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# Flannery O'Connor and the Poetics of Apophatic Theology

Denise Fidia

Thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
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Department of English  
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## Abstract

This dissertation explores the previously overlooked connections between the fiction of Flannery O'Connor and the writings of the apophatic (or "negative") theological tradition. By arguing for a greater relevance between O'Connor's stylistic negativity and her religious imagination than has been recognized, this study challenges the critical assumption that thematic approaches alone adequately explain the theological import of O'Connor's narratives. Accordingly, I read O'Connor's so-called negative style as part of a cultural rethinking of modernity that recalls the poetic-theological strategies of *apophasis* (negation) and its aesthetic of "unknowing." O'Connor's fiction, I argue, exploits the modernist crisis of meaning in order to underscore the transcendent dimension of experience, which most often admits something incongruous, even contradictory. Like apophatic writers, O'Connor uses tropes of darkness, emptiness, and silence to renew a sensitivity to transcendence; she relates the absence and unknowability that follows from the "death of God" ethos to the absence and unknowability of a "hidden" divinity that surpasses the furthest reach of comprehension. In doing so, she challenges the hierarchical and gendered meanings of tropes like darkness and light, presence and absence that have long dominated Western culture. Thus, my thinking toward the poetics of apophatic theology offers a method for approaching the fundamental aporia of theology in specifically literary terms. It also queries an opposing line of theoretical interest in apophatic discourse that valorizes its negative language forms as a dimension of postmodern antifoundationalism but ignores its vital interest in the constitutive power of language. I conclude that O'Connor anticipates the role of negativity and operations of the negative in the revaluation of the Western intellectual tradition that defines postmodernity, but by paradoxically exploring premodern modes of speaking and knowing.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### In the Negative: A Language of Transcendence

Whoever can say the most of God  
speaks the most in the negative.  
—Meister Eckhart

In 1959 a symposium on the short story brought Flannery O'Connor together with John Updike, Elizabeth Enright, and J. F. Powers. They were asked, what is a short story?

O'Connor replied:

This is a hellish question inspired by the devil who tempts textbook publishers. I have been writing stories for fifteen years without a definition of one. The best I can do is tell you what a story is not.

It is not a joke.

It is not an anecdote.

It is not a lyric rhapsody in prose.

It is not a case history.

It is not a reported incident. (*Conversations* 17)

What helps define Flannery O'Connor's unique voice in American letters is her fondness for writing in the negative, calling attention to what *is not* as a way to conceive what *is*. Her inclination to form even positive statements negatively is reflected in her private correspondence. For example, when O'Connor describes one of her hospital stays toward the end of her life, she writes, "it was not an uneventful stay in the hospital. Nor unprofitable, I trust" (14 Mar. 64, *HB* 569). When she gives her impression of the editors at Rinehart as a young author of twenty-four, she writes, "I have had no indication that they are bright" (7 Apr. 49, *HB* 14). To convey her commitment to rewriting, she states, "No one

can convince me I shouldn't rewrite as much as I do" (7 Apr. 49, *HB* 14). To express what she believes is certain to happen, she says, "There is no danger" of the opposite happening (30 Jan. 56, *HB* 134). Finally, to clarify the meaning of her first novel *Wise Blood* to her former college professor, she explains, "The gist of the story is that H. Motes couldn't really believe that he hadn't been redeemed" (23 May 52, *CW* 897). Writing in the negative lends itself to the sort of thinking that turns inside out when you stare at it. Flannery O'Connor is a writer who enjoys this turn of mind and orients herself toward reality, as often as *not*, negatively. (The idiom is infectious.) In fact, in the case of this American author a preoccupation with the negative can be statistically shown. Donald E. Hardy, who conducted a quantitative analysis of verbal negation in the writer's fictional works, finds her degree of analytic negation to be significantly higher than that of the American literature norm in O'Connor's time. Hardy thus identifies negation as "a stylistic marker of her writing" and interprets its high rate of occurrence as a device for drawing attention to the limits of human knowing, a recurring theme in her fiction (70).<sup>1</sup>

Negation also shapes the stories told about O'Connor. For example, in the following passage Rosemary M. Magee recounts the writer's first television interview in 1955:

Harvey Breit, an experienced if not expert interviewer had difficulty eliciting lengthy responses from O'Connor. It is clear that they are both ill at ease. Breit seems unnerved by her concise and concrete answers; O'Connor seems put off by the verbose and urbane Breit. At times he answers his own questions. He is particularly disturbed when he asks O'Connor if she would like to summarize the remaining part of her story "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" after the first portion had just been dramatized; O'Connor quite simply refuses: "No, I certainly would not." (xii)

The simple anecdote allegorizes O'Connor's relation to the written word. The story could not be reduced to a summary statement; as Magee explains, "it tells itself" (xii). This regard for words vested in efficacy compels O'Connor to engage with language and, more importantly perhaps, to let language engage with her. As she puts it, "I have to write to discover what I am doing. Like the old lady, I don't know so well what I think until I see what I say; then I have to say it over again" (21 July 48, *HB* 5).

O'Connor's preference for the negative does not simply characterize her syntax; it shapes her concepts, her epistemology, and, at its furthest reach, the analogy between herself and her God. "I measure God by everything that I am not," she wrote to Betty Hester (4 Feb. 61, *HB* 430). On the subject of God the far-reaching force of her mind's negative strain recalls the kind of thinking that mystics do when they say, as for example Meister Eckhart does, "to enter the ground of God is to know one is not" (*ES* 198; sermon 48), and "God is not a being...I would be speaking as incorrectly in calling God a being as I would in calling the sun black" (*TP* 256; sermon 9). O'Connor owned a 1941 Torchbook copy of Meister Eckhart but in a letter admits to not having read it. "At one time I got a double dose of the mystics, mostly Spanish and Italian, and I haven't had a taste for them since" (28 Sept. 58, *HB* 297). However, the Roman Catholic writer read Thomas Aquinas carefully, and in a book from her personal library marked approvingly the following citation from *Summa Theologiae*: "In matters of Divinity, negative statements are to be preferred to positive on account, of our insufficiency, as Dionysius says" (qtd. in Kinney 81). In the same book she also noted the following lines, which help explain the meaning of Aquinas' edict:

the Buddhist 'emptiness,' the Zen 'no-mind,' the 'void' of St. John of the Cross, the 'cloud of unknowing,' are various descriptions of the same prerequisite: to see things

in their suchness—above all, to bring the mind into contact with the ultimate Source of all things—one must keep one’s own thoughts out of the way. (qtd. in Kinney 81)

O’Connor never broadcast such privative descriptors in her published writings, though we may recognize their dark suggestiveness in her fictional settings, the dark pine woods, for instance, at the edge of a pasture scene that cut off the vision of unknowable space. She did endorse in various ways the need to “keep one’s own thoughts out of the way.” For example, in her essay “The Nature and Aim of Fiction” she remarks that to be a writer you must surrender what you think you know: “there’s a certain grain of stupidity that the writer of fiction can hardly do without, and this is the quality of having to stare, of not getting the point at once” (*MM* 77). This statement brings together the author’s habit of writing with an inner poise that lays down the task of knowing while retaining a desire to know. This is a mark of graceful relationship: the writer’s wish to attend with attendant unknowing. And this too has an analogue in the intellectual *askesis* of mystical theologies designed to prepare for the unknowing that lets mystery be.

However, the “negative” style that characterizes many of O’Connor’s fictional works has puzzled more than a few readers, especially those sympathetic to her religious commitment. Less sympathetic readers have associated the author’s so-called negativity with cynicism, determinism, Manichaeism, and the like.<sup>2</sup> O’Connor herself admits to situating at the heart of her narratives “the conflict between an attraction for the Holy and the disbelief in it that we breathe in with the air of the times” (13 Sept. 59, *HB* 349); and she imagines her audience consisting of “people who think God is dead. At least these are the people I am conscious of writing for” (2 Aug. 55, *HB* 92). In one sense, then, the force O’Connor gives the negative in her fiction is proportionate to the force it has in the modern world with its

increasing consciousness of the crisis of meaning. Yet there is another way of approaching O'Connor's preoccupation with the negative, to which my opening comments have already alluded, one that exposes a greater relevance between O'Connor's stylistic negativity and her religious imagination than is presently understood by O'Connor scholars.

Confronted with the "death of God" ethos, where thought and language surrounding God tend to be deeply negative, O'Connor relates the absence and unknowability that follows from the "death of God" to the absence and unknowability of a divinity that surpasses the furthest reach of comprehension. O'Connor treats the abandoned search for God not as a failure of longing but as an opportunity for questioning the manner of the search. She contributes her own critical reaction to enlightenment thinking by critiquing the self-elevation of humanity and ensuing eclipse of Mystery—that inexhaustible ground of reality to which the experience of mystery and of wonder is a response. Her narratives therefore expose the limits of unlimited trust in human reason, sense, and will by pointing to the deep darkness of the transcendent dimension of experience, which most often admits something incongruous, even contradictory: a denial of Christ leads back to, and not away from, faith (*Wise Blood*); a desire to know nothing yields a different way of knowing ("Good Country People"); and a revelation discloses that which remains concealed ("Revelation"). It is precisely O'Connor's rhetorical and thematic handling of the modernist disillusionment with the image of a meaningful, coherent universe that recalls the *via negativa* of a venerable mystical-theological tradition.

Represented in the Christian West by such figures as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (c. 500), Meister Eckhart (1260-1327), the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (c. 1370), John of the Cross (1542-1591), and Angelus Silesius (1624-1677), negative

mystical theologies make use of a negative rhetoric and logic to express and extol an experience of God through the failing (negation) of language and knowledge. Therefore, when O'Connor observes, "the whole world seems to be going through a dark night of the soul," this modern "dark night" does not simply refer to the general historical situation of the post-war era (6 Sept. 55, *HB* 100). The dark night also refers to a way of living that situation as a question of existence. In the poem by John of the Cross, the titular symbol of the dark night signifies the existential act of silencing and stilling the self as "the very means by which the lover and beloved encounter each other" (Kavanaugh 157). Accordingly, in her fiction O'Connor draws attention to moments that arrest and darken the mind and whose effect is rarely one of (positive) illumination for her characters; it is literally uncanny (*un*, not + *can*, know), as if the imperceptible change of heart stands itself under the command of the unknowable. As John of the Cross writes, "I went out unseen / My house being now all stilled" to the place "where he waited for me," "where no one appeared," where "I abandoned and forgot myself" (56). Here, ultimate human possibility arrives at the end of human possibility, which is to say, *beyond every control*, in an instant that allows for no determinable anticipation, and thus no preparation, save the loss of all preparations. Indeed, such divine encounters, deemed by O'Connor to be moments of grace, befall you "when you have the least" (21 Sept. 57, *HB* 241).<sup>3</sup>

What negative mystical theologies intimate and O'Connor's writing calls to mind is how negative linguistic forms profile "something that is arguably as real as anything else we know, even if it can be located only by carving out a void within what is being said" (Budick and Iser xi). Insofar as writing in the negative serves as a means of entry into empty or unknowable space, it observes the same structure of the world of the self, which is likewise



characterized by an intrinsic unknowing or otherness, an “inward poverty” in its classic formulation, which is in essence its greatest wealth. Thus Eckhart commends willing nothing, knowing nothing, and having nothing in his sermon “Blessed are the Poor” (*ES* 199-203; sermon 52).<sup>4</sup> And O’Connor reflects, unsparingly, “You Can’t Be Poorer Than Dead.”<sup>5</sup> This is the strange reversal of the negative way, according to which one comes closest to God in coming close to Nothing.

By homely gift and hindered Words

The human heart is told

Of Nothing—

‘Nothing’ is the force

That renovates the World—

(47; poem 1563)

This poem by Emily Dickinson not only identifies another woman in American letters exploring negative theological forms of belief but also highlights how prodigal the genre of poetry has been in its perennial commitment to expressing what cannot be said. At the turn of the twentieth century, developments in literary Modernism radicalize the problematics of the unsayable by professing a lack of confidence in language to express something of reality.

In his collection of essays *Language and Silence*, George Steiner offers an apocalyptic perception of the encroachment of silence in literature, attributing it to the deep malaise rooted in the degeneration of the word and the political inhumanity of the twentieth century. According to Steiner, the verbal character of Western civilization presents language as both sacrament and blasphemy—the “miraculous outrage of human speech” (36). This tension, which suggests the limitations of the word inasmuch as it sparks an intimation of that which

is beyond language, characterizes for Steiner the “joyous defeat” of the mystic tradition, wherein “What lies beyond man’s word is eloquent of God” (39). In stark contrast, Steiner observes how the modernist sense of “the work of art as entrapped, diminished when it is given articulate form and thus enters into a condition where it is both static and public, is not mystical, though it borrows some of the traditional tones of mysticism” (49). Yet at the juncture that would separate modernism from mysticism lies the poetic career of T. S. Eliot, a poet who conspicuously transfigures modernist forms of negativity into their mystical counterparts in an effort to animate a negative force that “renovates the World.” Like O’Connor, Eliot presents a unique literary voice in the twentieth century by opening up a theistic perspective, and moreover, by exploring matters of divinity through negative design. Significantly, their creative imagining by means of the negative does not suppose the inadequacy of language. Of both it may be said, “[t]he idea of a grounding of language in something outside it is still operative and indeed paramount” (Franke 2: 40).

In the following discussion of Eliot, I wish to demonstrate how a hasty analysis of the negative strain in Christian mysticism often exposes an unfortunate unfamiliarity with key negative theological texts, which bespeak a peculiar language and logic that now seems remote from the modern mind. My intention is to discern the thread that runs through *Four Quartets* to selected O’Connor narratives by calling attention to the linguistic resources they share. Ultimately it is a poetic-theological thread, one that helps to provide a focus for something postmodern theories of language are in danger of losing sight of. Like Tim Lilburn in the preface to his book of lyrical essays on negative theology, I turn to the “unusual language” of this ancient tradition “not to be hidden but to touch what now appears to be out of range. Contemporary terms, had I been able to find anything remotely suitable,

would have been inevitably reductive. They would have been unmusical, no ear in them for what the old words gesture toward” (xiv).

### **Transfiguring the negative: T.S. Eliot**

Although the late Robert Fitzgerald, O’Connor’s friend and literary executor, deflects the felt parallels between these two writers, not wanting to propose “any confusion between a London man of letters who wrote verse and criticism and a Southern woman who wrote fiction, for indeed they lived a world apart” (xxviii), both Eliot and O’Connor may be seen as writing in the service of an epistemology of loss. The value of their creative work—as knowledge—is to enhance a consciousness of unknowing, a non-epistemic knowing, so that “what happens,” to borrow from Eliot on his experience of writing poetry, “is something *negative*...the breaking down of strong habitual barriers” and, in turn, the breaking open of self and world (qtd. in Hay 7). As with O’Connor, the terms and concepts of theology are rarely used by Eliot as material for his creative work, not even after his baptism into the Anglo-Catholic church in 1927. Harnessing the power of language and images rather than of concepts to create their respective literary forms, the two writers do not offer statements of faith.<sup>6</sup> Their work is positive in direction but not positive in that way. After his acceptance of orthodox Christianity, Eliot “moved not from ‘negative’ to ‘positive’ celebrations of the world but toward celebrations of experience in which negation redefines itself in a wholly new role” (Hay 9).

From *Ash-Wednesday* on, the negativity of Eliot’s poetic expression carries none of the irony of his earlier work.<sup>7</sup> *The Waste Land* is an ironic quest romance, as quintessentially “negative” as it is modernist. From its opening section the poem insists, “You cannot say, or

guess, for you know only / A heap of broken images” (21-22), and thus proceeds to present in its five discontinuous segments various voices and characters, historical and literary allusions, and recurrent references to seasonal death and rebirth. The long philosophical poem epitomizes the modernist repudiation of narrative progression and coherence through an aesthetic of collage. Past and present, actual and imagined, “These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” concludes the poet (431). Frank Lentricchia terms the effect, “a nightmare of temporal simultaneity” (269). Evoked indirectly through a somber negative cadence, that which is missing fills the poem: “...I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing” (38-40); “There is not even silence in the mountains / But dry sterile thunder without rain / There is not even solitude in the mountains / But red sullen faces sneer and snarl” (341-44). The quest for regeneration in a discordant, desolate landscape remains unfulfilled, as the poem’s Christian allusions confirm. The speaker in “The Burial of the Dead” does “not find The Hanged Man,” and in “What the Thunder Said,” “He who was living is now dead / We who were living are now dying / With a little patience” (55, 328-330). In 1922 the grand narrative of Christianity perhaps appeared too tidy for Eliot, its rhetoric of triumph over death too phlegmatic a response to the devastation of The Great War and to the pain and absurdity at the centre of historical existence. As one critic observes, “The poem’s nightmare vision of Europe after the signing of the Peace Treaty of Versailles helps explain why no Western formula for peace could satisfy Eliot at the time” (Hay 67). Accordingly, the latter segments of the poem point away from the Christian tradition. References to Buddha’s “Fire Sermon” and the *Upanishads* provide for the poet a non-Western response to those forms of suffering and incoherence that cannot be subsumed under any system of thought, theological or otherwise.

To conclude his discussion of Eliot in *Modernist Quartet*, Lentricchia declares, “*The Waste Land* will remain the singular aesthetic event of modernist poetry in the English language; and its stance, however we construct it, seems one we can live with because, however we construct it, it seems one that suits our sense of ourselves” (286). At the poem’s end we nevertheless detect a hint of the direction Eliot’s later poetry would take. Here, against the horrors of history and the world of capital, Eliot sets down the merest of gains: “Datta, dayadhvam, damyata,” for which Eliot gives the translation, “Give, sympathise, control [oneself]” (433). These anchors of ascetic praxis, the poet implies, may yet renew the present age of spiritual indigence, if only by stilling the desire for renewal itself so the tormenting fire of calculative desire (“the profit and loss”) may cease to burn (314). Through a fragile unity across persons, and across time, as is realized in the figure of Tiresias, Eliot seems to hold that we can recollect the past and bring the long-dead back to speech, a possibility that runs athwart a time of narrated successions, thereby involving a profound breach in received senses of self and time.

If in *The Waste Land* Eliot perceives the modernist crisis in terms of an absence of presence, in *Four Quartets* he finds a way to turn that relation inside out.<sup>8</sup> He situates his concern with language, evident in so much modernist writing, in the context of a mystical strain of theology that proceeds negatively through denials, through paradox, through what is not. In the *Quartets*, the relation between negativity and transcendence is central, as is the question of time; for the model of linguistic negation that Aquinas commends and mystics like Eckhart perform suggests a particular temporal experience. As Paul Ricoeur theorizes, language structures reflect modes of temporality; the two are closely related, “as closely as, in Wittgenstein’s terms, a language game and a form of life” (169). To say what is not

measures out the area of the given and the possible; thus, a certain way of living time is expressed in this negativity, which I shall explore more fully below.

While Eliot criticism boasts of numerous articles on his interest in mysticism, only two book-length studies, by Paul Murray and Eloise Knapp Hay, address Eliot's knowledge of Christian negative mystical theologies and their bearing on his poetic work. In *T. S. Eliot and Mysticism*, Murray initially presents his task as "that of tracing and determining the extent and success of the transmutation into poetry of Eliot's admitted 'mystical impulse' together with his long-standing interest in mystical writings" (1). But the diffuse term "mystical" quickly sharpens to reflect the fact that "Eliot regards mysticism as a path of negation" (5). Murray thus sets out to discern "the secret history of *Four Quartets*" (his monograph's subtitle) in part by considering the poet's essential method of negation, the *via negativa*, as "no different from the method we find employed in the mystical writings of other authors working within the Neo-Platonic tradition" (39). Such a method hinges, like the poem itself, on the question of time, more specifically on the relation between time and eternity, between temporal, sensory, limited states of nature and the free, timeless realm of the transcendent. To those critics unconvinced by the poem's achievement as an expression of "the immanent presence of the Eternal in time," which is taken to be the task of the Christian poet, Murray responds by showing how Eliot's preoccupation with emptiness, darkness and deprivation throughout the *Quartets* reflects a distinct understanding of time and transcendence (78). To this end Murray briefly outlines two ways of conceiving divine reality in the Christian tradition.

The first, the way of immanence, sees the natural world as the manifestation of divine presence. The poetic expression of the way of immanence therefore celebrates the temporal

realm in its transfiguration by the light of religious apprehension. The second, the way of transcendence, “insists on an almost total separation of the human and the divine, of the temporal and the eternal worlds,” and so conveys the search for the transcendent God across this “immeasurable distance” as a turning away from the created world and as a path of “self-negation” (79). In Murray’s view, this second way, which is expressed in the negative theological writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and John of the Cross, among others, best characterizes the poetic vision in *Four Quartets* as well as Eliot’s own devotional spirit. As direct evidence Murray cites the following lines from the second section of “East Coker”:

In the middle, not only in the middle of the way  
 But all the way, in a dark wood, in a bramble,  
 On the edge of a grimpen, where is no secure foothold,  
 And menaced by monsters, fancy lights,  
 Risking enchantment. (qtd. in Murray 79)

The passage seems to jar rather than quicken the argument Murray is developing. Insofar as the way of immanence and the way of transcendence are inverse forms of conceiving and expressing divine reality in Murray’s schema, it is not clear how Eliot’s reference to “the middle” suggests the latter as opposed to the former. “In the middle” emphasizes instead this movement of the quartet’s questioning of the “limited value” of adhering strictly to a fixed way or pattern of thought whose “serenity [is] only a deliberate hebetude” (EC II). This helps explain why Eliot invokes Dante’s opening line of the *Inferno*, “Midway along the journey of our life / I woke to find myself in a dark wood,” but casts it negatively, “not only in the middle of the way / But all the way, in a dark wood.” Eliot distances himself from Dante partly because he wishes to broaden the allusion to middle age, and partly

because he wants to suggest further that “the wisdom of old men” (that is, men of old) cannot be his own. Knowledge of the past imposes a falsifying pattern onto the present whereas the unseen labour of every moment recomposes the past: “the pattern is new in every moment / And every moment is a new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore to be “all the way” in the middle way is to know “fear” and “folly,” to be “in a dark wood...where is no secure foothold,” where “The only wisdom we can hope to acquire / Is the wisdom of humility,” and, Eliot does not hesitate to add, “humility is endless” (EC II).

The darkness of the middle way provides no discernable path, no positive conception of direction. The middle way so understood is a way negatively conceived, since everything implied in the word way—“all going or making, arriving or finding,” as Hay observes—is called into question, just as it is “when the word [way] is prefixed by ‘negative’” (1). Fittingly, in the third section of “East Coker” Eliot leaves off way-making when he invokes Psalm 46: “I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you / Which shall be the darkness of God.” Murray interprets the poet’s exhortation to be still and to wait patiently in darkness as expressive of the way of transcendence, the poet’s determination “to go beyond the limited, time-bound states of Nature, so that in the end he might enter into the free, transcendent realm of the Timeless” (81). And yet waiting itself draws attention to a particular kind of temporality, which Eliot here associates with the self-emptying of hope, love, and thought:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope

For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love

For love would be love of the wrong thing: there is yet faith



But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.

Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:

So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing. (EC III)

Waiting here is not a suspension of time (and thus entry into the timeless) but rather a suspension of self-directed action. As the poet expresses elsewhere in the *Quartets*, there is no guarantee that an action taken will have been the right action:

...the rending pain of re-enactment

Of all that you have done, and been; the shame

Of motives late revealed, and the awareness

Of things ill done and done to others' harm

Which once you took for exercise of virtue. (LG II)

The stance of stillness in “East Coker” speaks to the cleansing of the springs of action, the will. It does not superannuate hope or love for they remain with faith “in the waiting.” The poet’s concern is “the purification of the motive,” which requires free detachment from even the crowning concepts of theological thought (LG II). The poet proposes to wait without hope and without love as a way to overturn the inclination to perceive hope and love as effectively directed toward an object: “For hope would be hope *for* the wrong thing,” just as “love would be love *of* the wrong thing” (EC III; emphasis added). The simple preposition “without” carves out a void in each theological concept; or, better, it abstracts our attention from the conceptualization of what is longed for to that which is nonconceptual. This is the transcending negative sense of “without” Eckhart makes use of in the following statement: “God is wise without wisdom, good without goodness, powerful without power” (TP 257; sermon 9).<sup>10</sup> The longing that shapes hope and love is often directed toward something

determinate and namable. Yet the poet's transcendent longing opens an intractable distance. In "Little Gidding" the poet speaks of love as "the unfamiliar Name / Behind the hands that wove / The intolerable shirt of flame / Which human power cannot remove" (IV). The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, one of Eliot's sources for the *via negativa*, puts it this way: "[I]t is not a will nor a desire, but something which you are at a loss to describe, which moves you to desire *you know not what*" (185; ch. 34; emphasis added). This insatiable desire for what transcends comprehension is itself the experience of transcendence.<sup>11</sup> To wait without hope or love and to locate faith in this waiting admits the possibility of something unknown and unforeseen, something transcending any "positive" sense of what may come. The symbol of divine darkness, both in Eliot and in negative mysticisms, points toward a transcendent divinity that cannot be conceived except negatively. Thought, including theological thought, thus becomes self-denying, opening itself infinitely to *you know not what* by way of negation. Murray rightly notes that such a detachment from thought is "a vital aspect of the mystical tradition to which Eliot belonged, the tradition of St John of the Cross and of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, of Pseudo-Dionysius and of Richard of St Victor" (231). But neither in Eliot nor in his mystical sources does this self-emptying movement imply a shift from time to timelessness. In his consent to wait "without thought" the poet yields to a diffuse non-objectifying openness, a still inner poise capacious enough to hold what appear to be contradictories: "the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing" (EC III). For Eliot the temporality of waiting, which constitutes a dimension of the poet's middle way, unravels the all-sufficiency of polarities, including that of time and timelessness.

Eloise Knapp Hay, I think, is closer, though she primarily reads the poet's references to the middle way in Buddhist rather than Christian terms. In *T. S. Eliot's Negative Way* Hay highlights the poet's understanding of the Buddhist middle path of liberation between existence and nonexistence, and considers how Eliot's path "of limitation / between un-being and being" looks back to earlier poems (BN V). In Nagarjuna's *Fundamentals of the Middle Way*, which Eliot studied, liberation means "freeing oneself" from "fixed formulas" that perpetuate a fixed perception of fixed states of affairs (Hay 173). This reading of Eliot's middle way reflects the very structure of the *Quartets*, which has been described as "an experiment in achieving form apart from dependence on a fixed centre" (Brooker 142), and similarly, "an alternation of voices lyrical and discursive, the expression of a writer who must always be questioning the worth and place of his expression" (Lentricchia 284).

Eliot's self-critical negativity notwithstanding, the poem's negative language forms, which characterize his middle way as a way of transcendence, are sometimes associated with linguistic transcendence by critics and, consequently, temporal transcendence. Shira Wolosky, for example, is critical of Eliot's negative way, interpreting the *Quartets* specifically as exposing the equivocal place of language, materiality, and temporality within theological hierarchies traditional to Western culture. "*Four Quartets* was completed during the agony of the Second World War," Wolosky observes, "and finds perhaps its first motive in the effort to place the events of so dreadful a historical time into an eternal, redemptive pattern" (49). But she concludes that the poem's negative method—its linguistic practices and mystical contexts—betrays a dubious axiological structure, in which "the promise to redeem the time itself takes on [the] negative cast" of a mystical theological tradition whose "devotion to union with the beyond takes shape as a need to disengage from involvement in

this world” (49). In Wolosky’s view, the poem’s conception of transcendence via negation advances “a mode of erasure—an erasure that applies no less to language than to world” (48). If this perilous implication haunts Eliot’s negative way and, by extension, negative mysticisms, it is arguably only insofar as the transcendent longing expressed therein upholds a dualistic understanding of transcendence and immanence. It is precisely this ubiquitous yet unexamined assertion that complicates readings of the negative way, which is too often regarded, by detractors and defenders alike, as a “stripping away of the very conditions that define the temporal, material world” (40).

Therefore, I wish to raise a question about the distinction between the way of immanence (also called the positive way) and the way of transcendence (the negative way), which is common enough in Christian theological and mystical traditions, in order to contribute to an understanding of a theologically inflected negativity. For what interests me is the clarity with which the negative method, the way of transcendence, is assimilated to timelessness. Not only Eliot scholars but also those who seek to recover negative theologies along certain postmodern lines are more consistent in this assimilation than the theologians they cite whose engagement with language in the face of the ineffable engenders, rather than obstructs, the experience of transcendence.<sup>12</sup> Postmodern theories about the structurality of language as a system of signifiers “cannot generate a new order of appearances, for its efficacy is, instantaneously with its arrival, sucked up into the production of signifiers...preclud[ing] anything approaching the annunciation of a sacred text in *its* mysterious otherness” (Radloff “Sublime” 80). In the theoretical statements of Derrida, for example, there is the world of (linguistic) exchange, and there is the otherness or outsideness of linguistic intercourse that inevitably falls under the condemnations of totalizing dialectic,

defined in relation to the illusoriness of presence. His conception of language as a sign system forces Derrida to conceive negative theology narrowly as an effacement of discourse (“*Il y a là cendre*”), and thereby to obfuscate any questioning of the spiritual, mental and emotional experiences these negative language forms (“the ashes”) inspire or provoke (“How to Avoid Speaking” 98). There is a tragic quality to such deconstructive thinking inasmuch as it implies a devaluation of the temporal and communicative—the culmination perhaps of the modernist attack on the time-consciousness (and related modes of narrativity) associated with presence.

Contemporary American writer and poet (and a close reader of Eliot), Annie Dillard acknowledges the transcendent-immanent divide that belongs to the Christian West. I quote Dillard at length because she deftly describes how life becomes a truncated travesty if imagined exclusively one way or the other:

Scholarship has long distinguished between two strains of thought which proceed in the West from human knowledge of God. In one, the ascetic’s metaphysic, the world is far from God. Emanating from God, and linked to him by Christ, the world is yet infinitely other than God, furling away from him like the end of a long banner falling. This notion makes, to my mind, a vertical line of the world, a great chain of burning. The more accessible and universal view, held by Eckhart and by many people in various forms is scarcely different from pantheism: that the world is immanation, that God is in the thing, and eternally present here, if nowhere else.<sup>13</sup> By these lights the world is flattened on a horizontal plane, singular, all here, crammed with heaven, and alone. But I know that it is not alone, nor singular, nor all. (*Holy* 69-70)

Dillard's final comment on seeing the world "crammed with heaven" and God "eternally present here, if nowhere else," echoes Eliot's first thought in "Burnt Norton." In this quartet Eliot evokes time abstractly to consider how a theory of time that includes both past and future in an eternal "now" atemporalizes time: "If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable." The "eternally present," the poet suggests, is devoid of movement, it lacks measurable time, and thus it rescinds the potentially liberative action of life. In response to the limits of this theory, the quartet later calls attention to the irresolvable tension between felt moments of arrested presence discontinuous with time and the poet's remembrance of these moments as experiences in time:

To be conscious is not to be in time  
 But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,  
 The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,  
 The moment in the draughty church at smokefall  
 Be remembered; involved with past and future. (BN II)

Eliot sustains this dual intuition throughout the *Quartets*, taking particular care never to overthrow the alliance of time and understanding. For example, in the fifth section of "East Coker," Eliot contemplates how every effort to *make it new*, to write and live freshly, "to be explorers," feels like a "raid on the inarticulate / With shabby equipment always deteriorating."<sup>14</sup> For Eliot, the efficacy of words is decidedly related to time because the act of speaking is identified with the act of being as such. The poet who "has only learnt to get the better of words" realizes he is no longer disposed to speak them (EC V). Language, the material of his art, constantly remakes itself, appraises itself unceasingly. In light of the dark unknowing engendered in a temporally shifting situation, what "has already been

discovered” by others “one cannot hope to emulate” since in the aspect of time it is “found and lost again and again” (EC V). Eliot, as a poet, stakes his vocation on the fact that speaking does not oppose transcendence and that linguistic negation does not lead to linguistic transcendence. For only *in time* do the illuminations of an instant, “Isolated, with no before and after,” swell toward the “burning” of a deeply communal time that is “not the lifetime of one man only / But of old stones that cannot be deciphered” (EC V). Hence, the liberation sought for via transcendence is not from temporal reality or from human illusion about what can and cannot be said, but from whatever conditions hinder the movement toward a mode of authentic transformative speaking. Moreover, it is a movement toward nondualistic understanding, which insists that we do not take for granted any level of dualism between self and world, between time and transcendence. The poem itself describes a kind of “music heard so deeply / That it is not heard at all, but you are the music / While the music lasts” (DS V).

Understanding is not *this* or *that* meaning, a matter of explanation, which a speaker or writer or even “dead master” could articulate as a piece of communicable information, as Eliot suggests in “Little Gidding” when the poet assumes “a double part...Knowing myself yet being someone other”:

I said: ‘The wonder that I feel is easy.

Yet ease is cause of wonder. Therefore speak:

I may not comprehend, may not remember.’

And he: ‘I am not eager to rehearse

My thought and theory which you have forgotten.

These things have served their purpose; let them be.’ (LG II)

The coincidence of understanding and time challenges the idea of transcendence as an atemporal realm that is extinguished by the temporal and communal practice of language. To look to timelessness for liberation not only bars the way to an authentically transfigurative thought and praxis but also misconceives the entire poem's emphasis on a process of disciplined reflection and meditation: with "the sudden illumination— / We had the experience but missed the meaning, / And approach to the meaning restores the experience / In a different form" (DS II). So, to return to the question of transcendence and immanence, what may be said of Eliot's middle way which proceeds negatively is this: it works to affirm transcendence but is not finally ruled by the opposition between transcendence and immanence because it is the result of an unmasking of the terms used to designate such oppositions. The poem's negative logic gives priority to the aporia of transcendence over the opposition of categorical alternatives, including that of transcendence and immanence, affirmation and negation.

In *Mastery and Escape* Jewel Spears Brooker identifies Eliot's modernist thinking as a trinary movement of mind involving surrender, mastery, and transcendence through "a play between opposites that moves forward by spiraling back (a return) and up (a transcendence)" (3). The transcendent movement, which Brooker detects in the motif of escape, does not designate a flight *from* this or that but a movement *to* a more expansive position. This concept of the movement of transcendence culminates in *Four Quartets*. The poem's master metaphor, "the still point of the turning world," cannot stand for the timeless space of the Holy. Nor does it invite an escape from engagement in the world. The poet's desire "to sit still" is a desire to cultivate a deeper connection to the world's turning. The still point moves him toward "not less of love but expanding," the overriding idea of the *Quartets* (LG



III). The extravagant act of such an expansive love, which in the poem extends to the living and the dead, the human and nonhuman, strikes Lentricchia as “Eliot’s grandest expression of communitarian vision,” and “the voice least likely to be heard in the modern secular and liberal state” (286). In “East Coker” Eliot describes it this way: “We must be still and still moving / Into another intensity / For a further union, a deeper communion” (EC V). And similarly, in “Little Gidding,” Eliot writes:

We die with the dying:

See, they depart, and we go with them.

We are born with the dead:

See, they return, and bring us with them. (LG V)

Because the starting point for Brooker is “Eliot’s rejection of a binary ‘either / or’ logic of exclusion,” she proceeds to argue that for the polarities of past and present, community and individual, tradition and originality, Eliot substitutes complementarities, “with *Four Quartets* providing the textbook example of his complexity, his logic of complementarity, and also of the modernist refusal of synthesis” (18-19). I would quibble with Brooker on this point to the extent that an “and / both” logic of complementarity overlooks the *Quartets*’ overall negative logic. For example, in the second movement of “Burnt Norton,” the poem’s drama of negations is strikingly expressed:

Neither flesh nor fleshless;

Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,

But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,

Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,

Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,

There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where.

And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.

The passage presents a figural negativity that, in turn, denies itself. “The repetition of negative forms (neither/nor, not, no) orders the semantic elements (ascent, decline, fixity, movement),” as Hay notes (8), but just as the passage rises to its climax with “There...there / ...*there*” the poem’s sayings are emphatically denied. The repeated phrase “I cannot say... / ... I cannot say” institutes a negative that negates the poet’s previous speaking—including its negative elements. This final negation of the negative thus removes it from a negative-positive dialectic; it demonstrates a negative logic that does not offer a judgment of opposition (simple negation) but sets out to negate oppositional thinking as such. A negativity wherein even negatives are denied resembles the logic of complementarity in that both draw attention to the distortion produced by dualistic thinking. However, Eliot’s negative logic attests to the temporal dimension of thought and language, which is to say, their movement. “Words move, music moves / Only in time” (BN V). As a kind of critical negativity, this logic constitutes the impetus or force beneath word and silence yet is identical to neither; rather, it is the logical functioning of the mobility of thought and language through their self-negation, a motion that perpetually opens toward a timely speech. Hence, the imagery of music is far from ornamental in the *Quartets*. Sound represents a world of “dynamism, action, and being-in-time,” according to Walter Ong, who goes on to explain how “sound necessarily signals the present use of power as no other sensible phenomenon necessarily does although it also exists only when it is going out of existence” (136).<sup>15</sup> Once again, the alliance of time and understanding is not overturned.

The logic of the negation of negation resembles a self-critical vigilance that perceives what is and is not and (re)turns to begin anew: “it was not (to start again)...” (EC II).

The temporal paradigm of this negative logic may be termed the *again* of the *already*. The again of the already suggests an uroboric structure. “In my beginning is my end” is eminently true of a circle, and a circle is a paradigm of all repetition—from its start bent toward the past. A circular movement moves away from a starting point but unlike a straight line begins its relentless return to its point of beginning at the very instant it starts to move away from it. There is renewal with the again of the already, but renewal here means not the future, not new newness, but old newness. The cyclical pattern of the *Four Quartets*, its seasonal cycle from summer to “mid-winter spring,” enforces just such a retrospectivity. Moreover, in the final section of the final quartet we read, “And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time” (LG V). Hence, inasmuch as the persistent tone of the *Quartets* reveals the voice of a poet trying to sit still, Eliot’s negative logic is a testimony to movement. Although movement for its own sake is “Not in itself desirable,” “Desire itself is movement” (BN V). “Only through time is time conquered,” writes Eliot in the first section of “Burnt Norton.” The word “conquered” sounds a rather militant note, but its two syllables, evenly dropped, echo the cadence of the previous line (“...involved with past and future”). To read this as expressive of the poet’s difficult ascent to the timeless realm of the Holy, and thus the “conquering” of the merely mortal or temporal, is to posit the speaker as the point of reference. An alternative reading would begin with the nonreferential and thereby contemplate how the limit of time instantiates infinity by denying its limits. And since the spacing of time is equally the timing of space, the temporal paradox is at once a spatial one. The transcendent is so

infinitely manifest that the dream of distance that inflames the poet's transcendent longing is, after all, a dream. "Love is...in the aspect of time / Caught in the form of limitation" because "You are the music / While the music lasts" (BN V; DS V).

Eliot's structuring narrative is that of incarnation, though his understanding of incarnation requires clarification. Eliot does not regard the incarnation as an event that has not only made possible but indeed necessitated an affirmative vision of reality. In Eliot's understanding, incarnation is precisely what enables the divine to be the transcendent ground of all that is, and in its Christian confession, it is the enacting of divine resource in "the defeated" who "leave us – a symbol: / A symbol perfected in death," a symbol that directs an ethics oriented by the right of the expendable, the least of these (LG III). Therefore the word "incarnation," which Eliot uses in the fifth section of "The Dry Salvages," directly informs his negative method. The incarnation as "impossible union" (DS V) exposes "the infirm glory of the positive hour" that Eliot decries in *Ash-Wednesday*. As Dionysius writes in Letter Three, "What is to be said of it [the incarnation] remains unsayable; what is to be understood of it remains unknowable" (264). The "hint half guessed, the gift half understood" lets mystery be (DS V). The Holy arrives, as it were, bringing along its own absence. Thus Eliot's moments of insight are experienced negatively in that they occasion an experience of "not forgetting"—their positive character remaining undefined because to remember for one awful moment that we forgot is an experience of "not forgetting / Something that is probably quite ineffable" (DS II).<sup>16</sup> The negative way disrupts all demands for absolutes, which appear like flights from our own incarnation, from the concession that we are linguistically and historically embodied.

In “Little Gidding” Eliot recapitulates the imagery of the three previous quartets, but by way of renunciation through the death of air, earth, water, and fire. This final quartet undoes the speaking of the previous three by speaking again as if for the first time, by saying more, impossibly more. Eliot, as the speaker who “came this way,” is praying the prayer of the dead (LG I). He has “put off sense and notion,” verification, instruction, curiosity and report. In this culminating quartet there is in fact no longer the negative way but the negation of all ways. This is “the dark time of year.” “Midwinter spring is its own season,” an hour to find oneself greener than grass and almost dead. The poet, like the sudden bloom “neither budding nor fading” and no longer “in the scheme of generation,” surrenders his pursuit; he no longer moves within the ambit of progress or purpose because, if you’ve come this far,

...what you thought you came for  
 Is only a shell, a husk of meaning  
 From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled  
 If at all. (LG I)

The “ash” and “dust” of the dissembled self once housed in self-defenses “Marks the place where a story ended” (LG II). And “Love,” Eliot dares to write, “devised the torment.” For the “intolerable shirt of flame,” our transcendent longing, obstructs insofar as this fire is self-love rather than a burning that finds itself at home in home-sundering desire for the “unfamiliar Name.” “The only hope, or else despair / Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre” (LG IV). Eliot is using the figure of fire in two ways here. He conceives fire as a vertical line of transcendent reaching; he also projects fire as a test of one’s ability to decentre oneself, to move out of the way, to clear one’s own heart and own will off the way, because

“that is where we start from” (LG V). For in order to “be redeemed from fire by fire” we cannot love our own love or love ourselves loving or love being loved. In this final quartet Eliot resolves the three dimensions of attachment, detachment, indifference, the three angles of the dance into a single “knot of fire” and transforms Being from “three districts” to two, “a double part,” and finally to “one,” the poem’s final word. Leaving the district of three and having made two one, Eliot speaks of the costly condition of “complete simplicity” (LG V). If we consider that this simplicity is what the dead can tell us, “what the dead had no speech for, when living,” but now can tell us, “being dead,” being those who “accept the constitution of silence / and are folded in a single party” (LG I), then the cost is no less than the power to say “I”–“the self” must “vanish...To become renewed, transfigured” (LG III). For one can be no poorer than “when the tongues of flame are in-folded” and all is ablaze (LG V). The asceticism of Buddha’s “Fire-Sermon” now burns with the pentecostal flames of Christian transfiguration (“I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!” [Luke 12.49]).<sup>17</sup>

The dissolution of self in a poem composed in a single voice that is unquestionably the poet’s own marks the complex tension within the modern identity between its disengaged and expressive aspects. Eliot reaches toward the edge of an epiphany that calls for a move away from the self, perhaps because such an epiphany may be incompatible with *self*-fulfillment. Lentricchia’s conclusion to his analysis of Eliot perhaps bears repeating with the addition of his comment on the late poetry:

*The Waste Land* will remain the singular aesthetic event of modernist poetry in the English language; and its stance, however we construct it, seems one we can live with because, however we construct it, it seems one that suits our sense of ourselves.

But Eliot after *The Waste Land* will continue to be another matter: an event unabsorbed because, in the context of advanced Western values, it is unabsorbable.

(286)

In *Four Quartets* Eliot wonders out loud what would become of us if, in cultivating the modern, we ceased to care about what connects us. Using images of emptiness, darkness and deprivation, Eliot counterpunctually expresses the critical need of attention, of respect for what is. The world, Eliot implies, makes a further claim on us.

### **Formalizing the Negative**

To approach O'Connor by way of Eliot may feel tangential, like an exercise in indirection, not least because Eliot's negative method concerns poetry while O'Connor writes prose fiction. But their confluence is apposite and their intersections illuminating for a study of the *via negativa* in literature. In view of the chapters to come, the question of genre nonetheless should be broached, if only in a cursory fashion.

The "tradition" of negative mystical theology in the Christian West is not circumscribed by generic distinctions but is constituted by a wide range of texts, including a Greek treatise on mystical theology, the vernacular sermons of a German theologian, an anonymously written English prayer manual, and the poetry of a Spanish Carmelite. The relation between these disparate genres hinges not only on the priority given to the transcendence of God but also on their shared linguistic maneuvers to express this transcendence. Together they do not compose a genre but explore an idiom or mode of speaking and thinking about that which is ineffable. Therefore, just as Hay identifies Eliot as "the first English poet who fully explored the desert places of negativity as a new domain of poetry" (11), this study

considers O'Connor to be an author who explored the dark spaces of negativity as a new domain for the religious imagination.

Notwithstanding the critical attention given to the visual dimension of O'Connor's imagination, owing in part to her visually dense prose as well as her early days as a cartoonist and talent as a painter, the pleasure of her fiction is undeniably a verbal one. Her "ascetic" writing style and its concision of effect depends on every word of every sentence fitting without remainder—save the silence that tarries in the wake of her most memorable lines. (Consider, for example, "She would of been a good woman...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" ["A Good Man Is Hard To Find" *CW* 153].) The centre of gravity in an O'Connor story is the words themselves, the invocative uses of language whereby something is imagined as present at the very moment language maintains its silence by speaking, that is, by grasping it in its negativity. As an author, she leans on words, and her characters often find themselves attending to words for what is being invoked just as her readers must.<sup>18</sup> A dimension of her verbal art is apparent in the comedic elements of her fiction; like a good joke, these depend on the violation of accepted standards of expectation and on adept verbal performance.<sup>19</sup> For example, in "Parker's Back," a well-placed line break supplies the humour:

*He made up his mind then and there to have nothing further to do with her.*

*They were married in the County Ordinary's office..." (CW 663)*

Therefore, to appreciate fully O'Connor's fiction is to understand its poetic-rhetorical art, its mode of expression and dramatic tenor, which I believe can be assessed in terms of its negative logic. This negativity is not ends but means, not exegesis but re-writing (in narrative form) the ancient method of approaching that which withdraws from every



approach and in all approaches is hidden. Furthermore, we reduce her narratives to the anecdotic surface of a story if we assume they take place within a narrative time that corresponds to the ordinary representation of time as a linear succession of instants. This risk is acute in O'Connor scholarship, particularly to the extent that those who are interested in the religious meaning of her fiction approach her literary art as an explanatory endeavor and propose to unveil the truth-claim concealed in the text in order to stabilize the "doxical" self of the (Christian) reader. O'Connor's narratives dramatically work to shatter the deep structure of her characters' accepted worldview, suggesting her awareness of the "mythic" function of all kinds of "texts." This is why solely in the experience of an otherness or outsideness that contrasts with what is common, known, or established can the world her characters have yet to divine appear; and yet what appears, in a way, is already there, and so leaves the world as it is even though it makes all the difference in the world.

The next chapter proposes to think toward a poetics of *apophasis*. This Greek word for negation, meaning unsaying or speaking-away, represents a unique tenor of negativity which, rather than producing a contrary, seeks to initiate a shift in the mechanisms of apprehension by cultivating a perceptivity at ease with unknowing. Apophatic theology makes use of dark descriptors that become obsolete in their enactment as descriptors, even though they paradoxically provide the very access to the experience to which they point. It is my contention that the conspicuous status of unknowing in O'Connor's fiction is not a concept among others but contains the author's central contribution to a postmodern (if this is the right word) religious imagination.<sup>20</sup> O'Connor's narratives baptize the way of unknowing as the central method of the religious. In chapter two I shall argue that the apophatic mode, as a poetics of unknowing, does not yet belong to theology properly

speaking; it does not itself form part of the order of theological discourse, to which it is preparatory. Its negative modality, in a certain sense, precedes any theological thesis because enactment is most vital, not explanation. This is somewhat analogous to the author's Roman Catholicism in which the crucial meanings attach to the performed ritual rather than to the theological statement. Much of the affinity between apophatic theology and O'Connor's short fiction lies in the fact that for both the demands of realization seem in opposition to "truth" as we think of it and command an apparent distortion of experience, a turnabout of perspective concerning life and death, light and darkness, knowing and unknowing, each with its own theological and perceptual resonance. As in classic apophatic texts, the momentum of negativity in an O'Connor narrative offers itself as "the other" in comparison with the "truth" of any theoretical attitude (theological, intellectual, moral), and thereby as the very vantage point from which the latter could be seen in its limitation.

The direction of my contribution to the understanding of an apophatic poetics may be summarized as the following: What apophatic theology intends as a language of transcendence is a simple difficulty or difficult simplicity that is ever more *aporetic* in that it increases, which is to say, becomes more unknowable, in the same measure as its negative method brings us closer to the world itself. Hence, apophasis is a language, but it is not only a language; its distinctive poetics participate in the kind of thinking that flushes the human longing to know into its wider existential (and ultimately unknowable) ground.

## Conclusion

Many O'Connor critics continue to discuss how her fiction is inextricable from theological concerns and profoundly shaped by them. Of these, Joanne Halleran McMullen

and Joseph Zornado give critical attention to her theologically influenced negativity. In *Writing Against God: Language as Message in the Literature of Flannery O'Connor*, McMullen examines O'Connor's grammar of negation as part of a more broadly defined study of the author's language choices. McMullen's thesis is that O'Connor linguistically conceals her religious message "to foster her concept of the Divine Mystery and to replicate this mystery within her fictional works" (142). In her chapter on negation, McMullen argues that O'Connor "encases her characters in a language that denies them the possibilities of attaining the salvation toward which they struggle" in order to accurately represent the nihilism of her time (101). Moreover, McMullen interprets this "negative overtone" as a disguise, a skillful veiling of the religious message O'Connor readily reveals elsewhere: "To see beyond the negative appearance and reach the conclusions O'Connor wished us to reach requires a familiarity with her private correspondence and lectures" (101-102). While I agree with McMullen's guiding idea that O'Connor's language choices work to disrupt the expectations of the reader, giving rise to her fiction's "mystifying quality," I wish neither to graft O'Connor's theological statements onto her fiction nor restrict her stylistic negativity to a strategy of obfuscation (143).

Reading O'Connor's fictional works alongside medieval negative theological literature and French post-structuralism, Zornado suggests how all three undermine the notion of "stable, knowable groundings for knowledge" ("Negative Writings" 121). O'Connor's "fiction of unknowing," Zornado argues, "often clears itself away as a meaning-bearing icon in order to introduce the reader to something other" ("A Becoming Habit" 27). In his unpublished dissertation, "Flannery O'Connor: A Fiction of Unknowing," Zornado shows how the *via negativa* surfaces in the general thematic pursuit of and flight from knowledge

in her stories. For all the project's merits, Zornado's insistence on the inherent indeterminacy of language characteristic of post-structuralist theory feels misplaced on an author whose writing demonstrates such a vital interest in words. What I am suggesting instead is that negative (apophatic) theology intends toward that which is unsayable and unknowable precisely by way of its linguistic expression.

In a little known essay written almost thirty years ago, David Williams proposed reading the negative aspect of Flannery O'Connor's work as a key ingredient of her religious vision: "O'Connor's writing suggests elements of a particular tradition within Christian thought and symbolism that reached its height in the Middle Ages and was constituted largely by the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, the Aereopogite [*sic*], in his formulation of the symbolic idea of the *via negativa*" (303). By extending these inaugural reflections on O'Connor's negative way, this study will demonstrate how a theologically inflected negativity offers a significant matrix through which to reinterpret the author's religious imagination. For this study I have selected her first novel and one narrative from each of her short story collections. *Wise Blood* (1952) and "Good Country People" (1955) are examined for their distinct uses of negation, while "Revelation" (1962) is shown to complicate its own references to light, vision, and revealability.

## Notes

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The epigraph by Eckhart is quoted in Soelle, who is using Josef Quint's critical edition *Meister Eckhart: Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke* (66; Quint 180).

<sup>1</sup> In addition to negation, Hardy investigates two other linguistic patterns in O'Connor's stories and novels: presupposition and verbal complements. His central purpose is to show how the "statistical significance of these patterns supports the argument that O'Connor's concerns with human knowledge permeate her stories at a remarkable level of detail" (9).

<sup>2</sup> For example, in *The Question of Flannery O'Connor*, Martha Stephens accuses O'Connor of cynicism toward life; in *The Added Dimension*, Louis D. Rubin, Jr. contributes an essay on the evangelical Protestantism of the South and its deterministic overtones in O'Connor's literary works; and in *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity*, Frederick Asals calls *Wise Blood* "a 'Manichean' book" (58). Perhaps most notorious is John Hawkes' charge that the author was of the devil's party. See Hawkes' article entitled "Flannery O'Connor's Devil."

<sup>3</sup> O'Connor uses this phrase to describe the disposition of one "open to spirit" or "grace." In another letter, she seems to sense a critical need for subtle and diverse understandings of the dread and delicacy of spiritual conversion: "I think more should be written about conversion within the Church. It is a more difficult subject than conversion without" (30 Oct. 55, *HB* 113).

<sup>4</sup> This refrain also appears in Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of the Simple Souls* (Sells 180-183).

<sup>5</sup> This story is an early version of the opening chapter of O'Connor's second novel *The Violent Bear It Away*. It was first published in *New World Writing* and appears in *The Complete Stories*.

<sup>6</sup> That O'Connor's published letters and essays make use of theological categories only further attests to the notion that literary language houses possibilities more discursive prose cannot realize.

<sup>7</sup> Earlier poetry expresses Eliot's sense of the limits of language, as Wolosky summarizes: "Prufrock's 'I cannot say just what I mean,' Sweeney's lament that 'I gotta use words when I talk to you' the arcane reference to the 'Word' as 'to en' in 'Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service,' all display Eliot's undercurrent of concern with linguistic issues, and specifically his sense of linguistic limitations" (11). See also Hay 11-47.

<sup>8</sup> For a reading of *The Waste Land's* "mystical void" as the basis of Eliot's mysticism, see Childs 107-127.

<sup>9</sup> See also Hay 172-173.

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<sup>10</sup> Eckhart is quoting Augustine (TP 260 n12).

<sup>11</sup> See also Franke 1: 21.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Kearns' essay, "Negative Theology and Literary Discourse in *Four Quartets*: A Derrida Reading," discusses negative theology but does so via the theoretical statements of Derrida rather than the writings of negative theologians, to which Eliot himself makes reference. The third movement of "East Coker," for instance, includes a direct transmission of John of the Cross.

<sup>13</sup> There is much evidence to support the fact that throughout his writings Eckhart locates the divine in the midst of existence, as Dillard suggests, a move that has sometimes been "conceptualized as a species of Christian existentialism." Nevertheless, Eckhart attests to the priority of the unknowable and unsayable in God's transcendent nature, and so makes conspicuous the fundamental emphasis of his apophysis, which is not exclusively on the immanence of the One-that-is or on the transcendence of the One-beyond-being but on the coincidence of the two (Franke 1: 27-28).

<sup>14</sup> See Lentricchia 285.

<sup>15</sup> For an alternative explanation of "the ideal of musical form" in modern literature, see Steiner 12-35.

<sup>16</sup> *Aletheia* (the prefix *a*, not + *lethe*, forgetting), the Greek word for truth used by Heidegger, similarly expresses a double negative that affirms without assuming special knowledge: "Western thought at its outset conceived this overtness as [*aletheia*], the Unconcealed. If we translate [*aletheia*] by 'unconcealment' or 'revelment' instead of 'truth,' the translation is not only more 'literal' but it also requires us to revise our ordinary idea of truth in the sense of propositional correctitude and trace it back to that still uncomprehended quality: the revealedness (*Entborgenheit*) and revelation (*Entbergung*) of what-is" ("On the Essence of Truth" in *Existence* 306). Because the manifestations of truth as correspondence and correctness miss the (negative) background of mystery, Heidegger argues we have forgotten that the essence of unconcealment is dominated throughout by concealment. According to Heidegger, this forgotten dimension was covered up in the intellectual tradition, though may be drawn out by a new reading of the history of metaphysics.

<sup>17</sup> All biblical citations are from *The Jerusalem Bible*.

<sup>18</sup> For a recent discussion of "why it is the *contemplative* mind, in particular, that O'Connor's fiction requires," see Behrendt's essay (137).

<sup>19</sup> On the similar functioning of jokes and apophatic language, see Sells 210.

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<sup>20</sup> In “Fire and Roses: Or the Problem of Postmodern Religious Thinking,” Raschke refers to *Four Quartets* as the first postmodern poem (105). See also Conclusion (182-83), below.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Toward a Poetics of Apophatic Theology

“Everything in the Godhead is one, and of that there is nothing to be said.” To say there is nothing to be said is not to say nothing. To say there is nothing to be said may yet be a way of saying something worth saying. In the above quotation, as soon as Meister Eckhart says, “and of that there is nothing to be said,” he speaks-away his earlier statement about the Godhead. Perhaps what Eckhart means to say is that the unity of the Godhead is ineffable. But this more sober phrase is an inadequate substitute. Another possible meaning could be that there is nothing that can be *definitively* said about the unity of the Godhead. But this reformulation also fails somehow; it is feebler than the original and yet too strong at the same time. To further complicate matters, Eckhart’s remark appears in a sermon that says a great deal about the Godhead: he describes it as the depths, ground, well-spring, where “God passes away” (*MT* 226). Strictly speaking, then, what Eckhart says above is not true. But, thankfully, we need not always speak so strictly. Eckhart says there is nothing to be said and, by saying so, he says something more—negatively. He turns back on what he has just said so the mind cannot make his prior statement about the Godhead into something to believe in (a propositional truth) or into the goal of a superhuman pursuit (mystical union). This is Eckhart’s precaution. He does not assert this precaution however. His singular use of language performs it.

#### Recalling Ancient Apophasis

Bernard McGinn, one of Eckhart’s foremost English-language interpreters, suggests that Eckhart’s peculiar way of speaking is a language he learned and recreated from



Neoplatonism (41). For it is in the speculations of the Greek philosophers that we find a “negative” method of thinking and speaking that provides the foundation for a diverse corpus of ancient lineage, whose traditional name is negative theology. The development of negative theology within the context of Greek thought is the subject of a two-volume study by Raoul Mortley entitled *From Word to Silence*. As a whole, this comprehensive analytic study of negation in Platonic, Neoplatonic, and Patristic writings is outside the scope of our concerns; Greek philosophy is not the subject here. What is of interest is Mortley’s claim that when negation “takes a theological twist” in the late classical period it shapes a new understanding of language (1: 125).

Preliminary doubts about language surface in Plato’s *Parmenides* and its hypothesis about the relation of being, unity, and language: “In my opinion all being conceived in discourse must be broken up into tiny segments. For it would always be apprehended as a mass devoid of one” (165B qtd. in Mortley 1: 130).<sup>1</sup> The question of the efficacy of language is therefore closely related to the philosophy of the One:

When Plato concludes that where the One does not exist, it is unknowable and unspeakable, he is offering to the Neoplatonists a means of characterizing their highest being. The question will be, henceforth, whether the One, or God, has qualities such as being, and consequently whether [the One] can be apprehended in discourse. The answer will be found to lie in negative discourse, and language will become the means of its own self-removal. (1: 132)

The breadth of the word “is,” which was given profound analysis by Plato, raises epistemological no less than ontological questions. Can the One be expressed in language and to what extent is unity necessary for language? Once the One, “the basic substance of

reality,” is excluded from the realm of being (i.e., from existing as *a* being), then the presumed relation between naming and being is recast (1: 134). Language, Mortley observes, now appears “fragmenting” and “separative” because it can no longer presuppose the unity of being as “the guarantor of its task” (1: 135).

The suspected incompatibility between language and unity is paramount in the early formation of negative theology as negation becomes crucial to the issue of how to express a unified reality. To overcome the apparent deficiencies of language that threaten to disrupt their understanding of unity, Neoplatonists extol negation as a way to express the One in language (the One *is not*, if *to be* is to possess a name). There are two Greek terms for negation which appear in connection with classical negative theology: *aphairesis* and *apophasis*. The former designates an operation of removal or abstraction, “a tool for definition, whereby extraneous characteristics are removed one by one, until the thing itself is conceptually clear” (1: 136). The latter, far from creating conceptual clarity, imparts indefiniteness by ascribing the quality of otherness to its referent. Plato thus writes, “So that, when it is said that negation signifies the opposite, we shall not concur, admitting only that the ‘not’ when attached to a word indicates *something other* than the nouns following it” (*Sophist* 257B qtd. in Mortley 1: 136; emphasis added). “It is not-being” is an open statement of this kind according to Mortley because it does not produce a contrary in the sense that what is referred to is left open by the negative: “we are not attributing to it a characteristic which is opposite to that of being: if we were doing so, the entity in question would cease to be. We are attributing an existent characteristic of otherness, designated by the term not-being” (1: 137).

While *aphairesis* is a method of abstraction that involves the systematic removal of attributes, *apophasis* initiates an opening of possible meaning and makes “a statement of difference only” (1: 137). Mortley tells us Aristotle held *apophasis* to be of limited use, though he retained the notion of indefinite otherness in his understanding of *apophasis*. For ontological inquiries into the essential nature of human and cosmic reality, Aristotle preferred abstract thinking (*aphairesis*), a method built on the idea that reality is incremental in its generation, and maintained that the ultimate essence of things could not be conceived of in terms of apophatic negation. Because *apophasis* left one without definition, Aristotle felt it was a poor way to understand the world. Mortley takes Aristotle’s rejection to mean that a school of thought actually did use *apophasis* as a mode for approaching reality.

Although the negativity of *apophasis* is distinct from that of *aphairesis*, in the early development of negative theology both are used to suggest the kind of negation at work in its discourse. Not only does negative theology seek to abstract our attention from concepts of a divinity to that which cannot be conceptualized; its negative discourse bespeaks this indefinite otherness by dismantling itself. Therefore in its theological register, negation functions as a remedy for the delimiting nature of language. *Apophasis*, most strikingly, *delimits*, opening the human mind to “vastness” so that “thought is holistic, not fragmented” (2: 253). This vastness, however, brought about by the indeterminate character of *apophasis*, leaves theology unsettled and unsettling because what is being referred to (namely God) is left open and undefined. In Mortley’s view, the negative way is all but absent in ancient Christian thought (the Dionysian writings being the notable exception) because its scope and tenor are keyed primarily to ontological questions (What is X?), and such questions are more characteristic of Greek than Christian thought. In an addendum

Mortley goes on to argue that modern manifestations of the negative method bear little resemblance to its ancient counterpart, suggesting that “any modern use of it will have to accept the ontological concern as a fundamental one,” or “effect a metamorphosis in the conceptualization of the issue” (2: 275).

Mortley’s express suspicion of the modern uses to which negation is put hints at the ambiguous role negative theology has played in the West. This is at least partly due to the unresolved tension at the heart of Neoplatonism, a tension that exists between the Platonist and Aristotelian elements in the development of the Neoplatonist tradition.<sup>2</sup> The Platonist orientation produces “skepticism about language and discursive thought,” while the Aristotelian results in “an almost untroubled confidence in the ability of reasoned philosophical discourse to give a perfectly satisfactory account of all realities below the First” (Armstrong *Plotinian* 181). This tension between Platonism and Aristotelianism arguably persists in the struggle between the non-rational and the rational elements in Christian religion, as explored by Rudolph Otto in *The Idea of the Holy*. Otto states that Plato does not pursue the object of religion by means of rational thought:

He abandons the attempt to bring the object of religion into one system of knowledge with the objects of “science,” i.e. reason, and it becomes something not less but greater thereby; while at the same time it is just this that allows the sheer non-rationality aspect of it to be so vividly felt in Plato and indeed vividly expressed as well as felt. No one has enunciated more definitively than this master-thinker that God transcends all reason, in the sense that [God] is beyond the powers of our conceiving, not merely beyond our powers of comprehension. (95)

In contrast, Otto regards Aristotle's thought as "absolutely rationalistic," and his temper "far less religious" (95). These remarks help explain a later comment Otto makes on negative theology. He states that negative theology arises "from purely and genuinely religious roots, namely, the experience of the numinous," which he argues eludes rational thought (185).<sup>3</sup>

For A. H. Armstrong, who was a prominent contributor to the reappraisal of negative theology, it is precisely due to its implicit critique of the priority of reason that negative theology has been subordinated historically within the overall tradition of Western Christian theology, which asserts a preference for affirmative non-contradiction. As a translator of Plotinus and scholar of Neoplatonism, Armstrong champions negative theology as a living tradition, though one neither fully developed nor fully realized in the West (*Plotinian* 77). While he acknowledges that the main reasons Christian thinkers, from Dionysius to John of the Cross, draw on apophatic theology "so whole-heartedly" are to be found in the Judaic and Christian traditions themselves, Armstrong attributes the restricted role of negative theology in the Christian West to its Neoplatonist overtones (*Hellenic* 31). On this point Armstrong comes close to Mortley's own assessment, though he does not share its ontological basis. Armstrong argues that "the early Christian theologians, before the author of the Dionysian writings, who made use of Hellenic philosophy, tended, on the whole, not to advert to the fully Neoplatonic doctrine of the One beyond Being and Intelligence" (*Plotinian* 77). Of its two constitutive negations, Armstrong suggests it is the doctrine's negation of thought that most discomforts Christian thinkers. By considering the One as absolutely beyond the reach of conception and comprehension, this doctrine withholds the transcendent God from any "articulation or organization, division or boundary, which would make description or definition possible" (82). Unlike Mortley who identifies the negative

way with ontological queries, Armstrong sees negative theology destabilizing the ontological loyalties that generally characterize Western thought as “an ontology of ontic categories, that is, an ontology which examines all that exists and grasps its truth in terms of concepts....Directly or indirectly this ontological way of thinking identifies existence with thought” (85).<sup>4</sup> In Armstrong’s view the Neoplatonic “scandalous doctrine” of the One puts critical pressure on the relation between being and thinking, thus contributing to the rejection of a fully apophatic theology. The early theologians, though sensitive to the mystery of God, were generally more intent on formulating intelligible propositions through which the divine could be thought, and when stirred to discount what they considered false teachings they conceivably claimed greater precision for their formulations than warranted (*Hellenic* 36). Therefore, “in spite of some powerful influences working for a more purely apophatic theology,” the early theologians adopted a kataphatic-apophatic mixture, which helps account for the overall kataphatic tradition of Western theology (*Plotinian* 78).<sup>5</sup> Because Christian theologians, both ancient and modern, subdue the apophatic (negative) approach via the kataphatic (affirmative) one, Armstrong reads the Western intellectual tradition as consigning the negative method of philosophical and theological speculation to the margins of our usual ways of thinking, and not without consequence:

This leads me to wonder how far the revolts, not only against traditional metaphysics but against any form of theistic belief, which have played such a notable part in the intellectual life of our times, are to some extent due to the neglect and eventually virtual disappearance of the negative theology. Are they, at least in part, reactions to claims to know too much about God? (*Hellenic* 31 n1)

## Re-turning Negative Theology

Although classical negative theology may feel far removed from modern concerns, negativity and operations of the negative are significant elements in the revaluation of the Western intellectual tradition that defines – and is defined by – twentieth-century thought. As the image of a meaningful, coherent universe gradually disintegrates at the turn of the century, heralded, however ambiguously, by the disappearance of God and the dissolution of the human subject, so does the syntax that once sustained it. The modernist preoccupation with the ways in which one's capacity for language affects one's thinking about the world draws attention to the “negative” operations of language that maintain silence and the functioning of language in and through this silence. The issue of (in)expressibility, along with the relative merits of silence and language, do not belong to one tradition. Still, a growing body of scholarship over the last three decades indicates that this questioning of language, so rampant in continental literary theory, recalls the fundamental concerns of negative theology.<sup>6</sup>

Contemporary interest in negative theology is perhaps most notable in the numerous attempts to relate the venerable tradition to Jacques Derrida, and in some cases to conceive a retrieval of negative theology along Derridean lines. These attempts have persisted since the discussion following the first oral presentation of “Différance” in 1968.<sup>7</sup> In this influential essay Derrida himself speaks of a possible correspondence, but only to contest it. He writes,

the detours, locutions, and syntax in which I will often have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology. Already we have had to delineate *that différence is not*, does not exist, is not a present-being (*on*) in any form; and we will

be led to delineate also everything *that it is not*, that is, *everything*; and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent. And yet those aspects of *différance* which are thereby delineated are not theological, not even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies, which are...always hastening to recall that God is refused the predicate of existence, only in order to acknowledge his superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being. (6)

Almost twenty years intervene between this brief, elliptical reference in “Différance” and two later essays in which Derrida turns his attention to negative theology directly: “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials” and “Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices.”<sup>8</sup> As these essays show, Derrida in some measure admires the volition of negative theological writing, which “does not cease testing the very limits of language,” and he concedes that negative theology is more complex than his earlier remarks in “Différance” imply (“Post-Scriptum” 299). In “How to Avoid Speaking” he replaces the monolithic term negative theology with negative theologies and asks whether such writings can be restricted to certain exemplary figures, texts, or traditions, while in “Post-Scriptum” (which is later revised and reprinted as *Sauf le nom*) he speaks of a paradoxical desire to ‘save the name’ of negative theology. Yet despite these abstruse endorsements, Derrida consistently criticizes negative theological discourse for remaining committed to an overall “ontotheological” project in its “movement toward hyperessentiality” (“How to Avoid Speaking” 79). A brief examination of such reservations will contribute to our thinking toward a poetics of apophatic theology by putting critical pressure on Derrida’s reading of this discourse and by arguing for a narrower



focus on the linguistic resources and peculiar logic of apophysis than the commonly-held understanding of negative theology permits.

John D. Caputo, who has sustained an interest in the religious undertones of Derrida's writings, endeavours early on to elucidate the Derridean perspective on negative theology. For the most part he follows Derrida uncritically, classifying negative theologies as "modified ontotheologies," variations on the metaphysics of presence, which turn out to be "detours on the way to even higher, more sublime affirmations. They are ways of saying in even stronger terms that an entity, namely God, exists" ("Mysticism" 25). Caputo rightly dissociates *différance* from any transcendental status, but to reinforce this idea he points out that *différance* carries "no ontological weight" (27). He presumes, I suggest erroneously, that the God of negative theology, though beyond being, can only be grasped as a being, as "an entity," when the ontic reduction of God is one of negative theology's foremost concerns and in many cases its sharpest point of critique. Eckhart makes the point thus:

Unsophisticated teachers say that God is pure being. He is as high above being as the highest angel is above a gnat. I would be speaking as wrongly in calling God a being as I would in calling the sun pale or black. God is neither this nor that. A master says: 'Whoever imagines that he has understood God if he knows anything, it is not God that he knows.' (TP 256; sermon 9)

When Caputo later reiterates his argument in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without religion*, negative theology has become an enemy of deconstructive thinking:

Far from providing a deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence, negative theology crowns the representations of metaphysics with the jewel of pure presence,

and effects in a still higher way, *eminentiore modo*, the triumph of presence over representation. In one of its voices, its most authoritative, negative theology is a still more effective way that presence has found to trump representation. To that extent, deconstruction is its nemesis. But that does not have the effect of leveling or razing negative theology, but rather of liberating negative theology from the Greek metaphysics of presence in which it is enmeshed and forcing it to come up with a better story about itself than the hyperousiological one that it has inherited not from the Bible but from Neoplatonism. (11)

This charge of hyperessentiality (negative theology as a “hyperousiology”) is a point about which Kevin Hart is especially helpful. The Greek prefix “hyper,” Hart tells us, does not claim more essential essentiality but more than essentiality. Better: “hyper” suggests *something other* than essentiality, which is to say, it carries the negative force of apophasis. “To say that God is *hyperousious*,” Hart explains, “is to deny that God is a being of any kind, even the highest or original being” (*Trespass* 202). The God of negative theology is not a supereminent form of being. To use Emmanuel Levinas’ well-known phrase, the divine is *otherwise than being*. As we shall see, the mystical language of apophasis upsets “the (ontological) supremacy of an order of beings over a law of desire” (Certeau 7).

Contra Caputo, Hart deflects debates on negative theology’s hyperessentiality and emphasizes instead its literary techniques, its rhetorical and textual maneuvers. For example, he links deconstruction to irony and irony to apophasis, pressing, self-admittedly, “critical points” into the service of a “tactical” one:

I have shown how deconstruction can be read as a mode of irony, and we need not question the efficacy of this in the hands of a conceptual rhetorician such as de Man.

What Kierkegaard shows us, though, is that while we may accept deconstruction as a permanent parabasis, the thematic *direction* of this parabasis is neither natural nor inevitable. There is no doubt that, for de Man, the ironies of deconstruction enforce a militant atheism. But Kierkegaard shows us that irony—a proto-deconstructive use of irony, moreover—can be turned to apologetic ends. As Bloom reminds us, the ironies of deconstruction are linked to a despiritualisation of thought. Kierkegaard meanwhile points us away from irony as a trope of disaffection to irony as a trope of elliptic affirmation. ‘Irony’, he tells us, ‘is like the negative way, not the truth but the way.’ And if this identification of trope and religious practice seems odd, we have only to remember that ‘apophasis’ names both the negative way to God and the trope of denial. (162)

As Hart argues, apophasis constitutes a theological approach and a set of literary techniques. In fact, it is precisely the possible concurrence between literary language and religious practice that animates apophasis to such profound effect.

However, for Derrida and Caputo “negative” theologies only arise with respect to “positive” theologies in that they are called upon to serve “as a strategic elusion for the inherent finitude of categories” we attach to God to preserve something of divine mystery (Foshay “Introduction” 3). If one interprets negative theology as a corrective or correlative moment of positive theology, then, as Derrida infers, “the negative movement of the discourse on God is only a phase of positive ontotheology. [It is] only a turn or detour of language for ontotheology” (*Writing* 337 n37).<sup>9</sup> Such an interpretation simply reinscribes the apophatic within kataphatic logic when this logic is the very thing being challenged by apophatic negation. Moreover, it reduces the object (and objective) of a negative theology

to conceptual knowledge, as evidenced in the following remarks wherein Caputo trivializes the negative theologian for her melodramatic posture in the face of the ineffable:

So when the negative theologian, falling upon our breast and looking up to heaven, sighs that she cannot name or say a thing about God, she also knows, in secret, even if she knows by unknowing, that if we call the Vatican guards on her, she has an answer. Way down deep, negative theologians know what they are talking about; they have not entirely lost their way or their balance; they are not *destinerrant*.  
(*Prayers* 10-11)

The choice of feminine pronoun is revealing. Because Caputo's blithe treatment of the "unknowing" negative theologian directly follows his discussion of Meister Eckhart, the female theologian in this passage calls to mind Eckhart's contemporary, Marguerite Porete, whose authorship of *The Mirror of the Simple Souls* was discovered in 1946. Porete belonged to a class of female lay religious, known as Beguines, and the writings and teachings of this group of women were an important influence on Eckhart's apophatic theology.<sup>10</sup> The Meister, who held a privileged position as a male in terms of institutional authority and education, crystallized the mystical thought of his beguine sisters. When prosecuted for heresy, Eckhart—as Caputo tells it—explained to the "Vatican apparatchiks" that he "is a loyal Dominican friar who agrees with (fellow Dominican) brother Thomas (Aquinas)" (10). In contrast, when Porete was called before the Vatican guards "she" offered no answer.<sup>11</sup> Her inquisitors were not convinced that she had not entirely lost her way or her balance; consequently, Marguerite Porete was burned at the stake for heresy in Paris, 1310.

In effect, both Derrida and Caputo presume negative theologies engage in a stripping away in order to “have” more. Yet this stripping away breaks the attachment to “having” itself. As we shall see, the so-called denials characteristic of negative theological texts “speak” in such a way as to point away from themselves or, more specifically, to subvert their own descriptive or conceptual function. Does this mean that the negative theologian actually “has” propositional knowledge, and that she simply chooses not to communicate it to others (even under penalty of death)? Could it not suggest, instead, that the model of propositional knowledge is not an appropriate model for what the negative theologian “knows by unknowing”?

Apophysis as a way of approaching reality deserves serious attention, not least because its patient and persistent critique of what is called thinking re-turns “thinking” to its perennial work as “spiritual exercise” aimed at “total self-transformation...enlightenment and liberation” (Armstrong *Hellenic* 35). The relation between apophysis and literature in the chapters to follow prompts an important observation about the former’s theological enterprise. Namely, apophatic theology does not reveal a set of truths about God. The anonymous English author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* makes this point explicit early on in his text. “But now you put me a question and say: ‘How might I think of [God] in himself, and what is he?’ And to this question I can only answer thus: ‘I have no idea’” (130; ch. 6). The task of apophatic theology is not to assert doctrine or describe mystical union, just as its concern is neither propositional truth nor extraordinary experience. Apophatic theology aspires to evoke a shift in the mechanisms of apprehension rather than define a subject discursively and is therefore composed of reflective writings not demonstrative ones. Because apophysis designates a unique tenor of negativity that imparts conceptual

indefiniteness, its sustained use in writing cultivates in the reader a disposition at ease with not knowing. Thus, far from purely qualifying the positive statements we attach to God, apophasis and its unique manner of speaking suspend “the predicative and constative determinations of logic in a performative *via negativa* that intends not merely to think but to *realize* a relation to a divinity” that cannot be conceived because it exceeds the furthest reach of our conceptions (Foshay 3 “Introduction”; original emphasis).

Alongside the historical, theological, and philosophical debates shaping recent interest in apophasis is the question of apophatic writing as such. How does apophatic writing generate its meaning? Does apophasis *avoid* speaking, giving its word not to say a word? To varying degrees contemporary debates take up such questions, though they are often parenthetical to the main arguments put forth. Denys Turner, for example, goes some way in identifying apophasis as a linguistic method, but ultimately cautions against treating apophasis as “severely and narrowly textual” (137). The import of apophatic writing, however, is inextricable from its expressive form and profoundly shaped by it: the meaning of its literary language does not lie outside its use. To pass over the formal qualities of apophasis, its conventions, logic and paradoxes is to risk transposing it into a nonapophatic paraphrase. Therefore, the rest of this chapter will attempt to develop as fully as space permits how apophatic theology functions as a language and logic—in short, as a poetics. Once this is established, we will consider how the performative dimension of its poetics introduces a different existential quality into our understanding of language and the world of self.

## I.

**Speaking-away Ineffability**

The central tenet of apophatic theology is the ineffability of God. But such a tenet fails to hold because to say the divine is ineffable is to speak-away, literally, its ineffability. That which can be called ineffable is not ineffable:

And for this reason God should not be said to be ineffable, for when this is said something is said. And a contradiction in terms is created, since if that is ineffable which cannot be spoken, then that is not ineffable which can be called ineffable.

This contradiction is to be passed over in silence rather than resolved verbally. (11)

In these lines from *On Christian Doctrine* Augustine attests to the primary dilemma of transcendence.<sup>12</sup> He acknowledges the difficulty of speaking of the transcendent as such and the paradoxes of naming that such speaking confronts, for to claim that the transcendent is beyond names one must give it a name.<sup>13</sup> In a rare and remarkable investigation of apophatic writing as a “literary mode” across doctrinal, geographical and historical lines, Michael A. Sells states that there are at least three ways in which to respond to the dilemma of transcendence (207).

The first is silence. To say nothing more, to abandon language is one possible response. In principle it may seem the only appropriate response; however, in practice nothing seems to incite us to speak more than ineffability. The second possible response is to resolve the dilemma verbally by arguing that the transcendent is ineffable in some respects, but not others. This is accomplished by distinguishing between different ways of speaking about the transcendent (for example, as it is in itself and as it is in the mind) as a means of

resolving the contradiction. But there is yet another possible response which Sells describes in the following way:

The third response begins with the refusal to solve the dilemma posed by the attempt to refer to the transcendent through a distinction between two kinds of name. The dilemma is accepted as a genuine *aporia*, that is, as unresolvable; but this acceptance, instead of leading to silence, leads to a new mode of discourse. (2)

This discourse is called “apophatic” because the etymology of the Greek word *apo phasis*, meaning un-saying or speaking-away, best characterizes its peculiar linguistic dynamic. Apophasis constitutes a unique response to ineffability. It accepts the “dilemma” of transcendence that institutes its speaking and actively expresses this *aporia* through an iterative process of speaking-away. Turning back on what is said in order to remove the delimitation, apophasis proceeds without losing from view the prodigality of its speaking. It responds to ineffability by using language as the means of its own removal, thus engendering an idiosyncratic speech.

For a succinct illustration of the apophatic dynamic, Sells cites Eckhart’s sermon on spiritual poverty wherein Eckhart advises his hearers to pray to God to be rid of God. This God-relinquishing prayer enacts the entire movement of apophasis insofar as the call to prayer turns back on itself to perform an unpraying. Modern translations of Eckhart have attempted to resolve the difficulty of this utterance by selectively adding inverted commas to distinguish between the God we pray to and the God we ask to be free of: “Let us pray to God that we may be free of ‘God’” (sermon 52; Sells 187-189). The interpolation of this graphic distinction between God and ‘God’ effaces the inherent paradox that is central to Eckhart’s discourse: the statement at once appeals to the name of God and speaks-away its



referential determination. A prayer that prays to God to be free of God actively relinquishes its own directional context and thereby affirms the aporia of transcendence.

To further emphasize the linguistic performance of apophasis, Sells differentiates apophatic theory from apophatic writing. Apophatic theory affirms the ineffability of the transcendent through assertion, in the manner of Augustine for example, quoted above, whereas apophatic writing affirms the ineffability of the transcendent by turning back upon the language used in its own affirmation (Sells 3). Choosing not to eschew the difficulties involved in articulating divine ineffability, apophatic writing uses language to call to mind the transcendent *as* transcendent. The procedure of rephrasing apophatic writing into single-propositional assertions is always possible; and yet the apophatic dynamic of unsaying will be the first to undo the logical and semantic structures at work within those assertions. Its propensity for turning back on its own speaking generates meaning otherwise, such that its meaning cannot be grasped independent of its expressive form. Eckhart's tribunal is a case in point. During the inquisition sets of articles were taken from Eckhart's writings and subjected to theological scrutiny. The commissioners of the inquisitorial process examined isolated propositions. In the face of charges Eckhart upheld his innocence, arguing he did not intend heresy—an offense of the will. His discourse was different, not his doctrine. Eckhart's verbal strategies, especially in the vernacular sermons, reflect "the absolute centrality of apophaticism in the Meister's thought," as McGinn argues (31). The paradox involved in attempting to speak about the transcendent "by no means reduced him to silence, any more than it did his predecessors and successors in the tradition of negative or apophatic theology" (31). Unbeknownst to his inquisitors, Eckhart was an important contributor to the diverse legacy of the Dionysian mode of speaking and thinking.

### Negating Negation: Apophatic Logic

The author of the Dionysian writings introduces apophasis into the theological and mystical traditions of the East and of the West.<sup>14</sup> Although modern scholars agree that the author was most likely a Syrian monk writing around the turn of the fifth to sixth century C.E., this enigmatic figure was a pseudonymous writer, presenting himself under cover of authority of Paul's Athenian disciple, Dionysius the Areopagite (Acts 17.34).<sup>15</sup> His short treatise *Mystical Theology* is paramount for understanding apophatic language and logic as a distinct method sanctioned by scripture. As J. P. Williams explains, "apophasis is for Dionysius primarily a scriptural methodology: we are not concerned with an esoteric or speculative theology here, but with an approach to God laid down for all to find in the writings which Dionysius prefers to call the Christian 'oracles'" (64).<sup>16</sup> Toward the beginning of *Mystical Theology*, Dionysius describes those "who think that by their own intellectual resources they can have a direct knowledge of him who has made the shadows his hiding place" (136; 1000A). With a view to offsetting this error in thinking, the treatise presents a procession of denials in its contemplation of the "ray of divine shadow which is above everything that is" (135; 1000A).<sup>17</sup> The following is a short excerpt from the fifth and final chapter:

It is not immovable, moving, or at rest. It has no power, it is not power, nor is it light. It does not live nor is it life. It is not a substance, nor is it eternity or time. It cannot be grasped by the understanding since it is neither knowledge nor truth. It is not kingship. It is not wisdom. It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness. Nor is it a spirit in the sense in which we understand that term. It is not sonship or

fatherhood and it is nothing known to us or to any other being. It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being.... (141; 1048A)

Dionysius denies all concepts or “conceptual” attributes of the transcendent nature of God, and then denies these denials by acknowledging the limits of all speech and thought including “every denial.” Assertions and denials equally fall short of naming or knowing a divinity that lies beyond rational activity:

There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth – it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial. (141; 1048B)

There are two negations at work: (1) the negation of the concept, and (2) the negation of the negation. The first negation denies all propositions or statements that claim a concept to be true of God. So Dionysius writes, the transcendent One is not *this* or *that* or *the other*. However, because such negations operate at the level of predication, they remain predicative—something which is affirmed or, in this case, denied about God. A negative predicate is still a predicate.<sup>18</sup> If we suppose that negative theologies follow the strict logic of negation by simply posing a statement of opposition, then they are bound to the same logic as affirmative or positive theologies. The moniker “negative theology” contributes to such an understanding, as does the ambiguous role negative theologies have played in the Christian tradition, which has largely followed Aquinas in regarding the negative and positive ways as a dialectic leading to a synthesis (*via eminentia*). For Aquinas, negations

correct theological affirmations, serving to show that the meaning of these affirmations must be understood in a preeminent way.<sup>19</sup> According to this widespread understanding, negative theologies function exclusively within the phenomenon of positive theologies, their negative forms serving only as a means for refining the concepts to which they attach themselves. In addition, the dialectical account of the negative and positive ways is a mode of reasoning and an application of the intellectual self. The Dionysian author's "mystical theology," in contrast, seeks to dissuade the self from relying on "intellectual resources" for "direct knowledge" of God (136; 1000A). The term "mystical" itself points to the limits of intellectual reasoning.<sup>20</sup> While Dionysius relies on negation, this negation is not merely an intellectual process. It is paradoxically an intellectual exercise in letting go of the discriminative powers of the intellect as such.<sup>21</sup> The Dionysian author therefore concludes that even denials must be abandoned because they are as deficient as affirmations in describing the divine. This second negation, the *negation of negation*, constitutes the peculiar logic of apophasis, what Vladimir Lossky calls, "the movement of apophasis" (157). Making use of this logic, Dionysius attempts to defeat, at the propositional level, the opposition between negation and affirmation. The way of apophasis is thereby distinct from the way of eminence because apophatic negation is not a correlate to affirmation but something else entirely. A close analysis of the Greek words Dionysius uses for negation confirms this: "Now we should not conclude that the negations [apophasis] are simply the opposites of the affirmations [kataphasis], but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial [aphairesis], beyond every assertion [kataphasis]" (136; 1000B). This passage from *Mystical Theology* does not present apophasis and kataphasis as equivalent but contrary strategies. Dionysius here refers to

three types of negation: privation, apharesis, and apophasis; and significantly, kataphasis has apharesis as its opposite.<sup>22</sup>

For Dionysius, the negative (apophatic) way triumphs over the affirmative way: “But the real truth of these matters is in fact far beyond us. That is why [our] preference is for the way up through negations” (130; 981B). What is perhaps most remarkable about this comment is that it comes in the conclusion to *The Divine Names*, which is considered the source of the Dionysian author’s kataphatic theology. Because the preference for apophatic negation remains confirmed at the level of *The Divine Names*, the Dionysian legacy advances the apophatic basis of the Christian vision. As Lossky suggests, the paradox of Christian revelation enacts the very movement of apophasis: “the transcendent God becomes immanent in the world [negation of transcendence], but in the very immanence of his economy, which leads to the incarnation and to death on the cross, he reveals himself as transcendent [negation of the negation]” (150).

Meister Eckhart is even more explicit than Dionysius in identifying the logic of apophasis and in linking rhetoric with metaphysics: “If I say God is good, this adds something [to him]. *One* is a negation of negation and a denial of denial” (TP 281; sermon 21). Ever attentive to the idea of unity, Eckhart makes use of apophatic logic to speak-away distinctions: “St. Paul says, ‘One God’ [Ep. 4:6]. *One* is purer than goodness and truth. Goodness and truth do not add anything [to God]; they add something only in the thought. When it is thought, it is added....What does *one* mean? *One* means something to which nothing has been added” (281). At the same time as a hidden oneness prevails over distinctions, however, it does so without suppressing the reality of those distinctions. “All creatures have a negation in themselves,” Eckhart continues; “one creature denies that it is

the other creature. One angel denies that it is some other angel. But God has a negation of negation; he is one and negates everything other, for outside of God is nothing” (281).

While Eckhart evokes the borderline between humanity and divinity, his articulation permits the espousal of what is nonetheless distinct, for he claims there is no-thing outside of God.

Hence, the apophatic mode tries to express the inexpugnable paradox of existence, an ontology governed by mystery. We see this throughout Eckhart’s vernacular sermons, most notably when paradoxes are given concise linguistic expression such as “the virgin wife” (*ES* 177-181; sermon 2), or “God is a word, a word unspoken” (*ES* 203-205; sermon 53).

### **No Not Nothing: Apophatic Language**

The logic of the negation of negation helps to clarify why classic apophatic texts conventionally use (in English) prefixes such as *un-*, *in-*, *non-*; prepositions such as *over*, *beyond*; formulae such as *more than*, *higher than*, *further than*; and negative syntactical structures that use *no*, *not*, *neither...nor*. These stylistic figures of negativity contribute to a rhetoric of emptiness and loss, indeterminacy and unknowing. And yet the privative or ascetic connotations of these negative language forms are simply the putative (“positive”) senses of their use. The linguistic negativity characteristic of apophatic writing acts as a self-emptying agent, signifying the very impetus beneath the movement from saying to unsaying. When Eckhart wishes to speak of “a power of the spirit that alone is free,” he begins by recalling how he has previously called it a guard, a light, a spark (*ES* 180; sermon 2). He then undermines what he has previously said using negative language forms. “But now I say that it is *neither* this *nor* that, and yet it is a something that is *higher above* this and that than heaven is above the earth. And therefore I now give it finer names than I have

ever given it before, and yet whatever fine names, whatever words we use, they are telling lies, and it is *far above* them. It is free of all names, it is bare of all forms, wholly empty and free, as God in himself is empty and free” (180). And lest this movement from naming to un-naming, from form to formlessness imply a privileging of the latter over the former, Eckhart immediately moves away from these abstractions to offer a concrete meaning, which itself suggests a further movement of unknown measure. This power of the spirit, without name or form, is the same power “in which God is verdant and growing with all his divinity” (181). The seeming negative state of privation suggested in the emptying out of name and form is coupled unexpectedly with the greening of divine life. As these lines demonstrate, the apophatic mode does not present negative formulations as more accurate or more applicable descriptors of the transcendent nature of God. Such counter gestures would necessarily operate right in the middle of that which they commit themselves to denying (for to appeal to a “negative” conception is to be firmly entrenched in the logic of conceptual determination). Instead, apophatic language enacts a disinterest or detachment in presenting descriptors as such.

In previous critical studies of the functioning of mystical language, writers, like Eckhart, who use negation and related counter-strategies, are charged with misreading the nature of language. In his analysis of mystical language, Richard Hubert Jones argues that mystics are “seduced” by the mirror theory of language. To deny God being, as Eckhart does, “still produces in the mind the image of an entity set off from other entities” (Jones 264). “Such an approach is reasonable,” Jones suggests, “if language is accepted as a mirror of reality,” that is, if grammatical distinctions are presumed to reflect ontological ones (264). Yet for the apophatic writer, it is not so much a matter of declaring, “God is a non-being,” with a

view to asserting a “negative” definition, to continue with this example, or perhaps even of asserting, as Jean-Luc Marion does in *God Without Being*, divine self-disclosure according to the more radical horizon of love (as opposed to being), as worthy an endeavour as that is. The negativity of apophasis calls attention to the phenomenon of language itself. It at once emphasizes the phenomenon of language and gives language the utmost space to be meaningful through its capacity to open experience. “For the positive concept encloses, but the negative expands the field of understanding” by using language “in a way which is unexpected” (Mortley 2: 253). To speak-away is to relinquish actively that which one may be clinging to—a way of speaking or thinking—so as to let something wholly other be. Negative rhetoric is provocative in mystical literature when considered as a way of releasing the hearer from the need to *define* (literally, bring to an end) the transcendent nature of God. The apophatic propensity for negation “encourages abandoning ideas, not wrestling with them,” by diffusing “the divisive thinking contained in the desire to delimit exactly what something is, and thus to demarcate exactly what it is not” (Bulhof and Kate “Echoes” 29).

Similarly, the common motifs found in apophatic theological literature such as darkness, emptiness, and nothingness are called upon to express divine nature as invisible, incomprehensible, inscrutable, unsearchable and infinite. So Eckhart says, I must “find God as in a nothing” because in contemplating nothing my awareness is shifted toward “I-know-not-what” (TP 323; sermon 71). The risk of a notion like *nothing* is that it will be taken precisely as definitive of the “what” that God truly is, or alternatively, the “what” of religious experience, even though the movement of apophasis actively works to suspend questions of “whatness.”<sup>23</sup> In apophatic texts, figurative references to *nothingness*, *darkness* and *silence* are used as a means of releasing the reader from the pressures of conceptual



reasoning; they hold the mind in repose. To still the thinking self in the practice of silent contemplation, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* instructs his initiate not to intellectualize over the meaning of a simple prayer word: “take just a little word, of one syllable rather than of two; for the shorter it is the better it is in agreement with this exercise of the spirit” (134; ch. 7). As with this prayer word, the value of evoking a word like *nothing* lies in its simplicity. It keeps the mind at ease with not knowing, just as a notion negative in form may often become the symbol, or “ideogram,” for “a content of meaning, which, if unutterable, is nonetheless real” (Otto 186). The aporia of transcendence through which apophatic theology speaks is itself a negative form, upsetting all positive programs and offering no security of consolation or knowledge. At best, the negative language forms and privative imagery prompt a (re)turn to the “darkest” experience of unutterable mystery, for which the name of God stands. Thus the affirmative aspects of apophatic language should not be underestimated; their negative connotations affirm that there is an awareness of God which consists in the abandonment of finite modes of knowing.

To encourage further a non-epistemic stance on the part of his hearers, Eckhart dismisses the need to extract any lesson from his homilies: “There is no need to understand this,” he says at one point, later concluding, “Whoever does not understand *what* I have said, let him not burden his heart with it” (ES 199; sermon 52; emphasis added). As these lines suggest, the semantic force of speaking-away involves a critique of the mind inasmuch as it is “conditioned by the language and logic of entities, mov[ing] inexorably toward delimitation” or “whatness” (Sells 18). Linguistically, we take our bearings from distinctions and use them to classify things; language engenders a mental habit of separating out the things of the world. Apophatic unsaying tries to unsettle this prevalent, though often

implicit, understanding of language as nomenclature, as a means for describing, defining, and categorizing in a spirit of utilitarian objectification. It may be argued that the movement of apophasis faces the threat of formalization due to its perfunctory turning back on each saying. To be sure, such formalization can become mechanical, reproducible, and henceforth falsifiable. But such a danger is not peculiar to the apophatic mode. Language after all is itself a formalization, which is precisely the point of the apophatic critique which seeks to abjure its generalizations as a way of intensifying and realizing the singularities of life here and now. By turning back on its own speaking, the apophatic mode transforms logical and semantic structures and generates performative intensities with a view to shaking off the dust of custom and habit, if only by making all things strange. Apophasis engenders a disorienting language that is, in effect, life orienting.

Yet because apophatic language communicates a considerable degree of indeterminateness, objections to its theological speaking seem at times formidable. As its medieval precursors discovered (some through death during the Inquisition), apophatic language and logic are not the surest means of upholding tenets of doctrine. Yet the difficulty of saying anything definitive about “what” apophatic theology means to say when it unsays every saying is apposite with the difficulty of thinking transcendence as such. To the extent that it withholds itself from the articulation of theological statement, the apophatic mode may constructively be considered a poetics.

### **Apophatic Poetics**

As a form of speaking that speaks-away all form, the apophatic mode imparts a peculiar poetics. It does not intend a formalist poetics, as William Franke observes, since “apophasis

exalts formlessness” (2: 39). There is no poetics of apophatic theology properly speaking. There can never be more than an indication of apophatic poetics; and even the most apophatic of all apophatic indications falls short of its aim: to free the mind from all preconceptions.

This caveat notwithstanding, our analysis of its language and logic attests to the fact that, as a poetics, apophasis is not opposed to saying this or that, to speaking a name, God’s or one’s own. Its propensity for unsaying is creatively “harnessed and becomes the guiding semantic force, the *dynamis*, of a new kind of language” (Sells 2). The movement of apophasis urges an active acknowledgement that the tension between saying and unsaying cannot be resolved. Thus poised it reflects our own attempt to come home to ourselves in the presence of that tension. So we read, in one of his sermons, how Eckhart had no sooner praised “those names [that] are permitted to us by which the saints have called him and which God so consecrated” than denied all names: “we should learn not to give any name to God, lest we imagine that in so doing we have praised and exalted him as we should; for God is above names and ineffable” (*ES* 204-205; sermon 53). Nowhere in the sermon does Eckhart account for the contradiction. This negative mode of speaking, prevalent in mystical literature, resists being reduced to “stringent philosophical or scholastic conceptuality. It is found in the capacity of poetic language for expressiveness, its freedom to narrate rather than philosophize, and its many linguistic resources for making meaning audible, palpable, palatable, resounding, and resisting definition” (Soelle 64). In fact the exploration of the way of unknowing is generally accompanied by unusual poetic gifts. Eckhart, whose vernacular sermons exhibit a rare concern with wordplay, is deemed a “consummate literary artist,” “a literary force of the highest magnitude” (Northcott xiv).

Sonja Sikka, too, comments on the linguistic innovations of mystical writers like Eckhart, and further explains how these “are designed not to obfuscate the obvious but to make the familiar strange in a poetic manner. This often constitutes a poetic revision of the language of metaphysics and theology, based on insight into what this language originally sought to articulate, that in response to which it was first uttered” (6). In classic apophatic texts, such insights come under the auspices of realization. “And because I do not know it,” writes Angelus Silesius, “I therefore have realized it” (43). As we shall discuss more fully below, the enabling power of the way of unknowing is not reflected in an intellectual ascent or a moral directive but in an existential stance.

To the question, “Is the transcendent nature of God knowable?” the apophatic mode yields at least three answers because the movement of apophasis embodies three degrees of knowing. First, apophasis, as a literary trope of denial, says no. The transcendent as such is unknowable by means of conceptual reasoning. However, inasmuch as apophasis works against conceptual reasoning, it actively uses conceptual reasoning to show its limits, to show that which cannot be conceptualized. Therefore, the apophatic mode performs an unsaying of any concept of God and thus also says yes. The transcendent nature of God is knowable, but negatively. Apophatic theology is negatively conceptual, negatively rational, asserting against the logic of non-contradiction, one of excess and deficiency, or, more specifically, the deficiency of reason in proportion to the transcendence of the referent. This is an ineffable knowledge since it is not at all certain what precisely is known. Finally, in its movement toward indeterminate openness, apophatic unsaying empties into, through, and out of yes. Its speaking-away flushes the desire to know into wider existential ground. As Angelus Silesius expresses with his concluding epigram: “Friend, let this be enough; if you

wish more to read / Go and become yourself the writ and that which is" (32). Apophatic theology is impelled by a fundamental intuition: that which cannot be comprehended is not an illusion. So if a writer like Eckhart is trying to impress upon his hearers a stance of openness toward what, at times, they already know, lest in knowing it so well they never realize it—as Sikka suggests, it is because the phenomenon of insight, the creation (apparently) of new meaning, carries an existential dimension.

## II.

### **Living Time: The Again of the Already**

This chapter's examination of the poetics of apophatic theology, though exploratory, does help to illustrate how language reflects the structure of basic thought. Inasmuch as language mirrors patterns of thought, it can serve as a kind of x-ray of our interior dialogue and illuminate the ways in which we create meaning. One of the ways to think about language is that it is built horizontally in sequences of question and answer, cause and effect, premise and conclusion. Language in this sense progresses, through linear time, to a conclusion or point of knowledge. On the other hand, the language of apophatic theology as discussed above is not structured around conclusion or resolution. It is built vertically in repeated patterns of saying and unsaying, of images and the canceling of images, layered on top of each other with increasing complexity and tension. It does not aim to resolve or drive to a conclusion. The rhythm-paradox of this language is sustained in a kind of continuous present and expresses a spiritual dimension. Just as there are differences in the functioning of language, so too are there different modes of thought and perception reflected therein.

Relationships to time, to value, to purpose, to ourselves—our basic existential tooling—are constructed in part through our manners of speaking.

Most noteworthy for the purposes of this project is the way in which the turning back of apophatic unsaying enacts a way of living time. This temporal paradigm is evident in another striking passage from Eckhart that reflects the paradoxical logic of apophasis though not its negative rhetorical forms. Toward the beginning of the sermon, Eckhart employs his usual strategy of quoting an authority before offering his own reflection, which more often than not turns against what the authority has said. In this particular instance, McGinn dutifully notes, “Eckhart appears to be citing himself” (*ES* 336 n2), an admission that only amplifies the central importance given to the act of *unknowing* in apophatic writing.<sup>24</sup>

Now one authority says: “God became man, and through that all the human race has been ennobled and honored. We may well all rejoice over this, and that Christ our brother has through his own power gone up above all the choirs of angels and sits at the right hand of the Father.” (*ES* 182; sermon 5b)

Eckhart subsequently asks, “How would it help me if I had a brother who was a wise man, if I still remained a fool?” (182). Eckhart then speaks of Christ, “our Lord and our God,” bringing humanity its blessedness and, at the same time, insists on the inherent blessedness of human nature. Concluding these remarks are two lines that express a dual intuition: “[Christ] became a messenger from God to us and brought us our blessedness. The blessedness that he brought us was ours” (182). The (authoritative) notion that Christ brought humanity its blessedness gives way to a realization that supersedes or displaces this notion. For how precisely are we to understand being “brought” what is already “ours”? Eckhart’s syntax blurs the distinction between gift and givenness, so that the givenness of

human nature includes its highest gift. Insofar as this language structure suggests the temporal experience of the *again* (“he brought us”) of the *already* (“what was ours”), the blessedness of humanity is held in one of the paradoxes of apophasis, that of “original and acquired enlightenment” (J. P. Williams 189). What’s more, the call to be Christ-like, which fills out the passage, is nothing less than a call to become again what we already are: “truly I say: Everything good that all the saints have possessed, and Mary the mother of God, and Christ in his humanity, all that is my own in this human nature” (*ES* 182; sermon 5b). This extravagant statement is a close parallel to one of the Meister’s articles condemned as heretical.<sup>25</sup> But it demonstrates how the affirmation of contradictories (fully human and fully divine), which carries as much of an apophatic tone as the negation of negation, suggests the temporal mode of the again of the already.

In view of this temporality, I wish now explore how an apophatic poetics intends not to turn our gaze away from the world but toward it. Inasmuch as apophasis bespeaks transcendence, this transcendence does not involve a release or escape from the world but from the habits and words that construct the world according to self-centered needs and anxieties.

### **Grounding Transcendence**

The aporia of transcendence through which apophasis speaks goes right through the self. We can scarcely so much as think about ourselves without thinking transcendence. We are traversed by this fissure insofar as the I who knows transcends ineluctably “what” I know. This makes for heretical speech, as Eckhart discovered. In his sermon “Blessed are the poor in spirit” he makes the radical claim that the I is the cause of God as well as of itself and all

other things (*ES* 199-203; sermon 53). Since God's ground is one with the soul's ground, in that simple ground the I is indistinct from the essence of God. "Thus, all that God chooses, wills, and is capable of here is also what the I chooses, wills, and is capable of," explains Sikka in her analysis of this sermon. "It is not even correct to say 'also' in this context," Sikka continues, "for the I in this indistinct ground is nothing other than God, God qua Godhead, in which the distinction I and God is so wholly dissolved that there is here no I and no God" (120-121). Hence, in their apophatic register, the words God and self, creator and creature do not so much emphasize an efficient cause and its effect as they name a dynamism of presence. The transcendent ground of God, and only it, has no ground other than itself. Eckhart does not efface the demarcation between self and God; rather, a full and abiding presence (the One, the Godhead) determines the dual schema, not the other way around. Although this may be "the limit on which our knowledge stumbles," for "Eckhart [this limit] is what his thought is all about" (Schürmann *Broken Hegemonies* 313).

From this perspective, the turning back of apophasis reflects a turning toward one's ground which is identical to the ground of God. Eckhart variously describes this movement as turning "into vast regions, into the sea, into uncharted depths," where "God passes away" (*MT* 226). Popular notions of mystical experience would readily regard such a turning as an inspired departure from the "normal" mode of awareness to which mystics eventually return.<sup>26</sup> In overemphasizing mystical flight it is all too easy to overlook that the existential possibility Eckhart commends to his hearers is not intended to be an extraordinary infusion. Eckhart advocates an abiding state of being. *Be* this, he says. "Because truly, when people think that they are acquiring more of God in inwardness, in devotion, in sweetness and in various approaches than they do by the fireside or in the stable, you are acting just as if you



took God and muffled his head up in a cloak and pushed him under a bench” (*ES* 183; sermon 5b). Eckhart discourages all cravings for some esoteric Truth, which can prevent us from allowing our thoughts to dwell on the transcendent, undemonstrable meaning of what-is. Eckhart does not preach an otherworldly mysticism that transports us to another realm. His is decidedly a this-worldly mysticism. Transcendence cannot be the object of a mystic’s desire, for it engenders desire as such.

Desire propels the movement of apophasis in a manner befitting its propensity for speaking-away. Sells helpfully explains how “to become free of will, it is necessary to become free of the will (expressed through petition) to become free of will” (192). Correspondingly, apophatic desire prompts one to let go of desire in the face of desiring what-one-knows-not. And yet, this letting go of desire does not extinguish desire. Apophatic desire exhales into greater desire with each new defeat. “The endlessness of desire,” writes Lilburn, “is one of the poverties to which desire delivers you” (90). This is the economy of desire found in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The author, quoting Gregory the Great, writes, “all holy desires grow by delay; and if they diminish by delay then they were never holy desires” (265; ch. 75). This suggests that loss or defeat is not simply an intermediate end of holy desire but its distinctive feature. It grows “by delay,” meaning, by the continual loss or letting go of its object insofar as what one desires is by nature unobjectifiable. So too in Eckhart: “The more you have of God, the more you long for him, for if you could be content with God, and such a contentment with him were to come, God would not be God” (*ES* 207-08; sermon 83).

## Living Without a Why

More important than any “object” of mystical experience is the apophatic dynamic of saying and unsaying in which one re-turns, awakened to the world through a displacement from it. This displacement is effected by what Sells calls the “anarchic” moment of apophatic theology, its propensity for speaking-away. He describes it thus: “The meaning event with apophatic language includes a moment that is nihilistic or ‘anarchic’—without *arche* or first principle. The anarchic moment is intimated in the turning back of the second proposition upon the first in order to remove the delimitation” (209). Because the anarchic moment, as Sells theorizes it, portends the intractable distance between the name of God—the name of names—and that which is without name, it is not without risk. For how does one distinguish being free of God from renouncing God?

When taken out of context, the nothingness of the deity is indistinguishable discursively from ‘mere nothingness’; the freedom of the soul from license; the disinterestedness of the soul from indifference; the bewilderment of the soul that knows nothing from irrationality. To attempt to interpose discursive distinctions by claiming that the mystic doesn’t really mean ‘nothing,’ when she says nothing, or doesn’t really mean she gives up all will, including the will to do God’s will, when she says she does, is to explain away the anarchic moment. To explain away the anarchic moment is to turn apophatic language into conventional theology. (Sells 209)

To the extent that conventional theology conceives truth as a function of the proposition, apophatic language overturns all propositions. The point of the apophatic critique is not to negate ceaselessly theological propositions but no longer to appeal to them as positions for

self-grounding. In this sense, the anarchic moment, set loose from any principle, has an existential parallel. In the sermons of Eckhart, it is called “living without a why.” Not only do words like *void*, *desert*, *darkness*, *cloud*, and *nothingness* point to the anarchic moment of apophatic language. They also intend toward the displacement of the self as the sole agent of action.

In his essay on Eckhart and Soto Zen, Reiner Schürmann states, “The term ‘anarchy’ has to be understood literally as the absence of a beginning, of an origin in the sense of a first cause. It must also be understood as negating the complement of *arche*, namely *telos*. I claim that the logic of releasement as it is lived in Zazen and by Eckhart leads to the destruction of origin and goal not only in the understanding of the world but even in human action” (“Loss of Origin” 283). As Schürmann goes on to suggest, Eckhart considers the praxis of releasement or detachment more powerful than any project of the will. Sells makes a similar point, suggesting that for apophatic mystics in general “the subtle forms of self-will within the will to do or be good, is ultimately...the death of the ethical spirit” (213). This helps to explain why Eckhart does not urge justice for justice’s sake. He beseeches his listeners to commend themselves to spiritual poverty, lest his hearers come to believe that the one who does just deeds is just. Though it is Nietzsche who exposes how classical interpretations of Christian ethics produce a slave morality, Eckhart had already drawn attention to the corruption of “intentional” virtue.<sup>27</sup> Eckhart preached whoever is just with a certain intention, even (perhaps especially) a noble intention, corrupts justice:

The just does not seek anything with his or her deed. For those who have something in mind with these deeds are slaves and mercenaries, people who act in the name of a way; even if it is for the sake of beatitude or of eternal life or of the kingdom of

heaven or anything else in time or eternity. All these people are not just. But justice consists in acting without a *why*. Yes, if I dared to say it, and I shall say it anyhow: even if it were *God* you had in mind, the deeds you do with that intention, I shall say it truthfully, they are dead, they are nothing! And not only that, but that way you corrupt *good deeds* as well. (sermon 65; qtd. in Schutter 129)

I say truly: So long as you perform all your works for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, or for God's sake, or for the sake of your eternal blessedness, and you work them from without, you are going completely astray. You may well be tolerated, but it is not the best. (*ES* 183; sermon 5b)

So long as you have a will to fulfill God's will, and a longing for God and for eternity, then you are not poor; for a poor man is one who has a will and longing for nothing. (*ES* 200; sermon 52).

In sermon 52, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," from which the last quotation is taken, Eckhart clarifies what it means to will nothing, explaining how what I will I am and what I am I will. In the poor, who will nothing, willing and being coincide.

Schürmann provocatively reminds us that Eckhart declares being the *verbum*, the Word-Verb: "It is our incongruous condition to always act 'in the *name* of the verb'" (*Broken Hegemonies* 311). Because it is this "indeterminacy of pure openness" in which all things stand inscribed, all moves toward power, possession and control feed on the "tragic denial" of this indeterminacy (311). Schürmann thus identifies the turning back and turning against of Eckhart's manner of speaking as

essentially phenomenological, inasmuch as in order to see a thing for what it is, it is necessary to cease overpowering it with positions, impositions, propositions, theses.

Only one kind of knowing counts, and it is practical—it is not knowing how to posit, but knowing how to let be. But this is what wrests phenomena from their concatenations according to ends. In order to let singulars be, the universal that frames them with ends has to be let go. To remain faithful to phenomena, one has to live “without why.” (273)

The goal-centered rationality that pervades our highly technologized world may help explain why contemporary assessments of apophatic theology presume that any theology worth its salt must be going somewhere. Some critical studies argue that the ceaseless linguistic negation aims to arrive at the silence of contemplation, while others argue that this contemplative silence is only a prelude to mystical union with God. But to speak (if not also to live) with a view to such ends is to be caught in an economy of accounting and justification. Eckhart calls this the spirit of merchandisers, and tartly condemns those who see God the same way they behold a cow: “You love a cow because of the milk and cheese and because of your own advantage. This is how all these people act who love God because of external riches or because of internal consolation. They do not love God rightly” (*TP* 278; sermon 16b). Eckhart sees any end as *telos* an impediment. As ultimate “why,” God may serve as a magnet, and yet serving such a God I make of myself a mercenary. The logic of cause and effect resembles an economy of strict reciprocity which demands the keeping of accounts. In such an economy, there are no gifts since nothing is given beyond the perception of what is due.

One may wonder, of course, to what end, then, does apophatic theology endeavor. In a certain sense, apophatic theology endeavors without end. The apophatic mode of speaking-away enacts a movement of transcendence, a possible “thinking” of transcendence without

transcendence being reached as an end. For the turning back of apophasis does not reduce transcendence to a goal to be accomplished. This is not to be understood as the deficiency of apophatic theology to fulfill its intentional aim. In fact, and this will bring us closer to the existential possibility of its poetics, the apophatic mystic does not “think” within the ambit of fulfillable intentionality. For inasmuch as it endeavors without end, in a related sense apophasis leaves off endeavoring. The rest, as Eliot says, is not our business (EC IV).

There is no reason why darkness should necessarily bring us to God. Darkness is a metaphor to explain the state of emptiness we experience when we have left all ways. As John of the Cross says, “entering on the road means leaving one’s own road....And turning from one’s own mode implies entry into what has no mode; that is, God” (87). So against the gravity of intentionality and the guardianship of purpose, the inner poise of spiritual poverty that bears out the way of unknowing lets all things (including God) *be*. The poor in spirit will nothing, know nothing, and have nothing; they give themselves away in all they say and do without reserve – that is, magnanimously. And lest this sound like renunciation, “I say yet more,” as Eckhart does (“do not be startled”). The height of Eckhart’s mysticism is this: Live without a why in the sheer delight of all that is:

Life lives out of its own ground and springs from its own source, and so it lives without asking why it is itself living. If anyone asked a truthful person who works out of his or her own ground: “Why are you performing your works?” and if this person were to give a straight answer, he or she would only say, “I work so that I may work.” (*ES* 184; sermon 5b)

To act out of one’s ground is to discover “I am [again] what I was [already]” (*ES* 203; sermon 52). This ground is called secret, hidden and unknowable because it belongs to no-

one, it is nowhere. As *The Cloud* author writes to his reader, “To put it briefly, I would have you be neither outside yourself, above yourself, nor behind, nor on one side or the other. ‘Where then,’ you will say, ‘am I to be? According to your reckoning, nowhere!’ Now indeed you speak well, for it is there that I would have you” (251; ch. 68). The existential attitude, which alone permits one to see what-is, is what Eckhart calls detachment. Only detachment allows one to cross the intractable distance that separates one’s ideas of God and that which is impossible to appropriate.

## Conclusion

G. K. Chesterton once wrote, “Now the best relation to our spiritual home is to be near enough to love it. But the next best is to be far enough away not to hate it” (11). Where familiarity breeds “the heavy bias of fatigue,” or, worse still, contempt, Chesterton advises making an imaginative effort to see the whole of one’s faith from a distance, “to strike wherever possible this note of what is new and strange, and for that reason the style on so serious a subject may sometimes be deliberately grotesque and fanciful” (17, 18).

Chesterton’s reflections are highly relevant as we turn to consider in the chapters that follow the literary works of a mid-twentieth-century Southern American writer who shared in her region’s penchant for the grotesque. They call to mind Flannery O’Connor’s essay on the grotesque in Southern fiction, in which she writes, “our present grotesque characters, comic though they may be, are at least not primarily so. They seem to carry an invisible burden; their fanaticism is a reproach, not merely an eccentricity. I believe that they come about from the prophetic vision peculiar to any novelist whose concerns I have been describing. In the novelist’s case, prophecy is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of

meaning and thus of seeing far things close up” (*MM* 44). As the kind of writer she is describing, O’Connor thus considered herself “a realist of distances” (44). She admits that the balanced picture of Dante, “who divided his territory up pretty evenly between hell, purgatory, and paradise,” is not possible for a modern writer; in addressing “the tired reader,” the serious fiction writer works “from a felt balance inside [herself]” (49).



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Parmenides* includes what is perhaps the most influential and concise account of classical negative theology: "...if the one is to be one, it will not be a whole nor have parts...the one is not anywhere, being neither in itself nor in another...the one is neither at rest nor in motion...the one has nothing to do with time and does not occupy any stretch of time...the one in no sense is..." (qtd. in Franke 1: 41-45). Franke notes how in this text Plato stages the "paradoxical logic of the One that cannot *be* and still be *one*" (1: 39).

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Toby Foshay for this line of argument and for alerting me to the work of Armstrong.

<sup>3</sup> The numinous is Otto's word for a unique, non-rational category of value.

<sup>4</sup> Armstrong is citing from Christos Yannaras's essay, "Orthodoxy and the West," *Eastern Churches Review* 3 (Spring 1971): 287-8.

<sup>5</sup> Negative or apophatic theology is contrasted usually with positive or kataphatic theology. It is the aim of the present chapter to challenge the basis of this conventional distinction.

<sup>6</sup> For example, on the "apophatic" rhetoric of Lacan, see David Tracy's essay, "Mystics, Prophets, Rhetorics: Religion and Psychoanalysis," in Francoise Meltzer, ed., *The Trial(s) of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). On Lacan and the question of language and desire in theology, see Edith Wyschogrod, David Crownfield, and Carl A. Raschke, eds., *Lacan and Theological Discourse* (Albany: State University of New York, 1989). On the apophatic trend in psychoanalysis more generally, see Michael Sells and James Webb's study, "Lacan and Bion: Psychoanalysis and the Mystical Language of Unsayings," in *Theory and Psychology* 5:2 (May 1995): 195-215. On Foucault and negative theology, see James Bernauer, *Michel Foucault's Force of Flight: Towards an Ethics for Thought* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1990), and Bernauer's earlier article "The Prisons of Man: An introduction to Foucault's negative theology," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 27:4 (December 1987): 365-80. On negative theology and feminist theory, see "Woman as God, God as Woman: Mysticism, Negative Theology, and Luce Irigaray" by Ann-Marie Priest in *The Journal of Religion* 83:1 (2003): 1-23. For reviews of publications on negative theology and philosophy by Marius Buning, see *Literature and Theology: An International Journal of Theory, Criticism, and Culture* 9:1 (1995): 99-103. See also *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, eds. Ilse N. Bulhof and Lauren ten Kate (New York: Fordham UP, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> During the discussion following "Différance," which Derrida first delivered as a talk on January 27, 1968, Brice Parain remarks, "[*Différance*] is the source of everything and one cannot know it; it is the God of negative theology." Derrida's response reveals the nature of his position: "It is and is not—it is above all not." See Derrida, "The Original Discussion" 84.

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<sup>8</sup> The first English translation of “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials” was printed in *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (3-70). “Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices” first appeared as a response, in the form of a conclusion, to conference papers collected in *Derrida and Negative Theology* from a 1989 symposium in Calgary, AB. Another version of this essay was later published under the title “*Sauf le nom* (Post-scriptum)” in *On the Name* (35-85). Additionally, Derrida’s commentary on Søren Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* in *The Gift of Death* brings much to bear on the topic of negative theology, particularly its motifs of silence and secrecy (53-115).

<sup>9</sup> See also Hart, *Trespass* 189.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed study of the theological underpinnings of Eckhartian and Beguine mystical thought see Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart*.

<sup>11</sup> According to Sells, “Marguerite refused to cooperate with the proceedings, to take the formal oath, or to testify” (116).

<sup>12</sup> Eckhart refers to this reflection by Augustine on the paradox of speaking about the ineffable God in sermon 53 (*ES* 204). While Augustine affirms the ineffability of God, his writings do not make use of the performative aspect of apophasis, which turns back on the language of its affirmations.

<sup>13</sup> This paradoxical dilemma led Augustine to view language as an obstacle between human beings and their desired union with God. His rhetoric is a “rhetoric of silence” because he maintains an absolute distinction between Word and words. See Ferguson 861.

<sup>14</sup> See Lossky 152.

<sup>15</sup> Hereafter referred to as Dionysius.

<sup>16</sup> For this reason, scriptural passages will be used in reference to what I propose about the fiction of Flannery O’Connor.

<sup>17</sup> What Luibheid translates here as “ray of divine shadow” is commonly translated as “rays of dazzling darkness” (Franke 1: 174).

<sup>18</sup> “One might be able to work up some of the negative predicates, such as ‘unsearchable,’ ‘immeasurable,’ ‘infinite’ into names, but despite his frequent use of such predicates, Dionysius does not take this step” (J. P. Williams 65 n3).

<sup>19</sup> “Our first understanding of apophasis has dominated Western thought since its formulation by Aquinas as *via negativa*, complementing the *via positiva* and transcended with it by the *via eminentiae*. Thus, predications of the divine, which are affirmed on the

basis of revelation or natural theology, are found not to be univocally so affirmed; and in that univocal sense, are therefore denied; the same affirmations may then be remade, on the understanding that their meaning is in some sense a pre-eminent one, their significance being to point to an analogy rather than an identity between the divine and the human realms. Negations are in this scheme an important corrective to theological affirmations, but thereby support a theology which is fundamentally affirmative” (J. P. Williams 3-4). A similar assessment is given by Carabine: “In the West, there has always been a strong tendency to favour affirmative theology in the analogical method of the *via eminentiae*. The affirmative way of ‘speaking’ about God, with its heavy reliance upon the creedal formulae adopted by the Ecumenical Councils of the early Church, has sometimes tended to forget that while creedal formulae provide a conceptual form through which a ray of truth can be communicated, they cannot contain the whole truth about God” (4). Carabine nonetheless goes on to present the negative way and the positive way as a dialectic.

<sup>20</sup> Carabine links the neglect of apophatic theology in the West to its mystical element: “Mysticism has always been a difficult area of study for the philosopher, and indeed for the theologian, as its advocates lay claim to a vision which cannot be subjected to the scrutiny of intellectual reasoning” (5).

<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the apophatic form of prayer espoused in *The Cloud of Unknowing* involves letting go of thoughts, even those deemed “holy”: “If any thought should rise and continue to press in, above you and between you and that darkness, and should ask you and say: ‘what do you seek and what would you have?’ you must say that it is God whom you would have. [...] And say: ‘you have no part to play.’ So say to the thought: ‘Go down again’” (131-32; ch. 7).

<sup>22</sup> This point comes from the explication of the three Greek terms for negation in the Dionysian corpus by J. P. Williams (64-7). It should also be noted that by not posing apophasis as the opposite of kataphasis, Dionysius is directly contradicting Aristotle (Pseudo-Dionysius 136 n6).

<sup>23</sup> See Sells 10-12.

<sup>24</sup> Sells identifies locutions such as “Great authorities say...Now I say” as “apophatic markers.” Sells observes how they echo the Sermon on the Mount where a series of positions marked by “You have heard it said” are then followed by new positions introduced by “But I say to you” (189-90).

<sup>25</sup> See Eckhart, *ES* 336 n4.

<sup>26</sup> Jones, for example, defines mysticism as an interior experience that moves away from the cognitive situation of a “subject” knowing a mental or physical “object,” the result of which is a state of consciousness without an object of consciousness. He thus concludes that mystics treat their mystical experiences “when they ‘return’ to the normal mode of awareness” (255).

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<sup>27</sup> See Schutter's essay, "Zarathustra's Yes and Woe: Nietzsche, Celan, and Eckhart on the Death of God," in *Flight of the Gods* 121-43.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Denial in *Wise Blood*: “That ain’t anything but a way to say something”

Of two men who have no experience of God,  
he who denies him is perhaps nearer to him than the other.  
— Simone Weil

Flannery O'Connor's affinity for the motives and motifs of the apophatic mystical tradition are nowhere more apparent than in her first novel *Wise Blood*. The narrative does not offer a counterpoise to the emphatic denials of its protagonist Hazel Motes, who describes himself as “member and preacher to that church where the blind don’t see and the lame don’t walk and what’s dead stays that way” (CW 59). He denies the usual categories of belief, “The only way to the truth is through blasphemy” (84), and later unsays the denial, “you couldn’t even believe in [blasphemy] because then you were believing in something to blaspheme” (116). His peculiar proclamations open epistemic chasms that relate closely to his way of seeing which is equally cavernous. At the beginning of the novel, a character finds her attention drawn to Hazel Motes’s eyes because “Their settings were so deep that they seemed, to her, almost like passages leading somewhere and she leaned halfway across the space that separated the two seats, trying to see into them” (4). Later, another character notices how his eyes “don’t look like they see what he’s looking at but they keep on looking” (61). Finally, at the novel’s end, Hazel Motes himself pensively surmises, “If there is no bottom to your eyes they hold more” (126). In *Wise Blood* Hazel Motes’s ways of seeing and speaking are defined negatively. Not only does his penchant for unsaying correspond to his manner of not seeing, but the movement of the narrative occasions a further negation: his unsaying leads to silence and his unseeing to blindness. This chapter

therefore highlights the various ways in which O'Connor makes her protagonist's predilection for negation itself the means to his transformation.

Much of the critical discussion surrounding the novel is premised on Hazel Motes's renunciation of Christianity as expressed through his positivistic statements that purport his wish "to be converted to nothing" (CW 12).<sup>1</sup> These statements cannot be discounted; however, my focus will be on textual moments in which the (apophatic) tendency to unsettle such sayings is most pronounced. I specifically wish to call attention to how his preaching on "no place" and the "Church Without Christ" is less a pronouncement than an evocation. It does not function in the novel as a definitive belief or stable proposition, but refers to an experience that guides as much as decants Haze's spiritual longing. Such a reading helps to sharpen the significance of the novel's final chapter in relation to the rest of the narrative. For over the course of the novel a widespread dynamic of negation propels the fringe preacher in dramatic movement toward the bottomless spaces of silence, blindness, and death. Critics keen to emphasize his sudden "conversion" tend to overlook the manner in which the patterns of Haze's earlier speaking and seeing are not abandoned but fully embodied by the novel's end.<sup>2</sup> O'Connor wrote in her introduction to the 1962 edition of *Wise Blood* that she saw in Hazel Motes "many wills conflicting in one man" (CW 1265). I hope to trace the thematic and semantic import of his will to "unknow" Jesus in order to underscore the apophatic tenor of O'Connor's first novel. Hazel Motes presses toward what sight cannot see except in darkness, what language cannot say without denial, something at the edges of knowing and desire, something paradoxical. In *Wise Blood*, which tells the story of a man who "negates his way back to the cross" (2 Mar. 54, CW 920), there is much the poetics of apophatic theology could illuminate.

Although *Wise Blood* was widely reviewed after its publication in 1952, the twenty-six-year-old author felt it was also widely misunderstood. Most contemporary reviewers criticized its unflinching focus on degeneracy, “masculine” prose style, and repulsive characters, with few detecting how “the novel is much closer to religious allegory than it is to naturalistic fiction” (Robillard 4). A five-page appreciative review by Brainard Cheney later that year, however, praised the young Georgia author for offering such a dramatic representation of the “predicament” of modern culture, for exposing in particular the secret “craving of the soul” against the limitations of materialism (O’Connor *Correspondence* 197).<sup>3</sup> In his review, Cheney compares *Wise Blood* to two earlier Southern novels, Erskine Caldwell’s widely praised *Tobacco Road* (1932) and William Faulkner’s less well received *As I Lay Dying* (1930), arguing that the former reflects a “Marxist morality” by concentrating solely on the physical poverty and degradation of its characters, while the latter grants its rustic characters profound significance as they engage in the religious rite of burying the dead, though they eventually “slip back into naturalistic anonymity” (196). In *Wise Blood*, Cheney asserts, O’Connor conveys the allegorical significance of destitution in modern culture: “In contrast to Caldwell’s reportorial naturalism and Faulkner’s poetic expressionism, she uses, under the face of naturalism a theological weighted symbolism” (197). This favourable review of her debut novel so pleased O’Connor that she sent a letter to thank Cheney for “writing about it so carefully and with so much understanding.”

I only want to tell you that I liked the review. There have not been many good ones.

I’ve been surprised again and again to learn what a tough character I must be to have produced a work so lacking in what one lady called “love.” The love of God doesn’t

count or else I didn't make it recognizable. So many reviewers too thought this was just another dirty book and enjoyed it for that reason.

(8 Feb. 53, *Correspondence* 3-4)

O'Connor, moreover, adopts one of Cheney's lines about the novel in her correspondence with another reviewer who, as she recollects to Betty Hester, had found *Wise Blood* to be "dandy and a kind of manifestoe [*sic*] for all us atheists" (24 Aug. 56, *CW* 999). O'Connor reproduces Cheney's remark that Hazel Motes "negates his way back to the cross," additionally explaining, "I only mean that complete nihilism has led him the long way (or maybe it's really the short way) around to the Redemption again" (2 Mar. 54, *CW* 920).

If the profuse negations of Hazel Motes expose a contact point with the apophatic dynamic of unsaying, it is not least because the novel represents the "Ur-text of O'Connor's asceticism" and "desert spirituality," as Richard Giannone has argued so poignantly in *Flannery O'Connor, Hermit Novelist* (3). Tracing the influence of the early Christian desert tradition on her work, Giannone finds in Hazel Motes "an ancient desert renouncer who has stumbled unexpectedly from fourth-century Egypt into twentieth-century America" (37). While the desert from which Haze has just returned after serving as a soldier for four years is a "topographical" entity in the novel, Giannone points out that the desert is also "an individual experiential matter," which "is sometimes no desert at all," but an empty place of "spiritual richness" where the heart settles its desires (36). Just as "the task of fixing the boundaries of the desert is vexed with indeterminacy," so too, I suggest, is the rhetorical-experiential borderland of Haze's negations (36). The desert experience, as Giannone presents it, approximates the apophatic way in that both are ventures in Christian asceticism taken up by those who feel at odds with the time they live in. Giannone not only attributes



the integrity of Hazel Motes to his “undivided effort to get rid of God from his mind” (a remark that recalls Eckhart’s counsel to pray to God to be rid of God), but also cautions us not to miss “the ardor O’Connor values in him” (44). For O’Connor testifies to the vitality of Haze’s negations when she herself tarries in the negative to describe him: “H. Motes couldn’t really believe that he hadn’t been redeemed” (23 May 52, *CW* 897).

## I.

The opening scene from *Wise Blood* pokes fun at the human need to subdue the inscrutable or unknown, even as it persists in attracting our attention. On the train to Taulkinham, Tennessee, the woman sitting across from Hazel Motes is disturbed by his silence and distracted presence until, to her mind, the price tag on his suit “placed” him (*CW* 3). “Irked” a moment earlier by the “outline of a skull under his skin,” she looks at his face again feeling “fortified against it.” Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock encounters a disquieting silence from Haze as well as a glimpse of death, the contour of his “plain and insistent” skull suggesting a *memento mori*. But following the mind’s habit of anticipating moments of recognition, Mrs. Hitchcock “wrenched her attention loose” from Haze’s skull and deep-set eyes in order to detect the cost of his suit; the calculable marker, still stapled to the sleeve, presumably “placed” him within the scope of her speculations. Focused on identifying what (or who) she knows in order to secure her bearings, Mrs. Hitchcock shows herself to be a woman capable of staving off disorientation. She says to Haze, “I guess you’re going home,” trying to engage him in her “train of talk” (3, 5). When Haze finally responds to say he isn’t going home but to Taulkinham, “She said she knew an Albert Sparks from Taulkinham. She said he was her sister-in-law’s brother-in-law and that he...” (5); and at

the mention of the train porter being from Chicago, “Mrs. Hitchcock said she knew a man who lived in Chi...” (6).

The end of *Wise Blood* overtly echoes its beginning. In the closing scene another woman is sitting by Hazel Motes, again observing how “the outline of a skull was plain under his skin,” and she exclaims, “I see you’ve come home!” (CW 131). Haze is now dead and Mrs. Flood, his landlady, leans “closer and closer to his face,” drawn to look deeply into his “eye sockets,” into “the dark tunnel where he had disappeared” (131). Her eyes closed, she stares searchingly at what “she couldn’t see,” sensing “she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn’t begin” (131). Like Mrs. Hitchcock on the train, Mrs. Flood senses in Haze an intimation of the unknown that will not succumb to her desire to know it. A widow trapped within the “bird cage” of a lonely and possessive heart, Mrs. Flood was avaricious for “money or anything else, as if she had once owned the earth and been dispossessed of it” (129, 120). “She couldn’t look at anything steadily without wanting it, and what provoked her most was the thought that there might be something valuable hidden near her, something she couldn’t see” (120). Earlier Mrs. Flood had proposed marriage, wanting Haze to stay with her permanently: “‘Nobody ought to be without a place of their own to be,’ she said, ‘and I’m willing to give you a home here with me, a place where you can always stay’” (129). But at once, Haze flees out-of-doors; two days later he is picked up by the police and dies from the blow of a billy club.

The character of Mrs. Hitchcock clearly anticipates that of Mrs. Flood. Whether curious or covetous, their way of seeing Hazel Motes is essentially the same. In clinging to appearances and to the quantifiable, the women betray not only the motives of materialism

but also the human impulse to secure or contain someone or something. It is this latter impulse that troubles Haze as he falls asleep in his berth on the train to Taulkinham.

Haze recalls the deaths of his grandfather, two younger brothers, father, and mother. He remembers thinking how his grandfather “ain’t going to let them shut [the coffin] on him; when the time comes, his elbow is going to shoot into the crack” (CW 9). He likewise dreams of his father “humped over on his hands and knees in his coffin,” saying, “nobody can shut nothing on me”; and of his mother, “seen through the crack of her coffin,” appearing as if “she were going to spring up and shove the lid back and fly out and satisfy herself” (10, 14). Upon awakening, Haze abruptly wedges himself through a crack in the curtain and calls for the porter to help him get out of the coffin-like berth that threatens to enclose him. Despite critical responses arguing to the contrary, it is not simply the dark unknown of death Hazel fears here (earlier he wanted the berth “all dark” [9]).<sup>4</sup> His resistance, directed as it is not against the moment of death but against an irretrievable, once and for all closure, suggests a resistance to containment, to a frightful finality that leaves no room for that which cannot be contained or secured. Haze, in his half-sleep, finds himself looking for what may crack through the soon-to-be-closed coffins.<sup>5</sup> And like the figures in his coffin dreams, Haze is depicted as a young man “unrested and looking” (14). He “sat at a forward angle on the green plush train seat, looking one minute at the window as if he might want to jump out of it, and the next down the aisle at the other end of the car” (3). His continual movement and sustained looking together generate the drama of the plot, especially to the extent that they deliver him “into the dark” (11).

As confirmed by the two scenes that frame the novel, *Wise Blood*’s defining movement is toward “home,” which is all the more compelling in its absence. For the narrative proper

begins just after Haze has left his hometown of Eastrod, discovering it upon his return from the army, deserted. On the train his thoughts are drawn back home, but the specificity of the place quickly dissolves to expose a larger undefined context: “Eastrod filled his head and then went out beyond and filled the space that stretched from the train across the empty darkening fields” (CW 5). The “empty darkening fields,” suggestive of Haze’s homelessness, also provide an early indication of the novel’s associative emphasis on darkness and directionality. The most striking image in *Wise Blood* to share in this association is Haze’s interior image of Jesus:

[H]e 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 the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown. (11)

This “wild ragged” Jesus figure is an O’Connor image *par excellence*: stark and strange. McMullen observes how the often “unorthodox” images O’Connor uses in her fiction “lead the reader into assuming that their meanings are equally unorthodox” (69). Yet McMullen praises O’Connor for presenting Jesus in her fiction as “an eccentric figure who is continually referenced unexpectedly,” and emphasizes that O’Connor’s peculiar language choices are effective in guarding “mystery” (68). To offer a more precise analysis of the image being considered, however, is to note that the figuration of Jesus is *dynamic*. It is not a static representation of a person (Enoch Emery’s “new jesus”) or a theological concept (“Redemption”). The Jesus who hides himself in the far reaches of Haze’s mind is a figure on the move, silently signaling for Haze to follow him into the dark as if for a game of hide and seek. This Jesus is provocative in calling Haze to “where he was not sure of his

footing.” But in remaining silent as he moves from tree to tree the figure also appears unthreatening. The darkness develops the dynamism of the image even further, for darkness here presents a spatial metaphor akin to the water Haze imagines walking on: both are to be traversed and, what’s more, in such a way that one “not know it,” or else “know it and drown.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the figuration of Jesus alerts us to the novel’s concern with an experience of (divine) darkness that is not discontinuous with the “way” of darkness.

This defining image of *Wise Blood* is consonant with the key image in Dionysius’s *Mystical Theology*. In the text’s opening address to Timothy, the author describes the ultimate goal of the *via negativa* in this way: “By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine darkness” (135; 1000A). As with O’Connor’s image, there is darkness and direction; in fact, the darkness is directional. For instead of an end point, a place to arrive, the Dionysian author gives an infinite pointer, “the *ray* of divine darkness,” as indeterminate as the dark wood into which an animated Jesus beckons Haze. In apophatic theological literature the motif of darkness doubles for the inability of the mind’s power to grasp the divine, and for an experience of the divine that is, itself, the source of this inability. In his study of apophasis, pertinently entitled *Denying Divinity*, J. P. Williams stresses the primacy of the latter because a negative estimate of the mind’s ability does not necessarily lead to an apophatic position; for this reason, Williams conceives the negations of apophasis as an iterative process (an “anagogy”) that is animated by one’s experience of the divine (5). O’Connor’s image thus presents an astonishing condensation of the movement of apophasis, its “wildness” in repeatedly turning away from all determinations toward the darkness of unknowing, while suggesting that Hazel Motes’s desire to “unknow” Jesus is, itself, a

testament to what he knows. Giannone similarly states, “His actions spring from the depth of his inner life that demonstrates in its turmoil that Motes has in full measure the soul he sets out to deny” (44).

To add briefly to McMullen’s point, mentioned above, the “unorthodoxy” of O’Connor’s image also avoids the naturalistic and aesthetic obstacles of images that are beautiful, accessible, and agreeable to the senses by engaging the mind directly in the way of negation (“it is not *this*”). A “wild ragged” Jesus frustrates any romantic notions of pious imitation; to follow such a figure is too dangerous and severe to remain a gratifying project of the ego. This helps to explain why the Dionysian author prefers incongruous symbolism, which is a preference derived from his reading of scripture, as he explains in *The Divine Names*: “Scripture, for example, calls the all-apparent light ‘invisible.’ It says regarding the One of many praises and many names that he is ineffable and nameless. It says of the One who is present in all things and who may be discovered from all things that he is ungraspable and ‘inscrutable’” (105; 865B-C). Indeed, the movement of apophasis is not an exercise in refining imagery, but an exercise in negating one’s attachment to it. Dark descriptors point and expand in this direction, taking us with them, because they cancel their very function as descriptors.

Not surprisingly, the figure of Jesus evokes a mood of unease in Hazel Motes, and thus offers an entrance into the movement of the plot, which carries the preacher toward greater and greater unknowing by way of dispossession. The narrator tells us early on that when Haze was a boy “[w]here he wanted to stay was in Eastrod with his two eyes open, and his hands always handling the familiar thing, his feet on the known track, and his tongue not too loose” (CW 11). But upon his return from the army, Haze discovers he has just lost both

family and home. In the deserted town of Eastrod, “there were no more Motes, no more Ashfields, no more Blasengames, Feys, Jacksons...or Parrums,” and the house he grew up in, now empty, offers him little solace. “That night he slept on the floor in the kitchen, and a board fell on his head out of the roof and cut his face” (10, 13). Forsaken by all that was familiar and known, Haze travels to Taulkinham and resolutely sets out to know that which he has not previously known. And yet, approximating the structural logic of apophasis, even these deliberate efforts are eventually relinquished. To begin with, he had never had sex, so he pays Mrs. Leora Watts for her services, only to find himself later wishing he could pay another woman to leave him alone. He had never owned a car (“he didn’t have any license”), so he buys a dilapidated Essex, which a police officer one day coolly pushes over a ridge (“Them that don’t have a car, don’t need a license”) (37, 118). While in the army he had also tried to avoid sin, so he resolves to seduce the daughter of a preacher, but then “abandoned the notion of seducing her and tried to protect himself” from her advances (82). Most significantly, though, the figure of Jesus had never stopped haunting him, so he begins the Church Without Christ.

The characterization of Hazel Motes as “unrested and looking” is sharply contrasted to that of Enoch Emery, the eighteen-year-old boy who is desperate for a friend. After meeting Haze outside a department store, at the “altar” of a potato peeler salesman, he tags after Haze and confides, “This is one more hard place to make friends in. I been here two months and I don’t know nobody. Look like all they want to do is knock you down” (CW 19, 26). Enoch works for the City Forest Park as a gate attendant. Every day after work he goes into the park, “and every day when he went in, he did the same things” (44). He performs a peeping Tom routine from the bushes on the bank above the swimming pool, drinks a

chocolate malted milkshake while making “suggestive remarks” to the waitress at the FROSTY BOTTLE, goes to see the animals, stopping at every cage to make “an obscene comment aloud to himself,” and then visits the museum (46, 53). Enoch performs this routine religiously, forcing Haze one day to do the same even though the actions “were only a form he had to get through” (53). The lustful habits and animalistic instincts that characterize Enoch’s ways of seeing and speaking are fully realized toward the end of the novel when he dons a gorilla suit. His “Hope” (“which was made up, in Enoch, of two parts suspicion and one part lust”) was to attract “a line of people waiting to shake his hand,” as Gonga, Giant Jungle Monarch and Movie Star, had done in front of a local theatre (108). In the scene of his final appearance in the novel, Enoch buries his clothes in a pine thicket, although this “was not a symbol to him of burying his former self; he only knew he wouldn’t need them any more” (111). As the narrator explains earlier, “Enoch was not a foolhardy boy who took chances on the meaning of things” (74); he was “willing to wait for a certainty,” and yet when his instincts told him one morning “today was the day” he would know for certain, “he decided not to get up” (76). Enoch Emery puts the meaning of Hazel Motes’s wakeful unrest into greater relief. For O’Connor’s protagonist dares to undo the meaning of things in the modern world and does not rest in indifference but courts uncertainty.

When Enoch speaks of having “a sign” that “something’s going to happen,” Haze responds, “Nothing’s going to happen” (CW 52). This brief reply utters nothing fixed or determinable, but it does not say nothing; rather, it allows for a future emptied of prediction, its indeterminacy making room for what exceeds Haze’s seeing and knowing. Like the prophets of Israel, Haze apprehends the unforeseeable precisely as unforeseeable. The



prophets “have never announced a God upon whom their hearers’ striving for security reckoned,” writes Martin Buber in a passage O’Connor marked in her copy of *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy*; “They have always aimed to shatter all security and to proclaim in the opened abyss of the final insecurity the unwished-for God who...confounds all who imagine that they can take refuge in the certainty that the temple of God is in their midst” (qtd. in Kinney 26). *Wise Blood* shows Haze repeatedly resisting those who want to displace, too quickly, incomprehension for consolation, or, alternatively, an inspiriting absence for a petrified presence.

When Hoover Shoats (alias Onnie Jay Holy) hears Haze preaching the Church Without Christ he quickly sees a way to capitalize on the idea of a “new jesus.” A former preacher from the radio program “Soulsease,” Hoover decides to help Haze promote his church, assuring those listening, “You don’t have to believe nothing you don’t understand and approve of. If you don’t understand it, it ain’t true, and that’s all there is to it” (CW 86). Hoover testifies to those gathered that this “new jesus” will bring a person’s “sweet nature into the open where ever’body could enjoy it” (86), for a person’s inner sweetness should be “on the outside to win friends and make him loved. That’s why I want ever’ one of you people to join the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ. It’ll cost you each a dollar but what is a dollar? A few dimes! Not too much to pay to unlock that little rose of sweetness inside you!” (87). Haze tries to discredit the imposter to the crowd and refuses to cooperate with Hoover’s scam. The next night, an undeterred Hoover Shoats introduces his own “True Prophet” (a Hazel Motes look-alike) for the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ, saying “listen to his words because I think they’re going to make you happy like they’ve made me!” (94). Haze resists the lack of emotional “cost” in Hoover’s preaching as much as the

demand for a financial one. As we shall discuss more fully below, Haze's strange proclamations carry an unsettling force that confounds his hearers; and insofar as this story depicts one man's apophatic approach to the darkness of God, the most important hearer of his preaching is Haze himself.

Also attracted to the Church Without Christ, Enoch Emery is anxious to present Hazel Motes with a new Jesus—a shrunken corpse embalmed and encased in the city park's museum that the boy routinely visits. Enoch's eventual theft of the body parodies the Gospel story of the empty tomb. Enoch steals the withered man from a glass coffin and thrusts him into a paper bag when the guard is asleep, whereas in the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene arrives at the tomb and finds there is no body. She stands before the empty tomb and says, "I do not know where they have put him" (John 20.13). Michel de Certeau reminds us that Christianity was founded upon the loss of a body and how this loss "constitutes the point of departure for the task of offering a body to the spirit, of 'incarnating' discourse, giving truth a space in which to make itself manifest" (80). Certeau, who identifies Mary Magdalene as "that eponymous figure of the modern mystic," concludes that it is absence not presence that stirs mystics in their desire and mourning (81).<sup>7</sup> So while the petrified new Jesus aptly underscores Enoch's body-fixation, it also starkly juxtaposes the dynamic Jesus who animates the darkness of Haze's mind. In *Wise Blood* the journey of Hazel Motes, from foreign desert to draining ditch, maps his visceral (no less than verbal) straining toward figural absence. Although earlier in the novel Haze himself impulsively calls for a new Jesus (who "ain't got any God in him"), he adds that this new Jesus should not be familiar or recognizable, but rather one "that don't look like any other man so you'll look at him" (CW 80; emphasis added). His comment implies that familiarity,

one's sense of knowing, can get in the way of actually looking. To look, Haze implies, is not to identify but to un-identify, to abandon the reach of recognition for a steadfast marveling that defeats you. It is just this manner of looking that Sabbath Hawks notices in Hazel Motes: "'I like his eyes,' she observed. 'They don't look like they see what he's looking at but they keep on looking'" (61). Similarly, at the city park zoo with Enoch, Haze stands before one of the cages and stares into its emptiness:

Enoch ran back to him and grabbed him by arm but Haze pushed him off and kept on looking in the cage. It was empty. Enoch stared. "It's empty!" he shouted. "What you have to look in that ole empty cage for? You come on!" He stood there, sweating and purple. "It's empty!" he shouted." (54)

Yet Haze keeps on looking because in the emptiness Enoch dismisses, Haze divines the single eye of an owl, open and watchful. Haze's way of seeing involves having to stare, which is associated here not only with emptiness but also with the only naturalistic image for wisdom in the novel. Because the apophatic dynamic of unsaying schools this long looking, we shall now turn to examine the nature of Haze's propensity to speak-away.

## II.

From his first public pronouncement, to his conflicts with false preachers, to his final silence, the entire trajectory of the character of Hazel Motes is defined by his irrepressible urge to preach, which (of course) he initially denies. "What I mean to have you know is: I'm no goddam preacher" (CW 18). Once this denial is itself denied, Haze begins to preach because he wishes to counter the preaching of others. In the style of a Nietzschean parable, *Wise Blood* depicts a mad preacher who leaps atop the nose of his rat-colored car in the

middle of the modern marketplace proclaiming the “Church Without Christ” to indifferent moviegoers. Having searched for his soul in the desert while a soldier, he recognizes the futility of his search and so returns to Tennessee to proclaim that there was no Fall, no Redemption, and no Judgment and that Jesus was a liar. Perhaps not unlike Nietzsche, O’Connor understood “the death of God” not merely as the historical and cultural stage at which humanity distances itself from religious and moral principles. In *Wise Blood*, the force of his theological unsaying attunes Haze to an ambivalent experience of absence and emptiness. On the one hand, his preaching signifies an experience in which the word “Christ,” however often it may be used or misused, has become an empty word. The name is no longer meaningful; it has become superfluous. The incessant cursing of Slade’s son at the car lot implies as much, as does huckster Hoover Shoats’ defense of his Holy Church of Christ Without Christ: “It don’t make any difference how many Christs you add to the name if you don’t add none to the meaning, friend” (89). This points to an experience of the infirm and foundering word. On the other hand, Haze’s verbal negations by no means confirm his nihilism. Like the dynamic of apophasis, his language serves to bespeak transcendence by dismantling itself. Although Haze’s negations seem to deny inexorably that which is no longer heard in modern life, i.e., transcendence, transcendence is precisely what is reclaimed through his language of unsaying. His negative rhetoric and speaking-away of categories of belief need not be dismissed as faulty theological statement. Apophatic theology recognizes there are other ways of speaking about the divine than the categories of theological discourse. There are evocative, poetical ways. For the devout Roman Catholic writer, words contain something of the Word, and if they fail to connect us to the life of the Word, stranger words may be called for. “I am much more interested in the

nobility of unnaturalness than in the nobility of naturalness,” O’Connor declares. “As Robert [Fitzgerald] says, it is the business of the artist to uncover the strangeness of truth” (25 July 59, *HB* 343). Thus, the apophatic character of Haze’s pronouncements queries the most common interpretation in O’Connor criticism, which deems his speaking nihilistic in terms of its exclusion of transcendence. It is, I suggest, questionable whether the remains and traces of transcendence no longer continue to work in this fringe preacher’s mode of expression.

Preaching outside the Odeon Theatre, at the height of his evangelizing (two women and a boy stop to listen), Hazel Motes cries out:

“Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it. Where is there a place for you to be? No place. Nothing outside you can give you any place,” he said.

“You needn’t to look at the sky because it’s not going to open up and show no place behind it. You needn’t to search for any hole in the ground to look through into somewhere else. You can’t go neither forwards nor backwards into your daddy’s time nor your children’s if you have them. In yourself right now is all the place you got. If there was any Fall, look there, if there was any Redemption, look there, and if you expect any Judgment, look there, because they all three will have to be in your time and your body and where in your body and where in your time can they be?” (*CW* 93)

These words ostensibly confirm O’Connor’s explanation of her fiction’s “negative” appearance. “If you live today,” she wrote to Betty Hester in 1955, “you breathe in

nihilism” (28 Aug. 55, *HB* 97). Critical studies exploring the religious design of *Wise Blood* generally interpret this speech as indicative of Haze’s spiritual blindness, because if “[n]othing outside you can give you any place,” then there would appear to be little room for transcendence. Susan Srigley, for example, maintains that Haze confronts the problem of “place” because he tries “to sever the divine-human relation.” In his “desacralized world,” he locates “all meaning within himself,” and therefore, “understands place as rooted entirely in the self” (74). McMullen similarly argues that the author’s “grammar of negation” serves as a “warning intended for her reading public” because it “denies her characters the fate she would choose for them” (101). Zornado, too, who reads *Wise Blood* with an appreciation for the *via negativa* of its protagonist, regards the sermon as “an extreme example of a mind driven to the edge of sanity in an attempt to reason his way out of the unreasonableness of faith” (“Flannery O’Connor” 93). According to Zornado, Haze’s language exposes “a nostalgia for foundational truths” but overlooks “the joy of endless deferral,” and so, it presents “a kind of deconstructionist’s primer” (“Flannery O’Connor” 94).<sup>8</sup> Margaret Peller Feeley comes closest to acknowledging that this sermon not only “has a ring of great poetry” but also calls to mind the “doctrine of dispossessedness” characteristic of “the Negative Way” (111). Yet Feeley stops short of exploring this connection further, concluding that Haze’s speech “point[s] to matter as the sole object of knowledge” and promotes “the terror of time” (111, 112).

However, if we advert to the volition of an apophatic poetics, the daring assertions of Haze’s sermon are appropriate paradoxes. As we shall see, in this speech, which marks the fullest articulation of his preaching in the novel, a transcendent experience is heard in the syntax. By unsettling those determinations that uphold limiting conceptualizations of self

and God, his manner of speaking gives profile to transcendence (the indefinite, infinite, beyond) by showing where its presence is felt most acutely—in the self. Haze’s way of unsaying complicates notions of self-containment. Transcendence within the self exceeds the self, and so displaces the self. Once we form part of a body which is both ourselves and infinitely larger than ourselves, the distinction between here (immanence) and there (transcendence) vanishes.

Unlike Mrs. Hitchcock in the novel’s opening scene, Hazel Motes counters the urge to find one’s bearings, to “place” oneself or another. He instead speaks of setting aside those references that would tell a person where (or who) he or she is. To do this Haze unravels the timing of space and the spacing of time: “Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there....You can’t go neither forwards nor backwards into your daddy’s time nor your children’s if you have them” (CW 93). Haze also countermands the desire to presume a place of exile and subsequently to look (high and low) for the transcendental in a realm beyond this world: “You needn’t to look at the sky because it’s not going to open up and show no place behind it. You needn’t to search for any hole in the ground to look through into somewhere else” (93). Such vocabulary is closer to that of an apophatic mystic than to that of a blasphemous preacher or devoted nihilist. In fact, writing to friend Betty Hester about Hazel Motes, O’Connor admits, “(you are right) he was a mystic” (10 Nov. 55, *HB* 116). This same letter contains O’Connor’s only direct reference to Dionysius, the enigmatic figure who introduces the terminology of apophatic mysticism into the early Christian tradition.<sup>9</sup> In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the anonymous author offers the reader the following advice: “To put it briefly, I would have you be neither outside yourself, above yourself, nor behind, nor on one side or the other. ‘Where then,’ you will

say, ‘am I to be? According to your reckoning, nowhere!’ Now indeed you speak well, for it is there that I would have you” (251; ch. 68). And Eckhart similarly preaches, “You should so seek [God] that you find him nowhere” (*ES* 192; sermon 15). In its unsaying of spatial and temporal reference, the apophatic term “nowhere” directs attention away from separative conceptions of self and God toward that which is nonconceptual. To be “no place” prompts a similar shift, speaking-away the perception of self as separate. For to undo temporal and spatial reference, as Haze does in this sermon, is to displace the self from its own containment. By enacting an apophatic movement toward the indefinite, “no place” paradoxically points to the illusion of estrangement.

The delimitations of time and space are further dismantled when Hazel calls on his hearers to look within themselves, saying, “If there was any Fall, look there, if there was any Redemption, look there, and if you expect any Judgment, look there, because they all three will have to be in your time and your body and where in your body and where in your time can they be?” (*CW* 93). The phrases “if there was” and “if you expect” transmogrify in being spoken together with the phrase “all three will have to be in your time and your body.” The distinction between what was and will be is a distinction of time. But these temporal categories dissolve. Moreover, what is “beyond” reveals itself “within,” as Haze identifies the human body—“look there”—as pressed into the service of inestimable time. The body here is held in time and also holds all time. This extravagant manner of speaking poses no distinction between two kinds of time, historical and eternal. More extravagant still, it fuses them within the self. Such strange proclamations disrupt conventional modes of thinking and speaking, suggesting, in the words of *The Cloud* author, that “[a]s for time, place and body, all three must be forgotten” (237; ch. 59). Neither ahistorical nor nonmaterial, this act



of forgetting one's time, place, and body is the very means by which one comes to "rest" in all three, for at a certain point searching for the unknowable gives way to trying to remove the impediments, to seeing again what is already there (*The Cloud* 237).

The other arresting claim in this sermon involves the question of truth. Haze speaks away any claim to Truth by preaching there is no truth: "'I preach there are all kinds of truth, your truth and somebody else's, but behind all of them, there's only one truth and that is there's no truth,' he called. 'No truth behind all truths is what I and this church preach'" (CW 93). Analogous with the notion of "no place", "no truth" signals a shift toward the unsaying of any single truth. "One truth" would be that which is most distinct, and, for Haze, it is paradoxically distinct by virtue of its lack of distinction, its refusal to pronounce *this* or *that* truth over another. "There's only *one truth*," he states, "and that is there's *no truth*" (emphasis added). This sentence includes within it the entire apophatic dynamic, which turns back on the idea of truth to relinquish its conceptual limits. Haze's performative speaking-away does not imply that no truth is somehow better or truer than any particular truth. No truth would then become another delimited concept. Haze's assertion is provocative when considered as a way of freeing his listeners (namely himself) from the need to "have" truth, from a cast of mind that perceives truth as propositional, as objectifiable. Contemporary critics of apophatic unsaying judge its denials to be mere "detours on the way to even higher, more sublime affirmations," and so accuse apophatic theologies of keeping in reserve a "hyper-truth" (Caputo "Mysticism" 25). Such reservations presume that apophatic theologies engage in a stripping away in order to "have" more, yet this stripping away breaks the attachment to "having" itself.

In *Wise Blood*, the Church Without Christ sets up a similar provocation. The word “without” contributes to the negative rhetoric of apophasis by instigating a turn toward indefiniteness. Accordingly, the Church Without Christ may be regarded as expressing a hyperbolic movement of transcendence that for Haze temporarily untethers Christ as name, named, or nameable, thus evoking the darkness of unknowing. According to Otto, beneath any concept of the Holy, beneath the clarity and lucidity of all belief, “lies a hidden depth, inaccessible to our conceptual thought” (58). O’Connor agrees, calling this the mystery of the “limitless God” that “dogma can in no way limit” (2 Aug. 55, *HB* 92). Haze lets go of the glib assurances that an affirmation of Christ’s presence engenders in, for instance, Mrs. Hitchcock. The narrative intimates that such an affirmation is not “wild” enough, for compared to Haze’s profuse denials Mrs. Hitchcock’s profession is amusingly tidy: “‘I reckon you think you been redeemed,’ [Haze] repeated. She blushed. After a second she said yes, life was an inspiration...” (CW 6). Sentimental affirmation can lend itself to a pious removal of Christ, another form of un-naming but one that creates consolation rather than wakeful unrest. By his own admission, Hazel Motes’s emphatic denials of place, truth, and Jesus “ain’t anything but a way to say something” (90).

Situating O’Connor’s work in the context of the Eisenhower era and the boom of post-war America, Ralph Wood observes how “Christian faith produces literal eccentrics, people who are off-center” because the “biblical plumb line reveals that the real deviate is not the shouting street preacher but the thoroughly well-adjusted man, the completely self-controlled woman, the utterly successful American” (*Christ-Haunted* 160). Reading O’Connor’s fiction in the context of fourth-century desert spirituality, Giannone nonetheless concurs: “The late twentieth century is too wary of believers and dogma to credit mere

updated, pious versions” of faith (45). While Giannone acknowledges that “[n]o modern novel can deal with unbelief in our more dangerous times by duplicating the motives and tensions arising from an era of faith,” he nevertheless argues that O’Connor saw our age as right for solitaries, for hermits, for “those on hidden personal searches...[whose] lives are a response to a radical human desire for wholeness” (45). Thus, in *Wise Blood* the Church Without Christ may be regarded as bespeaking a sudden crack in the easy containment of both belief and unbelief, an opening onto “the darkness or the unknownness of the hidden divinity who is without name, who is a denial of all names and who never acquired a name; and therefore the prophet said: ‘Truly you are the hidden God’” (Eckhart *ES* 192; sermon 15). Hazel Motes gives up the wealth of a name. But this is neither nihilism nor renunciation. In apophatic theologies, it is desire playing itself out.

Apophatic desire grows “by delay,” by the continual loss or letting go of its object insofar as what one desires is by nature unobjectifiable (*The Cloud* 265; ch. 75). The “wild ragged” figure that moves from tree to tree in the back of Haze’s mind “motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark” symbolizes just such a desire: one that always leaves you without ever going away from you (*CW* 11). The act of turning back “into the dark” prompts one to let go of desire in the face of desiring what-one-knows-not. Haze lets go with a vengeance, violently destroying whatever represents a reification of his words. He smashes the new Jesus Enoch brings him from the museum, and violently kills his own image as a preacher, his “twin,” Solace Layfield. His secret desire (“secret” because it is not a matter of knowing or having) calls for a blind search.

### III.

Key narrative moments in *Wise Blood* are marked by namelessness, blankness, and vast spaces, and thus additionally attest to the apophatic mode that undergirds the protagonist's search. Over the course of the narrative Haze repeatedly loses his points of reference as they all give way to the nonreferential. For example, "he forgot the guilt of the tent for the nameless unplaced guilt that was in him" (CW 36). "He had the feeling that everything he saw was a broken-off piece of some giant blank thing that he had forgotten had happened to him" (42). When he stares into the eyes of Asa Hawks, his "expression seemed to open onto a deeper blankness" (92). And just before his self-blinding, "[h]is face seemed to reflect the entire distance across the clearing and on beyond, the entire distance that extended from his eyes to the blank gray sky that went on, depth after depth, into space" (118). As Haze takes in this long-view from the top of an embankment, with his car lying scattered at its bottom, the patrolman asks him where he was going, and Haze remains silent. After questioning him for the third time, "Was you going anywheres?" Haze finally responds, "No." Nowhere. No place.

The aforementioned narrative moments, each empty of delimiting reference and pregnant with the realization that nothing can be contained, culminate brilliantly in the black, unbounded cosmos Mrs. Flood envisions when contemplating Hazel Motes's head:

She could not make up her mind what would be inside his head and what out. She thought of her own head as a switchbox where she controlled from; but with him, she could only imagine the outside in, the whole black world in his head and his head bigger than the world, his head big enough to include the sky and planets and

whatever was or had been or would be. How would he know if time was going backwards or forwards or if he was going with it? (CW 123)

The narrator articulates, through Mrs. Flood, how the utterly “beyond” reveals itself most intimately “within.” For Mrs. Flood, however, the bottomless blackness of his eyeless mind creates a dilemma, at once logical and semantic. She looks at Haze and sees all time and space within him. This articulation of the unraveling of spatial and temporal reference through the implicit metaphor of “flowing out” or “flowing over” is a key feature of apophatic writing (Sells 6-7). The dualism upon which the language of “inside/outside” is based fuses into a paradox: Hazel’s head is the world. Mrs. Flood imagines the interior welling up of all life within and into Mr. Motes, and effectively wonders, where is he? Hazel Motes is no place, as he began. “The transcendent self to which the ascetic aspires coincides with his original self,” writes Sykes (47). As with the apophatic way, in *Wise Blood* there is yearning and return, the again of the already. But Sykes offers the following caveat: Haze Motes “failed as a preacher” (47). I am suggesting to the contrary that the above description of a self fully synchronized with a transcendent ground expresses the embodiment of a design that was already intrinsic to Haze’s preaching.

Eckhart gives a sermon on the phrase *praedica verbum* (preach the word) from Paul’s second letter to Timothy. His own use of the apophatic metaphor of “flowing out” in this sermon repeats the paradox of Mrs. Flood’s reflections and hints at the nature of Hazel Motes’s fully realized proclamation:

It is a marvelous thing that something flows out yet remains within. That a word flows out yet remains within is certainly marvelous. That all creatures flow out yet remain within is a wonder. What God has given and what he has promised to give is

simply marvelous, incomprehensible, unbelievable. And it is as it should be; for if it were intelligible and believable, it would not be right. God is in all things. The more he is in things, the more he is outside the things; the more within; the more outside; the more outside, the more within....That something is spoken from the outside in is a common thing. This, however, is spoken within. 'Speak it externally!' This means: Be aware that this is within you. (*TP* 292-93; sermon 30)

At the beginning of the sermon, Eckhart gives a string of paraphrases for the phrase *praedica verbum*: "Speak the word, speak it externally, speak it forth, bring it forth, give birth to the Word!" (292). Preaching, as the proclamation of the Word, seeks God in the word. Fittingly, the editor notes how in Eckhart's sermon it is difficult to know whether to render it "the Word" or "word" (295 n2). In an effort to confront the absence of the Word in other preachers, Haze opposes the usual categories of belief until his actions become his proclamation. The Word, as Eckhart says elsewhere, is a word unspoken. "There is yet another kind of word that is not brought forth and not thought out, that never comes forth. Rather it remains eternally in him who speaks it. It is continually being conceived in the Father who speaks it, and it remains within" (*TP* 259; sermon 9). Indeed, by actively opening himself to darker and darker unknowing Haze at the novel's end is all but silent because, one could argue, he embodies an apophatic language that bespeaks transcendence by dismantling itself. The image of a blind Hazel Motes circling the boarding house with his cane poetically suggests the circular turning back of apophasis: both proceed with an awe-stricken limp.

Scott Daniel understands the Christology of *Wise Blood* to be analogous to that of Eckhart, although he sees the above passage reflecting an artistic dilemma for O'Connor.

Because the narrator “has relied on her protagonist’s sight to tell her story,” after Haze blinds himself the narrator moves to Mrs. Flood’s point of view; and just as Mrs. Flood cannot “imagine the contents of Hazel’s mind” nor could O’Connor (117). Daniel therefore concludes that O’Connor “shrinks from narrator-god into a character of timid virtues and vices, Mrs. Flood; at the end of her first novel, she finds herself, like her fictional doppelganger, at the beginning of something she couldn’t begin” (120). However, *Wise Blood* is not anomalous in this regard. Many of O’Connor’s narratives arrive precisely at such a point of inscrutability, thus underscoring this author’s sustained interest in such experiences over her short career. In addition, when the narrative point of view shifts to Mrs. Flood, Hazel Motes is no less the absurd character that he was at the novel’s outset. The progression of the narrative renders him more deeply absurd. He becomes increasingly a mystery to “the world.” Mrs. Flood, who watches Haze drop dollar bills into his trash can, fill his shoes with glass and stones, and wrap his chest with barbed wire, thinks, “he might as well be in a monkery” (CW 123). The comic narrative perspective masterfully shifts so that it is now the “sane” world of Mrs. Flood that appears to be a comedy of error (119).

Hazel Motes’s propensity for speaking-away carries him toward greater unknowing, toward a darkness of mind that perceives nothing. His looking and unrest turn inward. The novel thus implies that the state of the believer is one of constant agitation of the soul. As Haze experiences an intensification of his being toward God, to all appearances there is no agitation. This is dramatized in his uncanny quiescent state in the final chapter.

O’Connor scholars continue to grapple with the dichotomous directions of the novel’s two storylines because of its likeness to the dualism of Manichaeism that sunders spirit and matter. Frederick Asals confronts this dilemma directly by contrasting O’Connor’s formal

remarks on the sacramental imagination to the world of her first novel: “What [*Wise Blood*] does show on page after page is a world of matter so overwhelming that its hero can only seek out ‘the image at its source’ by turning away from that world, denying the physical and sensible in blindness, asceticism, and the pursuit of death. In short, rather than being pervaded by the ‘Catholic sacramental view of life,’ *Wise Blood* is in its deepest implications a ‘Manichean’ book” (58).<sup>10</sup>

More recently, in *New Essays on Wise Blood*, Robert H. Brinkmeyer Jr. contributes a reassessment of “the ascetic cast of O’Connor’s imagination” and finds the acts of self-mortification in Hazel Motes at the end of the novel signify “a plunge into the wounded body wherein matter and spirit are yoked together” (78, 88). Indeed, in the embodied proclamation of Hazel Motes, life is not divided into sense and spirit. His acts of silent penance indicate his body as “the thing he has in common with all humanity and thus the universal locus of testimony” (Sykes 48). As he preached earlier, the body (“look there”) must articulate the proclamation.

#### IV.

For Giannone, the day Hazel Motes goes up to his room to pour lime solution into his eyes is the “mere preliminary to a new life of complete denial and self-injury,” the unambiguous sign of his “conversion from crude nihilist to unperturbed hesychast” (31, 66). But this emphasis on conversion, by Giannone and others, bypasses what I am suggesting is most central. An apophatic dynamic of dispossession, propelled by Haze’s profuse denials, infuses the entire narrative. If his peculiar proclamations amount to blasphemy or nihilism, then how are we to read the apophatic undoing of all temporal and spatial delimitations



within Hazel Motes to which his landlady gives notice? Does this not suggest the inward turn of his earlier preaching? Attempts to interpret his spiritual awakening exclusively in the ending of *Wise Blood* confront the conspicuous absence of his spiritual “revelation.” Not only does Asals declare, “Hazel Motes receives no revelation” (53); but also Desmond, who finds the endings of O’Connor’s stories offer a “revelation of the numinous,” concludes that no such revelation occurs at the end of *Wise Blood* (*Risen Sons* 60). Srigley expresses a related concern: “Although O’Connor explains that when ‘Haze blinds himself he turns entirely to an inner vision,’ the substance of that vision is not made apparent to the reader (CW 921). One of the most perplexing aspects of Motes’s self-blinding is that there is no obvious indication of an inner revelation or insight on his part after he loses his physical sight. He is silent” (87). The obscurity that hovers over the novel’s end is partly due to the shift away from Haze’s point of view, forcing Mrs. Flood and reader alike to surmise the meaning of his silent acts. In his recent study of the aesthetics of revelation in O’Connor, John Sykes helpfully observes, “Haze knows nothing he can say—or at least nothing he is willing to trust to words. But this is not to say that he lacks insight, to use the dominant metaphor of the book. His actions indicate that he has found a new route to God, at once more immediate and more mystical” (48). In its refusal to reveal the substance (“whatness”) of Hazel’s inner vision, *Wise Blood* is all the more resonant with the level of critique put forth by apophatic mystical theology and the character of its dark poetics. Hazel Motes’s relative silence in the closing chapter confirms the apophatic dimension of his earlier unsaying. His silence is this speech continued. Further, in its refusal to present a revelation in some determinate form, the narrative also guards against the modern merchandising impulse, which packages (sex, animals, religion) for profit. If nothing is made apparent to

the reader, then she too enters into a non-objectified texture of unknowing, which is precisely what apophatic texts have always tendered:

[A]ll that you find is a darkness, a sort of cloud of unknowing; you cannot tell what it is except that you experience in your will a simple reaching out to God. This darkness and cloud is always between you and your God, no matter what you do, and it prevents you from seeing him clearly by the light of understanding in your reason, and from experiencing him in sweetness of love in your affection. So set yourself to rest in this darkness as long as you can. (*The Cloud* 120-121; ch. 3)

There has been little notice given to how O'Connor presents a paradigm for Haze's silence earlier in the book. After Haze escapes Sabbath's desire to get "better acquainted" in a country field, they walk toward a store with a gas pump because the Essex, once again, won't start (68). The gas station "had a deserted look," but unexpectedly "a man appeared from out of the woods behind it, and Haze told him what he wanted."

When they got out at the Essex, he put a can of gas in the tank and Haze got in and tried to start it but nothing happened. The man opened up the hood and studied the inside for a while. He was a one-armed man with two sandy-colored teeth and eyes that were slate-blue and thoughtful. He had not spoken more than two words yet. He looked for a long time under the hood while Haze stood by, but he didn't touch anything. After a while he shut it and blew his nose.

"What's wrong in there?" Haze asked in an agitated voice. "It's a good car, ain't it?"

The man didn't answer him. He sat down on the ground and eased under the Essex. He wore hightop shoes and gray socks. He stayed under the car a long time.

Haze got down on his hands and knees and looked under to see what he was doing but he wasn't doing anything. He was just lying there, looking up, as if he were contemplating; his good arm was folded on his chest. After a while, he eased himself out and wiped his face and neck with a piece of flannel rag he had in his pocket.

"Listenhere," Haze said, "that's a good car. You just give me a push, that's all. That car'll get me anywhere I want to go."

The man didn't say anything but he got back in the truck and Haze and Sabbath Hawks got in the Essex and he pushed them. After a few hundred years the Essex began to belch and gasp and jiggle. (CW 71)

Haze subsequently asks the man how much he owes him.

"Nothing," the man said, "not a thing."

"But the gas," Haze said, "how much for the gas?"

"Nothing," the man said with the same level look. "Not a thing." (72)

In this uncanny encounter, the one-armed man looks thoughtfully and silently, "as if he were contemplating," although to the person witnessing his behaviour, "he wasn't doing anything." This interaction has its counterpart in the final chapter when Mrs. Flood cannot understand Hazel Motes's silence or stillness. On the porch of the boarding house the two "would sit, he only sit, and she sit rocking for half an afternoon and not two words seemed to pass between them" (122). The landlady thinks to herself, "He could have been dead and get all he got out of life" (123). As this remark suggests, silence, stillness and blindness, this is also the language of death; and in the midst of life, Hazel Motes chooses to dwell with death, to dare this primal companionship as if "in a monkery" (123). I find the above scene

with the contemplative man evocative, too, in its intimation that this profound encounter befalls Haze at the very moment “nothing happened,” and that whatever may be reflected upon as having been given in such a moment (a gentle push, gas for the road) is pure gift, owing nothing.

At its most beguiling *Wise Blood* hastens a possible thinking concerning Hazel Motes’s inner revelation that makes no reference to vision, to light, to revealability. In fact, as we shall discuss in the fifth chapter, O’Connor’s short story, “Revelation,” invites just such a thinking by using “visionary light” to illumine “the darkening path” of revelation (CW 631, 632). This is similar to *Wise Blood* in that “light” is the novel’s final word. Hazel Motes, in death, appears to be “moving farther and farther away, farther and farther into the darkness until he was the pin point of light” (131). Yet this is from the perspective of Mrs. Flood, who could not imagine the depth of darkness Hazel Motes would be “seeing” as a blind man. “She had to imagine the pin point of light; she couldn’t think of it at all without that.” She was a woman who “liked the clear light of day. She liked to see things” (123). As early as in her first novel, then, we find O’Connor handling the question of revelation negatively, even mystically.<sup>11</sup> Sykes applies a statement by Rowan Williams to O’Connor’s fiction, a comment on the “strategy of dispossession” in the mysticism of apophatic theology: “The fruition of the process is the discovery that one’s selfhood and value simply lie in the abiding faithful presence of God, not in any moral or conceptual performance” (qtd. in Sykes 84).

For Hazel Motes’s secret “craving of the soul,” which Cheney identified at the heart of *Wise Blood*, O’Connor uses the biblical metaphor of a wound: “The army sent him halfway around the world and forgot him. He was wounded and they remembered him long enough

to take the shrapnel out of his chest” (CW 12). The wound metaphor symbolizes an absence felt as a presence, which O’Connor does not leave undeveloped: “they said they took it out but they never showed it to him and he felt it still there” (12). The metaphor is in agreement with O’Connor’s own devotional spirit. In a letter to T. R. Spivey, she writes, “You are right that *enjoy* is not exactly the right word for our talking about religion. As far as I know, it hurts like nothing else” (18 July 59, HB 341). And lest this strike us as signifying the punitive mark of finitude, in the *Canticle* of John of the Cross the wound is borne by the Bride (“Where have you hidden, / Beloved, and left me moaning? / You fled like the stag / After wounding me; / I went out calling you, and you were gone”), as well as by Bridegroom (“She lived in solitude, / And now in solitude has built her nest; / And in solitude he guides her, / He alone, who also bears / In solitude the wound of love”) (221, 226; stanzas 1, 35).

## Conclusion

*Wise Blood* dramatizes how the acts of speaking-away and of seeing without seeing involve submitting to be disarmed, to be lost and found in a cloud (or haze) of unknowing. And yet, the apophatic movement in the novel includes an active acknowledgement that the tension between saying and unsaying, seeing and unseeing cannot be resolved. Thus poised it is an attempt to “come home” to oneself, as Hazel Motes does, in the midst of this tension (CW 131). At its most intense, the apophatic dynamic will even deny O’Connor’s beloved category of “mystery” to the extent that it “become[s] reified into another name, another God of belief. The category of mystery is useful insofar as writer and reader turn back upon it to...unsay the name” (Sells 217). O’Connor’s contemporary, Simone Weil, whose bare,

aphoristic prose presents a modern exemplar of the apophatic tradition, commends praying to God “not only in secret” but also “with the thought that God does not exist” (20).<sup>12</sup> *Wise Blood* tells the story of a man who prays in secret, or, to use O’Connor’s expression, “*malgré lui*,” and with the thought that Jesus was a liar (CW 1265).<sup>13</sup> To highlight the movement of apophatic unsaying in *Wise Blood* is not to discount Haze’s positivistic statements but to explore alternative narrative moments in which the apophatic tendency to unsettle such sayings is most pronounced. In doing so, this chapter argues that the poetic-theological tenor of the novel may be considered apophatic. In such a reading the significance of the novel’s ending, the blindness and silence of Hazel Motes, deepens to reflect the daring trajectory of his earlier proclamations.

## Notes

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The epigraph is from Weil's *Gravity and Grace* (115).

<sup>1</sup> For example, see Asals, *Flannery O'Connor*; Desmond, *Risen Sons*; Han, "O'Connor's Thomism and the 'Death of God' in *Wise Blood*"; Muller, *Nightmares and Visions*; and Wood, *Christ-Haunted*.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Wood, *Christ-Haunted*: "Because he has noisily preached an insistent nihilism—deafening himself to the true Word—Motes comes to the truth by means of silence and vision...And having preached the counter-gospel that nothing is true but one's own body and place, Motes must work out his salvation precisely there, by mutilating the flesh that he had once deified" (169).

<sup>3</sup> In his introduction to *The Correspondence of Flannery O'Connor and the Brainard Cheneys*, editor C. Ralph Stephens points out that Cheney's review of *Wise Blood* "has been overlooked by O'Connor bibliographers" (ix n2).

<sup>4</sup> See Asals 26 and Feeley 107.

<sup>5</sup> Gibbons, who identifies Emily Dickinson as a "great poet of apophatic thought," similarly points to her imagery of "the coffin that contains infinity" ("Poetics [Part One]" 20).

<sup>6</sup> This final suggestion ("know it and drown") shimmers in its ambivalence. For this knowing may be for Haze the obstacle to complete faith, as it was for Peter (Matt. 14.22-33), or it may intimate the deeply embodied knowing that accompanies the mystic's surrender to the unknowable. As poet Leonard Cohen writes of Jesus, "he sank beneath your wisdom like a stone" (70).

<sup>7</sup> In *Mystic Fable* Certeau identifies the seventeenth century as a decisive turning point in the trajectory of Western Christian mysticism with its new interest in what Certeau calls "experimental knowledge" of the divine, a form of knowing that emerges not simply from within traditional theology or Church institutions but, increasingly, out of its detachment from them. See also, *The Silent Cry* by Soelle: "The definition of mysticism as a perception of God drawn from experience originates with Aquinas and Bonaventure. It has the dimensions of independence from hierarchy, which in practical terms means that it is women-friendly. A certain zone of freedom is accorded it. Next to the ordered way to God that is laid out by the institution of the church, the teaching authority of the office, and the scriptures administered by that office, there is an additional access to God that cannot be channeled but is, instead, experimental and tolerated at the margins of the institution. It is no coincidence that this margin was the place preferred by women, who were barred access to the centers of sacred power. They begin to search for their own language" (46).

<sup>8</sup> Zornado continues, "The absolute absence Hazel embraces represents an absolute no less than absolute presence does" (94). Zornado's study differs from my own to the extent that

his does not consider the progression of Hazel Motes' denials over the course of the novel (for they are not stable). Nor does Zornado consider the value attributed to the phenomenon of language in apophatic theology, and, in this respect, apophatic theology's distance from poststructuralist theories of language.

<sup>9</sup> In this letter O'Connor identifies Underhill's *Mysticism* as the source of her knowledge of Dionysius. Underhill: "'We must,' says Dionysius the Areopagite, 'be transported wholly out of ourselves and given unto God' [*Divine Names* 7.1]. This is the 'passive union' of Contemplation....He may try to translate this conviction into 'something said' or 'something seen': but in the end he will be found to confess that he can tell nothing, save by implication" (*Mysticism* 333). Underhill's citation from Dionysius comes from the Areopagite's discussion of "Wisdom."

<sup>10</sup> This questioning of the novel's "sacramental view of life" invites further consideration. To what extent does Hazel Motes figure as a "Protestant" living in a "Protestant" world? Problems in interpreting the novel often hinge on questions concerning the "Bible Belt" setting and O'Connor's dilemma in presenting Haze at the novel's end, as Sykes argues, "in terms that neither he nor any of the other characters can supply." Sykes continues, "She seems to want Haze to 'discover' Roman Catholic belief and practice without ever encountering it....Haze, we might say, is an 'allegorical' monk, comprehensible only to readers who can place him in a different framework than the one he is in" (50).

<sup>11</sup> O'Connor affirms "the essentially mystical nature of the religious experience," Orvell writes (19). Orvell also quotes from her book review of *Letters from a Traveler* by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, wherein she "circumvented the Church's disapproval of him by declaring that the Jesuit-geologist's life long effort to 'fit his knowledge of evolution into the pattern of his faith in Christ...is the work of neither scientist nor theologian, but of poet and mystic'" (20).

<sup>12</sup> I take this cue from Lilburn who cites Weil's compendium of writings *Gravity and Grace* alongside *Mystical Theology*, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and other texts "from the school of negative theology" (xiv).

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion on the affinities and distinctions between O'Connor and Weil, see Desmond's article, "Flannery O'Connor and Simone Weil: A Question of Sympathy."



## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Knowledge of Nothing in “Good Country People”

To come to the knowledge of all  
desire the knowledge of nothing.  
– John of the Cross

Among the ten stories published in Flannery O'Connor's first collection *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1955), “Good Country People” carries the distinction of including a passage from Martin Heidegger's 1929 inaugural lecture at Freiburg University, entitled “What is Metaphysics?” In the opening pages of O'Connor's short story, Mrs. Hopewell picks up one of her daughter's philosophy books and reads,

Science, on the other hand, has to assert its soberness and seriousness afresh and declare that it is concerned solely with what-is. Nothing—how can it be for science anything but a horror and a phantasm? If science is right, then one thing stands firm: science wishes to know nothing of nothing. Such is after all the strictly scientific approach to Nothing. We know it by wishing to know nothing of Nothing. (CW 268-269)

These words, the narrator tells us, “worked on Mrs. Hopewell like some evil incantation in gibberish,” inciting her to “shut the book quickly” and leave the room “as if she were having a chill” (269). O'Connor's invocation of Heidegger through this unusual narrative device reveals part of the philosophical context for Hulga Hopewell's claim to “see *through* to nothing” as “a kind of salvation” (280). The standard observation in O'Connor criticism is that this passage presents a sardonic use of Heidegger to establish Hulga's flirtation with nihilism.<sup>1</sup> Arguably, one possible interpretation of Heidegger's essay is that a thinking attuned to Nothing is the final word of nihilism; Nothing is merely the nugatory, and thereby

offers neither meaning nor measure because everything is nothing.<sup>2</sup> As critics frequently note, O'Connor identifies "nihilism" as "the gas you breathe" in the modern world (28 Aug. 55, *HB* 97), and admits to imagining her audience consisting of "people who think God is dead" (2 Aug. 55, *HB* 92). Yet to conclude that Hulga's attraction to Nothing via Heidegger denotes, unambiguously, the gas of nihilism would be premature. Less known (because less reported) is the American author's admiration for the German philosopher who defended his discourse on "Nothing" in a 1943 postscript against the charge of nihilism. In one of her letters to William Sessions, who was in Europe at the time, the name of Heidegger appears first in a list of esteemed theological writers: "Are you going to see Heidegger on his mountain top? Are you going to see Msgr. Guardini, Karl Adam, Max Picard, or is Max Picard still living? What about [Gabriel] Marcel and what about that lady critic that is so good – Claude Edmond[e] Magny?" (27 Sept. 57, *HB* 243-44).<sup>3</sup> She closes a subsequent letter to Sessions with "Regards to Heidegger" (3 Nov. 57, *HB* 251). I point this out only, or at least initially, as a way to begin a consideration of "Good Country People" that does not disregard O'Connor's respect for Heidegger's writings and, by extension, for his questioning of Nothing which "puts us, the enquirers, ourselves in question" (*Existence* 348).

O'Connor most likely read "What is Metaphysics?" and its postscript in her copy of *Existence and Being* (1949), the first English-language publication of Heidegger's thought (Kinney 20).<sup>4</sup> A few months before writing "Good Country People," O'Connor mentions Heidegger's essays on Hölderlin from this volume in a letter, calling them "very rich" and noting specifically the philosopher's reflections on "the poet's business" being "to name what is holy" (13 Sept. 54, *CW* 925). Stefan Schimanski, who contributes the book's foreword, presents "Professor Heidegger" as an ascetic solitary who, in an "atmosphere of

silence,” contemplates both the essence of philosophy and the essence of poetry in and through his writing. The man O’Connor met in the pages of this book and for whom she expressed a considerable regard may be glimpsed in Schimanski’s opening remarks. Recounting his visit to Heidegger’s small skiing hut on top of a mountain “with nothing but space and wilderness all around,” Schimanski describes the philosopher’s close relationship to the region of his birth place, his estrangement from Berlin, and his modest life whose relationship to the world was sustained through a stack of writing paper (xi-x). O’Connor must have felt some affinity for this solitary thinker who, not unlike herself, “communicates to [readers] what he has meditated upon in prolonged and silent thought, but who leaves it to them what they are able or ready to grasp and to assimilate” (Brock 18).

No less conditioned by the contemporary question of Nothing than Heidegger, O’Connor, in her first of many letters to Betty Hester, describes herself as “a Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness, that thing Jung describes as unhistorical, solitary, and guilty. To possess this *within* the Church is to bear a burden, the necessary burden for the conscious Catholic. It’s to feel the contemporary situation at the ultimate level” (20 July 55, *HB* 90). This “contemporary situation,” as O’Connor’s letter goes on to suggest, is marked by the slowly spreading banishment of transcendence, to which Nietzsche’s parable of the death of God gives notice. In her characteristic style, O’Connor writes, “This is a generation of wingless chickens, which I suppose is what Nietzsche meant when he said God was dead” (90). O’Connor’s remark underscores the eminent meaning of Nietzsche’s dictum, “God is dead,” as the cultural collapse of any transcendental principle that would direct and imbue human life. In view of this absence, modern culture confronts the threat of nihilism, one that would make Absence or Nothing itself into the absolute content of a new

secular “faith.” In *Return to Good and Evil: Flannery O’Connor’s Response to Nihilism*, Henry Edmondson presents Nietzsche precisely in this light, as the chief proponent of nihilism and, for that reason, in opposition to O’Connor who advocates for the recovery of the concepts of good and evil. This was her solution to Nietzsche’s failure “to offer anything of constructive value to replace what he sought to overthrow” (Edmonson xii).

Yet the death of God refers to an ambivalent experience, one that is not entirely lost on an author whose experience of Catholicism and modern consciousness self-admittedly presents its own kind of ambivalence. As Ilse Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate point out in their introduction to a collection of essays on the echoes of apophatic theology in modern thought, Nietzsche’s parable offers another perspective on the same event: the death of God also refers to a liberation from the god of reason, and thus from humanity-as-God. Modern culture, Bulhof and Kate argue, results in many ways from “a powerful self-affirmation of humanity,” which involves an attempt by humanity to manage and control the world (“Echoes” 3). In “What is Metaphysics?” Heidegger follows Nietzsche to some degree in identifying the history of metaphysics as nihilism to the extent that it has ignored the unaccountable source of all being, and so infers that only by posing the question of the Nothing can nihilism be countered. For both these thinkers, the way Western culture has developed logically leads to a society in which a transcendent principle is no longer needed, for rational control is the dominant value that grounds modern culture.

Although secularization has made God’s absence ubiquitous, “leaving humanity in an empty space,” it is “as if the emptiness creates the opportunity for a new, modern experience of transcendence” (Bulhof and Kate “Echoes” 45). Searching for ways to respond to her contemporary situation, O’Connor explores in her fiction how the emptiness that often

accompanies the loss of (rational) control itself bares her characters (again, as if for the first time) to the world and its mystery. As one critic observes, “The blessing of Flannery O’Connor’s heroes is in being deprived of all their resources” (D. Williams 305). This tacit blessing lies hidden, too, in the apophatic motives and motifs that distinguish an O’Connor narrative in its movement toward moments of unknowing as well as in its attention to the possibilities of language in relation to ultimate reality. “Most of O’Connor’s fiction,” Sarah Gordon observes, “alludes in some way to the philosophical relationship between language and the reality it signifies” (133).

It will be part of the task of this chapter to show how O’Connor’s story about a young woman’s experimental knowledge of “nothing” in the red hills of the American South refers not simply to the general historical situation, wherein “if you live today you breathe in nihilism” (28 Aug. 55, *HB* 97).<sup>5</sup> Hulga Hopewell’s claim to “see *through* to nothing” evokes as well a way of living that situation as a question of existence. In its narrative movement, “Good Country People” represents a story about the essence of O’Connor’s poetics, which turns toward “not abstract meaning but experienced meaning” (*MM* 96). For by the story’s end, “nothing” becomes a name not only for the ground of all that is absurd and riddlesome in existence but also for the ground that has no ground, the transcendent ground of all that greens in the openness of what-is.

The other part of the task will be to show how “Good Country People” contributes to an understanding of the apophatic strain in O’Connor’s religious vision. Although there are other stories in the 1955 collection that deal more explicitly with religious subject matter, including “The River,” “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” and the celebrated title piece, “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” “Good Country People” is particularly pertinent to a study of

the poetics of apophatic theology because it engages with one of the long-standing reservations to apophasis: its ostensible belief in nothing. In his far-reaching study of apophasis in the Patristic Christian and Soto Zen Buddhist traditions, J. P. Williams explains how “the undervaluation of apophasis by the mainstream of Western Christian tradition was driven partly by the fear that unfettered negation would so undermine the content of faith as to leave one at last with nothing to believe in” (9).<sup>6</sup> Because, conceptually, apophatic writing turns itself away, in a complex series of negations, from categories and definitions that it is the purpose of doctrine to maintain, it is not difficult to see how such negations could be regarded as simply denying a set of beliefs and offering nothing to replace them. Simple negation as an act of the intellect is limited to the conceptual domain, constituting that form of negative theology that merely serves as a strategic elusion of the inherent finitude of categories we attach to the divine, whereas apophatic negation extends its denial to negation itself, through the logic of the negation of negation, to initiate an opening of the human mind to that which is not limited to the conceptual-linguistic realm. Therefore apophasis “involves not merely some conceptual work but a continual re-submission of the self to the experience of the divine,” taking “its impetus from a never-ending process of checking the articulation of one’s encounter with the ground of being, against the character of the experience itself” (J. P. Williams 9). It is precisely this self-reflective character of apophatic negation that ensures its carry-over into wider existential ground.

### **Preliminaries**

Although Hulga Hopewell is a fictional cousin to O’Connor’s shrapnel-scarred renouncer, Hazel Motes, she is not noticeably Christ-haunted; therefore, we must begin by

asking by what measure are the theological implications of “Good Country People” to be determined. Carol Shloss, who has argued strongly for the need of such a question, considers “the grounds for construing a specifically Christian idea of ‘the whole man’ are not adequately developed” in this story (47). The following lines outline her position on this point:

It is possible to surmise what is wrong in the fictional situation—that nihilism is self-limiting and that what at first appears to be the intellectually superior perspective in the text is itself insufficient. But what would be a viable point of view in an encounter with Manley Pointer? If anything the story levels all philosophies, including potentially, the Christian one, for there is no indication that the absurd can be anticipated or explained by anyone. This is itself a remarkable achievement, a darkly humorous and awful study of the violent disruption of habitual patterns of thought. It offers a markedly derogatory evaluation of philosophic systems without suggesting a perspective that could explain and thereby limit or contain irrational experience. In this instance, exploding the myth of rational control, the negative purpose, is all that stands as a safely deduced authorial intention. It is a laudable achievement, but one attributable as well to William Faulkner, Franz Kafka, or any of the other “great charismatic seers” of modern literature, not simply to the Christian artist. (47-48)

These comments seem too univocal about the intention of the Christian artist, though they nonetheless contribute something worth noting; namely, the idea that “Good Country People” frustrates what may be termed an affirmative (kataphatic) theological hermeneutic, whose “positive” purpose would be to substantiate an idea of “the whole man.” David

Williams is another critic who expresses a sensitivity to the difficulty of O'Connor's "negative" style and vision in terms of its relation to a religious point of view, but he comes to a different conclusion.

The uniqueness of vision and style which has provoked such diverse reaction arises, I suspect, directly out of the philosophical, religious concept of reality which Flannery O'Connor wishes to express. This is, of course, not only the Christian or Roman Catholic concept, for there are many expressions of that concept and many diverse Catholic writers; but O'Connor's writing suggests elements of a particular tradition within Christian thought and symbolism that reached its height in the Middle Ages and was constituted largely by the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, the Aereopogite [*sic*], in his formulation of the symbolic idea of the *via negativa*. Like much mediaeval theory it is not always agreeable to modern sensibilities or even comprehensible without some restatement. (303)

Williams is one of the first critics on the record to suggest an affinity between O'Connor's fictional works and the apophatic tradition.<sup>7</sup> In his 1979 article, he briefly discusses the distinct uses of the technique of negation in "Good Country People" and "Parker's Back," and points as well to comparable uses of negation in O'Connor's two novels, *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*, although he views the genre of the novel limited in its ability to sustain an apophatic dynamic. In the character of Hulga Hopewell, Williams detects an "inherent desire to find the real road to negation," the *via negativa*, which he defines as "the process of asserting names and stripping them away" (306, 304). Williams follows the Dionysian notion of names as "all qualities, ideas, rational systems, and moral values which man devises in order to know and control reality" (304). Indeed, the Dionysian method of



negating names reflects an exercise in giving up the power and security of any conceptual or moral performance. In the apophatic theological tradition, such nominations betray the impetus to overpower reality. This is not unrelated to the shared concerns of Nietzsche and Heidegger, for whom nihilism is the result of the overvaluing of rational control in modern culture, and thus an expression of the will to power.

### **Nothing as the Negation of Names**

In “Good Country People” O’Connor initiates a dialogue with Heidegger and his reflections on “our contemporary existence as one determined by science,” or more specifically, by the rational and scientific nature of the modern mind (*Existence* 329). Notwithstanding each text’s distinct verbal form, purpose, and audience, “Good Country People” and “What is Metaphysics?” have as their common theme a questioning of the nothing. The enigmatic question of the nothing, conceived by Heidegger as a metaphysical problem, is directed to those who in pursuit of what-is exclude what-is-not from their considerations. As an author, O’Connor has serious fun with her protagonist’s claim “to see that there’s nothing to see,” even to the point of making it a condition for awakening her protagonist to the existential dimension of her negative poetics. “Hulga has tried to be a poet,” O’Connor explains in a letter written the same year the story was published, but “without being a realist” (8 Dec. 55, *CW* 975). Therefore, at the story’s close, the protagonist’s way of negation is not so much defeated as decidedly advanced.

The manifestations of “nothing” in O’Connor’s story are diverse and not entirely confined to the ontological questioning that is the subject of Heidegger’s address. It is nonetheless possible to discern in the details of the story O’Connor’s close reading of “What

is Metaphysics?”<sup>8</sup> It is, I think, to O’Connor’s credit that she deliberately invokes Heidegger’s non-theological language to express her protagonist’s desire to “see *through* to nothing” (CW 280). The simple word, nothing, serves precisely because it contains the charge of ordinary speech, a fact both Heidegger and O’Connor exploit in their respective texts.<sup>9</sup> Before turning to “Good Country People,” we shall briefly call attention to similarities between Heidegger’s consideration of Nothing and the motif of the nothing in apophatic writing.

In his lecture Heidegger observes how the very questioning of nothing most often posits in advance the nothing as a being, “something that somehow or other ‘is’ – as an entity,” and consequently turns the direction of this questioning “into its opposite” (*Existence* 329). Therefore in approaching the nothing “question and answer are equally nonsensical” because an ontological questioning of the nothing “deprives itself of its own object” (330). In “What is Metaphysics?” nothing is approached not as an object of thought but through moods that open an experience of Nothing. In contrast, a philosophical logic that privileges affirmative non-contradiction can only consider the nothing as thing or concept which arises out of the function of negation, so that “Nothing is the negation of the totality of what-is: that which is absolutely not” (330). Heidegger poses a challenge to this law of logic and encourages his listeners to be “led astray by the formal impossibility of an enquiry into Nothing” (331). The search for Nothing, he argues, already anticipates it: the seeking itself presupposes what is sought. Heidegger finally characterizes Nothing as essentially belonging to the transcendent Being of all that is, citing Hegel, for his own purpose, approvingly: “Pure Being and Pure Nothing are thus one and the same” (346). The logic of apophasis as the negation of negation constitutes one of the strategies for addressing the

impasse of the logic of non-contradiction that Heidegger wishes to subvert. The apophatic mode of thinking and speaking enacts a direct challenge to assertions of “whatness,” or, to use Heidegger’s term, “isness” as a way of relating to reality. In positing contradictory notions about reality, “the apophatic strategy is not to indicate that one is to be taken as eliminating the other’s claim to truth by the assertion of its own, but rather to suggest that divinity or reality lies within and beyond both and neither” (J. P. Williams 185-186).

For this purpose, apophatic writers prefer negative constructions, like *nothing*, because of their self-consuming character. This, too, I would argue, is what O’Connor appreciates in Heidegger’s discourse on Nothing. The revelation of the nothing consumes its own conceptuality in a way that the substantive language of God (or Being) does not. As Heidegger states, “There is nothing to hold on to” (*Existence* 336). Just as Greek philosophy recognized in apophasis a type of negation that does not create conceptual clarity but imparts indefiniteness by attributing the characteristic of otherness, Nothing, through the force of its de-limitation, leads to its own nihilation as a conceptual assertion. Like other apophatic motifs such as darkness or the cloud of unknowing, nothing represents a poetic correlate to the nonsubstantialist deity beyond being in apophatic texts. It is as part of this symbolism that Meister Eckhart equivocally speaks of nothing as the “simple ground” that gives way to no ground: “All things are created from nothing; therefore their true origin is nothing, and so far as this noble will [that “springs up in God” and belongs to the soul] inclines toward created things, it flows off with created things toward their nothing” (*ES* 184, sermon 5b). I say “equivocally” because in this sermon the word nothing carries “an unusually wide set of semantic transformations,” a characteristic Michael Sells refers to as “apophatic intensity” (50). Earlier in the sermon, Eckhart uses the term nothing in a

different sense from the one above. He declares, “You must become naked of what is nothing” (183). He then offers a figurative explanation: If a burning coal burns in my hand what is burning me is not the coal; rather, “it is nothing, because the coal has something in it that my hand does not have. You must see that it is this nothing that is burning me. But if my hand had everything in it that is in the coal and that the coal can do, my hand would have the nature of fire” (183). In the remainder of the sermon, Eckhart continues to develop his line of thinking, but the nothing that distances us from the nothing that is the simple ground of God is identified now as “image.” The smallest image signifies whatever comes “between you and the whole of God” (184). Thus, to “become naked of what is nothing” is at once to turn to nothing as the unaccountable source of all; and to heed these concomitant calls, Eckhart concludes, engenders a “true and free state” (183, 184). Both the nonconceptuality and the semantic range of nothing serve Eckhart well here, for he wishes to prompt his listeners to relinquish the entitative self and the entitative God in the realization that “life lives out of its own ground and springs from its own source, and so it lives without asking why it is itself living” (184). While the word nothing may be pressed into the service of certain epistemological or ontological assertions, it will be one of the first words called upon by apophatic writers to diffuse such assertions. In effect, the word nothing dissolves such a focus; it moves beyond ontological and epistemological questions, or perhaps, it falls short of them. The apophatic mode intends to attain nothing, and it does not get that far. Thus for the apophatic writer, if not also for Heidegger and for O’Connor, to attend to the nothing is to begin a serious way of thinking.

“Good Country People” centers on the uneasy relationship between a daughter and mother who both expose, in different ways, how language no longer names reality. Hulga’s

mother embodies the confirmatory force of language and thought through her predilection for platitudes. At pains to secure a utopia of niceness, the aptly named Mrs. Hopewell exemplifies how words habituate us and turn us away from reality, making intimacy with what is (us), and what is not, impossible: “people who looked on the bright side of things would be beautiful even if they were not”; there’s “nothing wrong with [a] face that a pleasant expression wouldn’t help”; “a smile never hurt anyone” (CW 267, 268). The negative form of her daughter’s reproach targets the deficiency of Mrs. Hopewell’s clichéd affirmations: “Woman! do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are *not*?” (268). The affirmations that characterize Mrs. Hopewell’s manner of speaking, which literally translate as “Is”-sayings, according to Heidegger, hinder Mrs. Hopewell from attending to any encounter with what she is *not*, with “lack.” “Mrs. Hopewell had no bad qualities of her own but she was able to use other people’s in such a constructive way that she never felt the lack” (264). The word “lack” recurs in the story as an indicator of the *is not*, the nothing. Having “never felt the lack” is analogous to “wishing to know nothing of nothing,” the idea that so disturbs Mrs. Hopewell when she reads the passage from “What is Metaphysics?” (CW 269; *Existence* 329). She does know “nothing,” however, if only as a word she rattles off every day. For the word nothing, Heidegger observes, is “so completely taken for granted and roll[s] off our tongue so casually” (*Existence* 332). The word supplies “one of Mrs. Hopewell’s favorite sayings,” which is, “Nothing is perfect” (CW 264). Although spoken “as if no one held them but her,” Mrs. Hopewell’s “Is”-sayings prove additionally inconsequential whenever her tenant Mrs. Freeman effects their dislocation from a singularizing semantic event: “When Mrs. Hopewell said to Mrs. Freeman that life was like that, Mrs. Freeman would say, ‘I always said so myself.’” (264, 265). Mrs.

Hopewell's language consists of one cliché after another, to which even the Bible salesman, who in the story's final pages uses a few clichés himself, responds with a clear awareness of language:

“Why!” she cried, “good country people are the salt of the earth! Besides, we all have different ways of doing, it takes all kinds to make the world go 'round. That's life!”

“You said a mouthful,” he said. (271)

Thus word disengages from being, no longer able to “name” reality in an evocative and creative sense; and the scene of mistaken names in “Good Country People” only exasperates the disjunction. The name of every character, with the exception of Mrs. Freeman, is at some point in the narrative negated. Hulga is really Joy, though once away from home she had her name legally changed; Mrs. Cedars is Mrs. Hopewell; Glycerin and Caramel are Glynese and Carramae; and Manley Pointer is the alias of an otherwise unnamed stranger.

Hulga Hopewell, the story's protagonist, is a thirty-two-year old “child,” with a Ph.D. in philosophy and an artificial leg, who resists the deadening habits of her mother's affirmative way of speaking (CW 268). The defiant Hulga hardly speaks, professing to “see that there's nothing to see,” and this initially strikes the reader as a constructive negation of the neatly managed, banal truisms of Mrs. Hopewell (280). O'Connor we know values the force of the negative. In a letter to Betty Hester she admits to measuring ultimate reality “by everything that I am not” (4 Feb. 61, *HB* 430). For the act of negation can initiate a way of thinking about that which withdraws when our knowledge (“Is”-saying) appears to encompass the phenomenal world. What remains unknowable is carried for Hulga by the elemental word, nothing.

In the story, the function of language and thought directly contributes to the tension between Mrs. Hopewell and Hulga. To her mother, Hulga no longer had the intelligibility of a communal sign. Mrs. Hopewell worries that her daughter's pursuit of a Ph.D. has prevented her from the "normal" good times enjoyed by young women and that she was increasingly becoming "less like other people and more like herself—bloated, rude, and squint-eyed" (CW 268). This complicates Mrs. Hopewell's manner of speaking:

The girl had taken the Ph.D. in philosophy and this left Mrs. Hopewell at a complete loss. You could say, "My daughter is a nurse," or "My daughter is a school teacher," or even, "My daughter is a chemical engineer." You could not say, "My daughter is a philosopher." That was something that had ended with the Greeks and Romans.  
(268)

Not only does Hulga defy acceptable Southern female behavior, but she also complicates the capacity of language to describe her reality since the job of a philosopher does not lend itself to explanations of utility. There is a related dilemma upon the arrival of the young Bible salesman, Manley Pointer:

Mrs. Hopewell could not say, "My daughter is an atheist and won't let me keep the Bible in the parlor." She said, stiffening slightly, "I keep my Bible by my bedside."  
This was not the truth. It was in the attic somewhere. (270)

Here the breakdown of communication is associated directly with absence of the Word. Addressing Mrs. Hopewell, Manley Pointer reports the absence of a family Bible in the parlor as "the one lack you got!" (270). The narrative implies that the reason Mrs. Hopewell lacks the Word is partly because she understands language as a force for stabilizing social meaning. By making the absence of the Word conspicuous, O'Connor obliquely attributes

to it the force of a destabilizing language that does not ground meaning but, as the author writes in another story, puts “everything off balance” (CW 152).<sup>10</sup> The Word, then, which constitutes Mrs. Hopewell’s “one lack,” disrupts affirmative sayings as a way to point toward what cannot be (affirmatively, propositionally) said. By implication, what the story deems as “lack,” the *is not*, the nothing, is constituted by creative forces, not simply serving to reinforce already existing values, meanings, and social structures but anticipating new ones, making possible transformation. Yet Mrs. Hopewell’s concern over what can and cannot be said in social discourse may be finally less significant than the fact that she questions language at all. As David Williams points out, although Hulga “considers the ability to negate a proof of her superiority,” she has added names too. She renames not only herself but also Mrs. Freeman’s daughters, and “has added as well the title of Doctor to her name thereby building up her self-description” (305). It is her mother, Williams argues, who unwittingly reveals “the inadequacy of [these] names and the necessity of negating them in her own resistance to her daughter’s nominations” (305).

The negation of names, along with Hulga’s need to re-name, are not unrelated to the representation of the Word in the narrative, to which the Bible salesman (read: mainly [a] pointer) serves as an index. As a salesman, Manley Pointer shows the “word of God,” which “you never can tell when you’ll need,” as a commodity to be bought and sold, exposing the materiality of modern life (CW 277). More importantly, in the hayloft with Hulga, he opens his suitcase to reveal a hollow Bible. The Word is completely absent and its place taken by a flask of whiskey, a pack of playing cards, and condoms. The items present O’Connor’s critical-negative interpretation of the process of secularization: humanity raises itself above the world, becoming the creator of its own existence, and



disenchants that world at the same time. Stimulants, games of chance with winners and losers, and methods of controlling life now stand in for a “liberated” existence.

### **Nothing as Experienced Mood**

Hulga Hopewell, unlike Hazel Motes, is not depicted as a “Christ-haunted” character. Emblematic of a late-modern person disenchanted with organized religion and traditional values, Hulga’s “atheism” demonstrates how the challenge of secularism has marginalized religion for many in the modern world. What O’Connor so perspicaciously identifies in her protagonist is the occasion to encounter the depths of modern disenchantment. For in the theme of nothing there is a contact point between the wastelands of modern nihilism and the deserts of apophatic denial. Hulga thus represents a promising proponent of the negative way because, as David Williams states, “the principles of truth behind which the main character hides are already negative at the beginning of the story” (305).

No longer engaged to walk over the fields with her mother because she didn’t come “pleasantly,” unable to lecture to university students due to a “heart condition,” and unmoved by her surroundings, whether “dogs or cats or birds or flowers or nature or nice young men,” Hulga Hopewell “obliterates every expression from her face” (*CW* 264, 265). Heidegger suggests it is precisely when “we are not absorbed in things or in our own selves” that “‘wholeness’ comes over us – for example, in real boredom” (*Existence* 333). For Heidegger, moods as affective states disclose what-is; in the mood of boredom, “because what-is-in-totality slips away and thus forces Nothing to the fore, all affirmation (literally, “Is”-saying) fails in the face of it” (336). Glossing Heidegger on this point, John D. Caputo explains how “in boredom the totality in which we are lost suddenly pales into indifference,

loses all significance. We are brought before the ‘all’ itself inasmuch as it is a ‘lack’” (19). In *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought*, Caputo draws parallels between the philosophy of Heidegger and the mysticism of Eckhart. Though 600 years of German thought separate the two figures, Caputo suggests that Heidegger read the Meister carefully. Caputo’s study goes some way to inspire the kinship between mysticism and philosophy, particularly in its comparative analysis of Eckhart’s treatise *On Detachment* and Heidegger’s “What is Metaphysics” (8-30). As with Eckhart, the revelation of the nothing, which is neither this nor that determinate being, is approached for Heidegger “by a ‘fundamental experience’ which shakes us loose from our preoccupation with ‘what is,’ which detaches us from the sphere of things” (Caputo 19). In “Good Country People,” Hulga appears sullen and detached (“she seldom paid any close attention to her surroundings”) and thus in stark contrast to Mrs. Freeman, who “was the nosiest woman ever to walk the earth” (280, 264). Mrs. Freeman exhibits a vulgar preoccupation with physical reality, including the physical condition of her daughters and the loss of Hulga’s leg. The narrator describes how “Mrs. Freeman had a special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children. Of diseases, she preferred the lingering or incurable” (267).

The mood of boredom, to which Heidegger refers in his address and which may be said to characterize Hulga in O’Connor’s story, is not to be understood pathologically as a state of mental apathy or agitation. “Good Country People” expresses this concern about the modern mind’s tendency to pathologize felt experiences of “lack.” As a young girl, Hulga’s “education” had removed “the last traces” of her childhood feelings of shame and embarrassment “as a good surgeon scrapes for cancer” (CW 281). Therefore, when planning her seduction of the innocent country boy, Hulga “imagined that she took his remorse in

hand and changed it into a deeper understanding of life. She took all his shame away and turned it into something *useful*" (276; emphasis added). The spirit of poverty that Eckhart commends (knowing nothing, having nothing, willing nothing), the modern mind can only construe in terms of either utility in an effort to control, or sickness, a "cancer," in an effort to elevate the power of the rational mind. In the mystical language of apophasis that irrupts at certain historical junctures, Bulhof and Kate identify the living echo of an indictment against every form of self-interest and self-will. The relationship "between transcendence and rationality, and thus between God and humanity, however hidden, remains one of the great and central problems of modern thinking: a problem with which it wrestles in embarrassment" ("Echoes" 35). It has been argued that modernity "had to eliminate mysticism – precisely to the degree that mysticism lay bare man's inner powerlessness – as an unproductive element, often falsely labeled as quietistic, irrational and occult. In reaction, mysticism...developed a language and a logic of its own which in turn rendered it unintelligible to cultural rationality" (qtd. in Jasper 5).

As Caputo points out, Eckhart and Heidegger agree that in facing Nothing we are not called to deal with it by any act of the will. Boredom becomes a sense of wonder akin to the "awefulness" which Rudolf Otto famously described as that which is experienced in the face of the numinous. "Only when the strangeness of what-is forces itself upon us," writes Heidegger, "does it awaken and invite our wonder" (*Existence* 347-348). In addition, the mood of disclosure "felt by the courageous" cannot be opposed to "joy" (343). "Joy" is Heidegger's word, which O'Connor must have noted in giving her protagonist the name Joy to which the name Hulga is opposed. Because an encounter with Nothing will have nothing to do with the will, Heidegger argues, "The task of thinking will be to get beyond the "will-

fullness” of Western metaphysics, which is preoccupied with beings and the manipulation of beings” (Caputo *Mystical Element* 24). It is here that Heidegger’s thought takes on its affinity to Eckhart, and that O’Connor’s story takes on its affinity to Heidegger. But the apophatic tradition goes further still. Rejecting the precept that being and thought are one (for the paradoxes of the apophatic mode encourage abandoning ideas, not struggling with them), it tries to find alternative ways to be in touch with the deep darkness of transcendent mystery, the way of mysticism for example, which confounds the subject-object schema that defines modern ways of thinking and being.

Eckhart’s favored term, “ground,” or “simple ground” points to an “experience,” but only in the sense opposite that normally attributed to the word in contemporary usage. The “experience” of the ground that has no ground, like that of Nothing, is an absolute otherness, since it signifies “the overcoming of what-is-in-totality: Transcendence” (*Existence* 344). To suggest that the object of this experience is nothing is to concede that there is no object of such an experience. As part of a historical critique of the experientialist approach to Christian mysticism, Denys Turner in *The Darkness of God* tries to rescue the medieval mystical tradition from contemporary understandings of mysticism as an experiential positivism. He claims, “modern interpretation has invented ‘mysticism’” and “we persist in reading back the terms of that conception upon a stock of mediaeval authorities who know of no such thing – or, when they know of it, decisively rejected it” (7). The point Turner later makes in support of this argument is that the motifs of darkness or nothingness in apophatic theological literature should not be viewed along the lines of a positivistic experience of the divine, which, if not sensory, is at least directly analogous to sensory experience in terms of an encounter between subject and object and in terms of the

knowledge such an encounter produces (259-265). The concept of the subject is a modern one, and generally a problematic one in the study of apophatic mysticism whose paradoxical language dissolves the distinction between human subject and divine object. “At its most intense,” Sells argues, “apophatic language has as a subject neither divine nor human, neither self nor other” (12).

### **Nothing as Ground**

Eckhart is acutely aware that to commend the abandonment of self-will is to prompt straightaway self-willing: the will to give up willing remains an act of will. By calling on his listeners to “become naked of what is nothing,” Eckhart deflects what “the authorities commonly say,” which is that “self-will” binds us (*ES* 183, sermon 5b). He says instead, “you must become naked of what is *nothing*,” you must let go of what your hand does *not* have, you “must see that it is this *nothing/not* that is burning” your hand (emphasis added).<sup>11</sup> This nothing is the knot of distinction between coal and hand that stops one from taking on “the nature of fire.”<sup>12</sup> There can be no freedom, Eckhart insists, until “a simplified One” remains:

O my dear man, what harm does it do you to allow God to be God in you? Go completely out of yourself for God’s love, and God comes completely out of himself for love of you. And when these two have gone out, what remains there is a simplified One. In this One the Father brings his Son to birth in the innermost source. Then the Holy Spirit blossoms forth, and then there springs up in God a will that belongs to the soul. So long as the will remains untouched by all created things and by all creation, it is free. (*ES* 184)

It is in this sense that apophasis does not stand alone as a verbal negation, but is an integral part of a human being's simplification which will render it like that which it desires to know, which is by nature ineffable in its simplicity and beyond every human control.

In "Good Country People," mechanical allusions point to the controlling impulse of human nature. The opening description of Mrs. Freeman emphasizes her reticence to being deemed "wrong on any point" by likening her facial expressions to the mechanical gears of a vehicle:

Besides the neutral expression that she wore when she was alone, Mrs. Freeman has two others, forward and reverse, that she used for all her human dealings. Her forward expression was steady and driving like the advance of a heavy truck. Her eyes never swerved to the left or right but turned as the story turned as if they followed a yellow line down the centre of it. She seldom used the other expression because it was not often necessary for her to retract a statement....Mrs. Freeman could never be brought to admit herself wrong on any point. (CW 263)

The matrons of the story give little notice to personal failings that would render them limited in any way. As previously mentioned, Mrs. Hopewell believes she "had no bad qualities of her own" (264). The denial of human limit is symbolized most powerfully in "Good Country People" by Hulga's prosthetic limb, which supports and develops the story's engagement with negation, with the *is not*, with "lack." It calls attention to Hulga's apparent attunement to the presence of an absence, the loss of her original leg having occurred in a hunting mishap during which "she had never lost consciousness" (CW 267). This incident from her childhood is mentioned only briefly and enclosed in parentheses that paradoxically enhance rather than diminish its significance by setting it off from the rest of the narrative:

“Mrs. Hopewell excused this attitude because of the leg (which had been shot off in a hunting accident when Joy was ten)” (266).

And yet, while her lumbering gait audibly announces a “lack,” her disposition will not, by “an act of will,” concede to any “lack” in her assertion about nothing (265). Hulga, in her searching experience of Nothing, halts for “nothing,” literally, and her willfulness “to keep” this philosophical stance amounts to an “achieved blindness” (265). This kind of negation stays on the same level as her mother’s “Is”-saying because it is a negation that is equally balanced by assertion. Therefore, in her daring to consider the question of what is *not*, Hulga calcifies her initial act of negation. The negation of her mother’s affirmations betrays a “wooden”-ness as Hulga fails to submit this negation to its own negation. The risk of a notion like nothing is that it will itself be taken precisely as definitive of reality rather than as a way of disrupting the will to objectify what-is. This is the scenario O’Connor plays with through Hulga’s character. Hulga regards those around her in terms of their use for her own ends: “Hulga had learned to tolerate Mrs. Freeman who saved her from taking walks with her mother. Even Glynese and Carramae were useful when they occupied attention that might otherwise have been directed at her” (266); and as Giannone argues, when she meets Manley Pointer she “at long last has a student on whom she can work her pedagogical will in the form of sexual instruction” (83). However, words such as *nothing*, *darkness*, or *cloud of unknowing* in apophatic theological literature are used to hold the mind in repose. Their value lies in their simplicity. The privative connotations of such words are the putative (positive) senses of their use. They are “negative *in word only*” (Giannone 17; emphasis added). Hulga appears to assume that “thinking [is] the way to an original comprehension of Nothing and its possible revelation” (*Existence* 330).

Thus, the prosthetic limb, in one sense, reveals what is *not*. But, in terms of the narrative plot, it actually conceals it. It is the prosthetic replacement that Hulga sanctifies, elevating it to the status of her soul: “No one ever touched it but her. She took care of its as someone else would his soul, in private and almost with her own eyes turned away” (CW 281). The leg-as-soul suggests the modern reduction of the intangible to thingness, to which the items in the hollow Bible also point. The artificial leg also betrays Hulga’s feelings of superiority: “She was as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about his tail” (281). But the symbolism is double. For in the hayloft, the childhood loss of her leg becomes suggestive of individuation, of the self as unique; “it’s what makes you different. You ain’t like anybody else,” the salesman says, for his own reasons. But nonetheless this “touched the truth about her” (281).

In the delicious wit that so often characterizes the denouement of an O’Connor story, it is Manley Pointer, that “real simple” country boy, who unwittingly articulates Professor Heidegger’s central point: “I been believing in nothing since I was born!” (CW 283). The nothing belongs to the essential unfolding of beings: to “see *through* to nothing” is to potentially awaken to the nothing that is “at one with” the openness of all being. When Manley Pointer takes off with her prosthetic leg, the philosophical ground on which Dr. Hopewell stood opens up beneath her in the realization that she has been deceived; she is, in more ways than one, without a leg to stand on. Defeated in her object lesson, her subjectivity is shattered. The revelation of nothing from this “providential nihilist” is the revelation of her being (D. Williams 306). The trite barb thus incites a potential awakening, reminiscent of an Eckhartian self-birth, which the imagery bears out, “straw” for a possible nativity, an “opening” toward which she turns her face, and the verdant field beyond:



“And I’ll tell you another thing, Hulga,” he said, using the name as if he didn’t think much of it, “you ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!” and then the toast-colored hat disappeared down the hole and the girl was left, sitting on the straw in the dusty sunlight. When she turned her churning face toward the opening, she saw his blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake. (283)

O’Connor does not show the reader whether this is a fertile encounter with Nothing. It is uncertain whether this will turn “dust into Joy” (267).<sup>13</sup> It is nonetheless difficult to ignore how resonant the barn loft encounter is with the tone of apophysis, as Michael de Certeau treats it: “Negative theology: it *signifies* by what it *takes away*. The sign itself is henceforth *the effect* of a taking away or division” (137; original emphasis). The story’s depiction of its protagonist’s progressive movement toward “see[ing] what you are *not*,” as Williams argues, “begin[s] with the illusion that she has accomplished it” (306). Her questioning of the nothing, as Heidegger predicts, puts the questioner in question. Thus, O’Connor tells a story about the trap of modern nihilism that would make “the nothing itself into the content, the last and emptiest, but formally ‘absolute’ content of faith” (Bulhof and Kate “Echoes” 41).

### **Nothing as Negative Logic**

To follow “Good Country People” this far alongside apophysis and Heidegger’s discourse on “Nothing” is to read the story’s end not as a simple indictment against Hulga’s experimental knowledge<sup>14</sup> of nothing but as its necessary existential extension. For the apophatic negation of negation is a mode of thinking and speaking by which the ossifying

habits of language are resisted so that words are able to relate us continually to the world here and now. It is impossible to engage merely intellectually in apophasis, since its negative logic underscores the limits of intellectual resources. There can be no halting at a purely abstract engagement with negation, as Hulga appears to do. Sooner or later there is a resubmission of the self to the experience of the other, to an interior looking that will affirm, once more, “We are not our own light!” (CW 268). At the end of the story, Hulga reenters a dynamic tension between what-is and what-is-not. “Her categories of language are shattered because the world is not as she has seen it to be; Manley Pointer is not ‘good country people,’ nor is he ‘a fine Christian’” (Gordon 180). Hulga advances by her own intellectual powers a certain distance in the negative way, but the last insight is something that overcomes her.

In an architectonic sense, the loss of her leg *again*, for she *already* lost the leg for which the prosthesis was a replacement, echoes the logic of apophasis. The stranger with whom Hulga struggles for her leg withholds his true name (like the angel who wrestles with Jacob), and performs a stripping away of that which itself already signifies a stripping away. The artificial limb stands in for an absence and it is this absence that is freshly revealed. O'Connor explains the leg as symbolic of a woodenness in her protagonist's soul, which, in the reading being developed here, confirms the woodenness in the dynamic of her way of negation. Hers is a gait that halts for “nothing.” But in a different sense, a gait that halts for nothing perfectly characterizes apophasis, for it is a manner of speaking that halts for nothing through the acts of dispossession and surrender. Hulga, in the arms of Manley Pointer, “felt entirely dependent on him” (CW 282); she shows him how to remove her

artificial leg and “it was like surrendering to him completely” (281). O’Connor figures this mystical manner of speaking as a kind of ‘walking’ or ‘gait,’ as does Certeau:

He or she is a mystic who cannot stop walking and, with the certainty of what is lacking, knows of every place and object that it is *not that*; one cannot stay *there* nor be content with *that*. Desire creates an excess. Places are exceeded, passed, lost behind it. It makes one go farther, elsewhere. It lives nowhere. (299)

Haze Motes, too, walks with a limp. In the final chapter of *Wise Blood*, the dynamic of his earlier unsaying is figured as a way of walking. Having already traversed the bottomless spaces of blindness and silence, Haze wanders out of doors at the novel’s end until he meets his demise.

The apparent restlessness of the apophatic mode may strike us as quintessentially modern, no longer marked with an “origin or end called God” (Certeau 299). It may even seem ingenuous to confer on modern disenchantment an apophatic tenor. “Of that self-surpassing spirit,” Certeau writes at the end of *Mystic Fable*, “...it seems that what for the most part still remains, in contemporary culture, is the movement of perpetual departure; as if, unable to ground itself in a belief in God any longer, the experience only kept the form and not the content of traditional *mystics*” (299). But the apophatic strain of mysticism questions whether the model of propositional knowledge is the appropriate model for what the mystic “knows by unknowing.” The movement of apophasis proceeds not by acquiring knowledge, but by “a process of repeatedly pressing on and falling back” (J. P. Williams 26). Like O’Connor’s protagonist in “Good Country People,” on the negative way one fails forward. The initial negation of the apophatic anagogy that Hulga performs in response to the surface optimism of her mother’s truisms serves as a kind of kick-start mechanism in the

process of spiritual maturation, and, according to J. P. Williams, this “generates the momentum for subsequent negations and cumulatively alerts the [person] to the nature of the process in which it is engaged” (223).

Apophatic logic, the negation of negation, reflects a scriptural model. The fourth chapter of Mark offers a relevant example: “for those who have will be given more; from those who have not, even what they have will be taken away” (4.25). Statements of this kind are susceptible to strict moral interpretations (the separation of the sheep from the goats is never far off). But the brevity of this saying, like other spiritual writings (aphorisms, sutras), intends not to engage the discriminative mind more than necessary. When one adverts to the structural logic of apophasis, the two distinct and apparently diametric formulations may be heard as moving in the same direction. “Those who *have* will be given more” and “those who *have not*” will be stripped of their privation, for “even what one has [i.e., nothing, for they *have not*] will be taken away.” In other words, the negative mode of not having will be itself negated. The *not* of apophatic denials is neither negative nor merely imaginative, but has a properly affirmative structure. There is, unexpectedly and magnanimously, the exclusion of exclusion, a judgment against judgment, which constitutes a logic of “one-ing” what is distinct without canceling the distinction. The apophatic strategy therefore may express a logic of both-and and neither-nor without halting in either because apophasis subsists in a nondualistic poise that frees itself from any attachment to “having” or “not having.” Accordingly, the proliferation of “having” carries as much of an apophatic tone as the stripping away of “not having,” that is, the negation of what is already negative. One may well wonder, of course, if this is just a way of having it both ways. It is, I think, a way of getting out of the way.

### Nothing as Knowing Your Onions<sup>15</sup>

The final paragraphs of the story are less frequently noticed than the scene of seduction and betrayal, but they contribute significant details to the story's meaning, especially concerning the value O'Connor places on Hulga's "searching experience of Nothing" (*Existence* 333). What befalls Hulga Hopewell in the hayloft appears acceptable within the context of the narrative plot, as her pretensions of control and superiority are countered by Manley Pointer. The story at this point returns to the characters with whom it began. Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman are digging up onions in the back field when they notice Manley Pointer emerging from the woods and heading for the highway. The onions, I think, are worth considering as the image that carries the story's final comment on Hulga's desire to "see *through* to nothing," and her flirtation with the knowledge of nothing.

The following dialogue between Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman compose the last lines of the story:

"Why, that looks like that nice dull young man that tried to sell me a Bible yesterday," Mrs. Hopewell said, squinting. "He must have been selling to the Negroes back there. He was so simple," she said, "but I guess the world would be better off if we were all that simple."

Mrs. Freeman's gaze drove forward and just touched him before he disappeared under the hill. Then she returned her attention to the evil-smelling onion shoot she was lifting from the ground. "Some can't be that simple," she said. "I know I never could." (CW 284)

Although Mrs. Freeman attends to an onion shoot that is “evil-smelling,” its pungency is redolent of Manley Pointer, whom she has just spotted. He is “Mrs. Freeman’s avatar,” as David Williams notes, for he acts out her own “natural penchant for deprivation” (306). Beyond this, we could consider that an onion is composed of several layers and when all of these delicate membranes (literally, “limbs” from Latin *membrum*), have been removed, there is nothing at its centre. Each layer shares this same centre of nothingness because in an onion, and in contrast to garlic or cloves, they are concentrically formed. These concentric layers, moreover, give the onion its name, which is based on the Latin word *unio*, meaning “one, unity.” Whatever value we confer on this image (which, at the very least, confirms the centrality of nothing in the story) will shape our reading of the story’s concern with nothingness. For my part, the concreteness of this image of nothing offers an exact correlate to the spiritual condition the way of negation urges for those seeking intimacy with God or ultimate reality. Dionysius, Eckhart and John of the Cross all present the *via negativa* as a stripping away of sheathes or husks until there is nothing visible, perceptible, or intellectual left. Eliot, too, invokes this imagery in the first movement of “Little Gidding” to suggest that for all (our) intents and purposes what is sought for escapes us at the moment it arrives.

And what you thought you came for  
 Is only a shell, a husk of meaning  
 From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled  
 If at all.

The onion, a kind of husk with nothing at the center, bestows an apophatic tenor onto Hulga’s desire to “see *through* to nothing.” Only when there is nothing left (to stand on) is

enlightenment possible.

The etymology of onion as “one, unity” points further still to the irony of the women’s banter, an irony that is directed toward the women themselves. Mrs. Hopewell expresses her esteem for the simplicity of good country people, but she and Mrs. Freeman (whom the story delineates, with Manley Pointer, as “good country people”) dissociate themselves from such simplicity. Simplicity, however, as the story’s final word is a value O’Connor most wished to underscore elsewhere. “Recover your simplicity” and other remarks of similar ken, are noticeable refrains in O’Connor’s letters.<sup>16</sup> As the above quotations from Eckhart bear out, simplicity connotes a state of oneness with the ground that has no ground. This is not abstract oneness but a vivifying openness that affirms, at root, all life. As discussed in chapter two, the apophatic mode of thinking and speaking develops in Neoplatonism as a way to express a unified reality. This unity, like the negative language used to express it, does not reconcile but guards the mystery of the One. The One *is not*, if *to be* is to possess a name.

## Conclusion

Who else but Flannery O’Connor could write a story about a philosopher attuned to the nothing and a Bible salesman with a perverse passion for particularities in order to expose that the simple ground that has no ground cannot be controlled or rationally explained. As scandalous as Hulga’s questioning of nothing seems among “red hills and good country people,” she presents a creative force (CW 268). Her questioning of the nothing—which puts her, the questioner, in question—does not finally permit her to rest in any constative

determination inasmuch as she discovers in the hayloft that its meaning is neither linguistic nor conceptual; it is to be embodied:

What is hoped for and heard, echoes in the body like an inner voice that one cannot specify by name but that transforms one's use of words...[coming] from an unknown quarter [it] inaugurates a new rhythm of existence – some would say a new “breath,” a new way of walking, a different “style” of life. It simultaneously captivates an attentiveness from within, disturbs the orderly flow of thought, and opens up or frees new spaces....The body is “informed” (gets form) from what befalls it in this way, well before the intellect becomes aware. (Certeau 297)

The questioning of nothing affirms a transcendent reality that escapes us but is not-other to immanence. The task of apophysis is not to assert an ultimate (negative) knowledge. As J. P. Williams explains, “If we may succeed in finding the linguistic means to point to a positionless position, it is not a position we may inhabit, but an arena to be traversed by means of the dynamic of emptiness and form, nothing and all” (205). “Good Country People” fittingly draws to a close with the image of the Bible salesman-cum-confidence-man-cum-unnamed-stranger “struggling successfully over the green speckled lake,” while Hulga (or is it Joy) is sitting, only sitting. And the grass grows green by itself.



## Notes

The epigraph is from the drawing of “the mount of perfection” by John of the Cross (45).

<sup>1</sup> See especially, Edmondson 73-90; Wood, *Christ-Haunted* 199-209; Asals 102-108.

<sup>2</sup> In his postscript to “What is Metaphysics?” Heidegger identifies this interpretation as one of the chief misconceptions to which his lecture gives rise. See Heidegger, *Existence* 352-354.

<sup>3</sup> Additional references to Romano Guardini, Karl Adam, Max Picard, and Gabriel Marcel can be found in O’Connor’s letters, including the following which attests to O’Connor’s reading of German thinkers: “Anyway, to discover the Church you have to set out by yourself. The French Catholic novelists were a help to me in this – Bloy, Bernanos, Mauriac. In philosophy, Gilson, Maritain and Gabriel Marcel, an Existentialist. They all seemed to be French for a while and then I discovered the Germans – Max Picard, Romano Guardini, and Karl Adam. The Americans seem just to be producing pamphlets for the back of the Church (to be avoided at all costs) and installing heating systems...” (16 July 57, *HB* 231). Claude Edmonde Magny, the last person O’Connor mentions in her letter to Sessions, was a French literary critic. Magny’s essay entitled, “Faulkner or Theological Inversion,” appears in *Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays* (66-78).

<sup>4</sup> *Existence and Being* consists of the following four essays by Heidegger: “Remembrance of the Poet” (1943), trans. Douglas Scott; “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry” (1936), trans. Douglas Scott; “On the Essence of Truth” (1943), trans. R. F. C. Hull and Alan Crick; and “What is Metaphysics?” (1929) with Postscript (1943), trans. R. F. C. Hull and Alan Crick. The book also includes a substantial introduction by Werner Brock to Heidegger’s key philosophical concepts: Dasein, Time, and Being.

<sup>5</sup> The phrase “experimental knowledge” is borrowed from Certeau’s *Mystic Fable*. See also chapter 3, above (117 n7).

<sup>6</sup> A. H. Armstrong also offers this explanation in *Plotinian and Christian Studies* (78).

<sup>7</sup> Feeley’s “Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*: The Negative Way” is another important early article with original insights into that novel’s motifs of dispossession and homelessness. But in his analysis, David Williams comes closer to the iterative dynamic of apophysis being highlighted in this study.

<sup>8</sup> See also Heidegger’s essay, “The Theological Discussion of ‘The Problem of a Non-Objectifying Thinking and Speaking in Today’s Theology’—Some Pointers to Its Major Aspects,” in *The Piety of Thought* 22-31.

<sup>9</sup> The passage from “What is Metaphysics?” that O’Connor quotes is one such example. A few lines earlier Heidegger makes this point more explicit: “But it is not remarkable that

precisely at that point where scientific man makes sure of his surest possession he should speak of something else? What is to be investigated is what-is—and nothing else; only what-is—and beyond that nothing” (*Existence* 328). O’Connor similarly makes the most of the word throughout her narration. A few examples include, “Nothing is perfect. This was one of Mrs. Hopewell’s favorite sayings” (CW 264); “Nothing had been arrived at by anyone that had not first been arrived at by her” (265); “Nothing seemed to destroy the boy’s look of admiration” (280). Nothing is, most significantly, the basic principle of Hulga’s philosophical stance: “I’m one of those people who see *through* to nothing” (280); “...some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there’s nothing to see. It’s a kind of salvation” (280).

<sup>10</sup> See Kilcourse’s study, *Flannery O’Connor’s Religious Imagination: A World with Everything Off Balance*.

<sup>11</sup> The Middle High German word *niht* can be translated either as adverb “not,” or noun, “nothing” (*ES* 336 n8).

<sup>12</sup> A story of the early Christian hermits: “Abbot Lot came to Abbot Joseph and said: Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and according as I am able I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts: Now what more should I do? The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: Why not be totally changed into fire?” (qtd. in Dillard *For The Time Being* 180). Compare: “I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!” (Luke 12.49).

<sup>13</sup> O’Connor’s reference to “dust” uncannily anticipates one of the well-known arguments against the language of apophysis. In his 1987 Jerusalem address, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” Derrida reiterates his long-standing objection to negative theology, saying “*Il y a là cendre*.” Derrida insists that negative theology functions as (every other) discourse because an “always presupposed event, this singular having-taken-place, is also for every reading, every interpretation, every poetics, every literary criticism, what one currently calls the oeuvre: at least the ‘already-there’ of a phrase, the trace of a phrase of which the singularity would have to remain irreducible and its reference indispensable in a given idiom. A trace has taken place” (98). Even in its act of speaking-away everything determinate and determinable, “depriving itself of meaning or of an object,” apophatic discourse *takes place*: “if it occurs only to efface itself, if it arises only in effacing itself, the effacement will have taken place, even if its place is only in the ashes. *Il y a là cendre*” (97, 98). However much one argues that the discourse of negative theology “consists” in exceeding the limits of language, Derrida insists that “by testifying it *remains*” (*Sauf le Nom* 54). Derrida thus maintains that negative theology cannot help speaking of that which it claims is essentially unspeakable. Derrida observes negative theology’s effacement of discourse without taking up the question of whether these ashes place the subject *differently* in relation to language. This helps to reveal that Derrida insists on a purely conceptual knowledge of the ‘object’ of theology, as he does of the ‘object’ of aesthetics, as Radloff has argued: “The possibility of the transformation of the knower through the work, inasmuch as

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the preservers of the work enter into the space which it opens to be shattered in their subjectivity by its presencing, is negated in principle” (“Total Mobilization” 253).

<sup>14</sup> See chapter 3, above (110 n4).

<sup>15</sup> The American expression “know your onions” was used from the 1920s onwards and nicely sums up a story about a young woman with a Ph.D. who was not as smart as she thought she was.

<sup>16</sup> For example, in a letter to William Sessions, O’Connor writes, “Your criticism sounds to me as if you have read too many critical books and are too smart in an artificial, destructive, and very limited way....My Lord, Billy, recover your simplicity” (13 Sept. 60, *HB* 407).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### “On The Darkening Path” of “Revelation”

Revelation—then looking back on it, nothing.  
— Emmanuel Levinas

On July 25, 1964, the year of her death, Flannery O'Connor wrote to Betty Hester, “We can worry about the interpitations [sic] of ‘Revelation’ but not its fortunes. I had a letter from the O.Henry prize people & it got first” (*HB* 594). One of the last stories written during her final illness, appearing first in the *Sewanee Review* (1964) and reprinted in the posthumous collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965), “Revelation” is considered to be among O'Connor's best. Ralph Wood calls it her “most winsome story” (*Christ-Haunted* 261), and Edward Kessler, “masterful” (106). Considering the focus of this study, “Revelation” may seem far removed from the apophatic topos of the hidden God. In title alone the story alludes to the idea of divine showing or disclosure, laying bare that which was previously unknown. Moreover, as the final book of the Bible, Revelation is a principal example of “apocalyptic” literature, which literally “reveals” the end of all things (apocalypse being Greek for revelation) in its description of the divine's infinity in time and space; the Book itself ends with a call to the one who is the first and the last, the alpha and omega (a title ascribed to Christ throughout early Christian writing) to return in judgment.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, O'Connor's debut novel *Wise Blood* culminates in the darkness of blindness and death, whereas “Revelation” closes with “[a] visionary light” (*CW* 653). In many of O'Connor's earlier works, dramatic moments of violence occur on or near the last page to announce a “revelation of the numinous” (Desmond *Risen Sons* 60). The moment of violent assault in “Revelation,” however, occurs not at its end but at an earlier stage in the narrative, when Mary Grace hurls her textbook at Mrs. Ruby Turpin and then attempts to

throttle her. Diane Tolomeo, who notes this shift in plot pattern, attributes it to the author's concern toward the end of her life "that we [the readers] do see the results" such a confrontation has on the protagonist, and "know with certainty" that it was "of a religious nature" ("Home" 338). In *Flannery O'Connor's Dark Comedies* Carol Shloss similarly underscores how "Revelation" presents a departure from the writer's earlier fiction. Shloss arrives at this conclusion through an analysis of O'Connor's reluctance to harness the potential of the omniscient voice. "For as talented as O'Connor is at rendering the violent and profound moment," Shloss argues, "she is nonetheless unable or unwilling to dramatize states of consciousness, to take her readers inside the mind of the perceiving character and show them what exactly has been experienced" (104). But in "Revelation" the reader is freed up from interpreting "the probable nature of the suffering insight" because "the content of Mrs. Turpin's revelation is fully externalized" in the vision she has at the story's close; "it is made as available to the reader as to the fictional recipient" (Shloss 110). Both critics detect an urgency on O'Connor's part that is not apparent in her earlier works, a desire for her religious point of view to be accessible and understood. "In her final hours," Shloss surmises, "the risk of offending a hostile audience must have seemed small indeed" (118).

Notwithstanding O'Connor's unusual step toward rendering a vision, the meaning of this vision, its "whatness," continues to present a knotty issue for interpretation. In fact the description of Mrs. Ruby Turpin's final vision of a parade of souls "rumbling toward heaven" attracts much of the critical attention surrounding "Revelation" (CW 654). The ensuing discussion, which exposes to varying degrees the uneasy relation between fiction and theology in O'Connor scholarship, is premised implicitly on particular notions of revelation and interrelated conceptions of religious truth. In approaching the story,

O'Connor critics, with some exceptions, presume that the import of revelation lies in the "fully externalized" content of Ruby Turpin's vision. So much so that the value of O'Connor's story frequently becomes identified with its capacity (or failure) to demonstrate a proper theological truth. For Frederick Asals, among others, "Mrs. Turpin's revelation perfectly illustrates the text, 'The last shall be first'" (224). For Susan Srigley, the story's end fits the "pattern of *kenosis* [which] is, for O'Connor, the Christian sacramental view of love" (164). Alternatively, for Shloss, the parade of souls is theologically and artistically unconvincing because it "is posed in exactly the terms in which Mrs. Turpin has always seen life, as a matter of social hierarchy" (112). As Shloss helpfully reminds us, efforts to develop sufficiently an overriding idea do not always account for the way such an idea is ironized and rendered ambiguous by the details of O'Connor's narrative. In his introduction to the story collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, Robert Fitzgerald quotes the author's own opinion on fiction that can be explained "by a proper theology." In 1957 O'Connor said such a story "will not be a large enough story for [the serious fiction writer] to occupy [herself] with." The fiction writer is concerned with theological ideas "only because the meaning of [her] story does not begin except at a depth where these things have been exhausted" (qtd. in Fitzgerald xxvii). To be equipped with certain theological apparatus is perhaps to show too great an alacrity in responding to O'Connor's fiction, defeating her literary method by readily employing familiar terms and concepts.

Therefore, I wish to recast the question of the story's titular concern. For what does not seem clear in O'Connor criticism is how the story's final "revelatory" vision serves as a decided response to the violence associated with naming first and last, with positing a top and bottom in the story's opening pages. Shifting the critical discussion to the question of

revelation itself demonstrates how the story complicates the revealability of Mrs. Turpin's revelation, and, in doing so, gives priority to the opaque dimensions of her revelatory experience. Therefore, my interest in this chapter is with negative revelation and the poetics of apophatic theology as a revelation of and through the negative. Revelation as such already institutes a negativity: it is a revelation that denies itself. In this sense I will show how O'Connor's story uses "visionary light" to illumine "the darkening path" of revelation (CW 631, 632).

### **Naming First and Last**

"Revelation" is a story about a woman grappling with who she is and so "ponders the question of who she would have chosen to be if she couldn't have been herself" (CW 636). The opening scene exposes Mrs. Ruby Turpin's preoccupation with social positioning, with knowing and having her place. She enters a medical waiting room with her husband Claud, who has a leg ulcer from being kicked by a cow, and her self-importance fills the room:

Her little bright black eyes took in all the patients as she sized up the seating situation. There was one vacant chair and a place on the sofa occupied by a blond child in a dirty blue romper who should have been told to move over and make room for the lady. (633)

The narrator describes Mrs. Turpin as a large woman, "a living demonstration that the room was inadequate and ridiculous," to indicate further the charade of her conceit as well as her lack of harmony with the world around her which, as the narrative goes on to confirm, stems from her anxieties about the South's new socio-racial configurations and forms of social

mobility. As she falls sleep at night, Mrs. Turpin rehearses her habit of “naming the classes of people”:

On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them – not above, just away from – were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. (636)

In her socio-racial scheme, Ruby Turpin’s self-positing posits everyone else, which is to say, her naming of every other allows her to secure her own sense of self. But eventually “the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her,” disrupting the stability of the hierarchical structure. “There was a colored dentist in town who had two red Lincolns and a swimming pool and a farm with registered white-face cattle on it” (636). Although Ruby’s nighttime habit exposes a mind duly formed by “the southern class and race system that prevailed before the civil rights movement legally changed America,” O’Connor does not confine its compass to segregationist culture (Giannone 227). The author extends the implications of this cast of mind to the atrocities of the Holocaust: “Usually by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were mooling and roiling around in her head, and she would dream they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven” (CW 636).

As with most of O’Connor’s short fiction, the opening pages of “Revelation” set up the story’s end, where the habit of naming first and last, of positing a top and bottom reappears



in Ruby Turpin's vision of "a vast horde of souls...rumbling toward heaven" (CW 654).

The hierarchy of the classes of people is now inverted, but it is not dispelled:

There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. (654)

Through the narrative device of indirect speech, Ruby's prejudiced naming also persists, thus complicating how "the vision replaces the genocidal image with a more redemptive one" (Britt 54). The "revelatory" nature of the final vision does not entirely disrupt her earlier naming of first and last, her positioning of a top and bottom; and although some critics frequently draw attention to its non-verbal character as a vision, thus distancing the experience from its linguistic expression, the dream she has in the night of boxcars and "gas ovens" is equally visual.

The collusion of naming and violence is pronounced in Eckhart as well, for throughout his sermons he never entirely abandons the association of naming with the imposition of force. Names are linked with metaphors of violence because when imposed on the ineffable, in Eckhart's view, they obstruct the divine and betray a person's own unpreparedness to let the other be. The soul encounters God when "all possibility of naming has been cast off" (TP 246, sermon 3). Eckhart contests the act of naming that defines kataphatic theological discourse in the name of a mystical experience of God that cannot be mastered, domesticated or logically understood. Eckhart argues we can neither name nor know conceptually that which is infinitely other (and, we might add, every other is every bit

Other). For Eckhart this is not the obstacle but the condition of love. At his most apophatic, Eckhart dispenses with the Dionysian project of divine names, putting theological discourse itself under critical pressure insofar as it has been approached in conjunction with the formation of philosophy, and thus shares the burden of its epistemological realism.<sup>2</sup> The apophatic call for silence in his sermons is less prohibitive than enabling. For if the gesture of language betrays an attempt to overpower what it names, to reduce the phenomenon to a concept, then Eckhart's precaution is fundamentally a questioning of the function of language itself.<sup>3</sup>

To relate this more closely to O'Connor's story is to consider its handling of the relationship between language and power in the character of Ruby Turpin. John Sykes notes how Mrs. Turpin's manner of speaking in the waiting room, which upholds white community norms and racist attitudes, constructs a domineering circle in which her language operates. This circle "is so tight that no new discourse can enter it. Every voice, every idea gets absorbed into hers, and that circle must be broken before she can 'hear' at all" (79). The point of rupture to which Sykes's comment alludes is the centerpiece of the story's dramatic action. The ironically named Mary Grace, an emotionally unstable Wellesley College student, throws her human development textbook at Mrs. Turpin, catching her just above the eye. Mrs. Turpin then receives a message from Mary Grace, which the older woman herself elicits.

"What you got to say to me?" she asked hoarsely and held her breath, waiting, as for a revelation.

The girl raised her head. Her gaze locked with Mrs. Turpin's. "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog," she whispered. Her voice was low but

clear. Her eyes burned for a moment as if she saw with pleasure that her message had struck its target.

Mrs. Turpin sank back in her chair. (CW 646)

Ruby's decision to interpret the message as "a revelation" expresses a receptivity to divine disclosure and an openness, moreover, to looking beyond her prevailing uses of language (CW 646). Brian Britt asserts that Ruby hears the utterance "*as a divine curse*" (52). A traditional type of Biblical revelation, curses are performative speech acts, thus they "require some efficacious notion of language in order to work" (53). In this scene, then, language becomes a potent scene of realization. Edward Kessler makes a similar point. As Mrs. Turpin struggles with the meaning of the message, "she begins to be conscious of the inadequacy of referential language" (149). Appropriately, the message itself comes from a figure who, Ruby Turpin suspects, knows her "in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition" (CW 645). By implication, Mary Grace's message works to turn Ruby Turpin toward that which is ultimately nonreferential, and so directly away from her habit of naming and its implicit will to power. The message in effect displaces Ruby from the security she felt in knowing and having her place in society because it announces that she is not, to borrow from Sykes, "the paragon of virtue she believes herself to be" (79). Thus, where her habit of naming shows language consisting only of thing-naming words, Mary Grace's message opens Ruby to language that calls for an attending to. Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Sykes finds O'Connor's story to be "dialogic in an *apophatic* sense: for [O'Connor], the highest use of language was to prepare us to encounter something beyond language" (78; emphasis added). While this insight takes an important step toward a consideration of the story's negative or apophatic revelation, Sykes surprisingly uses it to

endorse the conclusions of previous critics, emphasizing the “silent sign” of Ruby Turpin’s “positive revelation,” which is manifest in her final vision (83). O’Connor’s aesthetics of revelation, according to Sykes, use rhetorical strategies in order to build the narrative toward a climatic image, and it is this image rather than language that portends toward the contemplation of divine mystery. Yet, as I shall argue below, if the vision is revelatory in any apophatic sense, it is only insofar as it cancels its own effort to illuminate. There is additional narrative evidence to suggest that Ruby’s inverted vision of the classes of people is not the most salient aspect of her revelation, despite being the most visible one.

### **Neither This Nor That**

For Ruby Turpin, the impact of the violent incident in the waiting room immediately, and quite literally, effects a changed way of seeing. At first “her vision narrowed and she saw everything as if it were happening in a small room far way, or as if she were looking at it through the wrong end of a telescope” (CW 644). Then it “suddenly reversed itself and she saw everything large instead of small” (645). The two polarizing viewpoints are equally distorting, intimating that the story’s concern with revelation does not involve the simple reordering of how one sees the world through the adoption of one perspective *as opposed to* another. In fact the two extremes of Ruby’s confused vision intimate one of the story’s central concerns: a questioning of the dualist schema (self/other, top/bottom, first/last) that shapes Ruby’s cast of mind. The question is about this logic itself.

The Southern author’s affinity for opposites and extremes is a notable topic in O’Connor scholarship. Frederick Asals’s *Flannery O’Connor: The Imagination of Extremity* remains the most significant study to date. Asals argues that only extremes have genuine existence

for the author. He thus identifies two perspectives in O'Connor's work, the hylic and the numinous, wherein the first suggests a lack and the second an excess of spirit. "The radical tension of this double perspective," Asals writes, "pervades O'Connor's later work, and Mrs. Turpin's cry in 'Revelation,' 'How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?' articulates the duality that underlies all stories" (68). While I am sympathetic to Asals's argument that O'Connor's passion for extremes is central to her literary imagination, I find what is most striking in O'Connor's fictional works is not so much their underlying dualities but rather the ways in which they dramatically belie these dualities as points of opposition. For in most of her fiction the categories of human experience, including those of time and space, are disintegrated and extremes meet; the oppositions that often afflict her characters, those between physical and spiritual, body and soul, self and other, collapse into a *coincidentia oppositorum* that overcomes them. For instance, in "The Temple of the Holy Ghost," the critical scene takes place at a fair. There is a tent "divided into two parts," with men on one side, women on the other, and speaking to them all, so "everyone could hear," is a hermaphrodite, a symbolic embodiment of dualist distinctions (CW 206). At the story's end, the young female protagonist attends mass with her mother, and finds herself leaving off her prayer of petition ("Hep me not to be so mean, she began mechanically. Hep me not to give her so much sass. Hep me not to talk like I do"). Then her thoughts cease, her mind becomes "empty," and she wakes to the voice of the hermaphrodite at the sight of the Eucharist: "when the priest raised the monstrance with the Host shining ivory-colored in the centre of it, she was thinking of the tent at the fair that had the freak in it. The freak was saying: 'I don't dispute hit. This is the way He wanted me to be' (CW 209). It is therefore where Asals's study ends that my own reading of O'Connor begins. For in the final chapter

of his monograph Asals takes up the “religious sense” of the extreme structures he identifies as central to O’Connor’s dualist imagination and relates their sundering effects to mysticism.

In the following passage from his conclusion, the embedded quotations are taken from Evelyn Underhill’s *Mysticism*:

In their intensity and revolutionary effect, these climactic moments [in O’Connor’s fiction] resemble more the awakening of the mystic than they do conversion in its usual sense. This is the opening of “the transcendental consciousness,” not “religious conversion as ordinarily understood: the sudden emotional acceptance of religious beliefs.” It is an “unselfing” in which “the large world-consciousness now press[es] in on the individual consciousness. Often it breaks in suddenly and becomes a great new revelation.” (231)

A sustained examination of the mystical import of O’Connor’s “aesthetics of incongruity,” as Asals calls it (230), would soon approach the contours of an apophatic poetics. In addition, his concluding observations serve to caution O’Connor critics from developing theories of conversion about her fiction that intend toward a statement of accepted belief. For religious presuppositions often change the mystical dimension of experience and in giving it a meaning or a direction, determine it. But when we inquire what characterizes the climactic inner experiences of O’Connor’s protagonists, we find that it results in an *unknowing*, “an annihilation of the known self,” rather than knowledge or belief (Asals 231).

The apophatic strand of mysticism rests on the idea that one can only prepare for the transcendent through an emptying of all preparations. For Eckhart, the failure to achieve this emptiness results in unpreparedness, a cluttering up of the soul with obstructive

conceptions. In “Revelation,” the confrontation with Mary Grace prompts Ruby Turpin’s own inner (if involuntary) emptying, to which the narrator bears witness: “Mrs. Turpin felt entirely hollow except for her heart which swung from side to side as if it were agitated in a great empty drum of flesh” (CW 645). And after the doctor tends to the swelling over her eye, “Mrs. Turpin looked straight ahead at nothing” (646). The narrator reveals Ruby’s deep sense of dispossessedness when on the drive home from the doctor’s office with Claud, she is no longer certain she has a home to return to. “Mrs. Turpin gripped the window ledge and looked out suspiciously....She would not have been startled to see a burnt wound between two blackened chimneys” (647). Because Mrs. Turpin’s observations of others reveal her equation of status and value, her smugness is exposed, significantly, by the black characters in the story. When Ruby shares what has happened at the doctor’s office with the black hired hands, the women’s responses are heard as parodies of Ruby’s own disbelief in the appropriateness of the message. “Jesus satisfied with her!” “Deed he is” (650). Completely disarmed and divested of every conceit, Ruby Turpin finally approaches her God with “the look of a woman going single-handed, weaponless, into battle” (651).

### **Re-veiling Revelation**

What ignites Ruby’s fury is not knowing the why or wherefore of Mary Grace’s message. Once alone, she insists on an answer from God: “‘Why me?’ she rumbled. ‘It’s no trash around here, black or white, that I haven’t given to. And break my back to the bone every day working. And do for the church.’...‘How am I a hog?’ she demanded” (CW 652). But the “dark protuberance” that forms over her eye, courtesy of *Human Development*, presages a dark revelation, like that of Moses on Sinai enveloped in a dense cloud, a seeing without

seeing that darkens the mind's eye, for the swelling "looked like a miniature tornado cloud which might any moment sweep across the horizon of her brow" (651).<sup>4</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, whose work offers one of the most forceful contemporary treatments of apophatic theology, recently wrote, "Revelation (the *mysterion* par excellence) is precisely a saturated phenomenon" ("Mystic" 4). Marion's theory of saturated phenomenon rejects the widespread thesis that only phenomenon constituted as an "object" can be known or admitted into the field of knowledge. A saturated phenomenon does not appear "according to the a priori conditions that a finite mind imposes on experience" nor is it "limited to filling or to fulfilling the finite measure of the concept and/or the signification" (3). In theological language, Marion argues, such a notion of revelation "may be summed up according to the Greek fathers, in the fact that God is invisible, unspeakable, uncircumscribable, and incomprehensible" (4). As his references in the following passage make clear, Marion derives his idea of revelation from the most prominent figures of the apophatic tradition:

Yet the experience of not being able to comprehend, see, or think God can be taken seriously as a positive experience. We can be confronted to [*sic*] something completely outside our reach and nevertheless present as such, as absent. Such is the meaning of an epistemological rule, which can be found everywhere in the tradition of philosophy and theology, for instance, in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* 2.163: 'What we have to see is the very fact not to see.' We must see, in this experience, the very impossibility of seeing. This is repeated with the same word in the *Mystical Theology* 1.2 by Dionysius. And even Thomas Aquinas argues that 'the ultimate point of the human knowledge about God is to know that we don't know God.' (4)



Contrary to a philosophical method “marked by the primacy of the knowing mind over what it knows,” the negative method of apophasis undertakes to know best what it does not know (4). Therefore an apophatic or, following Hent de Vries, a “mystical” conception of revelation “precedes every expression of content, being its prerequisite without being its possession” (Vries “Theology” 184). Because an apophatic revelation is a seeing that consists in not seeing, it confronts the narrow focus of the knowing mind which tends to focus on what it knows, on defining the content of its knowledge. As a negative revelation, it unsettles its claim to presence, thus “fitting exactly what is at stake: the infinite, that is, God” (Marion 4). For how indeed does the infinite take place?

### **A Burning Silence**

When Ruby’s tirade of self-justifications escalates into one final attack, “Who do you think you are?” this suspenseful narrative moment occasions a sudden silence (*CW* 653). This silence is enhanced and made all the more perceptible in contrast to the “surge of fury” that “shook” Ruby as she roared her final assault. In this way it is akin to the voice of silence that is felt and heard by Elijah on Horeb when the elements are in repose after a storm (1 Kings 19).<sup>5</sup> Most critics appear in haste to fill this semantic void, some skipping over the silence entirely with the purpose of showing how the answer to Ruby’s importunate questioning of God is to be found in a subsequent vision. Giannone writes, “Precisely because Ruby’s questions are honest in their barefaced irreverence, O’Connor finds them worthy of an answer” (243). The answer, Giannone continues, surprises through its restraint: “Instead of falling in on Ruby, the sky opens up into a magnificent, carefree procession to heaven” (243). But this silence warrants attention inasmuch as it is, in a sense,

heard, whereas at the doctor's office, "the nasal chorus on the radio kept the room from silence" (CW 641). The silence figures as a cessation of Ruby's thought and speech as well as a space that holds dualities with ease in ways the usual grammar of perception (with its subject-object distinctions) cannot. To attend to this silence as the revelatory moment in the narrative is to challenge the assumption in O'Connor criticism that "[t]he content of the revelation was everything" for this religious writer (Shloss 104). The meaning of such profound moments is rarely made explicit in O'Connor's fiction. For this reason, Shloss finds the reader of an O'Connor story "is left, then, with a burden, with a brooding sense of weight, of ominous importance whose source is ultimately ambiguous, unlocatable in clearly defined experience" (104). But if we admonish O'Connor for withholding the content of revelation we risk ignoring the writer's apparent attraction to "unlocatable," undefinable experiences. This is no less the case in "Revelation" where an impossibility wounds the expectation of a positive revelation. The impossibility is the voice of the ineffable. Ruby Turpin awakens (if at all) to the silence of God. "It is a terrible thing when God keeps silence, and by keeping silence speaks," writes Karl Barth, a statement O'Connor noted in her copy of *Evangelical Theology* (qtd. in Kinney 48). Having exhausted all her rhetoric of rationalization and justification, Ruby encounters a silent word that annihilates everything she thought she knew, and restores that which she never lost.

For readers of O'Connor's oeuvre, moments of silence begin to feel like an authorial fiat, a command to pay attention. In "Parker's Back," written the same year as "Revelation," silence has its own way of speaking: "there was absolute silence. It said as plainly as if silence were a language itself, GO BACK" (CW 667). By prompting a poise of receptivity for character and reader alike, silent moments serve as "apophatic markers" in O'Connor's

narratives. Michael Sells uses this term to describe how Eckhart enacts apophatic unsaying with locutions such as “I have often said...Now I say,” which echo the Sermon on the Mount where a series of positions marked by “You have heard it said” are then followed by new positions introduced by “But I say to you” (189-190). This is especially evident in “Blessed are the Poor in Spirit” (*ES* 199-203, sermon 52). In this sermon Eckhart prepares his hearers to listen anew, “to be disposed” to his speaking through apophatic markers that signal a turning back of distinction into indistinction.

I have often said, and great authorities say, that a man should be so free of all things and of all works, both interior and exterior, that he might become a place only for God in which God could work. Now I say otherwise. If it be the case that man is free of all created things and of God and of himself, and if it also be that God may find a place in him in which to work, then I say that so long as that is in man, he is not poor with the most intimate poverty. For it is not God’s intention in his works that man should have in himself a place for God to work in. Poverty of spirit is for a man to keep so free of God and of all his works that if God wishes to work in the soul, he himself is the place in which he wants to work; and that he will gladly do....So I say man should be so poor that he should not be or have any place in which God could work. When man clings to place, he clings to distinction. (*ES* 202)

In this passage, Eckhart seeks to shift the mechanisms of apprehension by dismissing any compulsion to be a “place” for God. He describes spiritual poverty as an interior poise that does not “cling” to notions of self as distinct from God but instead “wants nothing, and knows nothing and has nothing” (*ES* 199).

Ruby Turpin's demands for an answer, a justification, a "why" yield a silence that similarly allows for a turning back of distinction into indistinction, an instant when question and answer, speaker and hearer are indistinguishable. "The question carried over the pasture and across the highway and the cotton field and returned to her clearly like an answer from beyond the wood" (CW 653). O'Connor paints a vast space, which impresses the reader with the feeling that the vastness itself (including the unknowable space "beyond the wood") is the main subject of the landscape. This wide open landscape becomes the symbolic setting of a revelation of and through the negative.<sup>6</sup> It is analogous to the setting of the desert, as the poet Edmond Jabès describes it:

You do not go into the desert to find identity but to lose it, to lose your personality, to become anonymous. You make yourself void. You *become* silence. It is very hard to live with silence. The real silence is death and this is terrible. It is very hard in the desert. You must become more silent than the silence around you. And then something extraordinary happens: you hear silence speak. (qtd. in Taylor *Disfiguring* 270)

In the silence that carries the echo, the distinction between speaker and hearer is suspended. Ruby has always posited herself and others through the idea of distinction, the practice of "naming classes of people," of distinguishing top from bottom, first from last. "'Go on,' she yelled, 'call me a hog! Call me a hog again. From hell. Call me a wart hog from hell. Put that bottom rail on top. There'll still be a top and bottom!'" (CW 653). As Ralph Wood aptly observes, "Even if Christ has totally overturned her hierarchy, putting the first last and making the wise foolish, Ruby Turpin determines to maintain the proper social distinctions" (*Christ-Haunted* 262). For Ruby there is no meaning without the idea of distinction. But in

this silent encounter, the idea of distinction has no meaning. Distinctions drop out creating “a transparent intensity” that “burned for a moment” but whose positive meaning is unclear (CW 653). Significantly, Ruby shows herself to be momentarily attuned to this silence, and by implication to the ineffable: “She opened her mouth but no sound came out of it” (653). And through the paragraphic presentation of this line, O’Connor communicates a cessation of printed text long enough for the reader to hear the silence itself. Such a silence which sounds an ineffable speaking represents “a negation, but a negation that does away with every ‘this’ and ‘here,’ in order that the ‘wholly other’ may become actual” (Otto 70). As a *negative* revelation, this is not an affirmation of a particular content but an affirmation of the most open and critical vulnerability.

### **Unselfing the Self**

The moment additionally offers a particular comment on the inner struggle that has plagued Ruby Turpin since the story’s opening. Ruby’s earlier preoccupation with her identity decidedly deepens in this scene, and its true range is existential. While the cross-section of Southern society that fills the waiting room emphasizes the social dimension of Ruby’s anxieties, the narrative forgets the presence of these characters almost entirely after the assault and shifts the spotlight onto Ruby herself. And what we see in the spotlight is an unexpectedly spiritual spectacle. For the narrative describes Ruby’s visual abilities reduced to dysfunction, her home blackened as if “a burnt wound,” and her words defunct. Then, there on the concrete platform of the pig parlor at the centre of her perception appears—her own being, “burn[ing] for a moment” with the name of God, the “I AM” response hidden within the question, “Who do you think you are?” This is not just a moment of revealed

existence: it is a spiritual event. It is possible that Ruby enters into ecstasy, the condition called *ekstasis*, literally “standing outside oneself.” She projects a question outward and receives back the sound of her own questioning as if from another. The duality of speaker and hearer vanishes into a single area of recognition. Rather than Ruby Turpin using language to determine the order of beings, language uses Ruby Turpin to return her to her being.

At the same time the silence opens Ruby to the very edge of language and knowledge, the moment also invites self-knowledge. Who do *you* think you *are*? This solicits something it cannot comprehend, for in this moment of indistinction between speaker and hearer, Ruby’s self-awareness is “indirect and essentially consists in a *negative* intuition,” an intuition that arises from “an experience of the *void*, a dark awareness of the self as the *existential presence* of an immaterial reality whose positive character remains undefined,” that is, “ineffable” (Ashley 244). Twentieth-century Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, whose influence on O’Connor continues to be discussed, voiced a fairly widespread skepticism about such negative insights.

Maritain believed that the danger of this type of spiritual experience is that it exposes an adept to the temptation to think that his or her spiritual self is identical with God. The negative character of this insight prevents any clear perception of the merely finite character of the human spirit. (Ashley 244)

This danger manifests in a potential “resistance to a monotheism in which created spirituality is sharply differentiated from that of the Creator” (244). The dynamic of apophysis faces a similar risk, but, as Sells argues, “[i]t is only when the distinction [e.g. between the created and creator] is overcome that it can be genuinely affirmed” (150).

Indeed, the “liberating effect” of such a nondual realization “derives from the non-difference between the perceiver and the perceived, a non-difference in which the actuality of their particularity which is also a linguistic materiality...is neither dissolved nor reified” (Foshay “Denegation” 552). Eckhart communicates this non-difference in less philosophical, more theological terms: “for the heights of the divinity cannot look down except into the depths of humility, for the humble and God are one and not two” (*ES* 190; sermon 15). Early on in O’Connor’s story, a distortion of this insight comes in the form a gospel song: “The gospel hymn playing was, ‘When I looked up and He looked down,’ and Mrs. Turpin, who knew it, supplied the last line mentally, ‘And wona these days I know I’ll we-eara crown’” (*CW* 635).

### **Farrowing God**

The silent encounter puts Ruby Turpin’s primary concerns into a larger context of what Paul Tillich calls “ultimate concern,” which O’Connor identified as her “only concern”: “It is what makes the stories spare and what gives them any permanent quality they may have” (19 May 57, *HB* 221). The mysteries of death and birth are evoked at the story’s end partly because they can never be objectified and thus understood.

A tiny truck, Claud’s, appeared on the highway, heading rapidly out of sight. Its gears scraped thinly. It looked like a child’s toy. At any moment a bigger truck might smash into it and scatter [their] brains all over the road. (*CW* 653)

Ruby’s earlier imagined deliberation with Jesus on “who she would be if she couldn’t be herself” decidedly deepens in this scene as she confronts the reality of her own mortality. The horizon of death signals, too, an incitement to rebirth and renewal, which requires a

poverty of mind, “brains” smashed and scattered. Ruby Turpin thus approaches a different sense of self through this door of unselfing. The impression of death sets aside the project of self and ushers in a negative description of the transcendent which can only be measured, in O’Connor’s words, “by everything I am not” (4 Feb. 61, *HB* 430). In death lurks the nothing, but as Eckhart says, “When the soul comes into the One and there enters into a pure rejection of itself, it finds God as in a nothing” (*TP* 323, sermon 71).

This divine *nothing*, according to Eckhart, is fertile ground. “It seemed to a man as though in a dream—it was a waking dream—that he became pregnant with nothing as a woman does with a child, and in this nothing God was born; he was the fruit of the nothing. God was born in the nothing” (*TP* 323, sermon 71). Appropriately, in “Revelation,” the narrative moves from the nothing of death to the fullness of birth:

Then, like a monumental statue coming to life, she bent her head slowly and gazed, as if through the very heart of mystery, down into the pig parlor at the hogs. They had settled all in one corner around the old sow who was grunting softly. A red glow suffused them. They appeared to pant with a secret life. (*CW* 653)

Wood suggests that the narrative describes “an old sow who feeds her suckling piglets in utter disregard for her own welfare. This scene of unstaunched giving and vibrant receiving enables Ruby to gaze ‘through the very heart of mystery’” (*Christ-Haunted* 263). But the narrative tells us earlier that the sow is “a few weeks off from farrowing” (*CW* 651).

Therefore, the image that compels Ruby’s gaze, “as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge,” is one of pending birth. Such birth imagery effects some provocative readings in O’Connor as much as in Eckhart. In Eckhart there is gender-bending as God the Father gives birth to his Son:



I have been asked what God is doing in heaven. I answer; He has been giving his Son birth eternally, is giving him birth now and will go on giving him birth forever. The Father being in labor, as a woman giving birth to a child, in every virtuous soul. Blessed, three times blessed, is the person within whose soul the heavenly Father is brought to bed in this manner.<sup>7</sup>

In O'Connor's story, the comparison between Ruby and the hogs persists almost from the beginning of the story, preparing the reader for Mary Grace's message. Ruby's sanitized self-image reflects her sanitized pig-parlor, and her reflections about pigs being the most intelligent animal ("There had even been a pig astronaut") furthers the human-animal comparison. But in this scene, Ruby resembles a hog in a transfigured way. Ruby too is pregnant but, like the man Eckhart describes, with nothing, which is to say, with a newly forged inner emptiness that is the ground of mystical birth. Because a sow is not an unusual sight for pig farmers like the Turpins, the narrative implies that Ruby is given no new discovery, but gains a deeper apprehension of what is already there.

The pregnant sow may also suggest an extravagant analogy: God as hog. There is always a point in apophatic writing "where the truly transcendent can be known only through its self-revelation as the absolutely immanent" (Sells 150). This does more than deliver a shock to sentimental and anthropomorphic piety. The analogy conveys a female image of God: God as mother. So in a truly unexpected way, Ruby's question, "How am I a hog and me both?" touches upon the paradox of the human and divine. Ruby Turpin appears to be "the right size woman" to bear the silence that makes her big, "monumental" with nothing so that she might birth divine life (CW 652, 653).

Common sense tells us silence is dead time for narrative and once “Revelation” arrives at the silent inexplicable encounter it does not end here as much as stop. The remaining dramatic action is sustained in a kind of continuous present, what Eckhart would call “now,” the meeting time of the alpha and omega. “The ‘now’ in which God made the world is as near to this time as the ‘now’ in which I am presently speaking, and the last day is as near to this ‘now’ as the day that was yesterday” (*TP* 256, sermon 9). The narrative achieves this effect by emphasizing Ruby’s stillness: she stands “like a monumental statue” (*CW* 653). And though the description of the parade of souls takes up much of the remaining text, the narrator tells us the vision appears and fades “in a moment,” and still, Ruby “remained where she was, immobile” (654).

O’Connor thus identifies the silent revelation with that of a specific modality of temporality as well as the unique (yet infinitely repeated) disposition it requires. This disposition is not one of security or grounded expectation. The story implies that revelation requires a wakefulness toward which no theoretical position will ever be appropriate. Mrs. Turpin’s recognition of a potential revelation upon receiving the message of Mary Grace awakens her to an unknowing that empties her of all self-satisfaction. This is at odds with her presumptive knowing in the medical waiting room, where “she speaks to reaffirm opinions she already holds, decisions she has already taken” (Sykes 80). And though her conversation with Mary Grace’s mother reveals her belief that no personal quality “beat[s] a good disposition,” only by way of unknowing is she disposed to revelation, a disposition that increases the essential unknowing (*CW* 634). Ruby Turpin, as a church-going woman, served anyone in need, “white or black, trash or decent” (642). “To help anybody out that needed it was her philosophy of life” (652). Well-intentioned goodness always looms in

O'Connor's fiction as an effective obstacle to God, "for it is a comfortable assertion" about a deeply transcendent reality (D. Williams 310). O'Connor's fictional works repeatedly call attention to the inefficacy of self-direction, as do Eckhart's sermons.

So long as you perform your works for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, or for God's sake, or for the sake of your eternal blessedness, and you work them from without, you are going completely astray. (*ES* 183, sermon 5b)

The apophatic way gives priority to the hidden God whom humanity can never have at its disposition. "If the divine birth is to shine with reality and purity," writes Eckhart, "it must come flooding up and out of us from God within God, while all our own efforts are suspended and all the soul's agents are at God's disposal" (*MT* 118-19).

### **How (Not) To Judge**

The question I wish to turn to now is how to account for the vision that retains Ruby's earlier prejudices. There appears to be a confusion of platforms, for is the vision the arrival or departure of Ruby Turpin's revelation? If the negative revelation that arrives through silence indicates the difficulty of saying what cannot be said, then it is this point that the vision puts in greater relief. For while a vision is evinced on the story's final page, its revelatory nature rather withdraws than publishes itself. One possibility is that the visual form contradicts the silent revelation rather than illustrates it. This would affirm, in part, John of the Cross's philosophy of vision as, at best, an oblique and untrustworthy method of apprehension, representing an accommodation of what is beyond the senses to our human capacities. In one of her books on John of the Cross, O'Connor marked the following passage: "The roots of Martin Luther's error consists in an inordinate desire for sensible

experiences of divine grace, a perversion of Tauler's mysticism...To this corruption of Christianity John of the Cross opposes the supernatural life in all its integrity—its supreme work of transformation and loving union with God” (qtd. in Kinney 54).

Because the religious truth claim of “the first shall be last and the last first” appears to be entertained at the expense of, and not thanks to, its textual expression, the vision, in a certain sense, fails to enlighten. Its linguistic form speaks-away any positive meaning. The vision does not adduce a firm ground on which Ruby might relinquish her prejudices but instead shows that it contests whatever enables it. In a sense, the silence is not diminished by the vision, for the hidden God is revealed precisely as the one “who hidest Thyself.”<sup>8</sup> But how is the reader to understand the story's close without judging Mrs. Ruby Turpin and her persistent prejudices? For to do this, according to John May, is to miss how the story interprets “the folly of our own human tendency to determine—rather than discover—reality's order, to consider ourselves superior to others, to impose our ways on others. It forces us to accept the fact that the word must interpret us, not we the word” (12). In *The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O'Connor*, May extols “Revelation” not merely for giving contemporary expression to the teaching that the first shall be last and the last first, but for speaking “this word of judgment on the reader” (12). If, following May, we approach “Revelation” as a parable, the literary form her art most imitates, it behooves us to consider how it continues to tease us into thought through its challenge to interpretation because the parabolic effect of her stories is a form of serious literary teasing.

O'Connor's stories do not aim to resolve. As is the case in most of the writer's major works, profound moments do not establish interpretations but call for them. May argues that parables achieve their effect indirectly. “The aesthetic nature of the parables is implied in

the synoptic evangelist's recurring comment on the ambiguity with which they were received. The most extreme position is the suggestion that Jesus taught in parables purposely to conceal the truth from those predestined to remain in their sins (Mark 4.11-12). 'They may look, but see nothing; they may hear and hear, but understand nothing; otherwise they might turn to God and be forgiven'" (14). This difficult passage in Mark, when Jesus, alone with his disciples, offers an explanation of his parables, directly follows his telling of the parable of the sower. In his book *The Genesis of Secrecy*, which discusses the nature of narrative in both biblical and modern fictional literature, Frank Kermode calls this Mark's "formula of exclusion," although Kermode also acknowledges that Mark's use of Greek is careless or unusual in this passage, distorting its sense, which would suggest something like the following: "I have to speak to them in parables seeing that they are the kind of people who can take stories but not straight doctrine" (30).

While the parable of the sower in the synoptic gospels includes an allegorical interpretation that casts judgment on the various places where the seed falls, an earlier version of this same parable in the apocryphal and very ancient Gospel of Thomas contains no such judgment:

Jesus said, Look! The sower went out. He filled his hand (with seeds). He cast (them). Some fell on the road. The birds came and gathered them up. Others fell on the rock and did not take root in the earth or put forth ears. And others fell on the good earth, and it produced good fruit. It yielded sixty per measure and one hundred and twenty per measure. (DeConick 33)

I make this comparison simply to suggest that the judgment the synoptic writers heard in the parable of the sower is not unlike the judgment we tend to hear in O'Connor's stories.<sup>9</sup> Like

the allegorical interpretation that follows the parable in Mark, the idiom of Ruby Turpin's vision can seem "inept, a distortion *après coup*," to borrow a phrase from Kermode (*Genesis* 29). It is as if the import of Ruby's ecstatic encounter when the world "burned for a moment with a transparent intensity" is already lost (CW 653). Because her prejudices remain in the description of the procession, the silent revelation, which communicates a blurring of the distinction between self and other (and by implication first and last, top and bottom), seems suddenly forgotten and its place taken by an imaginative vision posing as "an inferior homiletic substitute" (Kermode *Genesis* 29). As if to strengthen our suspicion, O'Connor admits in a letter to Betty Hester that she initially conceived ending the story not with a vision but with the hogs panting "with a secret life" (23 Nov. 63, *HB* 549). "I thought something else was needed," she adds. "Maybe not what I've got." The vision, then, was not the express revelation when O'Connor first wrote the story. In its earliest form, there was no "fully externalized" content, but a silent inscrutable encounter that leaves Ruby "coming to life" when she turns to the hogs with the inkling perhaps that she too burns with a "secret life" (CW 653).

The motif of secrecy in apophatic theology is not a secret content because it is not a matter of knowing. It is secret in the sense of eluding the determinations of religious presupposition. The "secret" of Ruby Turpin's silent revelation is, to my mind, an O'Connoresque ending. But O'Connor was well aware during her lifetime that many readers and critics wished to see a more explicitly "positive" quality in her fiction. Written at the end of her career and short life, "Revelation" has prompted critics to theorize the arc of O'Connor's oeuvre as one that moves toward the revealability of religious experience. In his discussion of the story, Sykes concludes, "The vision in effect completes a circle in

O'Connor's fiction first begun with *Wise Blood*. There, the antiprophet blinded himself in repentance and in a final desperate effort to acquire spiritual truth. Here, the soul's eye sees through the bodily eyes, and the door that opens is not the portal of death but the highway to heaven, a human parade having replaced the thin ray of light that Mrs. Flood thinks she can discern in the dying Haze. Thus, *appropriately*, the vision of 'Revelation' has content, the content of the heavenly city; the gathered humanity on its way to God" (83; emphasis added).

The apophatic nature of the silent revelation does permit another way of reading O'Connor's narrative. The silence breaks open, as it must, via word and image. This is the rhythm of apophatic unsaying, a rhythm that is a rhythm of negativity itself. "Lord, you say one thing, and I hear two things" (Ps. 61:12). Eckhart quotes the psalmist, explaining how "As God speaks into the soul, the soul and God are one; but as soon as this goes, there is a separation" (*ES* 205; sermon 53). Such a separation is not to be lamented. Even if the vision strikes us as Mrs. Turpin's defeat of an earlier nondual intuition, such a defeat has a dignity of a sort, "which is undeniably a human sort" (Kermode "Endings" 93). Ruby imaginatively perceives a vision that attempts to give profile to an ineffable encounter. Because the formulation of the vision places itself within the limit of Ruby's diction, O'Connor here, as elsewhere, defeats any tendency in her characters to be holy without being human first. The articulation of the vision is dis-graceful only from a superhuman perspective, which O'Connor's narrator in the end does not assume. As Kessler rightly observes, at the end of "Revelation," "the ironic viewpoint of the narrator is burnt away in deference to Mrs. Turpin" (151). In his prose elegy to the Southern author, Thomas Merton similarly wrote, "She respected all her people by searching for some sense in them,

searching for truth, searching to the end and then suspending judgment. To have condemned them on moral grounds would have been to connive with their own crafty arts and their own demonic imagination. It would have meant getting tangled up with them in the same machinery of unreality and of contempt” (41). Thus, the prejudiced naming may well serve to remind us that Ruby Turpin’s revitalized way of seeing is still held together by her personality, which is both its centre and its circumference.

As Merton observes, to judge Mrs. Turpin is to find oneself firmly entrenched in the pitfalls of a cast of mind that perceives discriminatively by comparison and contrast, which “Revelation” is at pains to dramatize. As a parable, the story is akin to the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, where all workers are paid the same wage whether they have worked for twelve hours or for one. This parable does more than invert the expected order of things. The satire is directed toward the need to keep track of who’s first and who’s last. Like this parable perhaps, the interpretation of the ending of “Revelation” is left for the reader to hear. As Kermode reminds us, “It was James who said that the reader’s share was ‘quite half’ and part of the contribution must be to work on endings, for the author cannot make ‘revelations stop,’ only draw ‘the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so’” (“Endings” 88). With this in mind, one way to work on the ending of “Revelation” is to observe what many critics overlook. The “visionary light” is not the end of the story.

### **The Darkening Path**

Because Ruby apprehends a luminous form to give profile to an inscrutable experience, and because the vision remains a prejudiced one, the silent apophatic revelation takes place as though nothing happened at all. The story implies that the most radical change of heart is



not merely intractable in narrative, but invisible, imperceptible, such that it brings almost no observable change at all. Serving as this chapter's epigraph is an arresting statement by Levinas: "Revelation—then looking back on it, nothing" (78). The vision, as a form of expression that attempts to give profile to an inscrutable experience, is not entirely a violation of this silence but the context in which the claims of silence may be heard. It is perhaps O'Connor's awareness of these claims that drives her to shape the narrative in her distinctive way; for example, as discussed above, in the use of language to complicate bedazzlement, thus inviting its teleological suspension in a context where the struggles and strivings of the character are not suspended, as well as in the value she accords darkness at the end of her story.

Although the vision repeats the socio-racial distinctions of Ruby Turpin's hierarchical naming, it also fails to repeat them inasmuch as Ruby is vulnerable to the darkness that dims her way home, implying that faith can never be supplanted by sight but is, as O'Connor writes, "a walking in darkness" (*MM* 184). After the "visionary light" fades and Ruby moves on to "what lay ahead," she makes "her slow way on the darkening path to the house" (*CW* 653, 654). This emphasis on "the darkening path" freshly breaks the vision's form and, in so doing, questions the security of its expression. The vision is neither enshrined nor calcified in "the descending dusk" (653). Ruby is turned, once again, to a dark awareness, her sense of self not newly secured but open. The vision which gives way to a darkening path has the character of a stepping stone for Ruby Turpin, yet, as the narrative is quick to point out, it is a stumbling block as well. For just before "a visionary light settled in her eyes," Ruby performs a priestly motion, which retains a dimension of her vainglory: "She raised her hands from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound" (653). The

“hierophant Omega” in Wallace Stevens’s poem “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” offers an intertextual connection. In this poem, Stevens suggests that our sense of reality never moves from beginnings: “Reality is the beginning not the end / Naked Alpha, not the hierophant Omega, / of dense investiture, with luminous vassals” (469; VI). The infinite yields what is without end. That is the insurmountable dilemma faced by the apophatic tradition. Searching for words for the infinite, language is defeated by the very infinity which it has revealed. It fails forward, much like Ruby Turpin in “Revelation.” The ending of O’Connor’s story, its omega point, does not end but refreshes the end in the sense of calling Ruby to continue to begin. So too in Stevens’ poem:

But that’s the difference: in the end and the way

To the end. Alpha continues to begin.

Omega is refreshed at every end. (469; VI)

In the argument I have been developing, a revelatory silence momentarily liberates Ruby’s mind from apprehensions of top and bottom, first and last, self and other. The darkness that characterizes her way home at the story’s end additionally suggests that Ruby Turpin’s revelation is not characterized by replacing one (false) set of notions with another (true) set of notions, but the abandonment of all notions altogether. In the “field of living fire” even the notion of virtue is “burned away” (CW 654). What results, according to the apophatic theological tradition, is a dark wisdom of unknowing that disrupts the usual assimilation of knowing to the act of seeing. It is a “real knowledge,” according to Jean-Luc Marion, “fitting exactly what is at stake: the infinite, that is, God” (“Mystics” 4). O’Connor’s story follows Ruby Turpin as she is emptied of “what sense comprehends” and “what the intelligence thinks it sees” and “keeps on penetrating deeper until by the

intelligence's yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible...This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness" (Gregory of Nyssa 95; 2. 163). Thus the story's title, perhaps for O'Connor's critical purpose, invokes a world of disclosure and of ending—at the very least, that of the story's end—which here works by paradoxically refreshing the end in the sense of darkening rather than illuminating, withdrawing rather than publishing, what exactly has been revealed. On the darkening path of revelation, O'Connor shows how visionary light casts a shadow, language re-veils, and silence speaks.

## Notes

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The epigraph by Levinas is from *Proper Names* (78).

<sup>1</sup> See also Jasper and Prickett, *The Bible and Literature* 314-318. References to the alpha and omega, which are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, “probably derives from the Hebrew word for ‘truth’ whose first and last letters are the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet” (316).

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the epistemological realism of Aquinas as endorsed by Jacques Maritain’s Scholastic view of art and Maritain’s influence on O’Connor’s aesthetics of revelation, see Sykes 4-8, 26-38.

<sup>3</sup> This topic has received renewed attention in view of deconstructionist arguments about the totalitarian impulse of all discourse insofar as it cannot do justice to the otherness of the other. For a comparison of Eckhart and Derrida on the violence of naming the Other, see Almond’s article “Doing Violence Upon God: Nonviolent Alterities and Their Medieval Precedents.”

<sup>4</sup> Tolomeo relates this allusion to Job in her article “Flannery O’Connor’s ‘Revelation’ and the Book of Job” (85).

<sup>5</sup> O’Connor: “I keep seeing Elias in that cave, waiting to hear the voice of the Lord in the thunder and lightening and wind, and only hearing it finally in the gentle breeze, and I feel I’ll have to be able to do that sooner or later, or anyway keep trying...” (4 Feb. 60, *HB* 373).

<sup>6</sup> Asals responds differently to O’Connor’s “blank” landscapes. With reference to the dark empty fields of *Wise Blood*, Asals argues, “the landscape possessed neither beauty nor terror, unless it was the terror of emptiness, the blank” (68-9).

<sup>7</sup> This “saying” attributed to Eckhart is quoted in Daniel’s “Gender-Bending Innuendo and Mystical Theology in O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*” (111). Daniel gives the following bibliographic citation for the quotation: “Sayings” *Meister Eckhart*. Ed. and Trans. Stephen R. Shanks. 1999 / 25 Apr. 2004.  
[http://members.wisp.com/~srshanks/Meister\\_Eckhart/index.html](http://members.wisp.com/~srshanks/Meister_Eckhart/index.html).

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 45:15: “Truly, thou art a hidden God.” While the Latin is passive (*deus absconditus*), the Hebrew is active-reflective, which translates “God who hidest Thyself.”

<sup>9</sup> Asals, for example, sees O’Connor functioning as a judgmental author and narrator: “Like God Himself, she seems to preside in her fiction as both creator and derisive judge” (158).

## CONCLUSION

Through the poetics of apophatic theology I have intended to contribute to an understanding of the concomitance of Flannery O'Connor's stylistic negativity and religious imagination. As a form of expression that undoes its own expressive forms, the apophatic mode does not lend itself to systematic conceptual elaboration. Therefore, my approach to the three literary works by O'Connor does not adhere to a common cast. I attempt to sound the significance of each narrative and its expression in relation to the poetics of apophatic theology. Each text is interpreted in a way that serves to elaborate an apophatic poetics and the imagination that it engenders and that this study as a whole explores.

O'Connor's debut novel *Wise Blood* engages explicitly with negative linguistic practices through the preaching of its protagonist, whose proclamations of "no place" and the Church Without Christ employ the full range of the hyperbolic characteristic of apophatic negation. "Good Country People" makes less use of the verbal dynamic of apophasis, but its narrative nevertheless enacts a negative logic (the negation of negation) in its handling of a woman's knowledge of nothing. Finally, "Revelation" underwrites an apophatic approach to the hidden God by complicating its own titular concern with revealability. In each of the narratives, the protagonist touches on a dimension of experience that engenders an unknowing, a letting go of the "whatness" of knowing.

This past year *The American Poetry Review* published two installments by Reginald Gibbons on the topic of apophatic poetics. He opens the first essay with the observation that apophasis is not prevalent in the English language. Due to its Adamic desire to name, "English is omnivorous of nouns," Gibbons writes, provocatively relating the "sheer appetite of the English language for words that name" to the imperial history of the English language

(20). While Gibbons identifies Emily Dickinson as the “one great poet of apophatic thought,” and Wallace Stevens as a poet “of the apophatic gesture,” his two articles dwell predominantly on twentieth-century Russian poets (20). He explains that the apophatic poetic mode is more indigenous to the Russian language, and quotes Osip Mandelstam to suggest why: “No language resists more strongly than Russian the tendency toward naming and utilitarian application” (qtd. in Gibbons 20). This suggested relationship between language and a way of knowing the world is a guiding concern for Flannery O’Connor. Several of her fictional works underscore the tensions between poetic and scientific modes of knowing and their attendant languages. She shows how knowing without the dimension of transcendence becomes instrumentalized and serves as a tool for some extrinsic and practical purpose. For example, in O’Connor’s second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, Mason Tarwater articulates the author’s own challenge to the modern mind which intends toward knowledge of that which is other as if it were an object to be possessed:

“He don’t know it’s anything he can’t know,” the old man said: “That’s his trouble. He thinks if it’s something he can’t know then somebody smarter than him can tell him about it and he can know it just the same. And if you were to go there, the first thing he would do would be to test your head and tell you what you were thinking and howcome you were thinking it and what you ought to be thinking instead. And before long you wouldn’t belong to your self no more, you would belong to him.”

(CW 366)

Another passage from this novel presents language as evocation and, by extension, knowing as fundamentally poetic in the sense that poetics tend to animate objects, to treat all things as

subjects. Young Francis Marion Tarwater imagines the things of the world (including, ironically, tools of utility themselves) calling to be named:

It was as if he were afraid that if he let his eye rest for an instant longer than was needed to place something—a spade, a hoe, the mule’s hind quarters before his plough, the red furrow under him—that the thing would suddenly stand before him, strange and terrifying, demanding that he name it and name it justly and be judged for the name he gave it. (343)

O’Connor thus stays in touch with ancient and medieval approaches to human knowing as a relational orientation toward otherness or outsideness rather than as objective or scientific. For her characters, the demands of realization work to shatter the deep structure of established truths through a sustained attention to that which can be experienced only in language that exploits the negative, the absent, the empty in their linguistic and imaginative forms. A poetic-theological approach to her fiction thus allows us to see afresh how O’Connor uses the intellectual ferment of the modernist crisis of language and transforms it for her own purposes. The three narratives explored in this study dramatize an apophatic move away from the revelatory capacity of the *logos* by exposing how the modern naming of the world “may not only fail to evoke by name what is real, but may also substitute for the real thing simply a name” (Gibbons “Poetics: Part Two” 39). These texts house a negative language and logic; and in relation to the concerns of theology, this language and logic testifies to “what it does not comprehend yet nevertheless contacts uncomprehendingly, in unknowing” (Franke 1: 18). In this sense, O’Connor’s apparent “negativity” carries a more potent theological significance than has been recognized, one that ultimately invokes divine transcendence.

In the introduction to a two-volume anthology entitled, *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature and the Arts*, William Franke avers, “We go on struggling in various ways to inherit and assimilate this legacy of the medieval apophatic tradition. This history forges some of the indispensable links leading from medieval metaphysics to modern, transcendental phenomenologies of experience. The possibilities for apophatic insight throughout this history very often hang together with the fate of analogical thinking—with interpretations of its legitimacy and limits” (1: 29). As Franke goes on to argue, in apophatic theology, analogies primarily operate as “disanalogies” because “it is not their content, but rather the spilling over of all bounds of content, their *uncontainment*, that conveys something, some inkling, of God” (1: 30; original emphasis). At certain periods of crisis or transition, when confidence in established discourse or authoritative utterance (“and even affirmative, assertive discourse per se”) begins to lag (1. 31), the apophatic mode of speaking and thinking irrupts and attempts to renew our relation to what cannot be said.

One of the crucial questions underlying the apophatic mode is what kind of meaning is being conferred by the use of certain words, images, or lines of thinking: what stands to be gained, what lost, and by whom? The lexical value of verbal signs depends on a language community. In the case of O’Connor criticism, scholars who focus on the theological implications of O’Connor’s fiction accept certain lexical values. The readings developed here, though also prompted by theological questions, at times contest standard interpretations because an apophatic poetics confers lexical value on different words and images from those that have so influenced Christian thinking. To read O’Connor alongside apophatic source texts is to offer interpretations that seem inside out. A blasphemous



preacher speaks a mystical language of unsaying, attunement to nothing rouses the creative force of lack, and a luminous vision cancels its own enlightenment next to the revelatory voice of silence. Yet just as interpretative questions change over time, so too do the meanings we confer on the language that guides our thinking. Such a change marks the beginning of the apophatic tradition, wherein Dionysius reverses Platonic imagery so that “the dualism of light and darkness collapses and light becomes the symbol of darkness” (Bulhof and Kate “Echoes” 24). The same is true of the opposition of nothing and all, as *The Cloud* author explains:

Leave aside this everywhere and this everything, in exchange for this nowhere and this nothing. Never mind at all if your senses have no understanding of this nothing; it is for this reason that I love it so much the better....Who is he that calls it nothing? It is surely our outward man, not our inward. Our inward man calls it All, for because of it he is well taught to have understanding of all things bodily or spiritual, *without any specific knowledge* of any one thing in itself. (252, ch. 68; emphasis added)

For apophatic writers, only the de-limiting language of darkness, nothingness, and silence is capacious enough for a divine transcendence whose presence remains unpresented and unrepresentable. This is the grandeur of the transcendence of transcendent truth: it takes place as if it did not dare to say its name, and thus arrives in humility—not triumph.

An apophatic poetics contains the potential for rich interpretive questions with especial attractions for the postmodern context. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard identifies a “desire for the unknown,” specifically in terms of aesthetics (67). He writes, “The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies the solace of good forms...that which

searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them, but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable” (81). Lyotard heralds the “postmodern” as an attitude in modern thinking that “does not oppose modernity, but is its hidden ground: a ground that can no longer function as foundation...but as a source of embarrassment, dilemmas, and critical reflection that also bring forth the seeds of a sensitivity to the ‘new’ and the ‘unknown’” (Bulhof and Kate “Echoes” 55 n95). To use the description “postmodern” in relation to the religious imagination of Flannery O’Connor, then, is to indicate how her fiction offers another possible relationship to modernity, one that calls attention to the experience of limits, including “the limits of language, of philosophical speaking, and of Western subjectivity that is constituted in its urge for truth” (55). What’s more, in the fiction of Flannery O’Connor, her characters’ active engagement with the limits of language, of thought, and of self engenders an experience of unknowing that is itself a mode of relation to the divine. Although the duality of God and humanity is often endured as a distance, by opening itself to this experience, humanity becomes involved in a transcendence that classic apophatic theology represents as divine life. In this way, Flannery O’Connor’s affinity to apophatic sources might well challenge and inspire late-modern sensibilities, at least among those for whom the unnamable God is not an object to be managed through theological argument, apologetic debate, or political stratagem, but rather the ever-present and abiding all that is no (one) thing.

\* \* \*

It is easier and even delightful to speak about God from a safe distance, to speak about how to “Do Unto Others,” as the devoted Catholic writer once wrote; “That can be found in any ethical culture series” (19 June 57, *HB* 227). This may be a necessary language for most public discourse about God, a language dictated by the grammar of spiritual correctness. Flannery O’Connor speaks from a different place, and so her words taste of fire. Her literary works and the interior terrains they map are alive with danger and possibility. They are not intellectual theories or moral directives but visceral straining to suggest what the touch of God may be like. For O’Connor, there is nothing that Spirit touches that is not Holy, and this is the fulcrum that lifts her stories in terms of their incarnational art. There is however no cheap consolation. Her fiction shows how the heart must be emptied, its longings woven into a single strand. It must lean into emptiness and absence because the divine is encountered “when you have the least” (21 Sept. 57, *HB* 241). Like a bullhorn against the modern world of capital, the ascetic dimension of her imagination says: shed. Although the doorway is narrow and often located in the most unattractive setting, Flannery O’Connor, like John of the Cross, speaks from the completely affirmative and affirming underside of what appears to be merely a negative cloud of unknowing, an utterly silent and deep darkness.

I once read that as a young writer Annie Dillard heard Flannery O’Connor speak at a writers’ workshop. The source of this anecdote I have long forgotten; the account may be apocryphal or simply misreported, but it strikes me as apt. Dillard, a writer schooled in theology and self-admittedly belonging to the “High Church,” also composes in the apophatic mode, as others have noted. This excerpt from “Tickets for a Prayer Wheel,” a

poem from her book by the same name, sounds the spare tenor of the apophatic way as it moves toward the arresting experience of the limit of human possibility.

You go down the hall  
and open the door,  
down the hall  
and open the small door,  
down the dark hall  
and open the smaller door,  
down the hall,  
small as a wire,  
bare, and the final door—  
flies from the wall. (58)

For Annie Dillard as for Emily Dickinson, and as I have argued, for Flannery O'Connor, this is a force that renovates the world.

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