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Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics
Applied to the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor

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ABSTRACT

Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics Applied to the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor

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Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics Applied to the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor confronts the grotesque beauty of Flannery O'Connor's stories through Balthasar's Christological aesthetics. Chapter one examines preliminary aesthetic themes for both Balthasar and O'Connor, followed by a brief survey of O'Connor criticism. Chapter two focuses on theological background, noting similar influences on Balthasar and O'Connor. I give a short history of neo-Thomism and its impact on O'Connor's thought, then I trace her interest in *la Nouvelle Théologie*. The next section of the chapter goes over Balthasar's relationship with Scholasticism and *la Nouvelle Théologie*, and finally his dialogue with Karl Barth on analogy. The chapter closes with a reading of O'Connor's story "The Displaced Person" according to a Balthasarian Christological aesthetic. Chapter three deals with issues of authorship and character. It opens with O'Connor's ideas about authorial intention and continues with Balthasar's notion of divine authorship from the first volume of *Theo-Drama*, examining scenes from *The Violent Bear it Away* in light of Balthasar's theology of vocation. A final section compares O'Connor's grotesque characters, especially Hazel Motes from *Wise Blood*, with Balthasar's "holy fools." In Chapter four, I discuss Balthasar's treatment of classical tragedy in its relation to plot. Balthasar considers the theological milieu of ancient drama is a precursor to Biblical revelation, and the

tragic figure of the suppliant, especially in Sophocles' plays, prefigures Christ. I examine O'Connor's story "Parker's Back" with regard to its re-enactment of a Christological plot. Chapter five considers the story "Judgment Day" in light of Balthasar's theology of suffering. I then question the relationship between beauty and O'Connor's vision, ending with a reading of the story "Revelation." A sixth chapter concludes the dissertation with suggestions for the future of Balthasarian criticism and a final look at O'Connor's vision of moral beauty. *Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics Applied to the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor* adds Balthasar's voice to the many theologians spoken of alongside her fiction. The study also represents another step toward the greater recognition of Balthasar's interest for literary scholarship.

This dissertation by Katherine LeNotre fulfills the dissertation requirements for the doctoral degree in English approved by Virgil Nemoianu, Ph.D., as Director, and by Ernest Suarez, Ph.D., and Nicholas J. Healy, Ph.D., as Readers.

Virgil Nemoianu, Director

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To my husband Gaston and our three children born during its composition:
Beatrice, Bernard, and Gerard.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1	Introduction: Aesthetics.....	1
Chapter 2	Theology and Beauty.....	46
Chapter 3	The Christological Character.....	80
Chapter 4	The Christological Plot.....	125
Chapter 5	Beauty and the Cross.....	155
Chapter 6	Conclusion.....	183

List of Abbreviations

By Flannery O'Connor:

CW *Collected Works of Flannery O'Connor*

MM *Mystery and Manners*

HB *The Habit of Being*

By Hans Urs von Balthasar:

GL *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (seven volumes)

TD *The Theo-Drama* (five volumes)

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The fiction of Flannery O'Connor is known for grotesquery and ugliness, not for beauty. Yet there is a kind of beauty in her work, and it springs from her theological beliefs. The intersection of aesthetics and theology forms the subject of Hans Urs von Balthasar's great study *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. The theological aesthetics of Balthasar as expressed in this work and in his *Theo-Drama* provide a hermeneutic for Christian art. For Balthasar, beauty is a crucial point of contact between the secular and religious spheres. The beauty we encounter is analogous to the beauty of God; the wonder engendered by beauty prepares us for the wonder of God's glory. Christ is the necessary link between finite and infinite beauty, and Balthasar includes the grotesque pain of the cross as part of beauty's dramatic character. This sacrifice is the enduring "tragedy" of God's great play, the "Theo-Drama" of creation. I will examine these themes from Balthasar as they relate to O'Connor's work and apply them to particular stories and novels. O'Connor's work represents characters whose beliefs shape their aesthetic sense; they also shows how aesthetics can be a starting point for belief in God. These aesthetically charged characters and events appear in literary art which is itself an aesthetic object. O'Connor's stories rely on the ultimate unity of beauty with goodness emphasized by Balthasar and uncover the potential for beauty in suffering.

There are likenesses between the thinking of O'Connor and Balthasar, but there was no direct influence between the two. O'Connor was a writer from Milledgeville, Georgia who died in 1964 at the age of 39, having produced a small but lasting body of fiction. The last volume of Balthasar's most important work was not published until 1987, a year before the death of the Swiss priest and theologian. Thus O'Connor could not have read the "great triptych" even if it had it been translated immediately. In a 1961 letter to Thomas Stritch, O'Connor wrote, "I don't know any new German theologians. All I know is Guardini and Adam" (HB 449). The only record we have of O'Connor even reading Balthasar's name comes from her friend, critic Bill Sessions, who spent time in Germany with a Fulbright scholarship:

At a vespers service at the Freiburg Cathedral during Lent 1958, I also heard a homily, about which I wrote O'Connor, by the Swiss priest Hans Urs von Balthasar, now considered by many one of the greatest Catholic theologians of the last century. Recalling these thinkers now, almost fifty years later, has a simple point: Flannery wanted to know about each one and wrote me for firsthand impressions. (57-58)¹

Her interest could not have moved her to investigate even Balthasar's earlier books since O'Connor read only English, and his work was translated in the last two

¹ Sessions, W. A. "Then I discovered the Germans': O'Connor's Encounter with Guardini and German Thinkers of the Interwar Period." In *Flannery O'Connor's Radical Reality*. Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 2006. Gretlund, Jan Nordby and Karl-Heinz Westarp, eds. 56-67.

decades. It is a sign of the quality of her reading that we remark on this language barrier as a limitation; she was an artist with a serious interest in theology, curating a significant personal library of theological works.

Conversely, Balthasar's theology draws upon a life-long interest in aesthetics.² He began his intellectual career not as a theologian, but as a doctoral student in German studies. His three-volume Ph.D. dissertation "Geschichte des eschatologischen Problems in der modernen deutschen Literatur" was later published as *Apocalypse of the German Soul*;³ it examines works of German literature for philosophical-theological themes. Alois Haas writes that "Today, he would be able to point out triumphantly—if the 'specialists' who always speak of interdisciplinary work were serious about it—that his approach was interdisciplinary when such a thing was still a scholarly scandal" (56).⁴ He then transitioned to theology during his Jesuit novitiate, but Balthasar's subsequent publications return to this aesthetic background in various ways. As a translator of plays, a literary critic, and finally a proponent of theological aesthetics, this interest was often explicit. However, an aesthetic preoccupation can be seen implicitly throughout his *oeuvre*, even in his works of theology about prayer or the Church Fathers. Throughout the triptych, artists' voices (and even images) are presented as

² One of Aidan Nichols' books looks at Balthasar's earliest essays, which are about aesthetics: *Scattering the Seed: A Guide through Balthasar's Early Writings on Philosophy and the Arts*. Washington, DC: Catholic U of America P, 2006.

³ *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele. Studien zu einer Lehre von letzten Haltungen*, vols. 1-3, Salzburg and Leipzig: Verlag Anton Pustet, 1937-39.

⁴ Haas, Alois M., "Hans Urs von Balthasar's 'Apocalypse of the German Soul.'" In *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*. Ed. David L. Schindler. Communio Books. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991. 45-57.

relevant contributions to theological arguments.⁵ Even when the arts are far from Balthasar's topic at hand, he often chooses analogies and examples about music, painting, and literature. His work is eminently interesting for students of literature.

Balthasar was an avid reader of Western literature in many languages, including English. However, no evidence indicates that he read either the English or French versions of O'Connor's work. Outside of Thornton Wilder, his reading of American literature was limited,⁶ and of Southern authors he seems to have known only Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun* (TD I, 77, 396). This dissertation presents O'Connor as a literary artist and as a theological aesthetician, and thus applies some of Balthasar's insights to an author he never knew.

Divisio and Texts

The two primary goals for this project could be called "aesthetic" and "theological" respectively. My first purpose is to examine O'Connor's stories of the beautiful/grotesque with the help of Balthasar's unique aesthetics. The second is to use specific theological ideas from Balthasar to illuminate O'Connor's parallel vision of how God acts in the world.

The remainder of this introductory chapter will focus on preliminary aesthetic concerns for Balthasar, note the aesthetics situation of O'Connor's work,

⁵ His section on Claudel in GL I, 399-405 or his study of Rouault in GL V, 201-204 two examples of this, but there are *many*.

⁶ A short list in the introduction to the *Theo-Drama* mentions Melville, Conrad, and Wolfe as "modern myths" (TD I, 78).

and provide a short critical survey. Flannery O'Connor's literary milieu was as complex as the America she lived in, and includes the American Catholic Revival, modernist and New Critical literary movements, and her regional background. Chapter two presents theological context important for understanding O'Connor's work, as well as some theological underpinnings of Balthasar's thought. Chapter three shows how vocation and the image of Christ play into the making of characters in O'Connor's work, including issues of authorial intention, personal vocation or, in Balthasar, "role," and finally the figure of the freak as a Balthasarian holy fool. Chapter four looks at Balthasar's theory of drama with a specific focus on tragedy, and relates this genre theory to O'Connor's plots. A fifth chapter reads O'Connor's grotesque depictions of suffering as a reflection of Christ's transcendent suffering on the Cross, and relates O'Connor's final vision back to Balthasarian beauty. A short conclusion discusses the future of Balthasarian criticism and O'Connor's particular theological aesthetic.

Throughout these chapters, I will examine short stories and passages from *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear it Away*. Following the custom of mainstream O'Connor scholarship, I will also consider her reviews, essays, interviews, and letters—not as a replacement for engaging the fiction, but as relevant for understanding O'Connor's thought. The reviews from *The Presence of Grace and Other Book Reviews by Flannery O'Connor* and essays found in *Mystery and Manners* and the *Collected Works* are polished work she intended for publication, hoping to impact the cultural climate of her time. The letters come from the various

published sources *The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, *The Correspondence of Flannery O'Connor and the Brainard Cheneys*, and the *Collected Works*.

Throughout this study we will assume, with O'Connor (and following Maritain), that since art is "a certain virtue or quality of the mind, it is susceptible to being shaped by the author's reasoned theories about art" (MM 64). O'Connor's total contribution to theological aesthetics includes both her art and her poetics. Not only does the poetics illuminate the fiction, but conversely, the fiction itself can be seen both as an exemplar for understanding her poetics. As Milan Kundera puts it, "Every novelist's work contains an explicit vision of the history of the novel, an idea of what the novel is" (1).⁷ O'Connor's work includes the embodiment of her vision and her commentary on that vision.

Balthasar's list of publications numbers literally hundreds of books and articles spanning a long lifetime. This study engages primarily the first two parts of his monumental trilogy: *The Glory of the Lord* and *The Theo-Drama*. The parts of the trilogy are devoted to three transcendental aspects of being: beauty (*The Glory of the Lord*), goodness (*Theo-Drama*), and truth (*Theo-Logic*). Although the first part, a seven-volume work, is explicitly called a *Theological Aesthetics* in its subtitle, Balthasar's whole vision includes the "theo-dramatic" aesthetic uniting beauty with goodness and truth. This is especially evident in the extended dramatic comparison in the volumes devoted to goodness, the *Theo-Drama*. The inherently

⁷ Kundera, Milan. *The Art of the Novel*. Trans. Linda Asher. New York: Harper Collins, 2000.

aesthetic character of the dramatic claim makes both the first and the second part of the trilogy important for students of literature (the third part concerning logic is outside the scope of this inquiry). By affirming the relationship between “beauty” and “goodness” as parts of his masterwork, Balthasar reveals a philosophical truth about the nature of each:

In order to maintain the right balance, a ‘theological aesthetics’ should be followed by a ‘theological dramatics’ and a ‘theological logic.’ While the first of these has as its object primarily the perception of the divine self-manifestation, the ‘dramatics’ would have as primary object the content of this perception—which is God’s dealings with man—and the ‘logic’ would define as its object the divine (or more exactly: the human-divine, and therefore already theological!) *manner of expressing* God’s activity. Only then would the *pulchrum* appear in its rightful place within the total ordered structure, namely as the manner in which God’s goodness (*bonum*) gives itself and is expressed by God and understood by man as the truth (*verum*). (GL I, 13)

Balthasar’s lofty claims for aesthetics parallel O’Connor’s theological hopes for fiction. His insistence on the potential beauty of suffering strikes a blow to romanticizing pleasure, a fitting counterpart for O’Connor’s critique of American “nice” culture and her fascination with the grotesque.

In addition to these major texts of Balthasar’s theological aesthetics, his works of criticism are significant for students of literature. The subject of Balthasar’s literary criticism could form the basis of a dissertation in and of itself.

Shorter works on literature are sprinkled throughout the triptych, including monographs from *The Glory of the Lord* on Dante and Hopkins; a long examination of Western dramatic literature in the first volume of *Theo-Drama*; and, as has been previously mentioned, numerous brief treatments of literature in the trilogy, notably of Dostoievsky and Claudel. Each of these critical pieces contains a valuable instance of theological aesthetics applied to art. The analyses are insightful and contain detailed textual readings useful to other critics. For example, Balthasar's treatment of ancient tragedy strongly informs the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

In addition to these shorter works, Balthasar wrote several books devoted explicitly to literature. *Tragedy Under Grace: Reinhold Schneider on the Experience of the West* and *Bernanos: An Ecclesial Existence* wrestle with themes of authorship and Christian literature. Balthasar often frames the question of authorial responsibility in terms of the Church's relationship with the world.

Schneider's poetry concerns history, especially its spiritual dimension. Balthasar admired him for suiting his art to his own historical *kairos* in the wake of the horrific World Wars:

[Schneider] does not want to describe but to help; this is his only desire to such a degree that he applies less aesthetic care to the form of the work in order to be present everywhere with his word; where the ruins pile up on every side, he no longer seeks any beauty other than that of truth and of love.

(*Schneider* 158-159)

This equalizing character of Schneider's post-war dramas is the opposite of O'Connor's almost Gnostic artistry; but, as Balthasar points out, a writer must suit his aesthetics to his place and time. Balthasar identifies Schneider as a great messenger of the Church, calling the German people to confession and a hope of being reconciled in God. Changes in his artistry reflected the people's changing spiritual needs. Balthasar believes that a poet's art can be placed at the service of an entire culture and can imitate the sacrifice of Christ:

the poet, as one who listens to God and creates on the basis of his service to God, enters the circle of those who represent the truth: like Philip, he dies to himself and lives out of faith, in order to give birth to the form. Only on the basis of Christ, who as the Word of the Father is a Person and is intensely subjective life as the message of Another, is it possible to understand the paradox that the Christian artist must be completely submerged in the work, in the idea, which is never himself, and that nevertheless a claim is made on his entire personal existence and vitality for his activity of creation.

(*Schneider* 175)

In his *Theo-Drama*, Balthasar draws out this implied analogy between the authorship of God and the artist. O'Connor would certainly have understood this sense of "submersion" in one's writing, the absorbing conviction that she was fulfilling a call from God. At the same time, she wrote with a humor and self-deprecation that Balthasar mentions during a similar analysis in his book about

Bernanos. Here Balthasar contrasts the author with priests and saints, who usually show an earnest face in public because they are so closely identified with Christ:

The layman who steps forth with Christ's truth must put his own life at times in the foreground and at times in the background. He is both self-affirming and self-effacing. He points to his own life because Another is living in him. Humor is the tool he uses to shatter the shell and expose the serious contents of the hidden core. (*Bernanos* 117)

Like Bernanos, O'Connor uses humor to "shatter" the complacency of nearly every character in her stories, both the ones she identifies with and those she writes about from a distance. Balthasar's constant attention to the spiritual welfare of both author and audience provides a pastoral mixture of literary theory and spirituality. As is clear from the scrupulous worries of her *Prayer Journal*,⁸ O'Connor felt responsible for the moral character of her fiction. However, she believed that the best way to serve her readers was to address the issues of her time through faithfulness to her particular aesthetic.

Theological Aesthetics as Aesthetics

⁸ New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2015.

Balthasar's aesthetic ideas center on the beautiful "form" and its relationship to glory or "splendor." In his introduction to the *Glory of the Lord*, Balthasar begins with a mixture of etymology and definition:

Those words which attempt to convey the beautiful gravitate, first of all, toward the mystery of form (*Gestalt*) or of figure (*Gebilde*). *Formosus* ('beautiful') comes from *forma* ('shape') and *speciosus* ('comely') from *species* ('likeness'). But this is to raise the question of the 'great radiance from within' which transforms *species* into *speciosa*: the question of *splendour*. We are confronted simultaneously with both the figure and that which shines forth from the figure, making it into a worthy, a love-worthy thing. (GL I, 19-20)

Balthasar combines several traditional understandings of "form" to speak of something general and almost self-evident. Material or structural "form" always appears in conjunction with a spiritual radiance. Balthasar associates the "splendour" of the beautiful with the Biblical account of God's glory, writing that the Resurrection "pours out its 'sublime splendour' (*kabod, doxa, gloria*) over the whole sphere of the Church and of the bestowal of grace" (GL I, 38). Later in the introduction Balthasar elaborates on these terms, calling them

two elements in the beautiful which have traditionally controlled every aesthetic and which, with Thomas Aquinas, we could term *species* (or *forma*) and *lumen* (or *splendor*)—form (*Gestalt*) and splendour (*Glanz*). As form, the beautiful can be materially grasped and even subjected to numerical calculation as a relationship of numbers, harmony, and the laws of Being.

Protestant aesthetics has wholly misunderstood this dimension and even denounced it as heretical, locating then the total essence of beauty in the event in which the light irrupts. Admittedly, form would not be beautiful unless it were fundamentally a sign and appearing of a depth and a fullness that, in themselves and in an abstract sense, remain beyond both our reach and our vision. In this way, the soul manifests itself in the body in various degrees of relationship which Kant and Schiller have described in a strict sense as beauty and as ‘the sublime’ in the sense of gracefulness and dignity. (GL I, 118)

Balthasar’s interpretation of the beautiful revolves around its theological dimension because his great aim is to show the relevance of aesthetics for theology. The first volume of *The Glory of the Lord* is subtitled “Seeing the Form,” and throughout the book he affirms the beauty of the form of God’s revelation. Here, in his discussion of basic aesthetic terms, he quickly identifies splendor with the spirit or “soul” of a beautiful thing. He presents form and splendor as a kind of spectrum, with emphasis on either classical perfection or the romantic sublime as two sides of the union between form and splendor.

For Balthasar, the beautiful is the earthly manifestation of God’s glory. Revelation is an aesthetic experience as well as a message and a set of ethical injunctions:

what is the creation, reconciliation, and redemption effected by the triune

God if not his revelation in and to the world and man? Not a deed that would

leave its doer in the background unknown and untouched, but a genuine self-representation on his part, a genuine unfolding of himself in the worldly stuff of nature, man, and history—an event which in a supereminent sense may be called an ‘appearance’ or ‘epiphany.’ (GL I, 119)

In this image, God himself is the splendor shown forth in the form of the world, and especially in the form of salvation history. This is Balthasar’s claim that God’s action or *Theo-Drama* truly reveals the glory of the Lord. The aesthetic object does not distract us from God, but rather leads us to him. As a Catholic inheritor of the *philosophia perennis*, Balthasar asserts the legitimacy of beauty on the grounds that it combines bodily form with divine splendor in a kind of hylomorphic union.

Despite this insistence on the aesthetic character of revelation, Balthasar carefully avoids conflating aesthetics and theology. In *The Glory of the Lord*, he distinguishes theological aesthetics from “aesthetic theology.” He does not set out to use ordinary aesthetics to introduce theological themes, but rather to “do aesthetics at the level and with the methods of theology” (GL I, 38). He hopes to correct or complete aesthetic theory while also addressing theology’s problematic relationship with beauty. Balthasar aims to create “a theology . . . which develops its theory of beauty from the data of revelation itself” (GL I, 117). He finds precursors for his project in classical, early Christian, and medieval thinkers. He points out that the Church Fathers “are all at one in the explicit recognition and emphasis they give to the aesthetic moment within contemplation, a contemplation indeed that is attentive to just this moment” (GL I, 40). In addition, he looks at aesthetic elements

of the Bible as a fair justification for theological-aesthetic inquiry, calling the “aesthetic dimension” of the Bible’s “unique dramatic action” the most “proper object of a theological aesthetics” (GL I, 43). Balthasar considers the Bible particularly in the last two volumes of *The Glory of the Lord*, but he examines other topics as well, defining the “object” of theological aesthetics broadly.

Balthasar assumes universality for his theological aesthetics because he takes beauty to be a transcendental attribute of all being—that is, an attribute of both divine and earthly being, insofar as each thing *is*. His central theological-aesthetic claim relies on an analogical relationship between the beauty of the world and the glory of God. This claim classes beauty as a characteristic of being equal to truth and goodness. His work examines beauty, the ignored transcendental, in its relationship to God, since beauty can be said to exist in both the world and its Creator.

Emphasizing transcendental beauty allows Balthasar to concern himself with, not only the subjective perceivers who form the usual focal point for aesthetic theory, but also with the beauty inherent in the objects they perceive. For Balthasar, aesthetic value resides in the beauty of the object seen as much as in the aestheticizing gaze. Theological aesthetics explores the full ramifications of beauty’s power by recognizing the frequently spiritual character of aesthetics. Balthasar warns that in our age, the beautiful “is lifted from the unreflected position within a totality which it had enjoyed from the days of the Greeks and is made into a separate ‘object’ with a separate science of its own” by treating aesthetics as an

isolated branch of philosophy (GL I, 79). Balthasar links his theological aesthetics with concepts from conventional aesthetics and moves beyond them: “theological aesthetics must properly be developed in two phases, which are . . . ‘aesthetics’ in the Kantian sense as a theory about the perception of the form of God’s self-revelation . . . [and] ‘aesthetics’ as a theory about the incarnation of God’s glory and the consequent elevation of man to participate in that glory” (GL I, 125). This double approach allows Balthasar to address both the “subjective” and the “objective” aspects of the beautiful as they relate to divine glory. He recovers the pre-modern view of the beautiful as existing transcendently in both the subject and the object and thus also allows for the use of contemporary perception-based aesthetics as a way of approaching the things of God. The viewer’s perception becomes a task requiring action as well as receptivity. Balthasar reminds readers of Rilke’s poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” which confronts the viewer with beauty and then demands: “You must change your life” (Rilke 180).

Beauty calls its viewer to a mission, thus making ethical demands through aesthetics. Balthasar sees this as a natural characteristic of *beauty*, which is co-extensive with—but also to some extent introductory to—*goodness* and *truth*:

The form as it appears to us is beautiful only because the delight that it arouses in us is founded upon the fact that, in it, the truth and goodness of the depths of reality itself are manifested and bestowed, and this manifestation and bestowal reveal themselves to us as being something infinitely and inexhaustibly valuable and fascinating. (GL I, 118)

The beautiful, then, “points beyond itself”: the beautiful, good, and true are one in being, but distinguishable for the purposes of study. Balthasar sees beauty as, not a superficial pleasure, but a real attribute co-extensive with goodness and truth. He calls goodness the “inner coordinate axis” of the beautiful, “which enables beauty to unfold to its full dimensionality as a transcendental attribute of Being” (GL I, 22-23). Beauty is convertible with goodness, just as it is with truth, and vice versa.

In claiming this union of beauty with the true and the good, Balthasar associates himself with a tradition stretching back to ancient times. In his analysis of Plato’s “theological aesthetics,” Balthasar writes that in the *Hippias Major*, “He who really reaches the beautiful has attained the good; if Socrates ‘dreamt’ of the Idea, then it was ‘of the beautiful and the good in Itself’” (GL IV, 204). Plato disregards a pleasure-only view of beauty even as he reveals the limitations of pleasure itself: “always refers to something opposed to it—satisfaction to hunger, filling to emptiness” (GL IV, 205). Balthasar finds further evidence for this idea in the hierarchical transcendence of beauty in the *Symposium*: “the *kalon* is in any case coextensive with being: it is a transcendental. This is to be seen in the ascent of the *Symposium* from beautiful bodies, to beautiful souls, to beauty itself” (GL IV, 201).

Plato offers “an aesthetic immanent in the world, in which the divine as well as the human appears in a final identity as a harmony of balance; the last glimmer of a revelation from above—some features of which in the middle period were left to the (transcendent) Sun of the Good—fades, or rather passes over into the

macrocosmic harmony which is accessible to philosophical enquiry” (GL IV, 213).

Balthasar sees this embodiment of goodness in earthly beauty as a sign of continuity with the Scholastic approach that followed it. While Plato might not use the terms of medieval transcendentalism, his description of beauty suits the analogical developments of the later period. Chapter two of this dissertation contains a further treatment of scholastic transcendentalism and its influence on Balthasar.

Balthasar contrasts his view of beauty with modern and contemporary aesthetics in volume V of *The Glory of the Lord*. In the section on “The Metaphysics of Spirit,” he outlines how philosophy’s “subjective turn” influenced the history of Christian thought and its relation to aesthetics. He interprets the move toward subjectivity as charitably as possible, but explains its fundamental flaw:

the philosophy of spirit—in which the immediacy of relationship between the divine and the human spirit is no longer mediated by the universe—is on the one hand the fruit of Christianity and, on the other, its greatest threat, because the material conception of the world tends, of itself, towards materialism. (GL V, 452)

Balthasar shows how a focus on subjective relationships limits Being to those relationships and renders the rest of the material world secondary. In effect, it severs glory from beauty.

In “The Metaphysics of Spirit,” Balthasar examines some aspects of Kant and the idealism that followed in Schiller and Hegel. Balthasar was fascinated by Kant’s

combination of morality, religion, and aesthetics. He considered Kant the last holdout for a limited analogical understanding of beauty and glory before the idealist collapse of aesthetics into a limited address of the temporal world only. Kant so fascinated Balthasar that he probably had him in mind when arranging his great trilogy with aesthetics first rather than last.

Balthasar's most important disagreement with Kant was over the definition of transcendentals. As has already been stated, Balthasar followed the ancient and medieval understanding of transcendental. By contrast, Kant "call[s] all cognition transcendental that is occupied not so much with objects but rather with our mode of cognition of objects insofar as this is to be possible *a priori*. A system of such concepts would be called transcendental philosophy" (149).⁹ Kantian transcendentals are not expressions of being as such; rather, they are a reflection upon human understanding. They "transcend" ordinary experience in order to reflect on "our mode of cognition." "Transcendental aesthetics" according to Kant limit aesthetic appreciation to the perceiver's own mind.

Balthasar saw his own work as the complete aesthetics when compared with Kant's subjective "aesthetics as science":

For when Being in its classical and Christian sense is understood analogically, together with that elevation of the Infinite and Divine above the finite and the worldly which remains unsurpassable for all forms of finite

⁹ Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant. New York: Cambridge UP, 1998.

being and thinking, when therefore the worldly dimension hovers in an incalculable distinction between Being and entity, there the transcendental properties of Being—the One, the True, the Good and the Beautiful—are so affected by this analogy and by this distinction that any reduction of metaphysics and of the metaphysical doctrine of truth, goodness and beauty to an ‘exact science’ is rendered impossible. (GL V, 598)

Balthasar explains how classical/Christian metaphysics is the necessary basis for a complete aesthetics, since it views the whole universe as part of Being.¹⁰ Balthasar admires Kant for retaining something from this older metaphysics even as he makes such a definitive move toward subjectivity: “Kant does not cross the threshold of German Idealism with its aesthetics of identity, since he refuses to interpret the ‘violence’ which must be inflicted upon man as a yet higher form of beauty. He retains a Christian sensorium which, however concealed, still has knowledge of the Cross” (GL V, 513). Kant’s understanding of the human remains truly humane in a way that Balthasar does not see in the thinkers following Kant.

In his account of Kant, Balthasar gives an outline of the development of eighteenth century aesthetic theory, in particular the idea of the sublime as opposed

¹⁰ Balthasar makes this point early on in *The Glory of the Lord*: “Psychologically, the effect of beautiful forms on the soul may be described in a great variety of ways. But a true grasp of this effect will not be attained unless one brings to bear logical and ethical concepts, concepts of truth and value: in a word, concepts drawn from a comprehensive doctrine of Being. The form as it appears to us is beautiful only because the delight that it arouses in us is founded upon the fact that, in it, the truth and goodness of the depths of reality itself are manifested and bestowed, and this manifestation and bestowal reveal themselves to us as being something infinitely and inexhaustibly valuable and fascinating” (GL I, 118).

to the beautiful. Balthasar acknowledges Burke's reframing of the classical theory of the sublime:

Burke therefore starts something new in so far as he grasps the sensations of the beautiful and the sublime as pure polarities: in the one 'pleasure' (*cf.* Kant's *Lust*) and in the other initially 'pain' (Kant's *Unlust*) on account of something threatening (and thus terrifying), which then in a second phase, when it becomes evident that no direct danger threatens, finds release in 'delight'. (GL V, 510)

The sublime, then, creates a different set of reactions in the viewer. The viewer's reactions are the focus of these aesthetic phenomena since the subjective experience holds precedence. An important feature of sublimity is its aspect of change. Unlike beauty, which pleases exclusively, the sublime moves the viewer from fear to delight. Balthasar emphasizes this dynamic character: "it is no still, contemplative delight, as was the case with the beautiful, but a 'movement' of the spirit: that which is sublime (*das Erhabene*) is at the same time, as Schiller will say, that which uplifts us (*das Erhebende*)" (GL V, 512). For Kant, this dynamism connects sublimity with the disjunctively otherworldly movement spirituality. When writing of God's manifestation on Mt. Sinai, Kant says, "the appearance of the absolute nature of the commandment is 'sublimity' in the moral sphere while, in the religious sphere, it is glory, *kabod*" (GL V, 501). Kant includes religion with its aspect of glory under the heading of sublimity. For Balthasar, this point is vitally important, since it brings worldly aesthetics into contact with theological aesthetics.

This understanding of sublimity offers a further category for understanding the work of Flannery O'Connor, where grotesquerie is more evident than beauty. Violence and terror are a potent aspect of her religious fiction, which aspires to the “sublimity” of glory as described by Kant.

O'Connor's Aesthetic Situation

It is commonplace in O'Connor studies to speak of the stories' technical perfection. Donald Hardy devotes his book *The Body in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction: Computational Technique and Linguistic Voice* to a stylistic study of O'Connor, focusing on her consistency and art at the grammatical level of the sentence. The balance of her stories' characters, dramatic actions, pacing, symbols, and narrative strategies, are deeply affective on an aesthetic level. The reader experiences pleasure at the narrative “rightness” of her stories; despite distasteful subject matter, they can enrapture through their beautiful forms. As beautiful, the enrapturing vision involves a moral responsibility. The technical aspects of O'Connor's stories enforce their “moral sense” by enacting the sense of completion so lacking in their characters.

Balthasar and O'Connor both use aesthetics as a way into ultimate questions of good and evil. Like O'Connor, Balthasar sees these questions foregrounded; extremes are commonplace: “in this world the spirit is forever confronted by a decision between the abyss of heaven and of hell” (GL I, 23). Both authors expect this moral polarization, for, just as “everything that rises must converge,” so too

“from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away” (Luke 19:26).

Physical violence reveals the spiritual violence involved in calling your brother

“Raca.”¹¹

In writing about Bernanos and Schneider, Balthasar joined a discussion of Catholic literature which was home territory for O'Connor. The two authors participated in the literary side of a larger cultural “Catholic Revival.” During a period historians date “roughly from the death of Newman in 1890 to the years immediately preceding John XXIII’s announcement of the Second Vatican Council in 1959,” Catholic intellectuals gained public recognition in Europe and then America (Huff 11).¹² The Catholic Revival among American artists, critics, and educators eventually expanded to include prominent Catholic celebrities, perhaps culminating in the 1960 election of president Kennedy. The Catholic-friendly surge was evident in novels, journals, and the press, and it even stretched to popular Catholic-themed films like *The Bells of St. Mary’s*, *I Confess*, and many others. This movement carried with it strong aesthetic implications. For these writers, a faithful representation of reality included, but was not limited to, spiritual reality. Ross Labrie, author of *The Catholic Imagination in American Literature*, writes that

What distinguished the Catholic literature of the past fifty years was the centrality of religion in the thinking of these writers—even in the case of someone such as Robert Lowell, whose Catholicism burned fiercely for a

¹¹ Matthew 5:22.

¹² Huff, Peter A. *Allen Tate and the Catholic Revival: Trace of the Fugitive Gods*. New York: Paulist Press, 1996.

limited time. It was this religious passion—a passion *for* religion as much as a passion for life that stemmed from religion—that marked the work of these writers and that continues to provoke the imaginations of contemporary readers. (276-77)

Novelists were expected to use their religious fervor to construct art with a strong rhetorical effect, bettering the situation of American Catholics at large. O'Connor's regular reading of Catholic journals and papers made her sharply aware of the desire for "uplifting" Catholic fiction. Even though her personal participation in this genre was plagued with reservations, O'Connor now stands as a major figure of the American Catholic Revival.

But other influences, most notably Modernism and the New Critical strain she first learned at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, played into her identity as a writer. In addition, contemporary fiction of her own region, the American South, depicted the gothic in helpful ways that O'Connor engaged. So many strong forces affected O'Connor's ideas about art that she characteristically writes in her letters that she has "no foolproof aesthetic theory" (HB 123). However, she was far from having no aesthetic theory at all, and most of her public lectures and statements are aesthetic in nature. The unique blend of comedy, grotesquery, and goodness in her writing owes much to these important inspirations: Catholicism, the New Criticism, and the American South.

American interest in Catholicism coincided with Catholics' survival as a religious and cultural group in the generation or two after their mass immigration to the United States, but preceded their subsequent absorption into secular culture after Vatican II. The Catholic intelligentsia were influential enough to support a substantial cultural movement, but they also called for the movement self-consciously, creating an inorganic group fraught with some anxiety. In his 1990 book *To Promote, Defend, and Redeem: The Catholic Literary Revival and the Cultural Transformation of American Catholicism, 1920-1960*, Arnold Sparr writes that their vision "was driven by three forces: to promote the intellectual standing of American Catholicism, to defend the Catholic faith and its adherents from detractors, and to redeem what was seen as a drifting and fragmented secular culture" (Sparr xi-xii). These deliberate motives spurred thinkers from Jesuits like Daniel A. Lord in the 1920s to professors like Georgetown's Riley Hughes in 1950. Many of these authors saw their writing as a vocation: "Catholic writers and critics . . . believed they had an important redemptive mission to complete. The writing apostolate, or 'Apostolate of the Pen,' was an integral part of that plan" (Sparr 145). Americans hoped to equal the achievements of their European counterparts, particularly the French novelists¹³, and called for what Sparr terms "the Great

¹³ O'Connor herself had experienced the Catholic novels of Europe as a way of moving deeper into her faith. In a 1957 letter to her young friend Cecil Dawkins, she wrote that "[t]o discover the Church you have to set out by yourself. The French Catholic novelists were a help to me in this—Bloy, Bernanos, Mauriac" (HB 231).

American Catholic Novel.” That novel was not to be written by Flannery O’Connor, but the movement affected her in several important ways.

O’Connor’s position as a public woman of letters allowed her to engage in her own Catholic intellectual activism. She aimed to “promote” the faith and “defend” its teachings first of all by staying abreast of current Catholic journals, novels, and theology. She both read and contributed to the Catholic critical culture in the form of essays, campus visits, and public lectures. O’Connor was an avid reader of French Catholic novelists like Bernanos and Mauriac; she likewise mentioned reading English language Revivalists like Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh (HB 570). More remarkably, though, she read an impressive amount of Catholic theology and philosophy.

She shared the fruit of this reading with her community. She spent years reviewing books for the Georgia Catholic *Bulletin*. These reviews have now become helpful notes for studying her influences. In her little town of Milledgeville, she even hosted an ecumenical reading group with other Christians (HB 259). One major avenue for her little evangelization was correspondence encouraging friends in their faith journeys, always hoping for their sincere conversion.

Notable Catholic conversions marked the Revival. Prominent cradle Catholics like O’Connor were the exception among such luminary American converts as Ernest Hemingway, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Clare Booth Luce, Tennessee Williams, Wallace Stevens, Walker Percy, and O’Connor’s personal friends Katherine Ann Porter, Robert Lowell, Allan Tate, Caroline Gordon, and the

Fitzgeralds.¹⁴ The European side inspired famous conversions through their own impressive litany: Jacques and Raissa Maritain, G. K. Chesterton, Graham Greene, Ronald Knox, Evelyn Waugh, and Christopher Dawson. The conversion and then apostasy of O'Connor's close friends Robert Lowell and, of course, Betty Hester were sources of great joy and pain for her. She saw human life as a battle between good and evil, and was constantly hoping her friends could find salvation through the church.

The trope of conversion figures prominently in her literature as a pivotal “gesture which somehow [makes] contact with mystery” (MM 111). She writes that such a gesture, when she could achieve it, must be

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

These gestures signaling the possibility of conversion are the central dramatic actions of her plots, as in “Revelation,” when a confrontation with a deranged teenager allows Ruby Turpin to recognize her need for God. By making spiritual realities the very heart of her stories, O'Connor internalizes the artistic hopes of the

¹⁴ See Huff's discussion of Catholic converts in *Allen Tate* 14-16.

Catholic Revival. She writes stories that are “catholic” in the sense of the word meaning “universal”—they include even the unpleasant in attempt to depict the wide array of human experience.

Her special brand of Catholic fiction, though, was considered so strange and offensive that it excluded her from much Catholic recognition during her time. Sparr writes that “Notably missing from [Catholic] critics’ lists during the early 1950s was Flannery O’Connor, whose stories about grace-smitten Southern fundamentalists (*Wise Blood*, 1952) defied easy categorization. O’Connor was not acknowledged as a serious Catholic writer until the mid-1950s, and by then the revival was all but over” (Sparr 149). Sparr thinks O’Connor’s reputation among Catholics was impeded by her favored genres as well as by their content—since she wrote only two novels, and even these were akin to the novella in length, she was not really considered a serious “novelist” to the sensibilities of the critics involved.

Even though she fulfilled the spirit of the search for the Great American Catholic Novel, O’Connor determined not to satisfy the explicit call put forward by critics of her time. In her published essays, she questions even the classifications of novels involved: “I don’t think that we have any right to demand of our novelists that they write an *American* novel at all. A novel that could be described simply as an American novel and no more would be too limited an undertaking for a good novelist to waste his time on” (MM 133) and elsewhere,

The very term ‘Catholic novel’ is, of course, suspect, and people who are conscious of its complications don’t use it except in quotation marks. If I had

to say what a Catholic novel is, I could only say that it is one that represents reality adequately as we see it manifested in this world of things and human relationships. (MM 172)

She believed in transmitting “the message” of the Catholic faith, but only as the Catholic faith stands for transcendent truth about the world. She actively worked to avoid both sentimentality and a moralistic tone in her stories; as Labrie puts it, “What saves O’Connor’s fiction from didactic ponderousness is her unstinting realism, her fine eye for dramatic irony, and her vividness” (215). These technical characteristics exhibit her ideas about how an artist works, which were drawn from Jacques Maritain’s Thomism in *Art and Scholasticism* and her subsequent reading of Aquinas. In its mature form, this view of the artist combines Aquinas’ anti-romantic conception of the artist as craftsman with his understanding of the prophetic vocation. She tried to subordinate religious goals to the aesthetic requirements of her art, believing this would ultimately be the truest witness to her faith and the most acceptable offering to God.

O’Connor also failed to satisfy Catholic reviewers of her time because she refused to write about merely “Catholic” themes and subjects; we can see her views on this choice in this criticism of Evelyn Waugh from a letter to Betty Hester: “he has too narrow a definition of what would be a Catholic novel. He says a novel that deals with the problems of the faith; I’d rather say a Catholic mind looking at anything, making the category generous enough to include myself” (HB 236).

O’Connor consistently voiced concern over the popularity of “pious” sentiment. The

explicit call for a Catholic alternative to modern anti-religious novels affected O'Connor deeply,¹⁵ but she hoped to answer its spirit rather than follow its artistic opinions. In the fiction of O'Connor, religious identity and theological concerns form an important part of the subject matter, not just a background to generic dramatic action.

Modernism & the New Criticism

O'Connor balked at style recommendations from the Catholic press in part because she valued the twentieth century's modernist fiction. In a letter to Betty Hester she recounts her literary education at Iowa State University: "I didn't really start to read until I went to Graduate School and then I began to read and write at the same time. When I went to Iowa I had never heard of Faulkner, Kafka, Joyce, much less read them. Then I began to read everything at once" (HB 98). O'Connor goes on to mention other books she read: the "Catholic novelists," "the best Southern writers," "the Russians," and many other single authors. But first and last, she mentions the high modernist writers—these were a shaping influence on her idea of fiction.

From Henry James, whom she read "almost all of . . . from a sense of High Duty and because when I read James I feel something is happening to me, in slow motion but happening nevertheless" (HB 99), she takes the interior disposition of

¹⁵ This call participated in the twentieth century exaltation of the novel as a genre, and may have influenced O'Connor to produce novels even though they did not come to her as naturally as short stories.

her characters as an overarching interest. However, she expresses this interest differently than James—through a narrator who inhabits characters’ consciousnesses to varying degrees, providing a rich texture of thought and interpretation. No story of hers is heard in the first person. Robert Brinkmeyer’s *Art and Vision of Flannery O’Connor* considers O’Connor as a Bakhtinian polyphonic author who allows voices other than her own to be heard throughout the story. She spent a great deal of effort to create these effects, saying “[p]oint of view runs me nuts. If you violate point of view, you destroy the sense of reality and louse yourself up generally. . . . Anyway you can’t just sit down and write a novel. You have to know who’s seeing what and all that kind of stuff” (HB 157).

O’Connor’s work strikes a balance between characters’ seeing and external action; in fact, her work reinforces the link between belief and action by showing how a character’s inner life carries serious consequences. She was influenced by theorists of her time like Caroline Gordon who encouraged a Neo-Aristotelian attention to “a complete action” as the basis of a narrative. This was an idea promoted by the scholars now called the “New Critics” who had a strong impact on American letters in the mid twentieth century. Their opinions were well respected at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop where O’Connor had her first real introduction to literary study. The aspects of fiction they valued—irony, symbol, and clear dramatic action—appear throughout O’Connor’s corpus.

Her adherence to many New Critical ideas put O’Connor squarely in the literary culture of her time. Through her connections from Iowa and her subsequent

residence at the Yaddo artists' community and in New York, she met or was in contact with some of the acknowledged stars of the American literary scene: the Fitzgeralds, Robert Lowell, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren are the most important of these names. Caroline Gordon (formerly Caroline Tate) was O'Connor's mentor, and her advice was crucial both for editing and for guiding principles O'Connor used during composition.

The New Critics developed their theories both as modernists and as reactionaries to modernism. The group sprang from critical pronouncements of Eliot and Pound; Southerners like Robert Penn Warren and John Crowe Ransom continued it. Thus the literature produced its proponents was overwhelmingly modernist in its style and content. However, various New Critics were also known for their political and religious conservatism, as well as their determination to retain canonical literature from the Western tradition as inspirations and precursors to their own achievements.¹⁶ They formally rejected aspects of their modern world, like the assumption that science explains all things. Contrarily, they asserted poetry to be a mode of knowledge all its own. On this basis they claimed literature should be read primarily *as* literature and that its "literary" features should be emphasized in schools when determining literary value. New Critics were the first to systematize "close reading," careful analysis of the text as text in an effort to understand its internal coherence and overall organic structure as well as its individual features like irony and symbolism. In extreme versions of New

¹⁶ Contemporary scholarship emphasizes the concealed racism and classicism of their political opinions.

Criticism, biographical information about the author, representation of historical or ideological realities, and even the emotional reaction of the reader would be discounted in favor of appreciation for the literary technique as a truth-bearing representation of reality.¹⁷ However strange these suggestions may sound today, they had a salutary effect on O'Connor in that they encouraged her to develop the technical excellence of her writing.

Her own participation in modernism extended to modernist subjects as well as technique. O'Connor was a woman of her time. She depicts heroes unmoored from a home community, like Hazel Motes, whose car gives him a surrogate sense of place. Other characters, like those of the many "dairy farm" stories, lose their sense of home through changing situations of class and race. Questions about embodiment and its meaning appear again and again, even in her symbolism emphasizing body parts rather than whole, functioning bodies. As Christina Beiber Lake points out in her book *The Incarnational Art of Flannery O'Connor*, O'Connor saw Cartesian estrangement between mind and body exacerbated by contemporary urbanization and technology.

She wrote for her own American problems as well as for these problems facing the entire western world. Friction between blacks and whites brings on the final conflict of "The Displaced Person," "Everything That Rises Must Converge," and "Judgment Day." She shows how, in the social structure of her time, the limited

¹⁷ For the New Critical ideas of the intentional fallacy and the emotional fallacy, see W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1967.

economic and social opportunities of black Americans sometimes led them to inhabit the demeaning roles left for them, and sometimes led them to forcibly reject them. She depicted racism as an evil force and linked it to the universal human capacity to sin. This message was desperately needed in the south in the late fifties and early sixties, since whites tended to consider race relations apart from their day to day morality. Feminist criticism has begun to give proper credit to the fascinating play of gender in O'Connor's fiction.¹⁸ Women in O'Connor's stories often take on roles usually relegated to males, like running a farm, and young girls chafe against traditional gender stereotypes. Conversely, her two novels center on dispossessed men unsatisfied by the usual expectations placed on an American male. Jon Lance Bacon's *Flannery O'Connor and Cold War Culture* explores the tense historical background in many of O'Connor's stories, a theme that is taken up and developed in light of recent history in the collection of essays *Flannery O'Connor in the Age of Terrorism*.

O'Connor's fiction engages these modern problems while looking to the past for solutions. These solutions draw on Biblical sources to claim the reality of God and the fallenness of man. She saw her world's problems from the perspective of her faith, even its political problems, saying, "[t]he Communist world sprouts from our sins of omission" (HB 450). When writing to Betty Hester she said, "it is easy to see that the moral sense has been bred out of certain sections of the population, like the

¹⁸ See especially Sarah Gordon's *The Obedient Imagination*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 2000.

wings have been bred off certain chickens to produce more white meat on them.

This is a generation of wingless chickens, which I suppose is what Nietzsche meant when he said God was dead” (HB 90). O’Connor wrote about the same “wingless chickens,” making characters who struggle with emptiness and alienation from *Wise Blood* to “Parker’s Back.” They liken their experiences of violence to images of the Holocaust and sometimes become agents of this violence as a protest to the pain of apparently meaningless life.

With critic Robert Scholes, we should speak of “modernisms” and consider the relevance of “marginalized modernists” like O’Connor.¹⁹ Scholes discusses modernists whose reaction to contemporary problems of isolation and rootlessness included various kinds of “conservatism,” including the use of sentimentalist tropes and traditional representation in art. O’Connor’s conservatism is evident in her fiction, but the stories still resemble those of Kafka more than those of G. K. Chesterton.²⁰ Seeing O’Connor as only a conserver of tradition minimizes her innovation while bolstering a false conception of modernism itself. The stories are modernist in all but the typical worldview associated with modernism.

This unusual yoking of an old religion and a new genre, modernist fiction, can sometimes be misinterpreted. Paul Giles, in his *American Catholic Arts and Fictions: Culture, Ideology, Aesthetics*, thinks O’Connor’s work is actually postmodern, saying she gives us “a typical postmodernist understanding of the

¹⁹ See Scholes’ *Paradox of Modernism*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2006.

²⁰ A reviewer referenced Kafka on *Wise Blood*’s jacket, as O’Connor mentions humorously in her letters (HB 33).

arbitrary and discontinuous nature of any kind of system” (392). But this reading ignores the stories’ cohesion in light of O’Connor’s Catholic faith, and in fact ignores the presence of that faith. Her typical reader is more likely to face a difficulty Paul Elie writes of in *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, a four-way biography of O’Connor, Walker Percy, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton:

O’Connor usually suggested that her work’s power to shock lay in the violence it dramatized or in the ‘strange skips and gaps’ of its style. This may have been true in her lifetime. It is not true today. The violence in her work now makes it recognizably contemporary, makes it familiar and accessible. The prose style now seems as clear as a headline. Today it is the religious faith in the work that has the power to shock. (425)

In our time, the stories’ religious themes retain the fiction’s edgy character, particularly presented as it is, in an otherwise modernist format.

O’Connor always considered the effect of her work, writing to Betty Hester that “[y]ou may write for the joy of it, but the act of writing is not complete in itself. It has its end in its audience” (HB 458). O’Connor’s ultimate goal vis a vis her audience was to jolt them out of their ordinary thinking, making room for the possibility of salvation. During O’Connor’s life, the general American reading public would have been more slightly more sympathetic to her Catholicism than the one she encounters today. Elie places their readiness to hear religious ideas in an aesthetic context:

As James Wood has pointed out, the decline of the Bible's authority in the nineteenth century coincided with the rise of the modern novel, which aspired to have something like a religious authority over the reader. In part, this development led to the defiant heterodoxy of the great modernist writers, who conceived of literature as cult, creed, and dogma, a world unto itself. And yet the Bible, in decline in Europe, retained its authority in America, and perhaps it was only natural that the religiously charged books of early modernity would prompt certain American writers to seek out actual religious experience, and then to set about writing literary work which would have a frankly religious power. (xi-xii)

As an antidote to art-as-religion aestheticism, O'Connor strove to maintain the integrity of both art and religion. O'Connor produced literature which carried religious conviction within a relevant modernist aesthetic.

The Literature of the South

Similarly crucial for O'Connor's development was her inheritance from her region and its fiction. She considered her Southern pedigree to be an advantage for her writing, telling Marion Montgomery "[t]he Southern writer can outwrite anybody in the country because he has the Bible and a little history" (HB 444). During O'Connor's time, to be southern and a writer was to be part of a respected, up-to-date cadre. As her fame spread, O'Connor appeared in interviews and panels with Katherine Ann Porter, Eudora Welty, and Robert Penn Warren. Such

connections allowed O'Connor's work to be seen within a context of which it is often considered the most extreme example.

O'Connor's mixture of southernness and Catholicism made her all the more remarkable. She wrote to Hester that at a Notre Dame lecture, she "was an object of considerable curiosity, being a writer about 'Southern degeneracy' and a Catholic at oncet [sic] and the same time" (HB 216). The combination surprises on a demographic level, of course; there is only a small statistical likelihood that such an author should exist, and few indeed did, apart from her and Walker Percy. However, as Labrie puts it, Catholicism does not necessarily depend on a certain location for its survival: "Unlike the Puritans of the seventeenth century, who were associated with a particular region and culture, American Catholics and American Catholic writers have exhibited an almost chameleon-like ability to adapt to diverse surroundings, as can readily be observed in the very different environments lived in by writers such as Flannery O'Connor, Thomas Merton, and Paul Horgan" (269). Our expectation that Catholics would thrive in only "Catholic" areas like Maryland probably comes from this Puritan example.

But O'Connor's Catholic/Southern combination surprises not just because she is a Southern Catholic. Her fiction stands out because of the Catholicism in the southernness. O'Connor's version of the South brings out its universal spiritual issues rather than adhering to the patterns established by other prominent twentieth century southern authors like William Faulkner, who evokes a mixture of

Old Testament theism mixed with nature worship, and Eudora Welty, whose moral sense permeates her fiction but remains secular.

The imagery of moral and physical decay dominates southern literature. Perhaps its most splendid example is Faulkner's epic story of the withered Sutpen family in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Not only do the plantation and its economy fall into shambles, but the family line, too, is destined to end with a suicide committed in the North. Loving attention to this dying or dead culture memorializes the nobility of humanity even in paying for its wrongdoing. O'Connor was born into this tradition, both literally, at her family's lovely rowhouse facing one of Savannah's many moss-draped squares, and figuratively, through her Iowa education in contemporary literature of the South, her own fiction avoids the trends and tropes of this aesthetic. One evidence of this is in her characters' attitudes toward the southern symbol of the old plantation. The children in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" find the grandmother's story of an old plantation boring save the idea of hidden confederate treasure; and even for the grandmother, the visit to the plantation would be a form of sentimental tourism rather than an authentic encounter with a significant place from her own past. Similarly, Julian in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" looks back on his mother's stories of an ancestral plantation with an envy bordering on hatred; they are not realities of his own life, but symbols for his own life's lack.

By contrast, O'Connor shows us many images of her contemporary dairy farm. This farm is anything but decayed: a pasteurizing, clean place run by a woman who must pay her workers and who struggles to get by. The farms of

“Greenleaf,” “A Circle in the Fire,” and “The Enduring Chill” are not romantic places, but they belong more to her era’s discussion of economic equality, class struggle, and technological change. They are an antipode to the plantation images left over from the civil war. In these depictions and in the extended southern parody of “A Late Encounter With the Enemy,” we find O’Connor assuming an outsider-position with regard to the “school of southern degeneracy.” “The Old South” is a land of tourism, dreams, and cabarets, a show to entertain idle hours or charm the ignorance of northern curiosity

Her south is “Christ haunted,” and this theological focus leads her to depict “gothic” or grotesque situations which are finely tuned to spiritual struggles. O’Connor sets her spiritually charged dramatic action within a careful recording of aesthetic elements of southern life as she knew it, particularly the Southern idiom and its social stratification.

Other Southern writers depicted the evils of poverty, violence, and race problems; O’Connor was drawing on these issues, but shaping them to show their relation to universal evil and good. She aimed to write something significant that would fulfill the spirit of the search for the “Great American Catholic Novel” rather than its proponents’ narrow definitions of what that novel should look like.

Criticism

Despite O’Connor’s strangeness, a large body of literary criticism affirms the Catholicity of O’Connor’s fiction. This group of critics reads the fiction as deeply

Christian and therefore as a fulfillment of O'Connor's stated objectives. Some of these studies examine connections between O'Connor's work and classic theologians like Thomas Aquinas and Augustine. Srigley's *Flannery O'Connor's Sacramental Art* also presents the viewpoints of more contemporary theologians read by O'Connor, like Martin Buber. Edmonson's *Return to Good and Evil* presents both O'Connor's response to the modernist thinker Nietzsche and her reading of Aquinas.

However, another large contingent of critics claims O'Connor's letters and essays are a distraction from the reality of the fiction. Some are of the view that O'Connor depicts, not a Christian cosmos, but a bleak world of power struggles and nihilism. For these critics a deep tension lies between O'Connor's stated beliefs and an artistry undermining those beliefs. During her own lifetime, O'Connor's friend John Hawkes opened this vein of criticism by asserting that the demonic claims ascendancy in O'Connor's stories. O'Connor was piqued by Hawkes' opinion even though she disagreed, claiming that Hawkes' misreading was based on an erroneous valorization of the demonic:

My devil has a name, a history and a definite plan. His name is Lucifer, he's a fallen angel, his sin is pride, and his aim is the destruction of the Divine plan. Now I judge that your devil is co-equal to God, not his creature; that pride is his virtue, not his sin; and that his aim is not to destroy the Divine plan because there isn't any Divine plan to destroy. My devil is objective and yours is subjective. You say one becomes 'evil' when one leaves the herd. I say that depends entirely on what the herd is doing. (CW 1156)

Hawkes' romanticized devil is actually a good American individualist, a frequent (and frequently misunderstood) object of O'Connor's satire. Most of the contrarian criticism hinges on some misreading of the good and evil forces in O'Connor's work. The evil forces are so palpably drawn that, for Josephine Hendin, they depict only a disgusting and materialistic world of pain (*The World of Flannery O'Connor* (Indiana University Press, 1970). Joanne Halleran McMullen's *Writing Against God: Language as Message in the Literature of Flannery O'Connor* (Mercer University Press, 1996), seems to assume that the Catholic faith is not actually very Christian. Even books which are not primarily concerned with debunking O'Connor's status as a Catholic author contribute to this contrarian theological criticism, as in Sarah Gordon's *The Obedient Imagination* (University of Georgia Press, 2000) and Frederick Asals' *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity* (University of Georgia Press, 1987).

Unfortunately, those who read O'Connor as primarily a Catholic writer and those who see in her an unwilling subversion of her beliefs sometimes dismiss one another out of hand. Robert Donahoo complains about this tendency while also articulating the chief obstacle for "true believers" in his introduction to *Flannery O'Connor in the Age of Terrorism*: "The problem that has confronted and will continue to confront theologically oriented criticism is how to avoid offering simply another slightly rephrased argument that O'Connor is indeed Christian and Catholic" (265). He proposes two criteria for separating the good from the bad in O'Connor studies: "(1) the ability to open up and deepen awareness of mystery in

her work; and (2) the ability to be generative rather than mummifying” (Donahoo 243). These criteria can be applied to both the “believers” and the “apostates,” and it is true that theological criticism of O’Connor sometimes goes through the oversimplifying exercise of pointing out ways in which O’Connor’s letters or essays correspond with the stories to yield Catholic dogmas. But theology is a field of complexity and debate, not a single ideology; the best of the theological criticism avoids the pitfalls described by Donahoo, “opening up” O’Connor’s work even while affirming its theological meaning. Several authors in this tradition should be acknowledged for their rich contributions to O’Connor studies: Ralph C. Wood, John D. Sykes, Susan Srigley, Christina Bieber Lake, Richard Giannone, and recently Jordan Cofer. These authors’ books are theological, but by no means doctrinaire. They address topics as varied as the culture of preaching in the O’Connor’s south; the significance of sensory imagery in the stories, mimicking the order of the Catholic Mass; the Purgatorial doctrine found in Catherine of Genoa; Cartesian versus Thomistic epistemology; and little-noticed Biblical references throughout the stories. A Balthasarian reading of O’Connor should complement the work already done in this field.

Ralph C. Wood’s books and essays have been particularly influential for me. His work contains the most rigorous and nimble theological examination of O’Connor’s thought. The form of this study is, to some extent, patterned off of his book *The Comedy of Redemption*. Wood places fiction in communication with the theologians Reinhold Niebuhr and Karl Barth to support his thesis that

Christianity is ultimately comedic, and this comedy reflects in fiction like O'Connor's. Similarly, I use the thought of Balthasar to show that O'Connor's grotesquery is ultimately beautiful, and that beauty's transcendent character can be a pathway to God. While my argument lies within the camp of "true belief," it is not a statement of O'Connor's belief. By adding yet another theological study of O'Connor, I affirm the variety of theology rather than the stories' self-evident theological subject matter.

In O'Connor criticism, religious concerns come up often; however, contemporary scholars in mainstream literary criticism usually avoid religious topics. The mid-twentieth century saw major critics like Northrup Frye, Harold Bloom, and Rene Girard make contributions to religious criticism by studying literature with reference to the Bible or the psychological/mythical underpinnings of Christianity. Their willingness to engage religious concerns paralleled the willingness of mid-century artists like O'Connor, Eliot, and Auden to write on Christian themes. But since then, religious points of view are predominantly absent from the ensuing critical multiplicity. Cultural studies, Marxism, feminism, queer theory—these approaches either expose or espouse ideologies as a dominating lens for looking at literature. Although the foundation for this important work has been built by critics like Nathan Scott, literary criticism needs more and better ways of approaching spiritual and religious themes in art.

Balthasarian criticism can help fill this lacuna. There are already several books devoted to literary applications of Balthasar's work.²¹ Most important is Michael Patrick Murphy's *A Theology of Criticism: Balthasar, Postmodernism, and the Catholic Imagination*.²² This book directly addresses a theoretical space for using Balthasar's work and then applies it to several religiously charged works of art, including the short story "Revelation" Flannery O'Connor. Ed Block has written several fine articles of Balthasarian literary criticism and also edited a collection of literary essays called *Glory, Grace, and Culture: The Work of Hans Urs von Balthasar*.²³ His leadership at the journal *Renascence* has also encouraged scholarship involving Balthasar and the arts. This dissertation seeks to continue the work established by these scholars and extend it to more of O'Connor's corpus. A major consideration here is to recognize some of the specific texts in Balthasar's voluminous work which are especially helpful for reading literature. Isolating some of these sections and showing how they relate to O'Connor's work should prepare some ground for later, more comprehensive Balthasarian studies.

²¹ Included in these are several offerings by graduate students, notably Christopher Douglas Denny's dissertation *Literature in the Dramatic Anthropology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* and Ignazio Bellafiore's thesis *Representation and Reconciliation: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Interpretation of Shakespeare in light of the Theo- Drama*.

²² The American Academy of Religion Series. New York: Oxford UP, 2008.

²³ New York: Paulist Press, 2005.

Chapter 2: Theology and Beauty

Many popular readers are drawn to Flannery O'Connor because of her Catholicism. O'Connor is known for her orthodoxy as much as for her stories' artistic acclaim. And indeed this stature fulfills one of O'Connor's ambitions: although she disdained propaganda, she considered herself to be a kind of artistic evangelist or prophet, believing that the truth of her fiction would reveal ultimate truth. Catholicism was the primary inspiration for her fiction: "I write the way I do because (not though) I am a Catholic" (CW 942). In her personal life, she made a conscious effort to defend and promote the Church's teachings while living them out herself. As she wrote in a letter to Thomas Mabry, "at some point in my life I realized that not only was I a Catholic not like someone else would be a Baptist or a Methodist but like someone else would be an atheist" (CW 930).

It is a mistake, however, to make quick assumptions about O'Connor's Catholicism. She signals the complexity of her orthodoxy by explaining that she is "a Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness, that thing Jung describes as unhistorical, solitary, and guilty" (CW 942). In a literary sense, O'Connor's "modern consciousness" connects her to larger trends in twentieth century fiction, as the previous chapter discussed; from a theological standpoint, her attention to current intellectual developments was remarkable for a laywoman before Vatican II. O'Connor maintained a dedicated interest in Thomas Aquinas, and spoke of him often as representing her thought, in a way befitting a traditional Catholic. Yet her theological reading and ideas aligned her also with more

controversial movements in twentieth century Catholic theology. In particular, she read widely in authors now associated with *Ressourcement* theology (also known as *la nouvelle théologie*). These thinkers shared her conviction that theology should look at the whole of Christian tradition as well as the contemporary intellectual climate. Hans Urs von Balthasar shared these two major influences of O'Connor's, Thomism and *Ressourcement*, and was also related with the theology of another shared interest, Protestant theologian Karl Barth. These influences inspired both writers to a special focus on redemptive suffering as an aesthetic object. In this chapter I will give some background about O'Connor's major theological influences, show how these influences and others contributed to Balthasar's theory of beauty, and finally give a reading of how a Christological aesthetic appears in O'Connor's "The Displaced Person."

Catholic Apologist

O'Connor's active intellectual life influenced the theological insights in her stories. Her knowledge of contemporary theology was impressive for a nonacademic laywoman—she wrote to Betty Hester, "I am surprised you don't know anything about the crisis theologians," but it is perhaps more surprising that either of them knew anything about the crisis theologians (HB 305). Her comment reveals the extensive and ecumenical character of her reading. In this case, O'Connor was probably referring primarily to Karl Barth, whose American lectures she read with pleasure in the book *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*. Her review declared

that “There is little or nothing here that the Catholic cannot recognize as his own.

In fact, Barth’s description of the wonder, concern and commitment of the evangelical theologian could equally well be a description of the wonder, concern and commitment of the ideal Catholic life” (Getz 203).¹ O'Connor's search for engaging theological content ranged widely, but it always aimed to define and promote “the ideal Catholic life.” O'Connor considered it part of her Christian duty to write book reviews for the local Catholic newspaper, and by the time of her death she had published over a hundred of them. A comprehensive collection of both the published and unpublished reviews can be found in Lorine Getz’ recent book *Flannery O'Connor, Literary Theologian*. Considering critics' extensive use of O'Connor's letters and lectures, the neglect of her reviews is curious. These reviews contain ample material for any student of O'Connor’s work. For instance, a snide comment about modern art (of which her own stories are such a fine example!) reveals a potential source for a frequent image in her stories, the sun's “red ball” which often signals divine interference:

The art work in *Jubilee* makes subject for vigorous debate in its letters column. . . . One can expect to find a double page devoted wholly to a two-line liturgical fish or a red ball. The reader can tolerate this since it is a healthy reaction to so much bad religious art of a different and worse kind. (Getz 185)²

¹ Review for *The Southern Cross*, October 24, 1963.

² Written of the journal *Jubilee* in her February 1962 review for *The Bulletin*.

In another review she gives her best non-fiction censure of the Southern character:

The word which might best characterize *The Georgia Review* is 'pleasant.' It is, apparently by design, one of the least intellectually strenuous of the college quarterlies. Critics do not criticize the criticism of other critic's critics in the pages of *The Georgia Review*. There are no battles in the footnotes; in fact, no footnotes. It is obviously a magazine by Southerners for Southerners about Southerners. Its manner is so relaxed as to suggest genial front-porch monologues by local scholars whom it is not necessary to listen to very attentively. . . . All in all, *The Georgia Review* is an unpretentious, and by that much, refreshing quarterly, admirably suited to the Georgia temper. (Getz 186)³

Revelatory little nuggets like these are not the reviews' only value, however; Getz is right to say that the reviews as a whole "reveal a facet of Flannery O'Connor little known to her critics, namely the socially conservative, culturally enlightened Catholic pedant" (85). O'Connor's conservatism is up for debate, especially with regard to theology. But Getz is certainly right that in the reviews, O'Connor takes up the position of a teacher or mentor. Even while emphasizing the Church's authority, she dispenses her own opinions with decision and expressive force. In her letters she showed rueful awareness of this tendency: "I find I have a habit of announcing the obvious in pompous and dogmatic periods. I like to forget that I'm

³ March 1962 review for *The Bulletin*.

only a story-teller” (CW 946). O'Connor's departures from her primary role cast light back onto her stories, as critics like Susan Srigley have already explained: “[t]o silence the dialogue between O'Connor's prose and her fiction inevitably reduces the possibilities for judging certain actions within the fiction” (Srigley 20). From her reviews we get a survey of O'Connor's theological interests.

Her reading in theology was urbane and international. We see its breadth in her praise of the journal *Cross Currents'* inclusiveness: “Barth, Tillich, Cullman and Buber are frequently represented in its pages as well as such Catholic thinkers as Guardini, Marcel, and the late Fr. Teilhard” (Getz 165). This variety of theologians, including some with questionable orthodoxy, focuses one of the few critical works examining the reviews, Ralph Wood's “The Heterodoxy of Flannery O'Connor's Book Reviews.”⁴ The article provides a healthy corrective to the image of O'Connor as a lemming-like follower of the Church. However, Wood's assumption of O'Connor's heterodoxy moves too far in the other direction. He believes O'Connor's criticisms of fellow Catholics imply dissent from the Church itself: “The most obvious evidence of Miss O'Connor's dissentient spirit as a book critic lies in her attempt to improve popular Catholic taste and to elevate the Church's spiritual sensibility” (Wood 4). O'Connor's grouching about Catholic taste indicates a sharp mind and tongue rather than actual dissent. Anthony Di Renzo shares the same confusion, as he demonstrates near the end of his book about O'Connor and the Medieval grotesque: “Despite her passionate Catholicism, Flannery O'Connor's characters seldom

⁴ *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 5 (Autumn 1976): 3-29.

conform to orthodox dogma. They are not exclamation points punctuating an elaborate apologia, but question marks representing the mystery of their own personhood. It is that mystery, located on the margins of all orthodoxy, that makes them grotesque in the first place” (222). Di Renzo is right to say that the mystery of personhood was at the heart of O'Connor's work. However, mystery is the heart of orthodoxy rather than its margin. Christian spirituality explicitly contemplates the mystery of personhood, especially the persons of God. Orthodoxy does not mean an escape from mystery or an erasure of personhood. O'Connor would have been the first to repudiate the idea of her heterodoxy, since for her “dogma is the guardian of mystery” (CW 1116). Dogmas formulate beliefs, but they do not offer explanations. Rather, a statement that bread and wine become Christ or that virgin birth occurred increases mystery for the believer.

For O'Connor, a work of art acting only as an apologia might be orthodox, but it would be bad art—a form of propaganda. Conversely, the lack of an overt apologia should not be seen as a litmus test for orthodoxy in art: “If the writer uses his eyes in the real security of his Faith, he will be obliged to use them honestly and his sense of mystery and his acceptance of it will be increased” (CW 810). O'Connor's “attempt to improve popular Catholic taste” in America and her addition of a “question mark” to our assumptions about mystery are the fruit of her acceptance of Church teaching. Her abhorrence of sentimentality shows her to be a zealously orthodox reformer. O'Connor saw sentimentality as a sign of the presence of her enemy, the polite “practical atheism” identified by Wood in his later book *Flannery*

O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South. The work of genuine reform, even in matters of taste, falls to those who remain within the system and criticize it with a spirit of love.

Although Wood errs in labeling O'Connor's theology "heterodox," he is right to observe that O'Connor's theological interests were not typical of Catholic orthodoxy at the time of their writing. Notable, of course, was her fascination with Teilhard de Chardin, which has been generously explored by other critics.⁵ Her contemporary Catholics could have considered her heterodox based on her book reviews featuring not just Neo-Thomists, but also authors associated with modernism or *Ressourcement*. In the next sections I will examine some of the most important of these influences on her thought: Thomism and *Ressourcement*.

Thomism and Twentieth Century Catholic Theology

Critics pay ample attention to Aquinas' influence on O'Connor.⁶ And indeed Aquinas' writings carried great significance for her. His teachings on prophesy in *De Veritate* shaped her idea of the prophet that Francis Marion Tarwater embodies in

⁵ See especially Steven R. Watkins' *Flannery O'Connor and Teilhard De Chardin: A Journey Together Towards Hope And Understanding About Life*. New York: Peter Lang, 2009. Also important on the topic of O'Connor and De Chardin is Ralph Wood's article, "The Heterodoxy of Flannery O'Connor's Book Reviews," explaining how O'Connor eventually moved away from her interest in De Chardin's work.

⁶ For example, see Edmonson, Henry T., III. *Return to Good and Evil: Flannery O'Connor's Response to Nihilism*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002 and Montgomery, Marion. *Hillbilly Thomist: Flannery O'Connor, St. Thomas and the Limits of Art*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2006.

The Violent Bear It Away.⁷ Her stories also exemplify some general precepts of Thomism which I will describe below. But O'Connor's contact with Aquinas was more complex than most of her critics' account of it. While O'Connor famously called herself a "hillbilly Thomist," she was really a "hillbilly Neo-Thomist," an inheritor of the twentieth century "Neo-Thomist Revival" led by Catholic laymen Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson. Maritain brought Thomist ideas into contact with contemporary questions of ethics and aesthetics, emphasizing the continuity in Western thinking from the Middle Ages to modern times. Gilson advocated the need for studying Aquinas in his historical context and helped found the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies at the University of Toronto. Both asserted Aquinas' relevance for philosophical thought as well as for theology. These scholars and others associated with their movement had a profound effect on the recent history of Thomistic studies, a history worth outlining here.

In the late nineteenth century, Aquinas became the official representative of the Church's positions in theology and philosophy. Pope Leo XIII's 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris* "commended [Aquinas] as providing the surest intellectual foundation for, and articulation of, Catholic doctrine" (Haldane xiv). The encyclical also called for a return to the actual texts of Thomas Aquinas. Leo XIII wanted to see a fundamental change in Catholic scholarship and the seminary education of the times, which taught systematized Scholastic thought through formulaic textbooks. These "dry manuals" usually took their material from Thomist

⁷ Susan Srigley documents this in pages 43-54 of *Flannery O'Connor's Sacramental Art*. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 2004.

commentators from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries rather from Aquinas himself.

Just as Leo XIII was countering the manual culture with his call for a Thomist renewal, other scholars were responding to their seminary educations with rebellion against Scholasticism. Proponents of what came to be known as Catholic Modernism combined a historical-critical approach to the Bible with an embrace of post-Cartesian philosophy. Major figures in this movement like Alfred Loisy and George Tyrrell ended up repudiating the Bible's inspiration and the magisterium's authority to define dogma. They were excommunicated and several Church documents were written against their ideas.⁸ From 1910 through 1967, all clerics were required to take an “oath against modernism” as part of their ordination (*New Catholic Encyclopedia* 995).

The Modernist Crisis caused major difficulties for theologians working outside Scholasticism for several decades. Indeed, “Modernism became a slogan to be applied to whatever was disliked in liberal Catholic thought, theology, literature, and politics” (*New Catholic Encyclopedia* 994). The attitude led to the widespread distrust and near-condemnation of the later movement *Ressourcement*, which encouraged the Church to engage with contemporary thinking. However, writers associated with *Ressourcement* were not opposed to theological tradition in the way Modernists were. They suggested methodological changes, championing a return to

⁸ The most important are the so-called “Syllabus of Errors” of 1864 and later *Pascendi* in 1907.

primary sources for theological study that included attention to the early Church fathers as well as to Thomas Aquinas. New Theologians were initially conflated with Modernists and disciplined; the 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis* was written against some of its major thinkers like Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar. Yet the magisterium accepted many ideas from *Ressourcement* during and after the Second Vatican Council.

Neo-Thomism and O'Connor

The Neo-Thomist Revival championed by Maritain and Gilson is now considered one of the major Thomist reforms of manual Scholasticism. The Revival was also widely revered among American intellectuals during the mid-Twentieth century. The extent of its impact can be seen even in O'Connor's decision to read the *Summa Theologica*, a text that decades earlier would have been inaccessible to laymen and even to many specialists. The edition O'Connor read each night "before going to bed," the *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas*, is a still-popular volume edited by Gilson's colleague, Anton C. Pegis (CW 945). In an example of the Neo-Thomist Revival's mediation, the introduction to this volume relates directly to O'Connor's poetics.

Pegis' introduction, heavily annotated in O'Connor's copy, outlines Aquinas' vision of human beings as enfleshed knowers: "It is not abstractions that we know, though we use abstractions; it is things" (Pegis xxv). Pegis writes that human beings are spiritual, but completely embodied. These ideas are undeniably Thomist,

but the Neo-Thomist focus on them was conditioned by later developments in philosophy. Descartes had the idea that we begin with knowledge of our own consciousness, not the outside world. Later, Kant would assert that we cannot directly know the world outside our minds. Scholars like Pegis were dedicated to and frequently mentioned the concept of “realism,” Aquinas' philosophy that the world is truly present to us through the senses. O'Connor absorbed this idea into a unique realist poetics.

For O'Connor, the necessity of sense information for knowledge melded with the idea of “show, don't tell” promoted by the popular New Criticism.⁹ She explicitly cites this Thomistic doctrine (based on her reading of Pegis) in a lecture:

the nature of fiction is in large measure determined by the nature of our perceptive apparatus. The beginning of human knowledge is through the senses, and the fiction writer begins where human perception begins. He appeals through the senses, and you cannot appeal to the senses with abstractions. (MM 67)

Throughout O'Connor's fiction, her narration avoids abstract pronouncements. She conveys tone and symbolism by describing the physical details of her characters and their actions. For instance, in “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” O'Connor describes “the children's mother, a young woman in slacks, whose face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage and was tied around with a green head-kerchief that had two

⁹ See John D. Sykes, Jr. in his *Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and the Aesthetic of Revelation*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2007.

points at the top like rabbit's ears" (CW 137). O'Connor carefully relates the color and some notable features of the young woman's clothes, knowing that these details provide the sense of insipid safety she will undermine later. The vivid images make the mother seem almost sub-human, a vegetable or animal, and a sign of the family's spiritual poverty. At the story's end, O'Connor uses the image of "the grandmother who half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky" to show how a change has been effected in her soul (CW 152). The old woman's sitting position recalls the cross, and her smile looks up to heaven. In both cases, physical details are arranged to produce fictional knowledge.

By no means do O'Connor's characters avoid speaking in abstractions, however. O'Connor often writes about extreme characters who fanatically harp on abstract concepts, especially theological concepts. Thus we have Hazel Motes saying, "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" (CW 93). O'Connor loves complicated characters who voice and play with the ideas that concern her, rather than spelling them out narratively. The priest in "The Enduring Chill" actually states the basis for most of the action in her stories: "The Holy Ghost will not come until you see yourself as you are—a lazy ignorant conceited youth!" (CW 567). By embedding her ideas in physical details and characters' speech, O'Connor allows the readers' imaginative "senses" to take in the meaning of the

story, embodying themes rather than providing direct guidance. She considered this technique to be her own brand of Thomism.

O'Connor read several books by Maritain and Gilson themselves, and frequently mentioned them in her correspondence and conversation. However, Maritain was most important to O'Connor, since his *Art and Scholasticism* influenced her personal life and aesthetics more than any other theoretical work (HB 216). *Art and Scholasticism* provided O'Connor with a framework for understanding herself as an artist.¹⁰ Speaking of her time at the Iowa Writer's Workshop, John D. Sykes points out that “despite the New Critical standards she accepted as supplying the rules of the game, it was only when Maritain gave her a specifically Catholic way of understanding art that she felt grounded in her vocation” (Sykes 29). The young O'Connor struggled over scruples and found great relief in Maritain's claim that “the pure artist abstractly taken as such . . . is something entirely amoral” (16). As O'Connor put it in a letter, “St. Thomas said that art didn't require rectitude of the appetite. . . . St. Thomases [sic] remark is plain enough: you don't have to be good to write well. Much to be thankful for” (CW 955). Here O'Connor leaves out direct mention of Maritain in referring directly to St. Thomas. She does the same in her essay “The Nature and Aim of Fiction,” attributing ideas to Aquinas when referring to the definitions of art and the artist found in Maritain

¹⁰ See Rowan Williams' *Grace and Necessity* for an interesting slant on O'Connor and Maritain. Williams thinks that O'Connor applied Maritain's “amoral artist” theory to narration. In my opinion, he also suffers from a basic misunderstanding of Maritain, who does not leave art as morally open-ended as Williams would like.

(MM 64, 82). This tendency displays a certain simplicity on O'Connor's part; she took for granted that the Aquinas she inherited and pieced together was the only Aquinas. However, O'Connor absorbed only a small portion of Aquinas' thought directly. Moreover, her Thomistic influence was primarily philosophical. She drew two major truths from the Neo-Thomists: the first was epistemological, and resulted in her Christian realism. The second, also philosophical, combined an ontological understanding of the status of art with an ethics for applying the artist's craft. From a theological standpoint, she drew primarily on the ideas of Neo-Thomism and those of *Ressourcement*.

O'Connor and *Ressourcement*

Thomas Aquinas carried symbolic weight both for O'Connor and for those around her because Aquinas bears the theological standard of orthodoxy for Catholics. This was especially true of O'Connor's time, when alarms about the development of modernism led to censures for non-Thomist theologians. O'Connor seems to have enjoyed participating in Aquinas' authority by triumphally citing his views to friends and audiences.

But she had other significant theological interests. The list of books reviewed by O'Connor reveals several works by authors now considered "new theologians": Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac, as well as theological works written by authors who are now loosely associated with Catholic modernism: John Henry Newman, Baron Friedrich von Hugel, and Romano Guardini. She also read texts by French

literary authors such as Francois Mauriac and Charles Péguy, who formed a kind of cultural counterpoint to *Ressourcement*.

O'Connor's treasured neo-Thomists participated in the same spirit of “return to the sources” promoted by *Ressourcement*. The first phase of *Ressourcement* involved French and Belgian Dominicans reading the actual texts of Thomas Aquinas “whereby the Thomas of the thirteenth century took pride of place over the (neo)scholastic Thomistic system,” an exercise inherited by Gilson and Maritain (33). Later *Ressourcement* theologians, however, abandoned Scholasticism all together; authors such as de Lubac, Congar, and Daniélou promoted a return to the study of the Bible and Patristic sources (both interests of O'Connor's as well¹¹).

Mettepenningen notes that “The expression nouvelle théologie is a paradox as such, given the fact that there is little apparent ‘newness’ in a return to the ‘old’ sources of the faith. The roots of this expression have a role to play in this regard, however, since the term ‘new’ within the Roman Catholic Church has often been taken as a reproach (with the exception of the ‘New Testament’, the ‘new Adam’, etc.)” (142).¹²

The name *la nouvelle théologie* was not chosen by these theologians themselves, who use the term *Ressourcement*, but rather applied to them by critics. Like the earlier modernist movement, *Ressourcement* thinkers awakened the Church's strong reproach since it challenged the neo-scholasticism that had come to be

¹¹ See O'Connor's reviews concerning the Bible, the Eastern Fathers, Augustine; they are numbered 10, 14, 15, 21, 48, 59, 73, 79, 80, 84, 101, 107, 114, and 116 in Getz.

¹² Mettepenningen, Jürgen. *Nouvelle Théologie: New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II*. London: T & T Clark, 2010.

exclusively associated with orthodoxy. Its authors lost their teaching positions and found their works added to the Index of Prohibited Books; worst of all, the 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis* rebuked them in all but name. However, unlike with modernism, the Church ultimately accepted the theology of its strongest voices:

the [Second Vatican] Council transformed the negative connotations associated with the *nouvelle théologie* into positive connotations, which reflected positively on its various representatives, several of whom were made cardinals (Daniélou in 1969, de Lubac in 1983, Congar sadly too late in 1994 and von Balthasar in 1988, although he died before the ceremony of elevation). (Mettepenningen 36-37)

O'Connor's early attraction to thinkers the Church would honor only later demonstrates both her open-mindedness and her prescience in theological matters. In his article "Flannery O'Connor, Benedict XVI, and the Divine Eros," Ralph Wood suggests that although O'Connor's aesthetics are formed by Jacques Maritain's interpretation of Thomas Aquinas, her theological insights may have more to do with ideas from *Ressourcement* than with traditional Thomism.¹³ He believes that her stories' depiction of grace acting in the world show the mingling of grace and nature rather than what is often referred to as the Thomist separation of the two.¹⁴

¹³ Ralph Wood. "Flannery O'Connor, Benedict XVI, and the Divine Eros." *Christianity and Literature* 60.1 (2010): 35-64.

¹⁴ In actuality Aquinas did not posit a pure nature apart from grace; he affirmed the final orientation of creation to its Creator. However, a separation between the two was handed down by Scholastic manuals and forcefully rejected by the *Ressourcement* theologians.

Wood's claim gains credence when we study O'Connor's influences. O'Connor seems to have intuited some of the movement's ideas in her stories about the "action of grace" as she called it, as characters asserting the exclusion of grace from nature come to knowledge of their own (ignored) interior lives (Wood 46). Derek C. Hatch, in his article "Wingless Chickens and *Desiderium Naturale*: The Theological Imaginations of Flannery O'Connor and Henri de Lubac" follows up on this idea, placing O'Connor's literary theology squarely within the tradition of *ressourcement*.

Balthasar and Scholasticism

Balthasar's theological formation included both of the influences on O'Connor discussed here, the Neo-Thomists and the thinkers associated with *Ressourcement*. The influence of Scholasticism on Balthasar is especially complex since he is himself considered a prominent *nouveau* theologian. All priests trained in the early twentieth century studied scholastic manual textbooks for several years. Balthasar said of these years,

My entire period of study in the Society was a grim struggle with the dreariness of theology, with what men had made out of the glory of revelation. I could not endure this presentation of the Word of God. I could have lashed out with the fury of a Samson. I felt like tearing down, with

Samson's strength, the whole temple and burying myself beneath the rubble. (Balthasar's *Prüfet alles* qtd. in Henrici 13)¹⁵

Despite his aversion to manual Scholasticism, Balthasar had great respect for individual scholastic thinkers. Volume II of his *Theological Aesthetics* includes monographs on Anselm and Bonaventure. According to Angelo Campodonico, Balthasar “offers an original interpretation of Aquinas' thought variously marked by the influence of other Thomistic scholars of diverse orientations, namely, Przywara, Rahner, de Lubac, Gilson, Pieper, and Siewerth” (34). Przywara, Gilson, and Siewerth are all associated with the Neo-Thomist revival; they based their scholarship on Aquinas himself, taken in his own intellectual context, and put Aquinas' ideas into contact with other thinkers' philosophy and theology. Their writings were far from the intellectually disappointing work of the manual writers.

Balthasar's experience with *Ressourcement* theologians was the opposite of his schooling in Scholasticism. As part of his Jesuit formation, Balthasar had the opportunity to share a house with Henri de Lubac:

He showed us the way beyond the scholastic stuff to the Fathers of the Church and generously lent us all his own notes and extracts. And so, while all the others went off to play football, Daniélou, Bouillard, and I and a few others (Fessard was no longer there) got down to Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus. I wrote a book on each of these. (qtd. in Henrici 13)

¹⁵ Peter Henrici, S.J. “Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Sketch of His Life.” In *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*. David L. Schindler, ed. Communio Books. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991. 7-43.

Balthasar was fired with enthusiasm as he studied the thinkers of the early Church. The Fathers put Balthasar in touch with a theology that was both interested in the beautiful and written in a beautiful style. His early encounter with these writings prepared Balthasar for a project combining his theological interests with his aesthetic inclinations.

As a *nouveau* theologian, it was part of Balthasar's great work to incorporate original traditional sources into the greater picture including modern aesthetic theory. But his allegiance to theologians like de Lubac and his bad experience of Scholasticism did not keep Balthasar from foregrounding key scholastic doctrines. Balthasar draws on the entire Christian theological tradition, and reserves a central place for the Scholastic doctrine of the transcendentals, basing this in particular on Aquinas' understanding of the analogy of being, *analogia entis*. Here Balthasar explains Aquinas' basic insight about the difference between God and being:

Thomas, here at his most competent and free from the suspicion of any dependence on Denys, will designate as *ens commune* or *esse*, that which for him is neither God nor yet the sum of individual worldly *entia* nor (what finally suggests itself) a conceptual abstraction (*conceptus entis*) but the first *created* reality proceeding from God, by participating in which all beings really are, something 'abundant, simple, not-subsisting', 'universal', 'flowing', participating in an infinite manner and thence in itself infinite, lending form inexhaustibly, which however is distinguished from God by the fact that God

subsists in himself, while being only subsists in finite beings. This being which Thomas uniquely discerned with his sharp sight and comprehensively defended but which was *intended* by Denys when he described being-in-itself as the first procession from God, and which without doubt was intended by the other Scholastics when they explained it as the object of metaphysics: *this being is creaturely reality in so far as it is seen and conceived as the all-embracing manifestation of God.* (GL IV, 374)

This is the Thomistic rock beneath Balthasar's aesthetics. The achievement of Aquinas, recognizing the analogical relation between "Being" and "being," is directly related to aesthetic experience:

It [*esse*] is therefore a *theophanic* being, in the classical but also in a thoroughly Pauline sense (Rom 1.18-21; Acts 17.22-29), to which unity, truth, goodness and beauty do not belong as properties possessed at one's own disposal—how could they, since this being does not subsist as such?—but with which it rather, in so far as they adhere to it, refers to the primordial ground of being which replicates itself in it like an image. (GL IV, 374)

Since *esse*, created being, is a true image of God, it is beautiful, good, true, and one, insofar as it *is*. Insofar as it *is* God's image, it *is* the transcendentals (rather than a being with these properties). Balthasar loves this insight because it secures a certain "objectivity" for beauty by placing beauty on a theological plane: beauty is important because it directly reflects God's glory.

In the preceding passage, Balthasar's care in mentioning Denys the Areopagite springs from his high estimation of this 5th century thinker. In volume II of *The Glory of the Lord*, Balthasar devotes an entire monograph to his work, carefully distinguishing Denys' contribution from the Platonism that informed it. Balthasar also gives credit to Denys for his deep impact on Scholastic views of beauty, especially in the work of Aquinas and Bonaventure. Denys' view of the beauty of creation helped connect Mediaeval thinkers with their ancient precursors:

In this form the mediaeval, especially the Thomist, transcendental philosophy of being forms the (higher) centre and mediation between classical and modern metaphysics and in this context is the most valid representative of distinctively Western thought. It is required of being that as such it be something united, something true and something good and beautiful. The first, that it is something united, characterizes every metaphysics, even Asiatic metaphysics, and does not allow the difference between being and God to emerge, just as the proposition *ens et unum convertuntur* positively obscures this difference and leaves the problem of different essences unilluminated. But that being is true, true and not illusion, not *maya*, is characteristic of the West from the time of Homer and the tragedians, and this truth holds precisely in difference: in the like-ness between God and being, in *aequalitas* or *rectitude* (Anselm) as cor-respondence. And only on the basis of this truth can being as such be good and beautiful, in so far as the image-likeness means that God, in positing being, does the good and in so

doing reveals the goodness which he is and which, as revealed, he acknowledges, approves and loves. (GL IV, 375-76)

Balthasar carefully parses the uniqueness of this Thomistic insight. The transcendentals are essential to an understanding of beauty because they accurately reflect the mysterious theological reality of the world. Balthasar takes it to be of utmost importance that the being of the world shows forth the goodness and beauty of God. He thinks that the combination of likeness and difference found in the image of creation is based on the distinct, yet unified persons of the Trinity:

But the doctrine of the Trinity is the final underlying guarantee of Western, transcendental philosophy: for only a triune God can render credible a world outside himself as true and good and yet in its free independence united with him, who is most free and most independent. The philosophical difference points back to a revealed, theological *mysterium* and is most happily confirmed by it. (GL IV, 376)

The relationship between the world and God, then, can only be understood as an analogy between his infinity and our boundedness.

Balthasar, Analogy, and Karl Barth

Balthasar believed that the aesthetic appreciation of a beautiful form prepares us for the contemplation of God's glory. Indeed, he writes that "contemplation [of God's Word] exactly corresponds to the aesthetic contemplation that steadily and patiently beholds those forms which either nature or art offers to

its view” (GL I, 32). For Balthasar, beauty is not extrinsic to faith, but rather a necessary aspect of conversion; he wrote that those who sneer at beauty “can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love” (GL I, 18).

Balthasar opens his *Theological Aesthetics* with the problem of beauty's exclusion from modern theology. The forgetfulness of beauty belongs to a general decline in philosophy and culture, but Balthasar finds the omission particularly inappropriate to theology. As he learned under de Lubac, beauty was a primary concern for Church Fathers like Augustine, and its importance was also recognized by Medievals like Bonaventure; Balthasar thinks that modern anti-aestheticism began with Luther's focus on salvific *action* to the detriment of *contemplation* (GL I, 45-57). Subsequently, Hegel's theological errors degraded aesthetics while Kierkegaard's mistrust of aesthetics became a part of theology. Slowly Christian thinkers began to associate beauty with depravity rather than glory. Balthasar describes a situation in which “The word 'aesthetic' automatically flows from the pens of both Protestant and Catholic writers when they want to describe an attitude that, in the last analysis, they find to be frivolous, merely curious[,] and self-indulgent” (GL I, 51).

Balthasar discovered an exception to this rule in the theology of Karl Barth, who was of great interest to Flannery O'Connor. O'Connor marked the following passage in her copy of Barth's *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*:

A quite specific *astonishment* stands at the beginning of every theological perception, inquiry, and thought, in fact at the root of every theological word.

This astonishment is indispensable if theology is to exist and be perpetually renewed as a modest, free, critical, and happy science. (64)¹⁶

This “astonishment” at the glory of God takes on an aesthetic character for Barth, who contends that Christ is not the alternative to beauty but the ultimate form of beauty (GL I, 53). Barth finds that contemplation itself is aesthetic in some sense, and that contemplation of God leads us, in turn, to the truth about beauty: “In this self-revelation, God's beauty embraces death as well as life, fear as well as joy, what we call 'ugly' as well as what we call 'beautiful’” (GL I, 56). Barth places love, and its expression in the passion of Christ, at the heart of beauty.

Balthasar appropriates this Barthian insight and develops it according to his interpretation of philosophical tradition. Balthasar thought “the complete rejection of aesthetics (as Barth already saw to some degree) results in a truncated conception of faith. It removes the *'inchoatio visionis'* from faith; it separates 'seeing' the glory of God's revelation from 'hearing' its message, and hence signifies the elimination of God's glory from the present age” (Viladesau 30). Balthasar claims that the glory of God is analogously present in the beauty of the world. He bases these claims on Scholasticism's analogy of being, the *analogia entis*, especially as articulated by his mentor and friend, Erich Przywara.

The idea of the analogy of being originated from Aristotle, who recognized that “being is said in many ways,” namely in the ten categories or predicaments.

¹⁶ From Arthur F. Kinney's *Flannery O'Connor's Library: Resources of Being*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1985.

This type of analogy is now called predicamental analogy. Medieval thinkers like Aquinas, and later Cajetan, posited a “transcendental” analogy describing the relation between creatures and God.

In the Scholastic understanding, analogy is opposed to both univocity and equivocity. Words referring to only one thing are univocal, like “animal,” which has one meaning, but is said of many different things. The same word referring to completely different things is equivocal, like the word “bear,” which can be either an animal or the act of carrying something. But words spoken of God, like “good” or “wise,” are related to God and creatures not univocally nor equivocally, but analogically. Both God and man are “good” in some sense, but not in the same sense; there is an infinite separation between them. Analogous concepts apply to things that have some similarities and some differences, but are related by a proportion. In the *Summa Theologiae* question 13, article 5, Aquinas writes that we say an animal is “healthy,” but “healthy” is also said of medicine “as the cause of health in the animal body.”

In the *analogia entis*, creaturely being is related to God's pure Being because the Being of God causes the being of creatures. Przywara wrote several books asserting that this *analogia entis* is the basis for all Catholic theology. His claim was famously rejected by none other than Karl Barth, who went so far as to call the *analogia entis* “the invention of the Antichrist.” Barth thought *analogia entis* cheapened divine glory by admitting an unseemly relation between God and the fallen world. He considered the Catholic acceptance of *analogia entis* to be the main

reason one should remain in the Protestant church. Barth and Przywara engaged in a scholarly debate about *analogia entis* through books and articles for decades after Barth's pronouncement in 1932.

In his book on *The Theology of Karl Barth*, Balthasar maintains that Barth misunderstood Przywara. Przywara and Balthasar after him were convinced that only analogy explains how creatures can be both the image of God and separated from him by all the magnitude of sin. In his later years, Barth developed the idea of an “analogy of faith” which Balthasar considers to be substantially similar to Przywara's *analogia entis*.

One could say that the greatest fruit of this debate between Barth and Przywara was, in fact, the theological aesthetics of Balthasar.¹⁷ Balthasar's central insight combines notions from both thinkers. A radical Christocentrist like Barth, Balthasar retains the idea that God and man are related analogically, asserting that Christ is the *analogia entis* personified. Christ *is* the connection between God and man, the analogue uniting two natures into one person. In this way, earthly beauty and heavenly Glory meet in Christ as well; in his salvific act, Christ reveals Glory through perfect obedience to the father who is Glory. Balthasar sees beauty as a transcendental along with the good and the true because of this connection through Christ with infinite Being. Balthasar's assertion that beauty is a

¹⁷ Thomas Joseph White writes that Balthasar's response to Barth was patterned off the work of Gottlieb Söhngen, especially with regard to the relationship of nature and grace. “Difficult Marriage in a Modern Age.” *First Things*. First Things Mag., 1 October 2014.

transcendental undergirds “transcendental aesthetics” (à la Kant) with a scholastic metaphysics.¹⁸ This move affirms the reality of our sense experience and gives it spiritual importance by relating it analogically to God. For Balthasar, insofar as a thing *is*, it is beautiful. He believes this status of the beautiful is self-evident if beauty is not to be restricted to the earthly realm alone.

In Christ, this transcendent beauty shines forth most clearly in his passion. As the act of supreme love and supreme transparency with the will of the father, Christ's sacrifice is the beautiful form which enraptures its viewers and calls them to loving service. Balthasar writes, “We are confronted simultaneously with both the figure [or form] and that [splendour] which shines forth from the figure, making it into a worthy, a love-worthy thing” (GL I, 20). Christ is an exemplary cause and model for a new creation whose original beauty is restored in God. And so it is this strange splendor, this beauty of God in Christ's cross that is the standard for all earthly beauty.

The concept of analogy—of likeness and difference held suspended—allows for Balthasar's reverence of mystery, and a key point of contact between his work and that of O'Connor. Both for Balthasar and O'Connor, mystery is a necessary, and

¹⁸ There is some debate among Medieval scholars on this point. Jan Aertsen thinks beauty is a subset of truth and goodness, not a transcendental in itself (“Beauty in the Middle Ages: A Forgotten Transcendental?” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* I (1991): 68-97). Other voices agree with Balthasar; for an example see Emma Jane Marie Spargo, *The Category of the Aesthetic in the Philosophy of Saint Bonaventure*. New York: The Franciscan Institute, 1953, p. 34 and following.

intellectually acceptable, component of faith. D.C. Schindler writes about Balthasar's surprising conclusions as reinforcing mystery:

One of the hallmarks of Balthasar's philosophy is his constant insistence on *mystery* as intrinsic to truth *as truth*, and vice versa. If mystery is characterized by abiding difference (or, as some would have it, absence as opposed to simple presence), then Balthasar's intrinsic linking of truth and mystery indicates a refusal to identify truth with difference-excluding identity and mystery with identity-excluding difference. Rather, the mutual implication of truth and mystery reveals a mutual implication of unity and difference in knowledge. The disclosure implied in truth is never one that brings the object wholly and helplessly under the control of the subject. (2)

Like Balthasar's truths, O'Connor's stories never bring their own themes "wholly and helplessly under the control" of either the author or the reader (D.C. Schindler 2). While retaining a Catholic message, they defy expectations and the conventions of religious narrative, sparking the loyalty or resentment of readers and the decades of fervid criticism outlined here. O'Connor allowed grotesque "difference" into the heart of her fiction.

Christological Aesthetic in "The Displaced Person"

One of O'Connor's longer stories, the "The Displaced Person" provides a clear example of O'Connor's Christological aesthetic. It is tale about xenophobia and racism, in which a Polish refugee disrupts the relations between the white and

black inhabitants of a Southern dairy farm. The displaced person, Mr. Guizac, is certainly not black; but neither is he white in the comfortable Southern way. The farm owner, Mrs. McIntyre, thinks that his “face looked as if it might have been patched together out of several others,” indicating the confusion she feels over his racial status (CW 313). In the story, ethical problems of prejudice intertwine with theological concerns as O'Connor makes the displaced person a kind of Christ figure. Mrs. McIntyre introduces the theme by calling the tireless expert farmhand her “salvation!” (294). She hopes that, by exploiting Guizac, she can dismiss some lazier employees and reach the promised land of financial stability (294).

Like Christ, the displaced person becomes unpopular over time. Mr. Guizac has no patience for the injustices of either the blacks, who steal turkeys when no one is watching, or the whites, who stop him from saving his cousin's life through a miscegenationist marriage. Everyone begins to hate his disregard of cultural norms as well as his relentless excellence as a laborer. A white employee, Mrs. Shortley, fears his threateningly foreign language:

She began to imagine a war of words, to see the Polish words and the English words coming at each other, stalking forward, not sentences, just words, gabble gabble gabble, flung out high and shrill and stalking forward and then grappling with each other. She saw the Polish words, dirty and all-knowing and unreformed, flinging mud on the clean English words until everything was equally dirty. She saw them all piled up in a room, all the dead dirty

words, theirs and hers too, piled up like the naked bodies in the newsreel.

(300)

Mrs. Shortley's vision situates the story into O'Connor's Holocaust-haunted historical context, and it also introduces a perverse theological reference. Mrs. Shortley first anthropomorphizes words, and then identifies them with broken bodies, broaching the Christological and Eucharistic imagery that will reappear at the end of the story, again associated with Guizac. Yet in Mrs. Shortley's mind, the broken bodies are part of a horror which can only contaminate, never save.

Mrs. McIntyre makes the comparison between Guizac and Jesus explicit as she speaks with the priest who arranged for the refugees' placement on her farm: "As far as I'm concerned,' she said and glared at him fiercely, 'Christ was just another D. P.' [or displaced person]" (320). The priest agrees with Mrs. McIntyre's statement, an unusual occurrence in their conversations. The priest speaks constantly of Christ and repeats the doctrines of the Church to everyone he meets, with or without their interest in hearing them. And by contrast, Mrs. McIntyre says of herself, "I'm not theological. I'm practical!" (316). The priest and the farm owner represent two opposed ways of seeing that affect their ways of thinking generally. O'Connor shows the difference between the two when a farmyard peacock raises its tail during their conversation:

Tiers of small pregnant suns floated in a green-gold haze over his head. The priest stood transfixed, his jaw slack. Mrs. McIntyre wondered where she had

ever seen such an idiotic old man. "Christ will come like that!" he said in a loud gay voice and wiped his hand over his mouth and stood there, gaping. Mrs. McIntyre's face assumed a set puritanical expression and she reddened. Christ in the conversation embarrassed her the way sex had her mother. "It is not my responsibility that Mr. Guizac has nowhere to go," she said. "I don't find myself responsible for all the extra people in the world."

The old man didn't seem to hear her. His attention was fixed on the cock who was taking minute steps backward, his head against the spread tail. "The Transfiguration," he murmured.

She had no idea what he was talking about. "Mr. Guizac didn't have to come here in the first place," she said, giving him a hard look.

The cock lowered its tail and began to pick grass.

"He didn't have to come in the first place," she repeated, emphasizing each word.

The old man smiled absently. "He came to redeem us," he said and blandly reached for her hand and shook it and said he must go. (317)

O'Connor depicts the priest as a character with a true Balthasarian attitude. The earthly beauty of the peacock so enraptures the priest that he is taken up into meditation on Christ, his transfigured glory, and his redeeming love. His conversation conflates Mrs. McIntyre's references to Mr. Guizac with Christ: "He didn't have to come in the first place." Mrs. McIntyre, in her self-absorption, can see

neither the beauty of the earth nor the glory of the Lord. She thinks of the peacocks as more mouths to feed and inwardly ridicules the priest.

O'Connor ends the story with a reversal of Mrs. McIntyre's smug vision. Representatives of each unjust Southern faction allow Mr. Guizac to be killed in an avoidable accident. The poor white hired hand, a Negro, and Mrs. McIntyre all fail to warn the Pole before he is crushed by a tractor. The narrator then recounts the following scene from Mrs. McIntyre's point of view:

Mr. Guizac's body was covered with the bent bodies of his wife and two children and by a black one which hung over him, murmuring words she didn't understand. At first she thought this must be the doctor but then with a feeling of annoyance she recognized the priest, who had come with the ambulance and was slipping something into the crushed man's mouth. . . . she was too shocked by the experience to be quite herself. Her mind was not taking hold of all that was happening. She felt she was in some foreign country where the people bent over the body were natives, and she watched like a stranger while the dead man was carried away in the ambulance. (326)

O'Connor again invokes the incomprehensible words and the broken body of Christ. Not only does Mr. Guizac receive the Eucharist, but he also embodies the sacrifice of Christ for the characters in the story. As his body breaks, the Pole breaks up the farm with its evil class system. Mrs. McIntyre's workers disperse and she sells off the cattle. She is no longer "quite herself" and finds that now *she* is displaced, a stranger to her lifetime of self-satisfaction. She has no prior experience with the

kind of love configured between the dead man, his family, and the priest. With Guizac's death, Mrs. McIntyre experiences her own brokenness for the first time. She stays on the farm, nursing her health, and O'Connor writes that "[n]ot many people remembered to come out to the country to see her except the old priest. He came regularly once a week with a bag of breadcrumbs and, after he had fed these to the peacock, he would come in and sit by the side of her bed and explain the doctrines of the Church" (326-7). The ending has something of the bleakness seen in contemporary secular novels like *A Handful of Dust* written early in Evelyn Waugh's career, but with the difference that redemption is at least feasible for Mrs. McIntyre.

Balthasar's understanding of beauty as analogous applies to characters at different points of the story's spiritual journey. The priest sees the beauty of the peacock's tail and thinks of Christ. Mrs. McIntyre gains her first insight into spiritual reality at Mr. Guizac's death. His broken body, reminiscent of Christ's passion, is transcendently beautiful and opens up the possibility of her conversion. Images of suffering and death are painful to us on the earthly or "predicamental" level. But Christ's love offers the vision of God's transcendent glory. O'Connor's fiction is criticized for shocking readers, and this reaction is a natural, "predicamental" reaction to evil. But O'Connor shocks with the scandal of the Cross and its power to destroy evil. Mrs. McIntyre is appropriately "shocked" by Guizac's end, taken out of herself. O'Connor's stories do not indulge in suffering and death for some dark pleasure; the opposite is true, namely that O'Connor trusts that the

reader or viewer can see these evils for what they are, something beyond man's understanding. They shock to provoke wonder. The figure of the suffering Pole is indeed something to be wondered at and loved, even more than peacocks' tails, and that is because in Mr. Guizac's body there lies the mystery of the Cross.

Chapter 3: The Christological Character

O'Connor often speaks of the mystery of human identity, a mystery she strove to reproduce in her fictional characters:

An identity is not to be found on the surface; it is not accessible to the poll-taker; it is not something that *can* become a cliché. It is not made from the mean average or the typical, but from the hidden and often the most extreme. It is not made from what passes, but from those qualities that endure, regardless of what passes, because they are related to truth. It lies very deep. In its entirety, it is known only to God, but of those who look for it, none gets so close as the artist. (MM 58).

Art was a way for O'Connor to explore identity and come to know it better. A major parameter for her exploration was to confront identity while also countering the growing twentieth century American fixation on individuality over and above any tie of relationship. Her own situation as an invalid made O'Connor painfully familiar with the emptiness of the quest for radical autonomy. The American ideal of abstractly "finding yourself"—that is, constructing yourself—receives strict censure in her fiction. Characters seeking to shape the world into their own image always fail, whether they are abstract intellectuals like those in "Good Country People" and "The Lame Shall Enter First," or secular do-it-yourselfers like the farm owners in "The Displaced Person" and "Greenleaf."

O'Connor assumes that all humans, including artists, are born flawed with the tendency to sin and must move toward a greater actualization of the identity

God intends for us, which “in its entirety, is known only to God.” This journey, understood in terms of a personal calling, can be accomplished through relationships and recognition that your own self-knowledge is limited. Likewise, Balthasar’s theology of vocation as found in his *Theo-Drama* teaches that your identity or “role” is given by the divine “author” and then directed by the attention of a loving God (TD I, 268-305). Both Balthasar and O’Connor see God’s will for a person as, not a one-time transactional call-and-answer, but a constant struggle and discovery. This complex view of vocation forms the basis for a Christian understanding of a fictional character.

Character and Action

The New Critics who so influenced Flannery O’Connor¹—first through the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and later through personal friendships—had a penchant for neo-Aristotelian literary theory tending to the doctrinaire. Yet even as O’Connor deferentially states the New Critical idea, following Aristotle, that dramatic action takes precedence over character, she includes her own ideas about the interrelation of plot and character:

A story is a complete dramatic action—and in good stories, the characters are shown through the action and the action is controlled through the characters, and the result of this is meaning that derives from the whole presented experience. I myself prefer to say that a story is a dramatic event that

¹ A fine outline of this influence can be found in John D. Sykes Jr.’s *Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, and the Aesthetic of Revelation*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2007.

involves a person because he is a person, and a particular person—that is, because he shares in the general human condition and in some specific human situation. A story always involves, in a dramatic way, the mystery of personality. (MM 90)

Here, and in other essays and letters, O'Connor moves beyond the dichotomy between Neo-Aristotelian “action first” and a Jamesian insistence on “character first.” She asserts the interrelation of character and action: “[i]n most good stories it is the character’s personality that creates the action of the story” (MM 105). Like the ancient Greek *moira*, a single word meaning both “character” and “fate,” character identity and action are mutually self-constructive.

Some comments of Balthasar’s from the *Theo-Drama* describe a similar solution to the same problem: “for the Christian poet, it is precisely because they are personal that [characters] can attain that relative universality which raises their personal interaction into a play of world proportions” (TD II, 39). He elaborates on this basic interrelation of action and character, going so far as to call characters “the subjective centers of the action” (TD II, 13). In this sense, action both stands “on its own” as the objective material of the play, and “as constructed” by the internal lives of the characters. Here Balthasar emphasizes characters’ individual freedom, a recurring theme throughout discussions of character in both O'Connor and Balthasar:

Only the action itself will reveal who each individual is; and it will not reveal, through successive unveilings, primarily who the individual *always was*, but

rather who he *is to become* through the action, through his encounter with others and through the decisions he makes. (TD II, 11)

Balthasar explains that the ultimate identity of the character will be tied to the play's action, but that the play's action can be somehow assumed in the ultimate identity of the character: the individual is pre-eminently "who he *is to become*," not merely who he "*always was*."

This discussion makes up part of the second volume of Balthasar's *Theo-Drama, Dramatis Personae*, in which he discusses "the characters" before "the plot" (his volume called *The Action* comes third in the sequence). Equally well aware of Aristotle's opinion that "[t]he plot . . . is the principle and, as it were, the soul of tragedy; character comes second,"² Balthasar, like O'Connor, feels the need to explain his choice to put "characters" before "action." He assures his readers that "nothing is purely static in theo-drama; even the theatre program with its list of characters already speaks of action insofar as it implicitly contains the whole play" (TD II, 18). Balthasar sees all people as dynamic images of the Trinity's dynamism and values the analogy of literary art because he finds, in drama, a true reflection of life. Reality is inherently dramatic, and the interplay of characters in drama makes this known: "The constellation into which [the author] draws the individual figures (*Gestalten*) of his play in order to make them into a whole (*Gesamtgestalt*) signifies the whole of reality in microcosm, and it is to this reality that the author wishes to direct his audience's attention" (TD I, 279). This patterning of roles into plot forms

² Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. Hippocrates G. Apostle, Elizabeth A. Dobbs, and Morris A. Parslow. Grinnell, IA: The Peripatetic Press, 1990. 8.

the central element of theater's relevance to theology. A true model for the relationship between humanity and God is this "constellation" of individual figures against a background of, in O'Connor's words, "meaning that derives from the whole presented experience"—a plotted whole conceived of by a deliberate author and interpreted by an attentive director.

Author and Character

By acknowledging the importance of character to plot, both O'Connor and Balthasar find grounds to criticize a common problem in narrative: the reduction of dramatic action to mere clothing for ideological statements. Balthasar wrote that art must remain true to the concerns of art alone to achieve its highest relevance, providing a mirror for reality. Art overly concerned with its "ethical or social function" loses aesthetic relevance:

the true self-sufficiency of art . . . fulfills its ethical and social function most faithfully by refraining from exercising a direct regulatory influence on reality; rather, in its playful and 'gratis' nature, art suggests that all-sustaining 'gratis' of grace, the gift of life, which transcends the 'utile' structure of reality as well as intractable destiny. So the author stays with his craft and does not mistake himself for worldwide providence; the actor remains an actor, incarnating, not some world-Logos, but only an aesthetic artifact; the director remains a director, not mistaking himself for the *spiritus creator* but simply producing a mere play, albeit in a convincing way. And as

for the spectator's pleasure in watching this play, it remains a reference to that delight that underlies and sustains all life's seriousness, a delight in being privileged to share in existence. (TD I, 266-67)

Balthasar focuses on the aesthetic role of art, but also claims that in this refusal to become "utile," art actually increases its suggestive power: "[b]y preserving that distance from the theological realm that its nature requires, the aesthetic realm can come very close to it" (TD I, 67). Art is most likely to effect "ethical," "social," or "theological" change when its author "does not mistake himself for worldwide providence."

O'Connor, too, believed art succeeds by concerning itself with its own aesthetic goals. Art must be the product of careful perception and technique, not grandiose ideas. She thought the over-ideologizing of fictional art stems from two pitfalls with regard to characterization: characters whose dialogue and actions avoid concrete physicality for abstract ideas and characters who thinly veil the author's own personality, lacking "freedom" of their own. This first problem in characterization is, to O'Connor, a novice's error. When speaking to writing students, she located a good story's roots in the particulars of the human life, especially sense experience:

I have found that the stories of beginning writers usually bristle with emotion, but *whose* emotion is often very hard to determine. Dialogue frequently proceeds without the assistance of any characters that you can actually see, and uncontained thought leaks out of every corner of the story.

The reason is usually that the student is wholly interested in his thoughts and emotions and not in his dramatic action, and that he is too lazy or highfalutin to descend to the concrete where fiction operates. He thinks that judgment exists in one place and sense-impression in another. But for the fiction writer, judgment begins in the details he sees and how he sees them.

(MM 92)

O'Connor valued fiction that would present an aspect of reality to the reader dramatically, not essays presented through allegorical figures. The author perceives reality and then attempts to represent it as faithfully as possible.

She also disparaged personal expression as a motive for and basis of fiction, as she does in this quote from her "Novelist and Believer" speech: "The novelist doesn't write to express himself, he doesn't write simply to render a vision he believes true, rather he renders his vision so that it can be transferred, as nearly whole as possible, to his reader" (MM 162). Here O'Connor champions, as did the New Critics, something like a Coleridgean concept of "organic form"—a literary form inexpressible in language other than its specific artistic manifestation.

O'Connor's apprentice story "The Crop" dramatizes the tension between self-expression, on the one hand, and true fictional art on the other. In it, she lambasts Miss Willerton, a silly female author who begins writing stories with an abstract theme in mind ("Sharecroppers!" or "The Irish!"), but ends by entering one of her own stories as a character. The resulting parody, which is both stilted and sentimental, becomes a romantic daydream and lacks cohesive narrative structure.

After Willerton finishes her writing session, she runs her errands. At the grocery store, this creative “artist” pities women who are engaged in a conventionally creative activity—bearing and raising children—by saying of them, “what did they get out of it [motherhood]? Miss Willerton wondered. Where was there any chance for self-expression, for creation, for art?” (CW 739). And, in the crowning irony, she shudders at the sight of her imagined characters’ apparition, in the flesh, on the street of the town (740). In O’Connor’s story, Willerton’s “art” fails to delight even its own author—she cannot recognize her own characters and her daydreams lead her to misjudge her neighbors. O’Connor maintains that art cannot become a secondary vehicle for propounding either a public or a private agenda.

Despite the propagandistic dangers of setting aside artistry for any other concern, later twentieth-century voices in literary theory have rightly corrected the New Criticism’s tendency to downplay the author’s role entirely. Rich textual analysis can result from examining how the psychological and historical situation of the author impacts the treatment of the artistic subject.³ O’Connor, too, would agree that one’s own sensory and emotional experiences form the truest basis for good fiction. Yet she rejected the idea that dramatic life-events were necessary to a good author, claiming that a quiet childhood alone provides enough fodder for a lifetime of writing.

³ See, for instance, Claire Kahane’s *Flannery O’Connor: Rage of Vision*. Diss. Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley Press, 1975.

Balthasar on Creativity in the Trinity

Balthasar's concept of the author in drama addresses the same question. His analysis of the creative work involved in drama yields a theological groundwork for vocation in general with ramifications for both characters and authors. He likens the action of the Trinity in the world to the compound creative actions of the author, the director, and the actor in constructing a successful play.⁴ God the Father writes the script of reality, the Holy Spirit directs the action, especially "interpretation" of the script, and the actors themselves consist of all human persons, including God as Jesus Christ. This analogy allows Balthasar to shed new light on vocation and human freedom because it sets up a complex balance of creative forces. Characters exist for the audience only because of the interplay of the author's, director's, and actor's free creativity.

By likening the author to God the Father, Balthasar works a way out of the tension between personal expression and true art. Human authors mimic the freedom and limitation of the divine author. If the author, like God, had at his disposal an infinite amount of material, all of which was his own felt life, he would always work from his experience, but yet always work with complete freedom. As it is, the author's calling includes both a necessary involvement with and a necessary distance from his own creations:

⁴ Here, as elsewhere, Balthasar follows the idea that the live performance of a play takes precedence over written records of it—scripts—which he sees as a record of the play than the play itself (excluding plays, like Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, which were not written for live performance): "the author is not the epitome of the drama but brings it forth and causes it to be performed—thus the play designed solely to be read is a peripheral genre" (TD I, 269).

if the author is to be 'God the Father to his characters', he must not ultimately allow himself to be governed by their interplay. He must love his characters, but for that very reason he must also cherish their autonomy. He owes it to himself, however involved he may be in the fate of his characters, to stand above them, so that in the very last analysis he can embody their destiny. (TD I, 280)

Balthasar's exploration of the author's role allows him to make a clear distinction between the action of the author and dramatic action of the play itself. The author causes the poetic work; he is not, himself, the poetic work: "[the author's] knowledge of real life can and must serve as material, but the matrix, the unifying form, lies in himself" (TD I, 270). The "self" Balthasar refers to is not his daydream-self but the seat of the author's freedom. The author exercises this freedom to select relevant material on the basis of the work being made: "the poet selects what to bring forth from his arsenal in order to create a valid likeness of the world" (TD I, 270). This distinction between the poet's life as "material" and the poet's role as "creator" has to do with the mystery of identity "as becoming" which Balthasar sets over against the identity that "always was" before. Artists exercise their freedom to look beyond their own "material," their "always was." Being an artist means attentively "creat[ing] a valid likeness of the world," not a repetition of the artist's own ideas or experiences.

Balthasar's view of the author as progenitor also ensures a level of respect for authorial intention. He is quick to denounce what he sees as "a direct attack on the author's primacy in the (nowadays quite usual) total reinterpretation of earlier plays by directors or secondary authors employed by them" (TD I, 269). He asserts that "[i]f this is intended to provide a new interpretation of the play's entire horizon of meaning . . . it would be more honest to drop the original author's name" (TD I, 270). Although he argues for the importance of the director and actors' freedom to interpret the author's text, their efforts must be in a spirit of cooperation with the author's intention, not an effort to usurp the author's role.

Balthasar's comparison of authorial intention with God's will for the world sheds new light on the general issue of authorial intention, a matter which the critics of O'Connor's time often confused by its very assertion that the poetic work represents more than just a byproduct of its author's psychology. W. K. Wimsatt called the interpretation of literature through statements by the author about his or her own work an "intentional fallacy."⁵ Yet Flannery O'Connor often questioned critics' readings of her fiction, sure in her knowledge of her own intentions. She was wary of judgments that constitute "reinterpretations": readings of her stories as failed sentimental literature, as nihilistic modernism à la Kafka, or as proponents of an abstract "theme."⁶ Balthasar's distinction allows the work to stand alone, but

⁵ Wimsatt, W. K., Jr., and Monroe C. Beardsley. *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1967. 3-18.

⁶ "People have a habit of saying, 'What is the theme of your story?' and they expect you to give them a statement: 'The theme of my story is the economic pressure of the machine on the middle

also approves of those who seek to experience the literary work in the spirit of the author's meaning.

No character can exist without the author's creative action. Balthasar gives the example of Pirandello's avante-garde play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, in which the characters disparage the author who has left their play unfinished, insisting on their existence and demanding that they be given the full life of a finished play. In this situation, the characters end in losing their identities. They cannot exist fully in dramatic action unless their action is given to them by the author. The play tries to imagine a world without a creator God, a play without a responsible author—yet, of course, the play's exploration of a “Godless world” could not exist without Pirandello's authorship of it.

Although the author's action forms the necessary prerequisite for the play's existence, the actor's personal importance is great in this analogy as well. Vis à vis the world, “the author has power to make himself present in the actor, and *only* in him” (TD I, 278). Balthasar further explains the actor's contribution:

The playwright's work is *potentially* drama: it only becomes *actual* through the actor. He lends a unique and incomparable reality to the dramatic idea. It is not the reality of everyday life--although as a human being he belongs to everyday reality--but that reality which *makes things present*: through his own reality he causes the idea to be embodied. It does not “appear”, like a ghost, but is materialized in the realm of reality. (TD I, 281)

class’—or some such absurdity. And when they’ve got a statement like that, they go off happy and feel it is no longer necessary to read the story” (MM 73).

Thus the “idea” comes into being in artistic embodiment, not “like a ghost” in the mind of the author or audience. Were an actor to use his freedom to reject the role, or to play it badly, the audience would perceive these actions immediately.

This respect for the author’s freedom mirrors the respect an author must have for the “freedom” of the characters in the story. Freedom allows each person the ability to either choose or reject a God-given role. Balthasar’s overall argument about freedom most concerns the third part of the creative force behind drama: the role of the actor. The actor represents a character but *is* a free human agent—a duality that makes this part of the *Theo-Drama* a challenging contribution to character theory. This duality forms the most important theological characteristic of the actor, as well. As an actor, he is actualized by accepting the givenness of a role; however, he exercises his art in his own creative interpretation of that role. Excellence depends on *both* submission and independence in a complete humility to the role (TD I, 295). Balthasar writes, “In this task of embodying, the actor is a mediator. He does not act for himself, but for the audience, on whom he is dependent in a new and different way” (285). The paradox of freedom both fulfills responsibility and creates it; freedom provides the basis for all vocations in that it allows each person to either accept or reject a God-given role. Character is bound up in choice and in motion towards God’s plan for each person. For the performance to be most successful, the actor must thoroughly absorb the role he has been assigned: “The closer a man comes to his identity, the more perfectly does he play his part” (TD II, 14).

Role acceptance or rejection's effect on "the mystery of identity" makes up one of the most significant concerns of the *Theo-Drama*. In the *Prolegomena*, Balthasar examines identity through a focus on the ancient injunction *Gnothi Sauton*, the Greeks' expression of human limitation as seen over against the power of the gods.⁷ He then follows the simple question "Who am I?" through the centuries, including mythical, philosophical, psychological, and sociological answers.⁸ Ultimately, Balthasar turns to theological interpretations as the richest answers to the question. For Balthasar, Christ forms the pattern for our understanding of the interaction of actor and role. With God the Father as the author of the world's *Theo-Drama*, Christ's appearance and performance as an actor on the stage represents the most significant event that could happen in the most significant play. Here the author and the actor express the perfect unity of intention found within the Trinity, since God as author acts the part of God as character. For Balthasar, the conflict between honesty and identity-as-gift resolves in the example of Christ:

Once and for all, the duality of 'being' and 'seeming', which goes through man's entire structure, is absolutely overcome in the identity of person and mission in Christ. But this duality is not cast off as something ambiguous and inferior: its two aspects are brought together in the humanity of Jesus, who, as the 'Suffering Servant', does the will of his Father. Since, however,

⁷ "Know thyself," the wisdom of the Delphic oracle (TD I, 487).

⁸ Stoic and Neoplatonic thought simultaneously emphasizes humanity's divine origin and current distance from the divine (TD I, 491).

the Spirit who mediates between God and the incarnate Son prevents any 'heteronomy', the same Spirit, given to men to enable them to be and act in a God-ward manner, can close the tragic breach between person and role in mission. (TD I, 646)⁹

In Christ, the "being" of identity, like the everyday subjectivity of an actor, merges completely with the "seeming" one acquired when playing an author's role: the "character" of savior *is* the person of Christ. So in Christ, we have the perfect model for the union of identity and God-given mission or vocation. The example of Christ renders all other characters in the theo-drama meaningful to the extent that they, like him, accept or internalize their given "roles," their vocational missions. From a theological perspective, each individual attains "personhood" (a term that has its roots in the dramatic idea of "persona") through taking up Christ's example:

[i]n the one, sole, archetypal instance [of Christ], it is God who defines who this Subject is and why he is there; it is he who sets forth the meaning, the task, the vocation. . . . *In Christo*, however, every man can cherish the hope of not remaining a merely individual conscious subject but of receiving personhood from God, becoming a person, with a mission that is likewise defined *in Christo*. (TD III, 220)

Balthasar encourages the ever-closer union of identity and vocation for every "character," as a way of entering fully into reality since "the role played by Jesus

⁹ 'Heteronomy' here refers Kant's view of the will. For Kant, the will 'must not be heteronomous, at the mercy, as it were, of desires and inclinations which form part of a causally determined series. It must, therefore, be autonomous. And to say that a moral will is autonomous is to say that it gives itself the law which it obeys' (Copleston VI, 329).

Christ yields the principle for allotting roles to all the other actors, insofar as they are given a real part—a part that has theodramatic significance—and are not merely playing purely ephemeral, this-worldly roles on a closed world stage” (TD III, 258). Just as Christ’s role was not invented but accepted through the Spirit from his author-Father, each individual must accept a mission from God in order to avoid playing an “ephemeral,” constructed role.

As we have seen, O’Connor’s view of authorial vocation meant working diligently and regularly as an artisan committed to a difficult process of false starts and revisions rather than passively “waiting for the muse” or exploring her own fantasies. She was well aware of the constraints associated with the freedom of following her own vocation. However, she contrasts authorship with the work of the artisan in that she claims she cannot “accept a commission”—the subject of her fiction must spring from her own specific talent. O’Connor writes often about this inability to suit the characters and actions in her fiction to the desires—often voiced as “needs”—of her audience. When, towards the end of her life, the Dominican Sisters from Our Lady of Perpetual Help Free Cancer Home in Atlanta asked O’Connor to write the story of Mary Ann Long, a pious girl with a facial deformity, part of her answer was that “a talent to write does not mean a talent to write anything at all” (MM 215). Not knowing the little girl herself, and not able to concoct a pious tale in the absence of concrete knowledge, she assumed an editorial rather than an authorial position for *A Memoir of Mary Ann*. O’Connor saw her calling to be a writer not as an open possibility, but rather as “a limiting factor

which extends even to the kind of material that the writer is able to apprehend imaginatively. . . . The Christian writer particularly will feel that whatever his initial gift is, he will not be willing to destroy it by trying to use it outside its proper limits” (MM 27). O’Connor sometimes found the limits of her own fiction to be severe, especially when faced with constant complaints from well-meaning sources like the local community and people looking for “uplifting” Catholic fiction.¹⁰ Yet she held to her gift as it was given: “every writer has to cope with the possibility in his given talent. Possibility and limitation mean about the same thing. It is the business of every writer to push his talent to its outermost limit, but this means the outermost limit of the kind of talent he has” (MM 171). The reality of vocational limitation, like the limits of an actor’s role, does not mean an absence of freedom. The desire to write well and the need to write honestly from experience with reality combined in O’Connor’s choice of her own limited vocation. Like Balthasar, who taught that “[a] genuinely human figure, developing over the course of a lifetime . . . has to be built up through free decisions” (TD II, 37), O’Connor embraced the complex nature of accepting one’s role and excelling in it.

O’Connor insists that, because vocation involves a given limit, one should not write “out of character” even if the constraints of one’s talent become onerous. We see O’Connor working within her known “material” time and again—a high percentage of her stories are set on her familiar territory of the Southern dairy farm, and all of them involve a violent interaction between the characters’

¹⁰ “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction” MM 36-50.

comfortable expectations and some unexpected but undeniable reality. These stories were built off of O'Connor's own settings and internal actions through free artistic choice, and she peopled her stories with characters who, like her, must choose to accept the givenness of their lives. She wrote that "free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man. Freedom cannot be conceived simply. It is a mystery and one which a novel, even a comic novel, can only be asked to deepen" (MM 115).

O'Connor writes about the fictional inspiration in terms of a "discovery" of the story's plot because of a story's characters. This aspect of authorial receptivity forms a necessary part of the final work's freshness and depth:

If you start with a real personality, a real character, then something is bound to happen; and you don't have to know what before you begin. In fact it may be better if you don't know what before you begin. You ought to be able to discover something from your stories. If you don't, probably nobody else will.
(MM 105-106)

O'Connor believed she would discover, through the process of writing, more about the reality of the human identity than she knew at a story's outset. This openness to the character's "suggestions" allowed O'Connor to both exercise her creative freedom and create imitative models of it.

Balthasar defines freedom as "man's openness to the good as such; it is the power of self-determination, the highest and noblest form of power" (TD IV, 77). Freedom consists, not in doing whatever one wants, nor in asserting one's own will

above all, but in recognizing and choosing the good. Addressing what O'Connor has called "the mystery of identity," Balthasar writes that man

is critically shaped by his freedom; and it is only by responding to the personal and impersonal challenges of the world around him that man's freedom is provoked and summoned to realize itself. Accordingly there are degrees in man's free self-determination, but at most this implies that there are also degrees in man's full humanity. (TD II, 37)

Man's full humanity achieves realization in some, but not all human beings—this is a consequence of personal freedom. Each individual decides whether and how to live out a given role.

With regard to the relationship between authors and their characters, Balthasar insists, "On the one hand this freedom means that the characters do not always grasp the author's ultimate purpose, and on the other hand it implies that the author does not approve of all his characters' provisional deeds and actions" (TD I, 277). In the context of the greater artistic vision, the author need not endorse brutality to depict these "provisional deeds and actions." Balthasar writes that the author experiences an "alternation of creativity from within and encounter from without, this gulf (albeit overcome) between allowing the characters to develop in their own way and guiding their interplay from a position of ultimate superiority—this is in fact the mystery of inspiration" (TD I, 276-77). From this point of view, the

author cannot be considered entirely culpable for the deeds of the characters; the characters determine their own actions to some extent.

Balthasar's idea of authorial responsibility explains O'Connor's experience of "discovering" her characters' actions. It also helps a great deal with interpreting the kinds of characters O'Connor presents in her novel *The Violent Bear it Away*, a novel focused on the protagonist's struggle with his vocation. Francis Marion Tarwater encounters horrible situations as he struggles to decide which "call" to heed. Tarwater is an orphan boy who was born into trouble: his mother gave birth at a fatal wreck and his father's subsequent suicide was prompted by despair at their sinful relationship.¹¹ After growing up with his great uncle Old Tarwater, educated in "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 Judgment" (CW 331), Tarwater approaches life from a viewpoint of acute spiritual awareness: everything in the world around him could be a sign from God. At the same time, Tarwater learns the story of his other uncle Rayber, an atheist decried by Old Tarwater but secretly interesting to the young boy. Tarwater finds himself caught between his two uncles' ideas about his calling in life: should he be a prophet, like the old man who raised him, or secular humanist, like the schoolteacher Rayber? Meanwhile, a sneaky inner voice advises him to just do whatever feels good at the moment.

¹¹ CW 355, 392.

Tarwater's vocational decision gathers urgency as the novel progresses and dire physical outcomes attend the issue of his choice.

The unpalatably violent action of the story is sometimes used as grounds to dismiss it as an artistic failure. Yet O'Connor thought "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). O'Connor purposefully created charged situations which would reveal her characters' deepest selves. She also tended to include extremist characters like Tarwater, who react strongly to their environments and thus help create the violent situations around them. Tarwater's philosophy of action polarizes the world and forces outcomes throughout the story: "You can't just say NO," he said. "You got to do NO. You got to show it. You got to show you mean it by doing it. You got to show you're not going to do one thing by doing another. You got to make an end of it. One way or another" (CW 427-28). The urbane middle ground in the story belongs entirely to the sad character Rayber. He says, of their great uncle old Tarwater, that he "used to enrage me until I learned better. He wasn't worth my hate and he's not worth yours. He's only worth our pity." He wondered if the boy were capable of the steadiness of pity. "You want to avoid extremes. They are for violent people" (CW 420). For O'Connor, a lack of violence like Rayber's indicates a lukewarm spiritual life.

In *The Violent Bear It Away*, the devil encourages a third way out of the choice between Tarwater's diametrically opposed uncles.¹² A strange voice conducts internal dialogue with Tarwater:

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

Jesus or the devil, the boy said.

No no no, the stranger said, there ain't no such thing as a devil. I can tell you that from my own self-experience. I know that for a fact. It ain't Jesus or the devil. It's Jesus or *you*. (CW 354)

The first set of options lines up with Old Tarwater's beliefs—"Jesus or the devil." Rayber succeeds most with Tarwater when he presents, not the humanist ideals opposed to religion, but rather the idea that Tarwater should "do what you want to do and not what he wanted—whatever idiocy it was" (CW 389). Rayber promotes the devil's version of independence without considering the violence of its possible consequences. When he says, "The great dignity of man,' his uncle said, 'is his ability to say: I am born once and no more. What I can see and do for myself and my fellowman in this life is all of my portion and I'm content with it. It's enough to be a man,'" he never suspects that this kind of "dignity" will render Tarwater capable of murdering his idiot son (CW 437).

¹² Frederick Asals' *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity* explores the question of dualism in O'Connor's fiction.

The fire and brimstone denied by Rayber are the very stuff of Tarwater's imagination. In fact, the lack of dramatic, Old Testament-style manifestations of God's calling brings about a crisis of faith for the boy. He wonders whether, as his uncle Rayber says, Old Tarwater's faith was a delusion with "its origin in insecurity" (CW 341). And the tempter's voice bolsters Tarwater's skepticism: "What you want is a sign, a real sign, suitable to a prophet. If you're a prophet, it's only right you should be treated like one. When Jonah dallied, he was cast three days in a belly of darkness and vomited up in the place of his mission. That was a sign; it wasn't no sensation" (CW 430). Tarwater's "friend" makes protests in this vein throughout the rest the novel; his basic message is that God is not involved in our lives: "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. And me. I'll never desert you" (CW 433). The stranger's voice encourages the idea of radical autonomy, the choice of *himself* rather than Jesus or the devil—but in the end, no human being can be left completely "alone in the world."

O'Connor's spirituality reveals that the choice to reject God necessarily means choosing a constant companion of another sort. If Tarwater continues on the path he began by drowning his cousin, the strange voice will never leave Tarwater alone—he will be subsumed into a closed, repetitive drama of exploitation. At the end of the novel, as the young boy looks down on old Tarwater's place where he grew up, the voice speaks: "Go down and take it, his friend whispered. It's ours.

We've won it. Ever since you first begun to dig the grave, I've stood by you, never left your side, and now we can take it over together, just you and me. You're not ever going to be alone again" (CW 475). Tarwater's choice is not really "Jesus or himself." No character can choose to be completely "free"; a choice to reject God means an alliance with the devil.

By contrast to this insistent voice, O'Connor associates God's calling with silence and the natural phenomenon of hunger:

Since the breakfast he had finished sitting in the presence of his uncle's corpse, he had not been satisfied by food, and his hunger had become like an insistent silent force inside him, a silence inside akin to the silence outside, as if the grand trap left him barely an inch to move in, barely an inch in which to keep himself inviolate. (CW 430)

This silence of God is the silence of true freedom—unlike evil forces attempting coercion, the good allows itself to be chosen. Near the end of the story, Tarwater's desire "to keep himself inviolate" leads to his violation—he accepts a ride from a pedophile incarnating the stranger's voice. When Tarwater awakes from a drugged stupor to find he's been raped, he returns to his habit of interpreting the world around him in spiritual terms by associating the rape with the devil. O'Connor meant for this horrible dramatic action to "remove the scales" from Tarwater's eyes, not to remove his judgment altogether. She writes,

Tarwater is certainly free and meant to be; if he appears to have a compulsion to be a prophet, I can only insist that in this compulsion there is

the mystery of God's will for him, and that it is not a compulsion in the clinical sense. However, this is a complicated subject and requires to be elucidated by someone with more learning than I have. (MM 116)

Balthasar's learning aids us in interpreting O'Connor's complicated subject.

Tarwater acts his God-given "part" by finally accepting his prophetic mission. This acceptance is not just a form of submission within the context of the dramatic action; rather, it is a necessary prerequisite to performing in the play at all.

Balthasar's definition of freedom as "man's openness to the good as such" recognizes the fact that no one can be free from all spiritual ties (TD IV, 77). The choice lies between different influences, between acknowledging the givenness of reality or pretending, while being exploited, that reality can be written by the actors themselves.

As a specific character on the world's stage, Tarwater's individuality deepens as he accepts his vocation, his theological personhood. He must act out his role in a creative way with his own talents and background—even if his education has prepared him to polarize the world and his talents seem particularly suited to burning everything in sight. As he accepts his role, the silence of God becomes extreme enough to appeal to the adolescent prophet:

Then the revelation came, silent, implacable, direct as a bullet. He did not look into the eyes of any fiery beast or see a burning bush. He only knew, with a certainty sunk in despair, that he was expected to baptize the child he saw and begin the life his great-uncle had prepared him for. He knew that he

was called to be a prophet and that the ways of his prophecy would not be remarkable. (CW 388-89)

The call of God's mission, while dramatic in its requirement of *doing* YES, works through the natural means O'Connor experienced in her own vocational struggle. Vocation becomes apparent in the circumstances of Tarwater's life as it is, not in terms of a different story he imagines to be his. The chariots of fire in Tarwater's mind correspond to a spiritual reality which O'Connor affirms through the strangeness of her story and its characters.

Hero, Freak, and Fool

Balthasar's theological aesthetics can help make sense of how O'Connor's strange characters like Tarwater fit into a Christian worldview. In the *Theo-Drama*, Balthasar suggests the particular characteristics of a Christian hero, and in *The Glory of the Lord*, he examines the Holy Fool, a recurring character who mirrors Christ more closely than the Christian hero.

Christian artists open themselves to an infinite "anxiety of influence" by accepting salvation history as the archetypal story. The climactic action of this perfect narrative has already happened, and the superlative hero has already been perfectly articulated as the Word of the Father:

In the identity of Jesus' person and mission, we have the realization par excellence of what is meant by a dramatic 'character'. . . . In the case of Jesus Christ, we have, in terms of real life, the truth of what is found on the stage,

that is, the utter and total identification of the character as a result of his utter and total performance of his mission. (TD III, 201)

While most actors fall short of their roles, Christ embodies his mission so completely that he *is* his salvific role. As theologian David Yeago puts it, “There is . . . no more basic personal identity to which this intuition [of mission] comes or which it modifies. Rather, the intuition of his mission is itself the foundation, the final dimension of depth in Jesus’ consciousness; the whole content of his personal identity is implicitly contained in it” (Yeago 142-43). The dramatic action of Christ is performed perfectly because Christ’s identity serves the play’s author alone.

Other characters in the story strive to imitate Christ, but they always fall short of his complete integration with his role. This destines the story of every Christian to be, first of all, a dramatic story fraught with conflict. The divine “director” cuts away those aspects of life that are not worthy of the mission:

the Christian who is given his place on the battlefield is not himself truth and purity, like Christ and like his originally spotless Church. He is a ‘broken ray’ through whom the contradiction passes with greater intensity, separating joints and marrow, increasing proportionately as he exposes his contradictoriness against God all the more to the sword of the Word of God, and is emboldened (and how can he avoid this?) to lay claim to worldly power and to deploy this for God. (*Tragedy Under Grace* 25)

Ordinary human stories and characters express glory through contradiction since anyone with a God-given role is “automatically allotted a combat role in the task of

world liberation” (TD III, 321). Human drama excels to the extent that it imitates some part of the vast salvific drama, even if that part is fraught with conflict.

Balthasar claims the relevance of Christ to dramatic narrative transcends the religion of specific authors, directors, actors, and audiences. He sees drama itself as a desire to find the relationship between “an essentially self-sufficient *Absolute*” divine figure and “a consciously insufficient *relative* [humanity], aware of its finitude” (TD III, 41-42). Dramatic art occurs as human creativity strives to reconcile life and death in light of immortality. Balthasar thinks of this basic desire for a connection with the divine in terms of a primal longing for Christ, present even before his historical incarnation. He writes, “[i]n the [history of world] religions, this mediating locus is rendered concrete in a wealth of mediator-figures, whose multiplicity yields a kind of *negative* and *inchoate Christology*” (TD III, 42). By uncovering this most basic human longing, Christ’s incarnation fulfills humanity. Each character’s meaning must now be construed relative to the perfect performance of Christ. For Balthasar, *all* human action “must be measured against the central event of the Incarnation of God—including the most hidden decisions of the conscience, which set in train the history of the world” (*Tragedy Under Grace* 24). Thus a character’s thoughts and actions reflect theological realities insofar as they represent believable characters: “in theo-drama, [Christ] is not only the main character but the model for all other actors and the one who gives them their own identity as characters” (TD III, 201).

Balthasar acknowledges the difficulty of representing Christ's goodness in literature. In *The Glory of the Lord*, he first notes the problems inherent in dramatic action depicting the saints. Hagiography tends to express the peripheral aspects of holiness rather than holiness itself:

For a long time, in countless Latin and vernacular legends, the saints were the canonical image of man, but the heart of sanctity, abandonment in transcendence to the open will of God, cannot be put into epic or dramatic form; only the indirect, accidental effects—miracles, heroic achievements, strange behaviour—offered narrative material capable of gripping a reader.
(GL V, 142)

Balthasar goes on to say that “the saint as hero was a mistaken interpretation, and . . . the history of this kind of discernment lasts well into the last century, perhaps into our own” (GL V, 142). The Christian hero, with his relation to the all-conquering death and resurrection of Christ, might be expected to conquer more victoriously than the heroes of any previous age. Yet the “saint as hero” falls short of dramatic excellence because any Christian hero must diminish when compared with his model, Christ: “in the Christian world all the lustre of mighty deeds was always outshone by the unsurpassable deed of the Redeemer's passion” (GL V, 142). In addition, Balthasar points out a deeper conflict between the pre-Christian idea of the hero and the Christian ideal of holiness. The “saint as hero” will always suffer the same contradiction that lies between the message of Christ and the World. Triumphalism would require the author to turn Christ's story into the beginning of

a comfortable political or social order, ultimately undermining the radical nature of the Christian mission in the world. Heroism drawn from Christ's story remains the paradoxical heroism of the Cross:

[I]n aesthetic terms [the Christian hero] can be a failure, a tragic figure. But just as the alabaster jar must be broken in order that the scent of the ointment may fill the whole house, so the chosen one *may* have to be shattered so that the universality which was contained in concentrated form in his mission may be manifested. (TD II, 32-33)

A Christian hero, while not the same as Christ, usually participates in the worldly failure and acute suffering which characterize the story of Jesus.

This theological tension matches another aesthetic tension within the representation of Christian holiness. Balthasar discusses the visual aesthetics inherited from Greece and Rome, which “took its canon of beauty for the human figure from the gods” (GL V, 141). The contrast between the “Apollonian” standard of beauty upheld in classicism and the shocking glory revealed in Christ's suffering on the Cross requires a different standard for describing the beautiful Christian figure. This is especially true in literature, which, Balthasar claims, “is meant to reveal [not the Greek gods, but] what the living man of flesh and blood is and the standard by which he is measured” (GL V, 141). The beautiful, for Christianity, then must include a “standard by which [man] is measured”—it must include reference to goodness as an aesthetic concern.

Balthasar explains that the Christian character exists not to embody beauty, but to be transformed through an encounter with beauty. This encounter inspires the Christian to take up his mission, to fulfill his role:

When a person is struck by something truly significant, he is not simply placed in a universal perspective from which he can survey the totality: an arrow pierces his heart, at his most personal level. The issue is one that concerns *him*. 'You must change your life', you must henceforth live in response to this unique and genuine revelation. The man to whom this has happened is marked for life. He has trodden holy ground that is in the world but not of it; he cannot return to the purely worldly world. . . . no one is enraptured without returning, from this encounter, with a personal mission.

(TD II, 31)

Balthasar quotes Rilke's famous lines¹³ about beauty to emphasize the ethical responsibility inherent in aesthetic experience. In Balthasar's system, beauty demands humility and obedience to this encounter with the real.

Balthasar defines the Christian hero by the valor of his response to reality. This definition includes a range of personalities from noble characters who follow the impressive archetypal mold to the unlikely or even anti-heroic characters found in modernist fiction. Balthasar claims that a level of heroic singularity could even

¹³ From "Archaic Torso of Apollo (*Archaischer Torso Apollos*).” In *Translations from the Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*. Trans. M. D. Herter Norton. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1938. Print.

render the hero more “universally” interesting because it would underscore the unique nature of every person's mission:

[The hero's] uniqueness is in no way opposed to his universality; rather, each points to the other. Once we have acknowledged the movement from the Beautiful to the Good, we can even go so far as to say this: the greater the uniqueness, the more universal the interest. In such a case, the lens that focuses the universal light is stronger and can disperse this light more effectively. (TD II, 32-33)

There is, however, a limit to this correlation between “uniqueness” and “universal interest.” Balthasar says, “When we speak of uniqueness here, of course, we do not mean the idiosyncratic and freakish” (TD II, 33).¹⁴ The Christian hero has both a wide range of possibility and a limit as well—he must remain within some bounds of accessible normalcy, like Beowulf, like Dante, like Alyosha. He may be a failure, but he must not be a freak.

Although O'Connor's characters sometimes exhibit qualities of Christian heroism, most of them fall within the category of “idiosyncratic and freakish.” She used the term “freak” loosely in her essays to explain what she was doing. In one instance of this, she wrote

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

¹⁴ The German here is “*Natürlich meint Einmaligkeit hier nicht das Kauzige, die Besonderheit nicht den Sonderling*” (Theodramatik II, 30).

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)

Her focus on the theological realities of life led her to disregard the more superficial aspects of normalcy. O'Connor wrote that "[e]ven though the writer who produces grotesque fiction may not consider his characters any more freakish than ordinary fallen man usually is, his audience is going to; and it is going to ask him—or more often, tell him—why he has chosen to bring such maimed souls alive" (MM 43).

Here O'Connor compares freakishness with fallenness; furthermore, the freakishness of the character extends to the spiritual dimension, the soul, and depends to some extent on the audience's viewpoint. When asked to apologize for her unpleasant stories, another of her comments turns back onto O'Connor's awareness of vocational specificity: "The writer can choose what he writes about but he cannot choose what he is able to make live, and so far as he is concerned, a living deformed character is acceptable and a dead whole one is not" (MM 27). While she did not consider all of her characters to be as shocking as her readers found them, O'Connor believed it was part of her mission as a writer to depict characters who could shock: "to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures" (MM 34).

Literary critics use the term "freak" when writing about disparate groups of O'Connor's characters. In the cases O'Connor mentions above, freakishness alerts readers to some spiritual lack in the character. Yet there are other wholesome

characters in her fiction nonetheless associated with the grotesque. O'Connor's freaks offer us a literary experience she describes as "disturbing" for the contemporary mind:

A sense of loss is natural to us, and it is only in these centuries when we are afflicted with the doctrine of the perfectibility of human nature by its own efforts that the vision of the freak in fiction is so disturbing. The freak in modern fiction is usually disturbing to us because he keeps us from forgetting that we share in his state. The only time he should be disturbing to us is when he is held up as the whole man. (MM 133)

O'Connor's theological aim in writing about the freak is to delineate the distance between Christ and his fallen, but redeemed creatures—to show her readers their own spiritual lack through the sinfulness of the characters she depicts. In this effort, O'Connor draws on her image of Christ and on theological knowledge of saintliness to find models of "the whole man."

Balthasar makes his own description of holiness in "The Metaphysics of the Saints" from *The Glory of the Lord* Vol. V: *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*.¹⁵ Here he draws out the principle of *apatheia*, or holy indifference, self-abandonment—a principle far from the triumphant heroism handed down from the Western tradition until Christ (GL V, 49-50). The concept of surrendering and diminishing your own will to find God's will forms the core of late Medieval and

¹⁵ GL V, 48-140.

early Renaissance spirituality; Balthasar traces this movement in its various authorial manifestations and finds its highest expression in St. Ignatius of Loyola's practice of discernment of spirits. Loyola balances the idea of self-negation with the importance of listening to the "good spirit" speaking within the human heart. Meanwhile, one must avoid the promptings of the similarly pervasive "bad spirit." Ignatius's spirituality of receptivity embodies Balthasar's claim that

[t]he closer a man comes to his identity, the more perfectly does he play his part. In other words, the saints are the authentic interpreters of theo-drama. Their knowledge, lived out in dramatic existence, must be regarded as setting a standard of interpretation not only for the life-dramas of individuals but ultimately for the 'history of freedom' of all the nations and of all mankind.
(TD II, 14)

Balthasar shows the positive action hidden within the seeming negativity of abandoning the self to God, writing that "[t]he indifference of the holy is an act of all-embracing love" (GL V, 147). For Balthasar, self-abnegation leads to "liberation from finite existence" and an eventual movement from restraining images to "pure, imageless being" (GL V, 49). Mystical *apatheia* prepares the way for folly as a Christian literary archetype.

In fiction, the fool has a special capacity to focus on the kingdom of God because his status in the world's eyes means nothing to him; his self-abandonment, if given to God, becomes a foundation upon which the fool can follow prophetic urges and focus on Christ in the midst of the world. In this way, folly in the world's eyes

corresponds to the inner abandonment of sanctity. Balthasar's figure of the fool, traceable from early Christianity to the present day, best represents the Christ-like character in art. Rather than identifying Christ with triumphal victors, classical models, or any hero at all, Balthasar emphasizes instances of foolishness in both the model and the imitators: "The saints follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who was despised, abused, thought to be mad (Mk 3.21) and possessed (Mt 12.24; Jn 7.20; 8.48) and yearn, for the sake of Jesus, to be regarded as fools" (GL V, 143). Balthasar also cites St. Francis as one who channeled the Christ-like characteristics of the fool as a way of following Jesus: "The extreme gestures which they [Christ's followers] have to perform, such as when the Poverello strips himself naked, can be interpreted this way" (GL V, 143). In art, the foolish character contrasts with the Apollonian ideal:

The classical hero without his gods may still be 'beautiful', but he is no longer glorious and soon seems boring. But there is a gleam of unconscious, unintended sanctity about the real fool. He is the unprotected man, essentially transcendent, open to what is above him. In the post-Christian era 'classical man' in his beauty is always somewhat melancholy. The real fool never is. Since he is never quite 'in his right mind', never quite 'all there', he lacks the ponderousness that would tie him down to earth. He stands nearest to the saint, often nearer than the morally successful man preoccupied with his perfection. (GL V, 143)

Balthasar's fool imitates Christ's receptivity to the Father by defying the world's expectations. The fool's focus displaces these expectations for a variety of reasons—Balthasar examines, for instance, the folly of the chivalrous Don Quixote and Dostoevsky's other-worldly Prince Myshkin. The figure of the fool appears across centuries and throughout Europe, in the work of Villon, von Tepl, Wolfram, Erasmus, Cervantes, Grimmelshausen, Dostoevsky, and finally the painter Rouault. Of all literary characters, the fool comes “nearest to the saint” (Balthasar considers actual saints to be literarily unrepresentable). The fool's power comes from the imitation of Christ's holy self-abandonment without any presumption that Christ could be surpassed or equaled.

These fools experience the same sufferings and failures Balthasar assigns to the Christian “hero.” The fool's success in sanctity has no correlation to our usual concept of narrative success: “neither the indifference of the saints nor the throwiness of the fool can raise any claim to conquer as a whole the world and existence therein” (GL V, 205). Fools succeed primarily in vexing the world:

the fools on their side are only effective either as a stimulating contradiction (Jacopone), as a rebel (Villon), as a timeless and rootless utopian (Don Quixote), or they stride out over an incipient realm of folly (Parzival), often to become cunning rogues (Simplicius); seldom do they achieve a lasting memorial (even after they have sunk: Myshkin, close to whom one could place Kierkegaard and Bloy), or something both concealing and embracing at the point where all worldly reason comes to an end (Rouault). (GL V, 205)

Christian folly unsettles in various ways, the fool is always identified by strangeness, by a contradictory nature. Fools' stories are dominated by struggle and frustration; rather than concluding with social normalcy, these stories continue to avoid comfortable resolution, goading the audience out of its comfortable assumptions to the end. The fool may not be a hero, but he is something of a freak.

The fool's freakishness corresponds directly to that displayed by some of O'Connor's characters. These characters seem ugly by design, but they represent spiritual realities. Three different kinds of freaks signal different relationships to moral goodness.¹⁶ The first group is physically and spiritually deformed, a warning against sin and not a foolish-Christian "sign of contradiction." For some of these, like Mr. Paradise from "The River" or Rufus Johnson from "The Lame Shall Enter First," deformities signal the devilish roles they play in the course of the story. For others, like Tom T. Shiftlett from "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" and Hulga from "Good Country People," the deformity signals a spiritual lack that will be examined in the course of the story's action. These are the freaks most discussed by O'Connor in her prose writing and most commented on by critics, but do not correspond to Balthasar's "holy fools."

However, not all of O'Connor's "freakish" characters symbolize an evil force or denote an incomplete character. The second kind of freak bears deformities of body

¹⁶ The distinction between the first two kinds of grotesquerie in O'Connor is explored by Christina Bieber Lake in her book *The Incarnational Art of Flannery O'Connor*. Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 2005.

or spirit either with moral neutrality or to moral advantage. Late characters like the obese Ruby Turpin and the ridiculous tattooed Parker are grotesque, but open to the action of grace in their lives; their freakishness is morally neutral since it can symbolize either evil or good. When Turpin sees herself as superior to everyone in the room, she is grotesque; when she realizes her connection with her hog at the story's end, O'Connor emphasizes the hog's fecundity and holy communion with the earth. Similarly, Parker's motley tattoos come off as "haphazard and botched" early in the story, but later Christ is gloriously enfleshed on his back (CW 659).

O'Connor's mentally disabled innocents, like Lucynell Crater and Bishop, are positive forces of goodness; their freakishness fulfills Balthasar's "holy fool" mission by testing the faith of those around them. The imagery associated with them is some of the purest and most beautiful in all of O'Connor's fiction. She also uses them to make an ethical/religious statement about the value of human life. Tarwater's old uncle points this out explicitly: "That boy cries out for baptism,' the old man said. 'Precious in the sight of the Lord even an idiot!'" (CW 350). In a letter, O'Connor calls Bishop's disability a special form of distortion: "This is not the kind of distortion that destroys; it is the kind that reveals" (MM 162). Bishop reveals the value of life even when it cannot be measured by society's standards. But Bishop's freak status also makes him an important catalyst for the reactions of other characters in the story. Rayber and Tarwater both decide their fates through their attitudes towards Bishop.

A final group of O'Connor's characters are freakish because of their strange, foolish-prophetic behavior. These characters appear as holy fools to the world because their strange actions manifest a struggle to enact God-given roles. Freaks like Tarwater are tortured and fanatical in the search for Christ, and represent a dark iteration of the holy fool motif. Rayber gives us a worldly view of the kind of freak Tarwater becomes through the course of the story. In his frustration, he curses the young boy: "Goddam you, his uncle thought, all I'm trying to do is save you from being a freak" (CW 436). Rayber expresses the secular view of religious fervor as fanaticism. Tarwater's choice to follow "in the bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus" makes him a freak in the world's eyes (CW 389). When he is being tempted, Tarwater reflects on his prophetic old uncle in the same vein: "The essence of the old man's foolishness flooded his mind like a rising tide of irritation" (CW 470). This kind of foolishness or freakishness comes primarily from those who view him.

The Freak/Fool in *Wise Blood*

The clearest example of this third kind of freak in O'Connor's stories comes from *Wise Blood*. Motes is undeniably strange. He lacks the ordinary behaviors and motivations most people share; or rather, his motives are followed so swiftly and exactly that almost all his actions are disturbing. This becomes clear in the story's first scene when Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock tries to engage him in ordinary travelers' small talk. Although Motes is off-putting, there is something fascinating

about his deep-set eyes which “seemed, to her, almost like passages leading somewhere and she leaned halfway across the space that separated the two seats, trying to see into them” (CW 4). Throughout the story, Motes’ eyes are a synecdoche standing in for his “vision” generally. As in other iterations of the holy fool motif, Motes’ view of the world both attracts and repels because of its spiritual nature. Mrs. Hitchcock’s attempt at conversation is persistent until Motes finally shuts her down her platitudes and inquiries with an acid non sequitur, “I reckon you think you been redeemed” (CW 6). Where ordinary rudeness was no a barrier to convention, blatant religious reference is the sign of unbearable foolishness. Hitchcock breaks off the conversation and finds another travel companion.

As indicated before, Motes’ status as a “freak/fool” character is clearest in people’s reactions to him. Most people are too busy or formulaic to take in Motes’ strangeness; those who notice him, like Sabbath Hawkes, Enoch Emery, and his landlady, become obsessed with peculiarity. Strangers in Taulkinham, often mistake him for a preacher, the socially accepted vehicle for prophetic messages. His fervent rejection of the “preacher” label unsettles all his interactions and as it becomes clear he that he rejects, not prophetic behavior, but rather the content of the Christian prophetic message. He quickly becomes an “anti-preacher,” the founder and sole missionary of the “Church Without Christ” (CW 59).

As the story progresses, Motes’ otherness develops from unsettling peculiarity to criminal deviancy. Motes approaches everything from a consideration of its spiritual reality. Ordinary human laws mean nothing to him, as can be seen in

his strange conversations and his driving. In a way, Motes' disregard for traffic laws and licensing indicates his total focus on divine law. When he sets out to violate divine law, Motes sees little difference between fornication and the murder he finally commits against his imitator, Solace Layfield (CW 115). Motes' eventual descent into violence follows from the emotional brutality of his upbringing. Along with the deaths of many of his family members, Motes' religious upbringing was perverse. His preacher-grandfather's faith focused on fear and judgment; the faith of his parents was full of suspicion and hypocrisy. Motes' rejection of Christ and Christian morality is patterned off of the extremism he saw exhibited in his own painful family relationships.

After a policeman destroys his car, Motes adopts a tortured and "foolish" holiness in place of his outlandish rebellion. He blinds himself and begins a life of ascetic acts "to pay" for his sins (CW 125). O'Connor does not provide a blunt declaration of Motes' conversion; instead, she gives the example of his silent penance, walking on sharp objects for hours every day. The blinding signals the end of Motes' extreme self-reliance.

Again, the reaction of another character makes it clear that Motes is now a true prophet. Motes attracts the attention of his landlady, who wonders at his actions and begins to think about life after death. In a dramatic shift, this landlady takes over the story's narration in the book's last chapter. O'Connor allows the landlady to stand in for the reader, the private (and puzzled) audience moved by the prophetic-foolish nature of Motes' strange behavior.

The landlady's attempts to make sense of Motes' actions fail continuously.

However, she cannot look away from him:

She first told him he couldn't stay because he wouldn't wear dark glasses and she didn't like to look at the mess he had made in his eye sockets. At least she didn't think she did. If she didn't keep her mind going on something else when he was near her, she would find herself leaning forward, staring into his face as if she expected to see something she hadn't seen before. This irritated her with him and gave her the sense that he was cheating her in some secret way. (CW 120)

Motes' action of blinding himself haunts the landlady and she searches for some motive or explanation. His mutilated eye sockets engross her to the point that she finally insists he marry her. The proposal prompts Motes to leave her house, and policemen bring him back to her dead from exposure and a beating. The story's final lines show the landlady still trying to see with the blind man's vision, to understand his actions and his trajectory:

The outline of a skull was plain under his skin and the deep burned eye sockets seemed to lead into the dark tunnel where he had disappeared. She leaned closer and closer to his face, looking deep into them, trying to see how she had been cheated or what had cheated her, but she couldn't see anything. She shut her eyes and saw the pin point of light but so far away that she could not hold it steady in her mind. She sat staring with her eyes shut, into his eyes, and felt as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she

couldn't begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther away, farther and farther into the darkness until he was the pin point of light. (CW 131)

That "pin point of light" imagined into a blind man's dead eyes is the sole scrap of positivity O'Connor leaves at the end of this bleak novel. And yet, the story is incredibly hopeful. Motes accepts the need to "pay" for sin and O'Connor makes it clear that the human powers in the novel (like policemen) are far from final judges. The landlady's obsession, and finally, love for Motes gives a clearer indication of how we are to evaluate him: as a reminder that God cannot really be abandoned. Motes is a sufferer whose pain imitates the foolishness of the Cross.

The landlady's attitude toward Motes gives an indication of how the freakish fool affects readers. At first, the character's freakishness repels us. Like the surly Tarwater, Motes' rudeness and alarming appearance draw attention to his strangeness more than to God. Over time, the freak's strange actions impel deeper reflection. And by the end, O'Connor's freaks show us the foolishness-to-man involved in following God. The fascination of their characters is certainly dark, but this is a darkness calculated to contrast sharply with the tiny lights left in the stories.

Flannery O'Connor was "interested in characters who are forced out to meet evil and grace and who act on a trust beyond themselves--whether they know very clearly what it is they act upon or not. To the modern mind, this kind of character, and his creator, are typical Don Quixotes, tilting at what is not there" (MM 41-42). Both O'Connor and Balthasar admired the "Don Quixotes"—both saw them as

conduits for the action of grace as it meets the world's ambiguity. The foolishness of O'Connor's characters flows from their vocations on the "stage" of her stories; by extension, it depends on the audience's active perception of the whole performance. O'Connor's meditation on the mystery of identity allowed her to deepen it for readers. But she asks for a strange kind of "negative capability." Her readers are asked to participate in the darkness she paints. To sympathize with her repellant fools, we must take on some of the darkness they see. The blinded Motes says, "If there's no bottom in your eyes, they hold more," and the act of reading O'Connor's stories is an act of accepting some blindness (CW 126).

Chapter 4: The Christological Plot

Plot theorist Peter Brooks writes that “[n]arrative is one of the ways in which we speak, one of the large categories in which we think. Plot is its thread of design and its active shaping force, the product of our refusal to allow temporality to be meaningless, our stubborn insistence on making meaning in the world and in our lives” (323). Brooks’ definition of plot works well when it is limited to the world of art: plot *is* the thread of design and its active shaping force in a story. Brooks believes we project our faiths and ideologies, shaping action into plot by imbuing it with meaning. His explanation accounts for the likeness between life and fictional narrative, but it is not the only explanation for this likeness. Both O’Connor and Balthasar thought the opposite: that the meaning in narrative mimics the meaning inherent in the world. In this chapter, I will use Balthasar’s theory descriptively to approach O’Connor’s plots. We will begin with some background for Balthasar’s dramatic theory, especially as contrasted with Hegel’s. The next section will outline Balthasar’s idea of genres and O’Connor’s experience with tragedy. I will then “read for the plot” in O’Connor’s story “Parker’s Back” by applying, first, some of Balthasar’s aesthetic theory, and secondly Balthasar’s discussion of action in Greek tragedy.

Balthasar and Drama

Balthasar examines elements of literary drama as a dramatic “toolkit” in the first volume of his *Theo-Drama*, the *Prolegomena*.¹ He elevates drama by drawing out an analogy between the art of the stage and God’s self-giving action of creation and salvation. Although Christ “eludes all literary categories and relativizes them,” Balthasar believes the comparison with literature points to Christ and draws out the dramatic character of God’s love (TD I, 429). Human drama is an echo of the true drama enacted in the trinity. The divine playwright (God the father) is also the divine director (the Holy Spirit) and enters his own play as an actor: Christ. Thus God’s action with regard to creatures encompasses each of the creative aspects of drama (TD I, 268-305). For Balthasar, the dramatic framework of meaning, the idea of a “world stage,” is not merely a human invention, but our human imitation of an essentially dramatic God.

¹ Although this *Prolegomena* is invaluable for literary studies, Ben Quash questions its actual impact on the theological volumes that follow: “one of the surprises that awaits a first-time reader of *Theo-Drama* is how, once the introductory volume is out of the way, Balthasar makes very little reference indeed to actual playwrights or plays. This prompts the question of how integral they are in actual fact to his ‘dramatic’ conception of divine revelation and the Christian life. The answer is: not very. While Balthasar does seem to intend to draw on theatrical patterns of encounter as a means of interpreting Christianity, the actual details of his exposition do not pay much attention to literary dramatic form *per se*. For example, his central christological tract (volume III) scarcely ever refers back to the dramatic theory adumbrated in the first volume. Volume I begins to seem more like a warm-up exercise – apologetic in intent and offering fresh perspectives from which to understand what is going on in the Christian revelation, while not integrating these perspectives very deeply with the subject matter of the doctrines themselves” (146-47).

The *Theo-Drama* represents a sort of segue from pure aesthetics to the theology he had always planned to do in the *Theo-logic*. But from another angle, *Theo-Drama* appears as his primary focus, the central work for which the *Theological Aesthetics* forms a necessary prelude. The *Theological Aesthetics* set up the need for aesthetic encounters and their inherently theological character; he considers drama to be “both existential and aesthetic” (TD I, 17). Balthasar writes the *Theo-Drama* “to find and assess an appropriate analogy between the drama of worldly existence (which attains visible form in the theatre) and the divine-human drama (theo-drama)” (TD I, 66). The inherent likeness between theatre and God’s action makes it the artistic genre of highest theological significance. For Balthasar, “God’s revelation . . . is his action in and upon the world, and the world can only respond, and hence ‘understand’, through action on *its* part” (TD I, 15). The human response to God continues the play set in motion by the creator. This dramatic pattern forms the basis of human life:

As human beings, we already have a preliminary grasp of what drama is; we are acquainted with it from the complications, tensions, catastrophes and reconciliations which characterize our lives as individuals and in interaction with others, and we also know it in a different way from the phenomenon of the stage (which is both related to life and yet at a remove from it). The task of the stage is to make the drama of existence explicit so that we may view it. For the stage drama is the missing link: it transforms the event into a picture that can be seen and thus expands aesthetics into something new (and yet

continuous with itself), while at the same time it is already translating
this picture into speech. (TD I, 17)

This combination of visual staging, the audible spoken word, and the sense of real-time action creates a symbolic representation of life in its totality. Balthasar thinks this representation has its roots in ordinary human experience that is common to all.

Although the personal experience of drama is universal, the relative unpopularity of contemporary stage drama seems to belie Balthasar's opinion. In his *Prolegomena*, Balthasar contrasts his idea of dramatic universality with Hegel's claims about the death of art. Hegel applies his dialectic theory to literary art: epic poetry, with its historical and moral aspects, is a thesis; lyric poetry is a personal, subjective antithesis; and finally drama is a synthesis of the two (TD I, 55). The advent of classical drama signals the end of poetry, since art has found its fulfillment and acme. In drama,

the substratum of moral truth remains present as the overarching and meaning-imparting horizon—essentially represented by the chorus; the heroes, the agents, detach themselves from it—representing the subjective and self-conscious element—only as far as is necessary so that the two poles form two sides, in dramatic tension, of the one all-embracing truth. This truth is divine; that is why classical tragedy is related to the oracle, the *nomos*, to cult and the mysteries. (TD I, 56)

Balthasar follows along with Hegel on this interpretation of the respective roles of the chorus and the actors. A few pages later, he suggests that “between the ‘substantial’ nature of the Church as a whole and the particular vocation of the individual, the Church actually realizes at a higher level the role of the ancient chorus vis-à-vis the hero” (TD I, 68). This imagery adopts and transforms Hegel’s idea of the chorus as the moral/spiritual voice of society. In addition, Balthasar seems to generally agree with Hegel’s high estimation of dramatic art, as well as with some of his criticisms of modern and contemporary art.

The disagreement between the two comes to a head with Hegel’s sweeping conclusion that drama—and with it, art—is dead. For Hegel, the decline of art began immediately after its fulfillment: “since drama was the epitome of art, Hegel can put forward the following formula: ‘Reaching this peak, comedy simultaneously leads to the dissolution of all art whatsoever’” (TD I, 58). Hegel’s startling verdict combines his general philosophy with history. He calls comedy the beginning of the end because it undid the delicate balance between actors and chorus, symbolically representing a synthesis of the individual and the society. In comedy, “As he steps forth from behind his mask, the actor shows that he (with his destiny) is no different from what the spectator is and knows himself to be in his ordinary everyday life” (TD I, 58). This conflation of the individual actor and the common man, together with a reduced or missing role for the chorus, destroyed the hierarchical/symbolic structure Hegel valued in tragedy. Artistic decline was exacerbated and cemented by the advent of Christianity. For Hegel, drama is

destroyed by “the process whereby, in comedy, the world is ‘deprived of gods’ and the actor becomes human, leading directly to the principle of God’s becoming man in Jesus Christ. Here ‘anthropomorphism’ is pushed ‘to the limit’” (TD I, 59). For Hegel, this leveling of God and man is its own epitome; Hegel would say that “Christianity replaces art” (TD I, 61). Christ’s life and death signify the end of the drama-producing difference between the human and the divine (TD I, 61).

How, then, does Hegel account for the existence of Medieval, Renaissance, and Modern drama? Hegel calls all drama after classical theatre a form of “Romance” and traces through it a continual decline (the decline to have finally ended in the nineteenth century). Ever greater focus on personal interests gradually degrades “romantic” art:

‘romantic’ art ‘in principle dissolves the classical ideal’; thus when romanticism itself disintegrates (conclusively in the nineteenth century), it is simply the manifestation of an intrinsic dissolution. For Hegel, this is so because he has defined the entire Christian phenomenon as an ‘image’ of the absolute process: as long as the spirit of a nation (primarily the Germanic spirit, but also that of the Romance and East European nations) was able to identify with it in faith, Christian art was possible; but once the ‘image’ as such is seen—in the enlightenment—to be part of the universal history of Spirit, that is, when religious faith and artistic inspiration part company, such art is no longer possible. (TD I, 60-61)

The unraveling of art coincides with a general realization of Christianity's ultimately secondary status. The change is not just philosophical, but historical, too. As this awareness grows, "The (subjective) 'adventure' of the courtly romance gives birth to the modern novel in which anything (and nothing) can happen" (TD I, 64). From a starting point in outwardly-focused epic, and inwardly-focused lyric, the synthesis of tragedy quickly led to a doomed internal-only focus.

Here, again, Balthasar acknowledges the credence of Hegel's argument. The modern novel can, indeed, seem narcissistic and trivial next to classical tragedy. Additionally, typical modern subject-matter tends to the private or banal. From a social point of view, drama as a genre has become less and less important; contemporary theatre is almost an antiquated art, since entertainment is now mostly privatized to personal consumption. Many modern and post-modern plays even leave individualism behind, instead pointing out only the meaninglessness or absurdity of life.

These facts lead Balthasar to wonder, "Why is Hegel right [about the decline of theatre]? May it be because personalist Christology, with its notion of a real acting and being on behalf of others and of a real participatory mission, has dwindled to nothing (as a result of orthodoxy and liberalism) and is no longer a lived reality?" (TD I, 67). Balthasar tries to understand the facts behind Hegel's mistake from the point of view of faith. Hegel has not understood the truth of the faith because he has not understood the person of Christ, his total involvement in the "society" idealized in the epic. For Balthasar, mistakes about aesthetics are

always theological mistakes. He disagrees with Hegel in theological terms:

“Hegel’s ultimate verdict depends on his view of Christianity which . . . jettisons the very aspects which are of theological significance to us” (TD I, 55). The most important of these aspects have to do with mystery of the Trinity and the identity of Christ. While Hegel’s theory places great value on the idea of Christ, it is far from Christian. The Hegelian Christ is important, not in himself, but for his stature as a synthesizing figure. Christ is not a cross-over from the divine drama into the human world; rather, for Hegel,

Christology has been superseded by philosophy (in a way that is both Nestorian and Monophysite, since the *purely* human is also the pure representation of God), and the doctrine of the Trinity is equally undermined (in a Patripassian and Sabellian sense). In the end, therefore, the difference between tragedy as play and the Christian passion as seriousness is abolished: analogy, which is essential to a theory of theo-drama, is absorbed into identity. (TD I, 66-67)

Here Balthasar invokes the philosophical doctrine of analogy both in its theological application, to show that Christ embodies the link between man and God, and in its aesthetic application to show the relation between human drama and theo-drama. Hegel’s misunderstanding of the person of Christ flattens this relation, making Christianity a religious replacement for artistic tragedy. And, just as for Hegel art ends with tragedy, so too for Hegel does religion begins its decline with Christ. Everything conforms to Hegel’s vision of the dialectic. Balthasar points out the more

general problem with this leveling philosophy from the point of view of ultimate meaning:

Without this continuance of the dramatic dimension beyond the ‘end’ allotted to it by *Hegel*, even the post-Hegelian left’s realism of world transformation—no longer on the stage, but in experienced reality—lacks a goal. Thus on the real stage of the world, too, there is an ultimate either-or, which *Schneider* clairvoyantly reveals as the alternative of tragedy under grace versus graceless tragedy: we are brought to ruin either by meaninglessness or by the God ‘who shatters kindly what we build and brings it down upon our heads’ (*Eichendorff*).... It may be that, today, the boundaries between the two forms of tragedy [“graceless tragedy” and “tragedy under grace”] have become less clear: the Christian martyr is submerged in the tide of nameless martyrdom, the voice of the Christian witness no longer penetrates the noise of the world of machines, and, to confuse the picture, many a non-Christian plays a role that is really intended for the Christian. (TD I, 121-22)

Hegelian synthesis leaves nothing beyond itself, and has no resource to encounter the pain of suffering. In an unending chain of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, the purpose of life is lost. Christianity, on the other hand, points to deeper meaning behind even the grossest tragedy. These distinctions were sharp for Balthasar, writing after the two World Wars. Even in a post-Christian world, the sacrifice—or martyrdom—of any human being can partake of the grace-filled love of God, even if unknowingly. This is the meaning of Balthasar’s talk about properly Christian

“roles” being played by non-Christians, and also the meaning of his insistence on applying theological aesthetics to non-Christian authors. Schneider re-focuses the question in terms more acceptable to Balthasar, terms that address “the basic problem of that theo-dramatic theory for which Hegel was ultimately searching and which forms the ultimate horizon of the present work: In what sense is the theological drama a drama of God himself?” (TD I, 69).

For Balthasar, God’s drama manifests constantly in its human analogues. Art is far from dead, and there is even hope for post-Christian theatre. His most simple claim about the survival of drama points out its transferral into contemporary media: “drama does not have to be written in five acts and in verse. It can take place on the market square and—why not?—experiment with new forms of expression in the cinema and television” (TD I, 78). If film and television series are counted as drama, then drama is just as influential in contemporary culture as it was in ancient days.

However, Balthasar also sees hope for the future of drama in conventional plays from the time of classical comedy to the present, whenever drama is willing to perform “the theatre’s intrinsic function, namely, to be a place where man can look in a mirror in order to recollect himself and remember who he is” (TD I, 86).

Balthasar devotes a large portion of the *Prolegomena* to pointing out the theological significance of plays from the whole history of theatre. He asserts the continuing relevance of Christian theology as well as its essentially dramatic character: “Where Hegel announces the *end* of drama (albeit a drama seen chiefly in terms of ‘art’ and

‘theatre’), new possibilities of drama open up from the angle of a Catholic theology” (TD I, 70). Balthasar maintains the dramatic richness of a solid Christology. As the next section will show, Balthasar contrasts Hegel’s theory with a Christian interpretation of classical tragedy that provides a context for interpreting O’Connor’s work.

Balthasar and Tragedy

Somewhat like T. S. Eliot in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Balthasar sees the great works of all ages speaking to one another and participating in reciprocal influence. While referring often to contemporary contexts, Balthasar allows authors from different historical periods and genres to address the same questions. Of these dozens of thinkers considered in his triptych, Balthasar singles out Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides as the greatest precursors to the dramatic theology of Christ’s passion in volume IV of *The Glory of the Lord: The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity*.² *Theo-Drama* continues this claim with a more general discussion of “Tragedy, Comedy, and Tragi-Comedy” (TD I, 424-450).

Balthasar uses the term “tragedy” in an unconventional sense, believing its referents in literary criticism to be too varied and unrelated. His understanding of tragedy in *Theo-Drama* I is based on a connection between the drama’s plot and the meaning of life:

² The tragedians are considered under the larger section on myth, GL IV, 101-154.

There can be tragedies depicting the fall of the hero within a horizon of meaning or meaninglessness, just as there can be comedies in which the partial reconciliation takes place either as a symbol of a belief in total reconciliation or, on the contrary, as an element of lightheartedness against a background of horror. Finally there can be tragi-comedies that observe the events (which have a simultaneously tragic and comic effect) either with conciliatory humor or grimness.

This overlapping arises from the fact that, in the historical origins of tragedy and comedy (tragi-comedy belongs to the modern era), there is no clear distinction between what we call tragic and comic. In Greek theatre there are many tragedies that have a conciliatory ending. Moreover, the concept of the tragic as applied to tragedies from antiquity to the present time exhibits an inner multiplicity inimical to clear classification. The first observation shows that it will not do to see tragedy as the opposite of comedy; there must be room for the overlaps that have emerged quite normally over the last centuries. The second observation calls for an elementary clarification of concepts on the basis of the relationship of the tragic (and analogously the comic) to the horizon of meaning. (TD I, 424-25)

Balthasar cites Albin Lesky as a source for classifying the “relationship of the tragic . . . to the horizon of meaning.” Lesky associates the three kinds of tragedy with three trajectories of tragic plot: towards reconciliation, towards destruction of the hero meliorated by societal reconciliation, and finally, towards the destruction of

both the hero and his society, a complete negation (TD I, 425-26). Each classification looks at the *end* of plot in a way that corresponds to Balthasar's eschatological view of narrative. The first two kinds of tragedy reflect a part of the total theological reality ("tragedy under grace"), and the third represents a departure from it ("graceless tragedy"). Balthasar relates various tragedies to these standards, comparing each play's specific action with its ultimate view of meaning.

Tragedies written before Christ contain partial foreshadowings of the ultimate tragedy enacted on the cross, according to Balthasar: "[t]he absolute gravity of great tragedy, together with its understanding of glory, directly enters and is so subsumed by the drama of Christ that, after Christ, it cannot be repeated" (GL IV, 101). Tragedies written since Jesus' time, especially those written by Christians, will have to take account of Christ's sacrifice and consider the place of the human being in a story with a revealed ending.

For Balthasar, the greatest dramatic antecedent to Christ's life was ancient Greek tragedy. He bases this claim on two major elements he sees adapted and intensified when they appear in the Paschal mystery. These elements are 1) a theological setting: a cosmos ruled by the gods, and 2) a hero whose accomplishment consists, not in a triumphant deed, but in enduring extreme suffering. Balthasar describes this second element as "the situation of the *hiketês*, [or suppliant] who 'craves protection'. . . The strength of heroism lies in the past; what takes its place is the heroism of the defenseless heart, reconciled to necessity" (GL IV, 107-108).

This situation of the *hiketês*' humility puts the sufferer in contact with the divine, the gods who otherwise appear in the background of tragedy.

Greek plays presage Christ in the first sense because their gods loom large in the dramatic action. Balthasar approves of this involvement, which reflects God's participation in the world stage. However, Balthasar points out ways these plays fall short of tragic perfection because of their theological errors. Sophocles' god withdraws from his people: "remote, concealed, and full of wrath," and Euripides' god is so "cruel" that "man no longer knows why he should render obedience" (GL IV, 107). For Balthasar, the love and justice of the Judeo-Christian God are essential characteristics evident even in the Old Testament, where "God's wrath or displeasure at human sin is never equated with his righteousness" (GL VII, 205). Furthermore, as God the Father reveals himself in the Son, any sense of excessive wrath is "taken up into the far greater momentum of the love of God in the New Testament" (GL VII, 205). Yet Balthasar praises the ancient Greeks for dramatically expressing the situation of human beings as involved, at every moment, with the divine life and considers this to be the first significant accomplishment of their theological aesthetic.

The second major element of tragedy in Balthasar's analysis is the heroism he sees in the *hiketês*, or suppliant, whose guilty suffering leads him to throw himself at the feet of the gods. Balthasar writes that in Greek tragedy, "the way of man to god and the revelation of the deep truth of existence passes directly through the most extreme form of suffering. That is the valour of the unshielded heart . . .

which stands in a direct relation to Christ” (GL IV, 103). This position of powerlessness reveals humanity’s greatest strength, the ability to endure pain for the sake of love. When Christ takes the role of this suppliant, he endures this most extreme form of God’s love: allowing his son to suffer for the sake of justice. Christ inhabits the character of the guilty suppliant from the tragedies, but from a state of complete personal innocence. He suffers pain and humiliation as an experience of alienation from man, but adds a further dimension, according to Balthasar, of self-alienation through separation from God. Balthasar famously (and controversially) interprets Christ’s “descent into Hell” as a painful personal experience of Hell.³ Christ’s Trinitarian intimacy with God the Father deepens this pain by adding to it the anguish of knowing “it is *God* who prescribes what is absolutely opposed to God . . . The one who has been abandoned is in utter isolation” (GL VII, 209). Christ must endure the full knowledge that God wills him to suffer. Christianity brings the role of the *hiketês* established in Greek tragedy to its final dramatic limit.

O’Connor and Tragedy

O’Connor also drew a parallel between Greek tragedy and Christ’s life. In a letter to William Sessions, she said, “I suppose anyone who did not believe in the divinity of Christ would correctly say that Oedipus’ words at Colonus and Christ’s on the cross meant the same thing; but to the believer, Oedipus’ words represent the known while Christ’s represent the unknown and can only be a mystery” (HB

³ See Balthasar’s *Mysterium Paschale* as well as *Theo-Drama III: The Action*.

212). Perhaps O'Connor was referring to Oedipus' line, "Who serves his neighbor serves himself," and distinguishing the merely human from the mysteriously divine. This distinction requires the basic likeness that Balthasar developed in the *Theo-Drama*.

O'Connor's education was not centered on the classics, so she was introduced to Sophocles by the Fitzgeralds during her time in Connecticut. She was still reading Greek tragedies later in her life, because a 1960 letter to Maryat Lee mentions, "I am in bed, confined, with the epizootic and taking two-toned pills so whilst confined I have occupied the occasion reading Euripides' *Alcestris* It's a pretty untragic play with only 1 dead body & that eventually brought back from the shades by Heracles. Having finished it, I am now reading *Medea*. More to my taste" (HB 378).

O'Connor joked in a lecture about the "tragic" effect her fiction might have on the audience as she prepared to read "A Good Man Is Hard to Find":

I don't have any pretensions to being an Aeschylus or Sophocles and providing you in this story with a cathartic experience out of your mythic background, though this story I'm going to read certainly calls up a good deal of the South's mythic background, and it should elicit from you a degree of pity and terror, even though its way of being serious is a comic one. (MM 108)

As she backhandedly intimates, O'Connor's work does have something in common with Aeschylus and Sophocles. Although the stories are undeniably comedic in the tradition of satirical comedy, their "Christ-hauntedness" infuses them with a tragic

character as well. O'Connor's repeated plotting of pain and violence parallels tragedy in its dramatic effect on an audience. John Sykes writes that O'Connor creates "an act of reading that is itself a kind of *imitatio Christi*, or more accurately, an *imitatio crucis*" (Sykes 44). O'Connor not only allows her characters to suffer, but even expects her readers to experience a form of imaginative suffering in the very act of reading. If we keep reading and engage with the difficulty of the story, we undergo this suffering voluntarily, like Christ—and profit by it.

This kind of purgation differs from the sadism she's been accused of by critics like Joanne McMullen and Mark McGurl, who castigate O'Connor for senselessly "beating" her characters.⁴ O'Connor's fiction is more of a penitential rite for the reader than the cruel "spanking" McGurl suggests (535-44). Rather, as Eileen Pollack writes in her essay responding to McGurl,

O'Connor chooses the point of view [third person limited] that allows her to generate a subtle but effective tension. . . . if O'Connor had used a more distanced third-person narrator, we would have had too strong a sense of the narrator judging," but the involvement of the narrator with the characters creates an atmosphere ripe for reminding readers of their complicity in sins like those in the stories. (551)

⁴ See *Writing Against God: Language as Message in the Literature of Flannery O'Connor*. Macon: Mercer UP, 1996 and "Understanding Iowa: Flannery O'Connor, B.A., M.F.A." *American Literary History* 19.2 (2007): 527-545.

An audience's discomfort in reading O'Connor comes from identification with the story's action. O'Connor depicts characters and scenes that are all too familiar, through a narrative voice that brings them all too close; then, she reveals the enormous spiritual stakes involved in everyday life by letting events roll wildly out of control. Here modern fiction becomes a religious rite like that of ancient Greek tragedy: an experience inviting the audience to mentally re-enact the fragility of life, underscoring humanity's lack of control.

"Parker's Back": Aesthetics

O'Connor's late short story "Parker's Back" is, as John Sykes wrote, "the most concerned with beauty of all [O'Connor's] stories" (50). It opens with Parker's aesthetic judgment of his wife Sarah Ruth and closes with hers of him. The difference between the two moments highlights two types of aesthetics, Parker's "worldly" aesthetic that ignores beauty's infinite horizon and Sarah Ruth's (misguided) theological aesthetic, which eschews worldly beauty as a distraction from the divine. For Parker, who wonders why he is staying with her, his wife is "plain, plain," and even less attractive because she is pregnant (CW 655). Sarah Ruth, on the other hand, represents a form of religious criticism which focuses on "the glory of the Lord" while censuring biblically suspect graven images. Although she is clearly wrong in the story's last scene, her character and opinions should not be written off; Parker's quest for the perfect tattoo *is* mostly vanity. O'Connor gives us clues to Sarah Ruth's complexity by showing her enjoyment of several worldly

goods: fruit, the sound of Parker's given name, and the beauty of moral rectitude. When pressed, Sarah Ruth even admits that "the chicken is not as bad as the rest" of Parker's tattoos, the sort of bird-centric comment O'Connor herself might have made (660).

The end of the story shows Sarah Ruth vigorously applying her faith to aesthetic matters. The two change places in the final scene, with Sarah Ruth misjudging Parker and Parker closing his eyes in painful imitation of Christ, even allowing Christ's "eyes" as depicted on his back to open rather than his own. O'Connor depicts Parker's gaze as rectified in Christ's and Sarah Ruth's evaluation of Parker as now limited to an earthly horizon.

Parker's final, "divine" perspective was prefigured throughout the story, particularly in the inspiration for his tattoos. As a dull fourteen-year-old, Parker watched a strong man at the fair "flexing his muscles so that the arabesque of men and beasts and flowers on his skin appeared to have a subtle motion of its own[;] Parker was filled with emotion, lifted up . . . as some people are when the flag passes" (657-8). Although the tattooed man might be just another freak for most people, Parker sees radiance in the tattoos' harmony, a compelling rightness which draws him beyond his ordinary perspective. For Parker, the unknown tattooed man has a sort of "patriotic" effect, a reminder of what O'Connor might have called his "true country." Balthasar writes about this simultaneous surprise and recognition inherent in the beautiful:

In the experiences of extraordinary beauty—whether in nature or in art—we are able to grasp a phenomenon in its distinctiveness that otherwise is as overwhelming as a miracle, something we will never get over. . . . *If Mozart's Jupiter* symphony has a finale—which is something that I cannot anticipate, derive, or explain on the basis of anything within myself—then it can be only the finale that it has; the symphony possesses its own necessity in this particular form, in which no note could be changed, unless it be by Mozart himself. Such a convergence of what I cannot have invented and yet at the same time what possesses compelling plausibility for me is something we find only in the realm of disinterested beauty. (*Love Alone Is Credible* 52-53)

Balthasar thinks this kind of experience only begins with the moment of vision. The beautiful object, grasped as perfect and wholly un-anticipated, is a form whose parts are integrated into the total effect and which is immediately present to the viewer as a totality. “Form” here refers to an aesthetic object’s irreducible identity, its “shape” which we accept before any analysis when we encounter beauty. Yet the receptive moment of vision, for Balthasar, has repercussions for future action. The one who sees is enraptured and *sent*: encounter with beauty means the beginning of a permanent change in the beholder (GL I, 120). For Parker, the tattooed man is like a Mozart symphony, a miracle, and one that determines the course of his future life. Parker takes up his service to beauty by beginning to mold himself into an image of the tattooed man. Tattoos preoccupy his mind since experiencing the transcendence of beauty again becomes his constant goal.

This mission is subconscious, however, due to Parker's lack of self-knowledge.⁵ He pursues his goal in a wandering haphazard way as he acquires tattoos according to whim; the purity of his initial aesthetic experience devolves into an association of the beautiful with the indifferently pleasant: "He found out that the tattoos were attractive to the kind of girls he liked but who had never liked him before" (CW 658). His tattoos are unsatisfactory when, as an ensemble, they fail to give the pleasure of beauty: "[t]he effect was not of one intricate arabesque of colors but of something haphazard and botched" (659).

As can be seen in his self-evaluation, the vision of the tattooed man also led Parker to assume the role of a critic. That sudden uplift of his heart and his subsequent inability to recreate it become aesthetic touchstones and throughout the story he offers pronouncements about tattoos, the cities of the world, and women. Parker makes a steady stream of aesthetically-oriented observations and invites such remarks from those around him. He spends the majority of his energy and money in a quest to impress himself and others with his "overall look" (659). He calls for admiration of the art he's commissioned for his skin, asking the opinion of his boss, the local bar flies, various women, and of course, his wife.

This assumed role makes Parker's marriage mysterious. Since Sarah Ruth is plain, cooks poorly, refuses to flatter him, and requires him to moderate his

⁵ As Donald E. Hardy puts it, Parker numbers among "[o]ne of O'Connor's most frequent character types, one who doesn't understand himself/herself or his/her own motivations" (111).

sexuality, his association with her involves little of his usual pleasure. Rather, Parker's attraction to Sarah Ruth is specifically linked to her critical gaze, the moral-aesthetic sense she brings to the act of vision. Although he is mystified by her concern about idols, he recognizes in her the kind of systematic aesthetic he has coveted throughout his lifelong pursuit of beauty. Balthasar calls the ethical realm which Sarah Ruth represents "beauty's inner coordinate axis, which enables beauty to unfold to its full dimensionality as a transcendental attribute of Being" (GL I, 23). Beauty is co-existent with the other transcendentals goodness and truth at the highest level, in God. Goodness, as represented by Sarah Ruth's solid religiosity and values, must be at the heart of any real beauty as its "coordinate axis," and Parker's attraction to Sarah Ruth signals a development in his taste as well as his morals. Sarah Ruth unravels the pleasure/pain dichotomy Parker had used to measure aesthetic value. During their courtship, Parker does little acts of charity for the Cates family and conforms to Sarah Ruth's sexual mores. He takes a job and comes home regularly. During these self-improvements, Parker finds the pain involved to be like that required for getting a tattoo: "just enough to make it appear . . . to be worth doing" (CW 658). Getting tattoos and marrying Sarah Ruth are the only two choices he's ever made that involve voluntary suffering; both are made for beauty's sake.

Tragedy and “Parker’s Back”

These smaller sacrifices prepare Parker for an embrace of suffering in the latter part of the story. His choices connect Parker’s dramatic action with that of tragedy and, ultimately, Christ. The story contains both of the two major tragic elements Balthasar identified. Like the Greek tragedies, “Parker’s Back” references a significant theological context. The first mention of God comes from Sarah Ruth’s harsh Christian fundamentalism. She reproves Parker for “talking filth” blasphemously and quotes Ecclesiastes to denounce his tattoos. The interaction between the two regularly refers to her religion and Parker’s stance of indifference or resistance. Parker becomes less and less opposed to the idea of God during the course of the story. First, he dwells on various religious images in an effort to think of one that “Sarah Ruth would not be able to resist” (CW 664). Yet as he goes in for his tattoo, his disavowal of salvation takes on a character of unreality: the Christ-denouncing “words seemed to leave his mouth like wraiths and to evaporate at once as if he had never uttered them” (669). The narrator gives us a description of Parker’s sensation in finer words than he would use, allowing us to see Parker’s active unbelief disappear with the words. Later, Parker allows that “the eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed”—then quickly moves on from this reflection at the thought of getting home to Sarah Ruth, who would be pleased by the new tattoo (672). At this point, we see the beginnings of change in Parker—instead of self-absorption, he wishes to please another, and the Christ imaged on his back will allow him to do so.

As he drives home, Parker “observed that his dissatisfaction was gone, but felt not quite like himself. It was as if he were himself but a stranger to himself, driving into a new country” (672). This country where he finds his own identity includes a present and ruling God, like the cosmos of the Greek tragedies. Parker gains more awareness of his changed state when, as dawn falls on him and he speaks his own full name, “all at once he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts” (673). A new relationship with Christ makes sense of his desire for Sarah Ruth’s ethical beauty and for sensory aesthetic pleasure. Parker imagines the man at the fair’s “arabesque of colors” transferred to his invisible soul, perfected as a divine image that had been impossible for him to attain with his “haphazard and botched” collection of merely human tattoos (659).

O’Connor quickly overturns this moment of balance, leaving the story with an evocatively “tragic” ending. The ending corresponds with Balthasar’s second major element of tragedy, the heroism of the afflicted *hiketês*. In Greek tragedy, “the way of man to god and the revelation of the deep truth of existence passes directly through the most extreme form of suffering. That is the valour of the unshielded heart . . . which stands in a direct relation to Christ” (GL IV, 103). This position of vulnerability reveals humanity’s greatest strength, the ability to endure pain for the sake of love. As Parker stands cries at the foot of the pecan tree, this immanently lonely man is abandoned not only by his illusions about himself, but

also by the hope of communion with his wife. He weeps hopelessly, aware of his faults and conscious only of his sufferings.

Parker's sufferings eventually show a resemblance both to the protagonists of Greek tragedy and to Christ. This likeness appears not through Parker's personal characteristics, which remain comically banal, but through Parker's actions near the end of the story. The sequence of events resembles the timeframe of Christ's Paschal Mystery. After bargaining with the artist over the price of the Pantocrator tattoo and lying still for the preparatory inking, Parker spends the night away from home much as Christ spent the time after the Last Supper at Gethsemane and the sites of his various trials. The next day, Parker finishes taking on Christ's image during the hour of three in the afternoon, the traditional time of Christ's death (670). As soon as the design is completed Parker begins suffering for Christ in the Holy Saturday "hell" of the pool hall (CW 672). Here Parker is maligned and beaten for the sake of God, much as Balthasar imagines Christ to have been tormented by the devils in Hell. Finally, Parker drives home to Sarah Ruth during the wee hours of the second night, returning from his life-changing adventure just as dawn strikes on the third day, and thus placing his "resurrection" to a new peace at a time parallel to Christ's Resurrection from the dead (673). These likenesses of sequencing suggest, not a direct allegory for Christ (they are not emphasized in the story), but O'Connor's habitual use of Christian imagery. She imagined a world both "charged

with the grandeur of God” (in Hopkins’ phrase)⁶ and suffused with the suffering of God.

Yet, it is after Parker’s three-day ordeal, as if prepared by it, that he experiences the kind of suffering associated with Christ’s tragic desolation. Finally moved to get a tattoo by something other than sensuality and ego, Parker has never been more innocent of idolatry in Sarah Ruth’s sense than at the moment of his accusation. In fact, the tattoo was made as a witness for Sarah Ruth more than for Parker. His pain at her censure is emotional as well as physical. Numbed by his wife’s rejection of the icon, which to Parker seems like a rejection of God, he “sat there and let her beat him until she had nearly knocked him senseless and large welts had formed on the face of the tattooed Christ” (674). As the scourged, reviled Parker sobs and clings to the cross-like pecan tree, he experiences profound abandonment. Like the *hiketês* of Greek myth, Parker no longer hopes for glory or triumph. His heart is exposed to the suffering he undergoes for “the eyes which must be obeyed,” for the one whose gaze is beauty itself. His desolation runs deeper than we can account for by Sarah Ruth alone. He sobs, like Balthasar’s Christ, at the fact that God, seeing everything, has allowed his pain.

⁶ Sarah Gordon’s *The Obedient Imagination* contains a sustained look at O’Connor’s depiction of the beautiful in “The River,” exploring the possibility that this story might be influenced by Hopkins’ poem “Pied Beauty” (145-152).

O'Connor's Tragi-Comedy

In "Parker's Back," we end with an imitation of the agonizing "tragedy" of Christ without the fulfilling "comedy" of Christ. Yet Christ's abandonment by God is his triumph, and Balthasar teaches that the Resurrection's joy manifests the glory immanent in the crucifixion's power. It is probably best to call O'Connor's work "tragi-comic" in that her stories contain a powerful mixture of both tragedy and comedy. Balthasar mentions that this blended genre is really the child of the modern era (TD I, 424). O'Connor's fiction works, in large part, by shocking readers with a juxtaposition of genres and themes. A satirical narrator leads us through horribly tragic actions undertaken by comically banal characters. Racist and classist structures become the setting for re-creations of the crucifixion. Ignorant backwoods runaways become prophets chosen by God. A Pantocrator icon gets tattooed to a vulgar simpleton. The jarring sensation experienced by O'Connor's readers comes both from the stories' violent content and from its close contact with the comedic stuff of everyday life: nice people, grotesquely ordinary people, and the crazies relegated to the streets.

"Parker's Back" stands out in O'Connor's corpus because of its overt focus on aesthetic concerns, unusual from this author who claimed to have "no fool-proof aesthetic theory" (CW 975). Here we see a fictional representation of Balthasar's lifelong obsession: Christ's salvific suffering as an object of aesthetic as well as ethical appreciation. At the end of her life, O'Connor created a narrative space where the beauty of fictive action recalls the beauty of Christ. The clear aesthetic

focus seems to have been an allegory for her lifelong quest to evangelize through fiction while retaining artistic integrity.

John Sykes writes that O'Connor's stories give us "the startling recognition that by violence we are saved—not by committing it, but by receiving it" (42). The violence in O'Connor's work is best understood in this Christological perspective: that suffering, when accepted out of love, is the path of Christian imitation. Christians easily forget the violence committed against their founder. But, as Balthasar's work shows, beauty can manifest itself in the midst of violence and tragedy. Christ, taken as the perfect union of the earthly and the divine, models not only an ethics, but an aesthetics as well. In drama, the violence of climactic action takes its place in the larger aesthetic of a complete play just as Christians see the crucifixion in light of Christ's triumphal resurrection.

The plot of "Parker's Back" imitates the "archplot" of Christ's story, what Balthasar calls "the 'postfiguration' of the gospel" (TD I, 465). Unlike the Greek tragedies, which could be said to "presage" Christ, O'Connor had the difficult task of working from humanity's revealed high point. She understood this challenge, writing that

One of the awful things about writing when you are a Christian is that for you the ultimate reality is the Incarnation, the present reality is the Incarnation, the whole reality is the Incarnation, and nobody believes in the Incarnation; that is, nobody in your audience. My audience are the people who think God is dead. (CW 943)

O'Connor worked to create images of God's incarnate reality. When Parker's suffering imitates Christ's, the fictive mode melds with theology in a clear example of Balthasar's dramatic genre theory. Balthasar examines parallel examples of this from Shakespeare's plays in a section immediately following his discussion of tragedy and Christ (TD I, 465-78). His theological focus leads him to praise minor plays like *Measure for Measure* because of the way its action describes Christ's mercy (470-77) and says of the play, "*Measure for Measure* shows particularly clearly how inadequate it is to classify the plays into tragedies and comedies" (472). We see the same principle at work with O'Connor's genre-defying stories.⁷ Genre and the history of literature are useful in that classifications based on them reveal the essential features of the works being studied.

In her late essay "An Introduction to the Memoir of Mary Ann," O'Connor discusses Hawthorne's story "The Birth Mark." This story describes a woman who, out of love for her husband, undergoes fatal surgery to take away a mark she had had since birth. Out of love, Parker acquires both the marks of the tattooist and the marks of Sarah Ruth's punishment. These images on Parker's back are meant to inspire the audience much like the man at the fair inspired Parker. O'Connor places an image of beautiful suffering in front of us and invites us to be transformed by it, to make it a touchstone for our own conversion stories. Balthasar's theology guides us to a new understanding of the tattoo and the man displaying it: the image of

⁷ Critic Louise Cowan, who uses Dante as a touchstone for understanding comedy, calls O'Connor's stories "Infernal" in her introduction to *The Terrain of Comedy*. Dallas: The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1984.

Christ represents the analogous union between finite creatures and an infinite God, and the suffering of the unguarded heart imitates the beauty of Christ's sacrifice. O'Connor, with her characteristic humor, imagined a man who made himself in the likeness of God.

Chapter 5: Beauty and the Cross

For O'Connor, religion and writing were mutually revelatory. As she wrote about characters in extreme situations, she explored the meaning of suffering: "If the writer uses his eyes in the real security of his Faith, he will be obliged to use them honestly and his sense of mystery and his acceptance of it will be increased. To look at the worst will be for him no more than an act of trust in God" (CW 810). O'Connor's stories raise questions about appropriate subject matter for fiction. Her depiction of "the worst" would be acceptable from a naturalist writer like Dreiser or Hardy; her inclusion of mystery and religious themes would seem more fitting in gentler fiction like that of J.F. Powers or even Walker Percy. O'Connor's insistence that we view "the worst" situations as an exercise of "trust in God" places her in close relation to Balthasar, whose theology centered around Jesus' crucifixion. Beauty in art like O'Connor's reflects God's beauty, the suffering Christ whose glory is manifested even in his pain.

This chapter has two parts dealing with themes from O'Connor's last work. The first includes an analysis of Balthasar's theology of suffering as part of dramatic representation and an exploration of the suffering in O'Connor's story "Judgment Day." The second part discusses O'Connor's final theological vision, especially as it regards beauty, and ends with a brief look at how that vision comes through in her story "Revelation."

Suffering and Drama

Balthasar's corpus revolves around the suffering of Jesus; Balthasar is probably best known for his idea that Christ endured the pain of damnation during Holy Saturday. However, he still rejects simplistic "pain of God" theology and critiques the works of authors like Moltmann, Koch, and Kitamori. To admit that God suffers pain (outside the economic trinity) would be to imply some defect in God. So when he writes of God's "suffering," he says it is mysterious and holds some analogical likeness to our pain, but "[w]e have no name for it: in contrast to our suffering and grief, it implies no imperfection; we can perhaps speak of it as 'the triumphant seizing, adopting and overcoming' of pain, even of death" (TD V, 242, quoting Maritain). Balthasar relates God's "suffering" to the contingency of love. Even within the Trinity's perfect dramatic relationship, there is a constant "emptying" and "risking" between the three persons:

There are no inbuilt securities or guarantees in the absolute self-giving of Father to Son, of Son to Father, and of both to the Spirit. Humanly speaking, it is a total surrender of all possessions, including Godhead. From the giver's point of view, therefore, it could appear to be an absolute 'risk' were it not for the *equally eternal* infinite gratitude he experiences for the reciprocal gift he receives—a gratitude that is ready to give the utmost in response to the giver. . . . This is God's 'blood circulation', the mutual exchange of blood between the Persons that, as we began by saying, is the basis for there being a 'death' in God. He is beyond life and death as known in the world, which is

demonstrated biblically in Jesus' Resurrection from the dead (for he takes his 'death' with him into his eternal life); he is the living 'lamb that was slain' of the Book of Revelation. (TD V, 245-246)

The suffering and death of Jesus are a version of the total giving already present between the persons of the Trinity. This understanding elevates suffering and justifies its central place in theology.

Balthasar's belief in the potential goodness of suffering began early in his life. His cousin recounts,

At his first Mass, celebrated for a small family group in a private chapel in Lucerne, he himself preached the sermon ("after all, you don't want to know how Fr. Gutzwiller preaches, but how I preach"). His text came from the words of consecration, which were also printed on his ordination card:

"Benedixit, fregit, deditque. [Because he blessed, he broke, and because he broke you, he could give you.]” He emphasized the breaking so forcefully that it remained in one's memory for life. (Henrici 14)¹

The fascination with Christ's blessed breaking continued throughout Balthasar's life. It found its full expression in the great triptych. A passage from that work's *Epilogue* recapitulates and summarizes his position:

¹ Balthasar has been criticized for becoming involved with the thought of Adrienne von Speyr. However, as Alois Haas notes in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, the major themes he embraced from the thought of von Speyr were already present in his work from the beginning, including an interest in apokatastasis and an obsession with the suffering of Christ. See Haas, Alois M. "Hans Urs von Balthasar's 'Apocalypse of the German Soul.'" In *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*. Ed. David L. Schindler. Communio Books. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991. 45-57.

Where suffering and death were often enough what religion was meant to free man *from* or what remained as a residue that did not disappear and against which one could at best immunize oneself by a well-considered indifference, they now become in Christianity the highest proof for God *being* love, because Christ revealed God's love in himself on the Cross, took the world's guilt upon himself, and buried it in his own death. . . death (as torment and shame) is now ultimate epiphany and tangible, fruitful love. (*Epilogue*, 36)

This vision of Christianity is the central theme of Balthasar's writing: that Christ's love is manifest in the world, and most of all in his suffering.

His approach leads him to an unusual view of death in literature. He believes mortality introduces a transcendent "vertical presence" into literature. Death and time incur on every human story with necessary theological implications:

The characters of the drama are limited, mortal beings, locked into a finite time-span within which a meaningful dialogue-action must take place horizontally. But this does not go on without the constant vertical presence, veiled or manifest, of human finitude—and it is this that renders the timebound play properly human, that is, human existence in an abbreviated and condensed form. The time-horizon is short and finite; this compels us to make final decisions and grounds the dignity of the mortal human being, who must live his life in the face of the a priori reality of death. Drama, with its horizontal-temporal restriction that calls for the action to be meaningfully

brought to a conclusion within it, provides a metaphor of the dimension of meaning in all human finitude, and hence it also allows us to discern a (vertical) aspect of infinity. (TD I, 344-45)

Balthasar links the “mortal” elements of drama with literary meaning. Death and the urgency of time bring out spiritual realities present in life and in literature.

This meaning opens literature to an anagogical meaning even when the author’s intentions discount anything beyond ordinary human life. The realities of death and time require characters to confront the ultimate fate of their love and hope.

Indeed, for Balthasar the time-boundedness of drama creates an almost “apocalyptic” momentum in its hurtling toward resolution: “All genuine drama is a kind of ‘man-trap’: its space and time are absolute and this means that, once the action has started, under given conditions, it must be played out to the end” (TD I, 346). The short, real-time duration of a dramatic performance links it to revelation in a particular way for Balthasar. He thought of drama as a likeness of God’s revelatory action in the world: “the aesthetic on-stage world provides us with an unreal—and yet enfleshed—model of that given meaning that revelation incarnates, no longer unreal but with utmost reality, in the reality of history” (TD I, 265).

Just as the actors give life to the play’s script, so too the real-world play of salvation history uncovers God’s plan for mankind. Taking this idea a step further, Balthasar discussed a Christian’s life in terms of a “playing” or re-enactment of Christ’s life:

insofar as the testimony of his Christian life is a dramatic mode of the presence of his Lord, who continues to act and suffer in his ‘Mystical Body’, a

new dramatic dimension comes into being—though it only attains fullness in the context of a Catholic concept of the Church. Here some momentous social or political situation becomes transparent: through it we discern the primal Christian drama that is played between God and the world in the central figure of Jesus Christ. We have already termed this a *postfiguration* in order to avoid the word (postchristian) ‘myth.’ (TD I, 118)

This image of a Christian “postfiguration,” can appear in any life since the Christian is called to imitate Christ’s eschatological self-emptying. As Ed Block puts it, “*Theo-Drama* rests upon the conviction that each dramatic experience is both unique and universal” (Block 179).² Lived and artistic expression play out this unique aspect of each experience. Like Hopkins’ just men who play the part of “Christ in ten thousand places / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his / To the Father through the features of men’s faces,” Balthasar’s Christian is an actor on God’s stage. The “plot” of Christ’s life is an arch-narrative or script, one that includes and inspires every other story. Thus Christian literature is also a postfiguration of the kind Balthasar discusses. Death and time remind us of God’s

² David Yeago makes a similar point in the same volume: “Von Balthasar understands the gratuity of grace in terms of its *narrative contingency*. In a well-crafted drama, as Aristotle pointed out long ago, both things are true: the plot is so constructed that it could have no other satisfying conclusion, and at the same time the conclusion is altogether surprising and unforeseen. In the same way, when the gift of grace is conclusively given in Jesus Christ, it can be seen that nothing else could draw the tangled threads of human existence into a meaningful resolution, while at the same time the shape of that gift could not be anticipated until it was actually given” (Yeago 93). Yeago, David S. “Literature in the Drama of Nature and Grace” In *Glory, Grace, and Culture: The Work of Hans Urs von Balthasar*. Block, Ed, ed. New York: Paulist Press, 2005. Print. 88-106.

presence at the most basic level; stories dealing with explicitly Christian themes come closer to a full imitation of the master plot. Balthasar's most beloved work of literature was probably *The Satin Slipper* by Paul Claudel, a play he translated from the French at least six times during his life. This cerebral drama deals explicitly with themes of redemption, and in that it mirrors the explicitly theological work of Flannery O'Connor.

She created stories about the themes most central to the spiritual life, and like Balthasar, she believed the spiritual life includes suffering by virtue of Christ's participation:

I don't think you should write something as long as a novel around anything that is not of the gravest concern to you and everybody else and for me this is always the conflict between an attraction for the Holy and the disbelief in it that we breathe in with the air of our times. It's hard to believe always but more so in the world we live in now. There are some of us who pay for our faith every step of the way and who have to work out dramatically what it would be like without it and if being without it would be ultimately possible or not. I can't allow any of my characters, in a novel anyway, to stop in some halfway position. (CW 1107)

O'Connor's stories are well-known for their episodes of brutality and death. She thought extreme actions were needed to depict the drama of salvation. But O'Connor took issue with critics who therefore associate her work with pure

negativity. She refused to exclude the grotesque from goodness, telling her friend John Hawkes,

I think what you do is to reduce the good and give what you take from it to the diabolical. Isn't it arbitrary to call these images such as the cat-faced baby and the old woman that looked like a cedar fence post and the grandfather who went around with Jesus hidden in his head like a stinger—perverse? They are right, accurate, so why perverse? . . . Nobody with a religious consciousness is going to call these images perverse and mean that they are really perverse. (CW 1163)

O'Connor's grotesque vision extended from physical disability to spiritual blindness, and her tendency to grotesquery also appeared at the level of imagery like the examples Hawkes mentioned. But O'Connor insists that a "religious consciousness" makes these images and characters "right, accurate." A religious consciousness, according to O'Connor, understands all of us to be somehow grotesque spiritually; certainly this includes our human sinfulness, a sinfulness avidly explored by O'Connor.

However, this religious consciousness also gave her the special insight that, from God's perspective, grotesquerie might have a different meaning. We might all look grotesque to God. Those considered most grotesque to us might appear

differently to God. Timothy Basselin explores this in his examination of O'Connor's work as disability theology:³

O'Connor's theological embrace of disability is a far different understanding than the one persons with disabilities generally receive from the church: to endure until heaven. Suffering, in O'Connor's understanding, is not something to be avoided at all costs, something to hope to bypass. Rather, it is an inevitable part of life, a life that is fully a gift from the giver of life. To accept suffering is an act of faith that witnesses to the reality of this givenness. Only through the acceptance of suffering is it possible for God to be the alleviator of suffering. Only through the acceptance of suffering is it possible for the cross to have meaning. The acceptance of suffering is what made the cross possible for Christ. (Basselin 30)

O'Connor's value for suffering, springing from her personal experience with it, allowed her to see it in a completely counter-cultural way. Her "religious consciousness" includes negative imagery because the suffering Christian understands afflictions and humiliations to be mysterious gifts from God. A man hounded by Jesus, like O'Connor's Hazel Motes or Obadiah Parker, would be blessed indeed (although not in the eyes of the world).

Openness to suffering is not a form of self-hatred. Despite being called "Jansenist," O'Connor wrote,

³ Basselin, Timothy J. *Flannery O'Connor: Writing a Theology of Disabled Humanity*. Waco: Baylor UP, 2013.

I like Pascal but I don't think the Jansenist influence is healthy in the Church. The Irish are notably infected with it because all the Jansenist priests were chased out of France at the time of the Revolution and ended up in Ireland. It was a bad day if you ask me. . . . Jansenism doesn't seem to breed so much a love of God as a love of asceticism. (CW 1080)

O'Connor considered that the ordinary course of life is so difficult as to offer plenty of unsought opportunity for what she called, after Teilhard de Chardin, "passive diminishments."

Ralph Wood offers one of the most thorough critiques of O'Connor's negativity in his book *The Comedy of Redemption*. He writes of O'Connor's violent early stories as a foil to the positive, Barthian Christianity he sees in her later writing. He sees "Good Country People" and "A Good Man is Hard to Find" as theologically lacking, a lack that affects their artistry as well. For Wood, the greater part of O'Connor's heavily satirical work is inadvertently dualist, giving evil an equal power with good and under-representing God's mercy:

The demonic and the divine assault O'Connor's characters with comparable violence. I contend that this near duality of the Holy and the Satanic derives not from O'Connor's unwitting concession to modern absurdity, as Bleikasten argues, but from her deepest theological convictions—namely, that God's Word is first wrath before it is forgiveness, a divisive No before it is a binding Yes, an evisceration before it is a restoration. . . . O'Connor the Christian

writer does not always discern that God's resounding Yea always precedes and follows his devastating Nay. (Wood 99-100)

Wood honors O'Connor by considering the theological claims in her fiction, but it is a theological difference that keeps him from seeing past the negativity of her work.

O'Connor herself considered the "negativity" of her work in these terms:

I don't believe you can ask an artist to be affirmative, any more than you can ask him to be negative. The human condition includes both states in truth and 'art,' according to Msgr. Guardini, 'fastens on one aspect of the world, works through to its essence, to some essential thing in it, and presents it in the unreal arena of the performance.' I mortally and strongly defend the right of the artist to select a negative aspect of the world to portray and as the world gets more materialistic there will be more such to select from. . . . The question is not is this negative or positive but is it believable. (CW 1002)

For O'Connor, as for Balthasar, salvation comes only by exalting the sacrificial love of Christ. Although she is credited with becoming gradually more "positive" as her work progressed, it is hard to see the change in her fiction so simply when one considers her final completed story, "Judgment Day."

"Judgment Day"

O'Connor was no playwright, but her fiction's intensity and emphasis on action share characteristics with drama. Robert Fitzgerald famously likened her to the Greek giant Sophocles. The drastic body count in a volume of O'Connor's short

stories is probably one of the reasons this comparison makes sense, but there are others as well. Like a play, the short story's brevity creates a sense of urgency and the need for resolution by the story's end. Every detail allowed into O'Connor's packed writing contributes significantly to the whole in a vibrant fictive economy. This "eschatological" sense of being ordered to the end pairs with O'Connor's strong theological themes. She seems almost obsessed with Christianity's "last things": death, heaven, and hell. When her characters die, their souls' final destinations are always intimated, as with the grandmother's "crossed legs" and heavenly smile in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" or the empty clawing of the murderous grandfather in "A View of the Woods." When her characters survive the story, their actions still involve crucial moral decisions that will contribute to their souls' ultimate destinations. These sufferings and "ends" of the characters are significant beyond specific events of pain or death. Pain and death make up the spiritual action of the story while being its literal components. O'Connor insists that her stories have meaning on the anagogical level. She wrote,

It seems to me that all good stories are about conversion, about a character's changing. . . . The action of grace changes a character. Grace can't be experienced in itself. An example: when you go to Communion, you receive grace but what you experience is not the grace but an emotion caused by it. Therefore in a story all you can do with grace is to show that it is changing the character. . . . All of my stories are about the action of grace on a

character who is not very willing to support it, but most people think of these stories as hard, hopeless, brutal, etc. (CW 1067)

The changes O'Connor depicts usually involve a character's pain and death, but signify something else, something not made explicit in the stories. Like Balthasar's transcendent "vertical presence," suffering in O'Connor's stories signals the possibility of conversion and the opportunity for imitating Christ.

O'Connor's American South was her medium, and so she often explores the complex morality of its racism. In "Judgment Day," the last story O'Connor wrote, she depicts the violent play of black/white power relations in a bleak tale describing a racist white man's murder. The story is a re-write of one of her first stories from MFA days, "The Geranium." Like the first story, "Judgment Day" involves an old man protagonist who has moved from his home in the rural south to live with his daughter in a depressing New York highrise. However, the later story is more polarized both theologically and culturally. Themes of masculinity and race take center stage, and end with an exploration of the possibilities of suffering. The story includes ample flashbacks, but deals with only a short passage in Tanner's life. The urgency he feels throughout the story relates directly to his impending death. Just as Balthasar explains, the presence of death brings a spiritual dimension to the story; Tanner thinks often of his own personal "Judgment Day" and his dearest wish is to be buried in his native soil. His nostalgia for the South stems from the comfort of his place in its racial hierarchy.

Tanner (whose name suggests that he is closer to his black brothers than he thinks) bases his manhood on the ability to control African Americans. Ironically, the most meaningful relationship in Tanner's life is his friendship with the black man Coleman. Again O'Connor uses the color-based name to emphasize the importance of race to her story. The two men's friendship is based on Tanner's illusion of racial superiority and Coleman's assumption of a subservient role. The men seem to understand that this arrangement a somewhat mutual agreement. O'Connor depicts a strange flashback of the moment when their relationship began. Tanner is an overseer at a saw mill, and Coleman is disrupting his black laborers' work by loafing nearby. Tanner realizes he must stand up to Coleman in order to secure the respect of his workers. His usual method of inspiring respect among them is to quietly, but threateningly, whittle a piece of wood as he talks to them. The presence of the knife reminds the workers that Tanner, as the white man, holds the power. In their confrontation, a mysterious connection emerges as Tanner offers Coleman a pair of crudely whittled glasses:

There was an instant when the negro might have done one thing or another, might have taken the glasses and crushed them in his and or grabbed the knife and turned it on him. He saw the exact instant in the muddy liquor-swollen eyes when the pleasure of having a knife in this white man's gut was balanced against something else, he could not tell what.

The negro reached for the glasses. He attached the bows carefully behind his ears and looked forth. He peered this way and that with

exaggerated solemnity. And then he looked directly at Tanner and grinned, or grimaced, Tanner could not tell which, but he had an instant's sensation of seeing before him a negative image of himself, as if clownishness and captivity had been their common lot. The vision failed him before he could decipher it. (CW 683)

The scene shows a play of "vision" and point of view. By fashioning the glasses and handing them to Coleman without a direct verbal challenge, Tanner initiates a kind of appeasement ritual in which he asks Coleman to accept his worldview. Tanner acknowledges that Coleman is free to reject the Southern white/black power structure, that he could kill Tanner rather than submitting to his arranged offer. Tanner even has a flash of recognition concerning their shared humanity, "as if clownishness and captivity had been their common lot." Unfortunately, "[t]he vision failed him" and the two men descended into the racist pattern common to their time and place. However, the relationship begins with at least a mock acceptance of this power structure, an acceptance allowing Coleman to retain some dignity and providing the basis for their future friendship:

'What you see through those glasses?'

'See a man.'

'What kind of a man?'

'See the man make theseyer glasses.'

'Is he white or black?'

‘He white!’ the negro said as if only at that moment was his vision sufficiently improved to detect it. ‘Yessuh, he white!’ he said.

‘Well, you treat him like he was white,’ Tanner said. (684)

The scene shows Coleman accepting Tanner’s racist vision by agreeing to put on the glasses. While Tanner bases his claim of superiority on the mere fact of his whiteness, he also displays a kind of ingenuity and authority that transcends his racism and surely appealed to Coleman. Balthasar would say the moment of failed vision, when Tanner rejects the kinship of suffering humanity, is a tragic turn in the story. Tanner’s inability to complete the vision of brotherhood with Coleman leads to his eventual downfall at the story’s end.

During their subsequent lives together, Tanner and Coleman share a home and common work at their secret still. Tanner retains his position of the “white” leader and Coleman “works” for him, but the two share equal poverty and mutual affection. When a negro doctor of mixed race buys the property they live on and insists they surrender the proceeds of their still as rent, the inversion of racial roles disgusts Tanner. He leaves Georgia for his daughter’s apartment in New York. His experience of New York was so horrible he later regretted his decision: “If he had known it was a question of this—sitting here looking out of this window all day in this no-place, or just running a still for a nigger, he would have run the still for the nigger. He would have been a niggers white nigger any day” (685). Again, Tanner’s primary meaning for the word “nigger” is “subordinate.” Being employed by another implies “being a nigger” for Tanner. Tanner expects everyone of African-American

descent to give him some measure of respect just by virtue of his whiteness. In some of the most disturbingly racist language to be found in O'Connor's work, she narrates the Tanner's thoughts on white ascendancy: "You make a monkey out of one of them and he jumps on your back and stays there for life, but let one make a monkey out of you and all you can do is kill him or disappear. And he was not going to hell for killing a nigger" (684). However, she shows the true interchangeability between the men when she later describes them both in simian terms: "When Coleman was young, he had looked like a bear; now that he was old he looked like a monkey. With Tanner it was the opposite: when he was young he had looked like a monkey but when he got old, he looked like a bear" (679). The comparison underscores the human kinship between the two while also emphasizing that racist attitudes create "monkey"-like people. When he imposes racism, Tanner is like a monkey; when he accepts it, Coleman becomes monkey-like in turn.

Tanner also associates characters' race with morality, but only insofar as the person's behavior reflects his assigned racial identity. The Georgia doctor who buys the land containing his shack is seen as a monstrous evil, a "brown porpoise-shaped figure" swelled with unbearable pride (680). In Tanner's eyes, his immorality shows through his heritage of mixed race. Tanner sees Doctor Foley's wealth and power as a sign of the end times, the rise of a sort of Anti-Christ: "[Foley] appeared to have measured and to know secretly the time it would take the world to turn upside down" (685).

When a black Yankee actor moves into the next apartment and refuses to fit his racial categories, the aging Tanner literally cannot survive the encounter. His world *is* turned upside down by the black man's refusal to accept demeaning epithets and become his fishing buddy. Despite his real friendship with Coleman, Tanner's racism comes out in his every word to the actor. It runs as deep as his religious beliefs and is bound up with them. When the actor says, "I don't believe in that crap. There ain't no Jesus and there ain't no God," Tanner "felt his heart inside him hard and tough as an oak knot. 'And you ain't black,' he said. 'And I ain't white!'" (690). Jesus and race realities are equally real to Tanner. His outburst precipitates the actor's first violent attack. He rejects Tanner's power construct by using brute force against this faded image of white oppression. In a twisted way, Tanner suffers for Christ in this attack. While his actual words were mixed with racism, they included an element of true belief.

The actor's assault brings on a stroke and renders Tanner virtually incapacitated. Unable to carry out his plan of returning to Georgia, Tanner feels as if he were already dead. He looks forward to his corpse returning home in the same way a faithful Christian anticipates the end times. His fantasy involves him popping out of his coffin and surprising his friends Coleman and Hooten: "Judgment Day! Judgment Day!" he would cry. "Don't you two fools know it's Judgment Day?" (692). Tanner longs for a greater power to save him from his misery. He warns those around of the end of the world because his old age and poor

state leave him powerless. Tanner's idea of sudden justice finds him the victim of judgment at the story's close:

The actor leaned closer and grasped him by the front of his shirt. 'Judgment day,' he said in a mocking voice. 'There's not any judgment day, old man. Except this. Maybe this here is judgment day for you.'

Tanner tried to catch hold of a banister spoke to raise himself but his hand grasped air. The two faces, the black one and the pale one, appeared to be wavering. By an effort of will he kept them focused before him while he lifted his hand, as light as a breath, and said in his jauntiest voice, 'Hep me up, Preacher! I'm on my way home!'

His daughter found him when she came in from the (694) grocery store. His hat had been pulled down over his face and his head and arms thrust between the spokes of the banister; his feet dangled over the stairwell like those of a man in the stocks. (694-95)

Tanner's final position "in the stocks" shows him to be judged and punished for his racism. But it is clear that O'Connor also asks us to judge the brutality of the actor. His rage grants no mercy to Tanner's age, pathetic physical state, and the relative "innocence" of a man who has only known racism. O'Connor clearly sympathizes with Tanner's inability to escape the Georgia mindset allowing him to patronize any black man with the epithet "preacher." She notices the faith, the friendship, and the love of nature that came along with the horrible evil of racism in her parents' generation.

Beauty and the Incarnation

The image of Tanner dead and “in the stocks” is an oblique postfiguration of Christ’s innocent death on the cross. Tanner suffers in a public way, a kind of execution, for both his sins and those of his whole racist society. Although the figure of Tanner is a grotesque moral amalgam, Balthasar would see his last days in the city and his death as a personal calvary. Although his bigotry makes him repulsive, O’Connor shows us Tanner’s potential and his fragile beauty. Prejudice is not just an addition to Tanner’s personality, but mixed up with the good things that are essential to his character. Balthasar writes about sin’s complication of goodness and evil: “Because of the energy that man has invested in it, sin is a reality, it is not ‘nothing’” (TD V, 314). The “reality” of sin is caused by its admixture with goodness. Building on the Augustinian view of evil as a privation of the good, Balthasar reminds us that although evil “is not,” it appears within a being that *is*. It grows alongside the good, as weeds among crops.

Tanner’s broken body, upheld as an emblem for our contemplation at the story’s end, can be read as a kind of *hiketês*.⁴ He imitates Christ in the totality of his humiliation. O’Connor places “meaningless suffering” before us to confront us with the question: is there any justice to be had? How does God’s loving will have anything to do with the universal experience of pain? The answer is left to the audience, who are free to respond with skepticism or, like O’Connor herself, a

⁴ The *hiketês* is the suffering, guilty suppliant of Greek tragedy discussed in Chapter 4.

deepened faith in Christ's suffering and resurrection. O'Connor shows us the reality of broken vision, and asks us to consider the transcendence nascent in the most repellent situations. In this, O'Connor creates a dark "theo-drama," one playing out the reality of suffering in a confused world.

"Judgment Day" includes other dramatic elements reminiscent of Balthasar's theo-drama. In reviewing his life and in projecting his future, Tanner's imagination works in terms of short skits. The humorous image of jumping from his own coffin to surprise his friends reappears twice in the mind of the protagonist. The story also places a black actor at the center of the discussion of God's reality. His sufferings are only hinted at, but they are acknowledged. Old Tanner must have appeared almost as a white demon in this man's life, personifying the racist society all around him. O'Connor also gives the actor the distinction of suffering in a lack of faith, the kind of theological problem she gives to favorite characters like the Misfit. O'Connor's inclusion of an actor as a primary "actor" leads us to wonder how he must have displayed the suffering face of Christ in his own life, however unwittingly. The vehemence of his opposition to God signals a history of injuries from Christians or their promises. Having a constant reminder of prejudice aggressively thrust before him at every turn drove this man to his breaking point.

In "Judgment Day," as in all her late fiction dedicated to the grotesque "good under construction" (CW 830), O'Connor shows us a bewildering mixture of loving details and jarring actions. In recent years, the best critics of O'Connor's work have elevated the importance of her "Introduction to A Memoir of Mary Ann." It is now

considered her best essay and the most pivotal for understanding her work. Of this essay, O'Connor herself wrote to Betty Hester, "The introduction is about the things that hold us fast to Christ when Christ is taken to be divine. It is worthless if it is not true" (1153). The mixture of beauty and grotesquerie in the distorted face of Mary Ann mirrors the incarnation of Christ, showing the enfleshment of beauty. Balthasar taught that enfleshed beauty is an incarnation of God's spirit in the world. Like O'Connor, who sees beauty in the gnarled grotesquerie of each fallen creature, he believes

The original of beauty lies not in a disembodied spirit which looks about for a field of expression and, finding one, adjusts it to its own purposes as one would set up a typewriter and begin typing, afterwards to abandon it. Nor is it a spiritless body which somehow 'throws itself together' through an inexplicable play of material forces ('impulses' would already be too strong), only to fall apart again soon after. (GL I, 20-21)

Balthasar rejects a "technological" model for beauty, an idea that the beautiful uses matter as a writer uses a typewriter. Like O'Connor, Balthasar insists that we must look for beauty in the real physical world around us, in all its apparent imperfections. Christina Beiber Lake writes at length about O'Connor's incarnational sense of beauty: "Bishop and the later grotesques signify the presence

of Being in being, the divinely created core of humanity that can be seen in spite of our fallen nature” (Lake 142).⁵

As was previously discussed, O'Connor took her formal aesthetic ideas from Jacques Maritain. In a passage she marked from *Art and Poetry*, Maritain writes, “art endeavors to imitate in its own way the conditions peculiar to the pure spirits: it draws beauty from ugly things and monsters, it tries to overcome the division between the beautiful and the ugly by absorbing ugliness in a superior species of beauty, and by transferring us *beyond* the (aesthetic) beautiful and ugly” (126). O'Connor's means of bringing us “beyond the beautiful and ugly,” like the Kantian sublime's progression from wonder to resolution, goes through the suffering of Christ to faith in the resurrection. O'Connor took Jesus' suffering as the climax of beauty in all its apparent contradictions. The poles of grotesque pain and perfect love reveal God's glory in the world and are reflected in art.

“Revelation” and the final vision

O'Connor addressed this cruciform aesthetic most explicitly in her vision-centric late story, “Revelation.”⁶ Unlike Tanner, who remains in the darkness of a

⁵ Basselin makes the same connection in his contribution to disability studies, writing “Early in her career, O'Connor did not receive the full good in her writing. She, like her critics, primarily saw the mirror she raised to reflect modernity's grotesque sin. Late in her career, though, she began to see how ‘the face of the good is grotesque, too’” (3). In Timothy J. Basselin's *Flannery O'Connor: Writing a Theology of Disabled Humanity*. Waco: Baylor UP, 2013.

⁶ Michael Murphy thinks the story is preeminently about words and how they mean: “How fitting that . . . Ruby's revelation comes both in language, which, because language and interpretation are fundamentally relational acts, bestows rich variety in truth, as well as in the Grand Silence (‘In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile’), a

racist worldview, Ruby Turpin undergoes a “conversion” of sight. At the story’s opening, her point of view comes across as subhuman: Turpin sees the world through a pig’s small and beady eyes. She shares a pig’s size and awkwardness, and her vision of the world reduces those around her to placeholders in her socio-economic hierarchy. Everyone she meets is changed into food for her voracious complacency. In the story’s major complication, Turpin faces the suggestion that she is not a highly respectable woman of morals and means, but rather a warthog from hell (CW 646). As Turpin considers the possibility that she may not know as much as she thinks, she ends up contemplating her own hogs and wondering about her identity.

O’Connor had a good practical reason to see a connection between humans and pigs. Her cutting-edge lupus medication was extracted from swine: “I owe my existence and cheerful countenance to the pituitary glands of thousands of pigs butchered daily in Chicago Illinois at the Armour packing plant. If pigs wore garments I wouldn’t be worthy to kiss the hems of them. They have been supporting my presence in this world for the last seven years” (CW 1063). O’Connor uses imagery of Jesus Christ to describe these thousands of pigs, the very pigs usually associated with the demons from the Gospels. Thus her comparison between Turpin and a hog is not completely negative. O’Connor humorously notes the necessary place of swine in her life, reflecting on her own spiritual, supra-swine reality.

concealment that reveals a still greater ‘language’ and promises a still greater variety in truth” (Murphy 88). However, I think the visual sense is far more important to O’Connor stories in general and this story in particular.

As Turpin reflects on the mysterious connection between herself and a warthog at the end of "Revelation," she notices the sun, a recurring symbol for the divine in O'Connor stories: "The sun was behind the wood, very red, looking over the paling of trees like a farmer inspecting his own hogs" (652). This is the first indication that Turpin, whose thoughts and prejudices have dominated the narration throughout, will be shown a new perspective at the end of the story. The image suggests a reality bigger than the one she habitually considers, although she still imagines this something-greater in terms of her own experience, magnified to a larger scale. Her mind continues to open as she shouts at God, "Who do you think you are?" and hears the echo of her words as an answer, signaling that she has been picturing God as a mirror of herself (653). Her next thought is that Claud's truck in the distance "looked like a child's toy. At any moment a bigger truck might smash into it and scatter Claud's and the nigger's brains all over the road" (653). This momentary recognition of mortality's contingency prepares Turpin for the vision she is about to receive. Looking up into the sky, she sees something incredible:

a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They

were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. (654)

Even in the face of this wonder, Turpin first reacts with her typical judgment cycle: she notes that the white-trash are “clean for the first time in their lives” and that the respectable white people walk “with great dignity.” But her eyes, still “small,” take on a deeply human expression of intensity as they notice that the respectable people’s “virtues were being burned away.” They come last in the procession toward heaven, stolidly behind Turpin’s disdained classes. O’Connor’s protagonists rarely achieve a decisive change for the better within the course of her short stories, but Ruby Turpin is a great exception. She realizes that her vision of the world has been restricted to the point of distortion. A heavenly perspective shows a completely different understanding of value and of beauty, one that expresses O’Connor’s views about the potential holiness of the grotesque.

O’Connor was thinking of the last things cosmically as she prepared for her own death. Her final stories, significantly titled “Revelation” and “Judgment Day,” are “apocalyptic” in that they offer an unveiling of O’Connor’s full theological vision. In “Revelation,” O’Connor humanizes sight by replacing an animalistic consumer’s

vision with a divine aesthetic perspective. In the last story she wrote, “Judgment Day,” the imperfections depicted become more difficult to accept. Instead of freaks or members of “lower classes,” O’Connor looks for beauty in a deeply sinful man, a man with bigotry in the fabric of his identity. The beauty she finds is of a strange kind, one practically foreign to typical aesthetics; Tanner’s beauty comes from an unwitting imitation of Christ’s suffering. Suffering unites even the most flawed human beings with the experience of Christ, whose grotesque sacrifice is the epitome of earthly beauty.

O’Connor’s search for beauty, hardly an obvious one, comes clearer in light of Balthasar’s aesthetics. Balthasar’s insistence on the formal beauty of Christ creates a standard for appreciating Christian art. It makes sense of the centrality of aesthetics in human experience. In his funeral homily for Balthasar, Joseph Ratzinger said, “He sought the traces of the Holy Spirit everywhere, the radiation from his truth, the windows that will open up to allow access to him. Everywhere, von Balthasar sought to discover ways which would lead him out of the prison of finitude into the whole, into truth itself.”⁷ Like Balthasar, we can see the depiction of sin and suffering as one of the ways out “into the whole.” As literary critics, it is tempting to take art as both too important and too insignificant at once. Its place is to hold something transcendently finite in our minds—an image of a freak with

⁷ Found in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*. Ed. David L. Schindler, Communio Books. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991. 292.

crutches leaping towards heaven, or an old man scrawling a last note to his friend—images carrying a reflection of glory.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

One of O'Connor's favorite hobbies was painting. As a way of noticing and interpreting minute physical details, visual art dovetailed with her writing. She was absorbed with aesthetic concerns, even though she spoke of her own theoretical practice ironically. O'Connor's religious fervor led her to seek the examined life in everything she did, from eating to raising fowl; she applied her greatest mindfulness to her gaze, to the practice of observation. Her aesthetic interests showed in her letters and lectures, and they also find expression in her fiction.

O'Connor broaches the theme of vision in her first novel, when Hazel Motes' conversion amounts to a special kind of *seeing* possible only in blindness. The theme continues through all her stories, which insistently show images of eyes, eyeglasses, and sudden, overwhelming tableaux: the broken body of a refugee, a suffering tattooed Christ, a white man executed for his racism. The stories even show visions of people *having* visions, as in the stories of Tarwater and Ruby Turpin. O'Connor presents the gaze as a crucial barometer of spiritual health. She writes about the clarity of sight necessary for faith. At the same time, her stories are meant to rectify the vision of her readers. Like the cartoons she drew for her college newspaper, the stories are funny, satirical, and aimed at giving her audience a fresh perspective.¹ She believed, like Balthasar, that aesthetic experiences can convey truth and point to goodness.

¹ For images of her early cartoons, see *Flannery O'Connor: the Cartoons*. Ed. Kelly Gerald. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2012.

This dissertation has explored some aspects of O'Connor's unique aesthetic with reference to sections from Balthasar's great triptych. Chapter 1 opened the discussion of how Balthasar's theological aesthetics might be generally helpful to students of literature, making preliminary statements about salient aspects of Balthasar's theory. This was followed by notes about O'Connor's aesthetic situation and a survey of O'Connor criticism.

Chapter 2 examined theological resources for the thought of O'Connor and their Balthasarian corollaries. I discuss Neo-Thomism and *la nouvelle théologie*, as well as their relations to O'Connor and Balthasar. An important section of this chapter looks into Karl Barth's contribution to Balthasar's thought. Balthasar embraced Barth's wonder at God's beauty, but wanted to correct it with a philosophy of realism inspired by Aquinas and the classical tradition. The combination leads to a focus on Christ, and especially Christ's passion, as the crucial intersection between earthly beauty as we experience it and heavenly glory as God's revelation. The chapter ends with an analysis of "The Displaced Person" for its Christological aesthetic.

Chapter 3 began with an exploration of character as role in Balthasar's theology of mission. It compares mission with O'Connor's understanding of the writer's vocation and of the mystery of human identity to be expressed in characters, with a special focus on Tarwater from *The Violent Bear It Away*. The last section of the chapter touches on some Christian character types outlined by Balthasar, especially his treatment of the "holy fool" figure in literature. Finally, I

compare Balthasar's fool with three types of freaks found in O'Connor's stories. I discuss how Hazel Motes, the protagonist from *Wise Blood*, exhibits "holy-foolish" traits.

Chapter 4 looked at some ways Balthasar's understanding of tragedy helps us read O'Connor. First I go over Balthasar's claim that, contrary to Hegel's belief, drama as an art form blossoms through contact with Christianity. Balthasar's interest in Greek drama as a precursor of the Christian story isolates features of tragedy that correspond to Christian tragic literature. Balthasar's classifications of tragedies according to the worldview expressed in their endings helps delineate the generic elements of O'Connor's stories as they depict suffering like Christ's at various points of the Paschal mystery. I then use Balthasar's framework as a way of examining tragic and comedic elements in "Parker's Back."

Chapter 5 looks at some of Balthasar's writings on the suffering of Christ as a way to understand of the suffering in O'Connor's stories. The chapter includes an examination of "Judgment Day" in its presentation of mixed suffering and love. The chapter's last section revisits the theme of beauty according to Balthasar and references O'Connor's story "Revelation."

Throughout these chapters I have hoped to gather some basic principles of a "Balthasarian criticism."¹ The principles of a Balthasarian criticism should include: an assumption that characters operate within a framework of meaningful roles,

¹ For a short book-length introduction to his theological aesthetics, see Aidan Nichols' *A Key to Balthasar: Hans Urs von Balthasar on Beauty, Goodness, and Truth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2011.

whether or not they choose to accept them; a conviction that the tragic and comedic elements of literature relate to beliefs about ultimate theological reality; and the possibility that even the most disturbing incidents or characters, to the extent that they *are*, contribute to a positive whole. These principles assume the transcendence of human life, our analogical connection with God. Balthasarian criticism accepts Christ's life and suffering as a template, and expects to find ramifications of Christ's existence again and again. As critical tools, Balthasar's teachings apply most to works of literature explicitly concerned with the spiritual realm, like Flannery O'Connor's.

Critic Dennis Taylor has suggested that discomfort leaves the spiritual aspect of literature—and therefore human experience—unexamined: “The subject of religious experience, and of course religion itself, is a profoundly divisive and disturbing subject, and for that reason famously avoided” (147).² Far from avoiding disturbing subjects,³ Balthasar was comfortable approaching faith and atheism alike. His fluid movement between religious and secular texts, along with his willingness to frankly apply Christian theology to any situation, make him a fascinating example as well as a critical guide.

Indeed, the future of Balthasarian criticism will have to include a “translation” of his ideas into something more digestible for those who do not share his beliefs and therefore cannot immediately follow his bold, transcendent approach.

² His article presents a fine argument: “The Need for a Religious Literary Criticism.” *Religion and the Arts* 1 (1996): 124-150.

³ Balthasar's willingness to confront disturbing subjects causes a lot of trouble for him, as can be seen in the controversy over his opinions on Hell.

Michael Murphy's *Theology of Criticism* mostly concerns itself with establishing connections between the work of Balthasar and the contemporary secular postmodern critical discussion. In my dissertation, I wanted to identify intersections between Balthasar's ideas and O'Connor's practice, while also studying the relevant intellectual history. I spent greater energy interpreting Balthasar than translating his principles into the terms of presiding critical theory. Future works of Balthasarian criticism should really combine an approach like Murphy's with an approach like mine; a theoretically fluent Balthasarian criticism combined with a thorough attention to the history of ideas would be a powerful contribution to contemporary scholarship.

This dissertation indicates the great range of resources available for literary criticism in Balthasar's work. In the triptych alone, there are several large sections of importance for the literary critic: the introduction to *The Glory of the Lord*; several literary monographs in *The Glory of the Lord* II and III; the philosophical/literary passages found in *The Glory of the Lord* IV and V, especially in "The Metaphysics of the Saints"; the entire literary *Prolegomena* to the *Theo-Drama*; and insights about character and plot to be gleaned from the later volumes of the *Theo-Drama*. Isolating and contextualizing the portions of Balthasar's work most important for literary study will continue to challenge Balthasarian critics for some time.

The applications of Balthasar's theology are so varied that each instance of criticism using his work will doubtless be unique to the literature studied as well as

to the critic. Although Balthasar's theological vision is broad enough to encompass most literature, it is also flexible enough to become highly individualized. The pluralism of applications available to Balthasarian critics mirrors the diversity of his work.

Balthasar himself deploys a wide range of methodologies in his own examples of applied theological aesthetics. *The Glory of the Lord* includes a series of monographs studying specific authors' theological aesthetics. Each monograph includes biographical information about the subject and a study of his writings elucidating a major contribution to theological aesthetics. But the results are as different as the subjects studied. The authors examined in the first of these volumes, *Clerical Styles*, are venerated theologians like Augustine; the second volume, *Lay Styles*, includes several priests, but these are considered "lay" in terms of their writing, which is either literary (Dante, Hopkins) or philosophical (Hamann). The "theological aesthetic" Balthasar isolates in each monograph is particular to the author studied, even though he evaluates each case with reference to his own theories.

For example, in his study of Hopkins, Balthasar attends carefully to the current of British nature poetry, saying that Hopkins valued "tense, utterly objective contemplation of the primal power of nature, the language of nature expressing itself free from any hindrance—such seemed to him the authentic school for the senses of the poet" (GL III, 360). He notes Hopkins' almost grotesquely singular way with language and counts it as a part of his total personality and

intellectual inheritance: Hopkins “retained not only in his choice of the religious life but also in all his aesthetic decisions an astonishing independence” (353). Balthasar scrutinizes this idiosyncrasy especially in an extended reading of “The Wreck of the Deutschland.” He finds the poem revelatory of the relationship between God and man: “here the foundering and shattering of all worldly images and symbols yield a final picture of the sacrament of the world: perishing and ascending to God—death as Resurrection: Resurrection not beyond death, but in death” (399). Balthasar shares this poetic insight as an example of Christological post-figuration, a moment of theological greatness in art.

Like Hopkins, O'Connor died young after a life of intense suffering. Also like him, she wrote in a grotesque way that was prone to misinterpretation.⁴ As a writer painfully aware of her authorial calling, and yet marginalized by her own personality as much as by her illness, the extreme aspects of human life remain in the forefront of her imaginative work. She wrote that “[t]o expect too much is to have a sentimental view of life and this is a softness that ends in bitterness. Charity is hard and endures” (CW 1085-86). O'Connor worked within the hardness of charity to show life's hard realities.

In one of her less positive sight-oriented stories, O'Connor shows how the freedom to choose the good emerges from self-knowledge. Relatively unpopular with critics, “The Partridge Festival” was disliked by O'Connor as well. In 1964, when she was arranging the selection of stories for her last book *Everything That Rises*

⁴ Sarah Gordon wrote about likenesses between Hopkins and O'Connor in Ch. 4 of her book, *The Obedient Imagination*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 2000.

Must Converge, she told her publisher Robert Giroux: “I also have found galleys of the one called ‘The Partridge Festival’ and after reading it, I have decided that it is a very sorry story and I don’t want it in. It’s just not up to the others” (HB 579). The story was left out of the final collection, even though it is well written and thematically powerful. One early critic suggests O’Connor found “The Partridge Festival” too dark, an odd man out in a collection admitting some element of hope at the end of each story.⁵

It seems more likely that O’Connor had personal reasons influencing her professional opinion. In a 1960 letter to her friend Cecil Dawkins, O’Connor had written, “I finally finished that farce [“The Partridge Festival”] and made it less objectionable from the local standpoint; however, my mother still didn’t want me to publish it where it would be read around here. So I told Elizabeth to send it to the *Critic*—a Catholic book-review magazine which is going to start publishing fiction in the fall” (HB 404-405). O’Connor wanted the story hidden from the local crowd because in it, she parodies events and characters from her own town. “The Partridge Festival” is reminiscent of a tragic Milledgeville shooting perpetrated by Marion Stembridge in 1953 (Pearson 146). Every year, Milledgeville held an Azalea Festival, and the enormous Milledgeville State Hospital asylum was just outside the city.⁶ Therefore, the short story was built off of *very* life-like circumstances.⁷

⁵ See Leon Driskell, “‘Parker’s Back’ vs. ‘The Partridge Festival’: Flannery O’Connor’s Critical Choice.” *The Georgia Review* 21.4 (1967): 476-490.

⁶ See William Monroe’s excellent article “Madness and Confinement in Michel Foucault and Flannery O’Connor.” In *Flannery O’Connor in the Age of Terrorism: Essays on Violence and Grace*. Hewitt, Avis and Robert Donahoo, eds. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2010. 213-230.

Part small-town parody, part literati spoof, the story opens with an immature protagonist lost in judgmental thoughts. Calhoun's scorn "swathed his vision in a kind of haze. He saw none of the activity around him distinctly" (CW 781). He imagines himself to be the piercing intellectual capable of correcting Partridge's consumerism and shallowness on a vast scale: "He would have to write a novel; he would have to show, not say, how primary injustice operated. Preoccupied with this, he went four doors past his aunts' house and had to turn and go back" (784). Calhoun's bumbling shows the limitations of his sight.

He is visiting his Aunts in the Georgia hamlet of Partridge. Ordinarily, he divides his time between selling appliances and doing nothing with his pseudo-intellectual friends. Calhoun's innate skill as a salesman embarrasses him, but he inherits it honestly from his great-grandfather, who was a founder of Partridge. His aunts point out his physical likeness to the ancestor as well, forcing him to look again at their father's picture: "The old man—round-faced, bald, altogether unremarkable-looking—sat with his hands knotted on the head of a black stick. His expression was all innocence and determination. The master merchant, the boy thought, and flinched" (774). In his great-grandfather, Calhoun sees a past he plans to escape. The ordinariness and despicable "innocence" of his ancestor disgust Calhoun. Instead, Calhoun's thoughts are consumed with the image of Singleton, a

⁷ Even though O'Connor's story paints a clear picture of Milledgeville, a second work of fiction based on the Stemberge murders follows the original story even more closely, Pete Dexter's 1988 *Paris Trout*.

man who shot six men in retaliation after his mock trial and “jailing” for failure to buy an Azalea Festival badge:

In the paper there had been pictures of the six ‘victims’ and one of Singleton. Singleton’s was the only distinctive face in the lot. It was broad but boney and bleak. One eye was more nearly round than the other and in the more nearly round one Calhoun had recognized the composure of the man who knows he will and who is willing to suffer for the right to be himself. A calculating contempt lurked in the regular eye but in the general expression there was the tortured look of the man who becomes maddened finally by the madness around him. The other six faces were of the same general stamp as his great-grandfather’s. (774-75)

Calhoun admires Singleton as a kind of southern uberman—“the man who knows he will.” He believes that Singleton’s act of violence against Partridge and its festival represents the moral complexity that can save him from becoming his great-grandfather. He feels like the spiritual descendent of the killer.

When Calhoun visits the insane asylum with his new friend Mary Elizabeth, this feeling of kinship comes out explicitly. Against the resistance of the hospital staff, he insists, “‘We’re his kin,’ Calhoun said. ‘We have every right to see him’” (793). Interestingly, Singleton himself reiterates the idea of their kinship in his lurid ravings to Mary Elizabeth: “‘You and me are two of a kind. We ain’t in their class. You’re a queen. I’ll put you on a float!’” (795). As attendants restrain him, Singleton tries to expose himself to Mary Elizabeth. Instead, he manages to expose

the young people to some grim realities about themselves and the world. As the two drove quickly away, “The sky was bone-white and the slick highway stretched before them like a piece of the earth’s exposed nerve” (795). This description is reminiscent of Singleton’s face in the newspaper photo: “broad but boney and bleak” (774). Confronted with the bare evil of Singleton’s criminal insanity, Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth realize their own folly and the ordinary common sense of the people of Partridge. They encounter the true meaning of “kinship” with the madman:

They sat silently, looking at nothing until finally they turned and looked at each other. There each saw at once the likeness of their kinsman and flinched. They looked away and then back, as if with concentration they might find a more tolerable image. To Calhoun, the girl’s face seemed to mirror the nakedness of the sky. In despair he leaned closer until he was stopped by a miniature visage which rose incorrigibly in her spectacles and fixed him where he was. Round, innocent, undistinguished as an iron link, it was the face whose gift of life had pushed straight forward to the future to raise festival after festival. Like a master salesman, it seemed to have been waiting there from all time to claim him. (795-796)

Being related to Singleton means being related to evil and madness. Shedding the haze of his former perspective, Calhoun looks for a moment into the eyes of another, searching for a way to understand his disappointment and fear. He is accosted by the very truth he has tried to avoid, his resemblance to his merchant great-grandfather.

Calhoun faces this image with new knowledge. He sees that he is just as “innocent”—unaware—as his great-grandfather was. Lack of awareness makes him “undistinguished as an iron link,” a part of the chain that binds communities into patterns of injustice. Although O’Connor’s own hometown was entrenched in the evils of racial prejudice,⁸ for the sake of the story she associates Partridge’s injustice with consumerism. The grandfather had been willing to sell anything, and coined the town’s repellant motto, “Beauty is Our Money Crop” (778). At the end of the story, Calhoun realizes the likeness between himself, Mary Elizabeth, his own ancestor, and Singleton. All share a propensity for evil that unsettles him and leaves “the sky bone-white”: his world is stripped of the “innocence,” the illusions he cherished in both the artistic and commercial aspects of his life (777). This recognition of fallen humanity gives Calhoun a chance to escape false innocence; it is the prerequisite for real freedom.

O’Connor’s friend John Hawkes was always misplacing O’Connor’s spiritual symbolism and probably associated Singleton with God in his interpretation of “The Partridge Festival.” In her 1961 reply to his letter, she wrote

The divine is probably the sum of what Singleton [the mad old man in “The Partridge Festival”] lacks and thereby suggests, but as he stands I look on him as another comic instance of the diabolical. I think that perhaps for you the diabolical is the divine, but I am a Thomist three times removed and live

⁸ The real Milledgeville murders committed by Marion Stembridge were racially charged. See, for instance, Jonathan Jackson’s article “Marion Stembridge Murders Rocked 1950s Milledgeville.” *The Union-Recorder* [Milledgeville, GA] 5 September, 2008.

amongst many distinctions. (A Thomist three times removed is one who doesn't read Latin or St. Thomas but gets it by osmosis.) Fallen spirits are of course still spirits, and I suppose the Devil teaches most of the lessons that lead to self-knowledge.... (HB 439)

Here O'Connor says clearly that she sees Singleton as a figure for the devil, but allows that encountering him might "lead to self-knowledge." Indeed, this Thomist-three-times-removed most often brings her readers into contact with fictional "spirits" teaching self-knowledge. Her stories juxtapose religious material with the harsh narrative elements of modern fiction: grotesque characters, violent actions, distant or disappearing narrators. Readers are meant to weather the storm and then listen for the whisper of God's voice.

In these encounters, we are aided not only by Balthasar's more "aesthetic" ideas, but also by those that are unequivocally theological: the idea of vocation as role, the constant reference to a higher horizon of meaning, his doctrine of Christ's suffering and its centrality. These theological concepts have an aesthetic application in the theo-drama of spiritual life. They remind us that the aesthetic experience is truly transformative; an act of seeing can constitute the beginning of a conversion, the active first step on a path to knowledge of the self and knowledge of God.

O'Connor's persistent attention to aesthetic matters shows us how moral beauty often coincides with an other-worldliness belying our assumptions. Moral beauty may appear in a guise that repels us: a refugee whose goodness offends, a young boy whose fanaticism irks, a simpleton covered with banal tattoos, a racist

old man, the quiet of an empty landscape and a humbled heart. O'Connor stretches the limits of the religious image to make it fresh for us once more, to "re-figure" the off-putting body of Christ into flesh we recognize from the banished margins of our own society. O'Connor's work places these other-ed freaks at the center of our attention, where we see how the action of grace works at all times, in all places, usually unnoticed, and sometimes called by the wrong name altogether. Although she strove to "show, not tell," her stories are pedagogical as the parables were instructive. To read them is to notice both our own distorted vision, and the distortions that can characterize even the encounter with goodness.

This dissertation examines O'Connor in light of Balthasar's theological aesthetics. A writer like O'Connor, with low-hanging fruit for theological criticism, is an obvious choice for Balthasarian study (Michael Murphy includes a chapter on O'Connor's "Revelation" in his book *A Theology of Criticism*). But the choice makes reciprocal sense as well. In conjunction with O'Connor's Christ-haunted stories, core Balthasarian themes come to the fore. O'Connor was, herself, a "theological aesthetician." Balthasar would have loved her stories, and reading them supplies us with a fresh approach to Balthasar's own work by contributing a welcome change of focus. Too often, discussion of Balthasar seems distracted by the most controversial issues in his *oeuvre*. His central work about the radical love of the Trinity and God's manifestation in the world is lost among concerns about Adrienne von Speyr and *apokatastasis*. Above all, Balthasar valued the great drama of "tragedy under grace": the painful "breaking" of bread necessary for the encounter with Christ. His

witness is needed to rectify the problems with Christianity emphasized in O'Connor's stories. O'Connor lampoons the "Church of Christ Without Christ," that is, the Church of Comfort and Nice. She hones in on Balthasar's best contributions to theological study: the aesthetic power of revelation, its narrative character, and above all, its exaltation of the Cross.

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