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Embodied Vision: Sublimity and Mystery in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor

Andrew Patrick Hicks
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Andrew Patrick Hicks entitled "Embodied Vision: Sublimity and Mystery in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Thomas Haddox, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Allen Dunn, Dawn Coleman

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Embodied Vision:
Sublimity and Mystery in
The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Andrew Patrick Hicks
August 2008

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Abstract

This thesis serves as a study of representative pieces of Flannery O'Connor's fiction alongside three particular theories of the sublime, and offers an exploration of the ways in which O'Connor employs and modifies the aesthetics of sublimity throughout her fiction. Three particular theories of the sublime are considered throughout this study: Edmund Burke's empiricist sublime, Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern sublime, and Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt's theological sublime. Burke's theory is considered alongside both the early O'Connor story "The Turkey" and the later "Greenleaf," while the story "Parker's Back" is read in light of Lyotard's theory and the novel *The Violent Bear It Away* alongside Bauerschmidt's theory. The readings of each of these fictional texts exhibit both their affinities for the accompanying theories of the sublime and the points at which O'Connor's literary vision departs from these aesthetic theories. O'Connor's own theological commitments and artistic choices present complications in considering her work alongside these theories of sublimity, and these complications echo and illuminate several recurring issues within the critical conversation concerning her work. This study finds that O'Connor's texts offer neither the egotism and biological determinism of Burke's theory nor the complete indeterminate freedom of Lyotard's theory, nor even the clearly-defined recovery stage of Bauerschmidt's theory. Instead, O'Connor charges her sublime drama with intimations of theological revelation, bringing the reader to a critical point that necessitates an interpretive choice.

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Introduction:

Embodied Rage, Embodied Vision

In Flannery O'Connor's second and final novel, *The Violent Bear it Away*, the aged and eccentric backwoods prophet Mason Tarwater gratefully remembers that God sent him "a rage of vision" that allowed him to escape from the home of his nephew, George Rayber. This vision communicates to Mason Tarwater that the schoolteacher, who had taken him in "on what he had thought at the time was Charity but what he said he had found out was not Charity or anything like it," has instead been "making a study of him...creeping into his soul by the back door, asking him questions that meant more than one thing" (4) for the purposes of a study for an academic journal. The ageing man is instructed by his vision to "fly...to the farthest part of the backwoods" (5) in order to escape his rationalist nephew's designs, which would make of him a case study and a cognitive possession.

O'Connor critic Claire Katz attributes the frenzy of the old prophet's spiritual revelation to O'Connor herself. O'Connor's artistic vision, according to Katz, reveals a "country...dominated by a sense of imminent destruction. From the moment the reader enters O'Connor's backwoods, he is poised on the edge of a pervasive violence" (54). O'Connor's landscape is distorted by a pervasive asymmetry, and poised to unsettle any notion of human autonomy "through an act of violence so intense that the character is rendered helpless, a passive victim of a superior power" (55). Katz acknowledges the cogency of O'Connor's stated religious intention for such violence and grotesquery, that a humanity that has become so convinced of its own self-sufficiency as to renounce any sense of spiritual need that would necessitate a divinity to shape its ends must be jarred and indeed shocked back into an awareness

of its inherent dependence (she concedes that this “certainly...is a coherent argument”). She is troubled, however, by the recurring patterns of intense violence that suggest a far different center to O’Connor’s work, a center that is more terrifying than stories that would boast redemption as their subject matter would merit. O’Connor’s fictional world in this reading becomes a universe that cannot escape the uncanny, “a closed universe fixed by infantile conflict—irrational, destructive, grotesque—in which adult interrelations do not—can not—exist” (67). This is a universe in which the layers that have been added to human society through reason and progress are stripped away to uncover a reality that is filled with primitive rage and frenzied superstition. Certainly Katz suffers from no shortage of examples of O’Connor’s “whirlwind of destructive force” (55): Francis Marion Tarwater’s rape in *The Violent Bear it Away*, the wholesale murder of an entire family in “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” Mrs. May’s goring by a charging bull in “Greenleaf,” and a procession of others.

In discussing the reader’s visceral response to O’Connor’s representations of violence, Katz notes that “the reader...identifies with the protagonist to the extent that the violent confrontations arouse dread and anxiety even under the surveillance of wit. Indeed, wit itself originates in what was once feared but is now mastered; and security from danger, both internal and external, is a precondition of comic enjoyment.” Rather than allowing the reader to observe her characters from a judgment seat of moral superiority, rather than allowing the reader to exult in the fact that he or she is beyond that which ravishes the victim of violence, O’Connor “undermines the reader’s sense of security, undermines comic elements by making the familiar world strange, by weakening our sense of reality through the distorting lens of an imagery that evokes archaic fears” (59). Because O’Connor’s entire landscape is poised on the edge of

violence, the reader can find no anchor of safety in the familiar within her texts. Such a notion, of an encounter with the terrifying that is beneficial because the subject is at a remove and not truly threatened by the terrifying force, has been discussed by 18th century Irish philosopher Edmund Burke in his work *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. In Burke's scheme, such an encounter produces in the human subject a passion that is categorically labeled *delight*, and is bound up in Burke's own understanding of the nature of the sublime. It is, however, a theme that exists in different variations in nearly all theories of the sublime.

The sublime at its core involves the paradoxical mingling of pleasure and pain, of fear and wonder, of defeat and victory. These are also the crucial paradoxes of O'Connor's fiction. My concern is with the ways in which O'Connor employs the sublime as an aesthetic strategy and a narrative model and with the significance of the sublime nature of the encounter between the human and the divine that she seeks to represent. O'Connor herself, I believe, makes apparent the parallels between her own literary vision and an aesthetics of sublimity in her essay "The Fiction Writer and His Country":

Redemption is meaningless unless there is cause for it in the actual life we live, and for the last few centuries there has been operating in our culture the secular belief that there is no such cause...The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience who is used to seeing them as natural; and he may be forced to take ever more violent means to get this vision across to a hostile audience...you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures. (34)

O'Connor's conviction is that this shock and the horror that it induces, instead of simply humiliating the human will in the face of a sublime terror, will leave this will open to a vision that will incorporate this shock so as to move beyond it:

The Catholic writer, insofar as he has the mind of the Church, will feel life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery: that it has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for. ("The Church and the Fiction Writer" 146)

Though theories of the sublime are manifold, I have chosen three that exhibit significant parallels to O'Connor's fiction: Burke's empiricist sublime, Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern sublime, and Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt's theological sublime. In discussing O'Connor's own version of sublimity, I find Burke's, with its focus on the terrifying, to be the most helpful place to begin.

In Burke's study of the human passions, the responses of the human body and mind to objects, whether natural or artificial, that move one from a state of indifference and into varying degrees of either pleasure or pain, the sublime is associated with the "passions...which are conversant about the preservation of the individual," which he declares to be "the most powerful of all the passions" (36). An encounter with the sublime, according to Burke, produces the passion which he identifies as "astonishment...that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended in, with some degree of horror." The object that arouses astonishment not only renders reason ineffective, but also overpowers the human mind with a sense of terror such as that which is associated with pain or death. "Indeed," Burke writes, "terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime." The paralyzing terror of the sublime is further allied to the sense of obscurity, as Burke declares that it is "our

ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions. Knowledge and acquaintance make the most striking causes affect but little” (57). Clarity, whether artificial or natural, is associated with the reassurance of the familiar. The sublime, in contrast, works upon a principle of defamiliarization, and is contingent upon the human mind’s inability to gain a foothold and reorient itself within the familiar. This is outlined adequately in Burke’s description of the sublimity of darkness:

...for in utter darkness, it is impossible to know in what degree of safety we stand; we are ignorant of the objects that surround us; we may every moment strike against some dangerous obstruction; we may fall down a precipice the first step we take; and if an enemy approach, we know not in what quarter to defend ourselves; in such cases strength is no sure protection; wisdom can only act by guess; the boldest are staggered, and he who would pray for nothing else towards his defence, is forced to pray for light. (130)

In this model three characteristic elements of human autonomy—strength, wisdom, and boldness—become useless tools in the face of sublime obscurity.

Such a basic understanding of how the sublime is defined in Burke’s *Enquiry* is necessary before discussing the place in this picture of the passion that Burke identifies as delight, and how it comes to bear on Katz’s reading of Flannery O’Connor. Delight for Burke is caused by the experience of the sublime at a remove, from a place in which the astonishing and terrifying nature of the sublime object may be witnessed without the safety or integrity of the witness being truly endangered. Before beginning his discussion of the sublime, Burke identifies delight in relation to the contrary passions of pain and pleasure. While it is not itself a positive pleasure in Burke’s scheme, delight comes to represent “the sensation that accompanies the removal of pain or danger” (34). Because Burke refuses to consider pain and pleasure as passions that exist purely in continuum with one another, but rather as positive passions that exist each in its own

right, the removal of pain or of a sense of danger cannot be identified as a positive pleasure itself, but is instead something akin to pleasure that is bound up in the presence of pain. This is the passion to which Burke assigns the name delight, and he confesses that this is a redefinition, as he is “satisfied the word is not commonly used in this appropriated signification” (34). Once Burke has identified the sublime as hinging upon pain and danger, he opens his discourse to the possibility of a relationship between the sublime and the passion of delight: “When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience” (36-7). Delight exists in the face of that which threatens but does not destroy.

The sublime in Burke’s text is set in opposition to the beautiful, as pain is to pleasure. Whereas the sublime to Burke arouses the passions of pain and astonishment, beauty is the emissary of pleasure. Burke declares that “beauty should not be obscure” (113), and in being allied to clarity instead of obscurity beauty is associated with the comfortable and the familiar. In opposition to the tension and excitement caused by the sublime, the beautiful affects a general sense of ease, of being at home. Though beauty is thus associated with safety, Burke readily assigns to it a potentially negative attribute. An excess of rest within the beautiful and the familiar could lead to a dangerously languid mode of existence, for an excess of rest “not only disables the members from performing their functions, but takes away the vigorous tone of fibre which is requisite for carrying on the natural and necessary secretions.” Burke declares that “Melancholy, dejection, despair, and often self-murder is the consequence of the gloomy view we take of things in this relaxed state of body” (122). In this physiological rendering of the

subject, pain becomes the beneficial labor that shocks the bodily members out of lethargic inactivity. Frances Ferguson notes that by the terms of Burke's dichotomy between the sublime and the beautiful, the ascendancy of the sublime is necessary because "the beautiful, as it turns out, figures in the *Enquiry* not just as the domestic and social or as that which submits to us, it is also the deceptive par excellence" (50). Although the beautiful does not inspire the same sense of terrifying threat as the sublime, it fosters a coercive sense of ease, and according to Ferguson "although the sublime inspires us with fear of our death, the beautiful leads us to death without our awareness...for all the obscurity of sublimity, there is a peculiar clarity as well—you know the danger you're in" (52). By masking its own more subtle threat to individual autonomy, the beautiful numbs the human passions into a state of dangerous complicity.

Burke identifies terror as a form of necessary exercise for the "finer parts of the system," preventing the passions from slipping into a general state of apathy, for if pain and terror do no immediate violence to the subject "they are capable of producing delight; not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror; which as it belongs to self-preservation is one of the strongest of all the passions" (123). Burke earlier declares that while no one, "though he should be removed to the greatest distance from the danger" would wish to see the city of London destroyed by an earthquake, he speculates that in the case of such an event "what numbers from all parts would crowd to behold the ruins, and amongst them many who would have been content never to have seen London in its glory" (44). Delight is the strange draw to the sublime terror, the sublime catastrophe, which from a distance can shock the witness out of the relaxed complacency that subversively threatens the individual subject. The sublime becomes something of a workout for the passions: just as the initial pain of physical exercise

tears the body down so that it may be repaired and strengthened so as to accommodate for future exertion, an ultimately safe encounter with sublime terror may freeze and debilitate the “finer parts of the system” so as to shock the subject out of the complacent ease that accompanies the beautiful.

Katz’s reading of O’Connor points to a notion of Burkean sublimity at the heart of the author’s work, a persistent terror created by the continual threat of violence that permeates O’Connor’s world. Her frustration, however, seems to be that such sublimity exists in a state that is severed from the potential for the delight of distance. O’Connor’s fiction, in this reading, is so thoroughly permeated by the obscurity and violence inherent in the Burkean sublime that the anchor in the clarity of the familiar, the detachment from immediate danger upon which the positive potential of the sublime depends, is denied to both the characters and the readers of O’Connor’s fiction. If O’Connor’s fiction allows readers “to experience the gratification of raging against the limits imposed on us, raging with all the fury of our common childhood fantasies,” it also “forces us to submit to those limits, to turn the rage back on ourselves. Because of her extraordinary fictional talent,” Katz says of O’Connor, “she could so shape and project her inner vision that, against our rational, progressive wills, we identify with freaks, equate human with grotesque, and renounce our humanistic heritage and the desire to grow up” (67). The triumph of O’Connor’s internal vision, then, is that it presents the world in such shocking and astonishing figures as to make the familiar impossible. The sublime, in this case, is not the singular object or the occasional event that may provide enough shock to keep the familiar on its toes, to keep it from wallowing in a despondent lethargy, but is instead the ruling principle of reality. The “rage of vision” permeates the entire fictional landscape that O’Connor

gives her readers. Just as Mason Tarwater's rage of vision drove him from the home of his rationalist nephew, so does O'Connor's corresponding vision drive the reader from the rational and the categorical, the marks of progress of the humanistic heritage that George Rayber embodies.

Katz notes the potential for this all-pervasive sense of violence and terror to underwrite O'Connor's religious intent by adapting a line from the novel *Wise Blood*: O'Connor identifies her narrative voice with "the Christ of her imagination, not Christ the Lamb, but 'Jesus hidden in [her] head like a stinger' ... Using her stinger, exercising the scorn characteristic of the superego, she imposes a humiliation so intense that they are forced to acknowledge their impotence." Christ, by this reading, assumes in O'Connor's fiction the role not of the crucified and humiliated substitute for human sin, but of the judgmental father who humiliates his children in punishment for disobedience, "the ultimate superego figure" (57). Bearing this in mind alongside Burke's notion of the sublime, there is certainly much that would rightfully be called terrifying about the Christ of O'Connor's fiction. To turn again to *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes fears the constant pursuit of Jesus so powerfully that he elects to avoid Jesus by avoiding sin. Jesus for him comes to represent the terror of the unfamiliar, a terror that is contained even in the miraculous:

Later he saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown. Where he wanted to stay was in Eastrod with his two eyes open, and his hands always handling the familiar things, his feet on the known track, and his tongue not too loose. (22).

Haze is threatened by the prospect of becoming lost in the obscure forest in “the back of his mind,” where the familiar gives way not only to the uncertain but also to the impossible, and the impossible to death. Similarly, O’Connor’s early story “The Turkey” could be read as the narrative of the stripping of young Ruller’s perceived strength, wisdom, and bravery, in which even his seemingly compassionate piety is disregarded in the face of the indeterminately named “Something Awful” that gives chase to him, “its arms rigid and its fingers ready to clutch” (53), to snap away his rebellious and self-sufficient pride. If one were seeking to construct a Burkean funhouse of the terrifying sublime, O’Connor’s work would provide more than enough props with which to begin. I would like to suggest, however, that the relationship is more complicated, as I will demonstrate in my reading of the later and more mature O’Connor story “Greenleaf.”

Though I will not devote a full section to the Kantian sublime, a discussion of Immanuel Kant’s theory of the sublime will prove helpful, as the place of the sublime in Kant’s intellectual project demonstrates a primary antagonism between his thought and that of O’Connor. As this discrepancy touches on several concerns that will be helpful in framing the conversation to come, I would like here to turn briefly to the Kantian sublime, and briefly outline its problematical relationship with O’Connor’s fiction.

Kant, in his *Analytic of the Sublime* from the *Critique of Judgment*, retains the concern for Burke’s notion of a pleasure that hinges on displeasure, a pleasure that goes hand in hand with pain. The terms of the Kantian sublime, however, are strikingly different from those of the Burkean. The Kantian scheme of the sublime retains the encounter between the subject and the

awe-inspiring, terrifying, thought-effacing object that freezes the faculties, producing “the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital forces followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger” (98). What is distinctive, however, is that in Kant’s scheme the attribute of sublimity in this encounter is not attributed to the object that produces the reaction within the subject, but to the subject itself. Kant declares that

all we are entitled to say is that the object is suitable for exhibiting a sublimity that can be found in the mind. For what is sublime, in the proper meaning of the term, cannot be contained in any sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason, which, though they cannot be exhibited adequately, are aroused and called to mind by this very inadequacy, which can be exhibited in sensibility. (99)

The Kantian sublime moves towards the mastery of the sensible world and its objects by the human subject, an unloosing from the moorings of material particularity and into the realm of the supersensible “so that we can feel a purposiveness within ourselves entirely independent of nature” (100). The sublime of Kant exhibits a rupture between the sensory in nature and the idea of reason, a rupture between the natural world and the transcendent world of concepts. Kant describes the sublime as “an object (of nature) *the presentation of which determines the mind to think of nature’s inability to attain to an exhibition of ideas*” (127). The transcendent idea, such as that of the infinite or of totality, cannot be presented to the senses and thus eludes representation. The mind is driven to “an effort, although a futile one, to make the presentation of the senses adequate to this [idea of] totality. This effort, as well as the feeling that the imagination [as it synthesizes empirical nature] is unable to attain to that idea, is itself an exhibition of the subjective purposiveness of our mind, in the use of our imagination, for the mind’s supersensible vocation” (128). The very failure to present the unrepresentable idea is itself a victory, as it reveals the ascendancy of mind over matter, of the subject over its own material

and empirical bounds. The subject may experience a certain Burkean terror in the sublime experience,¹ but this terror in the face of might is in the Kantian sublime a marker of the superiority of the subject to its natural conditions: “As such, however, it is a might [that allows us] to assert our independence of natural influences, to degrade as small what is large according to the imagination...and so to posit the absolutely large [or great] only in his (the subject’s) own vocation” (129).

Robert Baker highlights a crucial implication of Kant’s formulation of the sublime, and it is by way of this implication that the Kantian sublime becomes problematic in discussing O’Connor’s fiction. Baker identifies Kant’s philosophy as a “two worlds” philosophy, with a clear distinction between the world of material empirical reality and the transcendent world of the ideas of Reason. As the conversation enters the realm of theology, it is easy to see in the Kantian notion of the sublime a proclivity towards the dualism that O’Connor declared herself to be so firmly set against, a dualism that would negate the analogical relationship between the natural and the transcendent. Baker follows the Kantian notion of supersensible freedom from particularity to the solipsism that he believes to be its logical conclusion:

For...in defining moral freedom in terms of the subject’s absolute independence from the inclinations of its natural being as well as the habits and norms of any particular community, Kant provides an exhilarating account of freedom that, however, implies at the same time a severe disjunction between the subject of moral self-determination and everything “other” to this subject, including its own body and dispositions, the community to which it belongs, and the natural world at large. This conflict has continued to trouble modern society from Kant down to the present. Radical alienation, a kind of ghostly solipsism, may turn out to be the obverse side of radical freedom. (51)

¹ Kant declares that the subject is “indeed seized by *amazement* bordering on terror, by horror and a sacred thrill” (129).

In many ways, it is this very “ghostly solipsism,” this divorce of matter and spirit, against which O’Connor aimed her work.

Though Baker finds the seeds of Kant’s “two worlds” philosophy in what he calls “the dualism of traditional Christian metaphysics” (51), it is debatable whether this sort of dualism should be equated with the Christian theological tradition. O’Connor herself adheres to a Christian metaphysics that suggests the contrary. In her essay “The Nature and Aim of Fiction,” O’Connor makes her celebrated claim that “fiction is so very much an incarnational art” (68). While this statement clearly makes reference to the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, it also serves to highlight the importance that O’Connor places on the material world from which the subject is freed in the Kantian scheme of the sublime. Fiction is for O’Connor a matter of concretizing against abstraction. “The beginning of human knowledge is through the senses,” she writes, “and the fiction writer begins where human perception begins. He appeals through the senses...those concrete details of life that make actual the mystery of our position on earth” (67-8). O’Connor adopts this incarnational vision in opposition to a dualism that she sees prevailing in both secular and ecclesiastical culture, “one of those Manichean-type theologies which sees the natural world as unworthy of penetration. But the real novelist, the one with an instinct for what he is about, knows that he cannot approach the infinite directly, that he must penetrate the natural human world as it is” (163). Transcendence will not involve an unloosing of the chains that bind the subject to the sensible world, but will instead involve an ever increasing immersion in that world.

Christina Bieber Lake provides a detailed exposition of O’Connor’s incarnational writing-against-Gnosticism, and identifies the beginnings of a Modern Gnosticism in the thought

of Descartes, Kant, and Hegel, tracing the strain to its American embodiment in Ralph Waldo Emerson. To the modern artist, the heir of this intellectual tradition, the “outer universe is desiccated because the modern mind believes itself separate from it. To be separate from the body and from the universe is to render it completely other, an object for scientific study and mastery” (19). Against this sort of mastery and freedom Lake identifies O’Connor’s incarnational art as one that

...insists on the broken and limited human body as its starting point—the acknowledgment of which is the only means to spiritual growth... Our embodiment also means that we are dependent upon others both to prosper in community and to see ourselves truthfully. O’Connor’s fiction reveals that she believed human beings confronted with the severe limitations of others might be brought, finally, to see their own limitations, disabilities, and dependencies and thereby be opened to revelation. (12)

Far from revealing a subjective supersensible freedom, O’Connor’s fiction seeks to highlight the significance of embodiment, and it is O’Connor’s particular way of doing this that opens her up to critiques like that of Claire Katz. O’Connor, according to Lake, champions what Bakhtin would call “being-as-event,” and in doing this “teaches us we are not pure minds that think our way to the truth intellectually, but embodied souls that learn when we recognize revelation. This is the reason why O’Connor’s stories clearly uphold a reality so primal, so horrifying, so earthly, and so deeply psychological that many critics have been unable to locate the familiar world in them” (24-5). If this primal, horrifying, earthly, psychological reality is what frustrates a critic like Katz, it is also what serves to connect O’Connor’s fiction to a sublimity more immediate than Kant’s. This sublimity is found most fully in the work of Lyotard, and its seeds may be found in a Lyotardian reading of Burke.²

² It is by the immediacy of terror that Lyotard distinguishes the sublime of Burke from that of Kant, though this distinction is not unproblematic. There is in Burke’s theory of the sublime a certain turn that, while not entirely

These connections, however, serve as places from which to begin. If O'Connor offers her own distinctive version of sublimity, it is one that is informed by the Christian theology that she expresses in her essays and that informs her fiction. In light of this theology, the theories of sublimity offered by Burke and Lyotard at times assume relationships with O'Connor's fiction that are as problematical as the one assumed by the Kantian sublime. There is a certain theological ambivalence to both of these theories of the sublime. In Burke's theory this is represented by a haunting, recurring sense of biological or physiological determinism, that what we would call sublimity is truthfully the effect of terror on the nervous system. The sublime of Lyotard's theory hinges on a freedom from ideological determination, a sense of mystery that resists being synthesized into discourse, which becomes problematic in light of O'Connor's adherence to Catholic doctrine.

Kantian, presents a similar problem when one considers the fiction of O'Connor. There is an egotistical strain to Burke's theory, a strain that is notably exhibited in Section XVII of the first part of the *Enquiry*. This section links the sublime to ambition by positing that the subject, if sufficiently removed from danger, *identifies* with the majesty of the sublime object: "Now whatever either on good or upon bad grounds, tends to raise a man in his own opinion, produces a sort of swelling and triumph that is extremely grateful to the human mind; and this swelling is never more perceived, nor operates with more force, than when without danger we are conversant with terrible objects, the mind always claiming to itself some part of the dignity and importance of the things which it contemplates" (47). This notion is also evident in section five of Part Two (59-65), in which Burke presents a distinctly political form of this ambition: the most expedient way to deal with fear of the monarch's power is "mixing much in the business of the great world" (62). What is interesting about this notion, however, is the purpose that Burke assigns to ambition. The drive to distinction is divinely-implanted, and serves to safeguard against an excess of imitation through which, Burke declares, "Men must remain as brutes do, the same at the end that they are at this day, and that they were at the beginning of the world" (46). Though the rhetoric here is theological, it strikes a fairly Darwinian note (though pre-Darwin); ambition serves as a societal form of natural selection.

There is a way, then, in which this principle of ambition is not wholly separate from the tendency of Burke's text towards a sense of biological determinism, a strain that appears consistently throughout. Burke is fascinated by, and continually returns to, the inextricable link between the mind and the body, between the passions and the senses. "Our minds and bodies are so closely and intimately connected," he writes, "that one is incapable of pain or pleasure without the other" (121). It is by this strain that Burke's theory exhibits parallels with O'Connor's concern for embodiment, and it is on this strain that my own reading of Burke will focus. In this way, my reading of Burke is decidedly Lyotardian. Lyotard's own reading of the sublime stands strongly against the egotism of systematic intellectual certainty, and while this reading overlooks an inherently egotistical turn in Burke's theory, it does highlight certain themes within Burke's treatise that inform Lyotard's own conception of the sublime. In this way, Burke's primary significance in my reading of O'Connor will be as a necessary forerunner of sorts to Lyotard. Though O'Connor's adherence to the Christian metanarrative introduces certain complications into her fiction's relationship to a Lyotardian sublimity (complications that I will address in my second chapter), the tendency of the sublime to unsettle presumption is one that is appreciable by the terms of both of these writers.

It is my intention to show, however, that O'Connor's fiction itself demonstrates both the extent to which her vision has affinities with both of these theories of the sublime and the points at which her vision departs. My first chapter, "Like a Wild, Tormented Lover: The Burkean Sublime in 'The Turkey' and 'Greenleaf,'" serves as a reading of one early O'Connor story and one later story in light of Burke's theory of the sublime. While the early story "The Turkey" demonstrates more complete affinities with the Burkean theory, I believe that "Greenleaf" exhibits a significant departure from this theory on the points of Burke's biological determinism and his complete sundering of the sublime from the beautiful. Chapter two, "All Demanding, Enclosed in Silence: 'Parker's Back' and the Lyotardian Sublime," demonstrates the inherent parallels between O'Connor's aesthetics of the grotesque and Lyotard's theory of sublimity as found in his essay collection *The Inhuman*. A consideration of the story "Parker's Back" makes these parallels strikingly apparent, while also demonstrating the extent to which O'Connor's doctrinal commitments distance her from the complete indeterminate freedom of the Lyotardian sublime. In my final chapter, "Love Without Reason: *The Violent Bear it Away* and the Theological Sublime," I read the novel *The Violent Bear it Away* in light of the distinctively Christian "theological sublime" offered by Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt. Bauerschmidt's discussions of the crucifixion of Christ, the life of the Church, and the sacrament of the Eucharist all provide illuminating connections between a sublime aesthetic and O'Connor's final novel. The divergence that the novel exhibits even from this distinctly theological rendering of the sublime, however, serves to highlight both the distinctive nuances of O'Connor's work and the freedom that she bequeaths to her readers, a freedom that calls for an interpretive choice—a freedom that is perhaps also a burden.

Chapter 1

Like a Wild Tormented Lover:

The Burkean Sublime in “The Turkey”

and “Greenleaf”

As Burke delineates the objects, either in nature or in human representation of nature, that excite the sublime passions of astonishment and terror, he devotes a section of considerable length to the relationship between sublimity and power. Reminding the reader that the sublime object is that which arouses the terror that is associated with pain or death, Burke notes that “whilst we remain in the presence of whatever is supposed to have the power of inflicting either, it is impossible to be perfectly free from terror” (59). Power carries with it the ability to overthrow the human will; it is that which runs counter to the pleasure that the human subject experiences when allowed to pursue its own autonomy: “pleasure follows the will; and therefore we are generally affected with it by many things of a force greatly inferior to our own. But pain is always inflicted by a power in some way superior, because we never submit to pain willingly” (59). An object of vast strength, whether in the world of human society or in the animal world, excites the sublime passion insofar as it refuses to conform to the subject’s purposes.

To give a sensible illustration of this idea, Burke turns to the animal world and draws a distinction between the domestic animal, the animal that is controlled and set aside for work, and the beast that is not bound by any utilitarian function by which it might serve humanity. Noting that the ox is a creature of considerable physical strength, Burke denies this domesticated animal the role of the sublime object by virtue of its very domesticity. The ox is “an innocent creature,

extremely serviceable, and not at all dangerous; for which reason the idea of an ox is by no means grand.” By contrast, the bull is allowed sublime status because it does not exhibit such usefulness, because its strength is “often very destructive, seldom (at least among us) of any use in our business.” As an example of the way in which one sort of animal may serve the purposes of both serviceable sociability and uncontained sublimity, Burke turns to the horse, “an useful beast, fit for the plough, the road, the draft, in every social useful light the horse has nothing of the sublime.” However, by turning to the biblical book of Job, Burke is able to provide an image of the horse as a beast that refuses to conform to usefulness, “*whose neck is cloathed with thunder, the glory of whose nostrils is terrible, who swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage...* In this description the useful character of the horse entirely disappears, and the terrible and sublime blaze out together” (60). Borrowing further from the book of Job, a text in which the indignation of humanity at personal suffering is silenced in a whirlwind vision of the divine, Burke looks to the unicorn and the leviathan as representatives of this uncontained natural power that refuses subservience to human intentions.

Burke goes on to outline “the idea of God” as an object of the highest order of this sublime power, but at the same time notes the potential for this most ineffable of powers to be corralled into a domesticated and intellectually useful form. “I say then,” Burke declares, “that whilst we consider the Godhead merely as he is an object of the understanding, which forms a complex idea of power, wisdom, justice, goodness, all stretched to a degree far exceeding the bounds of our comprehension, whilst we consider the divinity in this refined and abstracted light, the imagination is little or nothing affected” (62). While the divine is considered simply as an amplification of common human virtues, the virtues that make for a useful and beneficial

member of human society, the astonished passion of sublimity is absent, even though these virtues may be carried beyond “the bounds of our comprehension.” However, when the human attempts to discern the attributes of God through secondary causes, to see God embodied by finding analogs of his attributes in the material world, the situation changes dramatically. “Thus when we contemplate the Deity,” he writes, “his attributes and their operation coming united on the mind, form a sort of sensible image, and as such are capable of affecting the imagination” (62). Though one may arrive at a recognition of God’s benevolent attributes, such as wisdom, justice, and goodness, through reflection and meditation, “to be struck with his power, it is only necessary that we should open our eyes.” The terrifying in nature, the forces that excite the sublime passions, become in this scheme indicators of the transcendent power of the divine, and while these objects are considered “under the arm, as it were, of almighty power, and invested upon every side with omnipresence, we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated before him.” This shrinking of the subject’s power before a tangible representation of divine power serves to temper a rather passionless understanding of God with a mixture of sublime fear: “If we rejoice, we rejoice with trembling; and even whilst we are receiving benefits, we cannot but shudder at a power which can confer benefits of such mighty importance” (63). For religious expression to be sincere, it must be accompanied by “so large a mixture of salutary fear.” Christianity has effected this in that it has “humanized the idea of the divinity, and brought it somewhat nearer to us” (64), allowing the divinity to be simultaneously benevolent in approachability and capable of arousing sublime astonishment through transcendent glory. In this case, however, the Burkean principle of sublime obscurity continues to apply, to dramatic effect. In considering the divine, “we have traced power through its several

gradations unto the highest of all, where our imagination is finally lost” (64). Burke’s empiricist project ventures into the obscurity of the sublime when the chain of cause and effect is traced to a divinity that is not immediately accessible to the senses in the same way that a bull would be.

In preparing to turn once again to O’Connor, it is important to note one specific implication of this section of Burke’s *Enquiry*. In this scheme, God, like the horse, may be approached either as the useful and the pleasing or as the overpowering sublime. When considered in the “refined and abstract light” (62) as the excess of noble human qualities, God is in a sense subdued, corralled like the horse and fit for use as a tool of the human intellect. In a sense, Burke employs the sublime attribute to rescue the idea of God from this domestication by injecting the proper level of “salutary fear” (64) into religious meditations and observances. Without this, the possibility remains to contemplate the divine in the same way that one contemplates the workhorse, as a figure of potential but subdued strength that is ultimately harmless. If this is the case, then Burke’s discussion of the attitude with which human beings approach the domestic and useful animal must be considered. In contrast to the wolf, which is sublime, Burke asserts that the domesticated dog arouses in its human owner a “love [that] approaches much nearer to contempt than is commonly imagined; and accordingly, though we caress dogs, we borrow from them an appellation...[that is] the common mark of the last vileness and contempt in every language” (61).

In the essay “Novelist and Believer,” O’Connor addresses just such a domestication of the divine in her own twentieth-century context. O’Connor begins this essay by identifying the specifications of the Sweetbriar College symposium at which it was delivered that “we conceive religion broadly as an expression of man’s ultimate concern rather than identify it with

institutional Judaism or Christianity or with ‘going to church’” (154). O’Connor expresses a continuous concern throughout the essay that the spirit behind this understanding of religion, a spirit that would unloose “religion” as a term from a determinate referent, will lead to a diminished sense of divine transcendence, inherently tending toward the question of “whether we are created in God’s image, or whether...we create God in our own” (157) and tending toward the latter. O’Connor notes that “for nearly two centuries the popular spirit of each succeeding generation has tended more and more to the view that the mysteries of life will eventually fall before the mind of man. Many modern novelists have been more concerned with the processes of consciousness than with the objective world outside the mind” (158). To put this in Burkean terms, those concerned with the processes of consciousness to the neglect of the ‘objective world’ would see God made in the image of this consciousness, as the potential of the most noble of human attributes stretched beyond their extremes. This is the domestic conception of divinity, the divinity that pleases rather than inspiring awe or terror. To O’Connor, this sentiment manifests itself in the religious as a desire for God as the facilitator of personal pleasure: “Today’s reader, if he believes in grace at all, sees it as something which can be separated from nature and served to him raw as Instant Uplift.” This expectation serves to disconnect compassion from the willingness to share in the pain of another and thereby to be “in travail with and for creation in its subjection to vanity” (165). This oversimplified association of religion with pleasure, for O’Connor, would serve to disconnect the religious subject not only from the mixture of salutary fear that Burke sees as indispensable, but also from the responsibility to engage and enter into the suffering of others.

Given O'Connor's declaration that it is against this attitude of religious self-concern that her fiction works, a drama of Burkean sublimity can easily be read into much of her work. In this drama, the human subject that has limited the divine by principles of usefulness and pleasure, of wish-fulfillment and "Instant Uplift," comes to ascribe a diminutive position to divinity, much as the human being contemptuously loves the dog. In O'Connor's fiction, the divine reasserts itself as unbounded power, as a force of both terror and violence that does not merely run contrary to the human will but overturns it by harsh imposition, through the terrifying whirlwind of violence that Claire Katz sees as central to O'Connor's work. O'Connor's own particular modification of this sublimity is that instead of fueling a sense of individual egotism, as the Burkean sublime does, the sublime encounter acts as a dismantling of the ego and a thwarting of ambition. Though such a reading could be applied to much of O'Connor's fiction, I would like to focus on two stories particularly, the early story "The Turkey" and the later "Greenleaf." The central character of each of these stories exhibits a bounded and self-serving conception of divinity: Ruller in "The Turkey" by seeking to utilize the divine for the purposes of wish-fulfillment, and Mrs. May of "Greenleaf" by insisting that "the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom" (316). The narrative action in both of these stories moves toward a disempowerment of these characters by a sublime violence: in "The Turkey," this is a violence of terror and privation, while in "Greenleaf" it is a physical violence that culminates in physical death. The emphasis on terror is the most significant aspect of Burke's text in such readings, but while "The Turkey" lends itself almost entirely to a reading of pure Burkean terror, I believe that the final and overpowering action of "Greenleaf" indicates a break with the Burkean sublime, leaving an excess that departs from such a reading.

Throughout “The Turkey,” young Ruller exhibits contempt for the confining restriction of the commonplace in his home-life. Though his older brother Hane is the delinquent black sheep of the family, Ruller regards him with a sense of awe at his freedom. The boys’ mother declares that Hane “had always been an unusual boy,” and in Ruller’s eyes his brother’s peculiar distinction is made manifest in his refusal to be limited by the rules their parents impose. When Ruller’s father expresses concern over the boy’s solitary tendencies, his mother dismisses this peculiarity in the face of the greater peculiarity of Hane’s disobedience: “if he wanted to play by himself, she didn’t see any reason why he shouldn’t...someone had told her, she said, that they had seen Hane at the Ever-Ready; hadn’t they told him not to go there?” (44). Ruller’s respect for Hane is elevated further by the older boy’s refusal to heed their grandmother’s religious injunction to good behavior: “Their grandmother had talked to Hane and told him that the only way to conquer the devil was to fight him—if he didn’t, he couldn’t be her boy any more...and she said she’d give him one more chance, did he want it? And he yelled at her no! and would she leave him alone?” (47) Ruller’s desire is to “knock her out of her socks” (48), to shock his family in such a way that he will cease to be the nondescript obedient child whose chief crime is that he “plays by himself” too much, and to become as singular and autonomous as Hane.

Bound up in the rebellion that Ruller seeks to enact against his family’s imposition is a cultivation of religious irreverence. After his pursuit of the turkey, the coveted prize of his self-reliance, is stalled by his collision with a tree, Ruller begins to delight in the profanities that he is able to speak unhindered. The boy recalls an incident in which his mother was able to silence Hane by appealing to the third of the Ten Commandments, and Ruller’s triumph is that he is able

to enact Hane's rebellion without receiving the same reprimand. As he slowly learns his ability to refuse both divine command and parental discipline, Ruller's exclamations become more pronounced and specific, and increasingly more blasphemous:

"God," he said.
 He looked studiously at the ground, making circles in the dust with his finger.
 "God!" he repeated.
 "God dammit," he said softly. He could feel his face getting hot and his chest thumping all of a sudden inside. "God dammit to hell," he said almost inaudibly. He looked over his shoulder but no one was there.
 "God dammit to hell, Good Lord from Jerusalem," he said. His uncle said "Good Lord from Jerusalem."

As his exclamations continue with no penalty, they move toward culmination in a reworking of the first line of the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father Who art in Heaven, shoot 'em six and roll 'em seven." Whereas his mother would "smack his head in if she could hear him. God dammit, she'd smack his goddam head in" (46), in the woods there is neither maternal reprimand nor bolt of divine judgment. Ruller is free to use the name of God as a vent for his frustration and a badge of his rebellion.

In a similar fashion, the wounded turkey of the story's title, which Ruller doggedly pursues throughout the beginning of the tale, also becomes for the boy a badge of distinction. To catch this turkey and bring it home to his family would distinguish him, would mark him as "an unusual boy" like Hane, though in a way that would excite admiration instead of rebuke: "He saw himself going in the front door with it slung over his shoulder, and them all screaming, 'Look at Ruller with that wild turkey! Ruller! where did you get that wild turkey?'" And to this Ruller would respond in the voice of humility "Oh, he had caught it in the woods; he had thought they might like to have him catch them one" (43). Upon catching the turkey (which has died of gunshot wounds that Ruller did not inflict), Ruller begins to reassess his rebellion:

Ruller wondered suddenly if he were an unusual child.
 It came down on him in an instant: he was...an...unusual...child.
 He reckoned he was more unusual than Hane.
 He had to worry more than Hane because he knew more how things
 were. (49)

In a striking moment of sympathy towards the domestic strife that characterizes his parents' marriage, Ruller begins to conceive of his success in laying hold of the turkey as an indication that his way is not to be the rebellious way of his brother: "He guessed he was one of the most unusual children ever. Maybe that was why the turkey was there. He rubbed his hands along the neck. Maybe it was to keep him from going bad. Maybe God wanted to keep him from that" (49).

While Ruller makes a turn here in his perception of the divine, a turn from contempt to gratitude, he is intent on enacting his newly-perceived divine calling on his own terms. No longer desiring to distinguish himself as a delinquent rebel like his brother, Ruller will serve God as a preacher and philanthropist. "Lord, send me a beggar" (51) he commands as he makes his way through the town bedecked with his trophy of a turkey, and the boy begins to see his newfound acceptance by God as contingent upon the divine completion of this request: "If one came, it would mean God had gone out of His way to get one. It would mean that God was interested" (52). And while the boy receives his beggar in the form of Hetty Gilman, Ruller completes his act of generosity in a spirit of frenzy rather than charity: "He darted at her and thrust the dime into her hand and dashed on without looking back" (52). By the terms of his sign-seeking he has been noticed, the deal is done, and so he has no need to supplement his economic charity with the charity of fellowship.

His act of anxious generosity, however, is not followed by an increased divine blessing, but by a stripping of the resolve and confidence that have been building and shifting within him throughout the story. The tenants' children who have been following Ruller during his search for a beggar forcibly take the turkey from him as he displays it for their admiration. This stripping of pride serves as Ruller's initiation into the terror that characterizes the story's conclusion, a terror that exhibits in full force the obscurity of the Burkean sublime:

He walked four blocks and then suddenly, noticing that it was dark, he began to run. He ran faster and faster, and as he turned up the road to his house, his heart was running as fast as his legs and he was certain that Something Awful was tearing behind him with its arms rigid and its fingers ready to clutch. (53)

The boy's courage, pride, and resolve, are here shattered in a terror that overtakes him body and soul, his heart in direct proportion to his legs. If the text tells us that Ruller is "certain," this certainty is the paradoxical certainty that he is confronted with sheer, indeterminate terror. What follows him cannot be named beyond Something Awful, and if this presence comes in answer to Ruller's prayer it is a seemingly sadistic answer, a turning of the tables so that the boy becomes the prey that the turkey was, a potential trophy for a terrifying divinity. Though Katz does not treat "The Turkey" specifically, the framework of her argument highlights the terrifying implication of the story's climax; that Ruller has learned a proper respect for the name of God is not enough. His piety has too much of presumption, and the certainty and stability with which he is beginning to carry himself must be challenged and stripped from him. The story's conclusion exhibits a striking irony as Ruller's quest for an increased and fortified selfhood ends in the destitution of terror.

While Ruller spends the bulk of “The Turkey” working to distinguish himself from both his pious family and his rebellious brother, Mrs. May, the widowed protagonist of “Greenleaf,” has a keen sense of her own distinction from others, and throughout the tale seeks to defend this distinction from encroachment by any opposing force. “I’m the victim,” she declares in frustration at both the recalcitrance of her hired man, Mr. Greenleaf, and the unsympathetic scorn with which her two sons, Wesley and Scofield, treat her. Mrs. May’s status as victim is not, however, restricted to the workings of these interpersonal relationships, but is the lens through which she views her entire reality. She sees in the pastures of her dairy farm “the reflection of her own character.” Just as the farm is fortified by “a black wall of trees with sharp sawtooth edges that held off the indifferent sky” (321), Mrs. May has adopted a conception of reality in which all creation is her antagonist, an antagonist that must be warded off by the most rigid exercise of control. The “sawtooth edge” with which Mrs. May holds off the antagonistic and ungrateful universe is her assurance that strenuous effort will preserve and maintain the place that she has built for herself, and that the proper imposition of order will make her farm a respectable and peaceable kingdom in which everything is properly in place. This assurance is Mrs. May’s particular badge of autonomy and singularity, correspondent to Ruller’s captured turkey, and by it she safeguards herself against any judgment, temporal or eternal: “Before any kind of judgment seat, she would be able to say: I’ve worked, I have not wallowed” (332). By this proclamation Mrs. May would distinguish herself from those who *have* wallowed, and the specific target of this judgment is the family of her hired hand, Mr. Greenleaf. It is against Mr. Greenleaf’s “shiftlessness” that Mrs. May must wield her iron hand. The events of the story,

however, suggest that Mrs. May's sense of control is illusory at best. Mr. Greenleaf remains an elusive presence on the farm, and his function in thwarting Mrs. May's intentions serves to create a disparity between the ideal farm in which Mrs. May would see the reflection of her own character and the farm as it actually exists.

If Mr. Greenleaf offends Mrs. May's sensibilities in regards to work and obedience, it is his wife who offends Mrs. May's religious sensibilities through her religious excess. Mrs. May does not gloss over the fact that she finds this more deplorable even than Mr. Greenleaf's vulgar recalcitrance. "Beside the wife," she confesses to herself, "Mr. Greenleaf was an aristocrat" (313). Mrs. May expresses no direct antagonism towards religious expression *per se*, but instead exhibits a guarded acceptance of socially proper and useful religion. Mrs. May "thought the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom. She was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true" (316).³ She also admonishes her sons not to make religious jokes and assures them that if they "would go to church, [they] would meet some nice girls" (320). Mrs. May accepts of religion, but only as a tool that may be used to secure the status of her family. If Wesley and Scofield meet "nice girls," at church or anywhere else, then the management of the farm, her life's work, will be safely continued. This hope wards off Mrs. May's persisting fear, that once she has died her sons will "marry trash and ruin everything I've done." Scofield reinforces this fear by jesting that he will marry "some nice fat farm girl that can take over this place...some nice lady like Mrs. Greenleaf" (315), and though antagonizing his mother is something of a sport for the man, his jest strikes precisely the right nerve.

³ Marshall Bruce Gentry identifies this as a deliberate critique on the part of O'Connor's narrator, and declares it to be "one of the strongest critiques of a character in O'Connor's works" (59).

It is Mrs. Greenleaf who provides the religious counterpart to Mrs. May, and it is in Mrs. May's judgment of Mrs. Greenleaf that the socially acceptable deity confronts and is unsettled by the irrational, unruly, and sublimely terrifying deity. Enacted in the obscurity of the forest as opposed to the clarity of the church, Mrs. Greenleaf's practice of prayer-healing is as raw and as earthy as the woman herself and is characterized by uncontained, ego-obliterating passion. The subjects of the prayer-healing are the morbid and the tragic, newspaper clippings of "the women who had been raped and criminals who had escaped and children who had been burned and of train wrecks and plain crashes and the divorces of movie stars" (315-16), a list that observes no boundaries of social class or propriety. Mrs. Greenleaf's passion is one that exhibits no discernible purpose, but is a pure, visceral identification with and supplication on behalf of suffering in whatever form it may come. Her unintelligible mumbles and groans are accompanied by frenzied motion, "so moving her huge arms back and forth under her and out again and finally just lying flat and, Mrs. May suspected, going to sleep in the dirt" (316). The one discernible word of Mrs. Greenleaf's utterances is the name "Jesus," and it is this that scandalizes Mrs. May completely. "Jesus," she tells Mrs. Greenleaf, "would be *ashamed* of you. He would tell you to get up from there this instant and go wash your children's clothes!" (317) Jesus is so thoroughly allied in Mrs. May's mind with the concerns of her own household and social class that she would presume to speak for him. In contrast, the Jesus that Mrs. Greenleaf invokes comes with a force of dispossession, a force that shatters control and unites her in pain with those for whom she is praying. "Jesus, stab me in the heart," is her plea, and she welcomes the pain and debilitation that would come with such force, making of herself "a huge human

mound, her legs and arms spread out as if she were trying to wrap them around the earth” (317) and mirroring the crucifixion through her impropriety.

Mrs. May’s initial encounter with Mrs. Greenleaf’s prayer-healing provides an apt example of the story’s affinity for the sublime terror of Burke’s theory. As she seeks out Mr. Greenleaf for a scolding, Mrs. May is frozen in horror to hear Mrs. Greenleaf’s “guttural agonized voice” crying “Jesus! Jesus!” This brings Mrs. May to a state of fear of some dimly perceived threat, a fear that is ward off by the return of reasonable consciousness: “The sound was so piercing that she felt as if some violent unleashed force had broken out of the ground and was charging toward her. Her second thought was more reasonable: somebody had been hurt on the place and would sue her for everything she had” (316). The second, “more reasonable” thought returns Mrs. May from a state of obscure terror, but leaves her still in the place of victim. The initial moment of terror, however, points to a narrative within the narrative of “Greenleaf,” which chronicles Mrs. May’s struggle and failure to “exclude from her awareness the destructive force that is on its way” (Kessler 118). Just as Mr. Greenleaf subtly undermines Mrs. May’s authority with his selective disobedience, there is a terror below the surface of “Greenleaf,” a terror that threatens the beautiful and well-ordered world that Mrs. May would see sustained.

It is not simply the farm and its upkeep that are threatened, however. In figuring her property as a “reflection of her own character,” Mrs. May sees her own wellbeing and that of the farm as inextricably linked, and therefore what threatens one in turn threatens the other. The saw-toothed line of trees that serves as the secure boundary at her property’s perimeter serves

also as the fortress that shields her ego from destruction, as Frederick Asals suggests⁴. At the heart of Mrs. May's concern is self-preservation, and her son Wesley spitefully accuses her of "always yapping about when-you-die." Mrs. May's horrifying vision of her farm going to seed, of it being taken over by people like the Greenleafs, is tied to the reality of her own death, and is opposed by a stern resiliency in the face of this reality: "They needn't think I'm going to die any time soon" (321). In Burke's text, the passions aroused by the sublime are those "passions which concern self-preservation," those passions "which are conversant about the preservation of the individual, turn chiefly on *pain* and *danger*, and they are the most powerful of all the passions" (36). The sublime object or the sublime experience is so on account of its production of terror in the face of potential pain or danger, and so the chain of cause and effect links the sublime to the passions of self-preservation. To apply this notion to "Greenleaf," then, would be to say that Mrs. May's concern with the safety and sanctity of her ego makes her the perfect recipient of an ego-shattering sublime experience.

The moments in which Mrs. May's resolve to withstand her own potential destruction provide images replete with the sensory assault characteristic of the Burkean sublime. "Extreme light," Burke tells us, "by overcoming the organs of sight, obliterates all objects, so as in its effect exactly to resemble darkness. After looking for some time at the sun, two black spots, the impression which it leaves, seem to dance before our eyes" (74). When Mrs. May opens the milking room for inspection "she felt as if she were going to lose her breath. The spotless white concrete room was filled with sunlight...The metal stanchions gleamed ferociously and she had to squint to be able to look at it" (325). This striking encounter with light, characterized by the

⁴ "Mrs. Cope in 'A Circle in the Fire,' Asbury in 'The Enduring Chill,' Mrs. May in 'Greenleaf' all gaze at that wall of trees as the final line of their ego's defense against the mysterious force that threatens to burst in upon them" (Flannery O'Connor: *The Imagination of Extremity* 69).

suddenness that, according to Burke, gives “a perception of danger and, and our nature rouses us to guard against it” (76), connects immediately to a threatening source. Mrs. May is “conscious that the sun was directly on top of her head, like a silver bullet ready to drop into her brain” (325). The sun, a recurrent symbol in O’Connor’s fiction, becomes an emblem of the very creation that has set itself against Mrs. May. On the night before her death, the sun comes again to Mrs. May in a dream of threatening premonition. Hearing again the slow sound of the bull eating the hedge under her window, Mrs. May makes a surreal association with the threatening sun: “She became aware after a time that the noise was the sun trying to burn through the treeline and she stopped to watch, safe in the knowledge that it couldn’t, that it had to sink the way it always did outside of her property.” Though Mrs. May rests secure trusting the defense of both the ego-sheltering treeline and the principles of natural order, the threat embodied by the sun resists these checks: “When she first stopped it was a swollen red ball, but as she stood watching it began to narrow and pale until it looked like a bullet. Then suddenly it burst through the tree line and raced down the hill toward her” (329). Mrs. May interprets the events occurring on her farm as a drama in which the fortifications of her own identity are at stake. Even if it is only in her sleep, her moments of vulnerability leave her open to the terror that accompanies the unnamed and unknown threat.

It is appropriate that Mrs. May’s initial perception of indeterminate terror is as “an unleashed force” that has “broken out of the ground” and charges at her, as this rendering provides a connection with the figure that unifies and incarnates this terror, O.T. and E.T. Greenleaf’s escaped scrub bull. The bull, to recall Burke, is the animal emblem of unconstrained power, power that refuses any utilitarian function imposed by human order. In contrast to the

humble and useful ox, the bull has a power “of another kind; often very destructive, seldom (at least amongst us) of any use in our business” (Burke 60). The Greenleaf bull serves just such a function, from its refusal to stay confined within the pen where it is to be kept for beefing to the threat that it poses to Mrs. May’s herd of cattle (she fears that it will “ruin the breeding schedule” [314] and introduce a contaminating strain into her herd). While Mrs. May generally regards the bull with the same class-conscious contempt with which she regards the Greenleaf family (as the bull is a scrub bull, the Greenleafs are “scrub-human”), the story opens with a vision of the bull that is charged with both sublime power and sublime obscurity. The shifting moonlight brings the bull, poised outside of Mrs. May’s window, into and out of focus, and when the moon is completely obscured by clouds there is “nothing to mark his place but the sound of steady chewing” (311). Vaguely conscious of this sound as she sleeps, Mrs. May identifies its source as a threatening presence:

She had been aware that whatever it was had been eating as long as she had had the place and had eaten everything from the beginning of her fence line up to the house and now was eating the house and calmly with the same steady rhythm would continue through the house, eating her and the boys, and then on, eating everything but the Greenleafs, on and on, eating everything until nothing was left but the Greenleafs on a little island all their own in the middle of what had been her place. (312)

The perceived threat is not only that of personal destruction but also the undoing of all that vigilant labor and social propriety have set in place on the May farm. As Mrs. May begins to awaken, she strives to diminish the significance of this threat by the referents that she assigns to it. Initially it is “a cow tearing at the shrubbery” (312), but when she is able to determine the source of the sound she invokes the social divisions that she perceives to be threatened; it is

“Some nigger’s scrub bull” (311).⁵ Mrs. May attempts to disassociate the escaped bull from her growing unease by refusing its status as a signifier of power. Instead, it is diminished, under her sway, and (as she takes great pains to assert to Mr. Greenleaf) “the awfulest looking bull I ever saw” (323). Mrs. May ascribes to the scrub bull a status that is “awful” without anything of *awe*; not the awful terror of the Something Awful that pursues Ruller, but the awful of the deplorable, like the Greenleafs themselves.

It is this awful-looking bull, however, that will be the bearer of the apocalyptically violent conclusion of the story, bringing the mounting threat to a head and Mrs. May’s premonitions of death to their fulfillment. In precisely this climactic moment, however, precisely at the moment in which the Greenleaf bull assumes its potential as a sublime and overpowering force, the logic of a Burkean reading of “Greenleaf” is frustrated. Burke’s economy of the passions operates on a strikingly mathematical principle, and this principle leaves little room for deviation on the part of either the object that arouses the passions or the subject whose passions are aroused. Burke reiterates so as to make abundantly clear the fact that the sublime is inseparable from a degree of terror, and goes even further to define terror in physiological terms as “an unnatural tension and certain violent emotions of the nerves.” Burke follows this definition with the assertion that “whatever is fitted to produce such a tension, must be productive of a passion similar to terror, and consequently must be a source of the sublime” (121). The status of the sublime as sublime is secured by the terror that it causes in the subject that observes or encounters it, and since the human subject has no more control over the automatic responses of his or her own nerves than those of another person, the status of the

⁵ This racial epithet is a demonstration of Mrs. May’s utmost contempt. It is her son Scofield’s status as “the best nigger-insurance salesman in this country” that prevents him from finding a “nice girl” (315) to marry him.

sublime object is predetermined biologically. The sublime, as that which excites terror and astonishment, is irreparably sundered from the beautiful, which is associated in the *Enquiry* with the social passions, not the least of which is that of love. Burke contrasts the effects of the sublime and the beautiful thus:

There is a wide difference between admiration and love. The sublime, which is the cause of the former, always dwells on great objects, and terrible; the latter on small ones, and pleasing; we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us...In short, the ideas of the sublime and the beautiful stand on foundations so different, that it is hard, I had almost say impossible, to think of reconciling them in the same subject, without considerably lessening the effect of the one or the other upon the passions. (103)

If the passions that turn on self-preservation, on the distinction and defense of the individual ego, belong to the sublime, the passions of interpersonal society and love, whether erotic or otherwise, belong to the beautiful. Positive pleasure belongs to beauty, and as positive pleasure (as distinct from Burke's definition of delight) has no part of the sublime, the experience of love and the experience of sublimity are sundered by the primacy of terror upon which the sublime turns.

It is this intractable distinction that "Greenleaf" serves to frustrate, and while this frustration becomes most clear in the moments surrounding Mrs. May's death on the horn of the Greenleaf bull, the categories of the terrifyingly sublime and the pleasingly beautiful are more subtly intermingled throughout the story. The Greenleaf bull is, at the opening of the story, a ravenous force that will consume everything that Mrs. May holds dear—it is also "some patient god come down to woo her" (311), and the hedge wreath that becomes entangled in the bull's horns serves as both a decorative ornament for "an uncouth country suitor" and "a menacing prickly crown" (312). If he is an emblem of the unpenned and unhindered deity that Mrs. Greenleaf invites to stab her in the heart, he is also, as Mr. Greenleaf points out, a "gentleman"

and a “sport” (323). There is an ambivalence regarding whether the Greenleaf bull should be seen as an emissary of divine wrath who will reassert sublime power despite Mrs. May’s belittling (like Katz’s stinging superego figure or Ruller’s *Something Awful*) or a lover who does not want subjugation but relation, and the story seems to suggest that he is both, a sublimity that seeks to be in continuity with beauty. As she and Mr. Greenleaf travel to find and shoot the bull on the final morning, Mrs. May’s response to her natural surroundings exhibit a similar categorical confusion between sublimity and beauty. Her senses are sharpened at “the exhilaration of having carried her point” in an argument with Mr. Greenleaf, and while she joyously proclaims the arrival of spring, the narrative description of the scene perplexingly resorts to harsh adjectives: “Birds were screaming everywhere, the grass was almost too bright to look at, the sky was an even piercing blue” (330). There is an eerie incongruity between the pleasure that Mrs. May takes in the landscape and the abrasive terms in which it is painted.

A similar incongruity exists between Mrs. May’s goring and the description that this event receives in the narrative. When the bull emerges from the line of trees (thereby cutting Mrs. May off from the boundaries that defend her), it is not with the “violent unleashed force” (316) that accompanies Mrs. Greenleaf’s grotesque ritual, but with “a slow gallop, a gay almost rocking gait as if he were overjoyed to find her again.” Upon the realization that the bull is charging toward her, head lowered, Mrs. May is transfixed and frozen in place, as is the subject in the face of the Burkean sublime, but the narration explicitly separates this paralysis from the expected terror. While the Greenleaf bull does not lose its status as a violent force, it is a violent force that is charged with the erotic passion of the beautiful:

She remained perfectly still, not in fright, but in a freezing unbelief.
She stared at the violent black streak bounding toward her as if she

had no sense of distance, as if she could not decide at once what his intention was, and the bull had buried his head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover, before her expression changed. One of his horns sank until it pierced her heart and the other curved around her side and held her in an unbreakable grip. (333)

The uncontrollable and uncontainable, the Something Awful, does in fact come, but it comes fully in the ambiguity with which it has been painted throughout the story. This is power asserting itself over that which would contain and diminish it, but this is also power that exhibits a wounded, grief-stricken longing for the one who would be its adversary. At the moment of her overpowering, Mrs. May does indeed register a sort of sublime astonishment accompanying the obliteration of her ego, as “the entire scene in front of her had changed—the tree line was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky—and she had the look of a person whose sight had been restored but who finds the light unbearable” (333). The tree-line that marks out and defends Mrs. May’s carefully-constructed and well-defended sense of self is rendered not superfluous to the larger creation, but injurious, a “dark wound.” The narrative concludes, however, with a gesture toward the mutual affection of the beautiful. When Mr. Greenleaf, after shooting and killing the bull, finds Mrs. May and the animal united in death, Mrs. May “seemed...to be bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal’s ear” (334). Within the image of courtly love that has resurfaced throughout the story, this final instance is not merely erotic passion but reciprocal affection, a finally requited love.

The inherent ambiguity of the story’s conclusion, however, is one that O’Connor critics often note. The shocking vision that Mrs. May experiences as she dies mirrors the violence that she has just received, and unlike the grandmother of “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” who is able to articulate her final revelation of solidarity to The Misfit before she is killed, Mrs. May is left

to whisper her discovery from dead lips into dead ears. This obscurity causes a dilemma, as whatever revelation Mrs. May has received is not present within the text, and the reader is left alongside Mr. Greenleaf to puzzle over this riddle, perhaps in contemplative silence. Speaking of O'Connor critics, Richard Giannone notes that the "consensus holds that [O'Connor] does not master the technical challenge of getting the bull's horns into the woman's ribs so that the action embodies a definite meaning" (167). Giannone himself acknowledges the primarily suggestive nature of any meaning attached to the story's final action, noting that the image presented is "a shift in facial expression, by which the reader can detect the brightening of Mrs. May's inner awareness" (171). Despite this, however, he offers a reading of this event that brings it in line with the grandmother's final declaration. Mrs. Greenleaf pleads for a divinely inflicted wound so as to be united with the suffering world for which she prays, but it is Mrs. May who receives this gift at the hands of the Greenleaf bull. According to Giannone, this is a gift that establishes her solidarity in suffering with those whom she has oppressed:

The response to Mrs. Greenleaf's plea, however, falls on Mrs. May. That it does is neither a technical expedience nor a literary irony. The displaced piercing incarnates O'Connor's belief that the growth of love building the earth toward convergence depends upon the response, willing or inadvertent, of one person for another. If others suffer because of Mrs. May's fear and oppression, then she too must bear anguish in the larger interest of charity. (172)

For Giannone this is not merely an instance of the oppressor receiving her just deserts, nor of a belittled divinity reining in the individualist's smug self-reliance. Mrs. May, instead, is rescued from her fear of dispossession by dispossession, is freed of her defensive posturing by the breaching of that defense. "The kindness of the Lord," Giannone asserts, "spares Mrs. May through violence" (174), and this kindness is realized as such as a "tremor of joy" leaves the

protagonist “gently murmuring the heart’s secret to the bull in grateful recognition of finding herself loved” (175). Marshall Bruce Gentry goes so far as to suggest that the climactic action of the story does not at all occur contrary to Mrs. May’s will, but that she unconsciously yearns for it and thereby acts throughout the story in such a way as to bring it about, “constructs a set of fatalistic expectations...which make it inevitable that Mrs. May will eventually have some transforming experience...In allowing the Greenleaf bull his freedom, she achieves her own” (61-2). Regardless of the extent to which one accepts such an assertion, the text of “Greenleaf” is clear in its presentation of paradox: there is a convergence of terror and love, defeat and desire, sublimity and beauty. Alsas identifies this as the working of O’Connor’s “paradoxical vision. The God of Wrath and the God of Love seem to be one: mercy and judgment, like the horns of the Greenleaf bull, come together in an awesomeness suggested by Asbury Fox’s discovery that the Holy Ghost is a ‘purifying terror’ (140). Mason Tarwater, the prophet of *The Violent Bear it Away*, also gives brief but eloquent voice to this paradox: “Listen boy...even the mercy of the Lord burns” (20).

It is the sundering of the sublime and the beautiful for which theologian John Milbank criticizes both Burke and Kant in his essay “Sublimity: The Modern Transcendent.” In the case of Burke, Milbank’s critique is concerned with the rather Hobbesian theological economy that is set in place by the ascendancy of the sublime over the beautiful. The pleasure in and attraction to the beautiful that the human subject experiences in Burke’s scheme is “to be explained at once in theological and functionalist terms; God has placed this response within us in order to promote erotic union and social cohesion.” The beautiful is that which unites and allows for participation

between subjects or between subject and object. The sublime, in contrast, “concerns simply self-preservation in the face of a threatened dissolution of self.” It is the sublime, however, that for Burke excites the strongest passions, and this for Milbank leads to the theological problematic inherent in Burke’s distinction between the sublime and the beautiful:

God, as most clearly portrayed in the Old Testament, is seen by Burke to be most fundamentally invoked by human beings as an object of fear, and concomitantly Burke conceives God as ensuring social order *primarily* through the drive to self-preservation and the fear of the other, rather than through the drives of sympathy and shared pleasure...the hierarchical elevation and distinction of the sublime undergirds the primacy of individual self-autonomy over social bonding in the constitution of the social order.
(222)

In regards to Christian orthodoxy, Milbank notes this to be “a certain deviant theology...which regards [God], not fundamentally as the author of being, but rather idolatrously as an actor in our plot, manipulating fear to produce order.” And in the face of this terrifying will, the desire for society and relation or “the love of the living other” (223), is overshadowed by the drive of self-preservation, the thrill of fear in the face of death. As Ferguson points out, Burke’s dichotomy between sublimity and beauty establishes the possibility of beauty as a deceptive sedative in which social cohesion blunts the edge of a more subtle threat to individual autonomy, leading to the necessary reawakening of the explicit concern for self-preservation that the sublime provides.

This critique of the Burkean sublime echoes the critique that Claire Katz offers of O’Connor’s fiction. The scandal of O’Connor’s world, according to Katz, is that the beautiful—or, more specifically, the healthy society characterized by healthy relations between human individuals, hardly exists. And if it exists at all, it exists to be destroyed, as her characters are doubly scourged by the authoritarian narrative voice and by Christ as the “ultimate superego figure.” In “Greenleaf,” certainly, Mrs. May has drawn the line clearly between herself and the

living other, and her gaze ever construes that other as an object of fear, as the potential dispossessor of all that she has subsumed into herself; the farm, her sons' futures, the task of dealing with Mr. Greenleaf. And the divine, if present at all, exhibits itself in Mrs. Greenleaf's grotesque and masochistic groans, in her desire for annihilation at the hand of Christ, and in the annihilation that Mrs. May *does* indeed receive. Joyce Carol Oates acknowledges the same oppositional nature to be present in this fictional world. O'Connor's characters (and though Oates's example in this case is Julian, the failed writer of "Everything that Rises Must Converge," the same could apply to Mrs. May and a host of others) serve as spokespeople for rationalist modernity, and both they and the civilization that they represent must be "jolted out of...complacent, worldly cynicism. *By violence*. And by no other way, because the ego cannot be destroyed except violently; it cannot be argued out of its egoism by words, by a logical argument; it cannot be instructed in anything except a physical manner" (170). Unlike Katz, Oates does not go so far as to suggest that O'Connor's theological themes can be completely written off as a distorted representation of psychological drama. In fact, Oates claims that O'Connor "is understandable only in a religious context" (145-6). Her critique does, however, point to a different concern within the fictional texts: the reader is presented with violent ritual by which "the temporal is united with the eternal" (155), and yet this violent ritual is all that the temporal within the text gets of the eternal. O'Connor provides no convenient strings that will clearly connect her fiction to any doctrinally orthodox understanding of God:

There is no patience in O'Connor for a systematic, refined, rational acceptance of God; and of the gradual transformation of apocalyptic religious experience into dogma, she is strangely silent. Her world is that surreal primitive landscape in which the unconscious is a determining quantity that the conscious cannot defeat, because it cannot recognize. (176)

In Oates's reading, the apocalyptic violence of O'Connor's texts provide the foundation for a theology that retains a certain obscurity and unknowing.

It is precisely this textual ambiguity that André Bleikasten seizes on, and he does so with a much greater intensity. As the title of his essay "The Heresy of Flannery O'Connor" implies, Bleikasten is concerned with the pervading ambivalence of O'Connor's fiction, stating that the primary concern of the O'Connor critic "is not the extent to which O'Connor's tales and novels reflect or express her Christian faith, but rather the problematical relation between her professed ideological stance and the textual evidence of her fiction" (140). Bleikasten's reading of O'Connor does much, like that of Katz, to highlight an underlying affinity with the terms of the Burkean sublime, and he likewise explores the problems posed by the primacy of terror and annihilation in O'Connor's fiction. This concern, in his reading, renders O'Connor's world a strikingly despiritualized landscape:

There is indeed little to suggest the 'depths' and 'secrets' of inner life which are the usual fare of religious fiction. The ordinary condition of her heroes is one of extreme emotional exhaustion and spiritual numbness, and from that catatonic torpor they only emerge to succumb to the destructive forces of violence or insanity. Moreover, in their deathlike apathy as well as their sudden convulsions, O'Connor's characters are ruthlessly stripped of any pretense to dignity. (140)

Bleikasten notes a fatalism in O'Connor's work that springs not from any orthodox form of her own Catholicism but rather from a predestinarian scheme in which autonomy is illusory.

O'Connor's protagonists, like young Tarwater of *The Violent Bear it Away*, are driven by either divine or diabolical calling, and regardless of the source of the calling the end result is the annihilation of the self. To the finitude of human understanding, the finitude that limits any protagonist (or reader) of O'Connor's fiction, there is little that distinguishes God from the Devil.

If the driving force behind O'Connor's work, as O'Connor herself would have it, is grace, Bleikasten is adamant in his assertion that this is not grace in any Catholic sense, or by any other terms of orthodox Christianity: "Instead of grace coming to complete and crown nature—as the mainstream Catholic tradition would have it—it breaks in on it...And paradoxically it is more often than not at the very last moment, at the climax of violence or at the point of death that grace manifests itself" (152). Bleikasten presents O'Connor's God in terms that call to mind the divinity of the Burkean sublime: "the agonizing mystery of absolute otherness...Man's relation to Him is one of vertical tension precluding any form of reciprocity" (155). Instead of a participation between the human and the divine, the reader is left with the humiliation of the human; with Mrs. May gored on the horn of the bull or Asbury Fox frozen in "purifying terror" ("The Enduring Chill" 382) at the approach of the Holy Ghost. The best that can be said of any O'Connor character is that he or she, like Julian at the conclusion of "Everything That Rises Must Converge," has been initiated into "the world of guilt and sorrow" (153), at best trapped in a purgatorial fire.

David Sandner, writing of O'Connor and her fellow twentieth-century Catholic J.R.R. Tolkien, acknowledges just the sort of aesthetic problem that Bleikasten sees in O'Connor's fiction. In Sandner's reading, however, this is a necessary problem; if the texts of O'Connor's fiction cannot formulate or unambiguously contain grace, if they instead only give us a surface violence that "presses the reader to reinterpret [the] stories in terms of (but not necessarily in the presence of) something like 'grace'" (172), this must not necessarily put an end to the reader's attempt to apprehend this grace. We are dealing here with grace as a trace within the text—to appropriate Milbank's words, a transcendent grace that is only partially revealed in the finite text.

The aesthetic problem is in this case a necessary one, as the presence of grace in O'Connor's fiction depends upon "a vanishing narrative, a moment when the aesthetic, the literary, fails or fades away and allows the reader...to somehow slip through the text, past words into faith" (171). Using "A Good Man is Hard to Find" as his exemplary text, Sandner points to the reality of grace in O'Connor's work as a frustration of narrative expectations that serves "to confound and then satisfy the reader's desire in a surprising, but compromised way." Sandner's further explanation is rife with the vocabulary of sublimity, of the defeated yet awestruck will:

This drama of frustration and qualified satisfaction is akin to the religious feeling of being bereft of hope and then awakening to the spiritual. Final victory is postponed to some other 'level' of understanding just out of sight in the proffered narrative itself. (185)

The reader, in other words, is tempted to see the grandmother's final gesture in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" as essentially futile. The Misfit rejects the call to solidarity and participation, rejects being identified as "one of my own children" (132), and kills the grandmother, effectively completing the murder of her entire family. The reader is left free to interpret the grandmother as a failure or as selfish to the end, desperately attempting to save her own life through a display of solidarity that is in truth fueled by the sublime passions of self-preservation.

In O'Connor's own understanding of her story, the grandmother's death is not defeat but victory precisely because it moves her beyond the domesticated religion of Instant Uplift and into a compassion that is truly an imitation of Christ and thereby a participation in the suffering of creation: "the sense of being in travail with and for creation...the sense which implies a recognition of sin; this is a suffering-with, but one which blunts no edges and makes no excuses" ("Novelist and Believer" 165-6). Sandner acknowledges both the validity of such a reading and the dependency of such a reading on a textual excess, on that within the text which points outside

of itself: “the textual excess, the impression made on the text by the violence of the narrative actions...Transcendence may be the point—but it is not a feature *of* a text; rather, transcendence only suggests a movement through and beyond narrative” (172). The gesture towards transcendence in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” is presented as the grandmother’s final declaration, and a line that Sandner quotes from O’Connor’s letters bears quoting here as well: “you say there is love between man and God in the stories, but never between people—yet the grandmother is not in the least concerned with God but reaches out to touch The Misfit” (188). Such a gesture, then, merges the beautiful and the sublime in the same way that Mrs. May’s death does. As Mrs. May is given no words, however, the gesture within the text is much more ambiguous.

The terms are nearly identical in Milbank’s critique of Burke’s dichotomy between the sublime and the beautiful, and of the further erasure of participation with the living other that the Kantian sublime provides in completely divorcing the sublime, the beautiful, and the ethical from desire, sundering *agape* from *eros*. The problem, in Milbank’s terms, is that the sublime becomes either “the command of absolutely self-sacrificial duty...or *else* this is a delirious necrophiliac narcissism, in which we are beckoned by that of which we cannot be robbed, our own death, which is yet absolutely other, but only as the *nihil*” (230). Milbank’s suggestion, in an appropriation of Patristic and medieval theology, is for a reintegrated notion of the sublime and the beautiful. In this scheme the desire for the beautiful and its participatory nature are not overshadowed by the drive to self-perseveration or to disinterested self sacrifice, but are instead lifted out of their own bounds and continued in the sublime:

Through this movement we are completed in our very incompleteness, beautiful in our very sublimity. For no longer is this incompleteness a

source of anxiety, nor of a dark eroticism that is but the inverse face of an absence of physical love, but rather of erotic delight, both in human others and in the divine Other. (231)

In place of Burke's notion that divinity will always be allied to terror and that the social and pleasurable are so because they are deceptively familiar and seem to be under our rule, Milbank allows for pleasure, positive desire, and social cohesion to be markers of the divine in our midst, as the sublime betokens the excess that cannot be contained within this cohesion but gives it as a gift.

It is toward this participation that a reading such as Giannone's sees "Greenleaf" moving. By this reading the violent circumstances of Mrs. May's death are vehicles of a grace that is in its very nature participatory, uniting Mrs. May to the world that she would see as her antagonist and to the lover's embrace of the divinity that she cannot control. The fact remains, however, that this reading is derived from highly ambiguous textual instances, as Mrs. May's internal awakening is conceived based on a change of facial expression and the appearance that her lifeless body gives of communication with an equally lifeless animal. Milbank would move beyond the clear-cut distinctions between the sublime and the beautiful that are offered by Burke and subsequent theorists, but his alternative theory is contingent upon a faith that one may find in empirical reality an excess that points to a referent beyond that reality, as the desire that is kindled by the beautiful points "to an Other only partially disclosed in finite others, to a distance disclosed but always also withheld, but a distance which we trust—have 'faith in'—as an always ever greater depth of harmony" (230). If the infinite is disclosed in the finite, it is only partially disclosed, and that Milbank acknowledges the necessity of faith in the apprehension of the infinite is telling. If the realization of O'Connor's vision within her texts depends on the

presence of a reality that exceeds the concrete empirical contents of those texts, it should be noted that the very faith that fuels this vision is also contingent upon this empirical excess. The catechism of the Catholic Church acknowledges that that which “moves us to believe is not the fact that revealed truths appear as true and intelligible in the light of our natural reason.” In order for reason to reach the propositions of faith, a supplementary revelation is necessary: “that the submission of our faith might nevertheless be in accordance with reason, God willed that external proofs of his revelation should be joined to the internal helps of the Holy Spirit” (48). A gap between textual evidence and theological realization may in truth be necessary for the realization of O’Connor’s vision, for she opposes herself to the presumption that the transcendent may be known without the mediation of a material world that is replete with mystery.

If O’Connor would oppose herself to the secular or religious forces that would anesthetize the mystery of the divine, she herself is consistent in upholding mystery, in upholding transcendence as transcendence. In her work, as Sandner has it, we as readers are “made aware that we are reading a story—we are made aware that representation is a process for apprehending reality and not reality itself. In that gap, the possibility of transcendence is supposed to lie” (181). Faith in this case involves an apprehension of representation’s incommensurability to its task, in its ability to bear witness to that which exceeds it. It is on this point that I would like to shift focus from the Burkean sublime to a consideration of the sublime as theorized by Jean-François Lyotard alongside one of O’Connor’s final stories, “Parker’s Back.”

Chapter 2

All Demanding, Enclosed in Silence:

“Parker’s Back” and the Lyotardian Sublime

Postmodern theorist Jean-François Lyotard concludes his “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” with an aesthetic call-to-arms: “Let us wage a war on totality; let us bear witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name” (82). It is an uncompromising and bellicose conclusion to an equally uncompromising essay. Lyotard champions the avant-gardes in art in a denunciation of totalizing modernist metanarratives, and the sublime plays a crucial role in the battle that he would wage. Lyotard adopts the sublime as theorized by Kant and appropriates it for his purposes, and the paradox of sublimity in which pleasure and pain are bafflingly mingled remains the focal point: “the sentiment of the sublime is, according to Kant, a strong and equivocal emotion; it carries with it both pleasure and pain. Better still, in it pleasure derives from pain” (77).

The painful pleasure of the Kantian sublime hinges on a realization of the limits of human cognitive faculties, a painful defeat of the human ability to connect sensory objects to Ideas of reason, and a subsequent pleasure at the very fact that reason would recognize that which escapes the sensible and make a place for it in its scheme. This is the “supersensible” power of the human subject, illustrating the freedom of the subject from the empirical particulars in which it is enmeshed and the ascendancy of subjective reason over the sensible world that it would schematize. Lyotard paraphrases the drama of the Kantian sublime thus:

It takes place...when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, match a concept. We have the Idea of the world (the totality of what is), but we do not have the capacity to show

an example of it... We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to “make visible” this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate. Those are Ideas of which no presentation is possible.

By this understanding, in the Kantian scheme, the biblical commandment against embodying the sacred in a ‘graven image’ is “the most sublime passage in the Bible in that it forbids all presentation of the Absolute.” Lyotard applies this idea to a theory of the arts in asserting that “sublime paintings” will operate on an aesthetic of negative representation: “it will enable us to see only by making it impossible to see; it will please only by causing pain” (78). It is by this understanding of sublimity that Lyotard will draw his distinction between modern aesthetics and postmodern aesthetics, and thus between modernity and postmodernity. “Modern aesthetics,” he writes, “is an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace or pleasure.” The unrepresentable, then, is present as an incompleteness of form, and an incompleteness that could be filled, even if only in fantasy. “The postmodern,” on the other hand, “would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable” (81). The postmodern aesthetic, according to Lyotard, is more truly sublime because it does not reach out to a lost totality, does not yearn nostalgically for a direct relationship between object and Idea.

In his study *The Sublime*, Philip Shaw outlines the reasoning behind Lyotard’s war on totality in light of the sublime. The call to “bear witness to the unrepresentable” is a call to disrupt both capitalist economics and totalitarian politics:

Lyotard, for example, regards the artistic avant-garde as a vital tool in exposing the logic of late capitalism, arguing that the resistance of 'difficult' forms of art to public consensus marks the limits of a consumer-based society...The artistic category that Lyotard assigns to the business of forging consensus is the beautiful. With its fostering of unity, harmony, and communicability, the beautiful becomes the perfect form for consolidating the version of reality that best suits the needs of a capitalist regime. (125)

Beauty, as in the scheme of the Burkean sublime, is the aesthetic that promotes and maintains a harmonious system of relationships, whether personal, political, or economical. When the aesthetic is appropriated for political use, the beautiful becomes a way of bolstering this unity and harmony and therefore a way of safeguarding the system. The sublime, by its excessive transgression of beauty, serves to disrupt the system that beauty keeps in place. Lyotard sees the sublime as working against totalitarianism in a similar fashion, and Shaw paraphrases his work from *Just Gaming* in order to illustrate this. "Lyotard argues," he writes, "that the injustice and terror of totalitarianism proceeds directly from the assumption that the true, which refers to a determinate object of cognition, and the just, which refers to an indeterminate idea, may be united" (125-6). The justice of a political system, then, is contingent upon that system's realization that justice itself is an indeterminate idea that cannot be embodied, the system's awareness of the sublime rupture between justice and its own concrete existence as a system: "Any society claiming to embody the idea of the just is immediately unjust, for it precludes the possibility of dissent. For politics to be just, therefore, it must strive to affirm the idea of the just as 'unpresentable' " (126).

An aesthetics of sublimity is necessitated, therefore, when the artist would contest the social reality that an aesthetics of the beautiful would serve to bolster. The artist, in this situation, must exhibit a deliberate obscurity that eschews "realistic" clarity and instead upholds the

unpresentable. Instead of working “to stabilize the referent, to arrange it according to a point of view which endows it with recognizable meaning,” artists must “refuse to lend themselves to such therapeutic uses. They must question the rules of the art of painting or of narrative as they have learned and received them from their predecessors” (74). By refusing to serve the ends of conformity the artist becomes a prophet in both the aesthetic and the social landscape, and Lyotard notes that the artist is thereby open to the typical fate of the prophet, which is rejection: “they are destined to have little credibility in the eyes of those concerned with ‘reality’ and ‘identity’; they have no guarantee of an audience” (75). Invention and innovation within the arts (and Lyotard mentions here both painting and writing) become means of preserving differences by bearing witness to the unpresentable that makes difference possible. Innovation is also, therefore, the means of “waging war on totality,” of breaking open an aesthetic of beauty that is a little too closed, a little too supportive of the status quo.

Robert Baker identifies this early figuration of the sublime by Lyotard as “a manifestation of the inventive powers of a subject that, subverting dominant social and cultural conventions, departs for the unforeseeable” (74-5). Baker notes a shift in Lyotard’s conception of the sublime over the course of his career, arguing that “in the late eighties Lyotard, while continuing to think of modernist art as the preeminent site of the sublime, comes to conceive of the sublime less in terms of the inventive power of the subject than in terms of a destitution of the subject” (69). There is in Baker’s understanding of this later formulation of the sublime a certain obscure *telos* to this destitution of the subject, as he asserts that Lyotard “discerns in the sublime a certain ‘opening’ of the human being toward a dimension of its own ‘inhuman’ being that is radically different from the ‘dehumanization’ effected by the functionalist networks

organizing modern society” (75). A later collection of Lyotard’s essays, *The Inhuman*, serves for Baker as an exemplar of this later conception of the sublime, and it is by the terms of *The Inhuman* that I would like to consider O’Connor’s story “Parker’s Back.” Before turning to this story, however, I would like to consider Lyotard’s elaboration of his manifesto for the postmodern artist from *The Inhuman* alongside Carl Skrade’s volume *God and the Grotesque* and O’Connor’s nonfiction work in *Mystery and Manners*. There can certainly be no complete correlation between O’Connor’s vision of the vocation of the artist in the twentieth century and Lyotard’s vision of the postmodern artist, as O’Connor does in fact express a totality of vision that is informed by very specific theological presuppositions. There are, however, some interesting parallels between O’Connor’s call to bear witness to mystery (and the connection of a grotesque aesthetic to this mystery) and Lyotard’s demand that the artist “bear witness to the unrepresentable.”

If Lyotard in “Answering the Question” serves as a voice crying in the wilderness, bearing witness to the coming of an artistic strategy that will disrupt totalizing schemes by refusing to operate under modernist strictures for the communication of meaning, he seems in *The Inhuman* to have found his prophecy fulfilled in the work of avant-garde artist Barnett Baruch Newman. Newman’s paintings, generally canvases of solid color which are prevented from homogeneity by the presence of isolated streaks of other colors, are presentations of no discernible forms. Newman bears witness to the unrepresentable by making it the very subject matter of his work, and by doing so evokes the sublimity of the unrepresentable. One cannot speak *about* this work, but only in response to this work: “The best gloss consists of the question:

what can one say? Or of the exclamation ‘Ah’. Of surprise: ‘Look at that.’ So many expressions of a feeling which does have a name in the modern aesthetic tradition...the sublime” (“Newman: the Instant” 80). The painting of Newman delivers a message, but not a message discernible by the terms of any linguistic discourse; its message is instead its own presence, and this presentation of presence is aesthetically sublime.

The sublimity of Newman’s painting, according to Lyotard, turns essentially on the Burkean concept of delight, though delight in this case is accommodated to the subject matter. The terror of the Burkean sublime, according to Lyotard, hinges on a threatened annihilation of being: “shadows, solitude, silence and the approach of death may be ‘terrible’ in that they announce that the gaze, the other, language or life will soon be extinguished. One feels that it is possible that nothing more will take place.” The sublime passion of delight comes when this threatened annihilation is thwarted, when being persists in the face of the possibility of nothing: “What is sublime is the feeling that something will happen, despite everything, within this threatening void, that something will take ‘place’ and will announce that everything is not over.” By this articulation the commonest of things, “mere ‘here’, the most minimal occurrence” (84) may be sublime.

It is by this sense of immediacy that Lyotard distinguishes the Burkean sublime from the Kantian sublime in the essay “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde.” This immediacy, which Kant eschews in an attempt to escape the empiricism of Burke’s theory, is linked directly to Burke’s understanding of terror as the ruling principle of the sublime. Lyotard notes that the concern with immediate and overpowering terror sets a place for the ‘*there is*,’ the ‘*is it happening*’ in a way that the sublime as formulated by Kant does not. Kant, according to Lyotard

...strips Burke's aesthetic of what I consider to be its major stake—to show that the sublime is kindled by the threat of nothing further happening... This entirely spiritual passion, in Burke's lexicon, is called terror. Terrors are linked to privation: privation of light, terror of darkness; privation of others, terror of solitude; privation of language, terror of silence; privation of objects, terror of emptiness; privation of life, terror of death. What is terrifying is that the *It Happens* does not happen, that it stops happening.

The sense of delight that is associated with the sublime, then, stems from the continuation of the *It Happens* in spite of the terror that it will cease. And in this delight the subject of the sublime experience encounters being in its most immediate sense, before it has been synthesized and systematized by thought. The task of the artist of the Lyotardian sublime is to bear witness to this encounter with the occurrence that has not been synthesized by thought. This will be a bearing witness to “elementary sensations” that “are hidden in ordinary perception which remains under the hegemony of habitual or classical ways of looking,” a seeking after “perception at its birth—perception ‘before’ perception” (102). Representing the sublimity of perception at its birth will of necessity be a representation of indeterminacy that will explode the frameworks of aesthetic theory: “The task of having to bear witness to the indeterminate carries away, one after another, the barriers set up by the writings of theorists and by the manifestos of the painters themselves” (103). Bearing witness to indeterminacy is part-and-parcel of waging war on the totality that would rush perception on from its birth and corral it within the fences of theory, that would forget the delight of the “elementary sensations” that rise in response to the sublime terror of the cessation of being.

Lyotard outlines the stakes of this war in his introduction to the essays collected in *The Inhuman*. The very term ‘inhuman’ operates on two levels in Lyotard's thought, and so comes to signify two different ideas which he takes pains to make distinct: “The inhumanity of the system

which is currently being consolidated under the name of development (among others) must not be confused with the infinitely secret one of which the soul is hostage.” The distinction is between an inhumanity that is extrinsic to humanity and would impose itself on humanity, and an inhumanity that is intrinsic to humanity, a haunting presence, a “familiar but unknown guest” (2) that opens the human to indeterminacy. Lyotard identifies this as a ‘native indetermination’ (6), a remainder of the child-state before the process of socialization. The dialectic between this native indeterminacy and the socialized human being is a distinguishing feature of humanity, as human socialization requires rigorous education in order to give definition to obscurity:

If humans were born human, as cats are born cats (within a few hours), it would not be...I don't even say desirable, which is another question, but simply possible, to educate them. That children have to be educated is a circumstance which only proceeds from the fact that they are not completely led by nature, not programmed. The institutions which constitute culture supplement this native lack. (3)

Despite education, socialization, and other cultural accretions, however, Lyotard declares that a trace of this ‘native lack’ persists to adulthood and manifests itself even in the institutions of culture, and he is quick to acknowledge that this trace bears positive implications. The indeterminacy of childhood, as the “eminently human,” is a nexus of possibility, and while it quickly becomes “the hostage of the adult community, is also what manifests to this community the lack of humanity it is suffering from, and which calls on it to become more human” (4).

The lack of humanity from which the adult community suffers is exemplified for Lyotard by the presence and prevalence of the other inhumanity that he outlines in this introduction. It is this inhumanity that constrains native indetermination with over-determination, and Lyotard identifies this constraining inhumanity as “the metaphysics of development,” the driving force behind the technological-capitalist social order. The danger of development in this sense is its

anaesthetization of human life through an ethos of self-perpetuating self-concern: “The striking thing about this metaphysics of development is that it needs no finality. Development is not attached to an Idea, like that of the emancipation of reason and of human freedoms...It assimilates risks, memorizes their informational value and uses this as a new mediation necessary to its functioning.” The only limit to development is the death of the sun, the universal apocalypse: “The anticipated explosion of this star is the only challenge objectively posed to development.” The war cry with which Lyotard ends the introduction to *The Inhuman* is the call to resist this inhumanity, and to resist it specifically by bearing witness to the other inhumanity, “the miserable and admirable indetermination from which [the human] was born and does not cease to be born...It is the task of writing, thinking, literature, arts, to venture to bear witness to it” (7). This task, as Lyotard makes clear in his essays on the art of the avant-garde, will be that of the sublime, that which resists the consensus of the beautiful. And the result will inevitably be grotesque by the standards of the beautiful: “These works appear to the public of taste to be ‘monsters,’ ‘formless’ objects, purely ‘negative’ entities...When the point is to try to present that there is something that is not presentable, you have to make presentation suffer” (125).

While Carl Skrade’s 1974 volume *God and the Grotesque* precedes Lyotard’s introduction to *The Inhuman* by nearly two decades, the thesis of *God and the Grotesque* is strikingly similar to Lyotard’s in *The Inhuman*, though Skrade’s book exhibits a decidedly more theological set of concerns. For Skrade, the problem facing humanity at the close of modernity is also a depersonalized, dehumanized concern with development that refashions humanity in its own image: “Man exists to consume—increasingly—in order to sustain increasing production,

this vital index in the technological society” (29). Unlike Lyotard, however, Skrade is adamant in identifying this inhumanity with rationalism, as the inevitable endpoint of Enlightenment thought. Drawing on sources as various as Marx, Freud, Jacques Ellul, and Paul Tillich, Skrade launches a challenge to rationalism that occasionally borders on diatribe, accusing Western humanity of a worship of reason that, in its attempts to foreclose the indeterminate (Nothing, death), has effectively repressed the indeterminate.⁶ In Skrade’s argument, this repressed indetermination comes back maliciously in an institutionalized worship of death:

This study will argue that our technological, death-oriented culture has its roots in a rationalism of repression, a repression of the death instinct that then returns to dominate us. Reason seeks to order and structure life in neat, quiet compartments. But life, real life, simply is not neat and orderly. Life is replete with rough edges and fantastic happenings and chances and changes. Since reason cannot accept these challenges to its necessities, reason ultimately opts for death. It is, finally, only that which is dead which is certain to remain quiet and in order. (37)

By assuming a truly unattainable Archimedean point from which to survey reality, according to Skrade, such rationalism gives way to imperialistic universalism that worships efficiency, the “god of technique” (48), and invariably leads to a violence against the indeterminate (Skrade’s recurrent illustration is the fascism of Nazi Germany).

As a theologian, Skrade is naturally very much concerned with the implications of this particular inhumanity for humanity’s understanding of the divine. Skrade’s concern is that theology has become infected by what he would call the disease of rationalism, and has in turn sought to repress any traces of indetermination in both humanity and divinity. “Is it possible,” he asks, “for God-talk to be meaningful if it eliminates or represses man’s very real experience of

⁶ Though Skrade’s argument does occasionally become extreme, it should be noted that his thesis does not entail an absolute rejection of reason. What Skrade opposes is an exaltation of reason that would foreclose what it cannot synthesize.

the non-rational?” (12). Mining his own Judeo-Christian tradition for a challenge to this repression, Skrade advocates a reconsideration of the God of the Hebrew Bible as the God whose proper name is “not given to man. God is not known via propositional statements and reasons; rather, God is known only in events—often strange and violent events at that.” The name of this God is “Yahweh, a form of the Hebrew ‘to be’ verb which may be translated as a present (“I am who I am”), a future (“I will be what I will be”), or a causative (“I am the one who causes what happens to come to pass”)...this God is met and known only in events” (64).⁷ As a New Testament example of this unreasonable God, Skrade cites the life and death of Christ as presenting the “inconceivable insight that this God is met not in power, as man would consider reasonable, but in weakness, in suffering...for Jesus, he is met...unreasonably, among us here, in the messiness of now” (64-5). A theology that would bear witness to this God would do so by bearing witness to the “*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*,” the fearful and fascinating numinous that “is not reducible to concepts or controls” (74-5). The aesthetic analog to this theology would be an aesthetics of the grotesque, which Skrade defines as “that which is incongruous with the accepted norms, that which by way of its ability to frighten or fascinate violates the standards, cultural and artistic, which consensual validation has sanctified” (82). While it would be hasty to make an outright equation between this aesthetic and that of the Lyotardian sublime, the connecting threads are certainly evident. Skrade upholds O’Connor as a practitioner of this grotesque aesthetics in fiction, and while he devotes a chapter to outlining the presence and the purpose of the grotesque in O’Connor’s fiction, I believe that O’Connor demonstrates this artistic vocation much more succinctly in her own essays.

⁷ This very Hebraic notion is one that Lyotard sees as crucial to understanding Newman’s art, which belongs to “the *Makom* or the *Hamakom* of Hebraic tradition—the *there*, the site, the place, which is one of the names given by the Torah to the Lord, the Unnameable.” (“The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” 89-90)

O'Connor's own justification for her use of a grotesque aesthetics is well-articulated in two essays particularly, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," and "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction." The former essay articulates this necessity as a response to the call the American writer receives to celebrate and bolster an ethos of American triumphalism. Those who declare an unparalleled American military and economic prosperity are impatient with the writer of discontent: "How, with all this prosperity and strength and classlessness staring you in the face, can you honestly produce a literature that doesn't make plain the joy of life?" O'Connor's response to this charge, a charge to an aesthetics of complicity (the negative form of beauty) is to posit that the writer would "begin to wonder at this point if there could not be some ugly correlation between our unparalleled prosperity and the stridency of these demands for a literature that shows us the joy of life. He may at least be permitted to ask if these screams for joy would be quite so piercing if joy were really so abundant in our prosperous society" (30). To the writer who would hold the sneaking suspicion that this call for joy comes rather from a domesticated despair and an anaesthetized and dehumanized sense of the beautiful and harmonious, the necessary task is to call the foundations of the consensus into question, and to do so by means of shock. This tension is the foundation for O'Connor's own battle cry, perhaps the closest that she comes to Lyotard's call for a war on totality: "you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and to the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures" (34). This necessary distortion bears immediate similarities to the Lyotardian sublime by calling into question both the congruence between social ideals and the social realities that bear them out and the nationalistic pride that would result from belief in such a

congruence, by providing a “revelation, not of what we ought to be but of what we are at a given time and under given circumstances..The first product of self-knowledge is humility, and this is not a virtue conspicuous in any national character” (34-5). This humility, for O’Connor, is inextricably connected to what will become one of her crucial terms, namely *mystery*. Though there are some inherent problems with equating mystery as understood by O’Connor to Lyotard’s sublime indeterminacy (problems to which I will return later), mystery in O’Connor’s vision assumes a similar role to ‘native indetermination’ in Lyotard’s.

O’Connor explicitly opposes mystery to rationalistic and technological progress in her essay “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” and like Skrade she makes a distinct connection between the rationalism that would erase mystery and the Enlightenment. Like Skrade, she also connects this rationalism with the genocidal horrors of the twentieth century. “Since the eighteenth century,” she writes, “the popular spirit of each succeeding age has tended more and more to the view that the ills and mysteries of life will eventually fall before the scientific advances of man, a belief that is still going strong even though we are the first generation to face total extinction because of these advances” (41). In its less overtly malignant manifestation, this totality of rationalism has subjected the human to a sort of sociological determinism, and O’Connor’s fear is that such a determinism leads to the abstraction of the human. This abstraction, this making inhuman of the human, becomes a temptation for the artist (who in this case is primarily the writer of fiction), risking a realism that is unreal, a realism that sees its responsibility to be a bearing-witness-to human reality as it is construed sociologically and not in its native state of mystery: “If the novelist is in tune with this spirit, if he believes that actions are predetermined by psychic make-up or the economic situation or some other

determinable factor, then he will be concerned above all with an accurate reproduction of the things that most immediately concern man, with the natural forces that he feels controls his destiny” (41). O’Connor opposes this aesthetic vision to that of the writer who “believes that our life is and will remain essentially mysterious,” who will be concerned with sociological reality “only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself...at a depth where adequate motivation and adequate psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted. Such a writer will be interested in what we don’t understand rather than what we do. He will be interested in possibility rather than probability” (41-2). This artist will find that the artistic vocation calls for an upsetting of the stabilizing and the determinate, the easily recognizable and synthesizable: “His way will much more obviously be the way of distortion” (42). The club-footed delinquent, the one-armed handyman, and the sideshow hermaphrodite preacher⁸ in all their grotesquery will bear the necessary challenge to the over-determined conception of humanity, because “a living deformed character is acceptable and a dead whole one is not” (“Fiction Writer” 27).

Lyotard calls for a necessary presentation of one inhumanity, that of our “native indetermination” that must be adequately refashioned before it can be synthesized into the community of consensus, a community that is prey to the other inhumanity of techno-scientific, capitalistic development. Skrade’s theological figuration of the issue deviates from Lyotard’s primarily in that “native indetermination” within the human is the very mark of the *imago dei*, a witness to the God of the Hebrews who eludes the human intellect, who is known “only in events.” For both of these thinkers, the strategy for battling a diseased totality is in an evocation

⁸ Crucial characters in O’Connor’s stories “The Lane Shall Enter First,” “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” and “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” respectively.

of what Lyotard calls “perception at its birth,” where the traces of native indetermination or the *imago dei* may perhaps be unspoiled. As I have noted, O’Connor’s concern with mystery bears some crucial distinctions that separate it from both of these notions, even from Skrade’s theological understanding of what is at stake. Before addressing these distinctions explicitly, however, I would like to offer a reading of O’Connor’s story “Parker’s Back,” suggesting that this story exhibits a particularly striking example of the struggle between the sublimity of Lyotard’s “perception at its birth,” of Skrade’s *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, and the inhuman totalities that bear it away. I believe that the story itself, while marking O’Connor’s inherent sympathies with such thought, will adequately demonstrate the points of divergence.

“Elementary sensation” is the other name that Lyotard gives to ‘perception at its birth,’ and elementary sensation is the ruling principle of the life of O.E. Parker, the protagonist of O’Connor’s story “Parker’s Back.” Parker’s uprootedness, his obsessive need for new tattoos, and perhaps most significantly his insistence on being known by his initials rather than his full name, all demonstrate his resistance to the over-determination (or even the slight determination) of elementary sensation. And if elementary sensation bears witness, as Lyotard would have it, to an initial wonderment at being in the face of nothing, then O.E. Parker is a man who exists continually in this state. “He was a boy whose mouth habitually hung open,” the story’s narrator says of Parker, “He was heavy and earnest, as ordinary as a loaf of bread” (513). In O’Connor’s country of backwoods eccentrics for whom intellectualism is an alien mode, this open-mouthed earthiness could very fairly be said to mark Parker as stupid or dense. Parker is thoroughly characterized as dim-witted, and the impulsiveness of his behavior prevents him from analysis of

his actions or thorough consideration of their implications. There is a paradox at work, however, for Parker's slack-jawed bewilderment is also the marker of something that is in both admirable and rare in the world as O'Connor presents it. Parker is a man of wonder, a man whose bafflement at what he sees is his connection to mystery. "Astonishment remains Parker's talent," according to Richard Giannone, "and his capacity for wonderment in the physical world leads him to God" (*Mystery of Love* 221). Parker's obsession with tattoos is rooted in this capacity for wonderment, and his constant and restless desire to decorate his body indicates that this elementary wonderment is for him a necessary and life-sustaining force.

If the sublime is that which gives rise to the elementary sensation, the "Ah!" that will not be determined further to suite the ends of any discourse or any metanarrative, then this too is exhibited in O.E. Parker's open-mouthed amazement. Parker's obsession with body art begins when, at the age of fourteen, he encounters at a fair a man who is completely tattooed, whose body is "a single intricate design of brilliant color. The man, who was small and sturdy, moved about on the platform, 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" (512-3). This display, initially random and surreal, takes the place for Parker of the patriotic experience: "Parker was filled with emotion, lifted up as some people are when the flag passes" (513). This is not an aesthetic sensation that works to produce social cohesion, that makes of Parker a citizen or a subject, but rather one that unsettles Parker, that makes evident to him what Lyotard would call the *It Happens*, opening him up to being-as-mystery, even his own being: "Parker had never before felt the least motion of wonder in himself. Until he saw the man at the fair, it did not enter his head that there was anything out of the ordinary about the fact that he existed. Even then it did

not enter his head, but a peculiar unease settled in him” (513). This unsettling unease, the effect of the sublime upon the human, continues for Parker even after his imitation of the tattooed man has begun, and becomes the fuel for his quest. His growing collection of anchors and rifles, big cats and cobras, European royalty and obscene phrases fails to capture the plentitude of presence that so fascinates Parker in the tattooed stranger. Parker’s efforts produce an effect that is “not of one intricate arabesque of colors but of something haphazard and botched. A huge dissatisfaction would come over him and he would go off and find another tattooist and have another space filled up” (514). Parker himself becomes the presentation of the unrepresentable, and as an aesthetic work his body bears frustrated witness to its own incompleteness. If Parker’s tattooed body fails to cohere aesthetically in the way that the carnival-man’s does, if it is incomplete in its status as “haphazard and botched,” it is also incomplete in the space that remains to be filled: “The front of Parker was almost completely covered but there were no tattoos on his back. He had no desire for one anywhere he could not readily see it himself.” Though this is an intentional incompleteness, though Parker himself does not consciously desire a tattoo for his back, this missing content is linked by the narrator directly to Parker’s unsettling unease and his insatiable and anonymous desire for he-knows-not-what: “As the spaces on the front of him for tattoos decreased, his dissatisfaction grew and became general” (514).

The native indeterminacy that reasserts itself, if only for an instant, in the sublime is a challenge and a frustration to totalizing schemes, and Parker himself unwittingly effects this frustration in the uprooted pattern of his living. It is initially the navy that presents a challenge to Parker’s inherent desire for the unrepresentable plentitude of the original tattooed man, and it does so by squelching the immediacy of his sense of wonderment and conditioning him to become a

part of a mechanized totality. “After a month or two in the navy,” we are told, “his mouth ceased to hang open. His features hardened into the features of a man. He stayed in the navy five years and seemed a natural part of the gray mechanical ship.” Parker retains a trace that resists being synthesized into this scheme, however, exhibited in “his eyes, which were the same pale slate-color as the ocean and reflected the immense spaces around him as if they were a microcosm of the mysterious sea” (514). Parker himself bears the image of Skrade’s non-rational God, and as such his break with the navy is a “dishonorable discharge” after his passions lead him to desert his post and spend a drunken period of residence in an unfamiliar city. Parker becomes a representative of mystery, but it is mystery without *telos*, mystery that resists being schematized by either social or theological institutions and remains within the instant: “Long views depressed Parker. You look out into space like that and you begin to feel as if someone were after you, the navy or the government or religion” (516). To conceive of reality beyond the instant provokes in Parker the same unease that is articulated by The Misfit that “Yes’m, somebody is always after you” (“A Good Man” 129). Parker’s safeguard against such long views that would seek to contain and determine the essential mystery of his being is to keep his given name a mystery by reducing it to initials; he is O.E. Parker, and his full name is accessible only in “the files of the navy and the government, and it was on his baptismal record which he got at the age of a month; his mother was a Methodist” (517). As Parker’s wife Sarah Ruth understands all too well, the biblical significance of his full name, Obadiah Elihu, would implicate him in one of these depressing long views, the narrative of biblical history.⁹

⁹The name Obadiah, one of the minor prophets of the Old Testament, carries with it a specific identification that is grounded in obedience to the God of Israel: the Hebrew translates as “servant of the LORD.” Similarly, Elihu (“God is he”) appears in the book of Job to defend the divinity against Job’s accusations.

Though it is, as is characteristic of an O'Connor story, an encounter with the divine that brings Parker's unease to a frenzy and drives him to the narrative's climax, it is crucial to note that this divine encounter within the text bears the markings of both Skrade's God-of-the-event (the Old Testament Yahweh) and Lyotard's *Makom* as opposed to the God of propositions that is frozen inside of abstract discourse. It is the God of a very Lyotardian sublimity. The impulse that eventually leads Parker to fill his unmarked back with a tattoo of a "religious subject" that his Straight Gospel wife will be unable to refuse is, in keeping with his impulsive character, a "dim half-formed inspiration." This inspiration, in addition to being incomplete, further provokes in Parker the sense of uneasy paranoia that he shares with the Misfit: "Once or twice he found himself turning around abruptly as if someone were trailing him" (520). The culmination of this unease is a violent epiphany, the theological significance of which is clear in its very subtlety. While bailing hay for the elderly woman who employs him, Parker receives a vision that harkens back typologically to the biblical passage in Exodus in which God as "I Am What I Am" is revealed to Moses. Parker's carelessness in his work leads to a ruinous accident that leaves Parker awestruck before a flaming tree¹⁰, unwittingly paying homage by his barefootedness to the hallowed ground on which he stands. However, he does not, like Moses, receive a specific vocational instruction, but instead makes his hurried way toward town and the tattoo parlor awash in an obscurity of purpose, knowing only "that there had been a great change in his life, a leap forward into a worse unknown" (521). As is standard for Parker, however, his brush with the indeterminate divine does not effect a merely internal change, but leaves a mark on his very body. Upon reaching the tattoo parlor, he is unrecognizable and inhuman to the

¹⁰ This tree itself frustrates Parker in that it exists simply for its own sake. His elderly employer is "the kind who would not cut down a large old tree because it was a large old tree" (520).

tattoo artist, who “did not seem to recognize Parker in the hollow-eyed creature before him” (521).

If the image of Christ that comes to fill Parker’s back does indeed identify and give presentation to both the obscure desire that fuels Parker’s impulsiveness and the obscure presence that haunts this desire, we should note the extent to which this image is itself in keeping with the aesthetically grotesque sublime that links Lyotard, Skrade, and O’Connor. Parker insists that an image of God be placed on his back, and Parker refuses the discussion of the particulars of the doctrine of the Trinity that this insistence would lead him to. “Father, Son or Spirit?” the tattoo artist asks, and Parker’s reply is impatient and insistent: “Just God...Christ, I don’t care. Just so it’s God.” As Parker surveys the book of available images of Christ, he does so in a way that eschews the familiar and recognizable images, each of which carries a certain non-threatening social implication; “The Good Shepherd, Forbid Them Not, The Smiling Jesus, Jesus the Physician’s Friend.” Parker’s encounter with the book leads him from beauty to sublimity, as the images of Christ gorily crucified become increasingly more grotesque: “Parker’s heart began to beat faster and faster until it appeared to be roaring inside him like a great generator.” The presence here of a Burkean sublimity of mounting panic is apparent, but it is the culmination of Parker’s search that exhibits the thought-freezing, discourse-silencing fascination of the Lyotardian sublime. Parker’s “heart too appeared to cut off” in the face of “the haloed head of a flat stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes. He sat there trembling; his heart began slowly to beat again as if it were being brought to life by a subtle power” (522).

This Byzantine Christ is not by any means an avant-garde painting, it is not Barnett Baruch Newman’s nearly-homogenous canvas that presents no discernible form. It does,

however, serve as a disrupting presentation on several levels. As an icon of the Eastern Orthodox Church, it is foreign all at once to the Methodism of Parker's baptism, to the Straight Gospel spirituality of Sarah Ruth Parker, and to O'Connor's own Roman Catholicism. In a reading of "Parker's Back," Ralph Wood highlights the intentional distortion inherent in this representation:

This is the Pantocrator, the Orthodox icon of the Lord of the Universe, the Master of all things visible and invisible, He Who Is. Its effect on Parker is precisely what iconic art seeks to accomplish: it commands his response. Icons are unlike anything in the Western artistic tradition. They deliberately reject all concern with proportion and perspective, all realistic imitation of the created order. Icons are deliberately flat and disproportionate in order that divine reality might emanate from them. (46)

The Pantocrator that is inscribed on Parker's back carries with it authority, and for Parker the troubling power that the image immediately exerts is centralized, like the authority of his wife, in the eyes. As he lies sleepless on his cot at the Haven of Light Christian Mission, Parker tries in vain to recollect the image of the Byzantine Christ's face, and "even though he could not summon up the exact look of those eyes, he could still feel their penetration. He felt as though, under their gaze, he was as transparent as the wing of a fly" (524). Under the scrutiny of these eyes, Parker comes to realize the incoherence, the inhumanity of his very soul, revealed as "a spider web of facts and lies that was not at all important to him but which appeared to be necessary in spite of his opinion" (527). The penetrating eyes issue a command, and while Parker recognizes this as a command to obedience, they issue another command as well, one that does not limit itself to Parker but issues outward from the sublime image on his back. The Byzantine Christ is heralded by silence that speaks "as plainly as if silence were a language itself" (522), and it continues to command this silence as Parker carries it out from the tattoo

parlor and into the world. When Parker makes his inebriated entry into the pool hall and displays his new tattoo to his friends there, the effect is consistent: “There was a silence in the pool room which seemed to Parker to grow from the circle around him until it extended to the foundations under the building and upward through the beams in the roof” (526). The silence of Parker’s open-mouthed bewilderment at his own existence, the silence of discourse in the face of the sublime, is what Parker’s very presence commands once his back has been filled.

This command to silence, however, fails upon Parker’s return home at the story’s conclusion, and it fails in the very instant in which he attempts to control the command, to actively make it his own and impose it upon Sarah Ruth. It is certainly true that Parker’s motivation for his final tattoo is an attempt to control Sarah Ruth; Parker’s choice of the image of Christ is the culmination of a search for the “exactly the right one to bring Sarah Ruth to heel” (520). It is also apparent, however, that this seems to constitute Parker’s endeavor to emancipate *himself* from Sarah Ruth as much as it is an endeavor to subject Sarah Ruth to him. If Parker’s role could be designated as bearing witness to the unrepresentable, to presenting the indetermination that destabilizes and makes way for the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, Sarah Ruth comes to represent, in opposition to this, a far more developed theology. One prevailing strand of interpretation among O’Connor critics is to identify Sarah Ruth as a representative of the Manichean Gnosticism against which O’Connor designates her fiction an “incarnational art,”¹¹ and I find this to be a largely adequate assessment of her character. Sarah

¹¹ Ralph Wood connects Sarah Ruth explicitly to a distinctively American brand of Gnosticism, epitomized in Transcendentalism: “this woman, Parker’s wife, is an emblem of a larger suspicion of sacraments that has characterized American culture since the day in 1832 when Emerson refused to celebrate the Lord’s Supper at the Second Church of Boston.” (44) O’Connor herself connects this Emersonian action to American Gnosticism in her essay “Novelist and Believer”: “When Emerson decided, in 1832, that he could no longer celebrate the Lord’s Supper unless the bread and wine were removed, an important step in the vaporization of religion in America was taken, and the spirit of that step has continued apace” (161).

Ruth is the daughter of a Straight Gospel preacher, and in her case “Straight” comes to signify “direct,” as she insists on the direct access to transcendence, unmediated by material reality, that O’Connor recognizes and deplores in American Protestantism. The divine is for Sarah Ruth sublimely supersensible, and any representation of this God is both a failed representation and an idol: “He’s a spirit. No man shall see his face.” Parker’s tattoos are to her a “heap of vanity” (515), and so the Byzantine Christ naturally exceeds mere vanity and is “Idolatry!” (529).

If Parker’s penchant for the elementary sensation keeps him within the instant, Sarah Ruth’s Straight Gospel spirituality serves as a spiritual schematization, a “long view” that to Parker is over-determination. As ethereal as the God that she worships is, Sarah Ruth adheres to a strict system, a system that to the impulsive and carnally-driven Parker is constraining not only because it leaves no room for the basic pleasures of smoking, drinking, and profanity, but because it also subjects Parker to the responsibility of a coherent identity, an identity that he would prefer to keep obscure and unstable. Though Sarah Ruth will not allow their marriage ceremony to be held in a church (as even the established church is idolatrous), she and Parker are married in an Ordinary’s office that is “lined with cardboard file boxes and record books with dusty yellow slips of paper hanging out of them,” and when the appropriate financial transaction has taken place the Parkers are given “some forms out of a machine” (518), effectively on file and defined as husband and wife. As the two live out their married life, Sarah Ruth’s spiritual system becomes a constant and nagging warning, as “Parker did nothing much when he was at home but listen to what the judgment seat of God would be like for him if he didn’t change his ways” (519). If Parker will not stabilize his own identity, according to Sarah Ruth, it will be stabilized for him before the judgment seat of God.

Despite my general agreement with those who would identify Sarah Ruth with a Manichean spirituality, I find that her role in the story is too complex to be dismissed as ideological over-determination that would repress or foreclose a native indeterminacy or as a rigidly formulated Gnosticism that violently represses the God-of-the-event. Parker is mystified by his marriage to Sarah Ruth and, anomaly as it may be, I believe that the union of these two may help to clarify the distinctive vision of “Parker’s Back,” and to illustrate the distinction between the mystery that O’Connor celebrates and the sublime indeterminacy of Lyotard, or the non-rational God of Skrade. While I do not completely accept John Desmond’s reading of Parker as thoroughly idolatrous (and Sarah Ruth, in turn, as more appropriately pious), his reading does serve to counterbalance a more one-sidedly critical treatment of Sarah Ruth through the realization of her primary importance. “Parker’s Back” is “unique in O’Connor’s canon,” Desmond writes, “because its theme of love is focused directly in terms of a vital man-woman relationship governed by the ‘long view’ of mankind’s place and role in the mystical community” (78). If Parker could be said to represent a Lyotardian sublimity of the elementary sensation and Sarah Ruth a supersensible sublimity that tends toward spiritual Gnosticism, then the narrative requires a synthesis of these two views in order to realize O’Connor’s incarnational project.

Before exploring this synthesis, however, a further clarification of what mystery means to O’Connor is necessary, and a further separation of O’Connor’s vision from that of Lyotard. Lyotard himself establishes a theologically charged distinction between the disembodied word of discourse and the visible, sensible figure in his essay “Figure Foreclosed.” Though the primary concern of this essay is with Sigmund Freud’s treatment of Judaism in his work *Moses and*

Monotheism, Lyotard's accompanying discussion of comparative religion speaks to the predicament of the Parkers, and does so in a way that provides a helpful demonstration of the point of divergence for O'Connor. Drawing from Freud's work, Lyotard establishes a "sequence of remarkable oppositions" (71) between Judaism and 'savage' or totemic religion (of which Christianity in this scheme becomes a resurgent example). It is on one of these, "Savage; Jew: visible; invisible," that I would like to seize, as it serves well to encapsulate the significance of "Parker's Back" within this framework. This distinction, according to Lyotard, "contrasts the Jew, the man of the book, with the savage, the man of the idol" (82). By refusing any representation of God apart from the divine word of the Law, Judaism establishes a metaphysics that rejects the visual in favor of the aural.¹² This is not a system of dialogue, however, because the chosen people do not speak; the chosen people receive a discourse, the Law, and do not respond. This is contrasted with the religion of the totemic, in which the senses (primarily the visual) are allowed a participatory relation to the implied transcendent order: "Existence is not divorced from concept, sensibility is reception, archaic passivity" (84). Divinity for the Jew is of necessity invisible, and the visible is suspect; for the totemist, however, the distinction itself is not so absolute.

To place O.E. and Sarah Ruth Parker within this framework would be rather easy. Sarah Ruth, the perfect Jew (in the Freudian/Lyotardian sense of "Figure Foreclosed"), would divorce "existence from concept": both Parker's final tattoo and the visible Church are infuriating idolatry. Parker, on the other hand, will not close his eyes so as to hear the word, and if he encounters the divine it is with eyes open, with all senses acutely attentive. Though these very

¹² "It is a fulfillment of the essence of the text, and its essence is that it is not addressed to the eye. The eyes must be closed if the word is to be heard" (82).

sensual concerns are central to O'Connor's vision, however, they are present in a distinctly differing form, as is Hebrew thought itself. In highlighting this distinction, I find Desmond's initial discussion of the subject to be more than adequate. Desmond places mystery at the center of O'Connor's biblical view of history, a view that upholds the Hebraic union of body and soul, matter and spirit, visible and invisible over and above Platonic dualism.¹³ He is careful to note, however, that mystery has a specific connotation in this scheme, a connotation that "has often been assumed, misunderstood, ignored, or glossed over...Sometimes it is used to suggest mystification, obscurantism, or total impenetrability" (9). In place of this understanding of mystery, one that would carry an almost complete affinity for the Lyotardian sublime, Desmond identifies mystery in O'Connor's work with mystery as it is presented by theologian Claude Tresmontant in his *Study of Hebrew Thought*. According to Tresmontant, a truly biblical understanding of mystery is not as an impenetrable obscurity that forever freezes thought but as "something so rich in intelligible content, so inexhaustibly full of delectation for the mind that no contemplation can ever reach its end. It is an eternal delectation of the mind" (Tresmontant 137).

What is crucial about this point for Desmond is that "mystery is intelligible; it is a proper subject of knowledge; it can be known *as* mystery" (9). Mystery implies an anagogical participation of the human sensible world with the divine transcendent world, and the linchpin for this participation is the historical Incarnation of God in Christ, the central event of the biblical vision of history. Christ, in his historical and personal particularity, becomes "the new shape of all things, yet he does not change by being realized in different things in creation, nor are they obliterated. The different elements and acts in creation and history are gathered up in

¹³ This is a decidedly different conception of Hebrew thought than that presented in "Figure Foreclosed," though it also stands in contrast to Lyotard's invocation of the *Makom* in *The Inhuman* and Skrade's identification of the Hebrew God as pure event.

him, and linked together meaningfully” (28). This is a “long view” to be sure, and again The Misfit, in his understanding that “Jesus thrown everything off balance” (“A Good Man” 131), becomes an eloquent prophet of O’Connor’s vision.

Within the framework of this vision, it can be seen that both O.E. and Sarah Ruth Parker err to one side or another—Parker realizes the significance of the sensible, but he will not allow it to be synthesized into any “long view,” which is the very thing upon which Sarah Ruth would seize at the expense of the sensible. In an attempt to rescue Sarah Ruth from complete defamation, Christina Bieber Lake accuses the majority of O’Connor critics of placing too little focus on “the necessary role Sarah Ruth plays in Parker’s redemption. It is out of desire to please her that he goes for another tattoo, and when he does, he comes to his real bodily limitation” (227). This thesis is strikingly accurate; until the decision to have Christ placed on his back, Parker does not care what specific images his tattoos present. If Parker’s redemption, for O’Connor, necessitates a move away from pure indetermination, then it is also Sarah Ruth, clearly, who forces him to claim his full name, an action that fulfills Parker’s desire for aesthetic and spiritual plentitude as much as does the tattoo of Christ itself, “turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts” (528). There is evidence within the text, however, to suggest that Sarah Ruth herself may not be entirely outside the reach of Parker’s embodied immanence.

Parker is convinced that if Sarah Ruth “had better sense, [she] could have enjoyed a tattoo on his back” (518), and he is certainly correct in this statement if we take “sense” to imply the sensual, the ‘sensible’ of the Kantian scheme. Certain instances within the story, however, suggest Sarah Ruth herself, by virtue of her association with Parker, to be in a process of

becoming more attuned to the sensible.¹⁴ While I would hold that Sarah Ruth's spirituality within the story remains decidedly Gnostic, there is certainly a subtle pattern at work in "Parker's Back" by which we may read Sarah Ruth to be drawn towards the physical, though in a much less dynamic way than Parker's obscure chasing after the transcendent. In the opening lines of the story, Sarah Ruth sits on the front porch snapping beans, and it is significant that among the spiritual reforms that she suggests to Parker is a return to "selling the fruits of the earth" (519), a connection to sensible creation, as opposed to suggesting a piously disembodied chastity. Additionally, as Desmond points out, Sarah Ruth's pregnancy implicates her in both the sensual pleasure of sex and biological reproduction. However, it is perhaps most significant to the present discussion that the 'elementary sensation,' the immediacy of wonder, is not entirely absent from Sarah Ruth's character. Upon first viewing Parker's tattooed arm, Sarah Ruth's reaction is tellingly ambiguous: "The girl gazed at this with an almost stupefied smile of shock, as if she had accidentally grasped a poisonous snake" (512). Parker's embodiment of Christ on his back is idolatry to Sarah Ruth, and it is significant that Sarah Ruth opts to punish Parker's body; as Parker moves toward the transcendent, Sarah Ruth moves toward the body.

While the text gestures towards this synthesis, however, it does not by any means complete it. As the story concludes, Sarah Ruth delivers her most violent reprimand for Parker's idolatrous presumption, scourging her husband with a broom and driving him from their house. To frame this in the terms of Lyotard's theory, this final antagonism between the two Parkers is more than appropriate, as it highlights the disparity between the metanarrative of Sarah Ruth's Straight-Gospel Christianity and Parker's resistance to ideological determination. It is

¹⁴ Thomas Haddox has suggested that, contrary to the abundant accusations of complete supersensible Gnosticism, "Sarah Ruth proves capable of some bodily pleasures" (416), most notably perhaps in the relish with which she eats from the bushel of apples that Parker brings to her.

additionally appropriate, however, as it highlights a turn that Parker takes that is highly contrary to the nature of the Lyotardian sublime, a turn toward control. Even in the beginnings of Parker's tattoo obsession, characterized by his striking sense of exaltation and wonder, there is a contrary current in his drive to accumulate body art, an egotistical current that is driven by the increased sense of sexual prowess the tattoos give him. This egotism resurfaces near the story's conclusion, as Parker attempts to assume the majesty of the Byzantine Pantocrator as his own and to use it to command Sarah Ruth. As he lies on the tattoo artist's table, Parker spends his idle time imagining "how Sarah Ruth would be struck speechless by the face on his back" (525). Instead of allowing the sublime to be the sublime, however, Parker attempts to force the effect, as he reveals the Christ-tattoo to his wife: "Look at this and then I don't want to hear no more out of you" (529). That Sarah Ruth rejects this injunction is significant on two levels, as it highlights more strongly her Gnostic faith's resistance to the sort of immanence that her husband represents while at the same time serves to remind O.E. Parker that the source of his awe is not to be commanded or used for control.

At the close of the story, the two Parkers remain polarized, and in their polarization the transcendent seems to be equally polarized from the sensible. After beating Parker with a broom, Sarah Ruth removes herself from his battered body and shakes out her domestic weapon "to get the taint of him off it." Parker, in contrast, remains within the sensational agony of the instant, "leaning against the tree, crying like a baby" (530). Parker may, unlike many of O'Connor's unluckier protagonists, escape from the text with his life, but he remains in isolation, alone before the painful and disruptive reality of the divine and without a stable interpersonal community with which to practice a participatory embodiment. The story's conclusion is rife

with ambiguity, and I find Gianonne's assessment that "God's revelation...takes the form of unknowability" (*Hermit Novelist* 257) to be strikingly apt. Like that of Mrs. May in "Greenleaf," Parker's entrance into the anagogical mystery of the participation of the sensible within the transcendent depends upon a gesture towards that which is not itself contained within the text. This gesture is encapsulated in the image on Parker's Back, the Christ that is now scourged. By the terms of O'Connor's theological vision, this is not simply a mark of the antagonism between basic experience and metanarrative, but marks Parker as a participant in the suffering of the Passion. In Lyotard's scheme of the sublime, the appropriate response to the agonized question at the severance of "existence...and signification...The only 'response' to the question of the abandoned that has ever been heard is not *Know why* but *Be*" (87). It is the way in which this issue holds significance in O'Connor's theological vision, the way in which the divine indeed speaks into and enters into the very experience of negativity, that I would like to examine in my final chapter through O'Connor's final novel *The Violent Bear it Away* as illuminated by Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt's distinctly theological figuration of the sublime.

Chapter 3

“Love Without Reason”:

The Violent Bear it Away

and the Theological Sublime

One could perhaps begin looking for the synthesis that “Parker’s Back” demands, a synthesis between the immanence of the elementary sensation and the transcendence of the ‘long view’ of history, in Mason Tarwater, the aged prophet of *The Violent Bear It Away*. It would be easy to characterize Mason as obsessed with his vocation as the lone prophet, as he does intentionally isolate himself from human society and exhibits several socially antagonistic characteristics. Such a characterization taken by itself, however, would overlook his status as a container for several violent contradictions. When George Rayber, his rationalist nephew, comes to take young Francis Marion Tarwater from his home at Powderhead he reacts with ferocity, blasting off Rayber’s ear with a shotgun. At the same time, however, Mason Tarwater occasionally exhibits an interpersonal interest, at times affectionate, in Rayber that is rare in O’Connor’s fiction. Before the scandalous revelation that Rayber has used him as a psychological case-study, Mason is “full of pride that his nephew had succeeded in having a composition published in a magazine” (75). If Mason Tarwater allows his radical sense of prophetic vocation to render him an outsider to society, he also has an awareness of human interdependency; if he is to be buried correctly, he needs the help of his nephew and apprentice, Francis Marion Tarwater. Perhaps the most succinct expression of Mason Tarwater’s character, however, is delivered by his friend (and customer of his moonshining operation) Buford Munson:

“He was deep in this life, he was deep in Jesus’ misery” (48). By the terms of O’Connor’s incarnational project the old prophet is thoroughly enmeshed in both the sensible world and the invisible, transcendent world in which it participates. O.E. Parker is “ordinary as a loaf of bread”; Mason Tarwater’s giant stomach extends over the top of his coffin “like over-leavened bread” (13) in a more saturated manifestation of Parker’s physical sensibility. For Giannone, Mason’s character is perfectly revealed in his name: “*Mystical* seems a peculiar adjective to describe the stance of [this] explosive, down-to-earth mountain of a man, a mason skilled in the materials of common clay; yet in his unlimited embrace of life he is mystical. The great-hearted Mason knows the depth of the physical” (*Mystery of Love* 128). Mason Tarwater is a builder, a moonshiner, and a grower of crops. Even his eschatological expectation is centered on the transfiguration of the most ordinary sensible experience; upon his death he will “hasten to the banks of the Lake of Galilee to eat the loaves and fishes that the Lord had multiplied” (21). It is in appropriate expectation of this meal that Mason Tarwater, in the opening pages of the novel, dies at a table set for breakfast.

If praise such as Giannone’s seems overly effusive for a man who is also capable of exhibiting a violent and confrontational intolerance, it is perhaps necessary in order to overemphasize the point: the sacramental focus of O’Connor’s incarnational art, the realization of the embodied and participatory nature of spiritual reality, is central to *The Violent Bear it Away* as it is in few other of O’Connor’s works. Frederick Asals marks a distinction between this novel and the earlier *Wise Blood* in the role that the material world assumes in each novel: “The deep antipathy toward matter that pervaded the first novel is gone in *The Violent Bear It Away*, or, more accurately, it is here...embodied in individual characters and viewed from an

ironic distance” (165). I would agree with this assertion, yet note that this work, while emphasizing the sacramental, also leaves an unusually large place for a more haunting presence, the very thing against which the wonderment of the Lyotardian sublime and O.E. Parker’s tattooed rapture serve as safeguards: negativity and nullity. By the terms of O’Connor’s theology, this appears as the severance of the material world from transcendent order. The tension between divine speech and divine silence occupies a significant place at the novel’s core, and *The Violent Bear It Away* has become a cornerstone text for critics concerned with negativity and nihilism in O’Connor’s fiction. In his well-known essay “Flannery O’Connor’s Devil,” John Hawkes identifies Tarwater’s disembodied friend/double, consistently identified as diabolical, as a mouthpiece for nihilism, and goes on to assert that this devil actually speaks on behalf of the author herself. O’Connor, he writes, commits herself “creatively to the antics of soulless characters who leer, bicker, or stare at obscenities on walls, or maim each other on a brilliant but barren earth” (94). Like Claire Katz, Hawkes posits a sadistic core to O’Connor’s fictional world, and he connects it to demonic negation: “Within her almost luridly bright pastoral world—usually created as meaningless and indifferent or corrupted—the characters of Flannery O’Connor are *judged*, victimized, made to appear only as absurd entities of the flesh...There is no security, no answer, to be found in...these horrifying and brightly imagined worlds” (94-5). Ralph Wood also allies the novel’s manifested demonic presence with nihilism but argues that the devil is a self-effacing enemy who “must deny all transcendent power and authority, and since the demonic is also a transcendent presence, he must deny the devil himself” (187). If we are to figure the negative in this way, as present in O’Connor’s work through the nihilistic goading of a demonic consciousness, then I would align my own reading of *The Violent Bear It*

Away most closely with that of Wood rather than with Hawkes's suggestion (similar to Blake's suggestion about Milton) that O'Connor is in truth of the devil's party without knowing it.

Marshall Bruce Gentry, however, offers something of a middle way, admitting that O'Connor's grotesquery is often informed by the devilish voice that espouses nihilism. He diverges, however, by declaring that "when one gets beyond the perverse thrill of calling O'Connor demonic and looks carefully at what Hawkes is saying, one discovers that he and many of his followers make the same basic mistake that many of O'Connor's religious critics make: equating O'Connor with her narrators" (145). Gentry's thesis rests on a clear distinction between narrative voice and authorial intent, and as such he presents the issue of "demonic nihilism" with a nuance that resists reducing the question to one of authorial allegiance.

I would like to provide a reading that is in many ways similar, focusing on a different form in which the negative appears in *The Violent Bear It Away*—neither as intellectual grounds for a philosophy of nihilism nor as the driving ethos of a sadistic narrator. I will instead focus on the negative as *experience*—the experience, faced by each of the novel's central characters, of the seeming severance of the material world from transcendent order, the experience of either the silence of God or of a thwarted sense of personal coherence and vocation. *The Violent Bear It Away* is often read as the narrative of Francis Marion Tarwater's prolonged and agonized choice between two clashing metanarratives—Mason Tarwater's prophetic theological vision and George Rayber's rationalist humanism. I have no quarrel with the reading that Tarwater does inevitably choose one and reject the other—I subscribe to such a reading myself. I will focus, however, on a different theme within the novel, on the perception that Mason Tarwater, George Rayber, and Francis Marion Tarwater each experience a universe devoid of metanarrative. I will

hold that this experience, whether it is figured as the silence of God or as the shattering of the character's sense of self and vocation, serves to call each character away from a particular idealization of reality, whether the grounds are rational, theological, or egotistical, and toward the physical world as an anagogical, sacramental participant in the transcendent. This is itself a theological vision with O'Connor's own particular nuances. To this end, I find Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt's essay "The Theological Sublime" particularly illuminating.

Bauerschmidt's formulation of a theological sublime turns upon a sacramental aesthetics, a fusion of visible and invisible, of surface and depth. The exigency for his essay is the rise and attempted definition of postmodernity, the attempt to grasp and name that which comes after the death of "the reign of modern 'clear and distinct' ideas" (201). Lyotard is Bauerschmidt's representative spokesperson for postmodernity, and if Lyotard's proclamation of postmodernity as the onset of a general incredulity towards metanarrative also implicates the Christian metanarrative, Bauerschmidt as a Christian theologian does not follow by equating postmodernity with epistemological nihilism. To assume this view, he states, "presumes an identification of modernity with truth and reason," and Bauerschmidt believes that the very collapse of the modernist metanarrative of the emancipation of the human through reason effects a certain clearing of the air, producing an opening for "a theological account of truth—an account that belongs neither to modernity nor to premodernity or postmodernity—that can begin to acquire new force as the end of the reign of modern 'clear and distinct ideas' comes into view. In this sense, postmodernity can be a propitious moment for theology" (201). Though Bauerschmidt holds that Lyotard's pronouncement of the end of metanarrative is itself in

continuity with a modernist emancipatory metanarrative, he distinguishes this account of postmodernity from another that is given by Lyotard in the essay “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism,” the account of postmodernism as the end of suspicion. This account is bound up in Lyotard’s figuration of the sublime.

The postmodern aesthetic of the sublime avoids, in Lyotard’s terms, the nostalgia that is associated with the modern aesthetic of the sublime, a nostalgia that posits the reality of the supersensible as the missing contents of representation, and Bauerschmidt associates this with the end of a certain modernist form of suspicion:

The postmodern shares with the modern a sense of the lack of reality of all representation, but is no longer suspicious of received representations, for it realizes that a lack of reality only warrants suspicion if one presumes that there is a ‘real’ to which one has some sort of (at least negative) access... In modernism the corrosion of suspicion strips away all exterior decoration—whether in art or philosophy—to reveal the sublime as what cannot be indicated by the bare form, while in postmodernity the sublime is the ever-shifting figuration of the surface. (203)

The unrepresentable is present in the superficial components of representation instead of in the ideal that is inevitably short-changed by representation. In the tortured, often grotesque representation lies the reality of the unrepresentable. This is a moment of potential for Bauerschmidt in that it effects a certain grounding of the aesthetic *and* of the human self that is decentered and called into question by the death of metanarrative: “The self is decentered—not in the sense of being fragmented, but of being unlocked from its Cartesian isolation—so as to discover truth in the concrete objects of the world” (204). The human self is no longer the *cogito* that faces (and is separate from) the material cosmos, but is itself bound up in material and historical particularity.

Bauerschmidt writes as an orthodox Christian theologian, and attempts to appropriate the terms of the Lyotardian sublime to call for a certain “theological realism” (209). This vantage point opposes certain movements within Christian theology itself, movements that are fueled by a desire for the ideal behind historical particularity, a “supersensible” theological purity that is free of the historical and cultural accretions of any established ecclesial body or movement:

One might say that just as modern aesthetics sought to register the sublime by stripping away superfluous ornamentation in the pursuit of pure functionality, so too the modern theological project has been to seek the ‘essence’ of ‘religion’ by clearing the ground of dogmatic, ritual, and narrative accretions. And when this essence is found, it is found as a certain kind of experience, just as for Kant the sublime is registered as a certain expansion of the soul. (207)¹⁵

Bauerschmidt champions theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar as presenting an alternative theological aesthetic that “seeks the unrepresentable mystery of God not through abstraction from particular categorically apprehended forms, but precisely *in* those forms” (208).

Bauerschmidt is quick to note, however, that there is at least one irreconcilable distinction between this theological aesthetics and that of Lyotard: for Balthasar there is one particular form that illuminates the totality of forms, and that is the Incarnate Christ. “One might,” Bauerschmidt writes, “put this in Lyotard’s terms by saying that for Balthasar there is in fact a master narrative that speaks the truth of the world. This is a fragmented, *crucified*, narrative, but it is still *one* narrative, which presents the glory of the triune God’s differentiated unity” (209).

As this narrative, this Christ-form, Bauerschmidt presents the “three-fold body of Christ; his ‘natural’ body that was born of the Virgin Mary and ascended into heaven, his ecclesial body; and his eucharistic body” (209). Bauerschmidt’s formulation of a theological sublime lies within

¹⁵ This theology of the modernist sublime, figured as a rather Kantian theology, is represented in Bauerschmidt’s essay by theologians such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Karl Rahner.

his reading of this three-fold body as presenting a baptized form of “themes...which are sometimes thought of as distinctly ‘postmodern’—negation, bricolage, and alterity” (209). The crucified body of Christ becomes a tortured representation, in Lyotardian terms, of the unrepresentable God, and it is with this tortured form that Bauerschmidt enacts a drama of sublimity in which the divinity is both object and subject. In the crucifixion, God experiences the negation of God, and Bauerschmidt interprets this as presenting a certain hope beyond negativity within the very experience of negativity itself:

...it is the hope that is given paradoxical voice in Christ’s cry of dereliction, the hope given birth by the cross seen as a trinitarian event in which God’s very being is extended to encompass even the ultimate alienation of hell and damnation, the hope beyond death that is awakened by Christ as he breaks bread with his disciples at Emmaus. We are no longer (or at least no longer take ourselves to be) citizens of the ancient cosmos imbued with the divine; our experience of the world is an experience of godlessness. But in the cross we are presented with a God who is present even in godlessness, and in the resurrection we are promised that godlessness shall not have the last word. (211)

The presence of the term “godless” here may be a bit misleading within a conversation that is framed by Flannery O’Connor’s uncompromising Southern prophets, since in the Southern Fundamentalist idiom “godless” becomes largely a term of moral indictment, a reference to a life characterized by unrepentant sin and rejection of religion. “Godless” for Bauerschmidt, however, is the experience of negativity, the experience of the human being who inhabits neither the intrinsically divine cosmos of the pre-Christian world nor the ecclesiastically-structured totality of medieval Christendom, but rather lives in a cosmos in which the transcendental Signified appears to be effectively absent. In Bauerschmidt’s scheme, this experience becomes a participation in the “‘cruciform life of Jesus,” in which the “cross and resurrection, in their very

negativity and obscurity, become the icon by which God presents to us God's own unrepresentable trinitarian life, and we are called not to irony, but to adoration and participation" (211). In the terms of O'Connor's anagogical vision, the experience of negativity becomes a participation in the suffering of Christ, and therefore it is all too fitting that O.E. Parker initially enters a world of defeat and bewilderment upon receiving Christ on his back.

This is not the conclusion of Bauerschmidt's sublime drama, however, as the sublime event includes both shattering and reconstitution. In Bauerschmidt's scheme, the Church, the ecclesiastical body, becomes a sacrament of the reconstituted body of Christ, a baptized version of postmodern *bricolage* that itself is a fragmented presentation of the unrepresentable divine through the Johannine notion that the dwelling of God is in *caritas*. This becomes a call towards historical and material particularity in that *caritas* is in this case concrete; "the fundamentally invisible reality of God manifests itself not simply in Christ...but also through the manifold concrete acts of *caritas* enacted within the Body of Christ" (212). There is a further sublimity here, as the presence of the divine in these acts of love is "not as some original that is imitated—even for those who do them there is no way of seeing the original apart from these acts—but as the sublime that is presented in that multitude" (212). The final turn of Bauerschmidt's argument is a gesture toward the Eucharist as the "sacrament of the Church, since it is the 'sign and cause' by which the Church is constituted in union with Christ." In a gesture that strikes a chord with O'Connor's concern for the sacrament, the material realities of bread and wine within the Eucharist are indispensable, as "this reality is not, as it were, self-subsisting, but is produced through the instrumentality of the sign (*sacramentum*) of bread and wine, through which the power of Christ's eucharistic body, which is both reality and sign (*res et sacramentum*) is

exercised. This odd category of that which is both reality-and-sign seeks to articulate the coinhabitation of depth and surface” (214). For Bauerschmidt the Eucharist becomes an entrance of divine reality into the concrete and particular realities of desire and hospitality, as given image in the eschatological wedding-feast, “the occasion for a banquet to which countless particular human ‘others’ are invited...coextensive with hospitality toward all who hunger or thirst or are naked or imprisoned (Matthew 25:34-40)” (216). The communal meal of the Eucharist becomes not simply a symbol of an eschatological hospitality, but its very reality and enactment.

Where Bauerschmidt’s essay speaks particularly well to O’Connor’s body of fiction is in the place where his narrative of sublimity begins. The very experience of the negative, the disorientation of the human who does not inhabit a cosmos understood as fundamentally sacred, and who cannot and will not live nostalgically as if he or she did, becomes a participation (an anagogical participation, in O’Connor’s sense) in the divine life through the suffering of God as Christ.¹⁶ As Bauerschmidt presents his theological sublime, this experience becomes a precondition for the realization of the sacramental community that further participates in this

¹⁶ Bauerschmidt relies heavily upon Balthasar’s theological historiography as presented in his volume *Love Alone is Credible*, a historiography that traces the shift from the premodern understanding of a fundamentally sacred cosmos to the modern location of the primacy of the individual and beyond, to the collapse of the subjective self that one witnesses after modernity: “The self becomes a pastiche of fragments collected around nothing more than the remote control that connects it to the cable television with its 57 channels (and nothin’ on)” (202). This scheme bears strong resemblances to Catholic theologian Romano Guardini’s volume *The End of the Modern World*, a text which O’Connor read and admired. Guardini seeks to trace the intellectual shifts evident over the course of three distinct historical periods. Guardini begins with premodern Medieval Christendom, in which the theology of the Church and the ecclesiastical calendar centralized collective experience. He characterizes the following Modern age as one in which the medieval totality of the sacred cosmos is replaced as the basis for human understanding and inquiry by “three ideals: a Nature subsisting in itself; an autonomous personality of the human subject; a culture self-created out of norms intrinsic to its own essence” (50). Guardini, much like Carl Skrade, sees a new sense of the human that is distinct from either of these previous forms to be ushered in by modern technological science, a “Mass Man” who “is absorbed by technology and rational abstraction” and “has entered the world with no tradition of its own; in fact, it must assert itself against those traditions which until now have held the day” (58). Like Bauerschmidt, Guardini highlights the decentering of the self that accompanies this new understanding of the human, a certain alienation of the individual from his or her own surroundings and experience. What is common in both of these writers is the concern with finding a way to render theological thought and experience that engages the “new” mileau with integrity, which does not assume a premodern social and cultural totality that is grounded in Christian revelation.

divine life. In this case, Bauerschmidt's theological sublime illuminates Flannery O'Connor's work, particularly *The Violent Bear it Away*. Though John Caputo and Bauerschmidt write from differing sides of the fence of theological orthodoxy,¹⁷ Caputo provides an illuminating identification of this negativity with which O'Connor's characters struggle:

The love of God is haunted by a specter that causes it to pass many a sleepless night...my problem is that I am permanently spooked by an "anonymous" spirit, by a specter whose name is "no name," "no one," "no-one-knows-we-are-here," a loveless specter who revisits me night after night. For the name of God and the love of God always transpires against the background of an anonymous and loveless force in things, which is why I am always asking, "what do I love when I love my God?" (118)

As the protagonist of *The Violent Bear it Away*, struggling between two competing metanarratives (to frame the issue in Lyotardian terms) with only the voice of "demonic nihilism" (Tarwater's shady friend will hereafter be referred to as "the voice") as a constant companion, Francis Marion Tarwater certainly encounters this sense of cosmic anonymity. It is important to note, however, that this encounter with the anonymous is crucial also to both Mason Tarwater and George Rayber. This becomes especially significant when one considers these two men not merely as archetypes aligned with the competing metanarratives of biblical prophecy and rationalist humanism respectively, but as each a character in his own right.

Though *The Violent Bear it Away* is intensely focused on the impending choice of the young Tarwater between his two uncles, Frederick Asals provides a paradigm by which we may

¹⁷ Caputo himself has choice words for the theological movement with which Bauerschmidt aligns himself, describing it as a "movement that describes itself with the unnerving, angry, and resentful title 'Radical Orthodoxy.' Radical Orthodoxy is a good deal more orthodox than radical, has managed to convince itself that God came into the world in order to side with Christian Neoplatonism against poststructuralism, and appears utterly dumbfounded by the fact that medieval metaphysics has lost its grip on contemporary thinkers" (61). Despite this overt antagonism, Caputo's presentation of the experience of cosmic anonymity resonates quite well with Bauerschmidt's presentation of the same.

see his struggles reflected in both of his uncles. Asals highlights the

...use of the double theme in *The Violent Bear it Away*...a close focus on mirrorlike figures who illuminate one another through prolonged concentration on their likenesses and distinctions. All four major characters of *The Violent Bear it Away* are complexly related in this way, a multiplied doubling which is rendered plausible by the close family ties among them. (168)

Rayber's conviction that he and Tarwater are joined together in the shadow of their deceased uncle is unquestionably correct, and I find Asals' suggestion that the three men serve as mirror-images of one another (with varying degrees of variance and distortion) to be equally correct. It is by this notion that I would like to read Mason Tarwater and George Rayber not as two diametrically opposed rivals for the soul of Francis Marion Tarwater, as is typical, but as struggling along with Tarwater in the face of the devil of anonymity. Tarwater's lesson, according to Asals, is that of embodiment; as opposed to Hazel Motes of *Wise Blood*, whose self-blinding exhibits a refusal of the material in favor of the spiritual, Tarwater "learns by violence that he *has* a body, that his fate is to endure the physical world" (167). Tarwater is all too willing, in the opening pages of the novel, to accept the prophetic role that his great-uncle has designated for him, provided it entails a bearing-witness-to the sublime and unearthly majesty of the Old Testament and the Christian Apocalypse: "When the Lord's call came, he wished it to be a voice from out of a clear and empty sky, the trumpet of the Lord God Almighty, untouched by any fleshly hand or breath. He expected to see wheels of fire in the eyes of unearthly beasts" (22). He is scandalized by the fact that his uncle's own idea of the prophetic vocation is bound up in the material and the ordinary, both in his uncle's Eucharistic fixation on the 'bread of life' and the insistence that his prophetic call is the baptism of Bishop, a child with Down Syndrome. Asals suggests that the trauma Tarwater faces as the novel draws to its close, his realization of

guilt at the drowning of Bishop and his rape at the hands of an eerie embodiment of his devilish double, serve as “the inescapable crucifixion in O’Connor’s work, the discovery of the ineluctable body, the doom of the limitation and suffering of flesh and blood” (189). If one were to phrase this in terms of O’Connor’s statements on incarnation and Gnosticism, then Tarwater’s humiliation is an unlearning of his desire for clear and direct access to transcendence, unmediated by the mystery of matter and the ambiguity of unknowing that accompanies this mystery.¹⁸ This is in opposition to the voice, who encourages Tarwater to validate his prophetic calling by the same terms of the miraculous in which he has cast it:

Sensations, his friend—no longer a stranger—said. Feelings. What you want is a sign, a real sign, suitable to a prophet. If you are 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. (161)

What Tarwater must learn to live with if he is to mark out a path distinctive from the one that his friend encourages is the ambiguity of a prophetic existence in which feelings and sensations, “something that could happen fifty times a day without no one being the wiser” (165), may be the closest thing to a positive sign that he receives.

This humbled state, what Mason Tarwater would call living in “the bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus” (91), constitutes the experience of negation in Bauerschmidt’s figuration of the theological sublime, the dismantling challenge to closed totality, and if it is constitutive of the struggle of Francis Marion Tarwater, it is no less a struggle for both Mason Tarwater and George

¹⁸ Lyotard, in his treatise on embodied thought from *The Inhuman*, “Can Thought go on without a Body?”, posits an inherent connection between embodiment and the desire that accompanies lack and loss: “And if we think, this is because there’s still something missing in this plentitude and room has to be made for this lack by making the mind a blank, which allows the something else remaining to be thought to happen...The unthought hurts because we’re comfortable in what’s already thought” (20).

Rayber. Joseph Zornado, for whom the mystery of unknowing is at the heart of *The Violent Bear it Away*, chastises both Mason Tarwater and George Rayber for exhibiting equal but opposite manifestations of the same sin: “Both [live] lives of extreme presumption; Rayber presumes that he knows where God is and can therefore avoid him, whereas Old Tarwater presumes he knows where God is and can therefore more readily embrace him” (48). If Francis Marion Tarwater’s experience of embodiment is inherently an experience of limitation, the narrative of *The Violent Bear it Away* also subjects his two uncles to the same experience, each passing through the same fire of obscurity and negativity.

As Tarwater and the voice begin to become acquainted, the voice tries to undermine the authority of the newly-deceased Mason Tarwater by proclaiming the man to be incorrigibly antagonistic toward the majority of humanity. When Tarwater recalls Mason’s professed reluctance in admitting that “his own sister [Rayber’s mother] was a whore,” arguing that the old man only pronounced this because “he had to say it to say the truth,” the voice counters by asserting that the old prophet took a perverse pleasure in declaring judgment even on his own family: “Shaw, you know yourself that it give him great satisfaction to admit she was a whore...He was always admitting somebody was an ass or a whore. That’s all a prophet is good for—to admit somebody else is an ass or a whore” (40). Regardless of what one makes of the voice, there is a kernel of truth in this pronouncement. It is, however, a truth of which Mason Tarwater himself was well aware, and it is the very fixation on judgment that he has had to unlearn through a paradoxical agony that he calls divine mercy. The old man is quick to remind Tarwater that “even the mercy of the Lord burns” (20), and if it is this mercy that burns away Ruby Turpin’s virtue at the conclusion of “Revelation,” Mason Tarwater himself must have his

own virtues burned from him. This is enacted through Mason's encounter with the senselessness of creation, the silence of his God which itself becomes a form of divine judgment:

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

Like Mrs. May, for whom the sun becomes a bullet to the brain, a prefiguring of her violent encounter with the Greenleaf bull, Mason Tarwater must have his own presumptions burned away during the course of his prophetic calling, which we are told will become one of preservation instead of destruction: "it was saving and not destruction he was seeking. He had learned enough to hate the destruction that had to come and not all that was going to be destroyed" (6). The prophet must learn the value of prophetic sorrow, of a great enough sense of kinship with those to whom he prophesies that he does not rejoice in destruction but instead hates it. And as with Mrs. May and the Grandmother, this humbled state is brought about by the negativity of privation, by participating in the suffering of a "godless" world.

The old prophet's lesson does not end here, however. When his vocation as the protector of Francis Marion Tarwater leads him to an act of violence, the shotgun blast that takes off Rayber's right ear and destroys his sense of hearing, Mason Tarwater must confront his presumption in a different way, personally connected to his nephew. The shotgun blast leaves

Rayber's face "blank and white, revealing that there was nothing underneath it, revealing, the old man sometimes admitted, his own failure as well, for he had tried and failed, long ago, to rescue the nephew" (7). Here, as will become common, Rayber is designated as blankly inhuman, an empty non-person, but in this case Mason Tarwater himself is implicated in Rayber's state of being. "There were moments," we are told, "when the thought that he might have helped the nephew on to his new course himself became so heavy in the old man that he would stop telling the story to Tarwater, stop and stare in front of him as if he were looking into a pit which had opened up before his feet" (7-8). These confrontations with the abyss are the occasions for old Tarwater's solitary and frenzied wanderings in which he "thrashed out his peace with the Lord," the wanderings that leave him, in the eyes of the younger Tarwater, in the state of transfixed and unearthly passion that befits a true prophet. It is ironic that he sees his uncle to be most transfigured when in the throes of agony, of "despair over failing in his vocation" as George Kilcourse would have it (216). Kilcourse also points out, very astutely, the presence of a textual parallel between Mason Tarwater's taking off Rayber's ear and "the impetuous act of Peter cutting off the ear of the soldier when Jesus is betrayed and arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is ironic that Matthew's gospel (from which the title of the book is taken) presents Jesus responding: 'Those who live by the sword will perish by the sword'" (221). While Kilcourse uses this parallel to highlight the symbolic significance of Rayber's deafness, to trace the full implications of this parallel would necessitate acknowledging that Christ's words are spoken as a reprimand to Peter, and for the purposes of *The Violent Bear it Away* this serves to highlight Mason Tarwater's implication in Rayber's deafness, an implication for which he must thrash out his peace.

The wound that Mason Tarwater inflicts upon Rayber causes the nephew to need a hearing aid, and it is through this dependence on the mechanical to experience the basic sense of hearing that Rayber is often characterized. Readings seize upon Tarwater's initial misperception that Rayber's "head ran by electricity" (87) to highlight the sensual sterility of Rayber's lifestyle as a secular ascetic. To Carl Skrade this mechanization carries an even more sinister connotation, particularly in light of Skrade's incredulity toward the Enlightenment: "O'Connor's description of Rayber is her classic description of that age which has flowered out of the eighteenth century 'Enlightenment.' Rayber is, almost literally, a mechanical man with 'two small drill-like eyes' which, peering intently out from behind his black-rimmed glasses, seem to bore out from his own soullessness as if to capture the souls of others" (89). To phrase this notion in terms of Lyotard's philosophy rather than Skrade's theology, Rayber is a representative of the metaphysics of development that would constrain the native indeterminacy that is embodied by his mentally handicapped son Bishop.¹⁹ Phrased in a different theological vein, Asals sees in Rayber "a spiritual type of the Antichrist. His occupation of teacher recalls one of Christ's primary roles, and he zealously sets about instructing the boy [Tarwater] in the terms of his psychological salvation" (181). Though O'Connor, in her letters, aligns herself clearly with Mason Tarwater as opposed to George Rayber, I find a reading that reduces "the schoolteacher's" character to the mechanical or the demonic to be severely reductive of the text itself. If Zornado is unconventional in attributing to Mason Tarwater a presumptuousness that is equal to Rayber's, he is unconventional also in the role that he assigns to Rayber:

Rayber...fears that giving into his great-uncle's teaching will draw

¹⁹ Ralph Wood, in fact, offers a reading of Bishop that bears a striking affinity for the sublime as Lyotard offers it in *The Inhuman*: "Bishop is a sign of the sheer gratuity of all created things, the stark and utter unnecessary of every living creature, the knee-bending astonishment that there is something rather than nothing at all" (255).

out the mystical love he feels for his dim-witted son, Bishop, and lead him to love the whole world unconditionally as his “idiot child.” Rayber fears the macrocosm, not like Tarwater, as a harsh prophet, but as the servant, loving all because, like Bishop, all are dim-witted and need spiritual and emotional guidance. Through an act of will, an act of reason, Rayber desperately struggles to control the overwhelming feelings of love that would crush his intellectual, knowing self. (47)

By focusing on Rayber’s *struggle* with his love for Bishop rather than his *refusal* of this love, Zornado provides a lens through which we might read Rayber as, like Mason and Francis Marion Tarwater, a participant in the drama of Bauerschmidt’s sublime. If, for Bauerschmidt, the experience of negativity finds an analog in the crucifixion of Christ, Rayber himself exhibits his own partial passion in his struggle to be father to his “idiot child,” as this struggle strains his own self-construction to the breaking point.

“Nothing ever happens to that kind of child,” Rayber tells Tarwater. “In a hundred years people may have learned enough to put them to sleep when they’re born” (168). Though Rayber expresses this belief that the implicit worthlessness of Bishop merits annihilation, his actions betray a proclivity that is far different. He has tried and failed once to drown his child, and he tells Tarwater that this was due to a “failure of nerve” (169). Bearing in mind O’Connor’s declaration concerning Hazel Motes of *Wise Blood*, that “one’s integrity [may] lie in what he is not able to do” (5), this is telling. Bishop’s worthlessness lies, for Rayber, in his perpetual childhood, in the fact that he will never make a positive contribution to human society. In Skrade’s assessment of Rayber, this is a gross and extreme form of utilitarianism; since Bishop can do no quantifiable good, the appropriate response is to discard him. The child in this case bears the *imago dei* of Skrade’s unreasonable God, that which cannot be contained by Rayber’s rigid rationalism. Rayber himself gives voice to this reality: “His normal way of looking on

Bishop was as an *x* signifying the general hideousness of fate. He did not believe that he himself was formed in the image and likeness of God, but that Bishop was he had no doubt" (113). If, however, Mason and Francis Marion Tarwater exhibit a compulsion to refute the charge that Bishop is inherently worthless by baptizing him, Rayber himself exhibits an equally violent compulsion: to love the child. The scandal of this love is that it, like the child who is its object, is effectively worthless by any utilitarian standard: "love without reason, love for something futureless, love that appeared to exist only to be itself, imperious and all-demanding, the kind that would cause him to make a fool of himself in an instant" (113-14). This love is an abyss in which the rational is lost, and Rayber's fear is that it will be lost forever. It is against this fear that Rayber cultivates a life of "rigid ascetic discipline" (114), and the novel's description of his mode of being serves to characterize Rayber more as a hesitant and anguished J. Alfred Prufrock than as the mechanized or diabolical enemy of Mason Tarwater. This is nowhere more evident than in Rayber's refusal to involve himself in the act of choosing: "All his professional decisions were prefabricated and did not involve his participation" (114). Rayber's fear is that participating in his own decisions would bring his rational self, the self through which he controls his passions and all that would excite them, into direct confrontation with his irrational love for his son.

Rayber's repulsion toward his love for Bishop, however, also serves to connect him to his nephew. Tarwater's fixation on the otherworldliness of his vocation leads him to deny the significance of the sensible world, and he avoids fixing his attention on any particular object of the earthy landscape of Powderhead for fear "that the thing would suddenly stand before him, strange and terrifying, demanding that he name it and name it justly, and be judged for the name

he gave it. He did all he could to avoid this threatened intimacy of creation” (22). For Tarwater, the ultimate significance of objects or events rests in their transcendence, and the breaching of division between the sensible and the supersensible that is implied by the “intimacy of creation” is for him the horrifying abyss in which his otherworldly prophetic vocation, as he conceives of it, is lost. Likewise, Rayber is appalled by his love for Bishop precisely because it threatens him with this same intimacy of creation, the vulnerability of his passions in the face of the material world and the living other: “Anything he looked at too long could bring it on. Bishop did not have to be around. It could be a stick or a stone, the line of a shadow, the absurd old man’s walk of a starling crossing the sidewalk.” This love is horrifying for Rayber because it is “powerful enough to throw him to the ground in an act of idiot praise. It was completely irrational and abnormal” (113). This is as ego-shattering for Rayber as it is for Tarwater, and if the lesson that Tarwater is to learn through his encounter with violent negativity is that of his own embodiment, the inescapable cord that ties his vocation to the particulars of the sensible world, then Rayber’s lesson is much the same. “What we understand, we can control” (194) Rayber tells Tarwater at the Cherokee Lodge, and if reason is the mechanism by which he controls the objects and even the human beings that he encounters, then his inability to synthesize his love for Bishop into the framework of his reason is a challenge to his control, a painful defeat.

It is appropriate, then, in light of the analog that Bauerschmidt finds for the moment of sublime negativity in the crucifixion of Christ, that the moment in which Rayber gives himself over to this irrational love is narrated in images that echo the crucifixion; O’Connor, in a sense, gives the reader the passion of George Rayber. In the novel’s middle section, Rayber and Tarwater witness the message of the child evangelist Lucette Carmody, and in the child’s

message is the core of the lessons that debasement would teach both uncle and nephew: “Love cuts like the cold wind and the will of God is plain as the winter” (132). Though Rayber’s declared endorsement of the annihilation of useless children such as Bishop would seem to ally him with the infanticide of King Herod, the biblical representative of evil in Lucette Carmody’s sermon, Rayber in the following chapter gives himself momentarily to the love that “cuts like the cold wind.” During an outing that is intended to end at the museum where Tarwater will be introduced “to his ancestor the fish, and to all the great wastes of unexplored time” (140), an exhausted Rayber rests himself on a park bench and momentarily makes an unprecedented and unconditional turn toward his son:

He suffered Bishop to climb into his lap. The child’s shoelaces were untied and he tied them, for the moment ignoring [Tarwater] who was standing there, his face furiously impatient. When he finished tying the shoes, he continued to hold the child, sprawled and grinning, in his lap...Then he closed his eyes and in the isolating darkness, he forgot Tarwater’s presence. Without warning his hated love gripped him and held him in a vise. He should have known better than to let the child onto his lap. (141)

This gesture towards Bishop brings Rayber into confrontation with the absurd love that he fears, and it is in this confrontation that his *agon* is made most apparent. As he holds his child on the park bench, his “forehead became beady with sweat; he looked as if he might have been nailed to the bench,” and though we here see exhibited once again Rayber’s stubborn struggle to refuse this pain, “face it and with a supreme effort of his will refuse to feel it,” it is here also that we see Bishop’s full significance in this struggle, for though “the child started the pain, he also limited it, contained it” (141). As he holds Bishop in his lap, Rayber recalls his attempt to drown the child, the “failure of nerve” that serves as a rupture between professed belief and enacted intention. It is later, however, that he explores the potential implications of Bishop’s death: “He could

control his terrifying love as long as it had its focus in Bishop, but if anything happened to the child, he would have to face it in itself. Then the whole world would become his idiot child.” In the event of Bishop’s death, Rayber anticipates his own sublime drama of self-shattering and reconstitution, as he will be overcome by the “threatened intimacy of creation” and himself become a part of a world that is not ruled by reason as he conceives of it.

Against this Rayber will bend the entirety of his ascetic will: “He would have to resist feeling anything at all, thinking anything at all. He would have to anesthetize his life...He felt a sinister pull on his consciousness, the familiar undertow of expectation, as if he were still a child waiting on Christ” (182). As he steels his will against this crisis, he does so against the shadow of his own former belief, and what Rayber regarded with expectation as a child is increasingly dreaded as sublime catastrophe as he fortifies the defenses of his ego: “when he was a child [he] expected any moment that the city would blossom into an eternal Powderhead. Now he sensed that he waited for a cataclysm. He waited for all the world to be turned into a burnt spot between two chimneys” (200). The significance of Powderhead to the child Rayber resided in his belief in the preaching of Mason Tarwater and a delight in sensible creation;²⁰ to the adult Rayber, it is appropriate that Tarwater has reduced Powderhead to a burnt-out wreck, as an “eternal Powderhead” would now entail an adoption of the entire world as his idiot child, an openness to the elementary sensation of O.E. Parker and Mason Tarwater that would constitute a destruction of his rational ego.

²⁰ Francis Marion Tarwater recalls his great-uncle’s view of the significance for Rayber of his education in both belief and backwoods sporting: “Since this was the first time anybody had bothered to tell these facts to the schoolteacher, he could not hear too much of them, and as he had never seen woods before or been in a boat or caught a fish or walked on roads that were not paved, they did all those things too and, his uncle said, he even allowed him to plow. His sallow face had become bright in four days” (64).

The very ego that Rayber seeks to protect, however, is itself a tightrope of tension stretched between the two intellectual extremes that he would avoid: the madness of his uncle and the emptiness of detached indifference, “and, when the time came for him to lose his balance, he intended to lurch toward emptiness and fall on the side of his choice” (115). The madness of faith and the empty asceticism of rationalism are in O’Connor’s fiction mutually exclusive; any self-perception that would seek to straddle the two is ultimately illusory. It is appropriate, therefore, that Rayber anticipates the moment in which the tightrope will fail and the balancing act will end, and it is in this moment that the narrative leaves Rayber before bringing Tarwater’s story to a close. After witnessing at a remove Tarwater’s simultaneous drowning and baptism of Bishop, Rayber literally collapses, and it does indeed seem to be in the direction of his choice: “He set his jaw. No cry must escape him. The one thing he knew, the one thing he was certain of was that no cry must escape him...He stood light-headed at the window and it was not until he realized that there would be no pain that he collapsed” (202-3). It would seem that Rayber has finally overcome his *agon* by refusing it, that he is in the final assessment triumphant in regards to his intentions, even if he does (as O’Connor would have it) make “the Satanic choice” (*Habit* 484). It must be noted, however, that Rayber’s victory in overcoming the madness of his love for Bishop is itself reversed by the text and rendered a defeat. If Rayber seeks to anaesthetize the indeterminate and elementary sensation that is useless love for an idiot child, his triumph over this love is not presented unambiguously.

As Tarwater and Bishop face one another in the rowboat, Tarwater on the cusp of the conclusion of his violent struggle against the charge he has received from his great-uncle to

baptize the child, Rayber, alone at the Cherokee Lodge, becomes increasingly satisfied with his success in ridding himself of passionate attachment, of any form of desire:

All he would be was an observer. He waited with serenity. Life had never been good enough to him for him to wince at its destruction. He told himself that he was indifferent even to his own dissolution. It seemed to him that this indifference was the most that human dignity could achieve, and for the moment forgetting his lapses... he felt he had achieved it. To feel nothing was peace. (200)

In a gesture further emphasizing his freedom from any desire associated with the particular and the sensible, Rayber deactivates his hearing-aid. In one sense, if the hearing aid is taken as an emblem of his mechanical nature, the inhuman mediator between himself and the sensible world, Rayber has reached a state of true automation as both representative and victim of the metaphysics of development. When he reactivates the machine “an instant before the cataclysm” that is Bishop’s drowning, Rayber’s dependence upon the machine is highlighted in its fullest intensity: “he grabbed the metal box of the hearing aid as if he were clawing his heart” (202). The hearing aid, however, serves another purpose in this passage, one that is quite contrary to the anaesthetized safety that Rayber seeks in deactivating it. The reactivated hearing aid forces Rayber to confront the physical world in both the “steady drone of crickets and treefrogs” and the “unmistakable bellow” that signals the beginning of struggle between the divided Tarwater and the helpless Bishop. A concurrent struggle ensues for Rayber as his ascetic and detached self strives to suppress the violent emotion that would erupt spontaneously in the face of his son’s murder. His hearing aid, far from mechanistically separating him from this struggle between will and passion, only makes the agony more intimate: “The machine made the sounds seem to come from inside him as if something in him were tearing itself free. He clenched his teeth. The muscles in his face contracted and revealed lines of pain beneath harder than bone”

(202). The machine upon which Rayber depends for his hearing serves to bring his tightrope struggle to a head.

Several highly contradictory readings have been offered of Rayber's final scene in the novel, most of them adamantly defending or rejecting O'Connor's own declaration that Rayber has made the "Satanic choice." Alsals reads Rayber's collapse as the final judgment passed on him, his entry into a damnation of his own devising: "he collapses when he recognizes that the nothing he feels defines not only what he is, but what he has been" (186). For Gentry, quite to the contrary, "Rayber is actually a budding prophet" who "in allowing Tarwater to drown the child...relieves himself of the crutch that prevents his collapse towards religiosity" (152, 154). My own reading, however, focuses on a textual element that makes Rayber's collapse less clear-cut. Certainly Rayber ends in indifference, and certainly it is the indifference that he has desired. If, however, Rayber's driving ethos has been control over both the love that Bishop or any object could spark and the very person of Bishop himself, what Rayber desires in the final instant is a final opportunity to assert control over his useless love. It is this desire that is denied him: "He stood waiting for the raging pain, the intolerable hurt that was his due, to begin, so he could ignore it, but he continued to feel nothing. He stood light-headed at the window and it was not until he realized there would be no pain that he collapsed" (203). Rayber's sense of self, his ego, has been one of a tightrope walk between madness and emptiness, and it has been dependent upon the tension that Bishop's presence has caused for Rayber's rational will. With Bishop's death, this tension has been released, and Rayber experiences this release as a shattering of his self. This shattering of self is rendered doubly horrific from his own perspective in that it is

accompanied by an implicit identification with Tarwater in his eerily lucid, almost clairvoyant comprehension of the boy's destiny:

What had happened was as plain to him as if he had been in the water with the boy and the two of them together had taken the child and held him under until he ceased to struggle...The boy would be moving off...to meet his appalling destiny. He knew with an instinct as sure as the dull mechanical beat of his heart that he had baptized the child even as he drowned him, that he was headed for everything the old man had prepared him for, that he moved off now through the black forest toward a violent encounter with his fate.
(203)

Rayber has foreseen his sublime drama throughout the duration of the novel, and he has seen two possible outcomes for it: either he will make his choice and collapse into emptiness, or he will adopt the entire world as his idiot child. In his eyes, one of these outcomes is a victory and the other is a defeat. What the text offers, however, is something more ambiguous, something that carries traces of both the victory that Rayber desires and the defeat that he fears. By Bauerschmidt's theological scheme of the sublime, the novel leaves Rayber in the initial stage, and if Christ's "cry of dereliction" is paradoxical in that it mingles negative despair and positive hope, echoing Mason Tarwater's own paradox of burning mercy, Rayber's sublime moment is equally paradoxical in that his resolve that "no cry must escape him" (202), his most extreme exercise of control, becomes the tremor that shakes the tightrope and throws his balance.

To trace O'Connor's novel past the initial stage of Bauerschmidt's theological sublime becomes problematic. The problem that it presents, however, is an important one, and I believe that it is a problem crucial to reading O'Connor's work. Bauerschmidt's theological sublime begins with the violent confrontation between the individual and the negativity of an anonymous

universe. It ends decidedly, however, in specific, concrete, and sacramental community.

‘Community’ itself is a problematic term when discussing O’Connor, particularly when used in reference to an ecclesial community or even a “community of the redeemed.” Gentry notes that the most common gesture toward a community of the redeemed in O’Connor’s work is achieved through images of mass annihilation, making the destruction of the individual ego of more importance in the text than any community this destruction might allow the character to join.

“Frequently,” Gentry writes, “these characters imagine themselves transported toward the site of their death. In the most suggestive versions of this fantasy, the character imagines traveling in a boxcar to join a pile of dead bodies or to be burned in an oven...As they join the community of the redeemed, most O’Connor characters give up their selfhood, thus freeing themselves from what has oppressed them” (5). If the communal vision takes the form of mass annihilation, as it does for Mrs. Cope of “A Circle in the Fire” and Mrs. Shortley of “The Displaced Person,” this is in keeping with the textual gestures of stories such as “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” “Greenleaf,” and “Parker’s Back”; the grandmother sympathetically recognizes her own implication in The Misfit’s life of crime but is simultaneously killed, Mrs. May can be broken of her stance of rigid control only on the horns of the Greenleaf bull, and O.E. Parker weeps like a baby. In addressing this tendency of O’Connor’s texts with respect to *Wise Blood*, Susan Edmunds reveals a deeper complication. Challenging the notion that O’Connor is a bit too silent on issues of race and gender equality, Edmunds seeks in *Wise Blood* a realization of “Paul’s eschatological vision of integrated community” that challenges Hazel Motes’s “notions of family, community, and selfhood” (562). Edmunds does indeed find instances of this community realized within the novel; these instances, however, are represented in brief occasions of vision,

mostly in images flashing across mirrors and museum display-cases. If this community is socially radical, it also remains within the realm of eschatology, as the “taboo practice of miscegenation approximates and anticipates the uniting of all God’s children in the body of Christ” (575). The immediate text remains permeated with isolation and unknowability, with integrated community glimpsed but deferred.

There are ways in which *The Violent Bear it Away* addresses this problem specifically. Early on, Tarwater recalls a trip taken to the city when his great-uncle had business to transact with a lawyer. In this recollection, what is most infuriating about his experience in the city is its pervading anonymity, the complete lack of interpersonal connection. The boy’s initial desire is to greet those whom he meets, to establish himself amongst them if only as a visitor: “He wanted to stop and shake hands with each of them and say his name was F.M. Tarwater and that he was here only for the day to accompany his uncle on business at a lawyers. His head jerked backwards after each passing figure until they began to pass too thickly and he observed that their eyes didn’t grab at you like the eyes of country people” (26). Tarwater’s perception of people in the city is as inhuman, impersonal “hulks” that churn themselves together on the city streets, and it is for this that he declares the city “evil” and deserving of divine judgment (27). Initially, the most striking contrast to this urban anonymity that the novel provides is the community that exists at Powderhead, a community that is in fact racially integrated, as the African-American Buford Munson acts more as Mason Tarwater’s intimate friend than any other character in the novel.²¹ Even when Tarwater returns to the burnt-out Powderhead at the novel’s

²¹ This is a relationship that is paralleled in one of O’Connor’s final stories, “Judgment Day.” Doreen Fowler provides an insightful reading of the story in her essay “Writing and Rewriting Race: Flannery O’Connor’s ‘The Geranium’ and ‘Judgement Day.’” Fowler’s reading focuses on the destabilization of linguistically determined racial binaries that is enacted through the characters Tanner and Coleman. By this reading, O’Connor’s judgment

conclusion, however, it is not to take his place as a participant in the life that he left behind when his great-uncle died, as both Buford's reprimand and Tarwater's oncoming vision leaves a rift between the two that the text does not see healed. In Bauerschmidt's scheme, the negativity of the crucifixion seems to be a precondition to entrance into the *bricolage* that is the ecclesial community held together by acts of manifest charity and the alterity of the Eucharist. If Tarwater's progression along this path is more defined than Rayber's, it is not without its own complications. After Tarwater's "crucifixion," as Asals would have it—that is, his rape and his own cry of dereliction—he does not enter into any set of stable relationships, but is instead sent unmistakably on his own mission, a prophet to "the dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping" (243). O'Connor's own forecast for Tarwater's sojourn among the children of God is quite bleak.²² Tarwater's community, finally, is revealed by his vocation as one of those "who would wander in the world, strangers from that violent country where the silence is never broken except to shout the truth" (242). It is as a member of this transtemporal community of prophecy that Tarwater will return to the city of anonymous hulks.

The only picture of the sort of gathered and Eucharistic *ecclesia* of Bauerschmidt's sublime drama to be found in *The Violent Bear it Away* is seen in Tarwater's final vision, which is also the final image that the novel gives of the deceased Mason Tarwater. O'Connor has called the novel a "minor hymn to the Eucharist" (*Habit* 387), and it is in this vision that Tarwater's hunger, throughout the novel a sensible marker for his spiritual desire, is pointed unmistakably toward the sacrament:

Everywhere, he saw dim figures seated on the slope and as he

upon such constructions is that they are "our own invention-and do not accurately reflect the mystery of the natural world" (35).

²²"The children of God, I daresay, will dispatch him pretty quick" (*Habit* 342).

gazed he saw that from a single basket the throng was being fed. His eyes searched the crowd for a long time as if he could not find the one he was looking for. Then he saw him. The old man was lowering himself to the ground. When he was down and his bulk had settled, he leaned forward, his face turned toward the basket, impatiently following its progress toward him. The boy too leaned forward, aware at last of the object of his hunger, aware that nothing on earth could fill him. His hunger was so great that he could have eaten all the loaves and fishes after they had been multiplied. (241)

The image has a double theological significance, hearkening to both the Eucharist and the miracle of the feeding of the five-thousand found in the gospel narratives. For Tarwater, this is the culmination of the lesson of his embodiment, the lesson that if he is to encounter the sublimely transcendent at all it will be through the mediation of the sensible. It is a vision of eschatological community that, in O'Connor's work, is rivaled in otherworldly clarity only by Mrs. Shortley's vision in "The Displaced Person" and Ruby Turpin's of "Revelation." It is also, however, a vision that brings us as readers back to the central tension in reading O'Connor, which I will reintroduce by reconstructing a recurrent critical debate concerning *The Violent Bear it Away*.

In an early piece of criticism, Martha Stephens finds fault with O'Connor for being overly polemical with *The Violent Bear it Away*. O'Connor has, according to Stephens, has constructed a narrative in which the actions of the characters are too controlled, in which every piece is forcefully wrangled by the author into a theological jigsaw puzzle. In so doing, according to Stephens, O'Connor shows herself to be an author who would presume to be untouched by the epistemological confusion that accompanies the end of the modern world: she presents "the unaccustomed feel of a writer strangely, almost unbelievably, unattuned to the ambiguities, uncertainties, bafflements of life and thought as most of us know and experience

them every day. Here was a writer attuned, rather, to the old ways where life rested ultimately on the all-embracing certainty of *the answer*” (105). O’Connor, to Stephens, exhibits no sensitivity towards the pervasive incredulity toward metanarrative, but instead unabashedly champions the metanarrative of her choice. In a later piece, however, Carol Shloss presents a strikingly different argument. To Shloss, O’Connor’s intense awareness of the disparity between her own theological vision and that of her assumed audience led her to a caution that is far from polemical. “While we know Flannery O’Connor’s personal view,” Shloss writes, “that religion offers the only viable and live alternative to the sterile rationalism of contemporary life—the problem with her fiction is that the conflict between spiritual life and rational life, as encountered dramatically, is real” (88). Far from reading Rayber as a straw-man for “the sterile rationalism of contemporary life,” Shloss sees in him a significant challenge to Mason Tarwater’s prophetic vocation, a challenge that is not unambiguously overcome:

...by indulging her desire not to offend, [O’Connor] has lost the ability unambiguously to affect. Giving voice to the secular (*i.e.* psychological) perspective in the fiction has done more than pay lip service to it. It has presented the reader with grounds for a moral choice. Old Tarwater may be just what he seems—insane. (89)

By this view, the clarity of the novel’s closing vision must be offset by the perspective from which the reader receives this vision: Tarwater is starving, obsessive, a murderer, and like his great-uncle, thoroughly mad by societal standards. Alsals goes further, declaring *The Violent Bear it Away* to be a thoroughly modern work because of an ambiguous core, again much like that which Bleikasten points out: God is hardly distinguishable from the devil, as both are utterly terrifying.

O'Connor herself makes the claim that the violence implied by her novel's title is "the violence of love, of giving more than the law demands" (*Habit* 382). This notion is as paradoxical as a mercy that burns, a mercy that one would need to be warned of by a prophet. For Giannone, who offers a reading centered on this paradox, the novel's representation of love must be violent because it stands in opposition to complacent egotism. The violence of love is intense interpersonal concern rather than isolated self-concern. His thesis is particularly illuminating in his treatment of two highly contrasting minor characters: Buford Munson and the salesman Meeks. Mason Tarwater's standard of love is the crucifixion understood as self-sacrifice on behalf of others, and Buford Munson in this reading enacts this example in his willingness to bear the burdens of others. Giannone asserts that Buford's actions in attempting to comfort Francis Marion Tarwater and in giving Mason Tarwater the burial that he desires exhibit a pattern of selflessness and vulnerability that further accent the self-centeredness of the novel's primary characters, for Buford understands that sacrificial love "involves the risk of touching the wounded child, digging the grave, and sweating over the old man's moldering corpse" (*Mystery* 125). In contrast, according to Giannone, Meeks espouses a "genial sales talk [that] coats a despiritualizing cynicism that makes love and human contact mere commodities" (126). Indeed, Meeks presents love as a self-serving business policy, "the only policy that worked 95% of the time" (O'Connor *The Violent* 51). These contrasting attitudes, for Giannone, constitute the central tension of the novel, the tension in which Tarwater and Rayber are caught, and in his reading Rayber's cultivation of emotional apathy is a move toward the depersonalization that Meeks represents. He acknowledges, however, O'Connor's refusal to offer an easy moral choice, for "to the very end, what O'Connor deems worthy she also fills with horror" (117). For

O'Connor, if the life of Powderhead is to be preferred to that of city-dwellers like Meeks, it does not follow that it should be more immediately pleasant.

If the relationship between O'Connor's second novel and Bauerschmidt's theological sublime, then, is problematic as pertains to the roles of community and Eucharist, there is one crucial aspect that the two unquestioningly share: neither precludes the possibility of the choice. As Bauerschmidt presents the threefold *Corpus Christi* that embodies his theory of the sublime, he does not foreclose the possibility of other readings of each stage on the road from the cross to the Eucharist; in fact, he includes these within his own text. The shattering of the Christ-form, for instance, may be read as a manifestation of the Nietzschean will to power, and Bauerschmidt makes it clear that our choice of foundation will be pivotal in interpreting the basic experience of the theological sublime: "But when we start from the narrative of the cross—the narrative of power as the kenotic donation of being on those things that are not...and we let this narrative shape our perception of the sign, then its negation is not will to power but love unto death" (210). The evidence that the reader is given of violent love within the text of O'Connor's novel is equally counterintuitive. However, if Shloss finds that O'Connor has failed to be clear enough, leaving the reader grounds for a choice as to what he or she will see in the novel's final pages, I would argue that this is a necessary gap, that this is, in fact, the point. Like Bauerschmidt, O'Connor builds her fictions out of a realization that the reader does not live in an era in which the theological response to phenomena and experience is given—the reader will decide whether to approach her texts from a theistic perspective or not. *The Violent Bear it Away* does not function as an allegory in which events of the text easily and immediately inscribe themselves into a symbolic system, and this is consistent with O'Connor's own statements about the nature

of fiction, her conviction that “any abstractly expressed compassion or piety or morality in a piece of fiction is only a statement added to it” (“The Nature” 75) and that any rendering of an infinite reality must be made with integrity toward the limitations of the finite.²³

Both Bauerschmidt’s aesthetic treatise and O’Connor’s fiction are illuminated by the conventional narrative of sublimity, the narrative of stasis, crisis, and recovery. In this narrative, the human subject is shocked out of an initial state of coherence that is often characterized by stagnation and presumption by a violent encounter with unknowing. This moment of unknowing is the most significant step in the Lyotardian sublime, but there is in the traditional narrative of sublimity a moment of recovery in which the subject works past the crisis, moves forward in a way that attempts to synthesize the crisis into a new understanding. Bauerschmidt, in a decided departure from Lyotard, maps out the recovery stage clearly and completely within an orthodox Christian understanding of the self and the world. What distinguishes O’Connor’s novel is that it pauses, dwelling longer in the moment of unknowing than in the moment of recovery—the center of her fiction is the characters’ unlearning of their presumptions about God, humanity, and the self. In theological terms, there is an echo here of negative theology, the *via negativa*, and yet this is not the complete picture of O’Connor’s fiction. The distinct forms that mark Bauerschmidt’s recovery stage are present within *The Violent Bear it Away*, present through a powerful but dimly-perceived picture of Eucharistic community. What O’Connor’s text exhibits in the emphasis on unknowing, however, is a faith that is presented not as dogmatic certainty, but

²³ O’Connor frequently refers to her fiction as “sacramental,” and what this means aesthetically is that the writer must exhibit a fidelity to the limitations of embodied experience, “to be humble in the face of what-is. What-is is all he has to do with; the concrete is his medium; and he will realize eventually that fiction can transcend its limitations only by staying within them” (“The Church and the Fiction Writer 146). This vision turns on an inextricable link between temporal and eternal, matter and spirit. Susan Srigley points out rightly, I believe, that while this explanation is bound up in Catholic doctrine it is “not intended as a doctrinal formulation...rather, O’Connor’s point here is to emphasize the possibility of spiritual mystery being known and experienced in the flesh” (3-4).

in the Pauline sense “through a glass darkly.” It is appropriate that the term “mystery” is so commonly used in discussing O’Connor’s work—it is an aspect of life, faith, and fiction that she strove to uphold, even to protect. “We Catholics,” she writes, “are very much given to the Instant Answer. Fiction doesn’t have any. It leaves us, like Job, with a renewed sense of mystery” (“Catholic Novelists” 184). The reader may not be told within the fictional text itself precisely what to make of George Rayber’s agony and Tarwater’s final vision, but is instead invited into this theological mystery.

There is a sublimity at work, then, in the very obscurity that allows for readings as disparate as Giannone’s and Stephens’s,²⁴ and the thrust of the novel, as Asals has it, demands that the reader accept the same paradox that is operative in O’Connor’s entire canon: “the excruciating loss that is...triumph, the agonized victory that is...defeat” (193). By this paradox the personal loss of thwarted ambition and frustrated intentions (even the best of intentions) is presented as an entry into humility, a purgatorial experience by which, as in Dante’s journey through the *Inferno*, the way down and the way up may in fact be one and the same. This paradox is characterized by the same mingling of pleasure and pain, debasement and exaltation that is the hallmark of the sublime. A crucial distinction, however, is that O’Connor charges this experience with intimations of revelation, opening the door to a theological understanding of her work. The reader is encouraged to assume a posture of expectation in anticipation of an overpowering vision.

²⁴ Gentry concludes that, despite the explicitly-stated nature of her theological intent, the open door that O’Connor leaves to other readings of her fiction is a crucial component of the very theological act that she is attempting: “We may conclude that the reader of O’Connor is encouraged to produce an extremely personal reading. Perhaps it was O’Connor’s greatest act of faith as a writer to assume that ‘misreadings’ of her work might turn out to be so many more paths to redemption” (165).

Conclusion

If there is an immediate connection between O'Connor's fiction and the notion of sublimity, it is in the paradox of a violence that is also a blessing. In O'Connor's world this paradox is the triumphant loss, the purifying terror, the burning mercy. By the same token, the sublime, according to Philip Shaw, "is a result of the coimplication of seemingly natural opposites: life and death, unity and fragmentation, God and man" (25). The coimplication of the natural opposites of pleasure and pain, that which Edmund Burke christens "delight," is a central feature of all three theories of sublimity considered in this study—the Burkean sublime, the Lyotardian sublime, and the theological sublime of Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt. Each of these theories of sublimity echoes with O'Connor's fiction—each also becomes problematic when one considers O'Connor's often explicitly stated artistic vision. If, then, O'Connor offers in her tales of Southern spirituality and madness a sublimity that is distinctive from the sublimity of Burke, Lyotard, or Bauerschmidt, while at the same time retaining traces of each of these, what might characterize and distinguish it?

Burke offers a sublime that is the harbinger of a terrifying awe, and through Burke's concept of delight this even becomes a "purifying terror" ("The Enduring Chill" 382) much like that which Asbury Fox experiences in his sickbed encounter with the Holy Ghost. The conundrum of the Burkean sublime, however, is that in displaying the obscurity of transcendence it hints at quite the opposite—a biological determinism by which the human subject is the slave not only of the force that acts upon it but of its own body's reaction to this force. Thus if the Greenleaf bull is an appropriate image of the Burkean sublime, it is perplexing that it is also something else; the tormented courtly lover who at the last seems to be comforted by Mrs. May's

sweet nothings as O'Connor somewhat undiplomatically asks the reader to accept a violent goring that is somehow also a lover's embrace, a sublimity that is somehow also beautiful. The Lyotardian sublime would point to a radical freedom against determinism, a native indetermination that, while it retains the overpowering and uncontrollable effect of the sublime on the human passions, challenges the "metaphysics of development" and refuses to be synthesized within an inhumanly anonymous or over-determined ideological scheme. While O'Connor champions this sort of unsynthesizable remainder of the human being to a point through O.E. Parker, her man of elementary sensation, it is also significant that Parker seems to need his fundamentalist wife, Sarah Ruth; the two, in fact, need one another.

These points of departure are significant. O'Connor's sublime is certainly aligned with Lyotard's against the "metaphysics of development" in one particular sense. Though Mason Tarwater's depiction of his nephew George Rayber does often border on gross caricature, it contains a very significant, very pertinent core: "every living thing that passed through the nephew's eyes into his head was turned by his brain into a book or a paper or a chart" (O'Connor *The Violent* 19), and such a force, whether or not it is embodied in any particular human being, is certainly to be challenged. "It is," Carl Skrade would remind us, "finally, only that which is dead which is certain to remain quiet and in order" (37), only that which is dead that will be perfectly chartable. Where O'Connor would diverge, however, is that she would uphold a contrary metaphysics of development, if you will, in opposition to the one that she, Lyotard, and Skrade all deplore.

The Catholic theologian Romano Guardini, whom O'Connor read and appreciated, offers in his volume *The End of the Modern World* a critique of the overly categorical and determinate nature of modern thought that strikes a significant chord with both Lyotard and Carl Skrade:

As seen by the contemporary mind man does not exist. The mind of today attempts continually to lock man into categories where he will not fit. Mechanical, biological, psychological or sociological abstractions are all variations of a basic urge to make man one with "nature," even if it be a "nature of the spirit." But a vital reality escapes this type of mind; namely, man's very act of being which constitutes a man in the primitive, absolute sense, which makes man a man at the very core of his self, which makes him a finite person existing. (81)

Until this point, Guardini's explication of the human remainder and Lyotard's concept of the same seem largely harmonious. It is in Guardini's further naming of this remainder, however, that the divergence becomes apparent; humanity exists as "called by God into being" (81), exists as understood in the terms of the Catholic faith. Again, as O.E. Parker would say, this is a "long view" to be sure.

It is perhaps fair to say, then, that the scheme of sublimity offered by O'Connor presents a significantly modified version of the narrative at the core of the Kantian sublime. The humbled, debased, defeated self is awakened to the reality of another self; instead of a self of supersensible power, however, this is the self as understood by the Catholic faith, as understood within the framework of sin and redemption. This is exhibited in her work, however, in varying degrees of intensity and explicitness. The most heavy-handed exhibition of this narrative of sublimity is seen in the experience of Mr. Head in "The Artificial Nigger," and Ruby Turpin of "Revelation" experiences an enlightening debasement that is only slightly less explicitly figured in theological terms. In the bulk of her work, however, O'Connor leaves the reader with a significant choice to

be made. This form of sublimity, as it is communicated in the text, offers neither a recourse to biological determinism nor the complete liberation of a native freedom without *telos*—it offers, instead, a call for the radical realignment of one’s self-conception. This realignment is terrifying because it would reveal a kinship, as Katz reminds us, to the large and startling, paradoxical figures of O’Connor’s fiction, for whom pain and pleasure are intertwined, salvation may contain something of annihilation, and love “cuts like the cold wind” (O’Connor *The Violent* 132).

O’Connor’s characters are forced to confront the reality that individual human existence does not clearly coincide with carefully-constructed ideals of what humanity should be. Neither, by the same token, does the individual Christian in O’Connor’s fiction coincide with any carefully-constructed notion of ideal piety, but is instead called into a relationship with the divine that is characterized, to borrow from both Paul and Kierkegaard, by fear and trembling. There is in this picture something of the terror of the Burkean sublime and something of the freedom of the Lyotardian sublime, and if the hope implicit in Bauerschmidt’s theological sublime is often presented somewhat obscurely, “through a glass darkly,” requiring a decision on the part of the reader as to what he or she will see, then this is itself a further sublimity.

There is something of the mechanical and automated in the life of George Rayber, but it is an agonized automation, one that is cultivated in a desperate attempt to avoid participation in his own choices. This is O’Connor’s picture of modern humanity, one sense in which Rayber might very fairly be taken as a representative figure, or as O’Connor’s way of making a generalized statement about her audience. The choice is terrifying, and in the midst of Rayber’s rhetoric that champions the freedom of choice there is an implicit desire for a far different kind of freedom: the freedom from having to choose altogether, a freedom from risking one’s

presuppositions, in which one remains within Prufrockian indecision. If this is the desire of George Rayber, whose very identity is bound up in the deferral of a choice between “madness and emptiness,” it is equally the desire of O.E. Parker, for whom choices would add up and would come to constitute a fixed identity for which he must take responsibility. What is sublime about O’Connor’s texts, then, is that they serve to challenge this sort of freedom. Despite O’Connor’s fascination with the fiery evangelists of the American South that she depicts, she herself does not assume for herself the same role—the writer of fiction must “safely leave evangelizing to the evangelists” (“Catholic Novelists” 171). She does, however, have at least this in common with her backwoods rhetoricians: in calling both characters and readers into an experience of the mystery of a world with everything off-balance, as *The Misfit* would have it, her altar-call is as all-demanding as the eyes on Parker’s back.

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Vita

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Andrew Patrick Hicks was born in Elizabethton, TN on July 16, 1982. He is a 2001 graduate of Elizabethton High School. Upon graduating high school, he attended King College in Bristol, Tennessee, and graduated in 2005 with a B.A. in English Literature and a minor in Spanish. After taking a year away from academia, Andrew entered the graduate program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and is currently completing his M.A. in English.