping his

²¹ For instance on the train, Mrs. Hitchcock speculates that Hazel's hat is one that "an elderly country preacher would wear" (*WB* 10); the taxi driver says to Hazel "[y]ou look like a preacher...[t]hat hat looks like a preacher's hat," and later, "[i]t ain't only the hat...[i]t's a look in your face somewheres" (*WB* 31); and Hazel nearly shouts at Leora Watts, "[w]hat I mean to have you know is: I'm no goddam preacher," to which she condescendingly replies, "Momma don't mind if you ain't a preacher" (*WB* 34).

eyes on the blind man" (*WB* 45), just as he followed his grandfather around as a child, but his grandfather only ever told him his religious fate as an immutable decree: "That boy had been redeemed and Jesus wasn't going to leave him ever" (*WB* 21). Once in the city Hazel takes to following Asa Hawks, but Hawks leaves room for some freedom in Hazel's religious life, releasing him from the pre-determined cage of his grandfather's making. Asa knows of the struggle in Haze, and simply asks him which pull he intends to follow:

"'Some preacher has left his mark on you,' the blind man said with a kind of snicker. 'Did you follow me to take it off or give you another one?'" (*WB* 51). Hawks identifies the critical issue: Hazel Motes has been marked by his grandfather's preaching, and Asa Hawks, as the fraudulent, blind preacher, can disabuse Haze of his religious background for good or become a different kind of mentor to him. Sensing the confusion in Motes and his inability to transcend his past indoctrination, Asa Hawks provides Motes with a model of rebellion. Hazel Motes' actions in the novel, and specifically the progression of his preaching, make it clear that O'Connor knows Hawks to be the only possible paradigm for Motes. We will return to the decisive comparison between these two at the end of this chapter, with the discussion of Hazel's blinding.

In this situation, Hazel Motes does the only thing he can do. His rejection of his family's religious ideas is acted out by him through the very professional calling that he resists: he preaches his rebellion. His response to the redemption through Christ preached by his grandfather can only become a negative version of the message of salvation that he rejects. His response is of a parasitic nature, unimaginative, which simply mimics with a

proffered salvation from salvation. This form of negative preaching prevents Motes from moving beyond preaching a church without Christ. Because Hazel Motes does not want to acknowledge that his wholeness as a human being is tied to anything beyond himself and his immediate senses, he is forced to manipulate the reality he lives in to be as he would envision it, drawing on his limited understanding and experience. Asa Hawks' character is important in this regard because Asa represents both the calling to be a preacher (he is the first city preacher Hazel encounters), and also the perversion (Asa is a fraud) of the deeper question of Hazel's rejection of God. Hazel Motes, in his desire to surmount the truth that Asa Hawks preaches, realizes that he must preach his own truth, although he can only formulate it as a response to Hawks' version. In particular, Hawks presents him with an obstacle against which Hazel Motes begins to formulate his rebellion: "you can't run away from Jesus. Jesus is a fact" (*WB* 51). Consequently, Motes' truth is always rooted in a disputation of the facts, as well as how the facts are determined. The connections between fact and truth form the basis for Hazel Motes' preaching, and the three different names he gives to his church are indicative of his struggle to understand the relation between truth and fact.

From the point when Hazel Motes decides to set up his own church to preach in response to Asa Hawks, the name of the church changes subtly, approximately every fifty pages. The first church is the "Church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified" (*WB* 55); the second is the "Church without Christ" (*WB* 105); and the third version is the "Church of Christ without Christ" (*WB* 151). They are all proclaimed as churches by Haze, and

they all include varying references to Christ, but the nature of the changes indicates Hazel's confusion in articulating his rebellion. The meaning of the variations is worth considering in detail, since they reveal the progression of Hazel Motes' understanding of, and confrontation with, the consequences of the negative version of Christian redemption that he preaches. Before turning to our discussion of Hazel's three churches, a few words about the corresponding symbol of the car are necessary.

While an analysis of his church names suggests the struggle of the intellect that Hazel experiences, the images of the car he buys, drives, preaches from and eventually loses, suggest the freedom, movement and choice of his soul. Hazel Motes' preaching and driving parallel each other, as the church Motes preaches can only develop in relation to the movements of his soul. Essentially, the car symbolizes freedom for Hazel, and this includes the freedom to interpret and preach his own version of reality. Reacting against the deterministic preaching of his mother and grandfather--"Jesus would have him in the end!" (*WB* 22)--Hazel discovers his ability to refuse. John Desmond suggests that "Haze is torn between his rejection of a purely mechanistic view of things--the redemptive vision of history represented by his mother--and his own inner sense of the spiritual and of freedom to act."²² However, Desmond argues that the car is essentially a "negative image" and that it is invested falsely with a spiritual meaning by Haze. To see the car representing entirely the negative direction of Hazel's rebellion, however, leaves no room

²² Desmond, *Risen Sons*, p. 58.

for the possibility that Hazel is or can be aware of his spiritual condition. Hazel's internal struggle could be elaborated by interpreting the images of the three churches in relation to his experiences with the car, *i.e.*, when the car is seen as affording Haze freedom, and when it is limited, hesitating, or breaking down. Instead of defining the tension of Haze's conflict as solely between his mother's religious views and his freedom to act, which in Desmond's analysis the car represents negatively as a determined will to absolute freedom, I would argue that the tensions are more complex and variable. Haze has the freedom to act as though his freedom were absolute, but he is equally free to recognize the limitations on that freedom.

Part of the problem with Desmond's interpretation of the car is that Hazel's resistance to his mother's views cannot overcome her influence, and therefore he never quite escapes his past completely, even in his pursuit of absolute freedom. Further, he cannot transcend reality, and various experiences, in the car or otherwise, remind him of the limitations to his freedom. Thus, the tension resides both in his rejection of his religious upbringing and also in himself, insofar as he can reject it and yet also embody the thing he rejects. To illustrate this using the corresponding images from the story more explicitly, the three variations on the church that Hazel preaches are offered in direct response to his mother's mechanistic view of things, as Hazel wants to remove the only reason for Christ's redemption of human beings, *i.e.*, human sinfulness, a spiritual idea that is meaningless in a world of facts. The car, however, can potentially represent both the positive and negative movements of Hazel's freedom; it can symbolize the choice of the

soul in the freedom to act, either with the idea of a freedom that is absolute or with the recognition of one's limits. Desmond sees the car as depicting exclusively the former, an "emblem of a desacralized world rendered with comic exaggeration,"²³ whereas I would suggest that the car, while often symbolizing Haze's misguided notions of freedom, also introduces moments of real spiritual freedom, wherein Hazel's movement in the car allows him to see where he is in relation to other things. When he drives along the highway after purchasing his car, Haze observes the various fields and notices that "the sky leaked over all of it and then it began to leak into the car," and when a string of pigs cross the road and Haze has to stop for them to pass, "[h]e had the feeling that everything he saw was a broken-off piece of some giant black thing that he had forgotten had happened to him" (*WB* 74). What these passages indicate is the possibility of recognition in Haze of some kind of spiritual interconnectedness with a larger reality, although obviously vague and inarticulate, *i.e.*, "some giant black thing that he had forgotten." But the sky connects himself with the pigs and the fields, and indeed even "leaks" into his car, suggesting also that the freedom of the car is not absolute, it is limited by the sky, the pigs crossing, and the boundary of the fields bordering the highway. Rather than eliminating the true tension of human freedom, therefore, the car serves more revealingly as a symbol of the condition of Hazel's soul, and these movements are related to the various modifications he makes while preaching his church. To put it simply, the preaching of his church marks his

²³ Desmond, *Risen Sons*, p. 59.

rebellion, while the car gauges his soul's struggles and possibilities in the process.

The Church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified

Hazel Motes' preaching career is sparked by Asa Hawks' insistence that he repent, at a point when Haze is already marked by defensiveness after his night with Leora Watts. When Hawks says to him "I can smell the sin on your breath," Haze draws back in shock (*WB* 49). It is no accident that the first church Haze preaches centres on the crucifixion and specifically on his rejection of the crucifixion as salvific. What he rejects is the idea that God's blood atones or makes human beings whole, although it must be stated that his understanding of atonement, given his religious background, is rooted in an idea of absolute human sinfulness largely equated with sex.²⁴ To reject Christ's redemption, therefore, one must first reject the need for it, and in Hazel's view, this means that he must proclaim human cleanliness. Even though Hazel posits human cleanliness primarily as a negation of sin as sex, he is nonetheless attempting to eliminate the only human connection to Christ that he knows from his religious background: redemption from sin through the crucifixion. If there is no sin, then there is no redemption and the crucifixion serves no purpose. Hazel's preamble to his naming of the church is that everyone is clean: "Every

²⁴ It is when Hazel is in Leora Watt's bedroom that he recalls having seen a naked woman at a local carnival as a child. His mother, "who wore black all the time and her dresses were longer than other women's" intuits that Hazel is guilty and asks "[w]hat you seen?" and without saying anything more, provokes Hazel to self-inflict a penitential act of walking with small rocks in his shoes until he thinks Jesus might be satisfied (*WB* 61-4).

one of you people are clean and let me tell you why if you think it's because of Jesus Christ Crucified you're wrong. I don't say he wasn't crucified but I say it wasn't for you" (*WB* 55). What Hazel Motes rejects is the personal need for Christ's act of atonement; at this point he does not want to refute the fact of the crucifixion, only its connection to individual human beings. Haze accepts the historical fact, but not the interpretation of the crucifixion as an act of God that is offered for the sake of humanity. To be true to the facts is Hazel Motes' direct response to Asa Hawks: "'Don't I know what exists and what don't?' he cried. 'Don't I have eyes in my head? Am I a blind man?'" (*WB* 55). Haze opposes this blind man's claim to spiritual sight by preaching the facts as *he* sees them, shunning all paradox or subtlety of vision. This church is "the church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified" (*WB* 55). Hazel's church without Christ crucified is a rejection of the only remnant left of his religious understanding of Jesus. It is an effective removal of the connection between human beings and the divine, to make way for a purely human salvation.

Enoch Emery's appraisal of Haze after his first round of preaching suggests that this preaching begins and ends entirely in himself: "You act like you think you got wiser blood than anybody else" (*WB* 59). This is what Motes thinks; because he denies the idea of redemption, he denies any link between human beings and God, and because he sticks to the facts, there is no spiritual reality. Enoch sees that the consequence of this is that Hazel Motes considers all meaning to be centred in himself, dependent on nothing wiser and purer than himself. Hazel Motes rejects Christ crucified because it suggests

atonement, or being "at one" with the divine.

To follow through with his plan, Hazel Motes needs a car from which to preach and for a place to be. He says to the car dealer: "I wanted this car mostly to be a house for me..I ain't got any place to be" (*WB* 73). The idea of place becomes a problem with the severance from God, for Hazel the car-as-soul is his only place to be, and he preaches independence of place with increasing insistence: "I'm going to take the truth with me wherever I go...I'm going to preach it...at whatever place" (*WB* 105); and, "[i]f there's no Christ, there's no reason to have a set place to do it in" (106). Hazel's relativistic position on truth is also illustrated in this question of place. He understands place as rooted in the self, and this understanding indicates clearly his own uprootedness from his family, both physically and religiously: "Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is not good unless you can get away from it. Where is there a place for you to be? No place" (*WB* 165). He further insists that nothing other than oneself can provide a "place to be"; for him, the car symbolizes the independence of the willfully enclosed self, an enclosure that will eventually become stifling and coffin-like:

Nothing outside you can give you any place...You needn't to look at the sky because it's not going to open up and show no place behind it. You needn't to search for any hole in the ground to look through into somewhere else. You can't go neither forwards nor backwards into your daddy's time nor your children's if you have them. *In yourself right now is all the place you've got* (*WB* 165-6, italics mine).

The only problem for Haze when he finds a car is that while he wants to get away,

he lacks the ability to drive well. He is seeking freedom but he does not know how to use it, or its cost. When he asks the young boy at the car lot for the price of the car, the boy replies, "Jesus on the cross...Christ nailed" (*WB* 70). The force of these words hit Haze with a sense of cost to himself, but he can think of them only in the context of his familial religiosity, and his rejection of that context. The boy's words imply that the car, as a symbol for the soul, has some connection to the redemptive action of Christ's crucifixion. Hazel's understanding, however, is that the car is "all the place you've got" and so he maintains that the boy's comments are meaningless in relation to his car. These episodes involving the car suggest a growing desire in Hazel to escape his background, especially its religiosity, while yet also finding himself enmeshed in it, not because of others' comments but because of his own confusions. More significantly, the difficulties Hazel has with the car signify his inability to act despite what he says. Although the car has the potential to be freeing, Hazel himself is stuck. He is uncertain of his driving owing to a lack of experience, he tries to leave with the brake still on, and when it is released the car shoots backwards (*WB* 74).

One of the first places Hazel Motes goes with his car is to see Enoch Emery in the park, but what he experiences there becomes the catalyst for the second church he preaches. The "Church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified" centred on the cleanliness of human beings without sin, and Haze wants to insist on being clean in order to deny the need for atonement. But his truth is still measured in relation to "Jesus Christ Crucified," albeit negatively, and so when Hazel is in the "Frosty Bottle" with Enoch, the seeds for a

new formulation of his church are sown. When the two enter, the waitress begins to obsess on cleanliness and compares Haze to Enoch, who has been pestering her daily, by emphasizing what a clean boy Hazel is. She strikes a chord, however, with her connection of cleanliness to God; even though it may only have been an expression, Hazel Motes recognizes its significance. She says, "Yes sir, there ain't anything sweeter than a clean boy. God for my witness. And I know a clean one when I see him..." (*WB* 91). Haze is silent, but then finally leans across the counter to the woman in a gesture of self-revelation and says, "I AM clean" (*WB* 91). The capitalization of the divine "I AM," reminiscent of God's revelation to Moses in the book of Exodus (3:14), is not simply an expression of emphasis on O'Connor's part, rather she is implying that Hazel's declaration of his own cleanliness must be felt to be independent of any divine source. The waitress, invoking God as the measure of cleanliness, forces Hazel Motes into a position of assuming that divine measure himself, thus naming himself clean. He concludes his point by acknowledging, "[i]f Jesus existed, I wouldn't be clean" (91). Hazel realizes that he is clean only insofar as there is no measure, and to preach a church without Christ crucified is simply to deny the redemptive purpose of Christ according to his own measure of truth. The realization prompts a change in Haze, and he now must preach a modified version of his church, which will invalidate Christ as the measure by making the measure the absence of Christ. He asks a boy outside the picture show what church he belongs to and the boy replies, "Church of Christ," to which Hazel answers "Well, I preach the Church without Christ" (*WB* 105). Hazel conceives the name of his church in negative terms, but he also

removes the words "truth" and "crucifixion" from it. Since Haze would not be clean if Jesus existed, then he must now insist that "[n]othing matters but that Jesus was a liar" (*WB* 105). To assert that God is falsehood rather than truth is the only way for Hazel to establish his church and himself as true.

The Church without Christ

In addition to separating truth from God, Hazel must also eliminate mystery and vision. His first sermon of the second church preaches a church that does not challenge the facts: "'I'm a member and preacher to that church where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way. Ask me about that church and I'll tell you it's the church that the blood of Jesus don't foul with redemption'" (*WB* 105). Hazel's reasoning must go further back than his earlier logic, which posited that the avoidance of Jesus was to be found in the avoidance of sin. He argues instead against the reality of any divine measure, whether for redemption or for sin. His church has no faith in what O'Connor stipulates as the theological truths of the universe for the Catholic fiction writer, namely the Fall, Redemption, and Judgement (*MM* 185). Hazel says, "'I'm going to preach there was no Fall because there was nothing to fall from and no Redemption because there was no Fall and no Judgement because there wasn't the first two'" (*WB* 105). For O'Connor, these doctrines are rejected by the modern secular world, not simply as doctrines, but as affirmations of the reality of "sin, or... the value that suffering can have, or...eternal responsibility" (*MM* 185). Hazel's rebellion is rooted in the desire to

reject the idea of eternal responsibility, and the only way he can preach his way out of that responsibility is to deny the reality of any kind of transcendent order, either external to himself or within himself. The major drawback to his preaching, however, is that his negative appropriation of the Church of Christ's teaching becomes tedious in the repetition of its doctrines in reverse. Motes never says anything new, and only repeats the same brief, negative message, "he began over and said the same thing again. They left and some more came and he said it a third time" (*WB* 105). Hazel Motes realizes that his preaching lacks power, and notices that he is not attracting disciples: "He had spent every evening preaching, but the membership of the Church without Christ was still only one person: *himself*" (*WB* 146). He takes his car in to be repaired.

Hazel tells the man at the garage that "he wanted the horn made to blow and the leaks taken out of the gas tank, the starter made to work smoother and the windshield wipers tightened" (*WB* 114). Each of these mechanical problems parallels something in Hazel himself. The silent horn signals his inability to speak the truth no matter how much he preaches his version of truth; the leaks in the gas tank suggest his incontinence of conviction; the failed starter exposes his failure to start his church; and the faulty windshield wipers cannot clear his vision. Despite these minor problems, Motes believes that the car is in good condition and when he asks the mechanic how soon it will be "put in the best order," the mechanic reveals that "[i]t can't be done" (114). Hazel Motes refuses to see the very bad state of his car, and rather than accept the mechanic's truthful appraisal he takes it to another, who speaks falsely about the car's superior condition.

Haze leaves the car with him, "certain that it was in honest hands" (*WB* 115). Haze is mistaken about his own car, but he persists in the hope that it will get him where he wants to go. The only way he can do this, however, is to accept lies concerning its condition. When he drives it again with Lily Hawks, he notices that "[t]here were two instruments on the dashboard with needles that pointed dizzily in first one direction and then another, but they worked on a private system, independent of the whole car" (*WB* 124).

The difficulty over the car that Hazel experiences reflects the disorder in his soul, which, increasingly, he wants to dissociate entirely from divine reality. The effect is a division within himself, like the car instruments going in different directions, indicating their apparent unruly independence. Hazel senses the conflict and determines that the "Church without Christ" is deficient because it does not offer anything but a negation of Christ, and his message shifts again to compensate for this lack. Even though Hazel withdraws truth from the title of his second church, attempting to negate Christ as the source of divine truth by calling him a liar (*WB* 105), he is left with the realization that he nevertheless wants his negation to be true. Hazel Motes does not desire the complete abolition of truth; what he desires is a de-divinization of truth. He wants the source of truth to be human, not divine, and yet so long as he seeks to establish the church without Christ, it can only be a derivative, negative appropriation of truth. Hazel Motes wants to overcome his own negation, but the only way he can accomplish this is to create an alternative saviour figure. Haze admits that he "believes in a new kind of jesus," one who is "all man and ain't got any God in him" (*WB* 121), because he can find no other means

for preaching his truth without some model of what that truth entails.

The most consistent aspect of Hazel Motes' rejection of Christ is rooted in the idea that the Incarnation does not change human beings, nor does the blood of Christ have anything to do with what will save human beings. For Hazel Motes, the religious teaching of his mother has instilled the impression that the only thing connecting human beings to God is human sin. Since there is no positive relation between the human and divine beyond the human need for redemption, and human beings are in need of God only on account of their sinfulness, Hazel Motes argues that without sin, divine redemption is irrelevant. He argues with those who pass by, "[i]f you had been redeemed...you would care about redemption but you don't. Look inside yourselves and see if you hadn't rather it wasn't if it was. There's no peace for the redeemed." He says further that "the truth don't matter to you. If Jesus had redeemed you, what difference would it make to you? You wouldn't do nothing about it" (*WB* 140). What Haze's comments reveal is his belief that there is no positive spiritual connection to God in human beings that would significantly affect the meaning of human existence, enough to make them even desire redemption. But rather than preaching that each individual simply find his or her own meaning or redemption, Hazel Motes wants to provide it himself.

The [Holy] Church of Christ without Christ

Motes becomes entangled in his own confusions because he cannot escape two impulses: the desire to preach the truth despite his rejection of it, and the need for a

model "saviour" to take the place of Jesus. These two impulses come to a head with the advent of Onnie Jay Holy, who gives a third and final name to Hazel's church: the Church of Christ without Christ. Hazel Motes objects to Holy's addition even though it is the most accurate representation of what he preaches. Haze is ignorant of the contradiction in his thinking that Onnie Jay Holy captures intuitively in his new name; essentially, Haze preaches a truth without the Truth and a saviour without the Saviour. As a preacher, Hazel wants to preach a message that he considers true for everyone, even if it is an individualistic truth, but the only "truth" he has to offer is that there is none: "I preach there are all kinds of truth, your truth and somebody else's, but behind all of them, there's only one truth and that is that there's no truth" (*WB* 165). And Hazel's negative appropriation of Christ is apparent in his call for a "new jesus": "What you need is something to take the place of Jesus, something that would speak plain. The Church without Christ don't have a Jesus but it needs one! It needs a new jesus! It needs one that's all man, without blood to waste, and it needs one that don't look like any other man so you'll look at him" (*WB* 140-1).²⁵ Hazel Motes is presented with two proffered saviours, one by Enoch Emery and the other by Onnie Jay Holy. Enoch gives Hazel the

²⁵ Hazel says this before he meets Onnie Jay Holy, when the third church is named. The implication in these preceding passages is that the "Church without Christ" (focused on a divine Jesus) is soon to become the "Church of Christ without Christ" (through the introduction of a "new jesus" who is "all man").

shrunk mummified man for his new jesus,²⁶ and Onnie Jay Holy gives him Solace Layfield (167). The mummy is all man, with no God in him, and the pseudo-prophet Solace Layfield is a consumptive image of Hazel himself. Each reveals the measure of Hazel Motes' rebellion, and he destroys them both.

Although Onnie Jay Holy is a charlatan like Asa Hawks, he too is able to understand Haze's struggle, in ways that Hazel himself cannot. Onnie Jay Holy preaches Hazel Motes' own predicament, using Hazel as his prophet in order to make a profit. His first assessment of Haze's church and coincidentally, of Haze's life, is the lack of a congregation or friends. He preaches the loneliness and alienation without friends, which not only describes Haze's current situation, but suggests the only kind of communal life possible when one despairs of the redemption of human beings: "not to have a friend in the world is just about the most miserable and lonesome thing that can happen to a man or woman! And that's the way it was with me. I was ready to hang myself or to despair completely" (*WB* 150). Holy understands that sweetness sells, and to counter Hazel's soured disposition and general lack of faith in human beings, he preaches the reality of

²⁶ The story line of Enoch Emery is an important and fascinating one, but my analysis of Hazel Motes prevents me from addressing it here in detail. The convergence of Hazel's preaching and Enoch's mission is significant, however, as the mummy represents man without the breath of divine spirit, which is the substance of Hazel's new jesus. To be presented with such a 'man' repulses and humiliates Hazel Motes, forcing him to contend with the image of his rebellion. For a full account of the theft and offering, see (*WB* 173-189). The mummy is also an interesting symbol of the "family" relations between Hazel Motes and Sabbath Lily Hawks. Sabbath immediately begins to treat the mummy as a child, coddling it in her arms before Hazel destroys it. The "child" appears after an account of the sexual encounter between Hazel and Sabbath: the empty, dead issue of their non-procreative union.

innocence lost, but with the potential to be recovered in the human heart. More specifically, and in almost direct contradiction to Hazel Motes' familial experience, Holy refers to his own mother, suggesting that sweetness is inherent in human beings, only sometimes forgotten--a position at odds with everything Haze has understood his Christian religion to be: "Not even my own dear old mother loved me, and it wasn't because I wasn't sweet inside, it was because I never known how to make the natural sweetness inside me show...Every person that comes onto this earth...is born sweet and full of love" (*WB* 150). The final contentious action of Onnie Jay Holy is to change the name of Hazel's church by adding a "Christ." Why does he do this? For the same reason that infuriates Hazel Motes: because it describes more accurately the nature of the negative church that Hazel preaches. Onnie Jay Holy has obviously heard Hazel preaching about a new Jesus, and so for this reason alone he is right to add a "Christ" to the "Church without Christ;" but the other reason that Holy's addition is relevant stems from the fact that Hazel Mote's church, preached as a negative version of Christian redemption, can only ever be a church of *Christ without Christ*. Hazel's rebellion is in essence parasitic; it is entirely in response to Christ, and therefore all of his attempts to be rid of Christ necessarily fail. Nonetheless, Hazel reacts violently to Onnie Jay Holy's appropriation of his church, who later even refers to it as his [Onnie J. Holy's] "*Holy Church of Christ without Christ*" (*WB* 151).

However, what finally divides Hazel from Onnie Jay Holy is Hazel's claim of spiritual superiority. He sees that Holy wants to sell the Church of Christ without Christ,

and Hazel knows that you cannot buy truth, which was never his interest, unlike both Hawks and Holy: "Listen!...It don't cost you any money to know the truth! You can't know it for money!" (*WB* 154). But Hazel cannot escape Holy, since his car has developed a "tic" making it "go forward about six inches and then back about four" and it does this "a succession of times rapidly" (*WB* 154). Onnie Jay has caught Hazel in his contradictory state of soul, the car symbolizing the confusion, as Hazel moves forward and is then set back. Holy tries to give Hazel advice about the car: perhaps he has flooded the engine? Or he needs to pull out the choke? The discussion of the car is paralleled by the advice Holy gives Haze about preaching, and when Hazel rejects Holy's addition of "Christ" to his church, Holy argues: "It don't make any difference how many Christs you add to the name if you don't add none to the meaning, friend" (*WB* 157).

Hazel Motes goes to sleep in his car after Holy departs, and dreams that "he was not dead but only buried. He was not waiting on the Judgment because there was no Judgement, he was waiting on nothing" (*WB* 160). While it might be true that he is waiting on nothing, Hazel Motes is definitely waiting. Part of the dream includes various eyes looking into the car window at him, and Hazel expects Asa Hawks to come (*WB* 161). By contrast to Onnie Jay Holy, Hawks seems to Haze more genuine in his blindness: Holy just sees dollar signs, whereas Hawks might have some insight into truth because of the cost to himself with his self-blinding. Hawks does not come, and instead Hazel goes to his apartment, picks the lock and enters, striking a match to look into Hawks' eyes while he is sleeping. Hazel wants to know the truth, and thinking that Hawks

may have seen it, he peers into his opened eyes. Hazel experiences the final revelation for his preaching: "the two sets of eyes looked at each other as long as the match lasted; Haze's expression seemed to open onto a deeper blankness and reflect something then close again" (*WB* 162). Asa Hawks is not blind and Hazel must refigure his church's message. He now has proof that the blind man is not blind, and thus cannot see anything beyond what Haze can see.

Truth, as Motes has been seeking it, is challenged by Asa Hawks and Onnie Jay Holy, who make the truth they preach merely the sham servant of their own interests, according to their individual desires for money. Hazel Motes, in his negative rebellion, wants to insist on a truth that he establishes in opposition to the religious truth taught in his family. He does not just want to oppose this Christian teaching, however; he wants to supplant it with his own church. The difficulty of his undertaking is intensified by Hazel's confrontation with others who preach their own church alongside his. Rather than accept the relativity of truth, Hazel cannot resist making a claim to truth which supersedes the rest: "there's only one truth and that is that there's no truth" (*WB* 165). O'Connor mentions this kind of response in her essay "Catholic Novelists and their Readers," where she reveals the nature of Hazel's predicament: "Those who have no absolute values cannot let the relative remain merely relative; they are always raising it to the level of the absolute" (*MM* 178). Hazel Motes cannot tolerate the idea that the truth he preaches is on the same level as Onnie Jay Holy's or anyone else's, relegating his truth to individual opinion rather than shared fact. Asa Hawks' initial challenge to Haze, that "Jesus is a

fact," was the impetus for Hazel Motes to confirm the negation of that fact, as fact.

Where he ends up, however, is merely asserting his absolute claim of no truth in order to reject any other possible claim to truth; this is all that Hazel, in his primarily parasitic relation to truth, can maintain.

Conscience

Where this deficiency in Hazel Motes' rebellion becomes obvious is in the conflict within himself. The car's backwards and forwards movement suggest this inner conflict symbolically, but the most revealing event in this regard is Hazel's physical confrontation with the mirror image of himself in the form of Solace Layfield. While Haze would limit the reaches of reality to what you can "hold in your hands or test with your teeth" (*WB* 206), he is also conscious of the importance of acting out that belief. He does not simply want to believe that there is no redemption, he wants to *live* like there is no redemption. In this Haze seeks consistency, and it is the reason for his attacks upon Onnie Jay Holy and even Solace Layfield. He says to each of them that they are not "true" (*WB* 152, 203) owing to the discontinuity between what they preach and what Haze intuits as their actual lack of concern with truth. Again, Hazel is caught in the midst of his truth claims: he cannot live as if there were no truth because he repeatedly wants to measure himself as true. Ironically, it is as he is preaching about the falsity of conscience--understood as the moral faculty of self-awareness in relation to a larger measure of truth--that Hazel meets "himself" as Solace Layfield. Hazel denies the conscience in his efforts to remove the

possibility of spiritual insight from human existence: "Your conscience is a trick...it don't exist though you may think it does, and if you think it does, you had best get it out in the open and hunt it down and kill it, because its no more than your face in the mirror is or your shadow behind you" (*WB* 166). What Haze lacks more than anything is an adequate spiritual perception of himself.

The state of Haze's soul is mirrored in Solace Layfield, the consumptive, hollow-chested man,²⁷ who is "not true" in his negative response to Christ. Hazel, though moved by the sight of Solace, is unable to see what the image reveals about himself; his own vision is so distorted that he only sees it as an illusion: "he was so struck with how gaunt and thin *he* looked in the illusion that he stopped preaching. He had never pictured himself that way before" (*WB* 167) (*italics mine*). There is no hesitation in identifying the illusion as himself, but he does not accept it as real. He decides that this illusion is one of those tricks of the conscience--which does not really exist and therefore must be destroyed--and so he acts on his preaching by killing Solace. Hazel does not simply kill him; he also condemns the dying man, but the judgement on his "twin" reveals the truth about who Hazel Motes is: "a man that ain't true and one that mocks what is" (*WB* 204). Significantly, Haze kills Solace with his car--the symbolic expression of a disordered soul that cannot discern the falsehood or division within himself. It is when Solace is lying face

²⁷ After Hazel's first encounter with Solace Layfield he develops a cough that echoes in his chest as though it were hollow (*WB* 184, 189). The latter reference describes Hazel's cough "like a little yell for help at the bottom of a canyon."

down on the ground, naked and dying that Haze is satisfied "[t]he man didn't look so much like Haze" (*WB* 204). Determining the resemblance to be purely external, and not perceiving his own internal conflict thus mirrored, Hazel is free to reject Solace Layfield's existence as meaningless to him. Yet the death of Solace is not only a symbolic death of Hazel; it is also a murder that is effected by Hazel's refusal to acknowledge--indeed his will to destroy--anything that transcends his understanding,²⁸ in this case, the experience of conscience. In the words of Onnie Jay Holy, the one who presents Hazel with himself, "[i]f you don't understand it, it ain't true, and that's all there is to it" (*WB* 152). Truth is self-defined, and this includes Hazel Mote's rejection of it. Hazel is only able to measure others in relation to himself as the locus of truth, but where he falls short is in understanding himself according to any other measure. When Solace tries to speak as he is dying he is addressing Jesus, but it is Haze who "squat[s] down by his face to listen." Hazel is contemptuous of Solace in his weakness making his confession, and yet at the same time Haze desires to be the one to whom it is addressed: "'You shut up,' Haze said,

²⁸ See Martha Stephens, *The Question of Flannery O'Connor*, 77-8. Stephens concludes that because O'Connor recognized the integrity of Hazel's rebellion, she was therefore supportive of this logical conclusion to Hazel's "quest." Stephens states that the murder is intended to illustrate "Hazel's super-integrity for the earnestness of his pursuit." Stephen's comment confirms that O'Connor's use of the word "integrity" in her preface to *Wise Blood* has been interpreted to mean "good" or "moral." Furthermore, Stephens adds the adjective "super" to integrity, thus importing a heightened moral purity to Hazel's actions. The problem with Stephen's analysis is that integrity is narrowly understood as moral purity, without any recognition of its relation to wholeness in the individual. This murder is one of the ugliest revelations of Hazel's distorted vision of truth, displaying Hazel's blindness to his lack of wholeness in his quest to be independent of the divine.

leaning his head closer to hear the confession" (*WB* 204-5). Hazel's confusion is revealed in his criticism of Solace Layfield as one who is "not true" and "mocks what is," thereby intimating the possibility of untruth within the self, measured in relation to something which transcends the self. Hazel cannot see his judgement of Solace as a judgement on himself because his inner conflict is rooted in wanting both to deny that transcendent measure and to appropriate it for himself.

iv) Self-Blinding Rebellion

After Hazel destroys Solace, a patrolman destroys Hazel's car, sending it over a cliff by a slight push with his. He reminds Haze, "[t]hem that don't have a car, don't need a license" (*WB* 209). Bereft of his vehicle for spiritual freedom and escape, Hazel is forced to contend with the empty place in which he finds himself. The patrolman suggests his condition: without the acknowledgement of a transcendent measure (a "license"), there is no need for moral or amoral justification, and no place from which to argue for truth (a "car"). Although Hazel is now actually looking up at the sky, he only sees the "blank gray sky that went on, depth after depth, into space" (*WB* 209). There is a suggestion of depth to the sky, but Hazel sees only a blank grayness because he does not really know how to see.

John Desmond considers the destruction of Hazel's car the impetus for a renewed vision: "Haze turns inward to act out his own integrity and commitment to personal truth by mortification of the body." His extreme penance, according to Desmond, reveals the

recognition that he has "to pay" for his acts, from which Desmond concludes that this "implies his acceptance of an identity within a spiritual order that extends beyond the self, an identity to which he is accountable."²⁹ Certainly the idea of a transcendent spiritual order is evident in Hazel's encounter with his conscience through Solace Layfield, but he responds to it in defiance: "If you don't hunt it down and kill it [conscience], it'll hunt you down and kill you" (*WB* 168). And while his acknowledgement of "payment" suggests accountability, it never overcomes the narrow religious vision of his childhood. Hazel's self-blinding reveals his continued misperception of spiritual reality, his assumption that the eyes must be detached from spiritual vision, or that the physical has no part in the spiritual, and finally, that the human relation to the divine must be measured in terms of moral debt. Hazel spends the final days before his death adding to his "payment" by wrapping his chest with barbed wire and walking with stones and broken glass in his shoes, the repetition of the latter penance presumably indicating a return to his mother's religious ideas.

The interpretations of the meaning and outcome of Haze's self-blinding and penance vary widely. Several commentators have used this blinding to accuse O'Connor of a Manichean separation of spirit and matter, and maintain that she was not, in fact, sacramental in her vision because she thought that the physical world was grotesque.³⁰

²⁹ Desmond, *Risen Sons*, 57.

³⁰ See Desmond, *Risen Sons*, p. 3. Desmond identifies three main sources arguing for Manichean elements in O'Connor's work: John Hawkes' "Flannery O'Connor's Devil," in the

These interpreters claim that O'Connor believed it was necessary for Hazel to destroy his eyes so that he could see the spiritual world beyond this one. They conclude from this ending that the physical eyes must go, and that the abnegation of the flesh is necessary for spiritual vision. But what is the substance of this spiritual vision? The discussion of Hazel's spiritual renewal inevitably becomes vague at this point, because there is no real indication in the story that Hazel Motes has any deeper experience or perception of spiritual reality other than a loose notion of "payment," which as discussed above, is no different from the narrow vision of his family's religious views. The author's preface and the dramatic ending of the novel, have sometimes been combined and held up as the final estimation of Hazel's rebellion, without a sufficiently close examination of the nuances of Hazel's religious understanding. O'Connor's work is especially prey to this type of interpretive manoeuvring because she was a Catholic. As she says in a letter: "I am afraid that one of the great disadvantages of being known as a Catholic writer is that no one thinks you can lift the pen without trying to show somebody redeemed" (*HB* 434). While this in itself is not a refutation of the possibility that Haze's blinding is redemptive, it does suggest that there might be a deeper judgement found within the story that would reveal this final self-blinding as a manifestation of the grotesque. Perhaps a more revealing indicator for the proper understanding of Hazel's blinding can be seen through a closer examination of two parallel examples of blinding referred to within the story itself, namely,

Sewanee Review 70 (Summer 1962), Martha Stephens' *The Question of Flannery O'Connor*, and Frederick Asals' *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity*."

those of Asa Hawks and of Paul.

It seems appropriate to return to a final discussion of Asa Hawks and the nature of his career as a blind preacher, because he is a key role model for Haze Motes. It is Hawks who perceives the confusion in Hazel, and who consequently removes the mark of one preacher and gives him another, as he offers to do during their first encounter (*WB* 51). To understand the meaning and impetus of Motes' self-blinding, it is worth considering the same for Asa Hawks. Asa Hawks provides Hazel with the most compelling instance of someone who apparently lives a life of self-sacrifice, including primarily, the significant cost of his eyesight, out of devotion to God. This sacrifice, in addition to the mystery of a blind man who *sees*, challenges the positivistic message that Haze preaches. When Hazel asks him about his blindness, "[i]f Jesus cured blind men, howcome you don't get Him to cure you?" Hawks responds by saying: "He blinded Paul" (*WB* 111). Hazel's question seems legitimate and biblically astute; curing blindness seems more typical of Jesus' ministry than bringing it about. Asa Hawks' reference to Paul's temporary blinding not only identifies him with an apostle, but also, since he is the one to have done the blinding, Hawks' action is also associated with Jesus' blinding of Paul. In other words, Paul does not blind himself, it is something that happens to him, and the blinding could be interpreted as being an effect of the vision he experiences, rather than the purpose of vision. The newspaper clipping saved by Hawks suggests, however, that ten years ago at a revival he promises to blind himself with lime in order "to justify his belief that Christ Jesus has redeemed him" (*WB* 112). The second newspaper article, which Hazel does not see, says

that Hawks lost his nerve, but his own recollection of the incident is more revealing as to the religious significance of his experience:

He had preached for an hour on the blindness of Paul, working himself up until he saw himself struck blind by a Divine flash of lightning and, with courage enough then, he had thrust his hands into the bucket of wet lime and streaked them down his face; but he hadn't been able to let any of it get in his eyes. He had been possessed of as many devils were necessary to do it, but at that instant, they disappeared, and he saw himself standing there as he was. He fancied Jesus, Who had expelled them, was standing there too, beckoning to him; and he had fled out of the tent into the alley and disappeared (*WB* 114).

In this account we witness the false preacher's confrontation with the truth about himself and his flight from that truth. Hawks is trying to conjure up his own vision, and the spectacle of his faith is worked up for the glory of notoriety. Asa Hawks speaks of the blinding of Paul as his impetus and inspiration; he, Asa, is going to justify Christ's redemption. But Paul did not blind himself. His blinding accompanied a vision of Jesus, and his blindness was temporary, for when the scales fell from his eyes they were opened, both physically and spiritually, to a clearer vision of his experience of Christ. Asa's blinding, by contrast, needs the possession of many demons, and it is Christ who turns them out and stops the deliberate blinding. Asa runs away. He prefers the darkness of the alley into which he runs over acknowledging Christ as the one who gives him his sight.³¹

³¹ Asa Hawks' recollection and subsequent actions are strongly reminiscent of what Søren Kierkegaard describes in *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Howard v. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980): "Whether a person is helped miraculously depends essentially upon the passion of the understanding whereby he has understood that help was impossible and depends next on how honest he was toward the power that nevertheless did help him," p. 39.

He still chooses self-inflicted blindness, and lives posing as a blind preacher in order to signify his refusal and rejection of the sight offered by Jesus in the tent.

Hazel Motes mimics the actions of a fraudulent blind preacher, though his response to Hawks' blinding for the sake of justification takes him further. His car represents his more extreme notion of spiritual autonomy and license: "Nobody with a good car needs to be justified" (*WB* 113). While Asa wants to justify himself and his redemption, Hazel rejects justification itself as the necessary implication of his rejection of redemption. Hazel can actually carry through with his blinding, since he has already blinded himself to spiritual reality; and his blinded condition finally convinces him that there is nothing more worth seeing. What is false in Asa Hawks is also false in Hazel Motes: both of them are the source of their own blindnesses, intended or accomplished, and yet the nature of their rebellion is to locate the responsibility in anything but themselves. Hawks pretends to be blinded by Jesus when it is Jesus who saves his sight, and Motes, who distorts his vision by reading the bible with his mother's glasses, identifies both as the source of a blindness from which he can free himself. There can be no mistaking Hazel's act as a refusal to see beyond himself. His self-blinding is the grotesque outcome of his rebellion against a spiritual order of reality that he will not accept. He pays, but he does not know the cost; he says he is not clean, but he has no vision of why. Hazel's physical blinding is the final act of isolating himself from all community.³² This is not redemptive; it is grotesque, and

³² Mary Jo Weaver points to this question of community and suggests that while Thomas Merton recognized in his own life the unhealthy isolation of his monastic seclusion, Hazel

by revealing it as such O'Connor is making a judgement on the measure of his vision of reality.

To return to our initial discussion in this chapter of what is grotesque to O'Connor, it is apparent that Hazel Motes cannot achieve wholeness independently of the divine, and his efforts to do so leave him broken, blind and incomplete. In the following comments from one of her unpublished lectures, O'Connor indicates two crucial aspects of her use of the grotesque that need to be emphasized: the relation of the grotesque to the beautiful, and its role as a kind of *memento mori*. She says:

As long as we live in an age which has a great sentiment for the beautiful but very little sense of it, we shall write not to please but to displease. No matter how well we are able to soften the grotesque by humour or compassion, there is always an intensity about it 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. The world will never relish this, but it will always be a part of the artist's responsibility.³³

Motes needed to find community within himself. Can this still be described as a "community?" It seems that one of the primary criticisms O'Connor would make of Hazel Motes is that he cannot find what could possibly hold a community together within himself, just as he cannot find complete meaning within himself. In a letter to "A" O'Connor corrects "A's" understanding of the order of events in *Wise Blood* and then remarks "[h]e put lye in his eyes first, which left him in no state to practice charity" (HB 335). Acts of charity require a community, and as O'Connor points out, Haze is incapable of this because his physical and spiritual blindness isolate him from any communion with others. This isolation, finally, prevents Hazel's practice of charity or love, necessary for any sacramental communion with the world. See Mary Jo Weaver, "Thomas Merton and Flannery O'Connor: The Urgency of Vision," in *Thomas Merton: Pilgrim in Process*, eds. Donald Grayston and Michael W. Higgins (Toronto: Griffin House Graphics Ltd., 1983), 27-40.

³³ Flannery O'Connor, unpublished manuscript, file 243a.

What is striking about this quotation is the parallel drawn between the experience of beauty and death in her account of the grotesque. The implication is that *sentiment* for the beautiful will only cater to a disapproval of the grotesque out of taste, as opposed to a genuine *sense* of the beautiful, which can more clearly perceive the reality of the grotesque; and ultimately, that which makes the grotesque ugly is precisely the lack of participation in what is beautiful. The death to the ego in this experience comes naturally with the confrontation of something which transcends the self, and the grotesqueness of Hazel's situation reveals his experience for what it is. When the two policemen find Hazel Motes, just before he dies in their patrol car, he is "lying in a drainage ditch near an abandoned construction project" (*WB* 229). By contrast, the transcendent order of reality, which is represented at the beginning of the novel as some vast construction work that is infinitely underway, both measures and encompasses the construction of Haze. Hazel Motes is forced to abandon his own construction of meaning, which denies this larger order of reality out of a desire to supplant it with his own. According to O'Connor's positioning of Hazel Motes, and the real outcome of his limited spiritual vision, one could conclude that the human construction project cannot be completed unless it participates in the eternal work of creation, "that involve[s] the whole order of the universe and would take all time to complete" (*WB* 37).

CHAPTER THREE

Violence and the Kingdom: *The Violent Bear it Away*

i) Freedom and Control

"Self-torture is abnormal, asceticism is not" (*HB* 458).

If the acts of self-inflicted violence and murder done by the preacher Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* were not grotesque enough, the murder/baptism by the young prophet Tarwater in *The Violent Bear it Away* is certainly liable to test the boundaries of even O'Connor's most sympathetic readers' sensibilities. Hazel Motes' parasitic religiosity can take him no further than preaching a Church without Christ; and his violence is ultimately rooted in a narrow religious vision inherited from his family, and encouraged by several religious frauds. For all his self-inflicted violence and torture, Motes cannot come to a redeeming vision of God: the violence is the outcome of his single-minded attempt to reconstruct reality in his own image, and this blinds him spiritually (and physically) to a more comprehensive vision of human beings in their relation to the divine. *The Violent Bear it Away* presents the experience of violence differently, in terms of a more complex series of influences and motivations impinging upon the main character, Francis Tarwater. In Francis Tarwater we see a multi-layered character whose internal struggles reflect the two major external influences in his life, his great uncle Mason Tarwater and his uncle Rayber, as well as his inner will to choose his own life. Tarwater is deeply affected by his

two uncles, but the double influence on him gives rise to a compelling dialectic in which his own will to act is both fuelled and obstructed. While Hazel Motes reacts primarily against his family's rigid religious mentality, applying its narrow vision to his own "religion," Francis Tarwater is raised by a dynamic religious prophet and then challenged by his atheist uncle, in such a way that the struggle of their opposing visions is mirrored in Francis' soul.¹ Hazel Motes' violence is the outward expression of his rejection of God: he kills his conscience and blinds himself to spiritual reality. Tarwater's violence is ultimately rooted in his divided self, which seeks order and resolution, but only by means within his control.

Francis Tarwater has to contend with, and reconcile for himself, two opposed visions of reality vying for his allegiance, both in relation to his uncles, and in his experience of self-reflection. There is an explicit recognition in Tarwater that *he* must test what his uncles offer him as truth: "my great-uncle learnt me everything but first I have to find out how much of it is true" (*VBA* 79). Hazel Motes' automatic rejection of everything spiritual in human beings has the effect of shutting down dialogue--while Tarwater's attitude affords the opportunity for a more dialectical engagement with spiritual reality,

¹ The differences in the nature of their rebellion are subtle, based on different religious experiences and should not be confused as the same. See Frederick Asals, *Imagination of Extremity*, p. 161: "in both books [*Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear it Away*] the protagonist is a young fundamentalist in revolt against his religious heritage." To lump Motes' and Tarwaters' "religious heritage" together, (with the likely assumption that any significant religious heritage is considered "fundamentalism") as though they were raised with similar religious ideas is to ignore the obvious indications to the contrary.

and consequently, for diverse levels of conflict. Tarwater does not resist the reality of spiritual experience; what he resists is the idea of any spiritual claims being imposed upon him. Tarwater is certain of his spiritual freedom; his self-reflective dialogue with his "friend" proves his ability to choose and to act on his own will. However, Tarwater resists any limitations to this freedom; he might want to be a prophet, but on his own terms and under his own control. Certainly the potential for myriad forms of violence is evident in light of these various struggles, none assuming simply that violence is to be equated with rebellion, or God's punishment of human beings.²

In *The Violent Bear it Away*, the central violent act appears destined to accompany the sacrament of baptism. The other violent actions also appear to be inherently connected to religious experiences, rather than the result of rejecting a particular religious idea. All of the violent acts described--whether the old prophet's burning vision of God, the drowning of Bishop, or the violation of Francis Tarwater in the woods--suggest a direct connection to the characters' revelatory insights, perhaps indicating O'Connor's more explicit attempt to draw word and act together sacramentally. Whereas it appears that Hazel Motes tries violently to self-appropriate his vision through penitential acts, the

² This is a relatively common dichotomy used for interpreting the violence in O'Connor's fiction, often related to the epigraph of the novel (see section ii). Consider Gilbert H. Muller, *Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972), 96. Muller states the either/or direction of violence: "Violence...illustrates both the pointlessness of a purely secular world and the indispensable need of God to correct the absurdity of man's condition." Such a reduction eliminates the possibility of violence that is neither rebellion nor divine affliction, but the internal struggle of the soul in the world, and *in relation* to God.

violence comes unsolicited in *The Violent Bear it Away*. The violent actions in the two novels could be further distinguished by O'Connor's comment regarding the difference between self-torture and asceticism above (HB 458): one leads only to blindness, the other, perhaps, to a clearer vision of God. Self-torture inflicts bodily violence to no purpose, while asceticism (from *ascesis*, meaning training, or discipline) assumes some intention of ordering or aligning both the physical and spiritual in human beings. If there is already disorder, or confusion, an imposed re-ordering will be experienced as somewhat violent.

In *The Violent Bear it Away*, we can witness at least four possible sources of violence: 1) Tarwater's desire to assert control over his vocation and his actions, against what others have determined for him; 2) several different interpretations of asceticism, whether the spiritual control and rigour of Old Tarwater, or Rayber's rigidly disciplined ascetic life; 3) the internal conflicts of various characters: Mason Tarwater's competing desires for destruction and salvation, Rayber's love of Bishop and his systematic refusal to acknowledge that love, and Francis Tarwater's internal arguments with his "friend" over what to believe and do; and finally, 4) the nature of prophecy itself, which, in its biblical roots, is usually associated with the violence of calling forth both the prophet and those whom the prophet addresses. The complexity and ambiguity of the violence in this novel has significant implications for the understanding of O'Connor's religious and moral vision. To understand the meaning of the violent acts in O'Connor's fiction requires a theological and moral analysis of how that violence is measured, which is a question that is related to

our discussion of the grotesque. As I have suggested in Chapter Two, O'Connor's use of the grotesque needs to be interpreted through a proper account of her knowledge of what is good: the same is true for understanding of her use of violence.

The strict determinism which critics tend to attribute to O'Connor's view of her characters, having her either damn or redeem them irrevocably, has resulted in a static interpretation of her theology. As it often happens, both the apparent damning and redeeming are accompanied by considerable violence, and this has provoked further commentary on the nature of her religious vision. The confusion that surrounds the question of whether O'Connor was unnecessarily leading her characters through violence, stems from what I consider a general reluctance, perceptible in the scholarship, fully to explore her theological anthropology. Interpreting the violence without clarifying her vision of human nature and her theological convictions, as well as the nature of the human-divine relation, often makes O'Connor's God appear entirely vengeful, and her human beings utterly corrupt. In a letter O'Connor wrote to Ted Spivey in 1963, she was compelled to correct one such misunderstanding, evident in his commentary on *The Violent Bear it Away*. She addresses Spivey's assumptions: "On page 1, you sort of leave the impression old T. [Tarwater] is Calvinist and sees people as dammed by God. He sees them as dammed by themselves" (HB 507). This clarification by O'Connor is significant, as it reveals her particularly keen attention to the details of divine and human orientation. Her remark to Spivey corrects his assumption about the source of "damnation" in her character's understanding. What O'Connor emphasizes is Mason Tarwater's perception of

human nature. In the novel itself, Mason's desire for the judgement and damnation of the world turns suddenly into an experience of that fury being visited upon himself rather than upon the world; but this experience is not a punishment from God, he is punished by the violence of his own outward desire for destruction. What he learns is the difference between God's justice and his own attempt to inflict his idea of it on others: "Having learned much by his own mistakes, he was in a position to instruct Tarwater...in the hard facts of serving the Lord" (*VBA* 5-6).

However, the anthropological assertion that O'Connor makes in regard to Tarwater, that "he sees them [including himself] as damned by themselves," should not be taken in isolation. The criticisms of O'Connor's anthropology have tended to be just as vociferous as the complaints about her theology; if her vengeful God is not bad enough, her human beings are worse, depraved and useless without God. The interpretive problem here is that the question is rarely voiced in terms of the relationship between human beings and the Divine, or anthropology and theology, which would mitigate the more extreme consequences stemming from their separation. In a letter to Sister Mariella Gable, dated May 4, 1963, O'Connor remarks:

Ideal Christianity doesn't exist, because anything the human being touches, even Christian truth, he deforms slightly in his own image. Even the saints do this. I take it to be the effects of Original Sin, and I notice that Catholics often act as if that doctrine is always perverted and always an indication of Calvinism. They read a little corruption as total corruption (*HB* 516).

O'Connor's Christian realism is the starting point for what she is able to see and

understand of human experience. She does not idealize human beings as perfectly complete, nor does she assume that this quality of incompleteness makes them purely corrupt; rather, she knows them to be incomplete in some way, and out of this lack still searching for completion. Herein lies the essential drama of O'Connor's fiction: the tension of human incompleteness is rooted in the double movement of the desire for completion and the freedom to resist it, or claim it as one's own. To resist being completed by God is to resist submission to the fact of one's limitation and need. This is the intersecting point of her anthropology and her theology and it is an intersection that is often accompanied by violence. Add to this the violence of an audience's reception³ when no such intersection is perceived or recognized, and we begin to see why the presence of violence in her fiction is not a simplistic solution to a moral or religious problem, but rather an attempt to explore the implications of freedom and fallenness in human nature and in the human response to God.

When the issue of violence—including physical and spiritual violence, self-inflicted violence and outward aggression—revolves specifically around the relationship between human beings and God, what becomes apparent is that the violence is always a struggle for control: the attempt to control what cannot be controlled, to take away another's control, to refuse to be controlled, to control oneself. The issue of control resists simple

³ See *Mystery and Manners*: "The Catholic who does not write for a limited circle of fellow Catholics will all probability consider that, since this is his vision, he is writing for a hostile audience..." (146).

moral conclusions in the same way that the issue of violence does; it is not simply a matter of determining that violence is bad, and non-violence is good, or that to be in control is good, or not to be in control is good. What is required in these instances is some discernment about the nature of the relation (self-relation, relating to others, to God), and whether violence and control or their absence are appropriate to the relation, rather than in themselves. O'Connor's novels, and in particular, *The Violent Bear it Away*, attest to and illustrate dramatically these issues of relation, rather than simply stating moral claims about the goodness or evil of violence and control. In this way, O'Connor's fiction overcomes a kind of moralizing that tries to determine, in all instances, the moral validity or invalidity of violence.

As for the issue of suffering violence, O'Connor's approach is specifically Christian in that she understands human suffering to be linked in some way to the Incarnation and suffering of Christ. This is not to say that Christ's suffering on the cross eliminates or magically alleviates human suffering, but it is to suggest that human beings are not alone in their suffering. Human suffering is not meaningless, nor does it indicate divine indifference to human beings; instead, O'Connor would insist that the divine action of Christ's suffering has a share in human suffering, thus connecting Christ's actions to human life. O'Connor does not suggest that human beings deserve to suffer, or that suffering is the point; she simply observes how the experience of suffering can be transformative in its Christian orientation. In letter written to "A" in 1961 she says: "You will have found Christ when you are concerned with other people's sufferings and not your own" (*HB*

453). O'Connor is critical of a sentimentality over suffering that focuses on individual feelings of suffering, rather than an active response to suffering. In a subsequent letter to "A" O'Connor clarifies further her point: "People's suffering tears us up now in a way that in a healthier age it did not...The kind of concern I mean is a doing, not a feeling, and it is the result of a grace which neither you nor I...in the remotest sense possesses...I am just trying to isolate this kind of abandonment of self which is the result of sanctifying grace" (HB 454-5). For O'Connor, the focus of concern should be directed towards other people's suffering, in an imitation of, and participation in, Christ's suffering. The central Christian mystery, underlying everything and ultimately more important than violent conversions, prophetic voices, minor graces and murdered children, is for O'Connor the fact that life "for all its horrors, has been found by God to be worth dying for" (MM 146). The active response of God to human suffering is at the heart of O'Connor's Christian understanding of reality.

To pass over "murdered children" in a sentence like the one above might rightly evoke Ivan Karamazov's outrage over the suffering of children,⁴ and the fact that it is a child who is murdered in *The Violent Bear it Away* makes this reference to Ivan's rejection of theodicy particularly relevant. Above all else, this injustice is intolerable. I doubt O'Connor would disagree, but her stories and novels tend to focus more explicitly on the

⁴ See the chapter entitled "Rebellion" and "The Grand Inquisitor" in Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 236-264.

meaning of human suffering and its relationship to God's goodness. This question is crucial for a reflection on violence in O'Connor's fiction, because God is usually implicated in our automatic moral recoil from violent acts. How could a good God *let* this happen? O'Connor mentions Ivan Karamazov explicitly in her essay "A Memoir of Mary Ann": "One of the tendencies of our age is to use the suffering of children to discredit the goodness of God, and once you have discredited his goodness, you are done with him... Ivan Karamazov cannot believe, as long as one child is in torment" (*MM* 227).⁵

In O'Connor's view, the accusation against God for human suffering is not only a diversion from the human acceptance of responsibility for suffering, but also an attempt to construct an ethical system by which all justices and injustices can be tabulated and controlled. Human suffering, for O'Connor, if it is seen clearly and honestly, usually implies a limit or lack on the part of human beings, especially given their inability to control it or remove it from human life. In one of her lectures, she defines one of the strengths of southern literature as "a distrust of the abstract, a sense of human dependence

⁵ Ivan Karamazov's rejection of any higher harmony if it costs one suffering child is compelling, and even Alyosha cannot resist agreeing with the terms as Ivan sets them out. The clear difference, however, appears in their respective responses to the outrage. Despite Ivan's moral indignation, he responds methodically, abstractly (he collects the accounts of his suffering children in newspaper clippings) and thus calculates that the "system" of God's justice is intolerable to him. Alyosha, although honest in his pain over the suffering of children, does not conclude that one can somehow free oneself from the responsibility of it by blaming God. His response is to live with it, truthfully, and to live with the children who do suffer, knowing them as real human beings. The difference lies in their participation in the reality of suffering; Ivan views it from an intellectual distance, while Alyosha is active and engaged.

on the grace of God, and a knowledge that evil is not simply a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be endured" (*MM* 209). Ivan Karamazov's "rebellion" and O'Connor's response to it is significant for our discussion insofar as it reorients the question of violence--away from formulaic solutions according to an ethical system of Catholic belief or unbelief--toward insight, or a clearer vision of the dramatic whole of suffering and need, responsibility and dependence, as it is enacted in the fiction. O'Connor indicates that a feeling-centred response to suffering also effects a loss of clear-sightedness: "In this popular pity, we mark our gain in sensibility and our loss in vision. If other ages felt less, they saw more, even though they saw with the blind, prophetic, unsentimental eye of acceptance, which is to say, of faith" (*MM* 227).

The difference between feeling and seeing is crucial. When O'Connor suggests that her readers should pay less attention to the number of dead bodies and more to the spiritual realities and actions of grace, she is not thereby dismissing the horror of the dead bodies. Instead she is directing the reader's attention to the "lines of spiritual motion," implying that the dead bodies are not gratuitous, but have some inherent connection to the spiritual movement of the story: "Now the lines of motion that interest the writer are usually invisible. They are lines of spiritual motion. And 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). It is important to recognize that O'Connor is not suggesting

a division between dead bodies (insignificant matter) and spiritual reality (grace).⁶ What she wants to insist upon is the centrality of seeing what is "invisible," and perhaps not as immediate as the dead bodies, in order to understand the meaning of the violent actions in relation to something more than the effects of the violence. When the dead bodies are seen abstractly, and not in relation to the spiritual movements of the story, they can be perceived as insignificant; O'Connor wants to re-order this assumption by emphasizing a clearer vision of the spiritual. The blind, prophetic eye that O'Connor holds up as preferable to an excess of feeling is not a blindness of undiscerning faith, but an apparent blindness--after the manner of the blind seers in Greek tragedy--who, lacking the obvious means of sight, depend on the other heightened senses to see spiritual reality more clearly.

Related to this question of sight is the nature of our knowing and its connection to faith. O'Connor suggests that faith can be known both abstractly as a definition and in the midst of real choice, but to limit it to the former will necessarily limit how one knows, and

⁶ This point is often belaboured in the interpretation of stories like "A Good Man is Hard to Find," particularly in response to O'Connor's later comments on the story. Because O'Connor speaks of a moment of grace that occurs with the grandmother's final gesture toward the Misfit, while still aware (perhaps even more so than before) of her murdered children and grandchildren in the woods, the response is usually one of moral outrage at O'Connor's apparent "spiritual" insensitivity. Her interpreters quickly and superficially assume an immediate causal relation between violence and grace—owing to a lesser value of the body—which is utterly void of subtlety. See, for instance, Claire Kahane, "Flannery O'Connor's Rage of Vision," where she states: "Her peculiar insistence on absolute powerlessness as a condition of salvation so that any assertion of autonomy elicits violence with a vengeance, the fact that she locates the means of grace repeatedly in the sexually perverse as in Tarwater's rape, or in the literally murderous rage of characters like the Misfit, suggest that at the centre of her work is a psychological demand which overshadows her religious intent..."(121).

inevitably leave one unprepared in the latter instance. She says:

Our response to life is different if we have been taught only a definition of faith than if we have trembled with Abraham as he held the knife over Isaac. Both of these kinds of knowledge are necessary, but in the last four or five centuries, Catholics have overemphasized the abstract and consequently impoverished their imaginations and their capacity for prophetic insight (*MM* 203).

The relevance of the above statement for interpreting *The Violent Bear it Away* is suggested by the juxtaposition of the biblical story of Abraham's faith with an intellectual definition of faith. For O'Connor, both are necessary, but the knowledge that is rooted in a lived response to life and shared through stories has been overshadowed by the predominance of abstract forms of knowing. Religious thought, however, when reduced to definitions, becomes formulaic and static rather than embodied and imaginative.⁷ The latter mode of thought is required in the interpretation of biblical stories no less than literature, and one should no more seek to distil formulaic doctrines from the literary works of a religious author like O'Connor than from the biblical stories themselves. With this in mind, let us now turn to the epigraph of the novel, which I consider to be significant for an interpretation of the whole novel, and in particular, for understanding Francis Tarwater's resistance to the Incarnation, represented by Mason's sacramental vision. What O'Connor's use of the biblical epigraph does is frame Francis Tarwater's reckoning with

⁷ See for example *Mystery and Manners*, where O'Connor writes, "[f]requently, in reading articles about the failure of the Catholic novelist, you will get the idea that he is to raise himself from the stuff of his own imagination by beginning with Christian principles and finding the life that will illustrate them" (*MM* 182).

the violence he inflicts and suffers by relating the violence and its direction to his responses to Christ and what his great-uncle teaches him.

ii) Matthew 11:12: Bearing Away

"Listen boy...even the mercy of the Lord burns." -Mason Tarwater

One of the main problems that O'Connor sees emerging from the negative response to literature that deals with the grotesque or the violent is the unrealistic demand for "positive" literature.⁸ Her comments on the subject reveal an insistent claim to address the issue morally. O'Connor does not write for the sake of the reader's satisfaction, and her spiritual insight into human life is such that it cannot avoid what is grotesque and ugly in order to "tidy up reality"⁹ according to a more positive view. What is obvious from O'Connor's discussions of her use of violence and the grotesque, indicative of fallen human nature, is that she understands the human experiences in these grotesque or violent acts, theologically. Even the more regional issue that claims grotesque literature is a typically

⁸ The topic of O'Connor's essay "The Fiction Writer and His Country," written in 1957, is a response to a *Life* editorial she had read where the novelists of America are criticized for not acknowledging and writing positively about the success and prosperity of their country. O'Connor responds to this call for a literature that illustrates the "joy of life itself" as follows: "What these editorial writers fail to realize is that the writer who emphasizes spiritual values is very likely to take the darkest view of all of what he sees in this country today. For him, the fact that we are the most powerful and wealthiest nation in the world doesn't mean a thing in any positive sense. The sharper the light of faith, the more glaring are apt to be the distortions the writer sees in the life around him" (*MM* 26).

⁹ A phrase that O'Connor quotes from Baron von Hugel in her essay "Catholic Novelists and Their Readers" (*MM* 177-8).

Southern feature does not detract from O'Connor's theological purpose: "Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one. To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological" (*MM* 44).

O'Connor has had to contend, however, with the assumption that if the story is to have a moral, it should be an uplifting or inspiring one.¹⁰ O'Connor's aversion to this kind of sentimentality is not a matter of taste, it is a matter of critical judgement that should not be misunderstood simply as harshness. Her view of human beings as "fallen" must be understood in relation to what they have fallen away from: God. What O'Connor rejects is a less discriminating human measure of compassion for all human action: "Compassion is a word that sounds good in anybody's mouth and which no book jacket can do without. It is a quality which no one can put his finger on in any exact critical sense, so it is always safe for anybody to use. Usually I think what is meant by it is that the writer excuses all human weakness because human weakness is human" (*MM* 43). O'Connor's appraisal of human nature and particularly human limitation is central to her theological and moral discernment, not only about violence and crimes, but also about sentimentality and an

¹⁰ O'Connor often received letters criticizing her use of the grotesque and violence. She says in her essay "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction": "I once received a letter from an old lady in California who informed me that when the tired reader comes home at night, he wishes to read something that will lift up his heart. And it seems her heart had not been lifted up by anything of mine she had read. I think that if her heart had been in the right place, it would have been lifted up" (*MM* 47-8).

excess of "feeling-centred" judgements. She notes: "The kind of hazy compassion demanded of the writer now makes it difficult for him to be anti-anything. Certainly when the grotesque is used in a legitimate way, the intellectual and moral judgements implicit in it will have the ascendancy over feeling" (*MM* 43).

With reference to a review of *The Violent Bear it Away*, O'Connor suggests that the virtues demanded by the reader are arbitrarily chosen according to taste and preference:

I have just read a review of my book, long and damning, which says it don't give us hope and courage and that all novels should give us hope and courage. I think if the novel is to give us virtue the selection of hope and courage is rather arbitrary--why not charity, peace, patience, joy, benignity, long-suffering and fear of the Lord? Or faith? The fact of the matter is that the modern mind opposes courage to faith (*HB* 438).

One of the ways in which O'Connor counters this emphasis on human nature as its own standard of moral conduct is by looking at the phenomenon of human nature struggling against itself, in the experience of the "unnatural." It is with her study of the unnatural that O'Connor locates the deficiencies inherent in fallen human nature, but also to reveal the positive desire to overcome them. The unnatural here is the ascetic impulse, a violent (or so, at least, it appears) quelling of the "natural" drives and impulses. O'Connor's comments on violence usually include both their external and internal orientations, and indeed suggest her preference for dramatizing the internal violence within the self. The internal violence of the ascetic is not necessarily a solitary struggle, however, because the ascetic contends with a larger order of meaning. O'Connor understands the interior

struggle of asceticism as an unnatural violence--meaning that it struggles against the "natural" instincts of self-preservation and protection--but one that is also capable of a certain nobility and integrity. For this reason, she is particularly interested in the relationship between the unnaturalness of the ascetic drive and its religious purpose.¹¹ To this end, O'Connor uses the words of Christ, describing the ascetic/prophetic implications of John the Baptist for the coming of the Kingdom, as the epigraph for *The Violent Bear it Away*: "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away."¹²

The epigraph itself is a rather enigmatic one, and while O'Connor doubted whether the book expressed successfully the meaning of the biblical passage, she did feel that the title and the epigraph were the best part of the novel.¹³ My intention is not to assess

¹¹ For an excellent new study of the importance of ancient ascetic spirituality in O'Connor's fiction through an analysis of the texts and traditions of the desert fathers, see Richard Giannone, *Flannery O'Connor, Hermit Novelist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000). For our purposes here, Giannone's analysis of *The Violent Bear it Away* offers an insightful interpretation of the ascetic, solitary heroes of the novel, and how their struggles are representative of desert spirituality (144-173).

¹² Sumner Ferris identifies this translation as the Douai-Challoner Version, noting that the King James version is not appreciably different. See Sumner Ferris, "The Outside and the Inside: Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear it Away*," in *Critical Essays on Flannery O'Connor*, eds. Melvin J. Friedman and Beverly Lyon Clark (Boston: G.K. Hall and Company, 1985), 88.

¹³ See her letter dated 16 March, 1960: "I am speaking of the verse, apart from my book; in the book I fail to make the title's significance clear, but the title is the best thing about the book. I had never paid much attention to that verse either until I read that it was one of the Eastern fathers' favorite passages--St. Basil, I think" (HB 382).

O'Connor's success in fictionalizing the epigraph (although its significance for the novel should become apparent in the exegesis that follows in section *iii*) but to explain how O'Connor understands it, particularly in relation to the question of violence and the moral order of creation.¹⁴ This should aid our understanding of the violent manifestations of Tarwater's rebellion, both externally and internally, and determine the relevance of this violence in a religious context. The biblical text provides the narrative context for the violence since the days of John the Baptist's introduction of Christ, and O'Connor dramatizes the struggle of Tarwater within this context and therefore in his response to Christ and the Kingdom.¹⁵ Thus, the violent acts of Francis Tarwater need to be understood with O'Connor's account of the biblical epigraph in mind.

I will now turn to O'Connor's own discussion of the epigraph, and draw out some of the ways in which her theological approach clarifies the conflicting violent acts present

¹⁴ Virginia Wray claims that a theological interpretation of the epigraph "can elucidate only the verse itself, not the title; it can say nothing about O'Connor's understanding of and adoption of the verse as the title of her second novel." This separation of the meaning of the novel from O'Connor's choice of biblical epigraph, in addition to sidelining all theological analysis of O'Connor's novel, is stated as though it were simply a matter of fact, without any trace of a convincing argument. See Virginia Wray, "An Authorial Clue to the Significance of the title *The Violent Bear it Away*," *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 6 (1977): 107-8.

¹⁵ John May raises this question of the direction for reading the epigraph, arguing that "the only reasonable way to proceed would seem to be from the novel and the author's world to the sense that she probably attributed to the text from Matthew." See John R. May, s.j., "*The Violent Bear it Away*: The Meaning of the Title," *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 2 (1973): 84. The obvious problem with this programmed direction of interpretation, which limits both texts by making one simply determine the meaning of the other, is that O'Connor is seen as an author speaking independently of the biblical tradition, rather than from within it.

in the drama of Francis Tarwater in *The Violent Bear it Away*. In her mention of Matthew 11:12, O'Connor reveals the direction of her inquiry: "I am much more interested in the nobility of unnaturalness than in the nobility of naturalness...The violent are not natural" (*HB* 343). The Matthew epigraph has two parts, one that refers to the violence suffered by the Kingdom, and one that refers to "the violent" bearing it away. O'Connor refers to "the violent" in one of her letters as the ascetics, directly linked to John the Baptist, that ascetic of the desert who announces the coming of the Messiah. She defers to Aquinas: "St. Thomas' gloss on this verse is that the violent Christ is talking about represent those ascetics who strain against mere nature. St. Augustine concurs" (*HB* 343). And, in another letter, she makes her interpretation more explicit: "This is surely what it means to bear away the kingdom of heaven with violence: the violence is directed inward" (*HB* 486). The violence is against the self, not for selfish purposes but for something greater, described in this verse as the Kingdom. The Kingdom, among other things, signifies the divine ordering of goodness in the world, and while it suffers violence, it is nonetheless the impetus and source of the human ability to "bear away" violence for its sake. The first half of the Matthew passage provides the necessary context for the asceticism: the inward direction of violence is intended to counter the external violence that is already present and aimed at the goodness of creation.

"The Kingdom of heaven suffereth violence," according to Matthew, and this line situates the reality of violence that is directed towards the divine order of goodness in the world. O'Connor talks about this first half less than the violent bearing it away, not

because it is less significant, but because it makes what O'Connor would consider an indisputable claim. It does not say that the Kingdom is violent, or that it requires violence to be entered, but it does say that it suffers violence. Jesus does not make this statement as a matter of discussion or debate, nor does he seem interested in the origins of violence; he is indicating a response of violent resistance to God's rule. In the passages surrounding Matthew 11:12, the resistance to both Jesus and John reveals an unwillingness to hear what they are saying and doing. John the Baptist is too much of an ascetic, and his extremity breeds contempt; Jesus is too familiar with the crowds, and his eating and drinking is perceived as gluttony (Matthew 11:18-20).¹⁶ Jesus certainly is not advocating a preference for gluttony, or for extreme asceticism; rather, he is undermining that claim to knowledge of what is good which is measured in terms of human preference. He uses the example of the people's fickle response to himself and John, in order to show their desire to bend or to change God's will: "But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places and calling to their playmates, 'we piped to you and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn'"(11:16). The Kingdom suffers violence from the desire of human beings to manipulate it according to their own wills, and the prophetic call to justice and repentance further engenders violence when it is resisted. Jesus is aware of this proud resistance, and so his words "blessed is he who takes

¹⁶ The parallels of Jesus and John to the habits of Mason Tarwater (as the "glutton") and Rayber (as the extreme "ascetic") are striking, especially in how Francis Tarwater resists each of them, for different reasons.

no offense at me" in Matthew 11:6 are all the more pressing. Offence is what bars the way to the Kingdom, unless the offence is borne away in repentance, through the destruction and mastery of pride.

The second half of the passage can now be seen in light of what it means to "bear away" internally the human injustices against God's goodness. The ascetic impulse is an attempt to absorb, or to take responsibility for, the violence inflicted on the kingdom of heaven. Understood in this way, the violence is not directed inward to no purpose, nor commanded out of divine sadistic delight; it is a bearing of responsibility, and a quelling of the natural pride that causes violence in the first place. The ascetic way is not pursued out of a love of violence, or a hatred of the self; on the contrary, it is a hatred of violence and the suffering it inflicts, as well as a love of the true self and what is good in it. The sustaining measure is the Kingdom, and it is for the sake of the Kingdom that the choice is made. In her story "A Good Man is Hard to Find," O'Connor has her character, The Misfit, express the tension perfectly:

‘Jesus was the only one who ever raised the dead, and he shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then its nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow him, and if He didn't, then its nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best you can--by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him...’ (*CW* 151)

The choice The Misfit describes accounts for the different kinds of bearing away: either it is the cross, and the sacrifice of the self that is borne for the greater good, or bearing the weight of the rejection of that goodness by inflicting as much outward violence as possible

to sustain it. The outward violence is a sign of the refusal to accept a divinely ordered world; the inward violence, a consequence of the acceptance of that order, bearing away that violence which seeks to destroy it, provided it is done for the love of God.¹⁷

O'Connor is careful to make distinctions that preserve the violence--both inward and outward--from being gratuitous, which is why the first half of the epigraph, the suffering of the Kingdom, is crucial for perceiving the gravity of the asceticism denoted in the second half. It is the love of God that motivates the action, not asceticism for its own sake. She makes this difference plain in a letter when she mentions Jansenism--the doctrine that denies any possible goodness to the human will--and states "Jansenism doesn't seem to breed so much a love of God as a love of asceticism" (*HB* 304). This contrast between the desire for violence against the self and the bearing of that violence for the love of God is indeed a central theme of *The Violent Bear it Away*. Mason Tarwater comes to learn in time about this difference: "He had known what he was saving the boy from and it was saving and not destruction he was seeking. He had learned enough to hate the destruction that had to come and not all that was going to be

¹⁷ It is worth noting here, in regard to the question of inward and outward violence, the example of Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood*. As I have argued above, the penitential acts are usually misunderstood by interpreters because of the assumption that these acts are the inward acts of renunciation and repentance. However, in this context, it seems more appropriate to say that those acts are still external, revealing more of Hazel's rebellion against the created order, rather than a willingness to bear the meaning and consequences of that order inwardly. This would instead entail a reorientation of his soul or heart, rather than a bloody mutilation of his body.

destroyed" (*VBA* 6). The prophet learns to know what saves and he does not pursue what saves by seeking destruction on its behalf, or by hating the world or things perishable, including human beings. Rayber, however, seeks to save himself and others by sheer will power, and in doing so, ends by destroying the very saving thing he needs--love.

Love is rarely mentioned explicitly in O'Connor's fiction and prose.¹⁸ It features, though, as the pivotal experience in *The Violent Bear it Away* and, notably, in another account O'Connor gives of the Matthew epigraph. O'Connor describes Christ's words as expressing love, but without sentimentality because its measure is truth and not human feeling. She describes the general confusion surrounding her choice of the novel's title and remarks that the perception of Christ, and his role in it, are also neglected:

One thing I observe about the title is that the general reaction is to think that it has an Old Testament flavor. Even when they read the quotation, 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, but in the face of which even John is less than the least in the Kingdom--all this is overlooked (*HB* 382).

O'Connor argues that the Matthew epigraph/title reveals the "violence of love" expressed in Christ's words. She explains how Christ's words indicate the "violence of love" with reference to the action of "giving more than the law demands." O'Connor's comment suggests that by the "violence of love" she means a human love that in response to the divine law sacrifices more or "gives" more than required by the law. The violence of love

¹⁸ For an interesting discussion of love as it is expressed in O'Connor's fiction, see Giannone, *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love*.

is a sacrifice borne by the self, and thus O'Connor equates the violence of love with asceticism (like that of John the Baptist's). The violence of love is an inward ascetic orientation that is done for the love of God and the Kingdom; Christ is the one who calls for this violence of love.

The violence of love can manifest itself in different ways, and so also, correlatively, can the nature of asceticism. Rayber's habits of life can be described as ascetic, but he is espousing an inward violence that wants to control and reject love; whereas the old prophet's love of the world is violent with a vision of the world transfigured. Between these two is Tarwater, who has to choose which vision of love will ground his life, and consequently the direction of the violence. At the end, on his way to the city and his future, O'Connor suggests that there must be a sacrifice borne, an inward re-orientation, and she uses the religious language of life and death: "He must of course not live to realize his mission, but die to realize it" (*HB* 342). All of this is tied to the image of love that the child evangelist expresses in her sermon, overheard by Rayber and seemingly directed at him, and reminiscent of Mason Tarwater's impressions of burning love. She says that the word of God is love, but then asks if anyone present knows what this word is: "The Word of God is a burning Word to burn you clean!" (*VBA* 130-4). This image of life and death is not physical, but symbolic of a movement of the spirit towards what is truly life giving, perceived when the self is no longer the centre of one's existence. It is not a modern or popular conception of love--commonly tied to the gratification of one's desires rather than the disciplined ordering of them--but it is at the heart of O'Connor's

religious vision.

The gospel epigraph to *The Violent Bear it Away* and the violence in O'Connor's work needs to be interpreted as the dramatization of the inward struggle of the soul that is not simply understood in terms of the soul striving against the body, but as an embodied spiritual struggle. As Peter Hawkins says about O'Connor: "The warfare she wages is not, in fact, spirit against flesh, but, rather, spirit *in* flesh."¹⁹ The tendency to construe O'Connor as writing primarily against the unbelief of the modern period is related to the accusation that she was held by a Manichean hatred of secular culture and the body. The effect of these combined assumptions--that her fiction aimed to shock and thus convert unbelievers to faith, and that she considered the physical world to be devoid of goodness²⁰--has been to make of her God an employer of vicious means, and of the practice of asceticism a form of self-torture. Such effects are themselves finally more dualistic or Manichean in attitude than what they wish to attribute to O'Connor. This distortion is the inevitable outcome of understanding asceticism in solely physical terms, as the necessary mortification of evil matter (the body), which then gives freedom to the spirit. For O'Connor, ascetic training must be understood as a spiritual discipline that

¹⁹ Hawkins, *Language of Grace*, 24.

²⁰ This is a difficult position to maintain of course, despite the fact that the word Manicheanism is often associated in this sense with O'Connor's thought. To offer just one example of her Augustinian account of the goodness of creation, both intellectually and physically, see *Mystery and Manners*, p. 157.

subdues the selfish will in the interests of others.

In this sense, the epigraph becomes central to the relation between violence and a sacramental understanding of the Kingdom. The violence and its direction, as stated above by The Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," is directly linked to the response to Christ. The Misfit does not occupy himself with proving the truth or untruth of Christ, he simply outlines the possible human responses to Christ according to whether Christ did what he did or not. The rejection of Christ will mean outward violence, motivated and spurred by the idea that there is no divine ordering of goodness in the world. The acceptance of Christ entails the willingness to suffer violence rather than perpetuate it, for the sake of the Kingdom and the goodness of the divine order. The presence of this divine order is affirmed in Francis Tarwater's sacramental vision. His final vision of the multitude eating the bread and fish is the Kingdom on earth, representing the connection between the living and the dead and the human experience of responsibility in and for that connection. In this way, the human acceptance of suffering and sacrifice participates in Christ's sacrifice.

John Desmond's work on violence also locates its meaning within the Christian biblical tradition.²¹ He notes two common perceptions of O'Connor's violence, either as stemming from a particularly hostile view of life or as reflecting the violent world in which

²¹ See John Desmond, "Violence and the Christian Mystery: A Way to Read Flannery O'Connor," *Literature and Belief* 17 (1997): 129-147.

we live. Desmond finds both these explanations lacking. In his argument, he attempts to link the use of violence in O'Connor's novels to the gospel message of non-violence.

Desmond recognizes the fundamentally spiritual character of the meaning and direction of the violence; even in O'Connor's use of external violations, "she focused attention on the spiritual violence of inner thought and attitude engraved in the heart and from which acts of murder, deception, rivalry, and stigmatizing erupt...O'Connor knew well that what must be emphasized and exposed is the interior disposition to violence which creates and directs outward actions."²² Further, Desmond argues, with reference to her letters and comments, that O'Connor did not participate in "a wholesale rejection of violence, but rather a transformed sense of its aim and meaning."²³ This point is crucial because O'Connor's Christianity tends to make readers assume that she must take an either/or position on violence, whereas I have been trying to emphasize the complexity of the violence, not only in O'Connor's work but in the biblical epigraph as well. Desmond is one of the few scholars who identifies the important connection between the ascetic discipline of the individual and the outward action of charity. He sees the inward violence as transformative, with a particular end in view, namely, harmony in human community. The double movement is described as follows: "first, the violence of self-denial, the turning of violence inward against the "natural" self to transform that inner self through asceticism;

²² Desmond, *Christian Mystery*, 130.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

and, second, the movement outward in acts of love and charity toward the human community."²⁴ Desmond understands O'Connor's moral vision as one rooted in the concrete actions of human beings living in community, which necessitates the curtailment of the aggressive claims of the selfish individual. Desmond's account differs from mine because of his use of René Girard. While both of our interpretations address the importance of non-violence and "bearing away" for the sake of human community and the Kingdom, I want to emphasize that this action is necessarily sacrificial, and therefore related to Christ's pattern of sacrifice.

Desmond organizes his argument using René Girard's works, *Violence and the Sacred* and *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*.²⁵ He uses Girard's anthropological and ethnographic studies to establish that the basic structure of human need revolves around the desire to possess what others have and each individual wants. This desire is at the root of all rivalry, and consequently, "the central cause of the human tragedies of violence."²⁶ Girard shows how cultural patterns of controlled violence--sacrificial rites primarily--have served to acknowledge and channel the natural violent

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 132. It is worth recalling here O'Connor's statement that Hazel Motes' self-blinding is an act that *prevents* his ability to do charity, rather than an asceticism in the sense of self-discipline that encourages charity through the suppression of selfish desires (*HB* 335).

²⁵ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977); and *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

²⁶ Desmond, *Christian Mystery*, p. 133.

tendencies in human beings. More significantly, Girard's studies suggest that a transcendent purpose for the sake of which the sacrificial violence is borne out, constitutes the necessary measure for violence amongst human beings: "In this sacrificial way, violence comes to be acceptable and necessary for maintaining communal order and unity."²⁷ What is pertinent in this to our study of *The Violent Bear it Away* is the connection between the need for properly directed sacrificial violence and communal harmony. Asceticism and forms of self-control are not always to be understood as entirely individualistic practices.

Using Girard's book, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, which considers the Judaeo-Christian tradition more closely than *Violence and the Sacred*, Desmond discusses the novelty of the Christian revelation and its response to violence. Rather than interpreting the death of Jesus as sacrificial, under the same category of ritualized sacrifice that controls covetous eruptions of violence, Girard contends that Jesus' death reverses the myth of violence enacted in most human cultures. The point, in effect, is that when Jesus says "love your enemies," "he reveals nonviolence as the only way to transcend the cycle of violence in the heart of humankind and human culture."²⁸ Desmond is suggesting by this reference that the reorientation of violence in the gospel message is enacted through Jesus' death, not as ritualized, violent sacrifice, but as a model

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

of non-violence and love. Desmond counters the assumption that violence is at the heart of Christian conversion by restating the gospel message of non-violence: "since the gospel of Jesus--sacrificial violence is no longer capable of creating peace and maintaining the social order."²⁹ He observes that if O'Connor's characters are willing to accept Jesus' message of non-violence, they must choose to "turn the violence inward against their 'natural' selves for the sake of membership in the kingdom of love (charity) preached by Jesus or to follow the kingdom of violence to its inevitable consequences."³⁰ This is the closest description in the literature on O'Connor of what I take to be O'Connor's idea of the internal "bearing away" for the sake of the Kingdom and human community, and the external violence that will be the outcome if it is resisted. Yet, it would seem that in following Girard's rejection of Jesus' death as sacrificial, Desmond overlooks the possibility of interpreting the internal bearing away as a kind of sacrifice for the sake of something greater than oneself, and as a participation in Christ's sacrifice.³¹

The language of sacrifice is not at all obsolete or unfounded in the description of

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

³¹ Girard's rejection of the crucifixion as a sacrifice is based on his anthropological studies of cultural responses to violence through violent ritual. Desmond wants to use this account to make a point about non-violence, but because Girard's descriptions of sacrifice are limited to his anthropological studies, they are described as means to an end, too highly controlled to be effective, and verging on magical transformations. These descriptions are not theological, nor do they consider the re-ordering of violence from outward expressions of pride to inward self-control as the result, not of magical or ritualistic acts, but of the disciplined efforts of the will.

this struggle of the will, where the quelling of violence does not come from one act, but out of a sustained, ascetic habit. It is, in one sense, a sacrifice of the self, at least of the self that seeks the satisfaction of all desires and wills to be one's own ruler. Francis Tarwater seeks this kind of self-rule, and insists upon it most emphatically to his rapist; however, with his first sip of alcohol in the car, Francis begins to lose control. Francis Tarwater is not a scapegoat in this act, but he does come to know something of the nature of the freedom he has been seeking, and he eventually discerns the need to sacrifice that kind of freedom in order to cultivate a different kind of control of the self. What Francis realizes is the "violence of love," and this way of speaking of sacrifice can also appropriately be used to describe Jesus' death. This is because the death is not simply a physical death, and the sacrifice not just another life. Desmond's dependence on Girard takes his analysis away from the spiritual meaning of the specifically inward orientation of the violence. Bereft of the language of sacrifice, Desmond focuses on the ethical ideal of "non-violence," rather than on the ascetic bearing away, following the pattern of sacrifice in the death of Christ and the call to the "violence of love" or giving more than the law (or an ethical ideal) demands.

iii) Freedom and Eternal Responsibility

O'Connor's insistence that the "religious" nature of the violence alluded to in the epigraph is ascetic offers sufficient reason for exploring the meaning of violence in the novel in terms of the soul's struggle with itself in relation to God. The protagonist,

Francis Tarwater, embodies this struggle, and in contrast to Hazel Motes, Tarwater's resistance is expressed as the resistance to external control. The response is a natural one for young Tarwater, since all of the adults he encounters seek to persuade him of their true authority. In particular, Tarwater's great-uncle Mason Tarwater and his uncle Rayber--both formidable influences who feel convinced of the authoritative veracity of their experiences and knowledge--want to impress upon young Tarwater their vision of reality. They seek to "free" Tarwater through their direction, and ultimately, their control. While it may appear on the surface that Francis Tarwater must decide between a religious and non-religious vision of the world and that the choice to become a prophet is to accept the religious view, Francis' actions and words do not seem to indicate such a struggle. Even if Mason and Rayber can indeed be categorized as religious and non-religious respectively, O'Connor's interest in the inner struggle of the soul of Francis Tarwater is what takes the conflict in the direction of consequences and ultimately, to a place where the ideological categories of "religious" and "non-religious" are secondary to the primary questions of existential meaning. I would argue that the theism *versus* atheism of Mason Tarwater and Rayber is only the second-level expression of the conflict that really concerns O'Connor; what torments Tarwater is not so much whether or not to believe in God's existence, but rather who he is in relation to God, and how that choice will affect his life and action.

The theme of control is central in *The Violent Bear it Away*, to Francis Tarwater, and also to the two characters who want to exert their control over him, Mason and Rayber. In fact, his adamant resistance to control is learned by Francis under their

influence, and especially from Mason Tarwater. What becomes apparent through a series of flashbacks and stories told by Mason to Francis is that there is a history of struggle for control between Mason and Rayber. When Mason returns to live with Rayber, suggesting he might be dying, Rayber takes the opportunity to run psychological tests on Mason, with a specific interest in his "archaic" religious beliefs. Mason, not realizing at first that he is being studied by Rayber, rebels against him when he discovers Rayber's manipulation. What Mason rejects and violently resists is not so much Rayber's deception as his attempt to "control," or consider himself in control of, Mason's thoughts and ideas. For Mason, no one can control one's thoughts or one's spirit: "Where he wanted me was inside that schoolteacher magazine. He thought once he got me in there, I'd be as good as inside his head...Well that wasn't the end of it! Here I sit. And there you sit. In freedom. Not inside anybody's head!" (*VBA* 20).

Rayber is equally resentful of Mason Tarwater's effect on him as a seven year old, when Mason kidnapped him and, according to Rayber, "indoctrinated" him with his religious ideas. Rayber's resistance is to Tarwater's charismatic religious control, something he experienced and knows to be especially effective on young minds, and this has led him to impose on himself his own ascetic discipline in order to avoid losing control of himself again. Rayber suggests to Mason Tarwater that he "ruined [his] life," and in the present situation of the novel he transfers his concern to the old man's influence on Francis Tarwater. Rayber says to Mason: "a child can't defend himself. Children are cursed with believing...You infected me with your idiot hopes, your foolish violence. I'm not always

myself, I'm not al..." (*VBA* 73). Rayber does not want to admit to the vestiges of control that Mason still exerts over him, and insists instead that: "I've straightened the tangle you made...I've made myself straight" (73). For Rayber, freedom from Mason Tarwater's control comes with education, an education that eradicates the irrational religious notions that Mason espouses.³² Freedom is to know, especially what is rational and factual. Rayber intends to offer this to Francis, to free him from Mason's control: "That's why I want you to learn all you can. I want you to be educated so that you can take your place as an intelligent man in the world" (110). Ironically, Rayber notices a kind of freedom already present in Francis, an "independence," which he clearly sees is owing to Mason's influence. While this independence would otherwise be a good thing, he qualifies the sort that Tarwater embodies: it was "not a constructive independence but one that was irrational, backwoods, and ignorant" (100).

In light of this struggle for control between Mason Tarwater and Rayber, we can observe that the corresponding struggle will be effected in Francis Tarwater's soul. Mason

³² There is another issue of "control" in Rayber's struggle, which he assumes to have been effected by Mason's emotionally charged religious indoctrination: his love for Bishop. Rayber recognizes the force of love which "would overcome him" robbing him of control, "the love that appeared to exist only to be itself, imperious and all demanding..."(*VBA* 113), but he dismisses it as an "affliction in the family" related to madness not transcendence. Rayber's response to this love for Bishop, in order to maintain "control" of himself, is to "anesthetize his life" (182). Rayber also refers to the lack of control over certain parts of the mind, presumably the "unconscious," which, he says to Francis, "works all the time, that you're not aware of yourself. Things go on in it. All sorts of things you don't know about." This does not interest Francis, who responds: "I don't care what my underhead is doing. I know what I think when I do it and when I get ready to do it" (171).

does not accept the control of being inside "anybody's head," and Rayber does not accept the religious control of belief and action. Francis Tarwater is trained to be suspicious of control, but in differing directions, especially from listening to Mason Tarwater tell his stories of the conflict with Rayber. The conflict in Francis Tarwater presents itself most clearly when he is with Rayber, and he must simultaneously resist appearing controlled by either of them. When Rayber tries to make Francis do the same tests he did on Mason, Francis is wise to his trick and insists, with Mason, that his mind and spirit cannot be controlled by Rayber: "'I'm free,' he hissed. 'I'm outside your head. I ain't in it. I ain't in it and I ain't about to be'" (111). And yet, when Rayber gets worried that Francis has been corrupted entirely by Mason's fanatic religiosity, Francis argues that "[h]e [Mason] ain't had no effect on me" (100). Added to the difficulty of Francis Tarwater's effort to resist both his uncles' control, however, is the compelling and onerous claim on his life and vocation: the call to be a prophet. The call to prophecy is something that Mason has claimed for Francis, and indeed expects of him, but it is also a call for which Francis awaits further divine confirmation.

The resistance to any control over his person is therefore provoked most forcibly in Francis by God's expectation of him as a prophet, voiced through another of his prophets, Mason Tarwater. Francis does not like the idea of being "called" to be a prophet, not because he is opposed to being a prophet, but for the simple reason that it is a claim of control over his life, either when he must listen to Mason's exhortations of his mission, or when he is waiting for a sign from God to determine his actions. He likes the

fact that Mason Tarwater insists on his spiritual freedom, but hesitates at the thought that the freedom is not absolute: "the child would feel a sullenness creeping over him, a slow warm rising resentment that this freedom had to be connected with Jesus and that Jesus had to be the Lord" (20-21). If Francis has to be a prophet he prefers to be an Old Testament prophet, like Mason sometimes seems to be, rather than one connected to Jesus: "Had the bush flamed for Moses, the sun stood still for Joshua, the lions turned aside before Daniel only to prophesy the bread of life? Jesus? He felt a terrible disappointment in that conclusion" (21). Not only does Francis resist the claim on his life to be a prophet who baptizes in the name of Jesus, he also resists the particular mission he is called to do: to baptize an idiot-child. To this challenge Francis Tarwater is uncommonly resistant, the reasons for which we will explore presently, and he voices his resistance to Rayber, although the "silent adversary" is not actually Rayber: "I won't get used to him! [Bishop] I won't have anything to do with him!...he shouted and the words were clear and positive and defiant like a challenge hurled in the face of his silent adversary" (93).

Francis Tarwater's resistance to God's claim on him as a prophet is played out in his internal debate between the ideas of Mason and Rayber, especially on the subject of freedom and responsibility. The issue of control is linked to how one understands freedom and responsibility, and Tarwater, in order to negotiate this internal dialogue, must come up with his own response to the competing visions of freedom and responsibility learned from Mason and Rayber. The ultimate focus for this debate is the child Bishop, the one to

whom Tarwater must respond if he is to follow his prophetic mission; but the issue of responsibility to himself and to others first appears when Tarwater has to face the burial of his great-uncle Mason. The mediator of this internal discussion is the invisible stranger's voice,³³ which converses with Francis, and responds to the internal dialogue that continues in Francis' mind between Rayber and Mason after Mason has died. With the absence of Mason, the stranger's voice keeps Francis company, but his response to Francis' remembrances of the episodes or arguments between his two uncles is intended to dissuade Francis from being controlled by either of them. He argues this by suggesting that Francis understands things *better* than both Mason and Rayber: "the truth is that you're just as smart, if you ain't actually smarter, than the schoolteacher...he had somebody to tell him the old man was crazy, whereas you ain't had anybody and yet you've figured it out for yourself" (38). With this flattery, the voice suggests that Francis cannot continue to abide by either of his uncles' ideas, and suggests instead that "[n]obody can do both of

³³ The voice that begins the discussion with Tarwater after his great uncle's death can, (among other possibilities) reasonably be assumed to be a form of Tarwater's self-consciousness, and self-reflection. While the voice is often defined simply as the "devil" (especially given O'Connor's comments to this effect in *HB* 359, 367), this should not preclude the fact that Tarwater is still, in fact, conversing with himself: "Only every now and then it sounded like a stranger's voice to him. He began to feel that he was only just now meeting himself, as if as long as his uncle had lived, he had been deprived of his own acquaintance" (*VBA* 35). The initial "contact" is strange and disagreeable, but eventually, as Francis senses that the voice is serving his best interests, he becomes his "friend." There is an interesting parallel between this experience of self-reflection and a "devil" character in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book 11, chapter 9, when Ivan Karamazov meets himself and/or the devil and finds him irritatingly aware of everything Ivan has thought about or written. I have analyzed this in my M.A. thesis, "Fyodor Dostoevsky's Symbolization of Conscience: Ivan Karamazov's Devil," (McMaster University, 1993).

two things without straining themselves. You can do one thing or you can do the opposite." Tarwater automatically assumes--still influenced by the tenor of his uncles' debates--that the choice is between "Jesus and the devil," but the stranger corrects him, "[i]t ain't Jesus or the devil. It's Jesus or *you*" (39). It is thus that Francis Tarwater confronts the nature of the resistance in his soul; "Jesus or you" names the conflict of control over his life between himself and God. Francis' internal dialogue voices his ultimate resistance to God for making human beings accountable or responsible in their freedom. He cannot take care of his own interests as well as God's, according to the voice, that would be straining himself. The problem about which the stranger warns Francis is reminiscent of Jesus' claim that "[n]o one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other" (Mt 6:24). As the stranger suggests for Francis, "[n]ow I can do anything I want to" (25). But the unresolved issue of the call to prophecy continues to propel the entire drama of the novel, and in a certain sense, determines the nature of Francis' actions and response. This issue of control remains unresolved.

Education

The claim that Francis Tarwater will be a prophet begins to take effect when Mason Tarwater kidnaps him from Rayber in the city and brings him back to Powderhead to educate him. Mason wants to instruct young Tarwater not only in the ways of prophecy, but also in self-knowledge, something Mason considers crucial for the prophetic

life. Rayber, of course, vehemently rejects the idea that Mason can educate Francis better than he can, and he considers himself the superior guardian when it comes to securing an education for his nephew. But Mason Tarwater is concerned about the inadequate nature of the knowledge Rayber has, especially the absence of true self-knowledge as a human being. What Mason wants for Francis Tarwater is not a religious education in a typical or doctrinal sense, but a lived sense of who he is, in the world, in relation to both God and others. The schoolteacher, Rayber, will raise Francis Tarwater to think and live according to "facts" alone, that is, according to the scientific method by which he lives his own life. He rejects any religious account of life or its meaning as unprovable nonsense, instead governing his life within the boundaries of what can be calculated or rationally understood. For Rayber this entails a life that denies the reality of anything larger than himself and his ability to understand it, including experiences of love and transcendence. The old prophet, Mason, inhabits a different spiritual and intellectual world, and sensing that Rayber's reductive understanding of the nature of reality is deficient for educating a young boy like Francis, he brings the boy to live with him. Concerning his great-uncle's approach to education, Francis Tarwater states: "His uncle had taught him Figures, Reading, Writing and History beginning with Adam expelled from the Garden and going on down through the presidents to Herbert Hoover and on in speculation toward the Second Coming and the Day of Judgement"(4). The education offered by Mason Tarwater is incorporated within the mythical framework of a religious interpretation of history that situates his present learning in relation to primordial origins and the eschatological future.

Of course, it is often the case that readers find Old Tarwater's approach to education fanatical and ridiculous--certainly outdated--and consider Rayber's approach to be more sensible. The events of the novel, however, are not bound by sensible facts, and O'Connor's purpose is to dramatize the different *visions* of Mason Tarwater and Rayber and the consequences of these visions for human relations. Rayber himself is not reducible to his secular, scientific ideology, and Mason is not only his thundering religious zeal. They should not be caricatured simply as stereotypes battling it out in Francis' soul. The reality of their existence as human beings, complicated by things that run counter to their ideas, makes the interpretive task for Francis Tarwater all the more difficult. For this reason alone, the "facts" of their teachings do not ultimately reveal who they are; this is obvious enough in the scenes where their ideas are bantered about, whether in the disputes between Mason and Rayber, Francis and the stranger, or Francis and Rayber. Their visions of the world, beyond the words that they offer, are inherently moral claims and not simply differing systems of thought. Francis Tarwater has to learn to distinguish the implications of the moral claim in what each says and teaches. The common tendency of the novel's characters (and some interpreters) is to freeze other characters to fit into their ideas. Old Tarwater does not account for, or perhaps even know about Rayber's gripping experiences of love for Bishop; and Rayber does not know of Mason's doubts and trials by fire. At a very young age, Francis Tarwater is left to struggle with the choice of imitation, either of what his prophet uncle has taught him or what Rayber is trying to teach him, all too aware of, and perhaps unduly biased by, what each thinks of the other. What does

emerge slowly in Tarwater's struggle to understand, is that the old prophet's account of human life, filled as it is with stories intertwining the lives of the living and the dead, and his mythic account of spiritual reality as it manifests itself in human decision, renders Rayber's rationalistic, ultimately reductive account of reality empty of meaning by comparison. Rayber cannot act, and significantly young Tarwater sees this.³⁴ What ensues, however, is Francis Tarwater's insistent and single-minded desire to act, in response to Rayber's inaction, but he rejects Mason's sacramental understanding of the connection between word and act: "Mason Tarwater has both the word of divine truth and the power to "act."³⁵ Francis ends up limiting his action, but as Desmond suggests: "in the act of drowning Bishop he is not freed from the Word--the words of baptism mysteriously pour forth from him. Hoping to redeem himself by this act and 'keep himself inviolate,' Tarwater has in fact steeped himself in guilt and further separation from his true identity."³⁶

³⁴ Tarwater makes several critical comments of Rayber in this regard, directed toward Rayber's detached intellectual reasoning--when he observes his hearing aid--"[d]o you think in the box...or do you think in your head?" (*VBA* 105); and Rayber's inability to act: "He [Mason] always told me you couldn't do nothing, couldn't act" (169).

³⁵ See John Desmond's insightful analysis in "The Mystery of the Word and the Act: *The Violent Bear it Away*," *American Benedictine Review* 24 (1973), 343.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

Baptism

What Mason's death entails for Francis is the burden of having to act, and this realization sparks the internal dialogue, which considers and chooses the orientation of his actions. It is often assumed that Francis' dilemma at this point is concerned primarily with the prophetic vocation³⁷ in a formal sense, and that therefore the main issue in Francis Tarwater's response is his struggle between acceptance of the old prophet's command that he baptize Bishop and fulfil his role as a prophet and of Rayber's lessons in secular self-salvation. But does Francis' internal dialogue indicate that he is simply deciding which view to accept, or is there a struggle of his own will to assert itself in the face of impinging attempts to control him? This is not the choice of a "career path" so much as it is the choice of the inner orientation of his whole life. Moreover, understanding the moral dimension of prophecy requires us to focus on the object of the prophetic call--Bishop. Bishop is the idiot-child of Rayber who Mason has commanded Francis Tarwater to baptize and recognize in the face of Rayber's denial of his inherent human worth. If we are to consider this in light of the epigraph, we need to examine the religious symbolism of violent acts in Francis Tarwater's quest--those outwardly committed and those inwardly accepted. The epigraph, as I have argued, relates violence in its direction, to responsibility, the choice between bearing away selfish impulses for the sake of others and

³⁷ See Preston Browning, *Flannery O'Connor* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974), 75. Browning describes the prophetic vocation as the novel's "most obvious motif," which is the focus of most interpretations, and he includes a brief overview of some of these interpretations.

a larger order of goodness, or by asserting one's responsibility only to oneself, inevitably at the expense of others. Francis Tarwater is given two charges of responsibility over Bishop: one comes from his great uncle Mason Tarwater, who urges him to baptize the boy, the other comes from Rayber when he allows Tarwater to take Bishop out in the boat (198). The reasons of each character for bestowing this responsibility upon Francis reveal their differing accounts of the meaning of responsibility.

Mason Tarwater wants Francis to baptize Bishop because this sacramental acknowledgement of his spiritual worth will be denied him by Rayber, who has reduced Bishop's existence to a rationally incomplete, and hence less than fully human, being.³⁸

³⁸ O'Connor's sacramental vision, apparent in the fiction and her essays and letters, should challenge the pronouncement of her fiction and thought as dualistic, but this charge inevitably arises in the interpretation of her work. Joyce Carol Oates sees an inherent dualism in O'Connor's portrayal of the visible world. She refers to O'Connor's "essentially Manichean dualism of the Secular and the Sacred," in which "the natural ordinary world is either sacramental (and ceremonial) or profane (and vulgar)." Quoted in Peter Hawkins, *Language of Grace*, p. 23. Oates ignores the meaning of "sacramental" in order to import a secondary division into O'Connor's sacramental vision of the world by adding two further categories of "ceremonial" and "vulgar." This kind of reasoning results when it is assumed that O'Connor directs her work entirely at the secular, apostate world, as though it were a separate category that was somehow sacramentally excluded. The supposition is that O'Connor's religious sentiments are divided, that she sees the world as sacramental, but only on her own religious terms, usually assumed to be rooted in Catholic doctrine. If one does not receive the sacraments, the world is not sacramentally received by that person. For O'Connor, the sacramental world is first known experientially. The sacraments are formal expressions and ritual enactments of that experience, but the only reason O'Connor can write novels and stories that revolved around specific sacraments (*The Violent Bear it Away* is O'Connor's minor hymn to the Eucharist, but also has a baptism) is because she sees them coming from something existentially deeper than doctrine. To accuse her of separating the religious sacramental experience from the secular, profane experience, is to misunderstand her sacramentalism entirely. Note O'Connor's comment from *Mystery and Manners*: "[w]hen I write a novel in which the central action is a baptism, I am very well aware that for a majority

Rather than interpreting Mason Tarwater's urge to baptize as a ritualized act intended to "save" Bishop, a necessary act for Bishop to be known by God--as Rayber might argue--it seems instead that his call for Bishop's baptism actually declares this spiritual recognition in the first place. Old Tarwater does not see Bishop as damned and needing this rite to fix him--in fact, he sees him as already "saved" from Rayber because his limited rational capabilities protect him from Rayber's narrowly rationalistic view of the world. The rite is the recognition and proclamation of Bishop's spiritual worth and dignity before God and by God, a recognition not forthcoming from Rayber. Mason confronts Rayber in an early effort to baptize Bishop with the plea that affirms his importance: "Precious in the sight of the Lord even an idiot!" to which Rayber can only respond by questioning that worth, a question that already implies a different measure of worth: "Ask the Lord why He made him an idiot in the first place uncle. Tell him I want to know why!" (33-4). This argument between Mason and Rayber (and in fact the debate of the whole novel) is about the meaning of the baptismal rite in relation to the two meanings of Bishop's life. For Mason Tarwater, Bishop's limited mental capacities make him all the more dependent, which only serves to increase the responsibility of Rayber, Francis and himself for the child's care and protection.

In Rayber's mind, baptism would be efficacious only if it could magically restore

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...I have to make the reader feel, in his bones if nowhere else, that something is going on here that counts" (*MM* 162).

Bishop's mental faculties; his understanding of baptism as a meaningless rite rests on the assumption that it cannot actually change Bishop's intellectual condition. He says to Mason: "You could slosh water on him for the rest of his life and he'd still be an idiot. Five years old for all eternity, useless forever." This perpetual condition of uselessness, Rayber concludes, warrants his refusal of a baptism; and as a matter of principle for the sake of what he calls "human dignity," he swears to Mason that Bishop will never be baptized (34). Human dignity as Rayber conceives it, however, has serious limitations, and when he describes his decision not to baptize Bishop "as a gesture of human dignity," it becomes apparent that dignity and usefulness reside solely in rational activity. Rayber's elevated speech might sound noble, cloaking itself in protective concern for Bishop, who would otherwise be mocked by a baptism. But Rayber reveals himself in a later discussion with Francis (and of course, when he tries to drown Bishop) indicating thereby whose human dignity he is protecting, *i.e.*, *his*. Rayber reiterates his view that "[b]aptism is only an empty act" and then he outlines his own preference for intellectual rejuvenation: "If there's any way to be born again, it's a way that you accomplish yourself, an understanding about yourself that you reach after a long time, perhaps a long effort. It's nothing you get from above by spilling a little water and a few words" (194). Conversely, he suggests to Francis, baptism is not only meaningless and "from above," it is an easy way compared with the self-saving actions of the human will and intellect, which offer a much more difficult, yet goal-oriented route. Rayber's path, however, is fraught with limitations, especially for one like Bishop: "It's the way you take as a result of being born again the

natural way--through your own efforts. Your intelligence" (195). Obviously, Bishop is denied this kind of rebirth, and so as to compensate for his lack, Rayber tries to adopt Francis, offering him the salvation that cannot apply to Bishop: "All the things that I would do for him--if it were any use--I'll do for you" (92). There is no "use" in saving Bishop, since what is salvific is reduced to intellectual pursuits and education in the "facts" of the "real world."

The conversation between Rayber and Francis on baptism ties directly into the meaning of Francis' mission to baptize Bishop. Rayber, in an effort to prove his conviction about the meaninglessness of the act, suggests that Tarwater baptize him right there in the lodge and get the compulsion out of his system (193). The confrontation is revealing because, so far as Rayber understands it, the issue is simply about Francis' religious indoctrination by Mason, which has compelled him to come and baptize Bishop. Rayber's confusion in this regard brings out Francis' resistance, since Francis understands the difference between Rayber's interpretation of baptism and the real meaning of Mason Tarwater's actions. Rayber tells Francis that his [Rayber's] view of baptism is rooted in the same estimation of Bishop as Mason's. But Rayber is mistaken about why Mason wants to baptize Bishop; he assumes that they both consider Bishop useless, except that Mason prefers a magical act to save him, while Rayber simply tolerates Bishop's existence. He argues for their fundamental agreement on this to young Tarwater: "I don't have a compulsion to baptize him...My own is more complicated, but the principle is the same. The way we have to fight is the same" (196). Francis Tarwater knows that what Rayber

says is wrong. He knows his great-uncle Mason better than Rayber does, and while he may not yet fully realize the meaning of baptism as Mason understands it, rooted in his desire to *act* more than anything else, he knows (and possibly this is all he knows) that it is different from how Rayber understands things. What their conversation reveals to Francis is that Rayber cannot act. Rayber has already tried to "act out" the implications of his view of Bishop by drowning him, but he could not follow it through (169). Rayber only talks of his self-salvation, whereas Tarwater is willing to act and knows the difference; on this point Francis aligns himself most closely with Mason Tarwater in opposition to Rayber: "It ain't the same...I ain't like you. All you can do is think what you would have done if you had done it. Not me. I can do it. I can act" (196). Francis' drowning and baptism of Bishop are active responses to Bishop as a human being, and he knows, however unconsciously, that drowning Bishop is more real than Rayber's attempts to ignore his existence. Where Francis' action is limited, however, is in his resistance to the connection between word and act. As Desmond suggests, Francis' desire finally to act out his rejection, putting an end to his indecision, is "to act as a means of escaping the threatened burden of the mystery of the Word *in* Act, the Past *in* the Present." Desmond argues that "in denying the "word" of his great-uncle and his true conscience, Tarwater falls to the opposite extreme of trying to silence conscience and his link with the "word" of the past through decisive action."³⁹

³⁹ Desmond, "Mystery of Word and Act," p. 345.

Burial

From the beginning of the novel, Tarwater is faced with his first major responsibility--burying his great-uncle. The burial, and Tarwater's self-conscious rebellion against it and its deeper meaning, is the beginning and the paradigm of Tarwater's confrontation with the call to responsibility for others. His rejection of his great uncle's request for a proper burial is the precursor of his struggles over his responsibility for the idiot-child Bishop. Like the burial, the baptism requires him to penetrate the purely external appearance of the rite and acknowledge the deeper meaning of its significance for Bishop, for himself, and for human life in general. The experience is striking, as Tarwater is confronted with a responsibility for human beings who are most dependent, a dead man and an idiot-child. Furthermore, the responsibility includes particular religious rites, namely, burial and baptism, which are intended to honour the inherent worth and dignity of human beings as more than just bodies (even in death, and even in the absence of reason). The struggle for Tarwater is to move beyond the view of these rites as empty acts, rooted in externally determined cause-and-effect rituals required for salvation, in order to see them as meaningful in both word and action, not separable from each other. After his great-uncle Mason dies, Francis Tarwater has to contend with the views of "the stranger," Meeks, and of Rayber concerning one's obligations to the dead, and more broadly, their insistence that there is no spiritual communion between human beings, whether living or dead. Given their comments, it is obvious that each of these characters considers death to be final, but more significantly, in their view, responsibility or

accountability ends with the moment of death, as if the embodied human being simply ceases to be an issue once no longer animated. The stranger says the dead are the most impoverished--"[t]he dead are poor... [y]ou can't be any poorer than dead"--but his remark is not offered to inspire Francis' responsibility to his dead uncle, it is meant to separate the living and the dead by insisting that the dead have no "rights." Therefore, in regard to his burial he reminds Francis: "He'll have to take what he gets" (24). The stranger tells Francis that his schoolteacher uncle Rayber "wouldn't consider for a minute that on the last day all the bodies marked by crosses will be gathered" (25). Indeed, when Francis tells Rayber what has happened to Mason, namely that whatever remains of his burnt body will be rejected by the buzzards and the dogs will carry off his bones, Rayber, speaking rather insidiously about a dead human being says "he got what he deserved" (89-90). Meeks, although he has no personal knowledge of Mason Tarwater, speaks with Francis about the dead and the relations between the dead and the living, as it coincides with his business policy. As a matter of personal attention to his customers, to give the appearance of caring about their lives, Meeks always asks after a man's wife and children before he sells him a copper flue. The burden of this level of attention, however, is relieved when someone dies; as Meeks says, "thank God when they're dead...that's one less to remember." Francis Tarwater echoes Meeks' sentiment for himself, "you don't owe the dead anything" (51), to which the stranger's voice adds, as though identifying the real substance of the conversation: "that's the way it ought to be in this world--nobody owing nobody nothing" (51).

In order to illustrate the way in which responsibility is resisted in the face of everything that Mason Tarwater has taught Francis, let us now consider Francis' reluctance to bury his great uncle as he wished. It is not the act of burying him that rankles Francis so much as it is the religious details of the burial, which suggest a larger framework of meaning and purpose in death, as well as an implicit connection and obligation between human beings, always owed by the living to the dead. As with the baptism, Francis does not want to have to acknowledge the two--word and act--as joined, thus giving meaning to the act beyond himself. Mason Tarwater's death makes Francis suddenly and solely accountable for the proper care of his body. The responsibility is burdensome, and what Francis must contend with are the possible reasons for why he must do this thing. Mason's desire that his nephew take care of his body when he dies, including the details of a cross and burial, suggests his understanding of the worth and meaning of the individual human being, the physical and spiritual relation of human beings to God, and the familial connection between Mason and Francis during life. Francis is the one Mason trusts to ensure a respectful burial: "All I'm asking you is to get me in the ground and set up a cross" (15). Mason wants to make the connection explicit to Francis, implying that their interdependent relation in life means that Mason will be Francis' responsibility when dead, but he also wants him to understand that the manner of treating a dead body reflects something of how one understands a whole human being, and that being's relation to the divine. He says of Rayber: "He'd burn me...He'd be willing to pay the undertaker to burn me to be able to scatter my ashes...He don't believe in the

Resurrection. He don't believe in the Last Day. He don't believe in the bread of life..."(16). Francis wants to dismiss the cross as superfluous: "I'll be too wore out to set up any cross. I ain't bothering with trifles." This reduction of the meaning of the cross to a trifle infuriates Mason, but his concern is not for himself or for the likelihood of having a grave marker; his concern is directed at Francis, who, Mason perceives, has not understood the meaning of the cross beyond the level of an external symbol. Mason returns Francis to the idea of human responsibility, and in doing what is right for the dead as an obligation to others and to himself--rooted in an understanding of human beings as connected in their physical and spiritual existence through responsibility, communion and love. He says to Francis: "Burying the dead right may be the only honor you do yourself" (15).

The stranger's voice urges against this responsibility, not only by inverting the relation of responsibility--*i.e.* what the great uncle and others owe him, Francis Tarwater--but also by mocking the religious faith of Mason Tarwater as unenlightened and superstitious. The voice of the stranger ridicules the meaning of the religious details of the burial in order to diminish its significance for Francis Tarwater's responsibility to Mason. When Tarwater starts to dig his great-uncle's grave, the stranger's voice taunts him, suggesting he burn the body rather than make the effort to dig a deep grave. His goal is to convince Francis that his great uncle's body is now meaningless matter, separated from his soul: "His soul is off this mortal earth now and his body is not going to feel the pinch, of fire or anything else" (36). This creates a conflict for Tarwater, because the separation of

the physical and the spiritual does not fit with Mason's embodied religious teachings, nor Francis' abiding consideration for his great uncle, and the body that once lived and raised him. The stranger mocks Francis Tarwater's attention to the details of his responsibility. What Francis once mocked in Mason, he is now defending to the stranger. The debate between Francis and the stranger, or Francis and himself, is the same one carried on by him and Mason, except that now Francis is having to voice his dead uncle's concerns on his behalf. In this way, Tarwater's internal dialogue embodies the connection between himself and Mason, and keeps the spiritual presence and words of Mason alive and active. Francis feels compelled to acknowledge his great-uncle's religious life by burying him with the mark of what ordered that life (the cross); but the stranger tries to reduce the meaning of the gesture by limiting it to a physical object, arguing, "don't you think any cross you set up in the year 1952 would be rotted out by the year the Day of Judgement comes in?" (36). The stranger's technique is to insist on the termination by death of the spiritual connection between the boy and his great uncle, not to mention between the uncle and his body. While Mason had always instructed young Tarwater about the connection between the living and the dead, through spiritual and communal ties, the stranger separates them radically.

Francis had tried out this technique of dismissing the needs of the dead once in a conversation with Mason, suggesting "the dead don't bother with particulars," but Mason Tarwater set him straight: "'The world was *made* for the dead. Think of all the dead there are,' he said, and then as if he had conceived the answer for all the insolence in the world,

he said, '[t]here's a million times more dead than living and the dead are dead a million times longer than the living are alive,' and he released him [Tarwater] with a laugh" (16). Francis is shaken by the truth of this statement of Mason's, although revealing his shock with only a slight quiver. The effects of Mason's understanding permeate Francis' mind and soul, and he argues with the stranger because he is so indelibly marked by Mason's words. The stranger knows this, and so his mockery turns from Mason to Francis himself, identifying Francis with the ridiculous superstitions of his great-uncle. The stranger wants to root out the idea of responsibility to others altogether; Francis is not burying Mason out of any obligation to him or to the dead, but because he is afraid of the moral consequences for himself. He tries to reduce Mason Tarwater's sacramental understanding of human obligation and responsibility to a moralistic fear of an unknown God. The stranger insinuates that for the sake of religious consistency, the condition of the dead body cannot make any difference to God because "what about people that get burned up naturally in house fires? Burnt up one way or another or lost in machines until they're pulp?" Francis' reply focuses on the relevance of *his* action: "If I burnt him...it wouldn't be natural, it would be deliberate" (36). Francis objects to burning his uncle, recalling Mason's horror at the thought of how Rayber might "dispose" of his body (15), but also because Francis senses that what he knows relates to what he does. Again, the stranger rebukes the possibility of responsibility, and characterizes Francis' actions as superstitious but nonetheless self-serving, concerns: "It ain't the Day of Judgement for him you're worried about. It's the Day of Judgement for you" (36).

The idea of responsibility that O'Connor expresses through Francis' experience of his great-uncle's death is one not limited by immediate needs and ends; it is owed not only to the living but to the dead who were once alive, since time and death do not alter its claim. The stranger wants to remove this notion of accountability in kinship, first by arguing that Mason's death is a final break in their communion, the body now dead and insignificant, and then by emphasizing (and certainly encouraging) Tarwater's isolation from his great-uncle and everyone else: "You're left by yourself in this empty place... You don't mean a thing to a soul as far as I can see"--to which Tarwater mutters "redeemed" (37), lamely hinting at the possibility of reality going further than that which is seen, especially by the stranger. Significantly, this invoking of isolation is also how the stranger discredits Tarwater's prophetic vocation; he points out that Tarwater does not have anyone to whom he can prophesy: "Anybody that's a prophet has got to have somebody to prophesy to. Unless you're just going to prophesy to yourself" (38). Later, at the Cherokee lodge, the stranger, now identified as a "friend," warns Tarwater against thinking that God is somehow present and waiting to confer prophetic powers upon him. The friend has to emphasize Tarwater's isolation in order to foster the idea of Tarwater's independence from God or any larger order of meaning: "The Lord is not studying about you, don't know you exist, and wouldn't do a thing about it if He did. You're alone in the world, with only yourself to ask or thank or judge; with only yourself" (167). The isolation he describes becomes more pointed; it is not about a lack of human presence, but of divine transcendence, spiritual community and the consequent futility of prayer, praise

and judgement.

The conflict engendered by the friend's prompting is between the understanding of oneself as part of a spiritual community (including the living and the dead) or as completely alone, both physically and spiritually. The meaning of moral choice in the novel rests upon this distinction, because it ultimately determines the view of responsibility one holds. Tarwater understands this much--surprisingly, since he has lived most of his life in the backwoods alone with his uncle. Yet, his great uncle has taught him the meaning of community, without an obvious, or necessarily "living" one of which to speak. The perception of the spiritual difference between community and isolation--the first still possible in physical solitude, the second possible in the midst of hundreds of people--is noted by Tarwater both in the backwoods and in the city. At Powderhead, he counts himself free "for the pursuit of wisdom, the companions of his spirit Abel and Enoch and Noah and Job, Abraham and Moses, King David and Solomon, and all the prophets, from Elijah who escaped death, to John whose severed head struck terror from a dish" (17). And in the city, when he accompanies his great-uncle, he is struck profoundly by the absence of human relations along city streets: "His head jerked backwards after each passing figure until they began to pass too thickly and he observed that their eyes didn't grab at you like the eyes of country people" (26-7). He decides instinctively that the city is "evil," not on any formally religious grounds, but because he feels that these human beings are not responding to one another in any real or engaged way. The stranger wants to break down these intuitive experiences of Francis, as a means of eliminating his

connection to Mason Tarwater and his feeling of responsibility.

Bishop

While the initial encounter with the stranger's voice in Francis Tarwater's internal dialogue begins over a dead body, his return to the city takes him toward an apparently "dead mind" in a living body--Bishop, whom Tarwater must choose either to acknowledge or reject, both in terms of his prophetic call to the ritual of baptism and in terms of his human responsibility. How he responds to the stranger's urgings in relation to Mason Tarwater is directly related to his subsequent experiences, and these affect his response to Bishop. I suggest that as the immediate focus of Tarwater's prophetic call, Bishop anchors the entire novel as the focal point for human responsibility, but more importantly, for what it means to be a human being. O'Connor intends this dramatic convergence on the character of Bishop, as she notes in a letter concerning other such "innocent" types: "Sarah Ham [in "The Comforts of Home"] is like Enoch [in *Wise Blood*] and Bishop--the innocent character, always unpredictable and for whom the intelligent characters are in some measure responsible" (*HB* 434). The issue of responsibility is best understood in relation to why one is responsible, and to whom. The stranger considers Tarwater responsible only to himself, not to Mason, because the latter is dead and exists no more, nor to Bishop because he is already mentally dead. In the boat, the stranger counsels: "No finaler act than this...In dealing with the dead you have to act...It's only one dimwit you have to drown" (*VBA* 215). The stranger defines life and death rather narrowly and

exclusively, and yet the striking effect of the novel, which, ironically, is revealed through this internal dialogue of Francis with the stranger, is that Mason Tarwater is still very much alive to Francis, and that Bishop's powerful affection--compared with Rayber's monotonous logic--makes him appear full of life, despite his intellectual deficiency.

The symbolic convergences between the characters of Mason and Bishop for Francis Tarwater suggest the continuing effects of Mason's prophetic charge, a request second only to that concerning his proper burial. Such convergences also represent the embodied spiritual communion of Mason's sacramental vision of reality. When Francis first sees the child, Bishop, the kinship with Mason is obvious: "He stood there, dim and ancient, like a child who had been a child for centuries," and the connection between Mason and Bishop is felt by Francis, who senses that "the child *recognized* him, that the old man himself had primed him from on high...The little boy was sticking out his hand to touch him" (93). Francis finds the demanding presence of the child as difficult as Mason's. In this regard, Francis is more like Rayber, and in fact he shares Rayber's distress at Bishop's presence. The struggle that Francis experiences is very much concerned with this issue of the conjunction between the physical and the spiritual (whether denied by the stranger and Rayber, or affirmed by Mason). The issue is present in his relation to both Mason and Bishop, although in different ways. What impresses Tarwater most about his great-uncle's profession as prophet is the very physical and frenzied nature of his battles with God, when after a few days in the bush Mason looked "as if he had been wrestling a wildcat, as if his head were still full of the visions he had seen in its eyes, wheels of light

and strange beasts with giant wings of fire and four heads turned to the four points of the universe" (8). By contrast, Mason's sermons about Jesus seem overly spiritual; they are less engaging and visually arresting to Francis Tarwater than the fiery visions. If Tarwater is going to be a prophet he wants to be an Old Testament type, not a spiritual follower of Jesus.

Francis is not prepared, however, for the insistent and undeniable presence of Bishop, despite his inability to speak or reason, and regardless of Rayber's advice that Tarwater ignore him: "Just forget Bishop exists...He's just a mistake of nature. Try not even to be aware of him" (117). But neither Rayber nor Francis can do this. The living, meaningfully silent presence of Bishop poses a challenge to Tarwater. At the most obvious level, Bishop is the one whom Mason has named for Tarwater to baptize, initiating his prophetic future; but Bishop is more than the fulfilment of Francis' prophetic role since he is a presence to contend with here and now, despite his lack of verbal communication. In the case of Bishop, and apparently in contrast to Francis' preference for Mason's more physical prophetic expressions, Francis abhors Bishop's very physical nature. Bishop is always grabbing at Francis, trying to touch him; he breathes heavily and with gurgling noises; he eats loudly, "like a hog" according to Francis, and perhaps because "he don't think no more than a hog..."(116). Although Bishop is verbally silent, he is nonetheless a very noisy child. Francis has a vivid material imagination of his prophetic role from his observation of Mason Tarwater, but this is altered by his experience of Bishop, and Francis repudiates the immediate physical pull of his presence,

thereby excessively spiritualizing the prophetic call. This spiritualized calling is evident in his desire for a momentous sign to inaugurate his prophetic role: "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 any fleshly hand or breath. He expected to see wheels of fire in the eyes of unearthly beasts"(22). With Mason Tarwater, Francis wants his wild prophetic actions without words, especially not sermons on the bread of life and Jesus; with Bishop, Francis wants a clear, disembodied voice, without the physical proximity of this idiot-child.

The silent communication of Bishop seems intended by O'Connor as a symbolic corrective to Francis' presumptions about his prophetic calling, but perhaps it could also be said that she is addressing her own prophetic art. In a letter to Andrew Lytle, she remarks that while her stories are usually aggressive in their portrayal of grace and love, she feels compelled to write about these experiences differently, not simply in terms of technique, but as her biblical allusion suggests, in terms of other forms of witness: "I keep seeing Elias in that cave, waiting to hear the voice of the Lord in thunder and lightning and wind, and only hearing it finally in the gentle breeze, and I feel I'll have to be able to do that sooner or later..." (*HB* 373). Her comment elucidates the same experience facing Tarwater, instead of an unembodied, clear and wild vision, he confronts Bishop, an idiot-child, incarnating the call of his prophetic life and silently, gently demanding him to make a choice. All of Tarwater's experiences of Bishop are associated with verbal silence and water. The water symbolizes the life giving waters of baptism, of cleansing, of drowning;

the silence defies Tarwater's expectations of his call, but it is also what comes when he drowns Bishop (except for the words of baptism). From his very first telephone call to Rayber's house, Tarwater has the premonition of an encounter. The strangeness of the new phone instrument leaves him "holding the earpiece tight against his head, his face rigid as if he were afraid that the Lord might be about to speak to him over the machine. All at once he heard what sounded like heavy breathing in his ear." He does not immediately realize the person on the other end is Bishop, and notices that "[t]here was a silence over the telephone but it was not a silence that seemed to be empty" (*VBA* 82). When Tarwater does realize who it is, he gets angry and insists that he does not want to speak with Bishop, to which, "[t]he heavy breathing began again as if in answer. It was a kind of bubbling noise, the kind of noise someone would make who was struggling to breathe in water" (83). This foreshadowing of the drowning of Bishop also foreshadows the lack of control that Tarwater feels in the face of this silent witness to his prophetic role. Like Rayber, Tarwater despises Bishop's ability to undermine his control, and his presence constantly reminds him of the prosaic, quiet revelation of his calling. This threat to their control elicits violence from both Rayber and Francis, violence that is directed towards Bishop, and in turn, themselves. Because Rayber cannot control the violence of love⁴⁰

⁴⁰ The "violence of love" that Rayber feels is, in one sense, the powerful force inside himself that desires to love Bishop even though he cannot consider Bishop a complete human being. It can also be related to O'Connor's description of the "violence of love" expressed in Christ's words, of giving more than the law requires. Rayber experiences his love for Bishop "violently" because it demands something more of him, it pulls him towards something that he does not believe is real.

that he feels for Bishop, he must somehow reduce his capacity for it in himself, by anesthetizing himself to its effects (182). Francis' experience is different, his violence is enacted upon Bishop when he drowns him, thereby defeating Bishop's control, but his simultaneous experience of control is mingled with the loss of control as he utters the words of baptism.

What is at stake for both Rayber and Tarwater, reflected in their responses to Bishop, is the threat of the "intimacy of creation," or engagement with the world in a spiritually embodied way, which finally is tied to their images of God. Bishop, symbolic of the mediating presence of incarnate divine love, threatens their control of themselves; for Rayber this presence evokes overwhelming love that is "powerful enough to throw him to the ground in an act of idiot praise" (113), and for Tarwater it evokes the prophetic urge to baptize and acknowledge Bishop's life. Both respond to Bishop in a way that expresses their rebellion against a transcendent order of meaning that threatens their ability to control their own experiences. While Mason Tarwater sees Bishop's intellectual lack as fortuitous, revealing God's justice--"[t]he Lord...had preserved the one child he had got out of her from being corrupted by such parents. He had preserved the child in the only possible way: the child was dim-witted" (9)--Rayber regards Bishop's life as reflective of God's injustice. His response is one of anger and resentment: "His normal way of looking on Bishop was as an *x* signifying the general hideousness of fate. He did not believe that he himself was formed in the image and likeness of God but that Bishop was he had no doubt" (113). In his own rationalistic way, Rayber, like both Tarwaters, has expectations

of what God and love should be like, and for him it comes down to usefulness. The overwhelming love that he feels in relation to Bishop troubles him because it does not make sense, nor does it appear useful to love someone like Bishop. Love used generally to improve his sister's life, for instance, makes effective sense (113). But Rayber fears any love that is out of his control: "It was love without reason, love for something futureless, love that appeared to exist only to be itself, imperious and all demanding, the kind that would cause him to make a fool of himself in an instant. And it only began with Bishop" (113-4). Rayber tries to stifle this love definitively by drowning Bishop, assuming that his absence would end the gripping love he felt, but he loses his nerve. To compensate for this failure, Rayber chooses to live a highly controlled existence, described in fact, as "rigid ascetic discipline" (114). Yet, in this case, the ascetic impulse is directed inwards, not in order to bury the selfish will, but in an effort to control any real engagement through love with the world and other human beings. Rayber resists the physicality of life, preferring instead a detached, intellectual existence. His asceticism, in effect, is a denial of life; it is like Francis Tarwater's repulsion for the bread of life (21) and sacramental participation in the world: "He did not look at anything too long, he denied his senses unnecessary satisfactions...He was not deceived that this was a whole or a full life, he only knew that it was the way his life had to be lived" (114). The major hindrance to this style of life for Rayber, however, is Bishop, which Tarwater perceives when he arrives at the schoolteacher's house: "The child might have been a deformed part of himself [Rayber] that had been accidentally revealed" (93).

The loss of control that Francis Tarwater resists is also threatened by Bishop's presence, but for different reasons. With the death of Mason, Francis feels suddenly free of the old prophet's control over his life, except for the continuance of that control in the form of his prophetic mission. Bishop stands in the way as an obstacle between Tarwater and his freedom. Francis can baptize the boy, or drown him in order to gain his freedom. He senses that to baptize Bishop will have more limiting consequences for him than drowning him, and he concludes that the violent action of drowning Bishop will most effectively prove himself in control, without being accountable to the added witnesses of Mason or God at the event of a baptism. Further, the choice implies Tarwater's ascetic detachment (like Rayber) from the world, whose summons he resists by averting his gaze,

...to keep his vision located on an even level, to see no more than what was in front of his face and to let his eyes stop at the surface of that. It was as if he was 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 this threatened intimacy of creation (21-2).

What this account suggests is that the call to name the human experience of the world is missing from Francis Tarwaters' actions. He avoids the incarnate world or the intimacy of creation by not speaking or responding to it. Francis Tarwater's interior battle is not finally the same as Rayber's intellectual ascetic discipline, because Francis is more heavily influenced by Mason Tarwater. The struggle Francis faces concerning his prophetic vocation and Bishop's relation to it is more a matter of spiritual wrestling

between the self and God concerning control. Mason Tarwater's own struggle as a prophet is revealing in this regard, because he had once dissociated himself from the world in his desire that the Lord destroy it. Instead, Mason is called to face the judgment of his naming of the world, which inevitably includes himself. When Mason Tarwater is first called on by God to be a prophet, he, like Francis, has very grand visions of himself and what being a prophet means:

He had been called in his early youth and had set out for the city to proclaim the destruction awaiting a world that had abandoned its Saviour. He proclaimed from the midst of his fury that the world would see the sun burst in blood and fire and while he raged and waited, it rose every morning, calm and contained in itself, as if not only the world, but the Lord Himself had failed to hear the prophet's message. It rose and set, rose and set on a world that turned from green to white and green to white and green to white again. It rose and set and he despaired of the Lord's listening. Then one morning he saw *to his joy* a finger of fire coming out of it and before he could turn, before he could shout, the finger had touched him and the destruction he had been waiting for had fallen in his own brain and his own body. His own blood had been burned dry and not the blood of the world.... (VBA 5-6).

Mason's experience is one of human limitation and judgment of the human pretension to see and define all of reality according to this limited capacity. Mason's prophetic proclaiming (in its damning view of the rest of creation) had revealed his expectations of God, what he desired, rather than what was expected of him. His judgement was ill-conceived because it did not account for his participation in the creation he judged. What is important about the old man's burning vision is that precisely this experience--the movement from an outward judgement/naming of creation to an inward experience of the demand for the justification of that judgement--is the form of Francis Tarwater's

experience in the novel as a whole. This transformative lesson of self-knowledge and accountability is the only thing that can save Francis from himself, though Francis will only really come to understand it when he sees the connection between his words and his actions, and the need to understand them in relation. This is how Mason educates: he tells a story of himself in order to articulate the drama of how Francis will come to know who he is. This tale of Mason's prophetic call hints at O'Connor's account of the movement and direction of violence: the violence is first directed outwards--towards the world (apparently devoid of God), as the prophet judges the world from what he thinks is a divine perspective. The movement of the violence is reversed, however, and turns back on Mason himself--not to destroy him, but only the illusion of who he is, as a prophet and as a human being, and to show him the discontinuity between what he says and what he does.

Francis Tarwater does not want to bring on the destruction of a sinful world so much as he wants to resist an embodied spiritual existence that demands his participation, and so he acts to reject that kind of world by drowning Bishop. 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 all responsible for all. Rayber rejects intellectually the penetration of this sacramental order into his consciousness, but Francis, who acts his rebellion rather than thinking it, must violate it externally. It is not a clearly decided choice however, and Rayber's coldness both fuels Tarwater's rebellion and quells it. When Rayber, speaking of Bishop and others like him, says that "[i]n a hundred years people

may have learned enough to put them to sleep when they're born," Tarwater's expression suggests a double response to Rayber's attitude: "Something appeared to be working on the boy's face, struggling there, some war between agreement and outrage" (168-69). Although the war between "agreement and outrage" is the struggle that remains undecided even at the moment of drowning (and baptism), the stranger's voice pushes Francis towards agreement because this encourages freedom from responsibility. Tarwater is warned that if he baptizes Bishop he will be doing it forever, and as he reflects on this eternal constraint and responsibility, he meets up with a man in the park who echoes the voice and the temptation to serve no one: "Be like me, young fellow...don't let no jackasses tell you what to do" (166). The voice counselling Tarwater preys upon his pride, suggesting that not even a divine call should affect his decisions. The stranger proposes that Tarwater take the matter of his divine election into his own hands, by drowning Bishop as an act of defiance; the suggestion comes from the voice, but the idea (and the view of Bishop's worth) is Rayber's (165).

Resistance

The tension that mounts in Francis' soul during the days preceding the drowning/baptism, is caused by his desire for, and yet his resistance to, a sign from God concerning his prophetic call. Francis Tarwater wants a physical manifestation of his calling and mission, and the voice feeds his pride by suggesting he should accept nothing less than an "unmistakable sign," such as "water bursting forth from a rock...fire sweeping

down at his command and destroying some site he would point to, such as the tabernacle he had gone to spit on..."(162). Yet, although the stranger's voice insists on something momentous, Francis wonders if the hunger he feels--"[s]ince 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 like an insistent silent force inside him"--might be a sign of his desire for the bread of life. The voice is "adamant that he refuse to entertain hunger as a sign" (162). After Francis' experience of listening to the charismatic child preach, he felt even more justified in desiring some obvious sign of his mission; he returned to Rayber's house, sat up in bed, and "raising his folded hat as if he were *threatening the silence*, he... demanded an unmistakable sign of the Lord" (163) (*italics mine*).

This demand for a sign betrays the real issue for Francis--his desire to choose his own destiny. He desires a sign that he feels is appropriate, while he resists the verbally silent claims of Bishop and Mason. When the sun falls on Bishop's head at the pool in the park, Francis is drawn towards him and the permeating silence signals something to him: "He felt a distinct tension in the quiet. The old man might have been lurking near, holding his breath, waiting for the baptism. His friend was silent as if in the felt presence, he dared not raise his voice. At each step the boy exerted a force backward but he continued nevertheless to move toward the pool" (165). Rayber, perhaps sensing Francis' intentions, snatches Bishop away, and Tarwater confronts his image in the pool. He chooses: "I wasn't going to baptize him...flinging the silent words at the silent face. I'd drown him first...Drown him then, the face appeared to say" (165). Francis finally refuses this "sign"

of baptism in the park, because, as his "friendly" voice counsels him, the acceptance of any sign will oblige him to further missions and to accountability to the Lord from whom the sign came. The only way to be in control of your life, cautions the voice, is to do it yourself without waiting for a sign from anyone else: "You have to take hold and put temptation behind you...If it's an idiot this time, the next time it's liable to be a nigger. Save yourself while the hour of salvation is at hand" (166).

Francis Tarwater has to overcome the command to baptize Bishop by commanding his own choice. Instead of baptizing, he will drown, thereby ending the prophetic claim upon his life and the responsibility that it entails. Tarwater violently acts out his rebellion by killing Bishop, but he lacks sufficient control to avoid baptizing him also. The baptism, while troubling to Tarwater, does not make him feel as though his refusal loses its weight. He reduces the baptism to empty words: "'They were just some words that run out of my mouth and spilled in the water.' He shook his head violently as if to scatter his thoughts" (209). He says to the truck driver on his way back to Powderhead: "I'm in full charge there. No voice will be uplifted. I shouldn't never have left it except to prove I wasn't no prophet and I've proved it...I proved it by drowning him. Even if I did baptize him that was only an accident. Now all I have to do is mind my own bidnis until I die" (210). Francis Tarwater's mission is done; he has turned the violence outward against the order that he felt impinging upon his freedom, refusing its call, and now his choice is to remain in his isolated but free existence at Powderhead. This is the height of his rejection, and as he leaves the trucker and begins marching back towards Powderhead, he vows to "live his

life *as he had elected it*, and where, for the rest of his days, he would make good his refusal" (218) (*italics mine*). In the midst of this march he meets another who has said "No," namely, the stranger with the lavender shirt and panama hat.

Judgement and Reconciliation

Just before Tarwater is picked up he meets the woman at the filling station, where he wants to buy a drink. This is Francis' first encounter with someone from his "community," who knows his uncle as a man, and not simply a textbook case of mad religious fanaticism. This episode is critical for our grasp of the theme of judgement in the novel, as well as its relation to violence, because it recalls us to the fact that Francis has done wrong by his great-uncle Mason's body, in the same moment we are recoiling from his violence against Bishop. The starkest mention of judgement after his killing of Bishop comes when Tarwater approaches the black-eyed woman: "There was all knowledge in her stony face and the fold of her arms indicated a judgement fixed from the foundations of time" (225). The force of her judgement is not physical, nor are there words of damnation. She simply knows what Tarwater has done, and awaits his response, the judgement contingent upon his ability to answer for his actions:

The boy pulled himself together to speak. He was conscious that no sass would do, that he was called upon by some force outside them both to answer for his freedom and make bold his acts. A tremor went through him. His soul plunged deep within itself to hear the voice of his mentor at its most profound depths. He opened his mouth to overwhelm the woman and to his horror what rushed from his lips, like the shriek of a bat, was an obscenity he had overheard once at a fair. Shocked, he saw the moment

lost (225).

Tarwater's soul is empty to answer but for some ugly words, a judgement and shame worse than anything else he could experience. The voice and counsel of his "mentor," his internal friend, is, at its most profound depths, obscene. He leaves her, shamed and disappointed with himself, yet longing for companionship to atone for his failure "to make good his refusal." He "wanted to explain to someone what he had failed to explain to the woman and with the right words to wipe out the obscenity that had stained his thought" (226). The obscenity feels like a failure to Francis, "[t]he boy's mind was too fierce to brook impurities of such a nature. He was intolerant of unspiritual evils and with those of the flesh he had never truckled. He felt his victory sullied by the remark that had come from his mouth" (226). The obscenity is too fleshly, too unspiritual, and Francis, considering that this affects (sullies) his spiritual defiance, perhaps begins to recognize the intrinsic connection between his obscenity and the defiance, as well as the need to justify in words, his actions. Just as Francis once sought spiritual signs "untouched by any fleshly hand or breath"(22), he now desires to make his rebellion pure and free of any physicality or ugliness. As he moves to drown Bishop he is described thus: "He felt *bodiless* as if he were nothing but a head full of air, about to *tackle all the dead*" (215) (italics mine). Even before he is raped, he is being forced to acknowledge the obscenity in himself, to acknowledge that his violence against Bishop was not simply a disembodied act of will. It was an ugly, fleshly, obscene act of violation, rooted in a spiritually defiant will, and this is made explicit when Francis is at the receiving end of such an act. When he is raped he can

no longer admit that "making good one's refusal" is a disembodied act.⁴¹

There are two exchanges early in the novel that foreshadow Tarwater's rape: one involves Mason Tarwater, and the other Rayber. The question remains whether these foreshadowings confirm that Tarwater's rape is the only way he is to be saved--generally assumed to be the judgemental religious view--or whether they reveal the different perceptions of judgement and justice of Mason and Rayber. The first comes from Mason Tarwater concerning notably, the prophetic life, a difficult vocation not fully determined by the prophet. He warns Francis that if he [Mason] does not manage to baptize Bishop, then he will have to take over. Francis is unimpressed by this task, displeased with the idea of such a minor first mission. He disagrees and says to Mason, "[h]e don't mean for me to finish up your leavings. He has other things in mind for me. And he thought of Moses who struck water from a rock, of Joshua who made the sun stand still, of Daniel who stared down lions in the pit." Recalling his own lessons learned after dictating the fantastic destruction of the city to God, mistaking his prophetic role for that of a divine judge, Mason directs Tarwater: "It's no part of your job to think for the Lord...Judgement may rack your bones" (9-10). Is it the case, then, that because Tarwater's bones are literally "racked," the rape is the judgement that Mason predicted? And would Mason condone such a judgement as an affirmative answer would seem to assume? Or is Mason's

⁴¹ See Giannone's interpretation of the rape in *Flannery O'Connor, Hermit Novelist*: "O'Connor's presentation of rape draws less on the modern understanding of rape as a political crime (with its attendant sympathy for the victim) and more on the timeless spiritual effects of this notorious weapon of degradation" (162-165).

prediction fulfilled in the "tremor" that goes through Francis as the black-eyed woman judges his shameful treatment of his uncle (225); a judgement not immediately retributive and physical, but eternal and related to Francis' responsibility to the dead? This kind of judgement requires a reorientation in vision--of the world, and others, but predominantly of oneself. Old Tarwater warns Francis that the prophetic calling makes one more prone to assumptions about God's judgements, and that, given his own experiences, the judgement is often turned back on oneself. To defy one's human limitations is invariably its own punishment, and Francis' excessively spiritualized notion of his prophetic calling is finally exposed by his own obscenity and the stranger's.

The second reference is even more suggestive of the rape, a comment offered by Rayber when Mason Tarwater has just baptized Francis Tarwater as a baby. After Mason tells Rayber that he has baptized Francis, Rayber takes the water bottle and pours it over Tarwater's bottom, repeating the words of baptism, saying "[n]ow Jesus has a claim on both ends" (73). While Rayber's pronouncement might insinuate that the claim of Jesus is again, literally enacted with the rape, it is necessary to consider Rayber's religious sensibilities in order to assess clearly his conception of judgement. The second baptism done by Rayber is his attempt to be provocatively irreverent. He derides Mason's assumption of Francis' spiritual dignity by parodying the sacrality of the act. Rayber finds the act meaningless. His gesture does not predict the necessity of Tarwater's rape as judgement, but it is a foreshadowing of the rape itself. This distinction is crucial: Rayber's action portends the cruel consequences of such irreverence to human dignity, when human

worth and sacrality are not acknowledged as divinely given and revealed, when words are enacted, and when actions require an answer.

Neither Mason nor Rayber are able to prepare Francis Tarwater, however, for the violation that he experiences at the hands of the stranger, whose name suggests the incarnation of the voice. Francis becomes the victim of his own rebellion, not divine retribution, and his suffering, experienced as a violation of both his body and soul, brings Francis to a realization of their connection. The question is whether the rape is a divine judgement on Francis' rebellion, either as punishment or as the means for Francis' spiritual enlightenment. It seems that whether the divine judgement is intended to punish or reveal, such a view is too simplistic in its portrayal of divine justice, and the struggle of the human will. It represents divine justice as retributive and argues a view of human nature that is determined and not free, in the choice either to do evil or to do good. And further, it does not seem that O'Connor's concern with Francis' actions is centred on judgment, but on responsibility. As he lies naked in the woods, "propped up against a log that lay across a small open space between two very tall trees" (232), on his cross of suffering, Francis is drawn beyond himself and what has happened, to a "final revelation." Francis' eyes are burned clean, and they "looked as if, touched with a coal like the lips of the prophet, they would never be used for ordinary sights again" (233), but the rape is not the revelation. What Francis is compelled to seek is at Powderhead, the home from which he ran and which is now his destination. For all of Francis' previous isolation and his desire to flee the constraints of human community and responsibility, he is now confronted with a

multitude:

Everywhere, he saw dim figures seated on the slope and as he gazed he saw that from a single basket the throng was being fed. His eyes searched the crowd for a long time as if he could not find the one he was looking for. Then he saw him. The old man was lowering himself to the ground. When he was down and his bulk had settled, he leaned forward, his face turned toward the basket, impatiently following its progress toward him. 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 (241).

I would argue that the question of judgement needs to be understood within the context of responsibility, particularly eternal responsibility--conjured up by the vision of the dead, "living" congregation at Powderhead. Understood in this way, the brief experience with the woman at the filling station and the encounter with the lavender-eyed stranger both become part of a complex process of self-revelation in Francis Tarwater. It is a revelation which opens his eyes, not only through the shock and pain in the woods, but also through the penetrating gaze of the black-eyed woman, to whom he is unable to account for his actions. When faced with the challenge of justifying himself to her--which is not an issue for the stranger in the car, who simply flatters and encourages Tarwater's insolence for his own perverse ends--Tarwater is only able to utter an obscenity. More than the revelation of the stranger's perversity and evil, Tarwater is shaken first by his own. But they are two things over which he has no control. Francis learns something about the evil he has committed and then he learns something about the life of freedom without responsibility. He sees these two things as the same.

In the final lines of *The Violent Bear it Away*, Francis recognizes himself as joined with those "who would wander in the world, strangers from that violent country where the silence is never broken except to shout the truth. He felt it building from the blood of Abel to his own, rising and engulfing him. It seemed in one instant to lift and turn him" (242). But surely Tarwater is not Abel, he is not the one who suffered death at the hands of his brother; he is the one who has committed the crime against his cousin Bishop. Yet in this moment of both being lifted and turning, with a redirected vision, Tarwater experiences the blood of Abel and Bishop crying out for justice (Gen 4:10); he comes to know Abel's suffering and takes it inwardly upon himself. He knows in this felt cry for justice that he is responsible for Bishop and his great uncle. In this sense, Tarwater is also Cain⁴², a murderer marked, and left to wander (Gen 4:12-17), who must begin to live out anew this responsibility to others. This inward responsibility that Francis carries with him is not dedicated to a violent judgement of the city towards which he turns. Francis is bearing away the violence of himself and others, with the new sights he has seen, in order to confront the children of God. Some might assume, like the old prophet Mason Tarwater once did, that the city is damned and worthy of destruction, but Francis' quest has nothing to do with destruction, other than the destruction of the false idols of human

⁴² The comparison is relevant and instructive on several levels, but especially with regard to judgement and punishment. Cain expresses his fear to the Lord, that in his exile from God, those who know of his crime might slay him. God does not accept this as just punishment, and prohibits any human hand from meting out his justice. He marks Cain instead, and protects him from this kind of retribution.

self-sufficiency and autonomy. He sets out to warn the children of God who lie sleeping of the "terrible speed of God's mercy," but the warning comes from an experience of that burning mercy, through which Tarwater has begun to understand his limits and his responsibility to know who he is.

CHAPTER FOUR

Purgatorial Visions: "Revelation"

"I have writ a story [Revelation] with which I am, for the time anyway, pleased pleased pleased" (*HB* 551).

i) The Burning up of Virtue

"Revelation" is one of O'Connor's perfectly constructed short stories, which reveals her masterful ability to integrate religious ideas with biblical symbols in an unassuming story of a southern country woman. The story of Ruby Turpin is about a religious woman who has nothing to worry about religiously; that is, her religious beliefs are secure and she is thankful to God for who she is and the state she is in. Ruby Turpin is not struggling against God, she is not unwilling to believe nor does she want to reject God's purposes. It is only when the suspicion is raised that perhaps God is not so content with who Ruby is, that the struggle begins. The resistance to God that Ruby Turpin embodies in "Revelation," therefore, is not so much a resistance against God, as a resistance against God's appraisal of Ruby herself, and indeed God's resistance to Ruby. Ruby is apparently cast out of divine favour when she receives a revelatory whack in the head with a psychology book on *Human Development*, at the hands of a girl named Mary Grace. The story chronicles the spiritual movement of Ruby Turpin's soul from her condemnation as a "wart hog from hell" through her purgatorial ascent to a proper vision and understanding of herself in relation to God. In order to resist the negative calling as a

"wart hog from hell," Ruby must descend into herself and grapple with the meaning of the call. The struggle is fierce as she seeks alongside Job and other biblical characters, to find a response that will justify *herself* to God. However, what she discovers in the process, which has its culmination in her final vision, is that it is precisely her self-justification that hinders her ascent. Ruby needs to be purged of the idea of her own righteousness and seek the source of righteousness outside of the shallow category of a "good disposition."

The purgatorial vision purifies human beings of their mistaken notions about themselves in relation to God. Moreover, the vision has its meaning in the midst of this life, not the afterlife, and Ruby is indeed transformed by it according to O'Connor: "She [Ruby Turpin] gets the vision. Wouldn't have been any point in that story if she hadn't...And that vision is purgatorial" (*HB* 577). But O'Connor's comment is not the only evidence; the story itself provides clues as to the nature of the vision and in what ways Ruby understands its meaning in relation to herself. When Ruby sees a fiery vision of souls marching towards heaven and she is *not* in the lead, and in fact, none of her expectations of the proper order appear, she is altered by the implications. She does not experience the revelation simply as an antidote to her hypocrisy, nor as a biblical reversal of fortune (the first shall be last and the last first): she comes to know herself before God. The spiritual purging she experiences is mirrored by what she observes, namely, the faces "shocked and altered" from "even their virtues... being burned away" (*CW* 654). Ruby's vision is purified not by her own efforts but through her witness to the burning away of her self-professed virtues. The purgatorial vision is a purgation of self-love from the soul,

and Ruby Turpin's self-love rests in the love of her own righteousness. While it is the vision in "Revelation" that O'Connor explicitly names as purgatorial, there are significant images of purgatorial themes in the two novels, which connect them to the story of "Revelation," and form an interesting progression for our discussion. The central theme of human resistance to the divine, common to all three texts is, as O'Connor sees it, necessarily connected to the theme of purgation, which is the experience of the soul when it is willing and able to move nearer to God.

The motifs of burning in the two novels (*Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear it Away*) and in "Revelation" all signify purgatorial experiences. In these stories, the burning, always accompanied by water (another medium of purification) symbolizes the purging that is required and desired in order to purify oneself before God, or to be purified by God.¹ In *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes realizes, however misguidedly, that he is not "true." Hazel intuitively understands that the truth in human beings comes from a more encompassing, divine measure of truth, and that to reject the measure that "is" by setting up one's own measure is a mockery of truth. His response is to end his untrue vision of the world and God by destroying this vision literally. Haze brings on the purging/purifying lime and water and burns his eyes to clean his vision (*WB* 210). His form of purgation fails, however; his

¹ See O'Connor's comment regarding these symbols: "Water is a symbol of purification and fire is another. Water, it seems to me, is a symbol of the kind of purification that God gives irrespective of our efforts or worthiness, and fire is the kind of purification we bring on ourselves--as in Purgatory. It is our evil which is naturally burnt away when it comes anywhere near God" (*HB* 387).

attempt to do it himself shows that he is unable to differentiate between purgation and destruction. What Hazel Motes needs is a transformation of vision, not its elimination.

In *The Violent Bear it Away*, the purgatorial symbols of fire and water abound. These symbols, understood in relation to the experience of purgation, reflect Francis Tarwater's desire to be purged free from divine control, particularly in its form of requiring responsibility for others. Tarwater drowns Bishop in an effort to reject the constraint on his freedom, but in the process also "baptizes" him. This baptism challenges Tarwater's attempt to purge his existence of responsibility. His rape in the woods by the stranger prompts another purgation by Tarwater, this time with fire, "eating greedily at the evil ground, burning every spot the stranger could have touched" (*VBA* 232). The uniqueness of the purgatorial images of fire and water in *The Violent Bear it Away* rests in their duality. Tarwater is caught in the middle of his growing apprehension that water both drowns and baptizes, and that violation and purgation both burn. While Hazel Motes only understands purgation as destruction, Tarwater learns the tension of being in the middle, faced with the choice of action and its direction. In this way, the symbolism of purgatory expands from the first novel to the second, and in one of O'Connor's last written stories, "Revelation," the purgatorial vision shapes the whole story.

Ruby Turpin's experience is markedly different from those of Hazel Motes and Francis Tarwater, because she is already convinced of her divine election and salvation. She does not want to save herself or to deny God. Ruby Turpin takes it for granted that her religious beliefs keep her in right relation to God, but she lacks a proper relation to

herself; she does not understand who or what she is. In a sense, Ruby needs to be confronted with herself from a perspective different than her own. Her vision is clouded, not by rebellion but by her self-love, inherent in her religious self-satisfaction. The point of the purgatorial experience, therefore, is not to punish the rebel or the hypocrite, but to bring them to a realization of who they are. Ruby struggles with God over this, but not against God's reality or existence: Ruby Turpin resists God's judgement of her righteousness.

Even though O'Connor describes Ruby's vision in "Revelation" as purgatorial, few scholars have followed up on the significance of that description in direct relation to the story's meaning.² In order to appreciate more fully the intent of O'Connor's remark, one important source for her use of purgatorial images should be considered. O'Connor's reading of the mystics is often alluded to in *The Habit of Being*, and there is one mystic in particular, St. Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510), whose treatise on purgatory O'Connor read. Through an examination of St. Catherine's treatise it is possible to recognize certain important elements of purgatory also present in "Revelation," as well as in other works by O'Connor, such as *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear it Away*.

In the foreword to St. Catherine's two major writings, the translator, Serge

² Asals mentions the theme of purgation in O'Connor's work in *The Imagination of Extremity*, p. 226: "Indeed, while the imagery of fire in O'Connor's fiction may be demonic, it is most often purgatorial, and what it signals is the infliction of a searing grace, the onset of a saving pain."

Hughes, describes her work on purgatory as follows: "*Purgation and Purgatory* is an account of Catherine's understanding, through revelation and meditation, of the transformation of the self through the love of God."³ The focus of the meditation is not the afterlife. St. Catherine's meditations on purgatory are about this life, "witnessed while still in the flesh" (71), and the relationship between self-love and the love of God. The marching souls that Ruby Turpin sees are part of such a witnessing vision, not a visual depiction of the afterlife, nor a final judgement on her soul. The purgatorial vision and the experiences which precede it allow for a transformation of Ruby's self-understanding while "still in the flesh." In one of her letters, O'Connor describes St. Catherine's notion of purgatory as "realization," thus emphasizing the revelation of self-knowledge as integral to the purgatorial experience (*HB* 118). The experience is not one of fear, nor of reward or punishment, and it is obvious in both Catherine of Genoa's treatise and O'Connor's story that good and evil, or virtue and vice, are secondary to love and self-knowledge. In our discussion of the scholarship, we will see that in most interpretations of "Revelation" there tend to be two general approaches to the final vision: the scene is either interpreted as a final judgement, God making his rewards and punishments known to the recipients, or it is seen as an indictment of human judgements, whether classist, economic, or racist. Neither of these types of interpretation develops the question of who the self is before God, (a

³ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory & The Spiritual Dialogue*, trans. Serge Hughes (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1979), xvi. For the discussion that follows, references to this work will be noted in text by the page number.

question central to O'Connor's thought) and how the vision reveals this to Ruby Turpin. This is *the* question of the story, shouted out to God, then returned and asked of Ruby also: "Who do you think you are?" (*CW* 653). Purgatory, or a purgatorial vision as Ruby experiences it and St. Catherine describes it, is the cleansing of the soul from self-love in order to know who the self is more truly in relation to God.⁴ In the following section I will draw out the main elements of St. Catherine's understanding of the purgatorial experience in order to demonstrate its importance for O'Connor's work generally, and specifically for the final vision in "Revelation." This will be followed by a brief analysis of the interpretive implications when the final vision is read without reference to its purgatorial meaning. Finally, in the last section I will offer a textual exegesis of the story itself, with reference to its biblical and mystical allusions to the soul's movement toward God.

⁴ In conjunction with the discussion in Chapter One, concerning the particular effects of the philosophical and biblical influences on O'Connor's work, it is worth mentioning that in the introduction to St. Catherine's writings, Benedict J. Groeschel identifies her three major literary sources: the Scriptures, (especially Isaiah, the Psalms, the Pauline and the Johannine writings); the poems of Lodi of the Blessed Jacopone da Todi (1228-1306), "an ecstatic poet...who writes in the tradition of the Christian Neoplatonism of St. Augustine and especially of Dionysius;" and finally, a devotional treatise on Dionysius, as well as a translation and commentary of *The Mystical Theology and the Divine Names of Dionysius*. See Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory*, pp. 23-4.

ii) *St. Catherine of Genoa & Purgatory*

St. Catherine of Genoa's *Purgation and Purgatory* displays her vision of purgatory and its meaning in life as the soul moves towards perfection in God. It speaks to a spiritual experience combining suffering, joy and love as human beings stand in the divine presence, and St. Catherine often admits that her words and expressions never communicate completely or fully this experience. Not intended as a literally descriptive account of purgatory, it is a spiritual revelation of God's love and its experience in the human soul. The order of love in the human soul determines the nature of the purgatorial experience as the soul nears God, which might explain why characters like Tarwater and Ruby Turpin can have such differing experiences of purgation. For St. Catherine, what is central to the experience is the re-ordering of human love, usually directed toward the self, through the presence of divine love. The purging is of whatever bars the way to the love of God and the reception of that love in human life. This divine-human love orders all of St. Catherine's meditations: "All that I have said is as nothing compared to what I feel within, the witnessed correspondence of love between God and the Soul."⁵ St. Catherine's treatise begins with the account of her vision "while still in the flesh" of "the fiery love of God, a love that consumed her, cleansing and purifying all" (71). God's love is imaged as fiery in its power both to consume and purify, but this power is necessary to purify the imperfect loves of human beings, which impede the soul's experience of God. The purging

⁵ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation*, p. 78.

is understood as desirable more than fearful or painful, and it is Catherine's joy to experience her "union with God in this loving purgatory" (71). The purgatorial experience is centred on the realization of the soul's connection to and desire for God through love, and, at the same time, the realization of the human, sinful impediments to God's love. Catherine notes both the suffering and joy that accompany these two experiences, and yet her vision suggests that the joy "increases day by day because of the way in which the love of God corresponds to that of the soul" (72).

There is no movement of the soul toward God that is not impelled by the soul's intrinsic desire for God, instilled in it by God. St. Catherine insists that "[i]n its creation the soul was endowed with all the means necessary for coming to its perfection" (80). The purgatorial experience of being in-between human imperfection and God's perfection is the reason for suffering. The suffering is in the awareness that something blocks the soul from God, and "the more the soul is aware of that impediment, the greater its suffering" (73). Suffering is not due to God's infliction of punishment; it is due to the soul's recognition of what it is and lacks in relation to God. The reasoning of moral cause and effect is absent in the soul's experience of purgatory, according to St. Catherine, as the soul does not calculate its measure in terms of reward or punishment, especially when in the presence of God:

These souls cannot think, "I am here, and justly so because of my sins," or "I wish I never had committed such sins for now I would be in paradise," or "That person there is leaving before me," or "I will leave before that other one." They cannot remember the good and evil in their past nor that of others. Such is their joy in God's will, in His pleasure, that they have no

concern for themselves...Should they be aware of other good or evil, theirs would not be perfect charity (71).

The perfection of love is achieved by overcoming human notions of justice, fuelled by human interests and self-love. St. Catherine says that the suffering of purgatory is the purging of the individual's concern for the self in the presence of God: "The greatest suffering of the souls in purgatory, it seems to me, is their awareness that something in them displeases God, that they have deliberately gone against His great goodness. In a state of grace, these souls fully grasp the meaning of what blocks them on their way to God." In this condition, according to St. Catherine, "all words, sentiments, images, the very idea of justice or truth, seem completely false" (78).

What this realization offers is the awareness of the distinction between human ideas of what is just or good, and what truly measures that justice or goodness. The effect is purifying in the sense that human beings are made aware of their self-defined measure of justice and how this is not only lacking, but is in fact an impediment to knowing God's justice and goodness, since "[a]ll goodness is a participation in God and His love for His creatures" (73). St. Catherine explains her purgatorial vision as one in which the human being strives for perfection and yet finds mostly imperfection, causing suffering. This is the heart of the vision, because it suggests that the experience of purgatory is the experience of God's graciousness and mercy towards human beings in their state of being "in-between" the poles of perfection and imperfection. What must be purged is the idea of perfection and goodness as human possessions so that the true source of perfection and

goodness can be seen. This is the purification of purgatory:

Things man considers perfect leave much to be desired in the eyes of God, for all the things of man that are perfect in appearance--what he seeks, feels, knows--contaminate him. If we are to become perfect, the change must be brought about in us and without us; that is, the change is to be the work not of man but of God. This, the last stage of love, is the pure and intense love of God alone (81).

Ultimately, the experience is both human and divine. As Catherine says, the change is both "in us and without us," and part of her treatise takes up this question through her analogical account of the human search for perfection. For O'Connor, this process of turning away from the self and towards God is the experience of conversion, conversion not as a singular event with a miraculous or permanent change of heart, but as a series of turns. She describes it in one of her letters: "I think once the process is begun and continues that you are continually turning inward toward God and away from your own egocentricity and that you have to see this selfish side of yourself in order to turn away from it" (*HB* 430). These movements are not external, they are inward spiritual movements that are manifest in the way human beings love God, others and themselves. The turn is not away from the self and outward toward an external God; the turn that both O'Connor and St. Catherine describe is an inward movement, towards knowledge of God and the purified self.

St. Catherine notes the difficulty of describing the desire for perfection in the human soul, especially when it is present but not complete. She uses the image of hunger, which is in us and yet is a desire for something beyond us that will satisfy it: "Joy in God,

oneness with Him, is the end of these souls, an instinct implanted in them at their creation. No image or metaphor can adequately convey this truth. One example, however, comes to mind. Let us imagine that in the whole world there was but one bread and that it could satisfy the hunger of all."⁶ St. Catherine discusses different levels of hunger, as well as different levels of willingness to seek that one bread, but for the hungry souls in purgatory she suggests that the experience is one of seeing some of the bread and hoping for more: "This, then, is their suffering, the waiting for the bread that will take away their hunger" (77). Again, the suffering is not inflicted as a form of punishment, nor is it otherworldly; it is present in life, inherent in the experience of desiring the satisfaction of a hunger that cannot be satisfied by human efforts alone.

How does St. Catherine's analysis of purgatory relate to the fictional texts of O'Connor? It is quite obvious that St. Catherine's treatise on purgatory includes references that are used almost directly in O'Connor's novels and stories; the influence of this text should not be underestimated in relation to O'Connor's writing. Some further reflection on St. Catherine's text on purgatory--with direct reference to the novels--will be helpful in indicating what St. Catherine and O'Connor understand to be essential in the purgatorial experience itself, as well as shedding light on the development of the theme of purgatory within O'Connor's fiction. As I have suggested, the novels *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear it Away* both contain significant elements of purgatorial cleansing in them,

⁶ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation*, p. 76.

not only in the images of burning connected to vision/sight, but also in the central characters' quest for the meaning of their existence in relation to the divine (often including their resistance). This quest is self-consciously illustrated by the Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," when he tries to understand his place, or where he "fits," given his actions and the actions of others toward him: "I call myself the Misfit...because I can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment" (*CW* 151).

In different ways, these fictional texts illustrate aspects of St. Catherine's explanation of purgatory, including how the experience should not be understood. The Misfit makes a claim that is similar to Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood*, in that they both understand the process of punishment in terms of debt/debtor relations, with the expectation of an eventual even balance between God and human beings. Hazel Motes' attempt at a final vision through blinding to make restitution for himself is not ultimately redemptive, as I have argued in chapter two; and St. Catherine's treatise on purgatory clarifies explicitly why the debt/debtor relation does not work in the human approach to God. Purification through the purgatorial vision is not to be mistaken, according to St. Catherine, with evening a score, paying a debt, or even being punished; it is a movement towards God that brings with it the realization of the self, and the necessary purging of self-centredness. The purging is desired, and accepted, but what is purified is the soul's excessive love of itself, supplanted by a love of God that is transformative. It is not a debt owed in the sense that human beings are able to "pay" it. She writes:

If contrition could purge it, the soul would turn to it in an instant and

forthwith pay its debt; and it would do so impetuously, since it has a clear appreciation of the meaning of that impediment in its way. (On his part, God does not forgive one spark of the debt due in keeping with his just decree). The soul, for its part, no longer has a choice of its own. It can seek only what God wills, nor would it want otherwise.⁷

In the *Violent Bear it Away*, Francis Tarwater's primary experience is not one of guilt or the fear of punishment, but of desiring a clear message from God. While Tarwater wants to insist that he is not searching for a religious life (especially to Rayber, *VBA* 109), he has trouble denying his strange hungering that food does not remedy: "I feel hungry but I ain't" (213). While the theme of hunger in the novel is tied to O'Connor's sacramental understanding of the world, and the kinship between the living and the dead imaged in Tarwater's final eucharistic vision at Powderhead, it is also tied to the experience of purgatory. St. Catherine of Genoa's treatise uses hunger as descriptive of the soul's desire for God, including the recognition of God as both the source and satisfaction of the hunger. It is with this hunger that Tarwater struggles: "his hunger had become like an insistent silent force inside him, a silence inside akin to the silence outside" (*VBA* 162). Given the use of the metaphor in *Purgation and Purgatory*, it is possible to relate O'Connor's emphasis on Tarwater's hunger to her reading of St. Catherine. Tarwater's experience echoes St. Catherine's description of the hungering desire inherent in human nature to be one with God:

That bread is what a healthy man, with an appetite, would seek; and when he could not find it or eat it, his hunger would increase indefinitely. Aware

⁷ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation*, p. 82.

that that bread alone could assuage his hunger, he would also know that without it his hunger could never abate. Such is the hell of the hungry who, the closer they come to this bread, the more they are aware that they do not as yet have it. Their yearning for that bread increases...⁸

The suffering here is internal, imaged as hunger but indicative of a spiritual yearning. The spiritual hunger experienced by Tarwater is in itself re-ordering, because it hints to him of the deeper truth of who he is, not simply as an individual, but in relation to the source and end of his hunger. The soul's hunger reveals him to himself through his desire and ultimately his lack, which must come from something greater than himself. As Tarwater experiences his final vision of the multitude eating from one basket, he becomes "aware at last of the object of his hunger...and...that nothing on earth would fill him" (*VBA* 241).

With the story of Ruby Turpin in "Revelation," we have a more compact envisioning of the purgatorial experience than in the novels. The quests undertaken by Hazel Motes and Tarwater revolve around knowledge, especially the distinctions between true and false knowledge. In "Revelation," the question of *self*-knowledge is pertinent to Ruby's vision, but self-knowledge as it relates to self-love and love of God. The re-ordering of Ruby's love frames the whole story, and so it is that Ruby's purgatorial vision, while revealing to her the measure of her soul and what she knows, reveals also to her the order of love. If the purgatorial vision in "Revelation" is understood primarily as a judgement scene, the re-ordering of love that Ruby experiences is neglected. As St. Catherine's treatise suggests, the purgatorial experience is one of being purged of self-love

⁸ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation*, p. 76.

enough to know what human beings are and can be through the purifying love of God. The re-ordering of vision described by St. Catherine is at the heart of Ruby's transformation: "God revivifies the soul with a special grace of His. In no other way could the soul renounce its self-centredness or return to the pristine state of its creation; and as the soul makes its way to its first state, its ardor in transforming itself into God is its purgatory, the passionate instinct to overcome its impediments" (81). Clearly this kind of purging still involves a measure of divine judgement, but the story itself, by means of different images and biblical allusions, discloses the particular nature of the judgement. An adequate interpretation requires more than equating the final vision with Ruby's final judgement. I suggest that Ruby's vision itself is purgatorial in the sense described by St. Catherine of Genoa, but also that the entire story, not just the final vision, reveals the purgatorial cleansing and transformation of Ruby Turpin. This spiritual re-ordering in O'Connor's story includes several images of the soul's descent and ascent, as it discovers its place in the "in-between" of purgatory.

iii) External and Internal Visions: God and the Unconscious

O'Connor scholars tend to diverge in their interpretations of Ruby Turpin's final vision. I believe that these divergences tend to be indicative of a more fundamental division in their assessment of the human-divine encounter. Sura Rath notes in his article on Ruby Turpin's redemption in "Revelation" that "[c]ritical polarity hinges on the *source* of Ruby's epiphany: whether it is internal, the redeeming awareness emerging from the

dramatic unfolding of the crisis she confronts; or whether it is external, the vision gratuitously descending upon her as a narrative *coup de grace*."⁹ Among the various scholars who argue this question in one direction or the other, Frederick Asals and Marshall Bruce Gentry represent the "external" and the "internal" views, respectively. While Asals recognizes the inner transformation of vision in O'Connor's characters to some extent,¹⁰ he focuses his analysis more on the insistent aspect of the divine action in revelatory encounters. Using Abraham Heschel for his account of the prophetic thrust of

⁹ Sura P. Rath, "Ruby Turpin's Redemption: Thomistic Resolution in Flannery O'Connor's 'Revelation'" *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 19 (1990): 1 (italics mine). Rath responds to the problem of polarity by suggesting that O'Connor was dramatizing the Thomistic "reconciliation of opposites" and that the "external objects" are "a means of tracking internal growth" (1). While the effort to diminish the polarity in this way is helpful, it still leaves Ruby separated from her experience, and encourages the hierarchical division of the natural world and the supernatural. Understood in this way, the natural world becomes a "medium" through which the "higher truth" is perceived; and Ruby Turpin can only know through her senses rather than through her soul's ability to transcend the "natural-supernatural dialectic" through ascent and descent. Rath's account includes ascent only, since the material world is used only as a medium, and consequently, the goal in ascending is to move "toward something fuller than the present life" (4). This assumption negates the purgatorial vision according to O'Connor and St. Catherine, which does not offer an escape to another world, but a transformed vision of how to live better as a whole person within this world.

¹⁰ Near the end of his chapter on "The Prophetic Imagination," Asals does acknowledge the human role in the transformative vision: "But although the awakening seems to come wholly from without, in O'Connor's work it comes from within also, for it entails the 'emergence of intuitions from below the threshold,' the 'openings of the soul's eye'" (231). But it seems that because intuition comes "from below" and "consciousness has its roots deep in unconscious life," Asals has removed the possibility of an active, conscious, spiritual re-ordering in the revelatory experience. This type of one-sided interpretation of visionary experiences can ultimately be traced back to some of the reductive accounts of reason that were discussed in chapter one, but for our purposes here it is worth noting that the primary emphasis is on a divine imposition of a religious vision, rather than the experience and participation of the main character in the vision. See Asals, *Imagination of Extremity*.

O'Connor's fiction, Asals describes O'Connor's prophetic consciousness as being projected onto her characters, causing them to be relentlessly pursued by God while they remain in rebellion or revolt. Asals does note O'Connor's comment in *Mystery and Manners* that "our age is an age of searchers and discoverers," but he suggests that O'Connor could not actually dramatize this search, especially the conscious search for God, in her fiction. According to Asals, O'Connor's characters are pursued, sought after and hounded by God, but they are rarely in pursuit of God themselves. He argues that the "dominant cast of the religious event in her fiction is what Heschel calls 'anthropotropic' rather than 'theotropic': the 'turning of a transcendent Being toward man' rather than the 'turning of man toward a transcendent Being.'"¹¹ Two things are assumed here without argument: one is that the movements of the human soul are typically patterned or immediately obvious to the reader, reflected primarily in external actions rather than symbolically revealed; the second assumption is that the direction of the pursuit is an either/or possibility, not only in general terms, but as a central feature of O'Connor's fiction. If, as Asals asserts, "[r]eason leads not toward revelation but away from it"¹² in O'Connor's fiction, then her characters are necessarily barred from any ascent or spiritual search that might be revelatory, leaving no alternative but Asals' contention that the fiction is entirely anthropotropic.

What occurs in such an interpretation is an effective emptying of the meaning of

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 214.

the experienced vision itself, other than to inform Ruby that "the first shall be last and the last shall be first." The purpose of the vision is thus reduced to a radical separation between the human and the divine. Asals interprets the procession through fire in the final vision as a purging without distinction, because it "cleanses everyone not only of his sins, but also of his virtues." Instead of considering why this burning up of virtue is critical for Ruby's self-understanding, Asals assumes too quickly that the entire human moral enterprise is worthless in light of the divine measure, which necessitates its destruction in the purgatorial vision. He determines that Ruby's "virtues" of good order and respectable behaviour are no longer useful in eternity: "although these gifts are apparently their *worldly* responsibility, they have no final value in themselves."¹³ The purgation, therefore, constitutes a removal of the worldly order of virtues, according to Asals, rather than a transformation of Ruby's *worldly* understanding of the measure of her virtue. In his interpretation, the purgatorial vision ends up being the destruction of all things worldly; although noting O'Connor's comment that "the man in the violent situation reveals those qualities least dispensable in his personality, those qualities which are all he will have to take into eternity with him" (*MM* 114), he seems to deny the possibility of such a qualified purgation in "Revelation." He concludes: "all that the visionary procession of "Revelation" clearly carries into eternity with it is the purifying action of the fire itself."¹⁴

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 225 (italics mine).

¹⁴ Asals, *Imagination of Extremity*, p. 225.

One of the interesting similarities between Asals' discussion and Gentry's, even though they understand the source of the vision differently, is their focus on the unconscious in their analyses. Asals, while presumably describing O'Connor's Thomistic influences, refers to his dependence on Victor White's book, *God and the Unconscious* for his description of intuition and visionary knowledge.¹⁵ O'Connor read White's book, as well as other Jungian psychoanalysts, but her appreciation of them is marginal,¹⁶ and her language and thought about human nature are more centrally influenced by the classical Greek and biblical traditions, as I have argued in chapter one. More specifically, O'Connor's understanding of personal religious visions and experiences is grounded primarily in the Christian mystical tradition. She makes this distinction between modern psychoanalysis and the ancient religious teachings clear in one of her letters: "The kind of 'belief' that Jung offers the modern, sick, unbelieving world is simply belief in the psychic realities that are good for it. This is good medicine and a step in the right direction but it is not religion" (*HB* 382). For O'Connor, what the psychoanalytic tradition offers is the recognition of the *psyche* (soul) as a reality in human experience, which, she says "the great mystics have always faced and that the Church teaches...we must face." The ideas of psychoanalysis are not novel to O'Connor, and she further notes that they offer a less

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 213, note 15.

¹⁶ In one of her letters O'Connor makes a reference to her reading of the depth psychologists, including Jung, Neumann and Victor White, about which she says: "All this throws light momentarily on some of the dark places in my brain but only momentarily" (*HB* 103).

comprehensive account of psychic realities--as in this explicit comparison of Jung to a mystic: "St. Catherine of Genoa said 'God is my best self,' by which she realized probably what Jung means but a great deal more" (*HB* 382). Whatever O'Connor might have thought about the psychoanalytic tradition, it is clear that her understanding of the religious vision is not that it is rooted in the unconscious. In Asals' argument, the emphasis on the unconscious negates the role of reason in the revelatory experience, and hence, the possibility of the soul's noetic movement towards God. His use of Victor White leads Asals to accept an account of reason that is less differentiated than Aquinas' account, because he ends by separating reason from any experience of vision or intuition. Thus while he notes that the imagination, according to Aquinas, is the main receptor of the revelatory experience, he concludes (*contra* Aquinas) that it is not connected to the activity of the intellect, and is therefore forced into the unconscious. The imagination, he says, "seems most open to revelation when it is withdrawn, that is, when it is unconscious. In short, 'it is through the sub-rational that the super-rational is brought to human consciousness.'" ¹⁷

In Gentry's interpretation, the unconscious is the focus of Ruby Turpin's vision, but instead of a withdrawn intellect, which leaves the unconscious open to the divine revelation, Gentry construes an active unconscious, which allows Ruby to make her own revelation to herself. Gentry's interpretation of the final vision comes from a different

¹⁷ Asals, *Imagination of Extremity*, p. 213.

direction--Ruby is the source, and she projects the vision from her own unconscious. As in Asals' argument, the psychoanalytical language, while at times relevant, is not complete in its assessment of the spiritual experience. Gentry's consideration of religious ideas, especially his focal theme of redemption, is dependent on formal textbook definitions (in this case from the *Catholic Encyclopaedia*¹⁸), which he often uses as rigid templates for his evaluation of the religious symbols in O'Connor's fiction. The result can be confusing for an analysis of the purgatorial vision in "Revelation," especially since Gentry discusses Turpin's vision in terms of redemption, rather than purgation. This point is not mere pedantry; there is a difference between the nature of the experiences, and O'Connor explicitly names this vision as purgatorial. Moreover, even though the human being is a participant in the spiritual experience of purgation in varying degrees, the event itself is primarily an experience of being measured by a transcendent God; but Gentry focuses on Turpin's self-redemption through a conscious/unconscious struggle, making "Mrs. Turpin's unconscious more clearly responsible for her vision of entry into a heavenly community."¹⁸ This explanation has the fantastic effect of construing a vision that emerges from the unknown (other) world of the unconscious only to be projected into the unknown (other) world of the heavenly community, which is equally vague in Gentry's description: "Mrs. Turpin is like a hog from hell, and she is going back where she came from, but her real origin, Mrs. Turpin senses, is heaven, and her residence in hell is a stopover on her way

¹⁸ Gentry, *Religion of the Grotesque*, p. 43.

back to heaven."¹⁹ Essentially, Gentry uses the religious language of heaven and hell but leaves the meaning of the words empty, replacing their meaning with what he calls the "strength and wisdom of the unconscious."²⁰ Where I find these analyses of O'Connor's religious symbolism to be lacking is in their reluctance to engage the images, both explicit and implicit, of O'Connor's religious imagination. As I hope to show in what follows, a recognition of O'Connor's dependence on St. Catherine of Genoa's account of purgatory is necessary for understanding the direction and nature of Ruby Turpin's spiritual experience in "Revelation."

iv) Job's companion

"If the story is taken to be one designed to make fun of Ruby, then it's worse than venal" (HB 552).

O'Connor resists interpretations suggesting that Ruby Turpin is "evil" or "damned" in the final vision. Harold Bloom's comment concerning the fire of "Revelation," is that "all are necessarily damned,"²¹ yet this common notion ignores the subtle action of purgatory, which is more than destruction and certainly not tantamount to damnation. In a letter describing a friend's assessment of "Revelation," O'Connor notes: "[she] found

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²¹ Quoted in Anthony di Renzo, *American Gargoyles: Flannery O'Connor and the Medieval Grotesque* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 216.

Ruby evil. Found end vision to confirm same...[and] suggested I leave it out. I am not going to leave it out. I am going to deepen it so that there'll be no mistaking Ruby is not just an evil Glad Annie. I've really been battling this problem all my writing days" (*HB* 554). By way of suggesting that this is a typical problem in the interpretation of her work, O'Connor notes that the manner in which her own religious thinking is perceived--conflated with the interpretation of her fictional characters--inevitably leads to the assumption that her vision is narrow and judgmental. This is why she wants to "deepen" the meaning of the vision so that Ruby is not simply dismissed as a bigot who gets what she deserves. While the general assessment of Ruby's vices is limited to her racist or classist attitudes, O'Connor is looking to reveal the motivations behind these ideological traits. Ruby does not understand who she is as a human being, especially as a religious one, and her self-love is most obviously manifest in her love of her own righteousness. The vision is not used to blame her or to judge her as evil, but to show her her faulty, human measure in the face of a higher one.

Further, to focus exclusively on the final vision as a judgement scene is to neglect the development of the story, including the other biblical allusions that are conversant with the final biblical image and revelation. My analysis of the story will address the question of order and hierarchy and how it is both understood and misunderstood in the story, especially by Ruby Turpin. This discussion will be framed by an interpretation of three biblical references within the story: to Job, to the unintelligible writing on the ceiling (Daniel), and to the reversal of the first and the last (Matthew). The interplay between

these biblical passages and Ruby's search to understand who she is in relation to God portrays the breakdown of simplistic hierarchical categories, and reveals the significant movement of descent and ascent in the re-ordering of Ruby's soul. The final purgatorial vision culminates with Ruby Turpin's self-realization, not of her (first or last) place in the afterlife, but her place in the middle of this life and how she loves others and God in this life.

Health and Sickness

The doctor's office is the right place to begin for someone who is ill. Although it is Claud who has the doctor's appointment for his swollen leg, Ruby is the one in need of healing, not physically, but spiritually. In fact, she is the one who does get treated, to the neglect of Claud. Ruby's soul is disordered, and her particular symptoms emerge once she is sitting in the waiting room, observing the other people around her, and recollecting her night-time hierarchical imaginings. The disorder is apparent, not only from her classification of human beings according to race, class and wealth, but more significantly because her vision is lacking in love and in spiritual orientation. The hierarchy is secular, Ruby is the judge, and her concern is limited to external accumulations and physical characteristics: "On the bottom of the heap were most coloured people...then next to them--not above, just away from--were the white-trash; then above them were the home owners, and above them the home-and-land owners..."(*CW* 636). Confusion creeps into her ordering when the external forms of merit cross racial and social lines, leaving her with

the problem of coloured, or common people who have considerable money. Generally, Ruby witnesses the fluidity of material possessions and the consequent instability of her measure: "some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there were coloured people who owned their homes..."(636). With the breakdown of her unreliable classification of human beings according to their possessions, colour and status, Ruby is left dreaming of "all the classes of people...moiling and roiling around in her head...all crammed together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven" (636). This horrific ending to her classification is the end product of her disordered soul, caught up as it is in merely human notions of hierarchy, in the absence of love.

Ruby's dictum that "you had to *have* certain things before you could *know* certain things" (CW 639) is the measure of this hierarchical ideal, a measure that is finally challenged at the end of the story, where, as we will note, the biblical verses about the first and the last are preceded by the story of the rich young man, who must give up all of his possessions in order to know God. It is the movement of reversal from Ruby's first vision in the doctor's office to her final vision, from an ordering according to external possessions to an ordering of love, that effects the transformative purging of Ruby's self-love. The hierarchy of Ruby's construction is not meant to be condemned by a reversed hierarchical judgement; it is to be overcome through love.

In the doctor's office, where people have come for healing of various sorts, Ruby is not expecting treatment, since she considers herself well. Ruby Turpin is continually

drawing attention to her wellness, and usually as a corrective to her observation of another's lack of it (among other things): "we got a little of everything (638); "when you got something...you got to look after it" (639); "the day has never dawned that I couldn't find something to laugh at" (643); and "[i]f its one thing I am...it's grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides..."(644). Ruby is convinced that the problem with others less fortunate than herself is their laziness: "Help them you must, but help them you couldn't" (642). The irony in this is that Ruby is equally lazy about herself, in a way that she does not yet understand. Mary Grace's book, pitched at Ruby Turpin's head, puts Ruby in need of the doctor's help, thereby negating her image of wellness; but Mary Grace's words force Ruby also to question herself in relation to some larger order of meaning. Mary Grace is straddled by the doctor on the floor, and Ruby looks *down* at her, this time quite literally, to hear Mary Grace say "[g]o back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog" (646). This statement has been understood in different ways, depending on whether the experience is interpreted as religious or not. It is always seen as a judgement, but stemming from different sources: the non-religious interpretations see Mary Grace's words as the appropriate response to Ruby Turpin's judgmental attitude, because they re-direct the judgement back on herself²², whereas many of the religious interpretations focus on the messenger's name, *Mary Grace*, and assume that it is a direct revelation of God's

²² See Clare Kahane, "Rage of Vision," p. 127, and Anthony di Renzo, *American Gargoyles*, p. 210-211.

judgement on Ruby.²³ While the name Mary Grace is probably not unintentional, to assume its literal meaning lacks imagination and engagement with other aspects of God's graciousness.²⁴ Invariably, the interpretations of Mary Grace's declaration see it as a kind of final word on Ruby, a judgement that is justified and accurate given her atrocious attitude towards the others in the waiting room. In my view, what Mary Grace says to Ruby is gracious, but not in the sense of a conclusive judgement. It provokes the beginning of Ruby's questioning, her soul's response and search for meaning. The divine measure is subtle, and its pull draws out more questions from Ruby, forcing her to contend with herself and that which compels her, perhaps for the first time, to really examine herself.

Indeed, to be called a "wart hog from hell" leaves Ruby with more questions than answers, and the questions are essential for the process of reorientation that begins with the accusation. Three questions, in particular, disturb Ruby, and she finally voices them near the end of the story. The first has to do with her identity: "How am I a hog and me both?" (*CW* 652). This question raises the possibility of a division within herself, the possibility that her spiritual orientation has better and worse directions that can in fact co-

²³ For example, John R. May says "Mary Grace, as her name itself suggests, announces the time of repentance" in John R. May, *The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O'Connor* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 12. See also, Norman McMillan, "Dostoevskian Vision in Flannery O'Connor's 'Revelation,'" in *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 16 (1987): 18

²⁴ See *Mystery and Manners*: "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" (165).

exist. The second question is directed at God's purpose in disturbing Ruby's relatively peaceful faith: "What do you send me a message like that for?" This question has its ultimate expression in her questioning of God--"who do you think you are?"--as Ruby grapples with the limitations of her capacity to understand the meaning of the message. Finally, the last question revolves around her eternal destiny: "How am I saved and from hell too?" (*CW* 652-3). This is the question that implicates Ruby's idea of her own righteousness, and forces her to contend with the possibility that righteousness, let alone salvation, is not measured or created by her own good will. It also suggests that perfect salvation or damnation are not realistic human prerogatives, and that their meanings are more ambiguous than the simple dichotomy of "in" or "out."

The questioning sparked by Mary Grace's accusation entails a process of reflection and purification, as the soul moves away from its self-defined measure to see itself in the presence of a transcendent measure. St. Catherine of Genoa writes of God's drawing action, which engenders the purgatorial experience: "He tugs at it [the soul] with a glance, draws it and binds it to Himself with a fiery love that by itself could annihilate the immortal soul. In so acting, God so transforms the soul in Him that it knows nothing other than God; and He continues to draw it up into His fiery love until He restores it."²⁵ From these words we can observe that the purgatorial movement is not a matter of a hierarchy of judged souls, but of the individual soul's orientation in relation to the divine.

²⁵ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation*, p. 79.

In Ruby's vision of the various classes of people crammed into the box car, the suffocating atmosphere of her confused human ordering symbolizes the soul's paralysis. Because Ruby's classification of human beings is limited to external traits without any recognition of their connection to the inner reality of individuals, she has eliminated the freedom of human life, which is rooted in the soul's free response. It is the movement and re-ordering of Ruby's soul through the process of questioning that begins to make this inner freedom apparent to her.

Job

Images of false hierarchies, combined with real movements of ascent and descent, permeate the ensuing reflections that Ruby has when she returns home from the doctor's office. Her first inclination is to lie down, and placed horizontally on her bed she must contend, not with her hierarchical classification system, but with herself: "The instant she was flat on her back, the image of a razor-backed hog with warts on its face and horns coming out behind its ears snorted into her head. She moaned a low quiet moan" (*CW* 647). The suffering that this image causes makes Ruby weep and defend herself against the charge, but to no avail. Ruby's situation imitates that of Job's: with her respectability questioned and tested, she is being urged to examine herself; but instead, she can only direct her examination outward, towards God or whoever has treated her unjustly. Ruby's tears over her brief self-questioning about her razor-backed hog image turn rather quickly away from herself when she considers, according to her previous hierarchical ordering, the

others who would have been more deserving of the judgement she received: "She had been singled out for the message, though there was trash in the room to whom it might justly have been applied" (647). This immediate hierarchical comparison, which reveals Ruby's unwillingness to examine herself for any sustained period, establishes her anger instead of regret, and as her tears dry, "her eyes began to burn instead with wrath" (648).²⁶

Ruby Turpin thus at first resists any questioning of her "respectability" by instituting her own measure of justice, which would indict anyone who would question her righteousness. The two central questions of the Book of Job, from both the human and divine perspectives, are fittingly applied to Ruby Turpin's experience. Gerald Janzen notes that the question "'Why do the righteous suffer?'" is posed in Job within the context of a prior and (at least for the narrator) deeper question posed by God: 'why are the righteous pious?'"²⁷ Ruby does not want to acknowledge this second question, asking only hers and Job's: "Occasionally she raised her fist and made a small stabbing motion over her chest as if she was defending her innocence to invisible guests who were like the comforters of Job, reasonable-seeming but wrong" (CW 648). Ruby defends her righteousness, like Job, and her invisible guests, like the comforters of Job, insist that she must have done something to

²⁶ For a compelling discussion of how the desert father Dorotheos of Gaza speaks to the spiritual conflict that Ruby Turpin experiences here, see, Richard Giannone, *Flannery O'Connor, Hermit Novelist*, p. 232.

²⁷ See J. Gerald Janzen's excellent commentary in *Job: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 2. The divine question of "why are the righteous pious?" raises the issue of the *motivation* for the piety, especially evident when the external rewards are absent or removed.

offend God, and that this suffering is the necessary payment.²⁸ But what is the significance of the Job analogy for this story? In what sense are the comforters of Job wrong, and in what sense is Ruby like Job? Perhaps the comforters of Job are wrong in that they are interested in divine justice only in order to decipher why Job deserves God's punishment (not unlike, it might be noted, the interpreters of Ruby Turpin who are convinced that God is judging and consequently punishing her retributively for her self-righteousness). Ruby is like Job in that she is more interested in her question as to why the righteous suffer, than in God's question--why are the righteous pious?--the most important question for the story, and for Ruby. It is only with this question that the reward/punishment mentality is transcended in order to consider the true measure of righteousness and goodness. Ruby desires a reward for being a "respectable, hard-working, church-going woman" (*CW* 648), and she is certain as she sings along with the hymn that "wona these days I know I'll wear a crown" (635). Furthermore, like Job whose righteousness is tied to his prosperity, Ruby identifies her level of respectability with what she and Claud own. This is obviously tested when his possessions are taken away from Job. Ruby's test is still to come. Righteousness, when measured by God, is not done for the sake of reward or fear of punishment, but is desired for its own sake. The apparent conversation that Ruby carries on with her invisible guests suggests the beginning of the internal dialogue, between her innocence and her guilt (how can she be both?), which will be vocalized soon enough in

²⁸ For example, Zophar the Na'amathite says, "Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves" (Job 11:6b).

the pig parlour before her vision.

The Writing on the Wall

One of the interesting symbols representing the challenge to Ruby's hierarchical (above/below) thinking in these scenes of self-reflection is her visual relation to the ceiling as she is lying flat on her back in bed. Although she is looking *up* at the ceiling (indicative of her soul's ascent) she is forced to see things--namely, the comforters of Job and the unintelligible handwriting--on a parallel plane. The second biblical allusion, to the handwriting on the wall (in this story it appears on the ceiling rather than the wall) is the revelation of the true measure of Ruby's righteousness. This reference is virtually ignored in the commentaries on "Revelation," but it makes a significant point about the appropriation by human beings of divine justice. The reference is to the Book of Daniel, where Belshaz'zar insists on using the silver and gold vessels that his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem (Daniel 5:1-4). At the moment the King and his guests begin drinking their wine from these vessels, "the fingers of a man's hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace" (Daniel 5:5). No one can read or understand the writing on the wall. The queen asks the king to consult Daniel, after none of the king's wise men are able to decipher the message. The king offers Daniel many gifts and rewards to make his interpretation known to him. Daniel refuses the rewards (5:17). He reminds Belshaz'zar of his father's fate due to his impiety and excessive pride, and warns him that witnessing this has not humbled his heart

(5:22). He chastizes him for offering his guests wine from the vessels of God's house "but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honoured" (5:23). According to Daniel's interpretation, the message inscribed as "*Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin*" (5:25) reveals that God has numbered the days of Belshaz'zar's kingdom, he has been weighed in the balance and found wanting, and his kingdom is divided between the Medes and Persians (5:26-28).

The story of Belshaz'zar, conjured up by Ruby's scrutiny of the ceiling "as if there were unintelligible handwriting" on it (*CW* 648), suggests a spiritual parallel to her story. Belshaz'zar insists on using the purloined temple vessels for his own purposes praising the gods of "silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone," to the exclusion of the "God in whose hand is [his] breath." Ruby has become so enamoured of her ideas and assumptions of righteousness that she has established herself as the measure of not only her own salvation but also of those around her. Daniel emerges as the interpreter for both stories, who, upon refusing Belshaz'zar's offers, reveals himself to be the one who seeks to know God's word without desiring a reward. His reading of the words speaks politically to Belshaz'zar and spiritually to Ruby: her days are numbered, requiring her attention to the orientation of her soul without the self-satisfied idea of her salvation. Secondly, she has been measured by God's justice and found wanting in her lack of mercy. Finally, her kingdom, or soul, is divided against itself in her love of her own righteousness over the

true source of righteousness.²⁹ After studying the ceiling, Ruby does what might seem at first strange: she asks Claud to kiss her. Yet if, according to the purgatorial movement of the story, the soul is being drawn towards God through love, then perhaps Ruby is becoming aware of how her self-love is an impediment, causing her inner division ("How am I a hog and me both?"). The kiss could signify a change of direction in the order of her loves. Ruby Turpin is thinking about who she is, what she has been called, and what is being revealed to her: "Her expression of ferocious concentration did not change...She continued to study the ceiling" (*CW* 648). This upward gaze, from which she turns briefly to consider her husband lying prone beside her, suggests Ruby's re-orientation of vision, that moves differently now--from herself to God and then back to other human beings.

When Ruby goes out to give water to the coloured workers, we are reminded of one of her comments in the doctor's waiting room: "I sure am tired of buttering up niggers, but you got to love em if you want em to work for you" (639). Her offer of water on this particular evening is not only an act of "love," however utilitarian Ruby might consider it; it is also an act of confession. Ruby's "loving" act of giving the workers

²⁹ Apparently, while Rembrandt was painting his *Belshazzar Sees the Writing on the Wall*, he had a neighbor in Amsterdam who was a rabbi and scholar, Manasseh ben Israel. This rabbi wrote a scholarly treatise in 1639 on the issue of the unintelligibility of the writing, where he argued that the wise men could not read the writing because it had been written from *top to bottom* rather than right to left as Hebrew is written. This is found in Richard Muehlberger, *The Bible in Art: The Old Testament* (New York: Portland House, 1991), 154. Ruby likewise sees human beings hierarchically ordered from top to bottom; this is at the heart of her inability to decipher the writing on the wall, and to see where she herself stands in relation to the divine order.

water is transformed by her willingness to admit to all of them what Mary Grace has called her. The "love" here demands humility, and this effects a change in Ruby. Earlier she was unable to tell Claud, not wishing "to put the image of herself as a wart hog from hell into his mind" (*CW* 648). But in front of her workers, with whom it would have been even more important to maintain an image of superiority, Ruby confesses, thus lowering her self-righteous image. What Ruby realizes is that she must confront the ugly possibility that Mary Grace is right about her, and so she struggles to speak the words. She hesitates several times, indicating the deep spiritual conflict that is forcing her to face the ugly side of herself, to question her love of herself and her own righteousness: "'She said,' Mrs. Turpin began, and stopped, her face very dark and heavy. The sun was getting whiter and whiter, blanching the sky overhead so that the leaves of the hickory tree were black in the face of it. She could not bring forth the words. 'Something real ugly,' she muttered" (*CW* 650). Ruby sees herself as the black hickory leaves in the presence of the whitened sky, purified by the sun. The flattery of the women--"[s]he sho shouldn't said nothin ugly to you...you the sweetest lady I know"--who deny the truth of the charge, only enrages her at this point, since she now knows the lie for what it is. Her recognition of their flattery as she makes her confession indicates the healing and reordering of her soul, and it convinces her of the truth about herself. Slightly humiliated by her confession nonetheless, Ruby growls "[i]diots!" and intimates that her confession might be better directed: "I got more to do than just stand around and pass the time of day" (*CW* 650). Ruby is not finished, but she is now prepared and ready to complete her ascent.

Stripped of her pride, wounded and humiliated, Ruby heads for the pig parlour, with the look of "a woman going single-handed, weaponless, into battle" (651). She climbs up the fence around the pig parlour and takes the hose away from Claud so that she might be alone for her final appeal. She is trying desperately to wash the hogs clean, desiring to make herself and them clean for her ascent, but her anger interferes with her vision: "Her free fist was knotted and with the other she gripped the hose, blindly pointing the stream of water in and out of the eye of the old sow whose outraged squeal she did not hear" (652). She shouts out two demands across the pasture, receiving a different response for each. The first demand addresses the sentence pronounced on her, and its inconsistency with her own hierarchical ordering. Ruby insists that the hierarchical order of human worth as she conceives it, and to which she clings, is real, so that no amount of shuffling will change it: "'Go on,' she yelled, 'call me a hog! Call me a hog again. From hell. Call me a wart hog from hell. Put that bottom rail on top. There'll still be a top and bottom!'" To this charge only "a garbled echo returned to her" (653). Ruby's confusion here is rooted in her inability to think beyond the human hierarchy of her own construction. By insisting (for the moment) that no matter where she stands, and despite God's manipulations (like putting the bottom rail on top), there will still be a "top and bottom," Ruby does not transcend her hierarchical mode of thinking. O'Connor's inclusion of this statement seems to suggest her resistance to the simple substitution of one hierarchy for another. The garbled response implies her confused question. Her second question, "[w]ho do you think you are?...carried over the pasture and across the highway

and the cotton field and returned to her clearly like an answer from beyond the wood" (*CW* 653). This question returns clearly because it is the right question, it has just been misdirected. Now the question is asked of her. Ruby understands this instantly, as she essays to make an immediate reply: "She opened her mouth but no sound came out of it." At this moment, Ruby realizes that she does not have the answer to the question, and this is her impediment. The experience leaves her feeling vulnerable, not only for herself but for the one she loves, and as she watches Claud's truck on the highway it appears as a child's toy to her. The magnitude of what she is witnessing in this spiritual dialogue reduces all things in the face of it. Ruby contemplates Claud's toy-like truck, and realizes that "at any moment a bigger truck might smash into it and scatter Claud's and the niggers' brains all over the road" (653), a possibility that freezes her until she sees the truck returning. When she must answer for who she is and is left speechless and vulnerable, her attention to herself is replaced with attention to another. Her self-love is diverted, and her vulnerability is transferred to other human beings, if only momentarily, and it is this that opens her soul to the ensuing visions. Whereas the image of the box cars carrying their passengers to the gas ovens did not even give Ruby pause, her vision of the tiny vulnerable truck in the distance, with Claud and their black workers in it, provokes her concern for them.

Ruby is described as a monumental statue coming to life (653) once Claud returns safely, and with this action comes the story's concluding descent and ascent of the soul. First, Ruby's vision descends as "she bent her head slowly and gazed, as if through the

very heart of mystery, down into the pig parlour at the hogs. They had settled all in one corner around the old sow who was grunting softly. A red glow suffused them. They appeared to pant with a secret life" (653). Ruby understands herself connected to the hogs in a real way, on a level deeper than that of status or ideas of hierarchical ordering. She looks at them "as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge" (653). Then Ruby ascends to the final vision lifting her head to look at the sky. The answers to Ruby's questions become clearer. She identifies with the hogs panting with their "secret life," which partakes of the divine life that animates all creatures. Ruby is no longer categorizing according to external measures, she sees the mystery of being "a hog and her both" through the spiritual connection of all living beings. By transcending the hierarchical nature of her thinking through the movements of her own soul, Ruby is freed to look at herself, and the question that she had previously directed towards God alone, is accepted by Ruby as the question posed to *her*. The other question that concerns Ruby comes from being called a wart hog from hell. Ruby Turpin takes this judgement literally, and ponders the question: "How am I saved and from hell too?" (652). This is partially answered by the descent and ascent of her soul, revealing to Ruby the human possibility of being oriented in different directions. Her external hierarchical ordering of soul-less beings who are either "in" or "out," "above" or "below," is broken down by her initiation into the life of the soul, which is determined, not by external measures, but by its relations of love to God and the self. What Ruby discovers is her place in the middle, or (in St. Catherine of Genoa's language) the state of being "in-between" the poles of perfection and

imperfection. Ruby's final vision, however, is deflating to her pride, and requires her to come to the final purgative experience of *kenosis*, in the imitation of Christ.³⁰ Her ascent cannot continue with her desire to find "equality with God," her humility is the only way through this final purgation, where the descent to a recognition of her true self is what will bring her back "up" to God.

First and Last

The final vision of the souls moving along the bridge through the field of living fire is the rest of the answer.³¹ The purgatorial vision is not meant to continue Ruby's

³⁰ See Philippians 2:3-8: "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."

³¹ Anthony di Renzo argues that "[i]f there is renewal at the end of 'Revelation,' it is a renewal through destruction." What di Renzo suggests is that the issue is not so much a battle between good and evil, but a destruction of the standards of judgement that Ruby and others in the story use to divide the righteous and the unrighteous. In this sense, di Renzo sees the final vision as unifying rather than divisive, as the distinctions upheld throughout the story are ultimately melted in the fiery vision: "Ruby's vision in 'Revelation' unites the saved and the damned in a blaze of fire. It is not good and evil that perish together in these ambiguous flames. Rather, it is the artificial standards of right and wrong, of beauty and ugliness, which mere mortals presumptuously use to divide humankind into two camps." Di Renzo's final word on the vision is in opposition to moralistic claims in any direction, but he wants to make the most important message of the vision the elimination of judgement: "It is a judgement against judgement, against all forms of separation." Di Renzo is right to note that the vision "wrecks our conventional understanding of Christianity," but he is unable to offer anything other than the "wrecked" vision *as he sees it*: a parody of the "divine" and a mockery of "mere mortals." Di Renzo puts "divine" in quotation marks while describing the vision, presumably because it does not fit what he assumes a divine vision to be: "Ruby's 'divine'

confusion, but to correct it. To interpret the vision as the literal enactment of the biblical passage in Matthew 19:30: "But many that are first will be last, and the last first" (Mt 20:16, Mk 10:31 and Lk 13:30), is to ignore what Ruby Turpin is coming to understand about herself, and the nature of the purgatorial experience. All of the above passages, except in Luke, are preceded by the story of the rich young man. In this story, a man comes to Jesus and asks what he has to do to inherit eternal life.³² After Jesus repeats the commandments to him, the man says that he has done all of them. In Mark's account, it says "Jesus, looking upon him loved him, and said to him, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me'" (Mk 10:21). Ruby is presented with the same choice in her witness of the purgatorial vision. To follow Christ she must not give up her money, she must give up herself. The one thing Ruby lacks is humility, and Christ's command to give that away, by "counting others as better"--like the young man's abdication of wealth in the service of the poor-- is the *kenosis* that Ruby must also accept. Ruby's self-emptying therefore, will

vision...is anything but orthodox. Rather than a sublime revelation of angels and spheres, an awe-inspiring display of celestial hierarchy, as in the *Paradiso*, Mrs. Turpin sees an All Fool's Day celebration, a mummer's parade of motley mortals." This kind of statement reveals the critics' tendency, especially common with the religious themes in O'Connor's fiction, to interpret according to *ideas* about Christianity rather than interpreting the story itself. A more obvious reflection of this kind of confusion is di Renzo's claim that the vision is "anything but orthodox" and also "unconventional," thus apparently identifying Christian orthodoxy as conventionality, without distinction. See, Di Renzo, *American Gargoyles*, pp. 215-6.

³² In Matthew 19:17, Jesus responds to the man's question with "[i]f you would enter *life*, keep the commandments." In other words, the emphasis is not the afterlife, but true eternal life.

bring her treasure in heaven with the ability to complete her ascent and rise to the God who resists the proud. She is not being divinely judged as one of "the last" through a simplistic reversal of the hierarchy she creates, since this would only echo Ruby's confused ideas shouted across the fields: "Put that bottom rail on top. There'll still be a top and bottom!" The experience is not externally hierarchical, but a movement within the soul, either closer or further from God, depending on the degree of self-love. The purgatorial experience, as St. Catherine of Genoa describes it, is the burning away of our excess self-love as we approach God: "The last stage of love is that which comes about and does its work without man's doing."³³ The only way to overcome self-love is with humility: Ruby is being purified, her self-assumed virtues are being burned away. This is the moment of self-realization because it is Ruby Turpin's love of her own goodness that has kept her from seeing herself and the fact that "[n]o one is good but God alone" (Mk 10:18). The young man in the gospel story needs to give up the thing that most hinders this realization; for him it is money. Ruby needs to give up her "righteousness" so that she can love it as not her own. The movements of Ruby Turpin's soul image the pattern of ascent and descent and the purifying movement towards God, reflecting the *kenotic* patterning of Christ who empties himself in the service of others. The transformative experience of purgation is described by the mystic, St. Catherine of Genoa, to illumine the connection of the soul to God, including both its rejection of and longing for the divine. O'Connor uses

³³ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation*, p. 81.

the purgatorial images from St. Catherine in her fiction, and particularly in "Revelation," to suggest that the human soul moves and is ordered by its relation to God, and that resistance is as much an experience of that relation as drawing near. The source of the self is mystery, and while certain modern authors try to locate this mystery in the unconscious, the classical and biblical symbolizations of this mystery call it God. O'Connor makes the distinction between God and the unconscious because the experience of God is not an unconscious one, despite the fact that it is mysterious. The transformation of Ruby Turpin works through her conscious participation in the divine mystery of the soul's ascent. Nonetheless, this participation involves more than her consciousness: Ruby must also act, by choosing the orientation of the will in relation to God. The soul is not just dragged up nor thrown down; it seeks and responds to the divine that is its source and destination. But in this dialogue, Ruby is being resisted, because her response is too proud in her assumption of righteousness. The questions posed to Ruby, and those that she asks of God in response, are crucial to the reordering of her soul, but they are incomplete without her humiliation and confession, begun in front of her coloured workers, and continued in her willingness to identify herself with the hogs in her pen. Moreover, Ruby learns that the nature of righteousness is not a human possession that determines one's worth in the presence of God, but rather an active, embodied relation to others--which is explicitly described in Philippians 2:3ff. The only way for Ruby to be truly righteous in the presence of God is to humble herself in the service of others.

CONCLUSION

Flannery O'Connor is a prophetic voice speaking to the modern age, not in its unbelief, but in its lack of spiritual vision. It is the distorted spiritual condition of modernity which is, according to her, the paramount issue: "We live in an unbelieving age but one which is markedly and lopsidedly spiritual" (*MM* 159). O'Connor understands the confusions of the modern age to be spiritual confusions; because it is impossible that even in an age of colossal unbelief all spiritual reality is wrenched out of human life, the real problem is in discerning the spiritual orientation.¹ Since what controls the human attempt to formulate meaning and direction in life is a spiritual, or non-physical faculty, O'Connor can identify the locus of confusion as a spiritual problem. It should be evident from the argument of this thesis that O'Connor did not understand the determination and creation of meaning to be rooted entirely in individual human beings, and that it is precisely this assumption which indicates the spiritual confusion she addresses. O'Connor explores how human beings understand themselves in relation to spiritual reality--both as it exists in themselves and in its transcendence of them.

The main characters of her two novels, *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear it Away* embody two spiritual confusions that she describes in one of her essays, "Novelist and

¹ "The unbeliever...is nevertheless grappling in a desperate and usually honest way with intense problems of the spirit" (*MM* 158).

Believer." In this essay, O'Connor describes the type of modern person "who recognizes spirit in himself but who fails to recognize a being outside himself whom he can adore as Creator and Lord...For him, man has his own natural spirit of courage and dignity and pride and must consider it a point of honor to be satisfied with this," and yet another sort of person "who recognizes a divine being not himself, but who does not believe that this being can be known analogically, or defined dogmatically or received sacramentally" (*MM* 159). These two orientations--either drawing all spiritual meaning into the self, or acknowledging a transcendent spiritual being that is entirely external to the self--are spiritual confusions that O'Connor brings to life in Hazel Motes and Francis Tarwater. Hazel Motes expresses the former confusion in his attempt to envelop all truth and purpose within his own construction of meaning, and Francis Tarwater displays the latter in his desire to disengage his actions from any incarnate experience of God. O'Connor's sacramental theology and her incarnational understanding of art are the prophetic responses to these confusions.

The biblical prophetic tradition, as O'Connor understands it, does not prescribe legally based moral rules as much as it advocates a unity of belief and action, or as Eric Voegelin has it, "love, humility and righteousness of action." This conjunction of belief and action is central to O'Connor's sacramental vision, and her attempt to draw together the various modern separations between nature and grace, reason and imagination, and vision and judgement, is rooted in this sacramental view. As a religious novelist, her self-defined role was to reveal the hidden spiritual struggles and motivations of human beings

as they manifest themselves in action, in order to determine what these struggles represent. She knew that what is required for good fiction are the concrete details of daily human existence: "the novelist always has to create a world and a believable one." O'Connor used this medium of fiction, especially as it is grounded in the natural world and works with all the realities of sense experience, to characterize and reveal human spiritual confusions by envisioning them sacramentally. In her view, art, when it begins with the concrete realities of life, is closer to a sacramental vision of the world than is a theological treatise on the subject, and O'Connor's fiction is purposefully incarnate in its attention to spiritual questions. She says:

The virtues of art, like the virtues of faith, are such that they reach beyond the limitations of the intellect, beyond any mere theory that a writer may entertain. If the novelist is doing what as an artist he is bound to do, he will inevitably suggest that image of ultimate reality as it can be glimpsed in some aspect of the human situation. In this sense art reveals, and the theologian has learned that he can't ignore it (*MM* 158).

This statement also indicates that O'Connor's art is prophetically relevant to theological and ethical discourse. The capacity of O'Connor's art to understand and express the specifically modern spiritual confusions in their rootedness in a separation between physical and spiritual reality suggests that her fiction is perhaps more effective in addressing the spiritual condition of modernity than a theological tract or an ethical case study might be. The literary artist is in conversation with theological and spiritual questions, but the art itself has the effect of illuminating these questions dramatically, with all the particularity and variability of incarnate human life. Perhaps the most significant

contribution of literature to theological/ethical discourse is indicated in these words of O'Connor about her craft: "Fiction writing is very seldom a matter of saying things; it is a matter of showing things" (*MM* 93). This "showing" can allow for the participatory entry of the reader into the dramatic episode, where mystery is incarnate and revealed rather than "said" directly.

The manner in which O'Connor "shows things" in her fiction is to locate her characters in the midst of the concrete reality that they have resisted in their various abstract formulations of meaning, whether it be about truth, freedom or love. Further, the experience of facing their own abstractions forces in each of them an inward turn, which to varying degrees humbles their assumptions of meaning. The three fictional works focused on in this thesis reveal a movement from truth through freedom to love, a movement apparent in the nature of each principal resistance to the reality that transcends and challenges their own version of reality.

In Hazel Motes, Francis Tarwater and Ruby Turpin, one can observe a gradual movement towards the intensification of the spiritual struggles they embody, as well as a more profound examination of their spiritual confusions. I have ordered my analysis chronologically, beginning with O'Connor's earliest novel and ending with one of the last stories she wrote before her death, not simply for the sake of clarity, but also because there is a perceptible change in tone that suggests developing concerns in O'Connor's writing and thought. (I will return to this question of O'Connor's writing, and its possible directions, to conclude this discussion).

How do the final scenes from "Revelation," and Ruby's transformative spiritual ascent from her self-love to a proper understanding of love of God and other human beings, relate to the grotesque comedy of Hazel Motes' "Church of Christ without Christ"? I think that what unites these stories, and also *The Violent Bear it Away*, is the theme of the divided self, which resists God and any spiritual reality that is elusive and transcendent, rather than subject to one's own will. Where there is a discernible progression among these stories is in the movement from a human rebellion that fixates on the externalized conflicts between the physical and the spiritual and the denial that the spiritual is real (Hazel Motes), towards a more subtle perception of spiritual conflicts within concrete human experience and action (Francis Tarwater). The progression is sacramentally directed, insofar as the movement is towards a unification--without denying the inherent tensions--of spiritual and physical existence. It is also sacramental in its movement towards a more explicit presentation of love. The experience of Ruby Turpin revolves entirely around the tension between self-love and love of God and neighbor. Her resistance, in the form of self-love, suggests the origin of all the previous forms of resistance, although they are seemingly motivated by other factors. And her final revelation and response, of confession and *kenosis*, might intimate the nature of the reconciling action that is finally required for the human ascent to God.

Love is virtually absent in *Wise Blood*, and O'Connor suggests that Hazel Motes' inability to practice charity stems from his preoccupation with penitential acts that are motivated not by love, but by an inherited idea that these self-torturing acts will satisfy his

"debt" to God. Hazel's desire to contain any redemptive purpose or spiritual reality within himself effectively eliminates his understanding of anything transcendent, including insight, conscience and especially, love. Hazel Motes seeks wholeness independently of God and spiritual reality, and this ultimately limits his ability to discern reality beyond his partial, narrow vision.

The Violent Bear it Away raises the question of love more explicitly, although it remains a mysterious force which emerges as a threat to overwhelm the characters with acts of deference and "idiot praise." Because of this fear, the response to love is repressed and its pulls are avoided by Francis Tarwater and Rayber especially. The only one who does not envision love as a threat is Mason Tarwater who, nevertheless, does not address love explicitly in his sermonizing, and his death at the beginning of the novel leaves his ideas about love to inference. Mason Tarwater hints at the mystery of love, and its connection to God in two ways: first, in his acknowledgement of Bishop's meaningful existence before God--despite his mental deficiencies--because he knows that the human-divine relation is one of love and not exclusive to the intellect; second, in his suggestion that humans participate in this love through sacramental communion with God and through the kinship bonds between the living and the dead. The love is not excessive or sentimental, but a concrete recognition of the ways in which human beings are related, physically and spiritually, through blood and community, with all of the obligations and responsibilities that attend these relations.

Francis Tarwater resists this embodied, concrete love in favour of an abstract

spiritual freedom from accountability and responsibility for others. Francis' struggle against love is rooted in his confused perception that while there might be a spiritual reality or God "out there," it cannot be received sacramentally, nor does it have any connection to his concrete actions. The aim of his existence is to act, but as a disembodied spiritual will, untainted by the flesh; he resists the incarnate world and consequently he is unable to appreciate the kind of love that Mason Tarwater affirms. The revelatory transformation that occurs in the novel begins with his drowning of Bishop, when the baptismal words are joined to the act. This sacramental image is the initial revelation to Francis of the connection between words (or beliefs) and actions, including his own, and so it redirects his attention to an inward contemplation of the spiritual existence that is embodied in him, Francis Tarwater. The succeeding revelations continue to confirm this connection, and it is the final sacramental vision of the multitude, and especially his great uncle Mason, eating the bread and loaves that reveals to him the love that exists between the living and the dead. Francis Tarwater finally starts to perceive love as it is connected to physical and spiritual reality, but he does not come to the explicit awareness that his disembodied acts of will stem from a spiritual orientation of self-love.

Ruby Turpin's experience focuses on the orientation of love towards the self, and she resists what is needed to relinquish this self-love, namely confession and humility. That this is a need for Ruby becomes obvious with every comment she makes about other human beings. But what is the process of the movement from self-love to love of God? Her self-righteousness certainly makes her oblivious to humility, but it is her

unsacramental vision of the human relation to God, evidenced in her external measures (*i.e.*, class and wealth) of spiritual worth that is her primary problem. The love that challenges and ultimately re-orders Ruby's love (of her own righteousness) is an embodied, concrete love that is in the service of others, rather than self-serving. Ruby's self-love is isolating and abstracted from real human experience because she cannot see beyond herself to loving anyone else. The only way she can do this is by emptying herself in order that she might be open to receiving a new vision of who she is in relation to God and others. This pattern of *kenosis* is, for O'Connor, the Christian sacramental answer to the various forms of resistance to God as they are expressed by the characters in these three fictional works. It is with the confessional, self-emptying love that seeks to serve others, rather than assert one's truth, or free will, or righteousness over others that the individual soul is able to ascend to a vision of God.

When a writer dies as young as O'Connor, one is tempted to reflect on where her thought was moving, and what kind of work might have been next. Although this can be no more than speculative, I would suggest, on the basis of comments that O'Connor made near the end of her life, as well as the direction observed in the three fictional works discussed in this thesis, that she was becoming interested in writing with a more pronounced focus on love, in the form of social activism, spiritual exercises and mystical contemplation. In a letter dated February 4, 1960, she writes:

I have got to the point now where I keep thinking more and more about the presentation of love and charity, or better call it grace, as love suggests tenderness, whereas grace can be violent or would have to be to compete

with the kind of evil I can make concrete. At the same time, I keep seeing Elias in that cave, waiting to hear the voice of the Lord in thunder and lightening and wind, and only hearing it finally in the gentle breeze, and I feel I'll have to be able to do that sooner or later, or anyway keep trying...(HB 373).

By the time of her death, her style of the grotesque, especially evident in *Wise Blood* and her first collection of short stories, had given way to the mystical ascent in "Revelation" based on St. Catherine of Genoa's vision of purgatory. She writes in another letter in 1963: "I've been writing eighteen years and I've reached a point where I can't do again what I know I can do well, and the larger things that I need to do now, I doubt my capacity for doing" (HB 518).

O'Connor's last novella in progress at the time of her death, an expansion of the short story "Why do the Heathen Rage?" (the novella used the same title), had as its main character an ascetic monk-like figure, who carried on a correspondence with a woman living on a commune involved in radical social activism. The manuscript pages of this work in progress seem to suggest that O'Connor was interested in the relation between the love of God as it is expressed in individual religious training and devotion, and a socially oriented activism--or a mutually enriching dialogue between the active and contemplative religious life. O'Connor's basic interest in writing about love in its relation to God and other human beings was perhaps always present in her sacramental view of the world, which as a Catholic, did not fundamentally change in the course of her life. What can be perceived from this discussion of her work, however, is that her writing developed in this regard, as she mastered and then felt compelled to move beyond her most famously

recognized writing form, the grotesque. If her ability to discern what is grotesque came, as I have argued, from a prior experience of the beautiful and good, then it seems that her diminishing interest in the grotesque and an increased concern to write more directly about love, was rooted in the desire to rediscover the real motivation for her work as a religious literary artist. The fiction of the grotesque serves to remind human beings of what is absent and distorted in human existence; the fiction of love would serve to remind human beings of what is good and worth seeking in human existence. It does not seem surprising that, as O'Connor neared the end of her life, her writing moved in this direction, towards the contemplation of the soul's ascent into the purifying love of God.

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