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**THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MEDIEVAL BODY
AND
FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S FICTION**

by

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**A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
the University of Ottawa, Canada in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of English

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Abbreviations

CW *Collected Works: Wise Blood, A Good Man Is Hard To Find, The Violent Bear It Away, Everything That Rises Must Converge, Stories and Occasional Prose, Letter.* Flannery O'Connor. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988.

HB *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor.* Flannery O'Connor. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald. New York: The Noonday Press, 1979.

MM *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose.* Flannery O'Connor. Eds. Sally Fitzgerald and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: The Noonday Press, 1969.

ST/LT *Short Text/Long Text in Revelations of Divine Love.* Julian of Norwich. Trans. Elizabeth Spearing. New York: Penguin, 1998.

All Scripture references are from the Douay-Rheims version unless otherwise noted.

The format is MLA footnotes.

Abstract

Flannery O'Connor based what she called her "anagogic vision" on the medieval way of seeing the world that allowed the reader of a text to discern "different levels of reality in one image or one situation." In my thesis I focus on the ways in which O'Connor revives this literary strategy and adapts it to address the modern cultural context. Accordingly, I examine in particular how her fiction engages Descartes' worship of consciousness and Nietzsche's supposition that "God is dead" by anagogically endowing her characters' bodies with two layers of signification. The first signified body is the spiritually-dead body, which belongs to the character who believes he is a god unto himself by virtue of his intellect. Since the character accepts his mind as his essence of being, his body appears in O'Connor's stories as the image of a soulless identity, a corpse. When the character recognizes the rightful place of the soul, the whole person emerges from the second signified body.

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**What do we want with the dead alive?
– *The Violent Bear It Away***

**As long as we are on earth,
the love that unites us will bring us suffering by our very contact with one another,
because this love is the resetting of a Body of broken bones.
– Thomas Merton**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	2
<i>Medieval Roots.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>The Critical Body Among a Body of Critics.....</i>	<i>15</i>
CHAPTER 1.....	27
O'CONNOR'S EVOLUTION OF THE THOMIST "GOOD MAN": THE FIRST SIGNIFIED BODY'S ARISTOTELIAN	
GENESIS	27
<i>The 'illegitimate mental fiat'.....</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>The Hupokeimenon: The First Signified Body.....</i>	<i>48</i>
<i>"A Stroke of Good Fortune": Ruby Hill's Hupokeimenon</i>	<i>74</i>
<i>Conclusion.....</i>	<i>86</i>
CHAPTER 2.....	89
COUNT MY BONES: THE RESURRECTION OF MEDIEVAL CORPSES IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S FICTION	
<i>Dem Bones' Gonna Walk 'Round : The Medieval Corpse.....</i>	<i>94</i>
<i>O'Connor's Cult of the Unholy Relic</i>	<i>114</i>
<i>Christ and the Corpse</i>	<i>121</i>
<i>The Reflective Corpse of Sarah Ham in "The Comforts of Home"</i>	<i>123</i>
<i>The Faces of Death in <u>The Violent Bear It Away</u>.....</i>	<i>148</i>
<i>The Dead That Don't Stay That Way in <u>Wise Blood</u>.....</i>	<i>181</i>
<i>Final Thoughts of Asbury, Tanner, and General Sash.....</i>	<i>185</i>
CHAPTER 3.....	191
PIÈ FERMO AND THE MIND-SOUL: O'CONNOR'S LIMPING SOULS.....	
<i>Grounding the Foot of the Soul Metaphor.....</i>	<i>193</i>
<i>The Walking Soul</i>	<i>199</i>
<i>Getting Their Feet Off The Ground</i>	<i>205</i>
<i>Mary and Mote's Suffering Feet.....</i>	<i>218</i>
<i>Reflections of the Left and Right Foot in "The Lame Shall Enter First"</i>	<i>232</i>
<i>Good Country People with Heart Conditions Walking Off Together</i>	<i>247</i>
<i>A Final Foot Note</i>	<i>262</i>
CHAPTER 4.....	266
"JESUS ANOTHER WOMAN": O'CONNOR'S TRANSGENDER TRANSFIGURATIONS.....	
<i>Mother Jesus in the Middle Ages.....</i>	<i>268</i>
<i>Mother Jesus versus Nietzsche's Self-Impregnated Higher Man</i>	<i>277</i>
<i>Tough Mothers for Jesus</i>	<i>284</i>
<i>In The Face of Suffering Mothers.....</i>	<i>313</i>
<i>The Distance of Tender Mothers.....</i>	<i>322</i>
<i>Three Women and One Face of Christ in "A Circle in the Fire"</i>	<i>332</i>
<i>The Hermaphrodite and Nietzsche.....</i>	<i>336</i>
<i>An Irksome and Not-so Irksome Conclusion</i>	<i>347</i>
CHAPTER 5.....	350
JULIAN OF NORWICH AND O. E. PARKER IN 'ONE WONDROUS VOLUME'	
CONCLUSION.....	362

Introduction

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche's famous mad man runs through the marketplace yelling that he is looking for God. Those in the market laugh at the old man, who holds a lit lantern in the noonday sun. What really seems ludicrous to them is the idea that this fool looks as if he is searching for a human being, when in fact he names his lost person "God." The mad man throws down his lantern and makes the most recognizable Nietzschean statement: "God is dead." He goes on to speculate how such a murder could have occurred, and comes to the conclusion that we must now be gods unto ourselves. The crux of his argument is that since we cannot recognize God any longer in any present reality, nor with confidence in any conceptual exercise, we must "become gods."¹ This dramatic scenario cast a long shadow over Flannery O'Connor's religious imagination. The whole of her fiction engages the figure of Nietzsche's mad man at different levels. "My audience are the people who think God is dead," she affirmed in a letter in 1955, "at least these are the people I am conscious of writing for."² She sets out deliberately to reverse the mad man's proposition. Her characters discover repeatedly that it is not God who must die, but their self-deification instead. For so many of O'Connor's characters, the idea of God has become abstracted to an annoying dream. They put stock in their mind's power to separate themselves from matter and mystery. They have inherited a modern consciousness that was nursed on Descartes' classical dualism and fed Nietzsche's nihilism. Such a nonspiritual nutrition has poisoned their ability to digest God, especially

¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Friedrich Nietzsche: Philosophical Writings*, trans. Reinhold Grimm and Caroline Molina y Vedia (New York: Continuum, 1995) 146.

² O'Connor, Flannery, *The Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: The Noonday Press, 1979) 92, cf. 90.

in the most immediate location, their body. They have constructed for themselves a false soul, a *mind-soul*, that denies the union of a body and soul.

O'Connor seeks to destroy in her characters the misguided *mind-soul* and replace it with one that engages, what she believed, is a sacred existence. She also desired that her readers, no less than her characters, would possess "the kind of mind that is willing to have its sense of mystery deepened by its contact with reality, and its sense of reality deepened by its contact with mystery."³ That O'Connor's aim was to undermine a misplaced faith in the modern consciousness is a view I share with scholars like John Desmond, who states that O'Connor's "business as a writer was to 'pulverize' the idolatrous minds of her characters and readers through force."⁴ She recognized the challenge of countering the "God-is-Dead" culture as one of presenting to her unbelieving audience the necessary contrary identity, Emmanuel, "God with us."⁵ She explained her dilemma as follows: "One of the awful things about writing when you are a Christian is that for you the ultimate reality is the Incarnation, the present reality of the Incarnation, and nobody believes in the Incarnation; that is, nobody in your audience."⁶ Desmond further suggests that if O'Connor "could not entirely restructure the modern idolatrous mind, she would at least open it to new ways of seeing by shattering the many false hierarchies her culture had given itself over to."⁷ I argue that for O'Connor, the mind's "sense of reality" and "its contact with mystery" derives from a profound understanding of

³ O'Connor, Flannery, *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: The Noonday Press, 1969) 79.

⁴ Desmond, John, "Flannery O'Connor and the Idolatrous Mind," *Christianity and Literature* 46.1 (Autumn 1996) 26.

⁵ For a further discussion of O'Connor's engagement of Nietzsche, see Jae-Nam Han's "O'Connor's Thomism and the 'Death of God' in *Wise Blood*" *Literature and Belief* 17.1-2 (1997): 115-127.

⁶ O'Connor, *HB* 92.

⁷ Desmond, "Idolatrous Mind" 26.

the human body, and that her way to open the modern mind to new ways of seeing begins with the way she depicted the human body. The bodies of her characters contain many layers of signification that point, on closer inspection, to the very God the mad man declared was dead.

Flannery O'Connor's fictional bodies have two major levels of signification. The first signified body is the spiritually-dead body. The character who believes that she is a god unto herself possesses this body. Until the character accepts the grace that is consistently offered in O'Connor's stories, she ignores and rejects the notion that her body is united with God. Hubris leads her to locate the essence of the individual in the intellect alone. The *mind-soul* creates a conceptual barricade from which the god-like character objectifies and subjectively views all that goes on around her, and even within her. The *mind-soul's* power is so great that it frequently denies a recognition of the character's own body, and ultimately its sacramentality. As the body is dismissed, so too is God. O'Connor brings her characters back to spirituality by making them become painfully aware of their physicality. When a character catches a glimpse of her body that is dominated by the *mind-soul*, she sees its reflection as a corpse. The corpse, the body without the soul, exemplifies the first layer of signification O'Connor attaches to the body.

The second layer of signification refers to what Saint Thomas Aquinas called the hylomorphic composition, or the whole human identity in the union of the body and the soul. It could be assumed that after experiencing his moment of grace, the character now possesses and begins to recognize the existence of a body and soul that earlier was denied. At various places in her fiction, after grace has been offered to her characters and received

by them, O'Connor makes more explicit the appearance of that second signified body. Ruby Hill's ambiguous internal stirring at the end of "A Stroke of Good Fortune," Francis Tarwater's singed eyes and fiery breath, and the penetration of the rising sun's rays through Obadiah Elihue Parker's tattoos and into his soul, are just some examples of how the second signified body manifests itself in her grace-filled characters. In subsequent chapters I identify corporeal transformations that signal a unification of body and spirit. O'Connor also created characters who do not go through a conversion process and yet signify the body-soul union. These Christ-like figures reflect "the ultimate reality" of the Incarnation, and notably are often women.⁸ I identify the female characters in O'Connor's fiction who participate in what I call a *transgender transfiguration*, since these women represent the male identity of Jesus Christ.

O'Connor's stories are based on medieval biblical aesthetics. In a key passage from her essay, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," O'Connor defined her literary strategy:

The kind of vision the fiction writer needs to have or to develop, in order to increase the meaning of his story is called anagogical vision, and that is the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or situation. The medieval commentators on Scripture found three kinds of meaning in the literal level of the sacred text: one they called allegorical, in which one fact pointed to another; one they called tropological, or moral, which had to do with what should be done; and one they called anagogical, which had to do with the Divine life and our participation in it. Although this was a method applied to biblical exegesis, it was also an attitude

⁸ O'Connor, *HB* 92.

toward all of creation, and a way of reading nature which included most possibilities, and I think it is this enlarged view of the human scene that the fiction writer has to cultivate if he is ever going to write stories that have any chance of becoming a permanent part of our literature.⁹

In what follows I examine the medieval roots of O'Connor's "anagogic vision" of the human body as evidenced in her fiction. It seems appropriate to approach O'Connor's stories with a sensitivity to her respect for anagogy, specifically with the medieval reverence for corporeality.

Medieval Roots

The medieval religious imagination holds a key to understanding how she aims to create a Christian art that uses the human body as a means of recognizing God. I believe that O'Connor draws creative inspiration from the Middle Ages in order to counter the prevailing ethos of nihilism that Nietzsche epitomized with his mad man and the laughing market people. O'Connor had read Erich Heller's *The Disinherited Mind*,¹⁰ a book whose content and title seem to summarize effectively what she called the struggle for the recognition of mystery's contact with reality. Years after publishing *The Disinherited Mind*, Heller summarized some of its main points in a series of talks, "The Hazard of Modern Poetry." One of the main points which he re-emphasized in those talks is that the end of the Middle Ages marked the end of the kind of anagogic vision which O'Connor held in high esteem. Heller states:

⁹ O'Connor, *MM* 72-73.

¹⁰ See her letter to Dr. T. R. Spivey on 25 May 1959 (*HB* 334).

I do suggest that at the end of the Middle Ages there occurred a radical change in man's idea of reality, in that complex fabric of unconsciously held convictions about what is real and what is not . . . For only when the spiritual is known and felt to be real, can there be a realistic discrimination between things that claim to be things of the spirit. These men held in their hands, touching and weighing it, the reality of the infinite; we have merely its taste . . . They knew the symbol when they saw it; we only see it, and are left in the dark. For it is merely a symbol and may mean this or that or nothing on earth.¹¹

In order to penetrate her reader's lack of sensitivity to the philosophical forces that had swept them into making what Christina Bieber calls an "illegitimate mental fiat,"

O'Connor presented an anagogic vision based on medieval realism. Although this topic is not the focus of her dissertation, "The Incarnational Art of Flannery O'Connor," Bieber notes in passing that O'Connor's "view of the artist's craft has a medieval root," even while she "wrote for an audience she knew to be very far from the medieval sensibility."¹²

The double signification that O'Connor imparts to her characters' bodies derives from the religious corporeal aesthetic of the later Middle Ages, and allows her to meet the twentieth-century challenges to a Christian understanding of art.

A central debate in the Middle Ages concerned the kind of tension iconography created for the viewer. Clergy and laity debated questions such as: Is there a risk of

¹¹ Heller, Erich. *The Disinherited Mind: Essay in Modern German Literature and Thought*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975) 268.

¹² Bieber, Christina Marie, *The Incarnational Art of Flannery O'Connor*, diss., Emory University, 1999, 233.

idolatry in focusing on a picture or a statue of God? Is there a spiritual vestige in visual representations of God? How can God be so explicit that I can see Him in an arched fresco above the altar, in the domed ceiling, or even in the reliquary? From its earliest reflections on what it means to believe, the Church wrestled with the angel of art. “Even the great Augustine had to admit that he could not comprehend fully the relationship between corporeal seeing and spiritual vision,”¹³ Herbert Kessler notes. An example from early Church history illustrates one aspect of the dilemma.

Fearing the potential harm that representations of saints had on the laity, the Bishop of Marseilles ordered the destruction of saints’ portraits. The bishop’s iconoclastic actions prompted Pope Gregory the Great to respond in a letter as follows:

Word has reached us that you have broken the images of saints with the excuse that they should not be adored. And indeed we heartily applaud you for keeping them from being adored, but for breaking them we reproach you . . . To adore images is one thing, to teach with their help is another.¹⁴

By the time the later Middle Ages arrived, the debate had not abated.

In the twelfth to fifteenth centuries religious images, especially of the Crucified Christ or tortured saints, fed the unprecedented appetite for mediums of somatic piety. The Black Death and the plethora of corpses it left in its wake awakened the medieval sensitivity to the meaning of the human body. Questions arose about how earthen vessels figured into God’s spiritual economy. The viewer of medieval art may have expressed a

¹³ Kessler, Herbert L., *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God’s Invisibility in Medieval Art* (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 2000) 1.

¹⁴ qtd. in Kessler 4.

general sentiment like this: “There is God, and His mother, and His saints. And here am I. We don’t look so different.” As Mitchell B. Merback puts it, “For medieval people, the experience of *seeing and imagining* a body that was ravaged and bleeding from tortures inflicted upon it lay at the center of a constellation of religious doctrines, beliefs and devotional practices.”¹⁵ The polemic of depicting God in the later Middle Ages differed from Pope Gregory the Great’s reprimand of Bishop Serenus of Marseilles. Gregory and the bishop’s troubles pivoted around the issue of idolatry, where members of the flock invested too much of their soul outside of themselves into an external image. In the later Middle Ages, however, the context of the controversy was not always a matter of the faithful extending a devotion externally toward the image, but conversely, of people internalizing the image in an expression of a shared humanity with Christ. The efficacy of the cult relic drew largely from medieval people’s immediate recognition of a common condition with the deceased holy man or woman: saint or sinner both possessed a body. The individual’s body now became a medium, as the religious icon had earlier, for achieving a communion with God. The external image of God became internalized in a pious devotion that facilitated the thought of God through self. Unlike the Bishop of Marseilles who could smash the images of saints to stop the dangerous practices of idolatry, the late medieval clergy would have to deal instead with an iconoclasm of the human body.

Flannery O’Connor faced a similar challenge as a twentieth-century artist.

O’Connor argued that the process of internalizing God’s image had gone too far, and with

¹⁵ Merback, Mitchell, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel: Pain and Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998) 19.

regrettable results. A main drawback had been an increased emphasis on individual autonomy that had led to the adoration of the human mind. In her essay, "Novelist and Believer," she claimed:

We live in an unbelieving age but one which is markedly and lopsidedly spiritual. There is one type of modern man who recognizes the spirit in himself but who fails to recognize a being outside himself whom he can adore as Creator and Lord; consequently he has become his own ultimate concern. He says with Swinburne, "Glory to man in the highest, for he is the master of things."¹⁶

In order for O'Connor to awaken her readers to a spirituality that comes from an earlier age, she employs the modern strategy of juxtaposing the past with the present. While her use of medieval spirituality and the body may have set her approach apart from that of other modern writers, O'Connor, nevertheless, joined ranks with her contemporaries who, following the lead of Eliot and Pound, returned to the Middle Ages for literary inspiration. In his well-known essay, "Tradition and Individual Talent," T. S. Eliot explained that "the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of literature . . . has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order."¹⁷ Ezra Pound made a similar point more succinctly: "All ages are contemporaneous."¹⁸ More recently,¹⁹ Umberto Eco

¹⁶ O'Connor, *MM* 159.

¹⁷ Eliot, T. S., *Selected Prose*, ed. John Hayward (New York: Penguin Books, 1965) 22-23.

¹⁸ Pound, Ezra, *The Spirit of Romance* (London: Peter Owen, 1970) 8.

¹⁹ Another notable article that expands upon the residual and parallel effects of the Middle Ages in our time is Daniel Dombrowski's essay, "Kazantzakis and the New Middle Ages" (*Religion and Literature*

has scrutinized why and how “modern ages have revisited the Middle Ages from the moment, when, according to historical handbooks, they came to an end.”²⁰ Eco identifies ten different ‘Middle Ages,’ one of which is “The Middle Ages of the *philosophia perennis* or of neo-Thomism.” I will make no attempt to locate O’Connor in exactly one of Eco’s categorizations, but her fiction reflects most often an engagement with the medieval *philosophia perennis*. In a letter to her friend, “A,” in 1958 she writes: “This is not an age of great Catholic theology. We are living on our capital and it is past time for a new synthesis. What St. Thomas did for the new learning of the 13th century we are in bad need for someone to do for the 20th.”²¹ O’Connor never tried to take up the pen as a theologian, but she did not hesitate to incorporate Thomist aesthetic principles in her art in an effort to help people discover “the invisible essence of things,”²² as Jacques Maritain phrased it in *Art and Scholasticism*. In a letter to James Farnham, O’Connor explained that “the Catholic writer . . . starting from what he sees, and what he is, writes what he can.” She elaborates, “I presume that if he is deeply Catholic, his theology will be

26.3 [Autumn 1994]: 19-32). What I find of interest is how Dombrowski explains Kazantzakis’ “attitude toward Marxism or Leninism or communism” as “anticipatory of the new Middle Ages” (25). Dombrowski points out that in Kazantzakis’s essay, “The Sickness of an Age,” he proclaims his belief in the imminent death of civilization, “but it is only implicit in its enthusiasm for the Middle Ages,” since in “the childhood of the human race . . . there was no trace of spiritual sickness” because for “simple people Nature smiles and unfolds in a miraculous way” (22).

²⁰ Eco, Umberto, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986) 65.

²¹ O’Connor, *HB* 306. For a fuller discussion of O’Connor’s participation in medieval *philosophia perennis*, see Gary Victory Wheatley Hart’s *The Influence of Thomistic Analogy on the Works of Flannery O’Connor* (diss., University of Southern California, 1984) and Kathy Jean Root Pitts’ *The Influence of the Book of Revelation and Medieval Catholic Theology on the Works of Flannery O’Connor* (diss., University of Southern Mississippi, December 1994); Jae-Nam Han’s “O’Connor’s Thomism and the ‘Death of God’ in *Wise Blood*.”

²² Maritain, Jacques, *Art and Scholasticism and The Frontiers of Poetry*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Scribner, 1962) 29. Maritain paraphrased Saint Thomas Aquinas in the quote above.

apparent in his work, but in some more subtle way than the usual Catholic reader is accustomed to looking for.”²³

It could be argued that the later Middle Ages presented the anagogic man and woman in his and her prime. Even if a medieval person could not read James de Voragine’s *The Golden Legend* with all its martyred saints, he probably saw various depictions of Saint Sebastian and Saint Agatha’s torturous deaths, which communicated that the martyr’s courage could only bear witness to the imminent presence of God, alongside the macabre reminder that ‘there but by the grace of God goes I.’ O’Connor adopted a similar attitude: everything sensual, everything ‘real,’ must bend toward showing the omnipotent power of God. What is ‘real’ and immediately accessible for revelation in both her characters and (she hoped) her readers is the human body, the same subject that captivated the medieval religious and literary imagination.

O’Connor also lamented that “[t]here is another type of modern man who recognizes a divine being not in himself, but who does not believe that this being can be known anagogically or defined dogmatically or received sacramentally.”²⁴ Whereas in the Middle Ages Christ’s humanity and its depictions both in narrative and visual arts reached out to those seeking to know their God, the modern man cannot perceive a human Christ bearing His divinity with Him across the two millennium divide. For this type of modern person, “[s]pirit and matter separated. Man wanders about . . . trying to reach a God he can’t approach, a God powerless to approach him.”²⁵ The question for a believing

²³ Farnham, James, “Six Unpublished Letters of Flannery O’Connor” *Flannery O’Connor Bulletin* XII (Autumn 1983): 63.

²⁴ O’Connor, *MM* 159.

²⁵ O’Connor, *MM* 159.

modern writer like Flannery O'Connor shapes up like the following: How can I artistically depict the power of God's action such that He can shake people out from worshipping themselves and see the force that shook them? The answer takes the form of a variety of approaches with one common critical element in all of them: the body. She first has to have her characters and readers recognize something that has been wrongfully adored, and to paraphrase Pope Gregory, to teach with the body's help what should be adored.

The paradox of the O'Connorian body is that it must be 'real' enough for the reader (and character) to believe in, but go through such a cataclysmic metamorphosis that it becomes recognizable in its significant spiritual proportion. On the one hand O'Connor recognizes that "[t]he fiction writer has to make a whole world believable by making every aspect of it believable,"²⁶ and on the other hand the writer has to "render his vision so it can be transferred, as nearly whole as possible, to his reader" knowing that the "problem is going to be difficult in direct proportion as your beliefs depart from his."²⁷ To close the gap between unbelieving reader and believing writer requires some artistic muscle. O'Connor gives insight into her literary strength.

When I write a novel in which the central action is a baptism, I am very well aware that for a majority of my readers, baptism is a meaningless rite, and so in my novel I have to see that this baptism carries enough awe and mystery to jar the reader into some kind of emotional recognition of its significance. To this end I have to bend the whole novel -- its language, its

²⁶ O'Connor, *MM* 188.

²⁷ O'Connor, *MM* 162.

structure, its action. I have to make the reader feel, in his bones if nowhere else, that something is going on here that counts.²⁸

I examine closely how O'Connor attempts to make her readers feel in their bones that the human body plays an important role in spiritual seeing. In her fiction we can detect a nostalgic longing for the Middle Ages when the body had internalized a spirituality that recognized its limitations and its connectedness to the Divine. Near the end of *Wise Blood* when Mrs. Flood admonishes Hazel Motes for his extreme self-mortification by telling him "People have quit doing it," he quips back, "They ain't quit doing it as long as I'm doing it."²⁹ But O'Connor didn't quite share such confidence in reconstituting through literature a spirituality that has long been defunct.

I don't believe that we shall have great religious fiction until we have again that happy combination of believing artists and believing society. Until that time, the novelist will have to do the best he can in travail with the world he has. He may find in the end that instead of reflecting the image at the heart of things, he has only reflected our broken condition and, through it, the face of the devil we are possessed by. This is a modest achievement, but perhaps a necessary one.³⁰

Through her modern depictions of the human body, she revives what may have been an overdone medieval somatic piety, to fill in the elision that came to be called "the lost God." "Distortion in this case is an instrument," O'Connor explains. "Exaggeration has a

²⁸ O'Connor, *MM* 162.

²⁹ O'Connor, Flannery, *Collected Works: Wise Blood, A Good Man Is Hard To Find, The Violent Bear It Away, Everything That Rises Must Converge, Stories and Occasional Prose, Letters* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988) 127.

³⁰ O'Connor, *MM* 168.

purpose, and the whole structure of the story or novel has been made what it is because of belief.”³¹ In her stories, God and humanity touch each other. Even if she has to pull the arm out of the socket, O’Connor will see to it.

The Critical Body Among a Body of Critics

O’Connor’s fictional works revitalized a corporeal aesthetic that had been buried since the Middle Ages. Although I do not aim to show the extent of her considerable knowledge of medieval religion and philosophy,³² I recognize that both medieval and contemporary writers conditioned her ability to practice her “habit of art,”³³ a term she borrows from Jacques Maritain, who explicated Saint Thomas Aquinas. While authors like Maritain and Gilson reinforced her Catholic sense of medieval Christian realism, O’Connor’s appreciation for the Middle Ages included its exaggerated examples of somatic piety, an element that most likely would not have resonated with Maritain and Gilson. Although he does not address in detail her use of the fictional body, George Kilcourse makes the case in *Flannery O’Connor’s Religious Imagination* that her characters animate religious concepts. Kilcourse writes, “As a theologian I gravitate to Flannery O’Connor’s fiction because she personifies the way in which the imagination theologizes.”³⁴ I contend that O’Connor writes from a position that links itself to

³¹ O’Connor, *MM* 162.

³² A plethora of evidence shows that O’Connor had a strong affinity with medieval religious thought. For example, her dedication to reading Saint Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* (O’Connor: “I read [the *Summa*] for about twenty minutes every night before I go to bed” (*HB* 93); the summary of writings that either allude or directly engage the Middle Ages (like her review of Etienne Gilson’s *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*); and the literary critical corpus on her work has firmly established her interest in medieval religious thought and philosophy.

³³ O’Connor, *MM* 101.

³⁴ Kilcourse, George A., Jr., *Flannery O’Connor’s Religious Imagination: A World With Everything Off Balance* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001) 10.

Catholic orthodoxy, and therefore I can locate myself in one of Marshall Bruce Gentry's "four critical schools" of O'Connor scholarship³⁵ in the company of many critics like Carter Martin, Kathleen Feeley, and (to update the list) George Kilcourse Jr. However, in achieving her artistic and religious triumph, O'Connor takes on what she perceives as her non-believing audience by presenting to them characters almost in a looking-glass world who signify everything that is against her Catholic orthodoxy. I hope to show that the double signification of O'Connor's fictional bodies plays both sides of the struggle, and therefore can give insight into how critics can argue from the premises akin to Gentry's three other critical schools: one that "denies the realization of theological content;" one that believes O'Connor takes an "overly harsh" religious position; and one that aligns her imagination with the "demonic."³⁶ But from my perspective, these three other critical schools only make half of the argument; their analysis stops at the first signified body. I can see how they can take such a limited analytical approach since the characters in O'Connor's stories walk a fine line between belief and nonbelief, God and the Devil. To resign, however, O'Connor's imagination to a place distant from her own Catholic beliefs, is to miss half of her anagogic vision, that is so firmly rooted in religious understanding. O'Connor knew just how ambiguous her stories were. In her second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, an atheistic school teacher, who epitomizes a spiritually-sterile culture, attempts to rescue his nephew from the influence of the boy's great-uncle, a backwoods preacher. We can sense just how closely O'Connor walked the line between the atheistic modern vision and the religious belief that informed and formed her art, when she writes

³⁵ Gentry, Marshall Bruce, *Flannery O'Connor's Religion of the Grotesque* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986) 3.

³⁶ Gentry 3.

to John Hawkes in 1959, "I fear that many of my readers will feel sorry for the school teacher, but the old man speaks for me."³⁷ According to Kilcourse, she was quoted as saying, "I can wait fifty years, a hundred years, for [*The Violent Bear It Away*] to be understood."³⁸

In *The Art and Vision of Flannery O'Connor*, Robert Brinkmeyer, drawing from Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of the dialogic and monologic artist, sees O'Connor as a gutsy risk taker when conveying her Roman Catholic belief. The dialogic artist opens herself up to insights outside of her own entrenched system of belief. "At some deep level," Brinkmeyer states, "the artist's encounter with the art is an encounter with the otherness of the artist's multi-voiced self."³⁹ In contrast, the monologic artist sees herself as "the sole possessor of truth and vision rather than merely one consciousness among many in a multi-voiced world of equal and fully signified consciousness."⁴⁰ Brinkmeyer cites O'Connor's comments on art from her letters and especially her essay, "Novelist and Believer," to conclude that her struggle was to create a dialogue between her monologic Christian voice and the non-believing world's cacophony.

³⁷ O'Connor, *HB* 350. Both in her correspondence and essays, O'Connor expresses her distress over her nonbelieving audience. One particular excerpt from a letter I believe epitomizes her frustration. To her friend, "A" in October 1958: "I suppose what bothers us so much about writing about the return of modern people to a sense of the Holy Spirit is that the religious sense seems to be bred out of them in the kind of society we've lived in since the 18th century" (*HB* 299-300).

³⁸ qtd in Kilcourse, *Religious Imagination* 11. Another example how O'Connor was conscious of her fiction's 'misinterpretation' is found in a letter O'Connor wrote on 21 May 1959 to Cecil Dawkins: "I can't remember if I told you what Jesse Stuart said to a friend of mine after I had read 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' -- at Vanderbilt. He said he didn't know why I ended it that way. Didn't I realize the audience identified with the grandmother. I should have kept it going until the cops got there and saved the grandmother!" (*HB* 333-334).

³⁹ Brinkmeyer, Robert H., Jr., *The Art and Vision of Flannery O'Connor* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) 17.

⁴⁰ Brinkmeyer, *Art and Vision* 17.

As a Catholic writer who saw her reading audience and the age itself as predominately secular and without faith, Flannery O'Connor certainly felt the temptation to impose her vision monologically upon others rather than open herself in her art to dialogic encounters that would explore and enlarge her consciousness. At the same time she was profoundly aware that such monologism was fatal to great art, and indeed she saw much fiction by Catholic writers, particularly American Catholics, as flawed in this way.⁴¹

I agree with Brinkmeyer that O'Connor's dialogic imagination conversed with two very opposing states of consciousness, and I further make the connection that these beliefs and doubts manifest themselves in how Flannery O'Connor depicts the human body. John F. Desmond in *Risen Sons: Flannery O'Connor's Vision of History* acknowledges that O'Connor was influenced by Claude Tresmontant's *A Study of Hebrew Thought*, and that she held to his dismissal of dualism by the integrity of the word "flesh" meaning "body and soul." Because I see O'Connor's imagination as dialogic and her use of the human body as an element of that characteristic, I disagree with Desmond's assessment that she evaded dualism by creating characters of one signified flesh that assumes body and soul. In my interpretation, O'Connor participates in the idea of dualism by her anagogic signification of the spiritually-dead body. She identified herself as a "Catholic peculiarly possessed of a modern consciousness."⁴² I argue that she does not relinquish her faith in order to engage aspects of modern life, but instead brings to the forefront what she called

⁴¹ Brinkmeyer, *Art and Vision* 18.

⁴² O'Connor, *HB* 90.

a “conflict between two sets of eyes . . . which cannot be settled beforehand by theory or fiat or faith.”⁴³ Hedda Ben-Basset has recognized how O’Connor possessed a dual vision which informed her rhetorical techniques. I also discover O’Connor “harnessing this double vision,”⁴⁴ but I examine its manifestation in her corporeal aesthetics. Using the body to represent the soul-depleting effects of dualism, her fiction’s denouement consistently reunites the body and soul.

Desmond contends that examining her art through a metaphysical lens means to look at “every specific object, every specific event . . . as a way of understanding their significance,”⁴⁵ and here I agree with Desmond to the point of focusing my argument on what I believe is the most important “specific object” of her art: the human body. While other critics have also noted that O’Connor stresses physicality in order to communicate a spiritual message, few have taken the human body in O’Connor’s fiction as the dominant focus of literary investigation.⁴⁶ O’Connor’s literary critics have investigated the implications of pain, linked her style with the medieval grotesque, and some have explained her treatment of the human body in this literary context. But none, thus far, have provided a detailed examination of how the human body consistently signifies

⁴³ O’Connor, *MM* 180.

⁴⁴ Ben-Basset, Hedda, “Flannery O’Connor’s Double Vision.” *Literature and Theology* 11.2 (June 1997): 185.

⁴⁵ Desmond, John, *Risen Sons: Flannery O’Connor’s Vision of History* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1987) 8.

⁴⁶ Two noteworthy investigations of the body in O’Connor’s fiction include Christina Marie Bieber and Debra Lynn Thorton’s 1999 dissertations. In *The Incarnational Art of Flannery O’Connor: Grace and the Body in A Good Man is Hard to Find* (diss., University of New Mexico, 1999), Thorton classifies the grace dispensed in O’Connor’s first collection of short stories according to four categories: The Direct Hit, The Unwitting Encounter, Grace Rejected, Grace of Innocents. Thorton keeps her distance from the Middle Ages, and strives to show O’Connor’s Catholicism is present in the dispensation of actual grace and its effects on the characters’ bodies. Bieber, in *The Incarnational Art of Flannery O’Connor*, presents an excellent discussion of O’Connor’s rationale for using the physical to communicate the spiritual, but like Thorton, she does not recognize O’Connor’s characterization within a medieval religious corporeal aesthetic.

a vestigial medieval spirituality. Most critical studies of her stories place them within the framework of Mikhail Bakhtin's observations about the grotesque body in medieval literature.⁴⁷ Anthony Di Renzo, for example, examines the human body from the Bakhtinian point of view in Chapter 5 of his book, *American Gargoyles: Flannery O'Connor and the Medieval Grotesque*. Di Renzo draws the reader's attention to the ways in which O'Connor parallels the medieval fabliau, especially its grotesque elements, in a handful of short stories.

Most often the work of Mikhail Bakhtin inspires scholars to make the connection between O'Connor and the stories of Rabelais, Chaucer or Giovanni Boccaccio. Anthony Di Renzo follows this critical tradition. Although the underpinnings of his argument are not overtly religious, Di Renzo's interpretation of the human body in O'Connor's stories has some parallels to my argument for a double corporeal signification. Using insights from Bakhtin, Di Renzo asserts:

The grotesque body, in the medieval tradition always exceed limitations without transcending its materiality The human body is never one body; it is always two or more. It is a body in conjunction, in transition, constantly shedding and taking on attributes, not something solitary and still that has reached a state of changeless perfection in eternity.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin becomes central not only for Di Renzo's argument, but also Brinkmeyer's *Art and Vision*, Christine Bieber's *The Incarnational Art of Flannery O'Connor*, and Marshall Bruce Gentry's *The Religion of the Grotesque* and "The Eye vs. The Body: Individual and Communal Grotesquerie in *Wise Blood*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 28:3 (Autumn 1982): 487-493.

⁴⁸ Di Renzo, Anthony, *American Gargoyles: Flannery O'Connor and the Medieval Grotesque* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univeristy Press, 1993) 67.

Quoting Bakhtin, Di Renzo locates the body “in immediate proximity to birth or death.” I embrace a significant portion of this vision of the body’s duality; the notion that “[i]t is dying and as yet unfinished” complements my suggestion that there is a metaphoric body that must die and one that must be reborn. Indeed I also see “the body [standing] on the threshold of the grave and the crib,” but in my interpretation of O’Connor’s Incarnational art, there is only one signified body that will remain. Bakhtin’s claim that “the two bodies unite to form one”⁴⁹ is an impossibility in the world of O’Connor’s fiction because the first signified body is the body that rejects the soul. Her fictional human bodies provide the medium to communicate the progression and conclusion of a spiritual struggle. On a somatic battlefield the conflict is between a self-made god and the Creator, and the stakes are for the recognition of the rightful place of human soul in the order of Creation. I trace the various elements of O’Connor’s characters’ spiritual-somatic battles in the five chapters of this dissertation.

In Chapter One, “O’Connor’s Evolution of the Thomist ‘Good Man’: The First Signified Body’s Aristotelian Genesis,” I explain the philosophical power that ‘creates’ the spiritually-dead metaphoric body, and discuss how such a body manifests itself in O’Connor’s fiction with its five attributes. For reasons that I detail in the first chapter, I call the first signified body the *hupokeimenon*. The *hupokeimenon* is 1) pure form (*eidos*) 2) representative of a false ‘Prime Mover’ 3) the voice of culture 4) masculine and 5) not able to know itself. I have dedicated individual chapters for the full discussion of some of the attributes, specifically the body’s inability to know itself (Ch. 2), the character as a false ‘Prime Mover’ (Ch. 3), and the body’s masculinity (Ch. 4). In the first chapter I give

⁴⁹ Di Renzo 68.

a substantial introduction to all the concepts, expanding on certain elements like the medieval gendering of the body and soul and O'Connor's character's participation in what I call a Heraclitian vision, to lend support to my argument that the body signifies the self-deified character's state of spiritual death. All five attributes contribute to an identity that is represented in O'Connor's stories as a corpse.

In Chapter Two, "Count My Bones: The Resurrection of Medieval Corpses in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction," I explain how the American author's imagination draws from four major considerations of the medieval corpse to effect what I call her *cult of the unholy* relic. O'Connor can make a bodily relic from two sources: 1) the body of a "living corpse" -- that is a living character who reflects the grace-destined character's *hupokeimenon* and 2) the literal corpses that appear in her stories. I call the former "living corpse," the "reflective corpse." As the fifth attribute of the *hupokeimenon* maintains, the character cannot know himself unless his image is projected away from himself.

Characters in stories like "The Comforts of Home," *The Violent Bear It Away*, *Wise Blood*, "Judgment Day," "The Enduring Chill," "The Displaced Person," "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" engage their own state of spiritual death in the image of either a reflective or literal corpse. The corpse, representative of an unholy relic, signifies the character's sin of self-idolatry. O'Connor frequently identifies such a vision as an integral step in her character's progression toward redemption. Another key step involves the character's feet.

In Chapter Three, "*Piè Fermo* and the *Mind-soul*: O'Connor's Limping Pilgrim," I locate the *mind-soul* as a part of the body, the foot. Such a concretization of the

abstract suggests that O'Connor's painful dispensation of grace has a consistent physical target. In nearly every story, before characters can receive grace, they have to get their feet off the ground. The Middle Ages worked from many different angles the idea of 'getting one's soul-feet off the ground' as a prerequisite for a spiritual conversion. Plato, Aristotle, Saints Augustine, Gregory the Great, Bonaventure, and Thomas Aquinas all took their turns at explicating the *soul-foot* metaphor. In this third chapter I establish how the foot signified the soul in medieval thought, and how O'Connor connected to that particular theological aesthetic in her treatment of the *mind-soul*.

The fourth chapter, "'Jesus Another Woman': O'Connor's Transgender Transfigurations," shifts the focus to the second signified body as it is especially represented in the Incarnation. I attempt to show how agents of grace appear in O'Connor's stories as female Christ-figures. Like the reflected corpse that I discussed in Chapter Two, and the feet that leave the ground and suffer physical wounds that I discussed in Chapter Three, the transgender transfiguration is yet another corporeal signal that the character's spiritual birth is about to happen. Also like the 'living corpse,' the relic cult, and the *foot-soul* metaphor, which all have their origins strongly linked to the religion of the Middle Ages, the idea of Christ as a woman was a prevalent theme in the religious imagination and mystical visions of medieval saints. In Chapter Four I re-introduce the traditional notion of God's maternity in connection to O'Connor's characterization of Tough Mothers, Suffering Mothers, and Tender Mothers. Through female Christ-like characters -- and in a special case with the hermaphrodite in "A Temple

of the Holy Ghost” -- O’Connor guides her characters to an understanding of God’s real presence through the Body of Christ.

The final chapter, “Julian of Norwich and O. E. Parker in ‘One Wondrous Volume,’” engages the one story of O’Connor’s that has a character who carries a continual exaggerated consciousness of the human body, “Parker’s Back.” In her other stories the body becomes recognized in particular scenes or because of some extreme event, but in “Parker’s Back,” the spotlight is almost continually on the body and its implications that it is Parker’s flesh, rather than a *mind-soul*, that keeps him distant from God. I argue that Parker’s *mind-soul* dominates his obsession with his flesh, because the *mind-soul* denies the significance of his body. In other words, Parker invests his identity in a picture, an object of art, and his pursuit in filling up his flesh with tattooed images ultimately threatens to turn himself into an object of art. He hopes to substantiate his existence through his creative dealings with his own skin, yet the effect completely reverses his expectations. Parker’s identity begins to vaporize as he loses more and more space on his flesh. Because his *mind-soul* keeps his body at an objectified distance, suspended from its sacred reality, Parker fails to see himself created in the image of God, with a body and a soul. When he decides to put a picture of Christ on his back, his decision follows the course set by his earlier tattoos; this final project symbolizes the objectification of God. We can consider Parker’s actions as being in league with the prevalent nihilistic culture. If Parker can get his wife to recognize God grafted unto himself, then Parker would prove the aspiration to have the individual take the place of God in the great chain of being. But it turns out that God is not dead, and cannot be

objectified like Parker's other tattoos. Christ's suffering image becomes intimately spliced with Parker's such that the Body of Christ becomes nearly indistinguishable between signified and signifier. I believe this is the quintessential story in which O'Connor uses the body to make her characters recognize the existence of God. O. E. Parker discovers God not in spite of his body, but because of it. God's image strips away Parker's *mind-soul*, and leaves behind his true self. Because of Parker's unique corporeal vision of himself, his conversion has some different corporeal signals prior to his moment of grace, but these stages, nonetheless, are rooted in a medieval religious somatic epistemology.

The short story exhibits three other characteristics, which find their full bloom in the medieval religious thought: 1) the *stigmata* 2) what Mitchell B. Merback calls "the experiential continuity" between image and the medieval viewer of pictures of Christ and 3) the three ways of knowing God as outlined by Julian of Norwich. Julian suggests one can know Christ through "bodily sight, . . . words formed in my understanding, and . . . spiritual sight."⁵⁰ Parker comes to know God and himself through the epistemological evolution described by Julian of Norwich. Parker's concentration on his tattooed body prepares him to read the mysterious *stigmata* of his flesh. The word formed in his understanding, "Go Back," is repeated over and over in the context of his contact with the particular portrait of Christ that he chose as his body's final tattoo. Through the image of Christ, Parker participates in a pious tradition stretching back to the Middle Ages that allowed viewers of religious art (notably Julian of Norwich) to achieve a communion with God. In the medieval imagination, God's image, even though it could be represented in a

⁵⁰ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Elizabeth Spearing (New York: Penguin, 1998) 11 [ST ch.8].

picture, could never be completely objectified. The viewer understood well that a picture of God possessed a potential power to transform his soul. As Merback points out in the special case of the *stigmata* and the artistic rendering of Christ's wounds, "*meditatio* became *imitatio*."⁵¹ O'Connor drew on this rich tradition in large part to counter Nietzsche's famous proclamation. In her stories, various attempts to kill God and deify the self end in repeated failure. It rarely seems enough for O'Connor's characters even to conceptualize God. In sometimes painful ways, they come to feel in their bones, through an unmerited favor granted by an external agent, what it is like to be truly divinized.

⁵¹ Merback 226.

Chapter 1

O'Connor's Evolution of the Thomist "Good Man": The First Signified Body's Aristotelian Genesis

In this chapter I examine closely how O'Connor's characters possess a body that signifies their state of spiritual death. Although each character animates only one corporeal vessel, the composition of limbs, face, and blood signifies the effect of the character's self-deification. O'Connor's characters displace the mystery of their soul with a presumptuous confidence in their mind's ability to understand themselves, the world, and ultimately, the *notion* of God. Dominated by a *mind-soul*, the character separates spirit and matter; his inflated intellect swallows up spirituality. Under the invisible spell of nihilistic dualism, the character hubristically denies the human body's union with a soul. The paradox is that the first signified body is animated by a pure *mind-soul* that thinks of itself as endowed with a god-like autonomy. Disillusioned about its own importance, the *mind-soul* willfully ignores the flesh's stamp of human authenticity, and confidently functions under the assumption that the body is merely extraneous to its existence, and constitutes nothing more than a dead weight. When characters catch a glimpse of their spiritually dead body they see the reflection of a corpse.

In order to show how the body implicitly communicates the character's soulless condition, I first need to explain the power that divides her characters. O'Connor was influenced by writers like Claude Tresmontant, Jacques Maritain, Etienne Gilson, William Lynch, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who exposed the spiritually depleting effects of Descartes' dualism upon the modern consciousness. The following discussion engages the

ideas espoused by these writers along with the insights of various O'Connor scholars. My goal is to track down how O'Connor's characters come to possess a *mind-soul* that reflects, in her view, the nonspiritual disposition of her contemporary society. After establishing the point that her characters function according to a limited vision that separates the physical from the spiritual, I address the five characteristics of the first signified body. This body is 1) pure form (*eidos*) 2) representative of the false Prime Mover 3) the voice of culture 4) masculine and 5) not able to know itself. These characteristics highlight situations in O'Connor's fiction that accentuate the body's exemplification of the character's dualistic vision. I illustrate each characteristic with examples from O'Connor's short stories and her two novels. I contend that these five characteristics appear consistently throughout her fiction, and to conclude the chapter I show how one can detect all five characteristics in a single story, "A Stroke of Good Fortune." Yet, before I can explain how the first characteristic -- the body as pure form -- can have any relevance to the character's spiritually dead condition, I must establish from the outset the spiritually degenerative effect of the *mind-soul*.

The 'illegitimate mental fiat'

Here is how I summarize what can be a rather complex discussion on the evolution of the *mind-soul*. Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* accomplishes a division between mind and body, and then through other philosophical suggestions -- most especially Nietzsche's nihilism -- the mind attains an elevated potency, indeed an omnipotence. The mind becomes the soul, the very essence of being. The body is marginalized, sometimes even

completely discarded from consideration. The promoted mind, now enthroned in a position of objectifying power, is prepared to heed Nietzsche's call for Higher Men, men who can keep God and humanity at a distance. From inside a self-erected mental fortress, the person can manipulate the reality of his world. One of the key manipulative actions divides mystery from matter, the spiritual from the physical. Such a division seems quite 'natural' since the *mind-soul* has already usurped the place of the soul in relation to the body.

I want to stress an important point that distinguishes my approach from the argument that O'Connor's characters struggle within a Manichaean paradigm, where they must search for the spiritual good at the expense of the evil flesh. The dualistic power that I see controlling her characters does not stem from the Manichean view that matter is evil, but as Robert Brinkmeyer and M. A. Klug have affirmed from various critical perspectives, O'Connor's characters suffer from Descartes' classical dualism that separated the mind from the body. Brinkmeyer makes the distinction between the Cartesian worshipped consciousness and the Manichaean split of spirit and flesh.⁵² Klug splices these two concepts as the "Manichean urge to escape from material creation to take up residence in the purely spiritual realm of one's mind."⁵³ Descartes' philosophy, albeit unintentionally, lends itself to the first step of Manichean division -- the separation of matter and spirit. Although Descartes does not make a moral judgment on matter, his

⁵² Brinkmeyer, Robert, "'Jesus, Stab Me in the Heart!': *Wise Blood*, Wounding, and Sacramental Aesthetics," *New Essays on "Wise Blood"*, ed. Michael Kreyling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 74, 84.

⁵³ Klug, M. A. "Flannery O'Connor and the Manichean Spirit of Modernism" (*Southern Humanities Review* 17 (1983): 304

division of the mind from the body opened up the way for a much greater spiritual infection: the deification of the intellect.

While I agree with Brinkmeyer and Klug's identification of O'Connor's sacramental vision, and acknowledge O'Connor's own apologetics for such a vision, which she articulates in her essay "Catholic Novelists and Their Readers," I believe that we must be careful in our use of the term "Manichaeism." I am not persuaded that O'Connor's sacramental vision hopes to nullify *only* the idea of matter as evil. In O'Connor's own essays and the critical dialogue about her work, there appears to be some ambiguity about the term "Manichaeism." Often, it seems to me, the term is employed to refer primarily to a division of matter and spirit, which I argue in more detail later, is analogous to the step taken by Descartes when he separates mind from body in his *Meditations*. O'Connor, herself, seems to adhere to this partial interpretation of the Manichean position. In her letter to Dr. T. R. Spivey, 30 November 1959, she wrote: "When the Spirit and the flesh are separated in theological thinking, the result is some form of Manicheism."⁵⁴ This not to say that O'Connor did not understand the Manichaeism contempt for the flesh and all matter, but rather to suggest that what appears to be driving the issue is the division between spirit and matter. The issue of O'Connor's understanding of Manichaeism has very recently been brought to the forefront by George Kilcourse in *Flannery O'Connor's Religious Imagination*. With respect to O'Connor's understanding of herself as an "unashamedly Catholic fiction writer," Kilcourse references William Lynch's strongly influential 1954 essay, "Theology and Imagination." In this essay Lynch describes two opposing theologies: "(1) the christological, as expressed in

⁵⁴ O'Connor, *HB* 360.

the 'Christic' imagination; [and] (2) the Manichaeian, or 'non-Christic' imagination.'⁵⁵

According to Lynch, one, if not the most significant, attribute of Manicheism is its non-analogical aspect that resists seeing multiple layers of reality and significance. In this interpretation, Manicheism directly opposes the anagogic vision that employs analogy as a way of imparting a christological vision of the world. Lynch writes:

For our present purposes, we may roughly and initially describe the analogical as that habit of perception which sees that different levels of being are also somehow one and can therefore be *associated in the same image*, in the same and single act of perception We may lump together under the word "manichaeian" all those habits of perception which instinctively *dissociate*, which dispose levels of being in a relationship of hostility or complete otherness.⁵⁶

Accordingly, my analysis does not touch on the issue of whether O'Connor depicts matter as evil in her stories. Instead her anagogic vision provides a lens through which the human body can be seen as something very corrupt, not in and of itself, but on account of its god-like status. In this dualistic vision, the divinization of the *mind-soul/body* allows the individual to look down at everything in the universe as being inferior to it.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Kilcourse, *Religious Imagination* 112, 113.

⁵⁶ qtd. in Kilcourse *Religious Imagination* 114.

⁵⁷ In an endnote, Kilcourse addresses Frederick Asals' argument in *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity*, which explains O'Connor's engagement of Manicheism with doubles using what Asals calls her "dualistic imagination" and "dualities." Since I interpret O'Connor's imagination working from the anagogic and analogical guidelines which Lynch stressed in "Theology and Imagination" and *Christ and Apollo*, I do not find my analysis gravitating, as Kilcourse says of Asals' interpretation, "toward the Manichaeian disease against which Lynch cautions us" (318, n#46). Asals never references Lynch's work in his argument.

Robert Brinkmeyer recognizes self-deification as an opponent to what he calls O'Connor's "sacramental aesthetics." When he refers to the Manichaeian split between spirit and matter, he assumes that such a split occurs along the lines of good and evil. However, he also locates the worship of one's own consciousness as an element of the "Manichean temptation." Brinkmeyer qualifies his argument when he recognizes that the violence in O'Connor's fiction is not targeted at evil flesh of Manichaeians but Descartes' worship of consciousness:

The modern consciousness, O'Connor knew well, utterly devalues all existence outside itself in its radical subjectification of reality; with God dead, or at least entirely absent, consciousness becomes the god to be worshipped. J. Hillis Miller calls this drastic turn inward "nihilism," because it collapses the world into nothingness of consciousness when consciousness becomes the foundation of everything." Such was the temptation for anyone living in the modern world.⁵⁸

And later with respect to the violence in *The Violent Bear It Away* he admits:

While the significance of the world disappears in these violent acts, they nonetheless do not point toward a Manichean split between matter and spirit; rather, in shattering the character's Cartesian worship of consciousness, they return the characters violently to their bodies into which the divine has somehow penetrated.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Brinkmeyer, "Jesus Stab" 74.

⁵⁹ Brinkmeyer, "Jesus Stab" 84.

Brinkmeyer defines the violence O'Connor's characters suffer as a "sacramental wounding," an infusion of God. Drawing on Lynch's distinction between the analogical christologic vision and the one-dimensional non-spiritual vision of Manichaeism, I discover a link between Descartes' classical dualism and the use of the term "Manichaeism" by critics like Brinkmeyer.

Descartes stressed that *thought* is the essence of human existence, thereby making the physical world inferior to the mind's activity. Likewise, Manichaeans perceived the physical world as inferior to what they believed is the true essence of life, the spirit. The inferiority of the flesh resonates with both Cartesians and Manichaeans, and subsequently the mind and spirit discover their own type of confluence. Therefore, when O'Connor depicts violence against the flesh in her fiction, it is not to render the body more inferior, but to elevate it back to a level on par with the mind or the spirit. In terms of my discussion, O'Connor launches an attack against the body so as to break the devotion of her characters to their own *mind-soul*. Characters who suffer "sacramental woundings" (to use Brinkmeyer's term) recognize the *true* source of being, which from O'Connor's perspective can only be God. Karl Barth explained such an epistemological transformation when he translated *Cogitor, ergo sum*, as "I am thought of, therefore I am." Barth concluded, "*God* is then true in this *cogitor*, this "being thought of" (by God), and all men in their *cogitare*, with their *self*-thinking, are liars."⁶⁰

Brinkmeyer counters Josephine Hendin's argument that "by burying the transcendent in the body O'Connor destroys the realm of the spirit." He asserts that "actually the violent wounding in her fiction brings that realm into the body to enrich and

⁶⁰ Barth, Karl, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, trans. H. J. Stenning (New York: Arno Press, 1977) 46.

transfigure -- that is if the characters accept this action of grace."⁶¹ Both views, I think, have some merit. Hendin is right in that O'Connor buries the *seemingly* transcendent in the body, and Brinkmeyer is right in saying that violent wounds allow for the body to be transfigured into the image of God. I can reconcile these two positions because I recognize (as Brinkmeyer and Desmond did as well) that O'Connor's target is not the evil flesh, but the Cartesian idolatry of consciousness, what I call the *mind-soul*. Hendin's 'embodied transcendence' is not the Christian soul, as she assumes, but the worshipped consciousness of the *mind-soul*. Brinkmeyer's description of O'Connor's violent dispensation of grace, identifies the first layer of the character's anagogic identity, the first spiritually dead signified body that has been corrupted by the *mind-soul*. O'Connor triumphs over Manichaeism by endowing her characters with an analogous body that possesses a double layer of signification. Her anagogic vision allows for the body to be the medium through which the deified consciousness is attacked, not because she panders to the Manichean split, but because she embraces Lynch's belief in the power of an anagogic, analogical vision that overcomes the Manichean one-dimensional approach. In her review of Lynch's *Christ and Apollo: The Dimensions of the Literary Imagination*, O'Connor says of the anagogical vision: "This is the Catholic way of reading nature as well as scripture and leaves open the most possibilities to be found in the actual."⁶² The body's double signification allows O'Connor to target the *mind-soul* and carry out her spiritual surgery through the corrupt body to which the *mind-soul* has given its particular signification of death. O'Connor's godlike characters, according to M. A. Klug, always

⁶¹ Brinkmeyer, "Jesus Stab" 84.

⁶² Zuber, Leo J., comp., *The Presence of Grace and Other Book Reviews by Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Carter W. Martin (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983) 47.

set out to create their own souls. It is the abysmal failure of such attempts, I argue, that O'Connor foregrounds in her fiction.

Klug, like Brinkmeyer, locates this soul-creative act within the context of a "Manichean urge to escape reality."⁶³ Also like Brinkmeyer, Klug seems to gravitate toward an argument that runs counter to the issue of a good spirit versus evil matter. According to Klug, O'Connor's characters strive to establish their uniqueness by going beyond morality, other people, and even God. This type of idolatry arises from the character's desires to secure a god-like isolation. Like Hazel Motes' contradictory Church without Christ, each person is called to be a member of the congregation united by their individuality. Klug maintains that O'Connor

rejects alienation as a necessity, much less as an ideal and her rejection of it goes much deeper than a commitment to a purely social or secular responsibility. It grows out of her belief in the inherent human spirit. She insists that there can be no need for the individual to create his soul; it is given once and for all to each . . . The soul is the destruction of a merely personal self, the defeat of any hope of individual distinction that might justify being; for it is the inherent image of God upon each man, binding him to the mystery of creation and to all other men in kinship with God. While the individual has infinite worth, it does not rest upon that which separates him from others but upon that which joins him to the Universal.⁶⁴

⁶³ Klug 309.

⁶⁴ Klug 309.

Klug contends that what O'Connor rejects is the character's attempt to dissolve his soul, and that drives the purpose behind the violence against her characters. I agree with this critical position, but come at the problem from a different angle. I propose that what O'Connor really wants to do is destroy the *mind-soul*, which is the dualistic influence to which the character acquiesces and surrenders his true soul. The character seems to have some success in dissolving his own soul, but this is actually just another extension of his self-deception. The moment of grace that sometimes occurs during violent action in O'Connor's fiction, does not so much reconstitute a new soul, but purges the character's belief in himself. The wounds received to his first signified body dissolve the *mind-soul* and allow for the recovery and recognition of the true soul in the secondary signified body, what Klug calls "the inherent image of God upon each man."⁶⁵ O'Connor launches a trenchant attack on the Cartesian view of consciousness rather than on the Manichean notion that matter is evil. "I believe too there is only one Reality," she affirmed in a 1955 letter, and that is based upon "Christian realism," of which "there is nothing harder or less sentimental."⁶⁶ Descartes' philosophy conditioned the modern mind to accept two realities, and in an order of precedence that disrupts belief. Jacques Maritain summarized the cart-before-the-horse nature of Cartesian philosophy as follows: "My thought exists, God exists. All flows from that."⁶⁷

Why would O'Connor be so strongly opposed to the philosophy of Descartes, and to his version of the *mind-soul* idea? To answer this question I will refer first to how

⁶⁵ Klug 309

⁶⁶ O'Connor, *HB* 92, 90.

⁶⁷ Maritain, Jacques, *Three Reformers: Luther - Descartes - Rousseau* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1932) 70.

Christina Bieber tackles the subject in her dissertation, “The Incarnational Art of Flannery O’Connor.” Then I will discuss how O’Connor based her literary response to Descartes by drawing on the works of his many critics.

Although the literary critics I have mentioned above offer different possible interpretations of O’Connor’s Christian art, Desmond, Bieber, Brinkmeyer, Klug, all identify the common challenge that O’Connor faced as being one of uniting something that Descartes fractured with his philosophy. Descartes’ classical dualism conflicts with an artist’s anagogic vision, and the artist’s use of analogy to convey multiple layers of meaning. Jacques Maritain argued that

[w]hat the Cartesian revolution introduces . . . is nothing less than a radical change in the very notion of intelligibility . . . Unqualified in principle to comprehend the analogy of being and to use it, and so from the first closing to itself approach to divine thing, the Cartesian analysis, cutting up and leveling down, can only break the internal unity of beings, destroy alike the originality and diversity of natures, and violently bring everything back to the univocal elements which it has been pleased to select as simple principles.⁶⁸

As discussed earlier, O’Connor assessed that a majority of her readers fell under the influence of Descartes’ divisional tactics and Nietzsche’s nihilism. The formation of O’Connor’s audience, Christine Bieber explains, is largely attributed to “Nietzsche’s philosophy [that] assumes Cartesian dualisms that are essentially gnostic.”⁶⁹ Nietzsche

⁶⁸ Maritain, *Three Reformers* 73.

⁶⁹ Bieber, *Incarnational Art* 6.

based his argument upon the assumption that Christianity and all religion “devalue the actual world in favor of the spiritual world.”⁷⁰ In order to create an art that leads others to what Maritain called, something “nobler than itself,”⁷¹ and to achieve such a transcendence by grounding it in the physical, O’Connor felt she had to engage nihilism directly. “If you live today you breathe in nihilism,”⁷² she wrote to “A” in 1955. From her perspective

the moral sense has bred out of certain sections of the population, like the wings have been bred off certain chickens to produce more white meat on them. This is a generation of wingless chickens, which I suppose is what Nietzsche said when he said God was dead.⁷³

O’Connor’s stories reflect the prevailing ethos of the age. Her characters have quaffed a spiritually poisonous cocktail of Cartesian dualism and Nietzschean nihilism, with the result that their human bodies gasp for the life of the Incarnation, “the ultimate reality.”⁷⁴

Bieber amplifies her treatment of the Cartesian division of mind and body (and its spiritually degenerative fall-out) by specifically considering the term “soul.” O’Connor’s admiration of Etienne Gilson’s *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*⁷⁵ affirms itself in her fiction when she creates characters who, as Bieber paraphrases Gilson, “have effectively lost [their] souls by an illegitimate act of mental fiat.”⁷⁶ Gilson believed that

⁷⁰ Bieber, *Incarnational Art* 6.

⁷¹ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* 75–76. Maritain writes, “Art teaches men the delectations of the spirit, and because it is itself *sensible* and adapted to their nature, it can best lead them to what is nobler than itself.”

⁷² O’Connor, *HB* 97.

⁷³ O’Connor, *HB* 90.

⁷⁴ O’Connor, *HB* 92.

⁷⁵ See her letter to “A” 30 September 1955 (*HB* 106–107). O’Connor writes, “Gilson is a vigorous writer . . . I have read his . . . *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, which I am an admirer of.” (cf. *HB* 477).

⁷⁶ Bieber, *Incarnational Art* 82.

Descartes substituted “mind” for “soul” because “‘soul’ assumes an inexorable link to the body.”⁷⁷ In line with the critical observations presented by Susan Bordo in *The Flight to Objectivity*, Bieber points out that “modern thought has been shaped by Cartesian rationalism . . . and this rationalism has discredited the role of the body and of subjectivity in knowledge.”⁷⁸ Pertinent to my argument is what Bieber gleans from Bordo’s insistence that “[s]ince Descartes, the ‘godly’ intellect can be exonerated from responsibility for the error it recognizes in humanity by severing the mind from the body.”⁷⁹ The main point here is an individual’s self-deification by virtue of his or her mind. Bordo writes:

While the body is thus likened to a machine, the mind (having been conceptually purified of all material “contamination”) is defined precisely and only those qualities which the human being shares with God: freedom, will, consciousness. For Descartes there is no ambiguity or complexity here. The body is excluded from all participation, all connection with God; the soul alone represents the godliness and the goodness of the human being.⁸⁰

The adoption of the *mind-soul* by O’Connor’s characters makes an intriguing hybrid. The mind assumes the essence of existence, and thus equates to the soul. The result is a

⁷⁷ Bieber, *Incarnational Art* 82-83.

⁷⁸ Bieber, *Incarnational Art* 227.

⁷⁹ Bieber, *Incarnational Art* 227. Like Di Renzo and Gentry, Bieber invokes Mikhail Bakhtin’s analysis of the medieval grotesque as a model for O’Connor’s imagination. Bieber maintains that the grotesque body, “that part of each of us that is quirky, embarrassing, nonsensical, apparently accidental” (*Incarnational Art* 233), has the muscle to pull together the Cartesian severance. Di Renzo makes a similar point in *American Gargoyles* when he explicates O’Connor’s use of the body that moves along a spectrum from “aggressive materiality” to “an aggressively sacramental vision.”⁷⁹ He borrows the term, “aggressive materiality,” from Howard Bloch’s assessment of the medieval fabliau where the triumph that occurs is the physical over the mental.

⁸⁰ qtd. in Bieber, *Incarnational Art* 227-228.

fictional body without a true soul because it believes that the mind is already self-sufficient. Therefore, if the body gets worked over to the point where the character must recognize his (or even someone else's) physicality, there is a chance that the soul may reappear in the character. O'Connor consistently designs her moments of grace within a concrete, physical setting. For example, in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," Julian's "mental bubble" bursts when he looks upon the dying face of his mother. Salvation through the body at the expense of the dominating mind: that is O'Connor's redemptive tactic.

O'Connor found a sympathetic voice in her struggle against the philosophical sickness Descartes infected the modern consciousness with. In *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* Etienne Gilson mounted one critical attack after another against Descartes. He asserted, "Descartes' philosophy was nothing else than a recklessly conducted experiment to see what becomes of human knowledge when moulded into conformity with the pattern of mathematical evidence. . . . The mind first, God next, then, and only then, the external world. Such was the order."⁸¹ Gilson's sentiment seems reflected in Old Tarwater's lesson to his great nephew: "Yours not to ask! Yours not to question the mind of the Lord God Almighty. Yours not to grind the Lord into your head and spit out a number!"⁸² O'Connor also learned from another critique leveled at the French philosopher by a writer she admired. Jacques Maritain begins his essay on Descartes in *Three Reformers* as follows: "I or my mind [Descartes] said. He produced his effect not, like Luther and Rousseau, by reproducing in souls the waves of his

⁸¹ Gilson, Etienne, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937) 133, 181.

⁸² O'Connor, *CW* 351.

sensibility, the vast tumult of his heart, but by leading the mind astray.”⁸³ Through Cartesian ontology and dualism, the soul fell under the light by which science knows its objects, *lumen sub quo*. “Due allowance being made,” Maritain writes, “we cannot help remarking here a strange likeness between this psychology of error in the fallen Angel and the psychology of error in us according to Descartes.”⁸⁴ The Cartesian effect felt during O’Connor’s century was the abstraction of the human body, the marginalization of God as an idea, and the concretization of the soul within the cranium.

This is the deleterious rationalist philosophy O’Connor has her characters eventually reject through her portrayal of the interaction between spirit and matter. As Christina Bieber has argued at length, O’Connor wrote fiction to answer a higher calling: “[F]or her the calling of the artist was so similar to the calling of the prophet.”⁸⁵ Jacques Maritain in *Art and Scholasticism*, which O’Connor dubbed as “the book I cut my aesthetic teeth on,”⁸⁶ assigned to Christian art “the sacred as well as the profane.”⁸⁷ In order to expose the disintegration of sacramentality, she splices the sacred and the profane together in her characters’ bodies. O’Connor called her fiction “Incarnational art,” and Bieber points to the fitness of her description since each O’Connor story “re-enacts the word become flesh, the mystery made visible, the universal born into a particularity.”⁸⁸ O’Connor offered her imaginative skills to give startling depictions and parables to what

⁸³ Maritain, *Three Reformers* 53.

⁸⁴ Maritain, *Three Reformers* 61.

⁸⁵ Bieber, Christina Marie, “Called to the Beautiful: The Incarnational Art of Flannery O’Connor’s *The Violent Bear It Away*,” *Xavier Review* 18.1 (1998): 44.

⁸⁶ O’Connor, *HB* 216.

⁸⁷ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* 65.

⁸⁸ Bieber, *Incarnational Art* 44.

contemporary philosophers like Claude Tresmontant asserted was a modern consciousness set against the notion that there is a Divine participation in physical things.

In *A Study of Hebrew Thought* Claude Tresmontant argued that “mystery today means something impenetrable to the mind, something never to be understood. To Saint Paul and the early Christian thinkers it was on the contrary the particular object of intelligence, its fullest nourishment.”⁸⁹ John F. Desmond summarizes the biblical metaphysical vision alluded to by Tresmontant and its modern counter-point, Dualism:

The sensible world is essentially significant and intelligible; there is no division between the sensible and the intelligible. The relation between the two is analogical. Through contemplation of the sensible object its essential reality can be known, it can be grasped as both a fact and as a sign. Under a dualistic notion of creation, the sensible lacks essential significance; it has no meaning in itself and it possesses a significance only by its virtue of its participation in the ideal world.⁹⁰

The sensible world for O'Connor was the only medium accessible to non-mystics, and most certainly, non-believers. In her belief, everything in the sensible world could point to another realm of existence. “The longer you look at one object, the more of the world you see in it,” O'Connor wrote in “The Nature and Aim of Fiction,” and elaborated upon what “world” she is referring to in a later essay when she maintained that “the artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the

⁸⁹ Tresmontant, Claude, *A Study of Hebrew Thought*, trans. Michael Francis Gibson (New York: Desclee Company, 1960) 137.

⁹⁰ Desmond, *Risen Sons* 9-10.

image of ultimate reality.”⁹¹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin perhaps synthesized it best when he stated, “By virtue of the Creation and still more, of the Incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see.”⁹² In the same vein, O’Connor said of Teilhard, “He was alive to everything there is to be alive to and in the right way.”⁹³

O’Connor did not cage her frustration toward her modern age’s lack of spiritual vision; rather she strove to create art that had meaning because it grounded itself in the sacred. Jacques Maritain affirmed that in all things, but especially in artistic creations, there is a “radiance of form.” Maritain contended such a “radiance of form”

must be understood [as] an *ontological* splendor which is in one way or another revealed to our mind, not a *conceptual* clarity. We must avoid all misunderstanding here: the words *clarity*, *intelligibility*, *light*, which we use to characterize the role of “form” at the heart of things, do not necessarily designate something clear and intelligible *for us*, but rather something clear and luminous *in itself*, and which often remains obscure to the eyes, either because of the matter in which the form in question is buried, or because of the transcendence of the form itself in the things of the spirit. . . . It is the Cartesian misconception to reduce clarity *in itself* to clarity *for us* . . . this misconception . . . condemns us to a beauty so meager that it can radiate in the soul only the most paltry of delights.⁹⁴

⁹¹ O’Connor, *MM* 77, 157. O’Connor makes this point succinctly in a 1958 letter to Cecil Dawkins when she writes, “It is what is invisible that God sees and that the Christian must look for” (*HB* 308).

⁹² qtd. in Bieber, *Incarnational Art* 225.

⁹³ O’Connor, *HB* 449.

⁹⁴ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* 28.

O'Connor observed that her contemporary artists and her readers generated, suffered and accepted such a pathetic state of the arts, impoverished by Descartes' misconceptions. In her essay "The Church and the Fiction Writer" she admitted that

if the average Catholic reader could be tracked down through the swamps of letters-to-the-editor and other places where he momentarily reveals himself, he would be found to be more a Manichean than the Church permits. By separating nature and grace as much as possible, he has reduced his conception of the supernatural to pious cliché and has become able to recognize literature in only two forms, the sentimental and the obscene.⁹⁵

To redress this lamentable situation, O'Connor revived the medieval anagogic vision as a way of bringing God back into the modern picture. Integral to her anagogic vision was the essential artistic element, analogy. Analogy makes possible the multiple interpretations that anagogy is based on. Since an analogy by definition detects resemblance between things otherwise unlike, it allows for different level of meaning -- including the literal and spiritual -- to emerge in the use of a given image. The anagogic vision cannot be exercised without analogy, then, because analogy assists in creating the "enlarged view of the human scene that the fiction writer has to cultivate."⁹⁶ In O'Connor's time there was arguably no stronger advocate for the literary use of analogy than Father William Lynch.

⁹⁵ O'Connor, *MM* 147.

⁹⁶ O'Connor, *MM* 73.

O'Connor found an inspiration for restoring the medieval anagogic vision in William Lynch's *Christ and Apollo*.⁹⁷ Lynch emphasizes that to understand the significance of our existence, we must consider the importance of the Incarnation as it relates to the proportion, or analogy, of humanity to divinity. As a Jesuit priest, Lynch had been well prepared make such a theological conclusion, but O'Connor knew that her audience was nowhere in Father Lynch's theological league. Before they could come to any conclusion about humanity being sanctified by the Incarnation, her readers would have to participate along with her characters in the gradual disclosure of God in her fiction. To get to a revelation of the Incarnation meant first acknowledging the present state of things. O'Connor's characters first signal their state of corruption, before they see the possibility of being born again into the life of the Incarnation. This leads to a key point in my analysis that I want to make clear. Because I see O'Connor using analogy, not allegory,⁹⁸ in her conveyance of a corporeal anagogic vision, her double signification of the body does not exclude the presence of the body and soul in her characters. The *mind-soul* and its related first signified body has merely eclipsed the character's Christian identity. No one is excluded from salvation in O'Connor's stories.⁹⁹ So while her characters' bodies may

⁹⁷ O'Connor became introduced to the medieval hermeneutic (literal, tropological, allegorical, and anagogical) per Anton C. Pegis's *Introduction to Saint Thomas Aquinas* (see Han 123); however, Lynch seems to have influenced O'Connor by framing those interpretive tactics into literary aesthetic. Most significantly, Lynch emphasized the importance of analogy. For O'Connor's review of Lynch's *Christ and Apollo* see Zuber 47.

⁹⁸ I have suggested earlier the concept of the co-existence of opposites in my discussion of Lynch's christological analogical vision in "Theology and Imagination." In Chapter Four I take up further Lynch's explanation in *Christ and Apollo* of the "unification of contraries," which is also applicable in this present discussion on the possibility of O'Connor's corporeal anagogical double signification. For an excellent discussion of O'Connor's interpretation of Lynch's "unification of contraries" see Kilcourse, *Religious Imagination* 118-123.

⁹⁹ The counterpoint may be made about the impossibility of redemption for characters who some critics have identified as characterizations of the Devil. I refer my reader to titles by John Hawkes, Kenneth Scouten, Nadine Brewer, who examine this particular issue. (cf. *HB* 367, 449-50, 439).

signify a spiritual death, there is another level of signification struggling to emerge, and that second signification is the life of the body and soul in Christ. Citing Lynch's argument, John Desmond declares that "the uniqueness of Christ as an analogical instrument is that he is single, concrete, historical person who claims to be the new shape of all things, yet he does not change by being realized in different things in creation." Desmond goes on to state that because of the Incarnation, "things and acts in creation are raised to a new level of meaning . . . everything 'counts'; nothing is neglected in the redemptive perspective."¹⁰⁰ As grand as this may be, O'Connor's characters (and perhaps her audience) may not even see the boundaries of salvation, without first seeing their own existence in its state of corruption. In other words, before her characters may recognize God's "total analogical identity," they will first encounter themselves in their own state of spiritual destitution as expressed in their body.

William Lynch and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin shared an understanding of the human body as a reflection of Christ, who is the source of all Creation. Lynch called Christ "the original analogical idea"¹⁰¹ and Teilhard called him the Omega Point.¹⁰² Both men set the cornerstone of their arguments on the premise that one must see God in Creation. Lynch took the vantage from the top down, where "The very act of existence descends analogously, *ana-logon*, 'according to proportion.'"¹⁰³ Teilhard saw humanity

¹⁰⁰ Desmond, *Risen Sons* 28.

¹⁰¹ See William Lynch's *Christ and Apollo: The Dimensions of the Literary Imagination* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1962) 149-160.

¹⁰² The idea of the Omega Point is in Teilhard's *The Phenomenon of Man* and *The Divine Milieu*. For a discussion on Teilhard de Chardin's influence on Flannery O'Connor see Margaret Early Whitt's *Understanding Flannery O'Connor*, (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1995) 109-161; also Karl-Heinz Westarp's "Teilhard de Chardin's Impact on Flannery O'Connor: A Reading of Parker's Back," (*Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 12 [1983]: 93-113).

¹⁰³ Lynch 150-151.

evolving to ascend into the Omega Point. The human body, however, meets on the same path, whether it is going up or down. Teilhard de Chardin wrote that the human body always signifies something greater than itself, and that when man is

studied narrowly in himself by anthropologists or jurists, man is a tiny, even a shrinking creature. His over-pronounced individuality conceals from our eyes the whole to which he belongs; as we look at him our minds incline to break nature up into pieces and to forget both its deep inter-relations and its measureless horizons: we incline to all that is bad in anthropocentrism. And it is this that leads scientists to refuse to consider man as an object of scientific scrutiny except through his body.¹⁰⁴

Although he admitted that his work, *The Phenomenon of Man*, “must be read not as a work on metaphysics, still less as a sort of theological essay, but purely and simply as a scientific treatise,”¹⁰⁵ Teilhard sounds more like Tresmontant and Maritain when he stated: “Man, the centre of perspective, is at the same time the *centre of construction* of the universe . . . If to see more is really to become more, if deeper vision is really fuller being, then we should look closely at man in order to increase our capacity to live. But to do this we must focus our eyes correctly.”¹⁰⁶ I contend that O'Connor effects this revelation through her image of the human body that first becomes analogous to the spiritually dead

¹⁰⁴ Teilhard, Pierre de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959) 35.

¹⁰⁵ Teilhard, *Phenomenon* 29. Teilhard accused Descartes' philosophy as not only disrupting metaphysical inquiry, but also, as instigating a scientific corporeal myopia. According to Teilhard, dualism and Cartesian ontology must be dismissed, not only to engage questions of theodicy, but also to scientifically understand our human existence (*Phenomenon* 29-30). Teilhard “deals with the *whole* phenomenon of man” (29). O'Connor views scientific objectivity working in tandem with supernatural belief. She opposes the modern precept that science must eradicate spirituality because faith endangers the existence of science. In a letter to Dr. T. R. Spivey, she writes, “This is a scientific age and Teilhard's direction is to face it toward Christ” (*HB* 388).

¹⁰⁶ Teilhard, *Phenomenon* 33.

instrument of dualism, and then analogous, in the words of Lynch, to “*the degree of fullness of being . . . adapting itself in its bone and heart to the bone and heart of each new subject of being, each new part of the total organism*”¹⁰⁷ in the body of Christ.

Under the influence of their implicit self-deifying *mind-soul*, her characters believe themselves to be the original analogical idea. Their ultimate existence sustains itself independent of Christ. To bring Teilhard and Lynch together: approaching human existence through the Divine being called Jesus of Nazareth “increase[d] our capacity to live” because it directly demonstrated the analogous fullness of the flesh in the Divine. Paraphrased by the Misfit in “A Good Man is Hard to Find”: “Jesus thown everything off balance.”¹⁰⁸ Tresmontant summarized the modern dilemma when he stated that “Dualism disrupts analogy . . . Dualism is the contradiction of the method of the Incarnation.”¹⁰⁹ O’Connor plugs dualism into an anagogic body, yet it is doomed for failure because it is out of its element. In her stories the Incarnation takes its place as the final and meaningful signifier.

The Hupokeimenon: The First Signified Body

To give a name to O’Connor’s first signified body, the body that does not recognize its union with the Christian soul, I have adopted the Aristotelian term, *hupokeimenon*. I have identified five characteristics attributed to the term, *hupokeimenon*, from Robert Con Davis’ discussion of the word in his essay, “Aristotle, Gynecology, and the Body Sick with Desire.” These five attributes resonate with qualities that I see

¹⁰⁷ Lynch 151.

¹⁰⁸ O’Connor, *CW* 152.

¹⁰⁹ Tresmontant 62, 65.

inherent in O'Connor's characters' first signified body. The *hupokeimenon* is 1) pure form (*eidos*) 2) representative of the false "Prime Mover" 3) the voice of culture 4) masculine and 5) not able to know itself. Some of the attributes require more room for explanation, and I will indicate in due course where, in my subsequent chapters, further analysis of these attributes will be found. For now, I will introduce, and if appropriate to the space of this chapter, expand upon the main literary analytical concepts behind each one of them. Then I will show how these attributes appear in O'Connor's fiction, and thus hopefully expose their critical interdependence in the composition of O'Connor's first signified body.

To the ancient Greeks *hupokeimenon* denoted what we today would call the "subject," or as Robert Con Davis describes it: "the Aristotelian sense of the focus of science -- the classical definition of what can be talked about and examined in scientific terms."¹¹⁰ For Aristotle, the material world consisted of form (*eidos*) and matter (*ousia*), but, as the Greek philosopher makes clear in his *Metaphysics*, "it is in respect to its form (*eidos*) that we know each thing."¹¹¹ The notion that the O'Connorian body is pure form (*eidos*) complements the *mind-soul*'s interpretation of the body as a mere concept, without matter. It also lends leverage to the *mind-soul*'s self-deifying domination that envelops the body into itself by creating a conceptually pure-*eidos*-being. The discussion previous to this section, where I explored the evolution of a Cartesian worship of consciousness, largely addressed this first characteristic. I explained how the *mind-soul*

¹¹⁰ Davis, Robert Con, "Aristotle, Gynecology, and the Body Sick with Desire," *Textual Bodies: Changing Boundaries of Literary Representations*, ed. Lori Hope Lefkowitz (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1997) 35.

¹¹¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysica, The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941) IV:5, 1010a.24-25 (746).

consumes the person's entire identity. Thus the character's first anagogical *biology* is pure *pseudo-spirit*, a walking god, its own "Prime Mover." This leads us to the second attribute.

The second attribute of the *hupokeimenon* concentrates on the character's refusal to acknowledge 1) that she is not her own Prime Mover, and 2) the mutability of her body due to the belief that as the Prime Mover she holds a position as an unchangeable objective observer. The term, "Prime Mover," as understood by Saint Thomas Aquinas (who derives it from Aristotle), refers unambiguously to God. I identify two specific corporeal signals that appear in O'Connor's depiction of the human body, and I align these two corporeal signals with two corresponding philosophical assertions. The first philosophical assertion is that the soul does not move itself, but it is instead under the influence of The Prime Mover, or God. O'Connor's wayward characters do not obey this maxim because their belief in their *mind-soul* has made them believe in their own divinity, and thus, they believe they can 'move' themselves. The corporeal signifier of this spiritual obstinacy is the character's feet. In Chapter Three I examine in detail how O'Connor concretizes the *mind-soul* in the foot, alluding back to the medieval metaphor, the *foot of the soul*. In order to prove to her characters that they are not their own Prime Mover, O'Connor gets their false spiritual feet off the ground, and sometimes creates situations where the feet become the specific target for what Brinkmeyer calls a "sacramental wounding." The second philosophical assertion is Aristotle's declaration that a thing is knowable by its form, of which a key qualifying element of that definition is that it must not undergo any change. Opposing the philosopher Heraclitus, who saw the world full of

flux and indeterminacy, Aristotle writes in *Metaphysics*, “For in pursuing the truth one must start from the things that are always in the same state and suffer no change.”¹¹² The second corresponding corporeal signal is O’Connor’s imparting a Heraclitian vision upon her characters. What I mean is that O’Connor sets up situations in her stories when the character undergoes an experience that momentarily disrupts the stable Aristotelian vision of the world. At times in her fiction the world seems to move toward, away, above, underneath, and around the person. Rather than the person being the Prime Mover, he is inserted into a world where his confidence as stable objective viewer is shaken. The *hupokeimenon* at these moments loses its sovereignty and becomes part of the greater system of Creation, a world of mystery and flux. In this chapter I show how this element of the *hupokeimenon*’s second attribute manifests itself in O’Connor’s stories. Getting their feet off the ground and experiencing a Heraclitian vision are two physical events experienced by the character that nearly always preface the epiphanic manifestation of the second signified body, the Incarnation.

The third attribute, the *hupokeimenon*’s masculinity, is important for two reasons. First, the *hupokeimenon*’s masculinity has importance because of how it fits into the gendered Thomistic analogy of the body (feminine *ousia*, or matter) to the soul (masculine *eidos*, or form).¹¹³ I explain this analogy and its applicability to O’Connor’s characters later in this chapter. Second, the *hupokeimenon*’s masculinity contrasts the female Christ-

¹¹² Aristotle, *Metaphysica* XI:6, 1063a.13-15 (859).

¹¹³ Although it should be obvious, I do not make any assumption that my interpretation of philosophy and theology with respect to twentieth-century American fiction possesses an equal reciprocity. In other words, while I believe O’Connor’s fiction possesses an underlying signification that can be better brought to the surface with the help of Aristotle and Aquinas, I don’t assert that Hazel Motes or Francis Tarwater could be plugged into either man’s writing as an example of their conclusions. I hold that my analysis can help to illuminate O’Connor’s use of the human body, not that it suggests something new about the views Aristotle or Aquinas on the human body.

figures that I perceive O'Connor depicting in her stories. Understanding the implications of the Thomist gendered analogy contributes toward explaining why O'Connor's characters encounter feminine representations of Christ. By having a woman as a Christ-figure, the flesh (understood as feminine in the Thomist analogical model) is emphasized. I discuss this second consideration fully in Chapter Four when I address O'Connor's transgender transfigurations of the Incarnation. In this chapter I establish the traditional idea that soul is masculine and flesh is feminine.

The fourth attribute acknowledges that O'Connor's spiritually dead characters speak with the voice of culture. The voice of culture is the culture of the self-deified mind that spiritually sterilizes the body and pushes God into Nothingness. In this chapter I couple this attribute with the first attribute to show how O'Connor's characters consider themselves god-like and alive only in their own conceptual world.

The fifth attribute acknowledges that the term, *hupokeimenon*, does not refer to the *knowing subject*, but to an object that can be known by the subject. Giving the first signified body an objectified nomenclature is very appropriate since this is how the *mind-soul* comprehends the body. Because the *hupokeimenon* is simply a shell without a true soul, it is unable to know itself. Davis makes very clear that "Aristotle does not use *hupokeimenon* to refer to the knowing subject."¹¹⁴ Because of this condition, it becomes necessary for the character to see a reflection of herself in order to acknowledge her first signified body. This reflection consistently shows the character's first signified body in the image of a corpse. I provide a full discussion of this last attribute in Chapter Two.

¹¹⁴ Davis 37.

Understanding the manifestation of the first attribute, the *hupokeimenon* as pure form, may seem very difficult. How does one represent a pure concept, indeed the character's identity as being wrapped up in the *mind-soul*, without some matter? I am not suggesting that O'Connor's fictional bodies waver in their substantial concreteness like C. S. Lewis' surreal characters in *The Great Divorce*. Perhaps the best way to 'see' O'Connor's characters is to look through their eyes and scrutinize their understanding of the world. Our approach must be through the character's words, and this is where the fourth attribute, *hupokeimenon* as the voice of culture, helps to illuminate the first. By examining what the characters say or think about the world or themselves, we can discover the soul-washing accomplished by their brain-washing.

Similar to Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*-being, Aristotle etherealizes the *knower* through language. Davis contends that in "some of his logical works Aristotle . . . goes on to theorize the subject as a *construction of language* and logical relations with no confusion between the subject as *knower* and the subject as *that which is known*."¹¹⁵ The Aristotelian "Word" is a Word without a body. "When the *hupokeimenon* as the subject of science speaks," Davis notes, "it is speech necessarily *for* the culture it belongs to, and as speech this voicing is the perceptible embodiment, or representation, of cultural authority, the possibility of speech that gives access to sanctioned values and reigning ideological commitments."¹¹⁶ O'Connor's characters make definitive proclamations about their identity that, when examined closely, give credence to the fact their existence has been swayed by dualistic and nihilistic trends. They have become defined by their *mind-soul*.

¹¹⁵ Davis 37 *construction of language* (emphasis mine).

¹¹⁶ Davis 41.

Joy-Hulga claims to be “a person who sees through to *nothing*,” Mrs. McIntyre claims to be “practical not theological.”¹¹⁷ Ruby Turpin knows that in her purely imaginative hierarchy of human beings, “she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and more land” (636). While sitting in the doctor’s waiting room, Turpin ruminates on her *credo*: “To help anybody out that needed it was her philosophy of life” (642). Yet, while her philosophy espouses an experiential altruism, she passes judgment mentally on all the other characters and affirms her own existence in her imaginary realm where she dialogues on par with God. Tanner in “Judgment Day” believes that domination of one human over another is a matter of showing the other that “his brains didn’t have a chance against yours” (681). Tapping his head, Julian in “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” schools his mother that “true culture is in the mind, the *mind* . . . the mind” (489). Ruby Hill in “A Stroke of Good Fortune” lives within her head so strongly that she can deny the reality of her pregnancy. In “The Lame Shall Enter First,” it is not Rufus Johnson’s crippled body but his mind that piques Sheppard’s interests. At the end of the story Sheppard recognizes that his own identity had been supported by his hope for Rufus’ intellectual development. Sheppard “stuffed his own emptiness” (632) with his faith in the boy’s I. Q. Perhaps O’Connor’s strongest character to warn against the dangers of the *mind-soul*’s dualistic effects is Old Mason Tarwater. The backwoods prophet explains to his great nephew that he kidnapped him as a child so as to save him from falling under the influence of his Uncle Rayber: “I saved you to be free, your own self! . . . and not a piece of information inside his head! If you were living with him, you’d be information right now, you’d be inside his head” (339). Some characters materialize

¹¹⁷ O’Connor, *CW* 280, 316.

their spirituality. Thomas T. Shiftlet can only say that he is a man, but that a man's spirit is located in his automobile, and in this respect, Shiftlet is like Hazel Motes, who holds to the belief, "that no man with a good car needs to be justified" (64).¹¹⁸ Her characters' reflections on their own identity nearly always suggest their own superiority to such a degree that they express no need for other human beings or for God.

Her characters uphold the integrity of their mental fortress, by objectifying God and others and promoting themselves as a god. Hazel Motes preaches, "Where has the blood you think you been redeemed by touched you? . . . Do you think I believe in Jesus? Well I wouldn't even if He existed. Even if he was on this train . . . Don't I know what exists and what don't? Don't I have eyes in my head?"¹¹⁹ Similar to the Tarwater's Stranger who substitutes the conflict between the Devil or Jesus as the choice between *you* or Jesus, Sheppard tells Johnson with his I. Q. score of 140 that he is much too smart to believe in the Devil. "We're living in the space age!" Sheppard retorts, "Maybe I can explain the devil to you" (601). Johnson complains to Norton about the boy's father, "God kid . . . How do you stand it? . . . He thinks he's Jesus Christ!" (609). Ruby Turpin screams at God across her hog pen only to hear echoed back her question "Who do you think you are?" (653). O. E. Parker tells the tattooist, "A man can't save his self from whatever it is he don't deserve none of my sympathy" (669). Joy-Hulga explains to Manley Pointer that her vision of the world has penetrated all there is to see: "We are all

¹¹⁸ Regarding modern culture, the mind, and the automobile, Thomas Merton wrote: "The central problem of the modern world is the complete emancipation and autonomy of the technological mind . . . The attachment of the modern American to his automobile and the *symbolic* role played by his car, with its aggressive and lubric design, its useless power, its otiose gadgetry, its consumption of fuel, which is advertised as having almost supernatural power . . . this is where the study of American mythology should begin" (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* [New York: Doubleday, 1989] 75, 76).

¹¹⁹ O'Connor, *CW* 58, 6, 7, 31.

damned . . . but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation" (280).

In a similar vein as Joy-Hulga's desire to show Manley Pointer the nihilistic truth, many of O'Connor's characters express their self-deification through their desire to create another person in their own image. In "A View of the Woods" identity pivots around a single word, a name. Mr. Fortune wants his granddaughter, Mary Fortune Pitts, to be "thoroughly of his clay" (528), and so he tells her to make up her mind as to whether she is a Fortune or a Pitts. "I am PURE Fortune,"¹²⁰ Mr. Fortune tells his granddaughter, and that means (among other things) that he holds in contempt anything that opposes his belief in the power of his wits (541). Through the worship of his own mental shrewdness, he keeps an objectified and objective distance, even from Mary. When Mr. Fortune sees his granddaughter being whipped by her father, Mr. Pitts, he does not act to stop the abuse, but instead hides in the bushes. Mr. Fortune's identity is purely constructed in his safe mental refuge. Like Julian's "mental bubble" in "Everything That Rises," Fortune "was safe from any kind of penetration from without" especially those things, people, and events "he could not bear to be a part of" (491). Tarwater struggles to keep himself separate from becoming like Rayber when he tells his uncle: "I ain't like you. All you can do is *think* what you would have done if you had done it. Not me. I can do it. I can

¹²⁰ The name "Fortune" has relevance particularly in relation to Mr. Fortune's perception of other people through his *mind-soul*. We might recall that Machiaveilli characterized human beings as having *virtù*, which Roland Bainton succinctly describes as "a dynamic energy in man, impelling him to power and greatness" (124), akin to Nietzsche's "will to power." However, it is *Fortuna*, Machiavelli's goddess, that is responsible for the "abdication of morality, because it is she who presents those necessities to which men must react by brutality" (125). Mr. Fortune's declaration that he is "Pure FORTUNE" (CW 541) indicates that he exercises his *virtù* immorally in worshipping himself as his own *Fortuna*, the source and effect of his brutality. See Roland Bainton's *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990) 124-127; and Machiavelli's *The Prince*, XVIII.

act.”¹²¹ In “The Artificial Nigger,” Nelson, the formative grandson of Mr. Head (an obvious symbolic name), looks toward his grandfather with “eyes [that] seemed to implore him to explain once and for all the mystery of existence” (230). Quite often what a character says is directly aimed at explaining (away) the mystery of existence.¹²²

In O’Connor’s stories the voice of culture frequently refuses to dialogue with God and severs humanity’s tie with Him. Rayber in *The Violent Bear It Away* contends he can explain God to Tarwater, and Sheppard has a perfect explanation for Johnson’s belief in the Devil. An example of the modern dismantling of spirituality is found in Mary Brittle’s response to Sabbath Lily Hawk’s question about whether fornication is acceptable since she considers herself damned to hell anyway. According to Sabbath, Brittle’s letter read as follows:

Dear Sabbath, Light necking is acceptable, but I think your real problem in one of adjustment to the modern world. Perhaps you ought to re-examine your religious values to see if they meet your needs in Life. A religious experience can be a beautiful addition to living if you put it in the proper perspective and do not let it warp you. Read some book on Ethical Culture.¹²³

¹²¹ O’Connor, *CW* 451.

¹²² We may note that in O’Connor’s stories the voice of culture speaks frequently, but her characters who come close to representing the Incarnation are often silent. The near silence of Bishop (*The Violent Bear It Away*), Lucynelle Crater (“The Life You Save May Be Your Own”), Mr. Guizac (“The Displaced Person”), and even the tight-lipped Mary-Grace (“Revelation”) impart a powerful effect on the other loquacious characters. Sometimes the power of silence comes through violent means as we may recall Bobby Lee’s comment to the Misfit regarding the Grandmother: “She was a talker, wasn’t she?” (*CW* 153). O’Connor underlined in Karl Barth’s *Evangelical Theology* the following passage: “It is a terrible thing when God keeps silence, and by keeping silence speaks” (qtd. in Kinney, Arthur F., *Flannery O’Connor’s Library: Resources of Being* [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985] #117, 48).

¹²³ O’Connor, *CW* 67.

Brittle's response epitomizes the marginalization of spirituality ("a beautiful addition to living") that O'Connor perceived plagued her typical modern reader's consciousness. In O'Connor's view, Mary Brittle could be on the same level as Sabbath. Speaking of Haze in the third-person Sabbath tells him, "That innocent look don't hide a thing, he's just pure filthy right down to the guts, like me. The only difference is I like being that way and he don't. Yes sir! I like being that way, and I can teach you how to like it" (95). Sabbath imparts the lesson that she learned from Brittle, who advised her to re-examine her "spiritual value to see if they meet your needs in Life." Sabbath attempts to erase Haze's conscience that has the soul for its seat. No conscience, no soul. The scene ends with Sabbath having sex with Haze, whom she calls "the king of the beasts" (96).

In my discussion of O'Connor's anagogic body, I make the point that her language works on an anagogic level, while the literal meaning seems to give voice to the reigning non-spiritual culture. Specifically, I draw attention to how the language supports her corporeal aesthetic.¹²⁴ For example, in Chapter Two I emphasize the significance of the words "enjoin" and "face" in the *Violent Bear It Away*. In Chapter Three I analyze what Mary Fortune Pitts means when she says "Nobody beat me," and in Chapter Four, I examine how words spoken to or by what I call Tough Mother Jesus-figures become actualized into physical wounds in *Wise Blood*, *The Violent Bear It Away*, and "Everything That Rises Must Converge." O'Connor's *logos* has attracted many critical

¹²⁴ Although Sue Walker takes a different approach to O'Connor's depiction of the body, I offer that my analysis tallies with some of the points she makes in her essay "The Being of Illness: The Language of Being Ill," and may even add a new dimension to some of her insights. Walker suggests that the "body presences an aporia that conflates seeing and saying" (Walker, Sue, "The Being of Illness: The Language of Being Ill," *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 25 [1996-1997]: 50). I argue that O'Connor's first signified body conveys an image of spiritual death that visually supports the nihilistic words spoken by the same characters.

perspectives. Edward Kessler suggests that O'Connor's language works on a spiritual level in *Flannery O'Connor and the Language of the Apocalypse*. Dilin Liu attempts to show how O'Connor collapses "signifier" and "signified" in "*A Good Man Is Hard to Find: The Difference between the Word and the World*." Mary Frances HopKins finds her reading of O'Connor at odds with Kessler's because she sees O'Connor's imagination engaging Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia. In "The Rhetoric of Heteroglossia in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*" HopKins evaluates Kessler's theories as "inadequate in that they do not account for the way the author forces the world to speak for itself."¹²⁵ I believe that O'Connor's corporeal aesthetic, which is just as alive in what her characters say as it is in what their bodies experience, welcomes Kessler's interpretation of language without sifting out the voice of culture that HopKins believes comes through in her stories. Joanne Halleran McMullen acknowledges the dualistic nature of O'Connorian words when she writes in *Writing Against God: Language as the Message in the Literature of Flannery O'Connor*: "O'Connor remains an enigmatic and complex artist. Stylistically through sentence structure, parts of speech, and verb usage, O'Connor determines the salvation of her fictional characters. However her language choices often appear to place her characters in direct opposition with her frequently expressed religious intent."¹²⁶ O'Connor creates characters who give a voice and a body to the reigning ideology, but by her estimation, that would be a triumph for the devil if she merely halted her depictions

¹²⁵ HopKins, Mary Frances. "The Rhetoric of Heteroglossia in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 75 (1989): 210.

¹²⁶ McMullen, Joanne Halleran, *Writing Against God: Language as Message in the Literature of Flannery O'Connor* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1996) 141.

there. Instead, her fiction always includes events that destroy the culture founded in a spiritual vacuum.

The *mind-soul* is safe as long as one rejects the Incarnation and the Resurrection. The Misfit from "A Good Man is Hard to Find" explicates the battle between the *hupokeimenon*'s voice of culture and the voice of Christian truth:

Jesus thown everything off balance. . . . Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead . . . and he shouldn't have done it. He thown everything off balance. If he did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but thow everything away and follow Him, and if he didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can -- by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness.¹²⁷

When the *hupokeimenon* animated by the Grandmother pleads for the *mind-soul*'s culture, "Maybe he didn't raise the dead," there is only one thing left to do and that's silence the voice of deceit with three bullets into the body.¹²⁸ After her death the Misfit's voice of truth can proclaim, "Shut up . . . It's no real pleasure in life."¹²⁹

In O'Connor's stories the characters who move themselves closer and closer toward damnation are stopped in their tracks. They cease to be their own Prime Mover and start advancing toward a recognition of *The Prime Mover*. One way O'Connor

¹²⁷ O'Connor, *CW* 152.

¹²⁸ The Misfit shoots the grandmother not just because she claims him as one of her own children, but also as a punishment for her hypocrisy. In a letter to John Hawkes (14 April 1960) O'Connor explains that while the Grandmother is the recipient of grace, the Misfit's "shooting her is a recoil, a horror at her humanness" that holds hands with her hypocrisy, which according to O'Connor would be an impediment to being "a medium for Grace" in the Protestant view, but she "sees things the other way," and tells Hawkes, "I'm a Catholic writer" (*HB* 389-390).

¹²⁹ O'Connor, *CW* 152, 153.

physically signals such a change in the character's spiritual disposition is through what I call the Heraclitian vision. As mentioned earlier, Aristotle challenged the philosophy of Heraclitus, who viewed the world in continuous flux and thereby drew the conclusion that it is impossible to know anything for certain. "For in pursuing the truth," Aristotle writes in *Metaphysics*, "one must start from the things that are always in the same state and suffer no change."¹³⁰ Aristotle explains that Heraclitus's belief in a world of indeterminacy leaves the *knower* in a confused state, unsure of anything. He explains: "Because they (Heraclitus and his followers) saw that all this world of nature is in movement, and that about that which changes no true statement can be made, they said that of course, regarding that which everywhere in every respect is changing, nothing could truly be affirmed."¹³¹ Robert Con Davis summarizes Aristotle's position:

For the Greeks, the position from which one sees the ultimate "good" must be based, in an analytical sense, "outside" of apparent motion . . . That scientific position of knowing can then be occupied fully only by those who can see into the natural order of the world -- for Homer, the stable viewpoints of Zeus and those in the pantheon, and for Aristotle, the scientific perspective and subject of inquiry. Aristotle's wager is that in any instance of interpretation or knowing there must be a "first mover," and the existence of this perspective addresses the problem of indeterminacy in the world.¹³²

¹³⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysica* XI:6, 1063a.13-15 (859).

¹³¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysica* IV:5, 1010a.6-10 (746).

¹³² Davis 52.

I suggest that in order for the her characters to become aware that they are not *The Prime Mover*, O'Connor gives them a taste of their own medicine by having them experience the world that they believe they understand so well. The character has an experience that disrupts his or her stable vision of "reality."

In nearly every story O'Connor's characters encounter a Heraclitian vision that preempts or becomes a part of their moment of grace. In *Wise Blood*, before Hazel Motes sees the mummified new Jesus and his mother's face on his own, he puts on her glasses which made the wall that he was facing move up closer and waver.¹³³ As he races down the highway, unwittingly toward the state trooper who will be his agent of grace, "he had the sense that the road was slipping under him" (117). At the end of the novel, Mrs. Flood's vision of redemption is described in terms of outside motion: "She felt as if she were blocked at the entrance of something . . . as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn't begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther away into the darkness until he was the pin point of light" (131). Before O. E. Parker falls off the tractor, "the sun, the size of a golf ball, began to switch regularly from in front to behind him, but he appeared to see it both places as if he had eye in the back of his head," then "all at once he saw the tree reaching out to grasp him" (665). Almost instantaneous with moment of Mary Grace's attack, Ruby Turpin ("Revelation") has an instinctual and physical feeling that "she was certain that she was about to be in an earthquake" (644). Right before the moment of his death, the entire landscape moves around Mr. Fortune ("A View of the Woods"), especially "the gaunt trees [that] had thickened into mysterious dark files that were marching across the water and away into the distance" (546). Tanner

¹³³ O'Connor, *CW* 105.

("Judgment Day") wants to get out of New York City where "the steps moved under you while you stood still," and go home where "he could put his feet on the ground" (686). In "The River," the boy immerses himself into the Heraclitian world. His body catches the strong current and is "treading on nothing," but he has no fear because "since he was moving quickly . . . he knew that he was getting somewhere" (171). In contrast is Julian at the end of "Everything That Rises Must Converge," who runs for help toward "a cluster of lights he saw in the distance ahead of him," but the "lights drifted farther away the faster he ran and his feet moved numbly as if they carried him nowhere" (500). General Sash in "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" "felt like he was running backwards and the words were coming at him like musket fire, just escaping him but getting nearer and nearer. He turned around and began to run as fast as he could but he found himself running toward the words" (261). Perhaps the most striking example of the Heraclitian vision is when Asbury in "The Enduring Chill" sees the water stain on the ceiling above his bed descend upon him like a bird.

A side note needs to be added here regarding Heraclitus playing the seeming Christian champion alongside of the 'pagan' Aristotle, who truly fed the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas.¹³⁴ My suggestion that O'Connor's characters experience a Heraclitian

¹³⁴ Perhaps one other implicit element bolsters the argument that Aristotle plays the unsuspecting opponent to my interpretation of O'Connor's neo-Thomism. Aristotle, as far as he is understood guilty-by-association to pure rationalism, inspired Averroës who attempted to reconcile religious beliefs with pure rational demonstrations. Aquinas' scholarship hoped to give a Christian response to Averroës Muslim rational philosophy, but at the same time, Aquinas drew also from Aristotle to make the counter argument. Depending upon how one reads Aristotle, he can either be a stumbling block or a cornerstone for one's belief in God participating in humanity. Etienne Gilson traces this polemic (37-66) in *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*, a book that O'Connor wrote a review that was never published (see Zuber's *Presence of Grace* 129). According to Gilson, the problem for Averroës and his successors "was how to think as Aristotle if we believe as Mohammed" (38). Gilson elaborates that theology for Averroës was always second-rate to philosophy and "that the Koran and its theological interpretations [were]

vision in opposition to an Aristotelian stasis may surprise some readers who think that the Thomist-Aristotelian school of analogous thought, which opposed the Heraclitian pantheistic view, would have won the Christian soul into recognition. There are two aspects of Heraclitus we must consider here: first, the particular aspect of Heraclitus' philosophy that may actually link it to a Christian vision of the world, and second, how I use Heraclitus in describing an element of the O'Connorian character's spiritual conversion. In an essay he published in 1960 called "Herakleitos the Obscure," Thomas Merton praised the mysterious philosopher whose *logos* Merton compares with the Tao of Lao-tse and the Word of St. John. "Herakleitos, we must remember, comes *before* Aristotle's principle of identity and contradiction," Thomas Merton writes. "He does not look at things with the eyes of Aristotelian logic, and consequently he can say that opposites can be, from a certain point of view, the same."¹³⁵ Merton chooses to praise Heraclitus' vision, not because its pantheism is morally indeterminate or dismantles monotheism. Instead, Merton finds Heraclitus compatible with his Catholic belief because (if I may draw this conclusion with a reference relevant to our discussion) like Father William Lynch, he recognizes the room available within Heraclitian logic for analogy. This is especially important since it relates not only to the sanctification of matter, but more specifically (as Merton pointed out) to the Incarnation, the *logos* of Saint John who begins his gospel with "the Word made Flesh." With respect to Heraclitus's indisputable pantheism, please remember how I employ the Heraclitian vision in my

nothing more to him than popular approaches to pure philosophy" (53). Thus, the influence of Aristotelian rationalism (either by Averroists or Dualists) marginalizes belief.

¹³⁵ Merton, Thomas, "Herakleitos the Obscure," *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnel (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1974) 260.

analysis of O'Connor's fiction, as O'Connor giving her characters "a taste of their own medicine." Pantheism, as Jacques Maritain so concisely states it, is "God confused with creatures,"¹³⁶ and it is precisely this pantheistic vision that her character, who believes herself or himself to be the Prime Mover, adheres to. C. S. Lewis remarked that Carlyle and Emerson advocated "on a slightly lower cultural level" than Hegel, that Pantheism was the "final religious refinement." Lewis countered that Pantheism is

in fact the permanent natural bent of the human mind; the permanent ordinary level below which man sometimes sinks . . . but above which his own unaided efforts can never raise him for very long . . . It is the attitude into which the human mind automatically falls when left to itself.¹³⁷

The fact that Heraclitus' pantheism appears to have left such a hallmark on the American consciousness through Emerson is not a point to be taken lightly, especially with respect to O'Connor. Emerson's god is the "god of 'ontotheology,'" a deity shared by Nietzsche whose philosophy "assumes Cartesian dualisms," Christina Bieber explains.¹³⁸ In a letter to Sally Fitzgerald in 1963 O'Connor wrote that "when Emerson decided in 1832 that he could no longer celebrate the Lord's supper unless the bread and wine were removed that an important step in the vaporization of religion in America had taken place."¹³⁹

Heraclitus is not the clear cut precursor of the Christian vision, but he is an enigmatic philosopher, who in the spirit of his unified understanding of the world, walks the theological line between right and wrong. In O'Connor's stories Heraclitus' philosophical

¹³⁶ Maritain, Jacques, *An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. E. I. Watkin (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1959) 197.

¹³⁷ Lewis, C. S., *Miracles* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) 136.

¹³⁸ Bieber, *Incarnational Art* 6.

¹³⁹ O'Connor, *HB* 511.

bent toward pantheism is akin to the self-deification of the dualistic character's *mind-soul*, and thus the character suffers the instability of attempting to maintain such a vision.

O'Connor's characters lose their ability to keep the world under their conceptual order, and that includes changes not only in their environment, but also especially in the way they view the body with respect to gender. According to Robert Con Davis, the *hupokeimenon*'s voice of culture, sides with the masculine. "The male as a speaking subject . . . is located within the *hupokeimenon* with its suggestion of a privileged and stable view."¹⁴⁰ The character must first recognize the body in order to understand its relation to the soul. In the tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas, the flesh corresponds to *ousia* (matter), which is understood as feminine. In the following discussion, I hope to lay the groundwork for thinking about the body and soul as feminine and masculine respectively in the medieval context. From this foundation, I build my argument (largely presented in Chapter Four) that readers of O'Connor can detect her representation of the union of body and soul in her female Christ figures.

First we must recall the foundation of Aristotle's epistemology: to know something is to know it by its form or *eidos*. Within the context of Greek culture and the philosophical dialogue that permeates Saint Thomas Aquinas' Christian theology, Aristotle's assertion has gendered inferences. The genderment reveals itself most clearly in Aristotle's *De Generatione Animal* where the philosopher assigns the male's semen as the bearer of form (*eidos*) and the woman's womb as the supplier of matter (*ousia*).¹⁴¹ In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas reconciles Aristotelian biology in two theologically

¹⁴⁰ Davis 52.

¹⁴¹ See Aristotle, *De generatione animal* 4:1.

pertinent positions. First, Saint Thomas explains that the composition of the human identity, which he calls the hylomorphic composition, is an Aristotelian analogue: soul is to *eidos* and body is to *ousia*. Second, he addresses questions about Mary's virginity and Christ's conception within the context of this same analogue.

In response to the question whether Christ is ignobled by having a woman's flesh, since, in the tradition of Aristotelian understanding of human embryology, Mary's womb enfleshes God, Saint Thomas responds:

According to the Philosopher (*De Gener. Animal*, I, ii, iv), in conception the seed of the male is not by way of matter, but by way of agent: and the female alone supplies the matter. Wherefore though the seed of the male was lacking in Christ's conception, it does not follow that due matter was lacking . . . Just as [Divine power] transmuted the slime of the earth into Adam's body, so could it transmute the matter supplied by His Mother into Christ's body, even though it were not the sufficient matter for a natural conception.¹⁴²

Aquinas follows up with his reply to an objection built around the supposition that "the male sex is more noble than female," by stating:

Although the Son of God could have taken flesh from whatever matter he willed, it was nevertheless most becoming that He should take flesh from a woman. First because in this way the entire human nature was ennobled . . . Secondly because thus the truth of the Incarnation is made evident . . .

¹⁴² Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica: First Complete American Edition in Three Volumes*, 3 vols., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican (New York: Benzinger Brothers Inc., 1948) Pt. III. Q.28. a.1 r.5 (2: 2170).

Thirdly, because in this fashion the begetting of man is accomplished in every variety of manner.¹⁴³

Synthesizing ancient embryological models with medieval theological concepts, Aquinas offers an explanation for Christ's transgender nature:¹⁴⁴ "The male sex is more noble than the female, and for this reason He took human nature in the male sex. But lest the female sex should be despised, it was fitting that he should take flesh of a woman."¹⁴⁵ Staying within the guidelines of Aristotelian conception and its spiritual analogue, Saint Bonaventure advances the nobility of the female flesh in his sermon *De assumptione B. Virginis Mariae*. Bonaventure asserts that Mary resides in heaven corporeally because the logic follows that the "soul of Christ is not her soul -- since soul does not come by transmission [from the parents] -- but his body is from her body. Therefore she will not be there [in heaven] in the mode of perfection unless she is there corporeally."¹⁴⁶ In Catholic belief, Mary is the prototype of all humanity's destiny and represents the transcendent nobility of the human body. Extending Bonaventure's argument could lead to the Catholic conviction that to know one's complete self and ultimate destiny, is to recognize God in one's flesh.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Aquinas, *Summa* Pt. III. Q. 31. a.4 (2: 2187).

¹⁴⁴ For an essay that affirms Aquinas' positive position toward women that has some parallels to my discussion of Aristotle's primitive understanding of gynecology, see Michael Nolan's "What Aquinas Never Said About Women," *First Things* 87 (Nov. 1998): 11-12.

¹⁴⁵ Aquinas, *Summa* Pt. III. Q.31. a.4 (2: 2187).

¹⁴⁶ qtd. in Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992) 212.

¹⁴⁷ One may contest the point that Saint Augustine's NeoPlatonic disposition counters such a recognition a spiritualized body (see esp. *Confessions* VII.17). Although he favored Plato's conceptual philosophy, Augustine never surrenders his Christian belief to a strict sense of dualism, such as Manicheanism. Admittedly, a seemingly paradoxical understanding of God surfaces in *Confessions*, as when he recognizes both the Incarnation as a physical reality, and yet prays, "O Lord, since you are God and not flesh and blood" (XII.32). However, his discourse both distinguishes and unites the nature of the Father and Son, and likewise, the body and soul. He ultimately brings humanity and the Godhead together, in their own separate compositions. After a long discussion of the mind (see especially X.11-19), body, and

For O'Connor's characters, such a recognition requires a new way of seeing. The *hupokeimenon* is pure *eidos*, and as Davis explains, "the connection here is form (*eidos*) as a natural and intrinsic expression of maleness."¹⁴⁸ *Eidos* in the Thomist analogy is the soul. As discussed earlier, the character anagogically enfleshed with the *hupokeimenon* considers herself or himself all *mind-soul*, and thus dismisses the body as a worthless tag-a-long. In order to see the body, and more importantly, the body that has a relationship with the soul, the *hupokeimenon* must encounter the Christian flesh, the spiritualized *ousia*. In O'Connor's stories the masculine, self-deifying *mind-soul* encounters the Incarnation as manifested in Christ's feminine carnality. Following the tradition of the later Middle Ages where Christ's body was also represented as feminine, O'Connor creates female Christ-figures. Chapter Four examines in detail the appearance of *transgender transfigurations* in a number of her works, but for the sake of a comprehensive introduction to the *hupokeimenon*'s fourth attribute, I will very briefly offer a sampling of where female Christ-figures appear in O'Connor's fiction.

In *Wise Blood* the memory of Hazel Motes' mother haunts him. After returning from a peep show, the youthful Hazel Motes tries to avoid his mother's stare. "She was standing there straight, looking at him. He moved behind a tree and got out of her view, but in a few minutes, he could feel her watching him through the tree."¹⁴⁹ The scene matches his earlier imaginative description of Christ. Haze "saw Jesus move from tree to

soul he concludes in the vein of Catholic sacramentality: "For it is my soul that gives life to my body, and it is you who give life to my soul. How, then, am I to search for this blessed life? For I do not possess it until I can right say, 'This is all I want. Happiness is here'" (X.20). Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1988).

¹⁴⁸ Davis 45.

¹⁴⁹ O'Connor, *CW* 35.

tree in the back of his mind,” (11) a wild figure who stalks him and aims to prove Asa Hawks’ maxim: “You can’t runaway from Jesus” (28). Near the end of the novel, when Hazel Motes looks at himself in the mirror “he saw his mother’s face in his” (106). Immediately following this revelation he destroys the mummified new Jesus and inadvertently proclaims to Sabbath Lily Hawks, “I’ve seen the only truth there is!” (107). The woman at the filling station, whom Francis Tarwater meets in one of the last scenes in *The Violent Bear It Away*, has “all knowledge in her stony face and the fold of her arms indicated a judgment fixed from the foundations of time” (467). In “The Artificial Nigger,” Mr. Head takes his grandson, Nelson, to the city so the boy can gain a knowledge about Black people. The old man thinks that once the boy is exposed to Blacks, he “would be content to stay at home for the rest of his life” (211-12). Mr. Head tells Nelson that the city will be “full of niggers” (212). While in the city, Nelson has to engage a black woman in conversation, and his encounter reveals to him Love itself. “He suddenly wanted her to reach down and pick him up and draw him against her and then he wanted to feel her breath on his face . . . to look down and down into her eyes while she held him tighter and tighter,” and after she speaks to him, “Nelson would have collapsed at her feet” (223). In Chapter Four I analyze these and many more examples of O’Connor’s representation of the spiritualized feminine flesh. Powell from “A Circle in the Fire,” perhaps summarizes my sensibility of O’Connor’s female Christ figures when he complains about the appearance of Mrs. Cope’s daughter: “Jesus . . . another woman” (242). One thing is consistent in all of her characters’ encounters with a feminine representation of the Incarnation. Once the character comes in contact with the female

Christ-figure, that encounter has a lingering effect upon the grace-recipient. Unlike their own *hupokeimenon* which they seldom recognize, when a character sees the female Christ-figure, he or she has to deal in some manner with this vision of the body-soul.

Bringing together the attributes of the character's first signified body yields the following conclusion. A character in need of grace commonly ignores the body and upholds the mind as the only thing that matters. As O'Connor's characters plummet deeper and deeper into the illusion of their *mind-soul's* sovereignty, they have to be caught in their spiritual freefall, and made aware of a higher existence, one present within the union of the body and soul. In order to achieve this rescue, the characters experience the discomfort of a Heraclitian vision, where their confidence as the Prime Mover is stripped away through their perception of a world filled with continuous motion and mystery. In line with Saint Thomas' gendered analogues, the transgender transfiguration supports the Christian belief that a human being's true divinity is expressed in the union of body and soul. O'Connor emphasizes this gendered analogical model of belief in her frequent representations of female Christ-figures. Regardless of whether it can continue to ignore its own body (*hupokeimenon*), the *mind-soul* must deal with its intellection of a character who signifies the body-soul union that it struggles to deny. One thing remains to be discussed, and that is how the character sees his or her own body. Since the *knower* is not the *hupokeimenon*, the only way the *knower* can know itself is if it is projected out into the world. In order to "see" the first signified body, O'Connor presents reflections of a character's *hupokeimenon* in mirrors, other living characters, or literal corpses.

As a reflection, the *hupokeimenon*, O'Connor's anagogic first signified body, appears in her stories as a corpse. The corpse can appear in another character (whom I call the *reflective corpse*) or in a literal reflection produced by a glass or mirror.

O'Connor has many reflective and literal corpses in her fiction, and sometimes both appear in one story. The new Jesus is the obvious literal corpse in *Wise Blood*, while the "hollow-chested" Solace Layfield makes Hazel pause and think that he "had never pictured himself that way before" (94). The memory of Old Tarwater's corpse haunts Francis Tarwater in *The Violent Bear It Away*, and the boy mirrors the cadaverous description of the Stranger -- "a pale, lean, old-looking young man with deep hollows under his cheekbones" (469) -- when "circles under [Tarwater's] eyes appear" and "his skin seemed to have shrunk on the frame of his bones from dryness" (468). In "The Displaced Person," the image of the fragmented body and corpse reflect the state of spiritual decay of Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. Shortley. Mrs. Shortley comes to her demise among a montage of dislocated limbs, and Mrs. McIntyre in the presence of a broken body. When characters stare into glasses and mirrors they see their anagogic reflections of death. Nelson ("The Artificial Nigger") looks into the darkened train window and "saw a pale ghost-like face scowling back at him" (214). Rayber (*The Violent Bear It Away*) encounters his "bloodless wired reflection in the glass of a shoe shop" (407). Characters also have their spiritual death reflected in corpse-like characters. Sally Poker Sash believes that if her grandfather, General Sash, had died before her graduation, "she thought she would have died herself" (257). Her imminent rendezvous with his corpse at the end of "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," gives the title of that short story a whole new reflective connotation. When Sarah Ham

comes to disrupt Thomas's life in "The Comforts of Home," "he needed nothing to tell him he was in the presence of the very stuff of corruption" (580). Thomas's disgust toward Sarah finds its true reflective source at the end of the story when his mother's repeated suggestion, "I keep thinking that it might be you" (575), reveals its anagogic veracity. "In the Lane Shall Enter First" Sheppard sees a reflection of himself in the two boys he tries to create in his own image. He ignores both God and his son Norton. At the story's conclusion, Sheppard's haunting vision of himself through his mental conjuring of Norton's sad face is accentuated in the physically horrific sight of his son's suicidal corpse. Norton's death results from his lack of understanding of Heaven. The thought of himself as a corpse consumes Asbury's imagination in "The Enduring Chill," and catalyzes a morbid vindictive joy to have his mother "see death on his face at once" (547). With a sense of satisfaction, Asbury sees in the mirror "his pale broken face glare at him;" however, the corpse that he imagines he can create never materializes in the way he desires. The anagogic corpse of the first signified body is the one reflected, and the one that will truly allow Asbury "to witness a majestic transformation" (547).

Represented as a corpse, the *hupokeimenon* reflects the true spiritual state of O'Connor's characters who believe in the god-like power of their mind. Since the *mind-soul* inherently denies the body's physical significance, it is not surprising that her characters miss their body's anagogic significance. It is usually not until the characters approach their own death, when they feel physical and sometimes intensely psychological pain, that they begin to recognize their inchoateness. I hope to establish throughout this dissertation that O'Connor treats the first signified body with some consistency. To

conclude the chapter I present my analysis of Ruby Hill's *hupokeimenon* in "A Stroke of Good Fortune," and show how we can discover these attributes that I believe are part of O'Connor's anagogic vision of the body.

"A Stroke of Good Fortune": Ruby Hill's Hupokeimenon

Ruby Hill is thirty-four years old, pregnant, and unaware that a new life is growing inside of her. Madame Zoleeda, a palmist she visited, assured Ruby that she has a "long illness" that will end "in a stroke of good fortune" (195). Upon returning from her walk to the grocery store, Ruby must climb four floors to her apartment, but in her condition, she finds the ascent arduous. Along the way she sits on a toy pistol left on the stairs, gets a history lesson from a 78 year-old ex-high school teacher on the fountain of youth, and is told by her friend, Laverne, that her swollen ankles denote not an illness, but Ruby's role as an expectant mother. The story ends when the owner of the toy pistol, Hartley Gilfeet, crashes into her on the stairwell and triggers in Ruby a deeper reflection about who she truly is.

Of all the characters O'Connor creates who are "out-of-touch" with their bodies, perhaps no one stands at a greater distance from herself than Ruby Hill. She exists as a person completely in her head. Despite the fact that her dress fits her more snugly than before, her feet are swollen, and although she feels something pressing her in the abdomen, she does not make the connection that she is having a baby. She desires things to remain as they are, stable and unchanging. The world that she experiences, however, is the Heraclitian one of continual flux and great indeterminacy.

Ruby puts faith in 'moving.' She translates Madam Zoleeda's prediction that her illness will end with a stroke of good fortune as "Moving," which on the surface means relocating to a subdivision (185). But what is really at issue on an anagogic level is not real estate but Ruby's role as the self-appointed "Prime Mover." To undermine Ruby's implicit confidence in herself, O'Connor creates a Heraclitian environment, full of mystery and indeterminacy; everything that should be static is dynamic, and thereby makes Ruby unsure of herself. The apartment house steps are "covered with a mole-colored carpet that looked as if it grew from the floor. They stuck straight up like steeple steps, it seemed to her. They reared up. The minute she stood at the bottom of them, they reared up and got steeper for her benefit" (185). Later, "[t]he steps were going up and down like a seesaw with her in the middle of it," (187) and outside of Laverne's apartment "the floor around her dropped on both sides [and] [t]he walls turned black" (191). Inside the apartment "the floor came up to where Ruby could see it and remained, dipping a little" (191). When she leaves Laverne's apartment "she began walking toward the stair, slowly, as if the floor were going to move under her" (194). Even though she again climbs the stairs with great deliberation, one step at a time, "she thought she were standing still" (195). Ruby's Heraclitian vision is filled with the potential for grace, because the instability of her physical environment gradually erodes Ruby's confidence in her mind's ability to apprehend the world around her. It is only after two significant events -- Laverne's exclamation that Ruby is a mother and Ruby's run-in with the charging Hartley Gilfeet -- that she becomes "motionless" (193) and "the steps stopped seesawing" (196). Ruby struggles to sustain an unchanging vision of the world with an Aristotelian

epistemology that recognizes things as pure form, not matter. In other words, everything she sees is a construction of her *mind-soul* rather than a reflection of objective reality grounded in the flesh. This includes, most importantly, her self-perception.

The first place Ruby sees a reflection of herself is in the “dark yellow-spotted mirror over the table” where she sets down her grocery sack. Her body maintains its posture after setting down her bundle. “She was too tired to take her arms from around it or to straighten up and she hung there collapsed from the hips, her head balanced like a big florid vegetable at the top of the sack” (184). The “gritty collard leaf” that sticks to her right cheek emphasizes her body’s form as something less than human, more like an unwatered plant. Her vocabulary limits itself to “Collard greens!” which she says “spitting the word from her mouth . . . as if it were a poisonous seed” (184). The mirror reflects her vegetable-body, a scientific subject; however, she doesn’t see the *hupokeimenon*. “She gazed with the stony unrecognition at the face that confronted her” (184). Ruby’s body as a poisonous, withered plant, represents her *hupokeimenon* not only because it aligns itself under Aristotelian objectivity, but more so, because it represents her spiritual death in the image of a corpse. In “A Stroke of Good Fortune” the withered, dead plant relates directly to the human corpse.

Ruby maintains a memory of her dead mother as a “puckered-up old yellow apple, sour” (186) and the corpse of her infant brother “like a dried yellow apple” (195). Having children, as far as she is concerned, means signing your death certificate. By Ruby’s reckoning, her mother was a living corpse. “All those children were what did her mother in . . . [h]er mother got deader with every one of them” (186). Both on the level of the

character's self-understanding and the anagogic signification which remains a mystery to her, Ruby's pregnancy symbolizes her personal death. Her maternity offers her an opportunity to recognize her *hupokeimenon*, and start a new life of the body and the spirit. At the beginning of the story, she grumbles over her husband's lack of understanding of why it's so important that they move. "With her health at stake . . . what did he think she was going to do, kill herself?" (186). As the story progresses and the child in her womb becomes harder and harder to deny, Ruby herself becomes like a corpse. "She was not going to have something waiting in her to make her deader," (195) but this potential change is beyond her control. When she finally admits to herself that she is pregnant, "[s]he felt her face drawn and puckered," and "she was old" (195). At the end of the story, she is pregnant, not only with child, but even more significantly, with a soul. The baby in her womb is the *ousia*, the matter that she incarnates with her own flesh. She gives birth, in other words, to her complete person, body and soul.

Ironically, Ruby does not think of herself as incomplete. "She felt the wholeness of herself, a whole thing climbing the stairs" (188). However, she is constantly made aware of her different body parts. She considers her body in their individual painful fragments: her chest, her heart, her feet, her stomach. After Mr. Jerger's history lesson on Ponce de Leon and the fountain of youth, Ruby feels "a pain in her stomach. It was a pain like a piece of something pushing against something else" (190). She at first fears cancer, but her faith in another bodily fragment, her hand that informed Madam Zoleeda of the imminent stroke of good fortune, helps her to overcome her fear. Ruby's mind reacts against what she assumes is a bodily infirmity, and attacks the pain in her womb with a

violently abortive bravado: “She slashed it in two with Madame Zoleeda She slashed it twice through and then again until there were only pieces of it that couldn’t be recognized” (190). Although meant to preserve her body’s integrity, Ruby’s attack actually shatters the ‘wholeness’ she felt earlier. Her bodily fragmentation continues until Laverne puts the pieces together for her, and Harvey Gilfeet reconstitutes them anagogically when he impregnates her with a soul.

Laverne Watts draws attention to one body part in particular, the feet. As mentioned earlier, I provide a fuller discussion of foot’s signification as the *mind-soul* in Chapter Three. For now I will consider Ruby’s feet within this anagogic corporeal equation. One point should be made, which may seem obvious once stated: In order for the *hupokeimenon* to be dismissed, the *mind-soul* must not be there to support its existence. It can be said, punningly, that in O’Connor’s stories the *hupokeimenon* should not have a leg to stand on. O’Connor’s pattern of redemption usually requires that her characters get their feet off the ground, and Ruby Hill is no exception.

So what’s wrong with Ruby’s feet? When she enters Laverne’s apartment, an anxious and dizzy Ruby gingerly walks “putting her feet carefully one before the other,” in contrast to a guffawing Laverne who “staggered back to the sofa and fell on it, her legs rising higher than her hips and falling down again helplessly with a thud” (191). Ruby takes a seat, and “looking at her feet” declares to herself that her ankles are “swollen!” She asks Laverne, “Are my ankles swollen?” Laverne’s opinion is that “they are kind of fat” (192). Fat ankles may not be flattering in the purely physical sense, but there is more than just the physical in Laverne’s language. O’Connor intensifies the irony by making

Laverne the secretary of a chiropodist, the organizer of words for a type of foot-specialist. If we understand Ruby's fat ankles as containing another layer of signification, then they reflect her inflated *mind-soul* that dominates her entire being and denies the body's existence. Ruby inches closer to a revelation; looking at her feet she admits, "I think they're swollen" (192). Laverne confirms her suspicion, but pushes it a bit further. "I believe your ankles are swollen Not just your ankles, you're swollen all over" (192, 194). Laverne acts out the implications of Ruby's physical image, mimicking a pregnant woman by sticking out her stomach and leaning heavily from side to side in an awkward waddle. When Ruby finally asks Laverne why she looks at her "that way -- swagging out that stomach," Laverne puts words to the flesh she mimics (193). She accompanies her message with high-stepping choreography.

Laverne began to do a kind of comic dance up and down the room. She took two or three slow steps in one direction with her knees bent and then she came back and kicked her leg slowly and painfully in the other. She began to sing in a loud guttural voice, rolling her eyes, "Put them all together, they spell MOTHER! MOTHER!" (193)

All the bodily fragments come together. Seeing the image of the woman she must become, Ruby stands up, plants her feet firmly on the ground and bellows out her denial: "'Not me! she shouted. 'Not me!'" (193). Ruby rejects her pregnancy, but of course in O'Connor's fiction, such an attitude of denial rarely carries with it just social or psychological baggage.

Ruby's rejection is ultimately a rejection of a life united with God, her own body united with a soul. O'Connor said of "A Stroke of Good Fortune," "It is, in its way, Catholic, being about the rejection of life at the source."¹⁵⁰ If we relegate her remark and her story to the level of a Pro-Life statement, then we miss the context of her anagogic artistry, where O'Connor infuses layers of meaning that penetrate to "the ultimate reality" and the true Source. Although God is never mentioned explicitly in "A Stroke of Good Fortune," the pregnant body becomes the perfect trope to imply the existence of a 'new life,' one beyond just physical ramifications. The fact that O'Connor called the story "Catholic" implies more than just a religious label. "I am always astonished at the emphasis the Church puts on the body," she wrote in 1955 letter. "It is not the soul [the Church] says that will rise but the body, glorified."¹⁵¹ In "A Stroke of Good Fortune," the feminine flesh becomes explicit in its union with an inner life, a masculine soul. Through her character, Ruby Hill, O'Connor effects a double impregnation, both a child in the womb and a soul. O'Connor's fictional body is not merely a collection of cells whose signification begins and ends on the plane of physical existence, but instead a body that exists to unite with a spirit. "The Catholic writer often finds himself writing for a world that is unprepared and unwilling to see the meaning of life as he sees it,"¹⁵² O'Connor suggested. Even if the audience falls under the classification of "Catholic," they too may miss the point. She admitted, "We Catholics are very much given to the Instant answer. Fiction doesn't have any."¹⁵³ "A Stroke of Good Fortune" is not merely about advocating

¹⁵⁰ O'Connor, *HB* 85.

¹⁵¹ O'Connor, *HB* 100.

¹⁵² O'Connor, *MM* 185.

¹⁵³ O'Connor, *MM* 184.

the Catholic position on abortion, but instead about looking ahead and beyond just the mortal implications. O'Connor's stories are always forward-looking to the body "which will be flesh and spirit united in peace;" however, she painfully conditions her characters first to recognize and accept their whole earthly being, which is also flesh and spirit.¹⁵⁴ Ruby Hill tries to see the problems her body is giving her as a minor part of her existence, certainly nothing on the level of the spirit. Before her encounter with Hartely Gilfeet, she qualifies the child in her womb as nothing more than "gas." It is not surprising then, that Ruby ignores the full implication of Laverne's parting shot, "Well I hope *all* of you feel better tomorrow."¹⁵⁵

Ruby is destined for grace, yet, she must recognize something beyond just herself. If Ruby is to "put on Christ," then she must accept the Incarnation. The *transgender transfiguration* is carried out by Laverne's bodily reflection of Ruby's inevitable motherhood.¹⁵⁶ In this story, Christ's metaphorical maternity is subtle, but taken in combination with the analysis I present in Chapter Four, Mother Jesus appears to be part of O'Connor's greater anagogic vision. To understand Ruby's denial of Christ is to understand Ruby's denial of her own womanhood and the reality of her flesh.

The masculinity of Ruby's *hupokeimenon* is evident in the story. She goes so far as to surrogate her female body to her husband. She depends upon her husband, a salesman of *Miracle Products*, to assure her impregnability. When Laverne tells her that

¹⁵⁴ O'Connor, *HB* 100.

¹⁵⁵ O'Connor, *CW* 195, 194.

¹⁵⁶ Per my analysis in Chapter Four, Laverne is a Tough Mother Jesus who has the following three characteristics: 1) she makes a judgment, 2) she prefaces or immediately effects pain and suffering on the judge, 3) the words in her dialogue become actualized as part of the grace-recipient's punishment and contrition. With respect to the third characteristic, consider when Laverne says to Ruby, "You better put that gun up . . . before you shoot somebody" (*CW* 194), with respect to Gilfeet's charging pistols at the end of the story.

she is a mother, Ruby retorts, “Not me! . . . Oh no not me! Bill Hill takes care of that. Bill Hill takes care of that! Bill Hill’s been taking care of that for five years! That ain’t going to happen to me!” (193). Bill has been the custodian of Ruby’s womb, a type of physician responsible for Ruby’s gynecological health. Davis asserts that the *hupokeimenon*’s masculinity has misogynistic ramifications when applied to a female body. He explains that “the doctor’s job, *as doctor*, is to provide the structuring or ‘form’ of health that a woman cannot provide for herself -- *to make* her healthy.”¹⁵⁷ Ruby relinquishes this responsibility to her husband, who *makes* her health in his image. Ruby may believe her rejection of motherhood promotes her independence as a woman, but instead, she pours her being into a male form, her husband’s gynecological responsibility. What results is an unintentional self-deprecation that gives credence to the misogynistic Greco-Latin aphorism, *Tota mulier in utero* (“Woman is nothing but a uterus”).¹⁵⁸

Davis suggests that a woman’s knowledge, her very self-awareness, becomes displaced by the masculine *hupokeimenon*. “The male doctor steps in to position the woman as a female subject. The gynecologist frames the woman’s viewpoint with ‘gynecology,’ in effect, deploying a male technology to displace female knowledge and self-awareness.”¹⁵⁹ Ironically, Ruby believes her mother’s acceptance of motherhood resulted “[b]ecause she hadn’t known any better.” To her understanding, her mother exhibited “[p]ure ignorance. The purest downright ignorance.”¹⁶⁰ Ruby believes her power is in knowledge, but that knowledge is not a feminine knowledge of a woman and

¹⁵⁷ Davis 48.

¹⁵⁸ qtd. in Davis 51.

¹⁵⁹ Davis 48.

¹⁶⁰ O’Connor, *CW* 186.

her own body, but instead a displaced knowledge. “I don’t know how you think you know so much,” (194) Ruby tells Laverne. Tired of her conversation and incorrect answers to Mr. Jerger’s questions, she tells him, “I hadn’t thought.” The old man responds, “Nobody thinks anymore” (190). Her *mind-soul* separates her body not only from her soul, but also from her gender by giving away the sexual organs that define her biologically as a woman. This opens the opportunity for her to be created in the masculine image of the *hupokeimenon*. With its implications of identity and new life, the womb is an obvious target for O’Connor’s dispensation of grace.

Ruby’s uterus causes problems for her. When she dismisses the possibility of conceiving a child because she completely trusts her impregnability to her husband, Ruby allows herself to be defined in masculine terms. In a sense, Ruby lends herself to one of the sharpest misogynistic critiques, of which the ancients gave voice and medieval society preserved in different forms: “Women . . . were failed males.”¹⁶¹ In the Hippocratic ‘understanding’ (perhaps a better word, ‘wild speculation’) of a woman’s physiology, the womb wanders throughout the body. The second century A. D. doctor Aretaeus of Cappadocia illustrated and summarized the common perception of the formless woman:

In the middle of the flanks of women lies the womb, a female viscus, closely resembling an animal; for it is moved of itself hither and thither in the flanks, also upwards in a direct line to below the cartilage of the thorax, and so obliquely to the right or to the left, either to the liver or spleen; and

¹⁶¹ Brown, Peter, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 10.

it is altogether erratic. . . on the whole, the womb is like an animal within an animal.¹⁶²

According to Davis, Aretaeus' medical opinion reflects his acceptance of the masculine *hupokeimenon* to give order and meaning to the amorphous matter collected in the female body. Ruby mimics this primitive gynecological diagnosis, when she can't identify her womb as the source of health problems.

She had wondered more than once if this breathlessness could be heart trouble. Once in a while, going up the steps, there'd be a pain in her chest along with it. That was what she wanted it to be -- heart trouble. They couldn't very well remove your heart.¹⁶³

Davis writes that from the Aristotelian perspective, "The woman's body lacking form, is divided into an errant, rebellious part, a kind of dark frontier of incivility and formlessness, and a malleable, colonized part that, while not well-formed in itself, is nonetheless capable of being structured and made healthy by the gynecologist."¹⁶⁴ Bill Hill, Ruby's "gynecologist," gives her womb form by the donation of his sperm, which in turn generates a new life. In the biological and theological tradition of the Middle Ages, Bill's semen is analogous to Aristotle's form and Saint Thomas's soul. The toy pistol serves as

¹⁶² qtd. in Davis 47. Medieval science did not completely dispel the ancient notion of the wandering womb. In *The Anatomy of Mundinus* by Mondino de' Luzzi (ca. 1265-1326), the medieval doctor dissects the uterus and explains how diseases can be diagnosed in connection with the "suffocation of the womb." Mondino de' Luzzi explains: "There is suffocation not because the womb moveth in the material sense to the neck, throat, or lung, for this cannot be; but because, being unable to expel the vapours downward, it is moved and contracted below so that it driveth them upward" (734 Grant, *Source Book of Medieval Science*). Michael McVaugh notes that "the idea of the womb as mobile was very wide-spread in the Middle Ages and may still be encountered among the ignorant. To it we owe our word *hysteria* (*υστερια* = womb)" (note#25, 734).

¹⁶³ O'Connor, *CW* 187. With reference to the preceeding note, Mondino de' Luzzi explains that when medieval people said that "their womb hath reached the heart," it translated into cardiac arrest, death.

¹⁶⁴ Davis 47-48.

a metaphorical means for Ruby's anagogic spiritual impregnation. When she sits upon Hartley Gilfeet's pistol, "nine inches of treacherous tin" that she says could have "ruined herself,"¹⁶⁵ Ruby foreshadows the anagogic conception of her new body and soul at the end of the story. The child in her womb and the soul in her body unite into one somatic symbol. Her eventual acceptance of her pregnancy, which makes her *hupokeimenon* "deader", gives birth to a new life in the flesh and spirit.

Hartley Gilfeet anagogically impregnates her with a soul. The boy, whose pet name is "Little Mister Good Fortune," knocks her off her feet (*mind-soul*) and knocks the old wind out of her. At the end of the story, when Ruby concludes that the child in her womb is nothing but "gas"¹⁶⁶ (195), Gilfeet runs up the stairs with his phallic toy pistols leveled, and rockets "through her head" (196). Ruby had calmed herself before Gilfeet's charge up the stairs by concluding that her illness "would end in a stroke of good moving" (195). She is moved by an agent of grace whose last name, Gilfeet, is an illogical hybrid of fish and animal parts. If 'Gilfeet' is understood as Gil(l) = fish = Christian symbol and feet = soul, then the face which "crashed into her" (196) was a Christian soul. The *mind-soul* and *hupokeimenon* are no match for the forceful encounter with a Christian soul, and Ruby finally gives way. The *hupokeimenon* dies and the spirit establishes itself in proper relation to the body.

The association of breath and breathing with the Greek, *spiritu*, is an easy one to make in O'Connor's fiction. Ruby labors throughout the story to catch her breath. Recovering from Gilfeet's charge, Ruby "sat on the step, clutching the banister spoke

¹⁶⁵ O'Connor, *CW* 187.

¹⁶⁶ For an expansion of the idea that Ruby's trouble is "gas," see note #162 that gives reference to the "vapours of the womb."

while the breath came back into her a thimbleful at a time” (196). The spirit enters her, and Ruby becomes tuned into her body in a way she had never been before. Whereas at the beginning of the story she did not recognize her own reflection, by the end of the story her recognition is not dependent upon form (*eidōs*), but rather, something internal and unformed and mysterious, yet spliced with matter (*ousia*). “She recognized the feeling again, a little roll. It was as if it were not in her stomach. It was as if it were out nowhere in nothing, out nowhere, resting and waiting with plenty of time” (196). The “roll” she feels *outside* of her body gives evidence of a new corporeal composition. She now feels the intimacy of her body, that seems near to herself, and at the same time, to fill a space greater than herself. Whereas the physical world of indeterminacy, the Heraclitian vision, seems to have ceased with the reintroduction of the stable staircase, the physical indeterminacy has been replaced by an internal world of spiritual mystery. Ruby senses a new person, composed of body and soul, who has come into existence.

Conclusion

Ruby Hill is but one of many incarnations of the *hupokeimenon*. As the rest of my dissertation will reveal, O’Connor’s first signified body consistently appears in her other stories, and with it, its five attributes. Misguided by the exaggerated importance given to their own mind, her characters echo Descartes’ ontological assertion: “I possess a body with which I am very intimately conjoined, yet because on the one side, I have a clear and distinct idea of myself inasmuch as I am only a thinking and unextended thing . . . I [am] absolutely distinct from my body, and can exist without it.”¹⁶⁷ In O’Connor’s fiction,

¹⁶⁷ qtd. in Swinburne Richard and Sydney Shoemaker, *Personal Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984) 29.

grace and subsequent revelations come through corporeal mediums so as to penetrate her characters' dualistically erected barriers. In the analogical tradition of Aristotle and Saint Thomas Aquinas, human beings are form (*eidos*) and matter (*ousia*); however, the first signified body downplays 'matter' because it is perceived within the Cartesian perspective of the *mind-soul*. Thus, the character positions himself as the one who can comprehend everything because he considers himself the 'Prime Mover,' the one who effects first and secondary causes. Ruby Turpin in "Revelation," carries on in her mind the idea that she could manipulate her own Creation by bargaining with God not to make her a "nigger" or "white trash." Asbury in "The Enduring Chill" believes his death is completely in his own hands. Tanner, likewise, fantasizes about controlling his own judgment day. Mrs. Cope from "A Circle in the Fire" says of herself, "I don't let anything get ahead of me," (235) yet, her confidence falls behind when three boys visit her farm. O'Connor's characters, who attempt to establish themselves as 'Prime Movers,' find themselves disoriented in a world of Heraclitian vision, immersed in mystery and indeterminacy, and recipients of grace through every sensation possible in the body. For Descartes, the soul's union with the body is merely "a notion" that is sustained not by faith in God but by the evidence of motion. In a letter to Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia on 21 May 1643 the French philosopher wrote, "As regards the body and soul together, we have only the notion of their union, on which depends the soul's power to move the body, and the body's power to act on the soul and cause it sensations and passions."¹⁶⁸ The grace dispensed in

¹⁶⁸ qtd. in Cottingham, John, ed., introduction, *René Descartes: Meditations on First Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) xxxv.

O'Connor's stories comes in such a dizzying, sensational means that even the dualistic character has to recognize the possibility that the soul exists.

Her characters speak with the voice of modern culture, yet it is in their silence that they usually discover the meaning of their lives. O'Connor underlined in John Henry Cardinal Newman's *Essay in Aid of A Grammar of Assent* the sentence: "Words which make nonsense, do not make mystery."¹⁶⁹ In order to come to know themselves as a part of a greater mystery, they encounter the complete human identity, body and soul, in the fashion of the Incarnation. But because the *hupokeimenon* apprehends things only by their form, and form coincides with the masculine, the grace-destined character confronts the Incarnation in the feminine flesh of Christ as a new way of knowing. Lastly, the character's first signified body is a contradiction in and of itself, since the body's signification results from its diminished importance (or even its very existence) by the character's dualistic *mind-soul*. Since the *subject-to-be-known* can never be *the knower*, the *hupokeimenon* must be projected outward from itself, in some sort of reflection. When the *hupokeimenon* is projected outward into mirrors or other characters, the reflected image is a fragmenting body and/or a corpse. The corpse, the subject of the next chapter, denotes the spiritual death of O'Connor's characters' first signified body.

¹⁶⁹ Kinney 44 (#113).

Chapter 2

Count My Bones: The Resurrection of Medieval Corpses in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction

During a 'fire-and-brimstone' sermon, the preacher of a small congregation was interrupted by the ninety-year-old female parishioner who sat in the front pew underneath the pulpit. After the preacher proclaimed that "God will have His vengeance on the sinner" and "on that Final Day there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth," the old woman belted out: "But Revern'd, what's if we ain't got no teef?" The clergyman leaned forward heavily upon the pulpit and hung over it like a buzzard. Staring into her inquisitive eyes, he dropped the volume. "Madam," he said in a voice steady with confidence and strained with intimacy, "Teeth shall be provided."

The preacher's conviction epitomizes Flannery O'Connor's treatment of her fictional bodies. O'Connor gives her characters a body vulnerable to pain, so that through a recognition of their physical afflictions they facilitate the healing of their spiritual infirmities. In Chapter One I made the claim that O'Connor's fictional bodies carry two opposite significations. The first signified body, the *hupokeimenon*, is the body which the character's *mind-soul* has conceptually enveloped. If the character possessed a spiritual vision and saw the error of his ways, he would see how he had enslaved himself to a dualistic, often nihilistic, belief that has taken his soul away. If the character could see his true spiritual state, he would see a dead body parasitically attached to his *mind-soul*. I suggest that O'Connor allows her characters to get a glimpse of their present state of spiritual disarray and its jeopardizing destiny when she sets up mirrors in front of them to

reveal their body as a corpse. As the fifth attribute of the *hupokeimenon* maintains, the character cannot know herself unless her image is projected away from herself.

O'Connor's characters will defer any spiritual change as long as they can ignore their body and its experiences of physical corruption and pain.

A corpse is about as startling an image of the body as we can imagine. Although our rational minds would tell us that a dead being cannot do us any harm, something spurs our imagination to give the corpse its frightful potential. Ironically, that *something* is usually the noticeable absence of a soul. The Christian understanding of a corpse is a body without a soul, but such a definition did not put to rest a theological debate in the twelfth through fifteenth centuries that tackled the issue of what to make of the body in the grave. In the later Middle Ages, Saint Thomas Aquinas advanced Aristotle's notions of matter (*ousia*) and form (*eidos*) into the necessary analogous elements of the human condition, respectively body and soul. But at the point of death when the soul leaves the body, what form does the cadaver take? Caroline Walker Bynum summarizes the debate with the supposition, "[I]f the cadaver is not the body, then Christ's body did not lie in the tomb for the three days between Crucifixion and Resurrection."¹⁷⁰ How important is material continuity of the body to the person's identity? We can almost hear the doubts from the late medieval laity paraphrased: "But Revern'd, what's if we ain't got no teef?"

I believe Flannery O'Connor's imagination animates the medieval corpse, with all its enigmatic characteristics, so as to bring to her readers a sense of the spiritual in a very physical package. I see her stories engaging four major, interdependent considerations with respect to the late medieval corpse. First, she embraces the medieval notion of a

¹⁷⁰ Bynum, *Fragmentation* 261.

corpse's 'life,' a "liminal period"¹⁷¹ as Katherine Park terms it, when the dead body appears in a semianimate, conscious state and undergoes physical corruption that has a spiritual purgatorial value. Second, O'Connor shares the late medieval thought that a body's material continuity from this world to the next has importance, especially with respect to preserving a person's identity. The flesh identifies an individual physically and spiritually. Third, O'Connor respects the bodily corruption of the sinner along with the incorruptibility of the saint's holy relic. She borrows from the medieval appreciation of a martyr's pain that often produced a saint's bodily fragment, which later became venerated as a holy relic. Her treatment of pain and corporeal veneration adapts the medieval cult of the holy relic in ways more suited for the mentality of her twentieth-century audience. Fourth, O'Connor believes, like many pious people from the twelfth through fifteenth centuries, that seeing a corpse and a person in pain results in what Mitchell B. Merback calls, "an experiential continuity,"¹⁷² a feeling of shared suffering and a motivation to become introspective of one's own moral fiber and humanity. Although these four considerations are distinct, it is impossible to discuss one characteristic of the corpse without referencing its other qualities.¹⁷³ Flannery O'Connor's imagination draws from

¹⁷¹ Park, Katharine, "The Life of the Corpse: Division and Dissection in Late Medieval Europe," *The Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 50 (January 1995): 115.

¹⁷² Merback 19.

¹⁷³ Other perspectives on the medieval corpse, which I do not cite directly in the dissertation, but may provide some further background include the following: Elizabeth A. R Brown's "Authority, the Family, and the Dead in Late Medieval France," *French Historical Studies* 16 (1990): 803-832, and Brown's "Death and the Human Body in the Later Middle Ages: The Legislation of Boniface VIII on the Division of the Corpse," *Viator* 12 (1981): 226-241; Peter Brown's *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Antiquity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981); Cynthia Ho's "O Corpus delicti: The Edifying Dead in the Example of Jacques de Vitry," *Medieval Sermons & Society* 9 (1998): 203-218; Rothkrug, Lionel. "German Holiness and Western Sanctity in Medieval and Modern History," *Historical Reflections* 15.1 (1988): 161-249; Hegeland, John. "The Symbolism of Death in the Later Middle Ages," *Omega* 15.2 (1984-1985): 145-160.

these four major considerations of the medieval corpse to effect, what I call, her *cult of the unholy relic*.

O'Connor can make a bodily relic from two sources: 1) the body of a 'living corpse,' i.e., a living character who reflects the protagonist's *hupokeimenon* and 2) the literal corpses that appear in her stories. I call the former 'living corpse,' the "reflective corpse." Some of the stories that I have chosen to analyze at length in this chapter ("The Comforts of Home," *The Violent Bear It Away*, *Wise Blood*, "Judgment Day," "The Enduring Chill," "The Displaced Person," "A Late Encounter with the Enemy") contain both reflective corpses and literal corpses. The reflective corpse and the literal corpse usually suggest, through a physical bodily fragmentation, the grace-destined character's spiritual corruption. Because of its role as a medium of the character's self-recognition, the corpse possesses an identity of its own, as well as the anagogic identity of its reflected subject. O'Connor's corpses typically expose a misplaced veneration of the *mind-soul*, and facilitate some sort of painful experience for the protagonist to become conscious of this misplaced faith in human autonomy. The character's painful experience often culminates in an epiphany, where the spiritual insight is accompanied by the physical appearance of the corpse. The epiphanic moment accentuates the protagonist's suffering through a visualization of death. The corpse is the essential element in the character's approach to salvation through the cult of the unholy relic.

On its most basic level, the very popular cult of relics in the later Middle Ages supported itself on the fragmentation of a saint's body, the body part's assumed incorruptibility, and a desire of the pious people to see that revered bone, hair, or

desiccated flesh. Pilgrims traveled to see a dead body part because it was a sacramental, a physical object that inspired a devotion to the Divine. O'Connor creates a cult of unholy relics where the pieces of flesh are parts (or reflections of parts) of the character's *hupokeimenon*. Unlike the medieval holy relic, where the saint's body is saved from decomposition in the grave, O'Connor's unholy relic is based instead upon the corruption, the continual fragmentation of the human body. In her stories characters express a constant awareness of individual body parts.

O'Connor's characters think of themselves or other people in terms of corporeal pieces instead of a whole body or person. Ruby Hill ("A Stroke of Good Fortune") has "swollen feet," "pain in her chest," and "her stomach stuck out."¹⁷⁴ Joy-Hulga ("Good Country People") "took care of [her wooden leg] like someone else would his soul" (281). Mrs. McIntyre has a vision of "[l]egs where arms should be, foot to face, ear in the palm of hand" and asks "Who will remain whole? Who?" (219). Hazel Motes' body at the end of *Wise Blood* comprises of glass-cut feet, a barbed-wired chest, and hollowed-out eyes. Mr. Tanner ("Judgment Day"), who had "something wrong with his *kidney* then that made his *hand* shake," tries to show Coleman that the Black man's "*brains* didn't have a chance" against his, by whittling "small crude figures" in an attempt to hide his physical infirmity (681). Of Tanner's willful ignorance of his physical affliction (and thus spiritual infirmity) the narrator says: "[H]e did not intend to see it himself or to countenance to it." O. E. Parker ("Parker's Back") understands his body through his tattoos, but they appear to him in total discord, "haphazard and botched," and he feels them penetrating his skin and tearing him apart from the inside in a "raging warfare" (659). "Sheppard ("The Lame

¹⁷⁴ O'Connor, *CW* 190, 192, 193.

Shall Enter First”) tells Rufus, “You’re not evil. You’re mortally confused. You don’t have to make up for that foot.” Whether unconsciously or consciously, O’Connor’s characters advance toward their redemption through a recognition of dead flesh, often in pieces and parts. The character encounters himself or herself as a walking dead man or dead woman. The pieces and parts of the *hupokeimenon* are the unholy relics that have an ironic sacramental effect. O’Connor’s unholy relics stir the viewer with a repugnance for death (‘life’ without a soul), and impart in him a holy longing for a spiritual life.

To better appreciate O’Connor’s treatment of the human body in her fiction and how it draws its symbolic power from the Middle Ages, I shall attempt to summarize some of the late medieval religious attitudes toward the corpse. The medieval body and death is a subject taken up in a plethora of books and scholarly articles, and I acknowledge that my efforts to “set-up” the medieval lens through which one might see O’Connor’s corporeal aesthetic at work can only offer so much power of magnification. Medieval thought spans several centuries and a number of different countries, but there are general aspects that have become recognizable even from a distance. My focus is on the major considerations discussed above and how they manifest themselves in O’Connor’s work. Following the discussion of medieval perspectives, I analyze the specific stories previously mentioned to show that O’Connor is a literary master at getting life out of a corpse.

Dem Bones’ Gonna Walk ‘Round : The Medieval Corpse

After reading three of her short stories and the novel *Wise Blood*, one of my students suggested a subtitle to Flannery O’Connor’s *Collected Works*: “Days and Nights

of the Walking Dead.” From the student’s perception, the lack of interest O’Connor’s characters seem to take in each other culminated in a community of zombies. Although the student’s interpretation of corpses may have differed from what I speculated was the cause of such a witty title, her point was well taken. O’Connor does make corpses walk (and limp). If there is one message that is notably absent in all her works it could be the hackneyed epitaph: R.I.P. In her rejection of a body’s eternal peaceful slumber, O’Connor extends a belief held in the Middle Ages.

Katharine Park explains that medieval northern Europeans envisaged death as “an extended and gradual process, corresponding to the slow decomposition of the corpse and its reduction to the skeleton and its hard tissue.” The corpse “during this liminal period” is “active, sensitive, or semianimate, possessed of a gradually fading life.”¹⁷⁵ As the corpse’s life gradually waned, many medieval people believed that the decomposing body suffered and in that ‘pain’ the body served out a purgatorial sentence. Even before death the body may be envisioned as a corpse. Jaques Le Goff notes that in the Middle Ages “[m]an’s body was not so much dust as rot. The way of all flesh was decrepitude and putrefaction.”¹⁷⁶ The dead-body-that-was-not-quite-so-dead-yet became a favorite subject of funerary art and storytelling. Through the “popular woodcut,” J. Huizinga explains, “[a]ll the meditations on death of the monks of yore had produced, was now condensed into a very primitive image.”¹⁷⁷ The transi-tomb depicted the body tortured by worms, snakes, and natural bodily decomposition. “However, the worms do not have the last

¹⁷⁵ Park 115.

¹⁷⁶ Le Goff, Jacques, *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 84.

¹⁷⁷ Huizinga, J. *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought and Art in France the Netherlands in the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1924) 124.

word,” as Caroline Walker Bynum points out. “After suffering a decay that parallels Christ’s agony on the cross, Body triumphs in the resurrection.”¹⁷⁸ More than just a symbol of death, the corpse individualized the experience.

The medieval imagination presented encounters with corpses that focused people’s thinking about death from the allegorical figure of Death, to the individual’s particular mortality. The famous legend, *Three Living and Three Dead*, tells of “three young noblemen [who] were out hunting, when they were confronted by three corpses who reminded them of their inevitable death.”¹⁷⁹ The illustrations of the story “conferred on the corpses a macabre vitality.” According to Katherine Parks, the corpses are “aggressive interlocutors of the living” who “confronted [the living] directly and on equal terms.”¹⁸⁰

The Dance of the Dead was yet another manifestation of a macabre encounter. With regard to the earlier depictions of the Dance of the Dead, J. Huizinga explains:

The dancing person whom we see coming back forty times to lead away the living, originally does not represent Death itself, but a corpse: the living man such as he will presently be . . . The indefatigable dancer is the living man himself in his future shape, a frightful double of his person. ‘It is yourself,’ said the horrible vision to each of the spectators. It is only towards the end of the [fifteenth-] century that the figure of the great dancer, of a corpse with hollow and fleshless body becomes a skeleton.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ Bynum, *Fragmentation* 203 (Figure 6.4).

¹⁷⁹ Park 120.

¹⁸⁰ Park 120.

¹⁸¹ Huizinga 131.

This duality of the flesh, as shall be discussed later, solicits an even more sophisticated interpretation when it is put under the scrutiny of the theological considerations of the time. What all these animated corpses lead to is an aesthetic of the body that renders an insight into more than mere physical health and existential confidence. The later Middle Ages sent a clear signal, and one that O'Connor salvaged through her curious characterizations: If you want to know about your soul, look to your body. "Among the great cultural revolutions associated with the triumph of Christianity in the West," Jacques Le Goff maintains, "one of the greatest concerned the body. . . . Indeed, not the least paradoxical thing about medieval Christian ideas is that the soul itself was envisioned in corporeal form."¹⁸² The living corpse, the body that won't let go of its soul even at death, became the image that forever shaped medieval religion, and as I contend, fueled Flannery O'Connor's imagination.

Four attributes of the medieval corpse in this liminal period contribute to the reader's discernment of O'Connor's walking dead: 1) the notion that the corpse still experiences some living sensations, 2) the decomposition (fragmentation) of the body in preparation for a new body, 3) the visualization of the corpse as a means of sharing a suffering experience, and 4) the representation of two kinds of flesh (a dead anagogic flesh and a suffering literal flesh) for one personal identity. In O'Connor's stories the characters who are destined for the offering of grace frequently encounter a reflection of their spiritual death in a literal corpse, another character that resembles a corpse, or the narrative's emphasis on bodily fragments.

¹⁸² Le Goff, *Medieval Imagination* 84, 85.

The *hupokeimenon* reflects its spiritual deficiency in a physical manner, which hastens the recognition of its deathly state, while (like the old woman's teeth so aptly provided for the Final Punishment) it chastens the character to shed their old skin. On a literal level, the character's body gets beaten up, sometimes to the point of death. On an anagogic level, a salutary evisceration -- O'Connor would probably call it "a healthy gutting" -- occurs at the point between the reconstitution of a cadaverous *hupokeimenon* into a living body-and-soul. O'Connor's reflective corpses and literal corpses dramatize spiritual implications through their physicality. Poised between seeing their spiritually-void *hupokeimenon* and their new Christian body, the O'Connorian character achieves a double-vision. Like Huizinga's description of the Dance of the Dead, the characters see two states of being, a frightful double of themselves, at one time.

An important point that was made earlier needs to be re-emphasized here, and it is this. O'Connor does not want death to become allegorized but individualized. In order to organize her art around such a principle, O'Connor pairs people up, like the Dance of the Dead, with their reflective corpse. Sometimes the characters recognize their own dead reflection, sometimes they don't, and sometimes they see a corpse but do not relate it to themselves. As shall be explored in greater detail later, in *The Violent Bear It Away* she has specific corpses, namely Mason Tarwater, Bishop, Rayber, and even the death-like Stranger, that work on Francis Tarwater's spiritual consciousness. However, there is a particular scene in the novel that presents an allegorized version of the Dance of the Dead, where the indiscriminate corpses represent a death by culture. At the diner, before Francis baptizes-murders Bishop, three teenagers dance around the nickelodeon.

The dancers were about Tarwater's age but they might have belonged to a different species entirely. The girls could be distinguished from the boy only by their tight skirts and bare legs; their faces and heads were alike. They danced with furious stern concentration. Bishop was entranced. He stood up in his chair, watching them, his head hanging forward as if any moment it might drop off. Tarwater, his eyes dark and distant, stared through them. They might have been insects buzzing across the surface of his vision.¹⁸³

Although Tarwater shows no interest in these particular dancers, they represent one type of lure in his continual struggle to leave behind the God-fearing lessons preached by his great-uncle at Powderhead. One possible escape would be to lose himself in the crowd. If Tarwater was to join figuratively in the dance of the city-dwelling teenagers, then his soul would never realize its mission to go to ones like these and tell them of "the terrible speed of God's mercy" (478). The three dancers, who are faceless, nearly genderless, and seemingly from a completely different species, get driven away by the Christ-like child, Bishop. Bishop begins to roar and bellow toward the dancers.

As soon as the dancers saw him, he stopped making the noise and stood still, devouring them with his gape. An angry silence fell over them. Their look was shocked and affronted as if they had been betrayed by a fault in creation, something that should have been corrected before they were allowed to see it. (448)

¹⁸³ O'Connor, *CW* 447.

O'Connor loads the language with anagogic signification. On the surface, the teenagers' smugness and feeling of being "betrayed by a fault in creation" alludes to Bishop's mental handicap, but behind the full impact of this encounter is the force of the Incarnation represented by Bishop, against the collective idea of a culture of death. In *The Violent Bear It Away*, O'Connor depicts a modern Dance of Death that lacks the personal recognition and confrontation that appears in the medieval legend *Three Living and Three Dead*. Admittedly, the anagogic signification of the three teenagers as corpses is subtle. O'Connorian corpses tend to have sufficient degree of furtiveness in her stories, but they are there.

With the mummified pygmy in *Wise Blood* O'Connor delivers a focused picture of a corpse that reflects Hazel Motes' demand for a "a new Jesus." However, the O'Connorian corpse seldom appears so explicitly. As readers we might not remember the mummy in "Everything That Rises Must Converge." In that story a young man named Julian looks at the world through his "mental bubble," his *mind-soul* (491). Through the powers of his conception he objectifies and imagines his mother's image, and she in turn mirrors her son's ability to live in "a fantasy world" (491). Seated across from his mother on the bus, "he saw his mother . . . purple-faced, shrunken to the dwarf-like proportions of her moral nature, sitting like a mummy beneath the ridiculous banner of her hat" (495) which was "a banner of her imaginary dignity" (489). Imagining his mother as a corpse has very little effect on Julian, besides increasing his indignation at her. Inside his *mind-soul*, his own body and being is "safe from any kind of penetration from without" (491). Yet, at the end of the story, when his *mind-soul* has been stripped away by the power of

the Incarnation, he sees the literal dead face of his mother as a reflection of her real dignity. He feels a death in himself that makes him want to embrace her, not with his mind, but with his body and soul. In a *tableau* that suggests *The Pietà*, Julian “fell at her side,” cradled her, cried over her (500).¹⁸⁴ Regardless of whether or not O’Connor gives enough evidence to suggest that the character is cognizant of his or her spiritually-dead reflection, the death-like companion still makes an appearance, no matter how subtle, as part of the character’s movement toward achieving a vision of redemption.

The skeletonish Mrs. Connin, leads Harry Ashfield, also known as Bevel, to his own death. Bevel possesses a five-year-old child’s perspective that allows him to have enough innocence and ignorance to search for the Kingdom of God under the surface of “The River.” When Mrs. Connin comes to take Bevel away for the day while his disinterested parents indulge their hedonistic lifestyle, the old woman is described as “a speckled skeleton” (154). She plans on taking the boy to a healing at the river, and as she and the boy travel away from his apartment, she whistles through her sparse teeth “like a musical skeleton” (156). At the river, Bevel meets his would-be namesake, the Reverend Bevel, who also resembles a skeleton with his face of “all bone” (161). Upon returning the boy to his parents, Mrs. Connin stands “staring into the room, with a skeleton’s appearance of seeing everything” (167). It may seem odd that Mrs. Connin, the one person who takes time to teach the boy about Jesus Christ, would appear consistently as a skeleton, an image of death. The same could be said about the Reverend Bevel, who

¹⁸⁴ The living corpse that converts to a literal corpse is one approach O’Connor may take in having her characters sharpen their spiritual vision. In “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” the earlier imagined mummy is a reflection of Julian’s *hupokeimenon*, but the face of his dead mother at the end is an image of Christ. This point is explained fully in Chapter 4.

baptizes the boy and promises him that once he goes under the water, he'll "count" (165). For as much as death appears in these two characterizations, the boy is never cognizant of the idea of death. He divides the world, not between life and death, but between, time in his parent's apartment and time away from that locale. He also associates "jokes" as the expression of life with his parents, and the absence of jokes as the life away from his parents.

It occurred to him that he was lucky this time that they had found Mrs. Connin who would take you away for the day instead of an ordinary sitter who only sat where you lived or went to the park. You found out more when you left where you lived. He had found out already this morning that he had been made by a carpenter named Jesus Christ. Before he had thought it had been a doctor named Sladewall, a fat man with a yellow mustache who gave him shots and thought his name was Herbert, but this must have been a joke. They joked a lot where he lived. (160)

When Bevel goes to the river and is about to be baptized, he attempts to make a joke by rolling "his eyes in a comical way" and bellowing his name with an exaggerated sound. But the "preacher didn't smile" and Bevel gets "the sudden feeling that this was not a joke," and makes the mental comparison that "[w]here he lived everything was a joke." When the preacher tells Bevel that if he baptizes him that will allow him "to go to the Kingdom of Christ," the boy interprets it to mean that he "won't go back to the apartment" but instead just "go under the river" (164-65). Bevel goes under, but the preacher draws him back out. It is not until he leaves the apartment and tries to stay

under the river by himself that he chooses the River over the apartment, even though he thinks at the last moment, when he feels like the river won't have him, that "it's another joke, it's just another joke." But the current catches him, and he drowns with a conviction that "he was getting somewhere" when "all his fury and fear left him" (171).

Mrs. Connin and the preacher's skeleton-profiles reflect the boy's spiritual death inside of the apartment. It would make more sense to have his mother and father appear as stewards of death, rather than the two characters who seem to take an interest in the boy's spiritual life. But that is because these personal interlocutors of death come to draw the child into the Paschal Mystery, that allows for a dying seed to be reborn. Going the way of death is the only way the child can be "fixed right . . . for Christ's sake" (154). Bevel, like the faceless dancers around the nickelodeon in *The Violent Bear It Away*, is lost in the crowd of the apartment's ribaldry. When he decides to leave the ashtrays, empty bottles, and hung-over parents to try his luck with the river and the Kingdom of God, he has been guided by two corpses that have shown him, to the degree a five-year-old can comprehend, that he must say good bye to the place where he didn't count, and go to the place that welcomes him as one who does count. He must die to his old life in the apartment, so as to live forever in the Kingdom of God. To an adult, the skeleton-like characters might send a shock about his mortality and his ultimate destiny. To a child, who is as Christ said, "one such is the Kingdom of God,"¹⁸⁵ there is no fear or fury over death, just a confidence that this way, this river, this death leads to a better life.

Let's imagine the O'Connorian character possessing a split field of vision, where on the left she sees the *hupokeimenon* and on the right, a reflection of the body of Christ.

¹⁸⁵ Luke 18.16.

As the story progresses, both these fields of vision sharpen, despite the character's attempts to haze them over with her own bias, pride, and spiritual rejection. When grace is offered in O'Connor's stories, the benefactor may clearly see her dead *hupokeimenon* on the left-hand-side, and on the right, the potential in her body to achieve a new creation with God. This chapter deals with the field of vision on the left, the corpses of the *hupokeimenon*. Chapter Four addresses the representation of Christ's body in the right-hand-side field of vision, and the character's physical response to that representation. I propose that in this double-envisioning of the O'Connorian body, where two types of flesh (living and dead) compete for one single identity, O'Connor draws on the later medieval religious debates over whether a person's identity could survive bodily corruption.

Though the opinions vary, all religious experts can confess with Saint Augustine that what happens to the corpse "is a matter farre above my capacity."¹⁸⁶ Actually, when it comes to speculating on the corpse only some medieval religious writers, like Saint Thomas Aquinas, follow Saint Augustine's *post-mortem* intellectual humility. In *The City of God* Augustine desires to allay Christians' anxiety about the particularities of burial, citing the point that God can reconstitute our bones in the Resurrection. Following the reports of so many encounters with deceased persons and the mediation of the martyrs in the life of the living, Augustine refines his position on the corpse. In *De cura pro mortuis gerenda (On Proper Burial)* Augustine writes, "We must not therefore imagine, that the dead do ordinarily and of course mix themselves in the affairs of the living,"¹⁸⁷ but, he adds, that if the dead do engage the living, then its because God gave them the grace to do

¹⁸⁶ Saint Augustine, *De cura pro mortuis, Saint Austins care for the dead*, microform, Early English Books, 1641-1700 Series 482:16 (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International) 86.

¹⁸⁷ Augustine, *De cura* 86.

it. Saint Paul's declaration that no man hates his own flesh frames Augustine's understanding of the human inclination to be custodians of the dead. It's natural for people to want to bury the dead in a respectable way; "Whereby all men naturally love their own flesh, yea and think it reasonable, that in some cases a man should have care of his neighbor's body, as well as his own."¹⁸⁸ But once the corpse is in the ground, according to Augustine, it is on its own. "We are not to imagine that anything we do for the dead doth profit them,"¹⁸⁹ he concludes.

But Augustine's confidence in the separation between the dead and the living was not shared by all people in the later Middle Ages. The cult of the holy relic stirred up piety as well as confusion. Although Saint Thomas Aquinas concentrated his efforts on Christianizing the philosophy of the body and soul, his seemingly solid rationality wavered under questions like "Should we worship the relics of the saints?" Aquinas' answer begins by quoting Augustine from *The City of God* that "in no way are the bodies in themselves to be despised." Then he insists that "[w]e worship that insensible body, not for its own sake, but for the sake of the soul that was once united thereto." Saint Thomas ends by suggesting a caution when Christians consider the body. "The dead body of a saint is not identical with that which the saint had during life, on account of the difference in form, viz. the soul: but it is the same by identity of matter, which is destined to be reunited with form."¹⁹⁰ Caroline Walker Bynum rephrases Aquinas: "The body in the tomb is the body that will be joined to the saint in heaven."¹⁹¹ The rotting flesh holds an identity as long as

¹⁸⁸ Augustine, *De cura* 101.

¹⁸⁹ Augustine, *De cura* 101.

¹⁹⁰ Aquinas, *Summa* Pt.III. Q.25. a.6 (2: 2157-58).

¹⁹¹ Bynum, *Fragmentation* 263.

it is considered along with the soul. So whether death meant that the soul left the body or not, the medieval imagination had to make the soul linger around a corpse if people wanted to think about the human identity of the corpse.

Whether it had to do with God's gathering together of dust to reform the body, or the argument that God could never create an incorruptible thing from a corruptible substance, the medieval corporeal polemic was complex and conveyed a tension, an irritability on the part of the age's greatest thinkers to get things straight. The tension surfaces within these writers' own works, who at times echo Saint Augustine's caveat in *De cura pro mortuis gerenda*, who says (in so many words), 'this is what I think but let's remember we are talking about life-after-death and God knows what else.' In explicating the tone for medieval thought, David Lyle Jeffrey detects that same tension. "Myth after myth, in and out of Christian literature describes [a] situation as one of lostness in the middle, where a command of structure, narrative and progress are beyond the reach of thinking -- out of the grasp of mere words."¹⁹² Lost in the middle, medieval thought struggles with a dual vision of humanity. Life and death commingle in its imagination. Jeffrey continues, "Man is invited, in medieval Christian thought, to taste and to see, to compare, to evaluate, to read, to interpret, and then to grow toward understanding."¹⁹³ In the twelfth century, with the influx of 'new knowledge' rooted in ancient Greek teachings of natural science and philosophy, erudites forced the issue of bodily resurrection to come under serious scrutiny. The Averroists, Moorish scholars from Spain, challenged the Church to take a position on the meaning of the corpse. Saint Thomas Aquinas rose to

¹⁹² Jeffrey, David Lyle, *By Things Seen: Reference and Recognition in Medieval Thought* (Ottawa, Canada: University of Ottawa Press, 1979) 3.

¹⁹³ Jeffrey 6.

the challenge, but even then his efforts never completely silenced the disputes over the body in the grave.

Thomas Aquinas believed that he brought the Averroes' use of Aristotle and Greek thought more in line with his own purifying Christian scholarship.¹⁹⁴ However, Aquinas' opponents contended that his theory of hylomorphic composition actually promoted the Moors' materialistic ideologies. Caroline Walker Bynum explains:

Thomas Aquinas' theory of the human being as a hylomorphic (form/matter) union of body and soul is thus read as a victory over dualism, holding as it does that 'the soul . . . is not the whole person, and I am not my soul.' The distrust and, in certain key areas, outright condemnation of Aquinas' ideas in the 1270's and 1280's are seen in this close interpretation to stem from suspicion that exactly in their close union of soul and body, such ideas might threaten the immortality of the soul and lend support to the hated teaching of Averroism.¹⁹⁵

Aquinas felt the pressure within his own Christian circles, as Franciscan thought, for example, seemed to side more with Saint Augustine's Platonic notions of dualism (body is a tool for the soul). Religious figures such as Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and Saint Francis of Assisi, who "exercised the most ferocious ascetic practices," were the ones who had "the sharpest sense of body/soul conflict" and "had the clearest and most

¹⁹⁴ For a further related discussion of Saint Thomas and Aristotle see W. H. V. Reader's *The Moral System of Dante's Inferno* "The Method of Saint Thomas: Authority and Truth," 80-95 (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1969). Reader insists "that the problem set to . . . St. Thomas was not the testing of other doctrines by the touchstone Aristotle, but the establishment of Aristotle by proving his conformity to accepted standards" (94).

¹⁹⁵ Bynum, *Fragmentation* 255.

passionate awareness of the potential of the body to reveal the divine.”¹⁹⁶ Thus, in the later Middle Ages Christians often looked upon the body with a double vision. On one side stood the body which possessed no life without the soul, impoverished by Platonic dualism and tainted with the Moors’ assertion that Aristotle’s understanding of the materialistic body was valid even while it insinuates an innate hedonism. On the other side is Thomas Aquinas’ union of the body with the soul, a body potentially triumphant because of its communion with the Divine.

To refine the split vision of the body a bit more, consider that both bodies, the one without the soul (left) and the one with the soul (right), both suffer. The left-hand side body, the body without a soul, represents the corpse. The corpse ‘suffers’ its decomposition in an unceasing progression toward Judgment and Resurrection. The body on the right-hand side, the body with a soul, represents the living person. This body of course suffers as well, but the living person can direct his body’s suffering in a conscious effort to improve his soul. So there are two fleshs: one that serves out God’s justice in the grave’s terms, and one that can manifest God’s justice with a living response to bodily suffering. As mentioned earlier, I contend that Flannery O’Connor’s stories imitate this same type of somatic double envisioning. Characters see their dead spiritual state reflected in corpses, bodies that represent God’s judgment on their own ‘dead’ spiritual being. Characters also see representations of the Christian body, indeed sometimes even Christ-like bodies, that spur them to direct their suffering for the betterment of their soul. The medieval decomposing body in the grave is on a salvific auto-pilot course toward God; the cadaver serves out the curse of Adam beyond the influence of human will. The

¹⁹⁶ Bynum, *Fragmentation* 256.

medieval living body and soul have the potential to take control of its communion with God.

Medieval piety channeled its spirituality through the body. The notion that the body could be brought closer to Christ's divinity by sharing in His suffering humanity motivated the ascetic practices of Bernard of Clairvaux, Marguerite of Oingt, Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, Peter Damian, Christine *Mirabilis*, Adam of Perseigne, Rupert of Deutz, and a host of others. Time after time the writings of these medieval religious figures speak of the duality of the flesh, the division between the sinful flesh of Adam/Eve and the redemptive Body of Christ. Giles Constable points out that "Bernard of Clairvaux stressed the importance of the reality of Christ's flesh and the carnality of man's love for Christ in his twentieth sermon on the Song of Songs, saying that carnal love was good because it excluded carnal life and spurned the world."¹⁹⁷ The asceticism documented of the thirteenth-century Flemish saint Christina *Mirabilis* further corroborates the duality of a flesh that provides an obstacle to being with God, and an entombed flesh destined for a union with God at the final trumpet.

Then wailing bitterly she began to beat her breast and her body "O miserable and wretched body! How long will you torment me . . . ? Why do you delay me from seeing the face of Christ. When will you abandon me so that my soul can return freely to its Creator?" . . . Then she would rest a little in silence Then, taking her feet with both hands, she would kiss the soles of her feet with the greatest affection and would say, "O most

¹⁹⁷ Constable, Giles, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 211-12.

beloved body! Why have I beaten you? Why have I reviled you? Did you not obey me in every good deed I undertook to do with God's help? . . . Now, O best and sweetest body . . . is an end of your hardship, now you will rest in the dust and will sleep for a little and then, at last when the trumpet blows, you will rise again purified of all corruptibility and you will be joined in eternal happiness with the soul you have had as a companion in the present sadness."¹⁹⁸

Adam of Perseigne theologizes the type of reaction Christina *Mirabilis* has to her body in his fifty-first epistle. Adam's language is as complex and confusing as Christina's understanding of how to appreciate her body. We may remember David Jeffrey's point quoted earlier, that medieval thought inferred a "lostness in the middle, where a command of structure, narrative and progress are beyond the reach of thinking -- out of the grasp of mere words."

Thus the word came through the flesh, [and] it chose this method of coming so that in the flesh . . . the flesh forgets the love of fleshly life; and the divinity of the word should offer itself to fleshly people without flesh, and love of fleshly things cannot better die in men than if the presence of the incarnate word instructs them concerning heavenly things.¹⁹⁹

Although there may be a struggle to discern the role of the body in its seemingly dual ways of suffering, one accepted fact surfaces consistently through medieval reflections on the

¹⁹⁸ qtd. in Bynum, *Fragmentation* 236-237.

¹⁹⁹ qtd. in Constable n.#390, 212.

human body: when you're dead and in the grave, your body is exclusively there on God's terms, and that might be a very scary thought indeed.

In the later Middle Ages questions about the cadaver's identity fed laity superstition and clerical treatises. Artists' creation of the transi-tomb, a popular funerary art that depicts the body in the process of decomposition usually accompanied by the labors of worms, was just one example that firmed up the medieval imagination about 'a buried life-after-death.' The fifteenth century manuscript, "Disputacion Betwyx the Body and Wormes," "modifies the traditional debate between Body and Soul" with its dramatization of death and decay. Bynum recounts the poem: "Here, a female body, so misled about the significance of the body, boasts of her descent from Eve, is forced to hear the message of Worms, who will strip the body of its stinking flesh, scouring the bones."²⁰⁰ The decaying female corpse does achieve a happy end but only through a post-mortem suffering. "The poet argues for victory over death, not denying the horrors of decay, but by identifying corruption with the suffering Christ on the cross."²⁰¹ Katherine Park notes that northern Europeans in the later Middle Ages frequently catered to the transi-tomb as the appropriate funerary art. Park argues:

The function of the northern European transi . . . was to show the deceased as dead (a point underscored by the body's nakedness) but during the crucial liminal period of decomposition when corpse was most sensitive and vital, and when the person was still in the corpse. In that sense, it was still a portrait and an immediate image of the self; the penitential aspect of

²⁰⁰ Bynum, *Fragmentation* 237.

²⁰¹ Bynum, *Fragmentation* 237.

the image -- its emphasis on the mortification and humiliation of body -- drew its force from the fact that the person himself or herself was counting in some sense to suffer as the body itself decayed.²⁰²

George Chastellain's *Le Pas de la Mort* describes in great detail the moment of death and the putrefaction of the body, but tags at the end of such macabre descriptions a reminder of the value of the body's decomposition. "Corps femenin, qui tant es tendre, / Poly, soeuf, si precieux, Te fauldra il ces maulx attendre? / Oy, ou tout vif aller es ceiulx. [O female body, which is so soft, / Smooth, suave, precious, / Do these evils await you? / Yes, or you must go to heaven quite alive]."²⁰³ Understanding the medieval attitude toward bodily decomposition is critical to appreciating O'Connor's *cult of the unholy relic*, where the fragmentation of the body manifests "these evils" that await her characters so that they have the opportunity to go to heaven. While the sinner's bodily corruption renders a purgatorial service in achieving a communion with God, it is the incorruptibility of the saint's body that empowers the holy relic with proof of its venerability.

The relic of a saint's dead body is a sacramental, an object that evokes a devotion to the Divine. A tortuous martyrdom frequently supplied the saint's body or body part that later became a holy relic. Although the saint underwent cruel treatment before and at the moment of her death, medieval art and narratives censored her physical expressions of agony. Caroline Walker Bynum notes that "[o]f the 153 chapters of the *Golden Legend* devoted to saints days, at least 75 have dismemberment as a central motif." Yet, "the point of such tales is not the presence, but the absence of suffering; there are only one or two

²⁰² Park 123,125.

²⁰³ Huizinga 133.

references in all James's [of Voragine] accounts of the early martyrs to the fact that mutilations might hurt."²⁰⁴ Scholars like Bynum, Merback and Esther Cohen have especially emphasized the paradoxical trend in late medieval depictions of martyrdom,²⁰⁵ which suggests that the grotesque representation of the Crucifixion witness to the reality of human suffering, while the martyr's "almost smug . . . imperviousness to discomfort" testifies to the Divine presence.²⁰⁶ At the torturous moment of their death they seem to possess a distance from their abused body and a closeness to an apparently supernatural body that was beyond their persecutors' efforts.²⁰⁷ If the relic possessed healing powers, perhaps its salutary efficacy resided in the pilgrim's hope that his body could achieve a similar *mimesis*: to possess a body which belongs to Christ while still suffering here below. The saint's God-assisted-attitude before death reflects her soul's indissoluble integrity and may foreshadow her body's incorruptibility after death. Thus the medieval holy corporeal relic must always be understood in the context of pain and morality.

The relic may have stood as a *memento mori*, but it also was a physical representation of a person who dedicated her or his living body to the imitation of Christ. One of the controversies over relics in the Middle Ages was their fragmentation, a fact that alluded to the disgrace of public execution. "Public dismemberment was the penalty for the most appalling crimes," notes Park, and for this reason medical dissections were

²⁰⁴ Bynum, *Fragmentation* 290.

²⁰⁵ See Merback's *The Thief, The Cross, and the Wheel*; Bynum's discussion in *Fragmentation and Redemption* and "Bodily Miracles and the Resurrection of the Body in the High Middle Ages," *Belief in History* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990); and Esther Cohen's "Towards a History of European Sensibility: Pain in the Later Middle Ages," *Science in Context* 8.1 (1995): 47-74.

²⁰⁶ Bynum, *Fragmentation* 232, Figure 6.14.

²⁰⁷ O'Connor makes this point explicit in her imaginative depictions of martyrdom in *The Violent Bear It Away* (CW 441-42) and "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" (CW 204). I examine more closely this phenomenon of *VBA* in this chapter and "A Temple" in Chapter Four.

limited because it became an issue of the deceased person's honor.²⁰⁸ In the case of relics, the dismemberment of the saint's body was not a matter of shame but of fame, since these holy women and men shared in Christ's suffering and would ultimately overcome Death like Christ did. Even if "people didn't receive all their previous matter in the resurrection," Thomas Aquinas believed, "God could make up the difference."²⁰⁹ The dismembered saints, whose many body parts were deposited in ornate reliquaries, underwent the humiliation of criminals but did not suffer such shame because of their strong communion with a God who transcended suffering for them. Even when the saint's body did decay, this natural process always became justified within a moral context. "Whether or not fragmentation or diminution is characterized as significant (or even in fact occurring) depends not on what happens to the body physically but on the moral standing of the person to whom the bodily events pertain," Bynum reiterates. So physical infirmities signaled the degree of spiritual integrity, depending upon whose body was under the moral microscope. A criminal's body could depict the effects of sin, while a saint's broken body could glorify itself in imitation of the suffering Savior. Going back to the earlier model of the double vision of the flesh: the rotting corpse on the left infers the state of spiritual death, while the suffering body on the right reserves the possibility to direct the human agony toward a suffering communion with God.

O'Connor's Cult of the Unholy Relic

²⁰⁸ Park 130.

²⁰⁹ Bynum, *Fragmentation* 260.

Flannery O'Connor's stories produce the sacramental effect evoked by the medieval cult of relics through bodily fragmentation, and yet, they completely invert a holy relic's signification. O'Connor's unholy relic compares and simultaneously contrasts with the medieval relic in three ways: 1) the assumption that the body or bodily fragment is the *locus* of the sacred 2) the understood personal identity assigned to the relic's dead flesh or bones and 3) the fragmentation or dismemberment of the deceased body within the context of morality and pain. I will examine in greater detail how these three attributes, which comprise the structure of O'Connor's cult of the unholy relic, appear in "The Comforts of Home," *The Violent Bear It Away*, *Wise Blood*, "The Displaced Person," "The Enduring Chill," "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," and "Judgment Day." But to get a sense of O'Connor's incarnational spirituality, I will briefly take these three attributes one at a time to show how O'Connor courts the idea of the medieval corporeal relic, without ever committing herself to a perfect similitude.

To begin with the obvious, the unholy relic does *not* denote the *loci* of the sacred, but instead, a reflection of the *hupokeimenon*, the projection of the character's dead spiritual state as a corpse. In "The Displaced Person" Mrs. Shortley voices her staunch bigotry to her husband. Mr. Shortley listens with an exaggerated passivity, and his words and body language reflect his wife's deathly state. "Mr. Shortely folded his hands on his bony chest and pretended he was a corpse . . . 'Don't worry me now,' Mr. Shortely said, 'I'm a dead man.'²¹⁰ Later, his face has "a corpse-like composure" that reflects his wife's literal corpse when he tells Mrs. McIntyre that his wife is truly dead. For three days Mrs. McIntyre ruminates over the dead woman's memory. "She told herself that anyone would

²¹⁰ O'Connor, *CW* 297.

have thought they were kin" (318). Mr. Head from "The Artificial Nigger" witnesses a deathly reflection of himself before recounting his scornful purpose for traveling to the city. In the train's window he sees a "pale ghost-like face scowling at him . . . pale but grinning, under a black hat" (214). When Hazel Motes (*Wise Blood*) screams at the top of his lungs, "I don't want nothing but the truth!" Sabbath Lily Hawks has brought him a mummy (107). In "The Comforts of Home" when Thomas confronts Sarah Ham "he needed nothing to tell him he was in the presence of the very stuff of corruption" (580). The narrator introduces Coleman in "Judgment Day" as "a stinking skin full of bones arranged in what seemed a vaguely human form," a description that matches up with Tanner's understanding of himself when he ponders: "You ain't got a thing to hold up to [Dr. Foley] but the skin you came in, and that's no more use to you now than what a snake would shed" (679,680). In an ominous foreshadowing, Mr. Fortune ("A View from the Woods") looks into Mary Fortune Pitt's face and "what he saw was the Pitt's look . . . as if it had been found on his own face . . . but he might have been chauffeuring a small dead body" (542).

Although the dead flesh of the unholy relic reflects a lack of holiness, the overall potential effect on the character of seeing this physical representation is still, although arguably unconsciously, sacramental. The reader may detect the culmination of such reflections in a character's self-assessment that voices a particular hollowness, an absence of what counts, the soul. They resemble in effect Eliot's "Hollow Men." Asbury in "The Enduring Chill" "felt has if he were a shell that had to be filled with something but he did not know what" (568). Tanner from "Judgment Day" "had continued to look across the

field as if his spirit had been sucked out of him into the woods and nothing was left on the chair but his shell" (685). After destroying Sabbath's mummy Hazel Motes coughs, but "[i]t was not much of a cough -- it sounded like a little yell for help at the bottom of a canyon" (107). Like water filling an empty vessel, words incarnate General Sash in "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," who "felt as if there were a little hole beginning to widen in the top of his head" where "the words kept seeping in through" (259). O. E. Parker becomes cognizant of his "spider-web soul" when the light from the rising sun pierces his skin and penetrates to a place somewhere inside of his body (673). Joy-Hulga surrenders her wooden leg to Manley Pointer and compares her submission as "losing her own life and finding it again miraculously in his" (281). The body finds its identity in the soul, and O'Connor's characters fight with themselves to find the soul they have hidden.

Saint Thomas Aquinas insisted that in order for relics to have any signification, they must possess the identity of the person whose soul inhabited that body. The second attribute of O'Connor's unholy relics is precisely the underlying truth that the dead body of the reflective and literal corpses has an identity. The anagogic identity of an unholy relic is the subject of the reflected *hupokeimenon*. For example, when Sarah Ham reflects the fragmenting corpse of Thomas in "The Comforts of Home," Sarah doesn't stop being Sarah Ham, yet the unholy relic she portrays possesses the identity of Thomas' spiritual hollowness. Medieval pilgrims wanted to connect with the relic because it shared a similar aspect of their humanity, say a finger bone. They had only to look at as far as their hands to see that the saint's sacred fingers and theirs didn't look so different, and that there might be hope for their own sanctification. It doesn't work that way with O'Connor's

pilgrims, though. When one of her characters sees a reflection of his *hupokeimenon*, the reaction is denial rather than recognition.

The character has no desire to imitate or possess a similar body to the corpse they encounter. The character rejects the relic because he cannot perceive that it shares any aspect similar to his humanity. Thomas' mother tells him time after time that when she sees Sarah Ham, "I keep thinking it might be you" (575). Characters resolve never to know themselves, like Joy-Hulga who had "the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it" (265). Mrs. Shortley prophesies that the "children of the wicked nations will be butchered," and yet, the montage of limbs and heads that illustrate her prophesy become the same corporeal dislocations of her children that frame her moment of death (301, 305). Hazel Motes smashes the mummy to dust and murders Solace Layfield. Mr. Fortune in "A View of the Woods" denies that his granddaughter, Mary Fortune Pitts, could characterize any part of her other grandfather (Mr. Pitts) who whips her with a belt. In Mr. Fortune's mind she was a perfect reflection of himself, and he was a far cry from the cruel Grandpa Pitts. After murdering his granddaughter, Mr. Fortune bends over her corpse and whispers, "There's not an ounce of Pitts in me" (545). Characters reject the identity of the unholy relic, because the body that they see, a reflection of their own *hupokeimenon*, has no goodness and no life in it. Even Tanner who imagines himself a corpse in "Judgment Day" never fully accepts the role of being a corpse in his dreams, but toys with the idea of playing a trick on Death by pretending to be buried alive. To be a corpse means to rot, to fall apart, to lose the power to control your own life. A character like Asbury in "The Enduring Chill," who "was

pleased that [his mother] should see death in his face at once,” still “felt he must have some last significant culminating experience that he must make for himself before he died - - make for himself out of his own intelligence” (547, 568). The challenge for the spiritually dead is to keep “it” all together, and the “it” that requires cohesion starts, from the *hupokeimenon* perspective, not with the soul but exclusively with the *mind-soul*’s concept of the wholeness of the human body. At first Ruby Hill “felt the wholeness of herself,” but at the end of “A Stroke of Good Fortune,” she feels a roll that not only is in her stomach, but somewhere outside of herself (188, 196).

The final element of the *cult of the unholy relic*, fragmentation and dismemberment of the body in the context of morality and pain, is very significant and in true O’Connor style, highly ironic with respect to the tradition of the Middle Ages. Unlike the martyrs in James of Voragine’s *Golden Legend* who appear not to feel their dismemberment, O’Connor’s characters feel themselves coming apart (physically and psychologically). Unlike the spiritually-justified executed martyrs, her characters experience shame. The body parts that draw their attention are reflections of their own criminal bodies.

One of the most obvious moments of dismemberment is in “Good Country People” when Manley Pointer takes off Joy-Hulga’s wooden leg, “handling it as tenderly as if it were a real one” (281). Joy-Hulga’s shame and fear of rape is real because “[w]ithout the leg she felt entirely dependent on him” (282). Asbury (“The Enduring Chill”), who believes his intelligence will manifest that culminating experience, “kept . . . turning his thudding head from side to side as if he wanted to work it loose from his body” (567). Rufus Johnson’s (“The Lame Shall Enter First”) club foot has multiple layers of meaning,

but in one part of the story the narrator suggests the foot and its shoe resemble Saint John the Baptist's decapitated head. Early in the story Johnson's face has a "fanatic intelligence" and the club foot reminds Sheppard of a "severed head" (599, 600). Near the end of the story Sheppard brings the two together: "The pieced together shoe appeared to grin at him with Johnson's own face" (624). Sheppard efforts to remove the foot's moral influence on Johnson's self-esteem prove ineffective. The shoed clubfoot, which has become a relic in its association with the martyred head of John the Baptist, stirs Sheppard with emotions akin to Herod's disposition. Herod closed his ears to John's call to repentance and grieved over ordering the prophet's execution. Sheppard "hated the shoe, hated the foot, hated the boy. His face paled. Hatred choked him. He was aghast at himself" (624). At the end of the story Sheppard discerns that Johnson's foot spurred him to the point where he "had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself" (632).

Katherine Parks' assessment of the medieval corpses in *Three Living and Three Dead* as "aggressive interlocutors of the living" who "confronted [the living] directly and on equal terms"²¹¹ sums up the corpses' role in O'Connor's fiction. The corpses afford an opportunity for that split-vision of life and death. In the later Middle Ages the fragmentation of the corpse, whether in the grave or in a reliquary, served to move the mortal life toward the Divine. The *cult of the unholy relic* effects the same sacramentality but couched in terms that O'Connor's characters can understand.²¹² At times in her fiction, the corpse can go further than invoking an anagogic recognition of spiritual death; it can create a living corpse who has a chance at an earthly spiritual life.

²¹¹ Park 120.

²¹² See O'Connor, *MM* 112-114.

Mrs. McIntyre becomes a living corpse. After seeing the tractor roll over Mr. Guizac and break his body in half at the end of "The Displaced Person," she can't keep herself together and comes down with "a nervous affliction." Mrs. McIntyre's body fragments. "A numbness developed in one of her legs and her hands and head began to jiggle . . . Her eyesight grew steadily worse and she lost her voice all together."²¹³ In her final days, she perpetually mirrors the sight of Mr. Guizac's broken corpse, a shocking *tableau* that includes her memory of the priest bending over the top of the dead man and putting a Eucharistic host in his mouth. Suffering a nervous breakdown, in failing health and bedridden, no one remembers the physically broken Mrs. McIntyre, except for the same old priest who comes regularly "to sit by the side of her bed and explain the doctrines of the Church" (327). Between life and death, similar to the liminal period attributed to the medieval corpse, Mrs. McIntyre serves out a purgatorial sentence.

Christ and the Corpse

Such a 'secondary death' as Mrs. McIntyre seems to experience is not that unusual to the medieval Christian imagination. Saint Augustine's *City of God* fueled the debate about the liminal life of the medieval corpse. Augustine contends that in the life to come we will possess a body that can feel pain and even death; the only difference is the sensation will be eternal.

For death will not be abolished, but will be eternal, since the soul will neither be able to enjoy God and live nor to die and escape the pains of the body. The first death drives the soul from the body against her will: the

²¹³ O'Connor, *CW* 326.

second death holds the soul in the body against her will. The two have this in common, that the soul suffers against her will what her own body inflicts.²¹⁴

Augustine makes the point both in *The City of God* and *On the Immortality of the Soul* that the torment of the body can only be considered in relation to its connection to the soul. "The body subsists through the soul, and it exists to the extent that it is animated."²¹⁵ O'Connor seems to keep Saint Augustine's teaching as a notable guide in her dispensation of grace and suffering to her characters. Similar to the medieval corpse in its liminal period, O'Connor holds the soul in her characters when their suffering is at its greatest intensity. While her character's suffering may have eschatological implications, it is certainly earth-bound and occurs in real time.²¹⁶ The corpse and Christ's suffering become intimately connected, in a knot that compares with Augustine's knitting the body to the soul.

A corpse in the transi tomb may have appeared discomfoting in its torment; however, medieval Christians took hope that the natural decay a body suffered would imitate Christ's suffering and thereby mitigate their entrance to Paradise. Saint Paul in his

²¹⁴ Saint Augustine, *The City of God, The Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, 2 vols., ed. Whitney J. Oates (New York: Random House, 1948) XXI.3 (2: 565).

²¹⁵ Augustine, *On The Immortality of the Soul, Basic Writings XV* (1: 314).

²¹⁶ On the issue of "real time" and eschatological implications, Saint Augustine suggests in *Confessions* that time itself seems to have an angogic implication. He contends that even the isolated and considered moment extends beyond just the earthly present into the eternal continuum. "In eternity nothing moves into the past: all is present. Time, on the other hand, is never all present at once. The past is always driven on by the future, the future always follows on the heels of the past, and both the past and the future have their beginnings and their end in the eternal present" (XI.11). Joseph K. Davis engages O'Connor's use of what he calls "eschatological or apocalyptic time," which occurs during her moments of grace when characters suffer. See "Time in the Demonic in William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor" (*Studies in the Literary Imagination* XX.2 (Fall 1987): 123-143).

second letter to the Corinthians speaks about the endurance of persecutions for the glory of Christ.

Continually we carry about in our bodies the dying of Jesus, so that in our bodies the life of Jesus may also be revealed. While we live we are constantly being delivered to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our mortal flesh. Death is at work in us.²¹⁷

Corpses and bodies-like-Christ pair up throughout O'Connor's stories. Sometimes the corpse-Christ pair occurs within the same character like Mary Fortune ("A View of the Woods") and at other times in a duo like Thomas' martyred mother and the corruptible Sarah Ham ("The Comforts of Home"). Either corpse or Christ -- the figures act as mirrors, reflecting either the *hupokeimenon* or the potential hylomorphic body-and-soul of the recipient of grace. Through her encounters with corpses and Christ-like bodies, the character begins to see her own body as corruptible and soulless. The bodily fragmentation, suggestive of the corruption of the decomposing corpse and the *hupokeimenon*, produces O'Connorian relics that prompt the protagonist to begin a devotion to something higher and holier.

The Reflective Corpse of Sarah Ham in "The Comforts of Home"

In order to understand himself as something higher and holier, Thomas in "The Comforts of Home," must confront the corpse-like character, Sarah Ham, and his Christ-like mother. "The Comforts of Home" is a story about bodies in competition for a space. Thomas is the *loci* for this somatic struggle. From the very beginning of the story his

²¹⁷ 2 Cor 4.10-12.

body is described as the scene “of a mob assembling,” and later, in a layered comparison by Sarah, Thomas is “a riot” and a body that “would look like . . . he would blow up”²¹⁸ While the story ends with a literal corpse, the role Sarah Ham plays as Thomas’ reflective corpse draws my attention here. O’Connor’s cult of unholy relics makes a strong entrance in this story. Thomas’ spiritual identity connects continuously with physical representations, both with his parents and with Sarah’s reflecting anagogic identity. The narrative suggests bodily fragmentation and even a metaphorical sexual encounter in preparation for Thomas’ potential birth of a new self-understanding. The more the body fragments, the less powerful the *mind-soul*, and the body imagery in this story suggests that wholeness relates to holiness. It is through corporeal divisions manifested in Thomas’s maternal-paternal composite identity, Sarah Ham’s reflective corpse, and the metaphorical sex scene (indeed the etymological root of “sex” is “to divide”) that Thomas begins to recover his spiritual health. During the story Thomas struggles to hold on to his mother’s spirituality, but in the end, it is his *mind-soul* that warps him. His final action of murdering his Christ-like mother graphically depicts the bodily and spiritual melee that the story recounts.

The title, “The Comforts of Home,” alludes to a passage in Luke’s gospel: “The foxes have holes (dens), and the birds of the air nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.”²¹⁹ The scriptural context places before the individual a series of choices he has to make between Christ and comfort, between Christ and family ties, and between Christ and concerns about the past. Thomas’ mother welcomes Sarah, whose last name

²¹⁸ O’Connor, *CW* 573, 579.

²¹⁹ Luke 9.57

(Ham) connotes an outcast.²²⁰ Her “daredevil charity”²²¹ attempts to move Thomas outside of the complacency, making him undergo the displacement required of Christian charity. She begs Thomas to “[t]hink of all you have . . . all the comforts of home, [a]nd morals” (582). But to Thomas’ consideration, “His home was to him home, workshop, church, as personal as the shell of a turtle and as necessary.” With Sarah’s intrusion, “he could not believe it could be violated in this way” (585). His mother hopes for her son’s change of heart, but he fails to see the issue as anything but pragmatic. Thomas surmises that if his mother had misplaced her trust in his gullible equability, she at least hoped to fall back on his pragmatic indolence. In other words, “[s]he was counting on his attachment to his electric blanket” (573).

The tension between Thomas’ spiritual vision and pragmatically indolent myopia takes a physical form. The body of Sarah Ham reflects the state of Thomas’ spiritual decay. The body of Thomas’ mother reflects the Christ-like love that will give one’s life for one’s friend. The voice of his dead father works to create his son in Sarah’s reflective corpse image. Saint Luke continues his exhortation about choosing Christ over self when he rebukes the man who asks to “suffer me first to go, and to bury my father. And Jesus said to him: Let the dead bury the dead.”²²² At the end of the story the two figures of Death, Sarah and Thomas’ father, do inadvertently corroborate to manifest a vision of spiritual life, but at the cost of his mother’s martyrdom.

Thomas himself is a composite of unnurtured (if not dead) parts, but his wholeness is gripped together by his *mind-soul*. “Thomas had inherited his father’s reason without

²²⁰ See Genesis 9.20-27

²²¹ O’Connor, *CW* 573.

²²² Luke 9.59-60

his ruthlessness and his mother's love of good without her tendency to pursue it. His plan for all practical action was to wait and see what developed."²²³ Thomas' indifference to his personal evolution institutes the objective distance that the *mind-soul* labors to preserve. Like Julian in "Everything Rises," Thomas views the world from inside his head, a sanctuary space that he describes like his den. His mother's corporeality is physically real, yet anagogically significant. His mother "had a heavy body on which sat a thin, mysteriously gaunt and incongruous head," and her eyes were "intimate but untouchable" (574). His father lives purely in his imagination. "His father took up a squatting position in his mind," a posture that presented the façade he was a country-person, while his city-raised savvy meant to exploit his small-town neighbors (583). Thomas' father is all head, no body. The mother has too small a head for such a big body. Thomas feels the moral genetic conflict going on inside of him. Toward the end of the story the tension becomes more acute. "Several ideas for getting rid of [Sarah] had entered his head but each of these had been suggestion whose moral tone indicated that they had come from a mind akin to his father's, and Thomas had rejected them" (588). Thomas' resistance to his father weakens, however, and he relinquishes his mother's spirituality in exchange for his father's deadly being. The internal struggle incarnates itself in Sarah Ham's body as she reflects his spiritual decay.

Throughout the story there surfaces a confusion between the identity of Thomas and that of Sarah Ham. When considering Sarah Ham, his mother tells him, "I keep thinking it might be you" (575). As the story unfolds Thomas shifts his hatred from himself, to Sarah Ham, to his mother, and ultimately back to himself. His repugnance

²²³ O'Connor, *CW* 577.

shuffles his dislike of himself, of his spiritual death, from one person to another, until it finally comes full circle. This revelation pivots around Sarah Ham. After Sarah invades Thomas' bedroom and his mother sadly reflects that Sarah could be her son but-by-the-grace-of-God, "Thomas felt a deep unbearable loathing for himself, as if he were turning slowly into the girl" (575). Before his mother invited Sarah to live with them, there seemed an obfuscation between Sarah and Thomas. "To his annoyance, [his mother] appeared to look on *him* with compassion, as if her hazy charity no longer made distinctions" (578). His mother's clichés "had real experience behind them" (577), so when she says to her son, "We don't know how the other half lives" (576), or that Thomas is "so dead set against [Sarah]" (583), her words carry a veracity that penetrates to the true nature of spiritual things. Thomas does appear dead, set against his reflective corpse. As Thomas's reflective corpse, Sarah exhibits the bodily fragmentation of O'Connor's unholy relics and the liminal tenacity of a medieval body in the grave.

Sarah Ham reflects Thomas *hupokeimenon*, the dead self, the body without a soul. "She's a moral moron," Thomas tells his mother. "Born without the moral faculty -- like somebody else would be born without a kidney or a leg" (575). Although the mother believes "[s]he looks like a wholesome girl," Sarah consistently appears in terms of bodily fragments (576). She debuts in the story when her "long slightly bowed legs slid out" from the car (573). Like the disjointed bodies depicted in a medieval transi tomb, the "girl gave the immediate impression of being physically crooked" (578). When she gets out of the car after Thomas drives her to the boarding house, "one leg emerged, then her small white crooked face" (581). The next morning Thomas reflects that crooked face at the

breakfast table with “his brow lowered and the thrust of his jaw indicating that he was in a dangerous humor” (582). On an anagogic level, Sarah is the decomposing corpse. She animates the death of the soul through a liminal period where the fragmentation of the body serves a purgatorial sentence in a hope of redemption.

Medieval piety understood the spiritual benefits of bodily decomposition, and thus it created a paradoxical context for considering the human body. Fragmentation, while on the one hand signaled the state of death, it did so while participating in an inevitable process that lead toward a spiritual reconstitution and life. Falling apart so as to recognize one’s wholeness in some transcendent unity is an idea espoused most heartily in Christian thought,²²⁴ and most especially with respect to the community founded upon Christ. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul metaphorically describes community as the Body of Christ. He writes:

For as the body is one, and hath many members; and all the members of the body, whereas they are many, yet are one body; so also is Christ . . . For the body also is not one member, but many. If the foot should say, because I am not the hand, I am not of the body: is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, because I am not the eye, I am not of the body: is it therefore not of the body? . . . but God hath tempered the body together, giving to that which wanted, the more abundant honor, That there might be no schism in the body, but the members be mutually careful

²²⁴ Beyond just consideration of its Christian connotation, the human body provided an excellent metaphor to consider the social and political health of society in the Middle Ages. See Jacques Le Goff’s “Head or hear: The Political Use of Body Metaphors in the Middle Ages” “Head or Heart? The Political Use of Body Metaphors in the Middle Ages,” *Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part 3*, ed. Michel Feher et al, trans. Patricia Ranum (New York: Urzone, 1989) 13-27.

for another. And if one member suffer anything, all the members suffer with it: or, if one member, glory, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and members of the member.²²⁵

John Desmond has interpreted the appearance of Saint Paul's Mystical Body of Christ in O'Connor's stories. In *Risen Sons*, Desmond dedicates an entire chapter to "Imagining the Mystical Body," and particularly relevant to our present discussion, is what he says about the fictional community O'Connor builds within her fictional framework.

This mystical community is composed of all the living and the dead, who are bonded together by one central act -- the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ . . . for O'Connor this dynamic process of history moving toward fulfillment of the mystical community is the natural state of things, that is natural in the sense of being consistent with the true nature of man and the true end of being. Therefore death and other various defects in the world of physical nature are not definitive of the final order of reality.²²⁶

The reflective corpse, which I argue is an ubiquitous figure in O'Connor's stories, supports Desmond's contention that O'Connor integrates the signification of life and death in her process of advancing her characters toward their participation as a member in the mystical body of Christ. Indeed, Desmond's subsequent point is that O'Connor achieves her goal through the use of analogy, which I have already identified as a key

²²⁵ 1 Corinthians 12.12,14-16, 24-27. O'Connor was emphatic about the Catholic understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ: "For us the Church is the body of Christ, Christ continuing in time, and as such a divine institution. The Protestant considers this idolatry. If the church is not a divine institution, it will turn into an Elks Club" (*HB* 337, cf. 230-231).

²²⁶ Desmond, *Risen Sons* 64.

element in O'Connor's anagogic signification.²²⁷ The anagogic signification with respect to the reflective, fragmenting corpse relays the same message as Saint Paul's:

fragmentation of the body leads to an unhealthy separation from a transcendent source of life; wholeness is holiness. Wendell Berry has written on this same theme at length from a variety of angles in his essays "The Body and the Earth," and "Health is Membership" that complement O'Connor's anagogic vision of the human body. The concept of bodily fragmentation, both in its physical and metaphorical connotations, has prompted him to write, "I believe that health is wholeness, " and when "we speak now of 'spirituality and healing' . . . the way to respect the body fully is to honor fully its materiality." Berry demands of his audience a precise understanding that he does not argue against "complexity or mystery but dualism."²²⁸ Berry explains:

The word *health* belongs to a family of words, a listing of which will suggest how far the consideration of health must carry us: *heal, whole, wholesome, hale, hallow, holy*. If the Body is healthy then it is whole. But

²²⁷ See esp. Desmond, *Risen Sons* 64-65.

²²⁸ Berry, Wendell, "Health is Membership," *Another Turn of the Crank* (Washington D. C.: Counterpoint, 1995) 90. Although his subject is society in general and not O'Connor's fictional communities, Berry nonetheless resonates with my assertion that O'Connor's character's spiritual health is in jeopardy because of their self-deification. He recounts the traditional human conscious decision to "go into the wilderness, measure himself against the Creation, recognize finally his true place within it, and thus be saved both from pride and despair. Seeing himself as a tiny member of a world he cannot comprehend or master or in any final sense possess, he cannot possible think of himself as a god" ("Body and the Earth" 99). O'Connor uses her landscapes to make just such a point. After the Essex gets rolled over the embankment Hazel Motes' face "seemed to reflect the entire distance across the clearing and beyond, the entire distance that extended from his eye to the blank gray sky that went on, depth after depth, into space." Perhaps we can get a sense of what Hazel Motes is experiencing at that moment from O. E. Parker. "Long views depressed Parker. You look out into space like that an you begin to feel as if someone were after you." Even within the tight confines of the doctor's waiting room, when Ruby Turpin is attacked by Mary Grace, "[a]ll at once her vision narrowed and she saw everything as if it were happening in a small room far away, or as if she were looking at it through the wrong end of a telescope" (*CW* 118; 661; 644). See also Nancy B. Sederberg's "Flannery O'Connor's Spiritual Landscape: A Dual Sense of Nothing," *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, vol. XII (Autumn 1983), 17-34.

how can it be whole and yet be dependent, as it obviously is, upon other bodies upon the earth, upon all the rest of Creation in fact.²²⁹

When M. A. Klug addresses O'Connor's engagement of the Manichean modern consciousness, Klug emphasizes that the illness O'Connor attempts to heal in her character's is their fragmentation from the mystical Body of Christ, as represented by the characters' efforts to isolate themselves from other people.²³⁰ Thomas in "The Comforts of Home," wants to kick Sarah Ham out of his house and his life. Ruby Turpin imaginatively pigeon-holes all of society. Asbury wants to connect with his mother, but only after he has died. Ruby Hill tries to reject the child in her womb. One might consider Mason Tarwater's backwoods kidnapping as an example of willful isolation, but what should be remembered is the inorganic and fragmented life of those in the city, and most particularly, the automaton-like Rayber, whose asserts "my guts are in my head," and Tarwater thinks that "his head ran by electricity."²³¹ So, it is not Rayber and Francis that make the Body of Christ, but Mason and Francis. Two is enough for community. When Francis is with Rayber, he "wore his isolation like a mantle, wrapped it around himself as if it were a garment signifying the elect."²³² The boy's return to Mason's grave at the end of the novel symbolizes a return to the wholeness of the Body of Christ, even among the old man's fragmented bones. Christ's promise, "For where there are two . . . gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them,"²³³ becomes fulfilled in Francis' reunion with the

²²⁹ Berry, Wendell, "The Body and the Earth," *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (New York: Avon, 1977) 99.

²³⁰ Klug 309.

²³¹ O'Connor, *CW* 465, 386.

²³² O'Connor, *CW* 399.

²³³ Matthew 20.18.

spirit and corpse of his great-uncle. In the reflection of the fragmented body, O'Connor's characters move closer toward putting on Christ, or re-membering (into) the Body of Christ.²³⁴ Through the use of the reflective or literal corpses and their fragmentation, her characters encounter a metaphor whose signification extends beyond their own corporeal frame, into a transcendent body that offers them an opportunity to recognize their membership in the Body of Christ, and that means a simultaneous (and often painful) acknowledgment of their newly found wholeness in stark contrast to their previous hollowness. This is Thomas' destiny in "The Comforts of Home."

Thomas starts to see Sarah's body and his body in parts, not as a whole. At dinner, he feels her stare, and she makes him aware of his own body. "The quality of her look was such that it might have been her hands, resting now on his knees, now on his neck."²³⁵ Amid the narrative that suggests bodily fragmentation, Thomas mother "advanced several plans for the wholesome use of Star's [Sarah's] spare time" (580). Upon leaving the house with Thomas, "Thomas did not offer his arm but she took it anyway" (580). Although he assures himself that he will teach her lesson once they are in private, Sarah makes Thomas reassess his potency in terms of bodily sections. "At his desk, *pen in hand*, none was more articulate than Thomas. As soon as he found himself shut into a car with Sarah Ham, *terror seized his tongue*."²³⁶ The whole scene is a

²³⁴ My argument runs counter to Patricia Yaeger's interpretation of fragmentation and moral decay for some obvious reasons. Yaeger places O'Connor's violence outside of the context of "moral-symbolic decay" (a phrase borrowed from Slavoj Zizek). Relying upon Zizek's interpretation of the symbolic wound, Yaeger cites Zizek and concludes that the wound "cannot be integrated into the totality of 'our own body,'" because by her estimation, O'Connor's characters border on "their condition as human beings," not against the boundary of the Body of Christ, but an "alien and mechanized world" which she finds is best expressed in cartoons like "Wily Coyote and Sylvester the Cat" ("Woman without Any Bones," 104, 105, 106).

²³⁵ O'Connor, *CW* 580.

²³⁶ O'Connor, *CW* 580 (*emphasis mine*).

corporeal montage. Sarah's feet curl under her buttocks, then swing off the car seat. Hands hang limply over shoulders. A leg emerges followed by a crooked face. Sarah sums up the pieces: "What if you were me?" Thomas resists seeing himself as Sarah, but when he looks into her eyes he sees a reflection of himself. "There was something about the look that suggested it was the blindness of those who don't know they can't see" (581). Thomas eventually thinks about fragmenting himself. "He was like a man handed a knife and told to operate on himself if he wished to live" (588). Such an operation would amount to suicide, and in the context of killing his own *hupokeimenon*, nothing could be more noble.

Similar to the medieval understanding of the rotting cadaver, which possesses a 'life' in its breaking apart, Sarah's reflective corpse suggests Thomas's gradual spiritual decay. Even within his mental estimation, Sarah is a corpse because she is a body without a soul. Thomas "needed nothing to tell him he was in the presence of the very stuff of corruption, but blameless corruption because there was no responsible faculty behind it."²³⁷ If Sarah causes him pain (to be sure she instigates a discomfort), then that reinforces the principle Saint Augustine explains in addressing torture of 'the second death' that experiences a punishment because the soul is kept in the body. What Thomas fails to see in Sarah's reflective corpse is his own soullessness, and a prefigurement of his corruption that occurs on God's terms.²³⁸ Sarah's body represents the corpse's liminal period where the body suffers because of the soul's imperfection, but this is not clear to Thomas, not only because he believes her "responsible faculty" is missing, but also

²³⁷ O'Connor, *CW* 580.

²³⁸ Augustine, *City of God, Basic Writings* XXI.3 (2: 565).

because he leans upon his false *mind-soul* to support his judgment. Saint Thomas Aquinas emphasized the point that in order to think about the identity of the body in the grave, it must be connected to the soul. Ironically, Thomas speaks the truth about Sarah's anagogic identity, the body in the grave being punished on the Lord's terms. "Don't you know," he tells his mother, "her kind never kill themselves." He describes Sarah in terms that could apply to the decomposing body depicted in a transi tomb. "Her kind clung tenaciously to life and were able to wrest some histrionic advantage from every moment."²³⁹ To Thomas, Sarah is the "moral moron" who is without a soul like someone without a kidney. It is not until the end of the story, when he obeys the urging of his father's voice that calls *him* a "moron," that he feels the pain of his own spiritual corruption.

To penetrate that anagogic vision of himself, Thomas enters into an intimacy with what he most hates: Sarah Ham. The metaphoric sexual encounter that occurs near the end of the story sets up the final scene, which receives Sheriff Farebrother's interpretation as "the killer and the slut [who] were about to collapse into each other's arms."²⁴⁰ Sarah continually threatens Thomas with sex. Her invasion into his bedroom recalls a similar occurrence in the life of Thomas' patron saint, Saint Thomas Aquinas (a champion of order). The story of Saint Thomas and the prostitute was a story with which we know O'Connor was very familiar.²⁴¹ When juxtaposed, the stories nearly read the same.

²³⁹ O'Connor, *CW* 587.

²⁴⁰ O'Connor, *CW* 594.

²⁴¹ In her letter to "A", 28 August 1955, O'Connor writes, "The more I read St. Thomas the more flexible he seems to me. Incidentally, St. John [of the Cross] would have been able to sit down with the prostitute and said, 'Daughter, let us consider this,' but St. Thomas doubtlessly knew his own nature and knew that he had to get rid of her with a poker or she would overcome him" (*HB* 97).

She had invaded his room. He had waked to find his door open and her in it. There was enough light from the hall to make her visible as she turned toward him. . . He had sprung out of his bed and snatched a straight chair and then he had backed her out the door, holding the chair in front of him like an animal trainer driving out a dangerous cat.²⁴²

Thomas's mother excuses Sarah's behavior as it expresses a part of her nature beyond her control: "So awful, so awful . . . it's something she can't help. Something she was born with. Thomas . . . suppose it were you? . . . [a] Nimpermaniac" (574). The mother's mistaking "nymphomaniac" for her own nomenclature, "Nimpermaniac," is significant for understanding Sarah's reflective corpse and its effective use of sex as a weapon.²⁴³

The etymology of the mother's neologism, "Nimpermaniac," relates to her own son's lack of bodily order. Thomas' understanding of self is based upon a careful moderation of internal acts and thorough organization of external things. He is content with his singular self, isolated in his own den, which as I alluded to earlier, accrues enough meaning to associate itself with his *mind-soul*. What bothers Thomas when he discovers

²⁴² O'Connor, *CW* 573-574.

²⁴³ D. G. Kehl examines the idea of 'sex as a weapon' in "Flannery O'Connor's 'Fourth Dimension'" *The Role of Sexuality in Her Fiction*, *Mississippi Quarterly* 48.2 (Spring 1995): 255-276. Kehl actually identifies "eight distinct functions" of sex in O'Connor's stories, but pertinent to my analysis is Kehl's recognition that sex "serves . . . to expose the rotting foundations, those both of the individual's lives and of modern society, revealing the meretriciousness and fraudulence which lie at the core of our culture" (274). This point is expressed in a different way in the First Letter to the Corinthians, where Saint Paul explains that having sex with a prostitute can corrupt the entire Mystical Body of Christ (1 Corinth 6.15-17). Karl Barth elaborated upon these verses in *The Resurrection of the Dead*: "Fornication, and all human *hybris*, however, signify that not only our corruptible, but also our incorruptible part is surrendered . . . the unbridled human vitality [drags] down to the dust not only man . . . but the *Lord*" (32). Thomas' crime of planting the gun in Sarah's purse metaphorically parallels a sexual encounter, and exposes how much of his integrity he has relinquished. His corrupt action weakens not only his moral integrity but also affects adversely the other members of the Body of Christ. The climax of the story carries a sexual charge and turns very violent. As Kehl explains: "Like violence, with which it is frequently allied, sexuality often serves to expose and destroy the specious good" (274). Barth, Karl. *The Resurrection of the Dead*, trans. H. J. Stenning (Arno Press: New York, 1977).

the gun missing from his desk drawer is not Sarah's possession of it, "but the thought of Sarah Ham's hands sliding among his papers" (588). Thomas feels violated by Sarah Ham in a sensual way, although she never touches him. Her influence is felt through a different medium. The comforts of home and the comforts of the body have a symmetry about them. As long as Thomas can keep domestic order, he can maintain his state of spiritual indifference. With the entrance of Sarah Ham into his well-ordered domestic universe, Thomas encounters a reflection of himself, a 'Nimpermaniac.' Taking apart the word: *nim* comes from Latin means "too much, excessive, beyond measure"; *per* is a Latin preposition describing "through the midst (of space)," and finally, *maniac* from the Greek refers to the disorganization and inordinateness of the person, especially akin to the *menos*, spirit. "The Comforts of Home" is a story about bodies in a struggle to possess Thomas. His body fuses with many different bodies, all extreme representations of inordinate personalities, which compete for a space inside of his moderating *mind-soul* and *hupokeimenon*. *Nimpermania* threatens the order of Thomas's universe, and chaos for him translates into an awareness of his soul's existence. To know about his soul, he has to come to know how dead his body on its own. In O'Connor's plan for Thomas' revelation, he comes to know his body through an intimate encounter with a reflection of his dead body, Sarah Ham, the nimpermaniac.

Sex and suicide pair up to become powerful allies in Thomas's revelation. Sarah prophetically lays out how Thomas will destroy his own *hupokeimenon*. "Tomsee'll find out. I'll kill myself and then he'll be sorry he wasn't nice to me. I'll use his own lil ol' pearl-handled revol-lervuh!"²⁴⁴ Suicide, which is a mortal sin in Catholic theology when

²⁴⁴ O'Connor, *CW* 587.

exercised against the body united with the soul, claims an integrity on the anagogic level when it means that a person kills the part of himself that denies the spiritual union. The death-wish fits into the paschal mystery, which is metaphorically synthesized by the example of a “grain of wheat falling to the ground.”²⁴⁵ The New Testament often makes explicit the renunciation of self-worship in terms of bodily death. Saint Paul explains “those that are Christ’s have crucified their flesh with the vices and concupiscences.”²⁴⁶ Of course he places himself into such a self-crucified membership, and goes on in another letter to assert that “it is good for me to die, rather than any man should make my glory void.”²⁴⁷ A death-wish within the proper spiritual context is a good thing in terms of *wholeness* and *holiness*; however, what often happens in O’Connor’s stories, especially at the end when the moment is loaded with eschatological signification, the death wish takes on a dual nature, reflective of the character who stands at the anagogic threshold between the death of their *mind-soul-hupokeimenon* and the re-emergence of their body-soul. At this moment of grace he or she realizes that the *death* they believed they understood in the physical sense has missed its mark, and has struck them in a way that brings a greater pain to their living. Death becomes the means of a paschal purging that draws the character closer to Christ through contrition, and that contrition tortures the character by his or her desire to die. In true apocalyptic form, death for characters such as Julian in “Everything that Rises,” Thomas in “Comforts of Home,” Sheppard in “The Lame Shall Enter First,” Asbury in “The Enduring Chill,” and Mrs. McIntyre in “The Displaced Person,” gathers a newly understood nature that is described in the Book of Revelation: “In those days men

²⁴⁵ Luke 12.24

²⁴⁶ Galatians 5.24.

²⁴⁷ 1 Corinthians 9.15.

shall seek death, and shall not find it. They shall desire to die, and death shall escape them.”²⁴⁸

This ‘anagogic threshold’ may sound familiar with respect to Mikhail Bahktin’s description of the medieval grotesque body standing “on the threshold of the grave and the crib” that subsequently collapses when “the two bodies unite to form one.”²⁴⁹ As I noted earlier, I see the two bodies as very distinct, so their unification is an impossibility because their anagogic signification inherently opposes each other. Thus, even the spiritual effect of death can be interpreted -- I may even risk saying “felt”-- by the character in two very different ways: an intense contrition and a desire to stop the pain of guilt by dying themselves. The first effect lines up as an integral step of Saint Paul’s recommended spiritual self-crucifixion. The second effect parallels the tortuous consequence of those who cling to the old sinful flesh in the Apocalypse. Erich Heller offers some insight on how interpreting death’s split effects can actually lend support to the idea that O’Connor desires salvation for her characters through their acceptance of the purgatorial effects of death. In her copy of *The Disinherited Mind*, O’Connor underlined the passage where Heller discusses why Goethe’s Faust is beyond redemption. Heller writes:

Both [Faust’s] eternal striving and his desire for peace are merely the extreme stations of his mind and heart in their never-ending voyage of self-exploration. His ‘tragedy’ is that he is incapable of tragedy. For tragedy presupposes the belief in an external order of things which is indeed in complete without the conformity of the human soul, but would be still

²⁴⁸ Apocalypse 9.6

²⁴⁹ Di Renzo 67.

more defective without the soul's freedom to violate it. Yet Faust's dilemma is different. His 'two souls' are merely the one soul divided in itself because it knows of no independent external reality to which it is related as a free agent.²⁵⁰

To rephrase Heller in terms of the present discussion, Faust possessed exclusively a *mind-soul*. As such, he is outside of tragedy, because as William Lynch says in *Christ and Apollo*, he is outside of the "deeper level of human existence, a place where the human spirit 'dies' in frequent real helplessness."²⁵¹ Under the Christian influences of both Heller and most especially William Lynch, O'Connor consciously wrote Christian tragedies,²⁵² stories that conclude where "the points of death and life coincide in one act."²⁵³ In my argument for the complexity of the effects of death and suffering, which on one hand invoke the necessity of a Christian's compliance to take up his own cross, and on the other, to experience inevitably the apocalyptic torture reserved for those who deny Christ, I feel an obligation to acknowledge the critical perspective of Patricia Yaeger.

Yaeger takes the position that O'Connor's use of violence can be interpreted as having nothing to do with divine justice or redemption. She summarizes the critical discourse she confronts when she writes, "Contemplating her fiction, we are left, then,

²⁵⁰ Heller 60. O'Connor underlined the passage starting from "For tragedy presupposes" (see Kinney 129).

²⁵¹ Lynch 79.

²⁵² This idea of tragedy is addressed in detail in Chapter Four when I discuss William Lynch's interpretation of Christian tragedy as presented in *Christ and Apollo* (66-88). In his essay, "Parker's Back: Flannery O'Connor's Iconography of Salvation by Profanity," (*Studies in Short Fiction* VI.5 [Fall 1969]: 525-535) Preston Browning Jr., expands upon Brainard Cheney's remarks that O'Connor writes with "the characteristic dramatic strategy of her short stories" such that they begin "with familiar surfaces, in an action that seems secular at the outset . . . [but] before you know it, the naturalistic situation has become metaphysical" (qtd in Browning 525-526).

²⁵³ Lynch 79.

with a primitive sadism that most critics convert into an old comfortable theology” and adds in another essay, “O’Connor, the theory goes, is too good a writer to be obsessed with mangled corpses alone; her deviant prose reflects a lofty intent.”²⁵⁴ Yaeger’s O’Connor is a writer who “takes a wry pleasure in sticking it to her hero and heroine alike,” and these characters “seem poised on the border of their conditions as human beings.”²⁵⁵ According to Yaeger, O’Connor not only omits the character’s “political context,” but “she burns it away,” thus destroying “the narrative coordinates that might help us make sense of her cruelty.”²⁵⁶ Her criticism of O’Connor’s fiction extends beyond just the texts themselves, and more into the realm of reader response. In her essay, “Flannery O’Connor and The Aesthetics of Torture,” she makes the point that one may want to disregard the reader’s participation in O’Connor’s fiction, drawing the line between “physical torture” and the “‘aesthetics’ of torture.” She maintains that some may hold the conviction that “the reader’s experience of coercion can be only a shadow of the coercion experienced by those in the grip of military, judicial, or state apparatuses,” but the magnetism of O’Connor’s stories can nonetheless draw the reader in as a participant of a “textual masochism.”²⁵⁷ My response to Yaeger’s assessment of O’Connor seeming lack of mercy is not simply to quote something along the lines of a ‘tough love’ argument, but is instead to identify what makes us really uncomfortable about O’Connor’s violence: O’Connor may attack a character who can appear quite morally upright.

²⁵⁴ Yaeger, Patricia, “Flannery O’Connor and the Aesthetics of Torture,” *Flannery O’Connor: New Perspectives* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996) 191; “The Woman Without Any Bones: Anti-Angel Aggression in *Wise Blood*,” *New Essays on “Wise Blood”*, ed. Michael Kreyling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 102.

²⁵⁵ Yaeger, “Woman Without Bones” 113, 105.

²⁵⁶ Yaeger, “Aesthetics of Torture” 191.

²⁵⁷ Yaeger, “Aesthetics of Torture” 191.

The character's willful separation from God may seem a minor issue in light of the fact that the character tries to exercise humanitarian virtues. Certainly many of us would feel irritated at Julian's bigoted mother, and equally annoyed by Asbury's or Thomas' overly protective mothers. We most likely are sympathetic towards Sheppard's attempts to bring a juvenile delinquent back into society. We might share Mrs. May's frustration with her sons and the Greenleafs. Who doesn't harbor some regret about Mrs. Cope's victimization at the hands of three young arsonists? If O'Connor applies the torturous textual screws to her characters it is with the intent of breaking their *human* spirit, and that may mean cutting away some good cells along with the cancer. O'Connor identified the problem of the modern consciousness as being its inability to discern between the Holy Spirit and the human spirit. One writer she criticized for promoting this obfuscation was John Steinbeck, whom she quotes in an essay as saying, "In the end was the word and the word was with men."²⁵⁸ Steinbeck is a literary champion of the secular human spirit; however, his artistic vision may seem quite similar to O'Connors, especially in his choice of characters. He begins *Cannery Row* with an explicit characterization of the neighborhood residents' dual natures.

Its inhabitants, as the man once said, "whores, pimps, gamblers, and sons of bitches," by which he meant Everybody. Had the man looked through another peephole he might have said, "Saints and angels and martyrs and holy men," and he would have meant the same thing.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁸ O'Connor, *MM* 159.

²⁵⁹ Steinbeck, John, *Cannery Row* (New York: Penguin, 1994) 5.

O'Connor would have probably cheered such a description, if Steinbeck hadn't secularized his saints, angels, martyrs, and holy men. In "Novelist and Believer" she writes that "[f]or him, man has his own natural spirit of courage and dignity and pride and must consider it a point of honor to be satisfied with this."²⁶⁰ Through his character, Casey, Steinbeck makes his point in *The Grapes of Wrath*:

I figgered about the Holy Sperit and the Jesus road. I figgered, 'Why do we got to hang it on God or Jesus? Maybe,' I figgered, 'maybe it's all men an' all women we love; maybe that's the Holy Sperit -- the human sperit -- the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul and ever'body's a part of.' Now I sat there thinkin' it, an' all of a suddent -- I knew it. I knew it so deep down that it was true, and I still know it.²⁶¹

What makes O'Connor's readers uncomfortable is that in the face of all her characters' sins, it seems wrong to crush a character who shows some semblance of love, even if she or he (in Steinbeck's Casey's words) doesn't "hang it on God or Jesus." Perhaps we could think that O'Connor considered her characters (and perhaps her reading audience) so steeped in the Steinbeckian type of self-deification, that unless they undergo a dramatic death-like experience, they will go to heaven and have an exchange with Jesus that one can imagine as follows:

O'Connor character: "Lord, when did I see you hungry, naked, or lonely?"

Christ: "Whenever you loved the least ones, you loved me."

²⁶⁰ O'Connor, *MM* 159.

²⁶¹ Steinbeck, John, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin, 1992) 33.

O'Connor character: "No, I think you're confused. You weren't there. There was just this kid with a clubfoot, my mother who drove me crazy, and my farmhands that wouldn't work to save their soul. There's no need to go hanging those people on You. Now, what were you saying about being naked?"

Yaeger surmises it is a "primitive fascination with death and bodily privation" that makes "the bedrock of O'Connor's fiction," which suggests O'Connor's goal has a Manichaeian intent. I beg to disagree. O'Connor does not burn away the political or secular context, as much as she injects a new perspective into it. The bedridden Asbury has stared at the water stain thousands of times, but only at the end of the story does it take on its symbolic form and descend. As he climbs the stairs to see Norton, Sheppard probably still believed that his purchasing the telescope was a good idea, and useful for Norton's rearing, but when he gets to the attic it takes on a whole different meaning. Ruby Hill in "A Stroke of Good Fortune" does not cease to be a middle-aged pregnant woman, but the roll she feels inside of her suggests the existence of a much larger new life. Hazel Motes does not stop getting checks from the government, but their importance to him and Mrs. Flood continues to change in the final pages of *Wise Blood*. What O'Connor achieves with her deathlike moment is a type of spiritualization of matter and of the critical secular context. This spiritualization is similar to what Tresmontant found in Teilhard's treatment of asceticism in *The Phenomenon of Man*. O'Connor writes that asceticism for Teilhard does *not* consist "so much in liberating and purifying oneself of 'matter'" -- but in further spiritualizing matter . . . in sanctifying and spiritualizing the real

which has been given to us, by ‘working together’ with God.”²⁶² What may seem to Yaeger as O’Connor’s unwarranted and exaggerated means to usher her characters toward death, and cultivate subconsciously in her readers the realization of a death-wish for the story’s denouement, really is an attempt to show up the aesthetic apologetics for the human spirit over the Holy Spirit provided by modern writers like Steinbeck. In order to make her point, she has to show how Casey’s theology of the “human sperit,” as noble as it may be in its exhortation to love everybody, can seriously backfire if it leaves out the Divine. In “The Lame Shall Enter First,” the religiously zealous Johnson says of humanist Sheppard: “I don’t care if he’s good or not. He ain’t *right*” (604). We can see the opposite standard applied by Thomas in “The Comforts of Home,” who sees that his Christ-like mother is good, but according to his human standard, she “ain’t right.” Thomas harbors a death wish for Sarah Ham, and in O’Connor’s typically ironic style, Thomas, who prays to his own human spirit, will both get and *not* get what he has wished for.

The reason Sarah is the “kind that will never kill herself,” is because the identity that needs to be destroyed is the reflective corpse’s identity, Thomas himself. The only one who can renounce the old flesh to make room for the Christian body and soul is the keeper of the old flesh, not the reflector of it. To know himself, Thomas does what he would swear never to do. He has sex with Sarah. Sex occurs not with their bodies, but through the objects that operate on an anagogic level. Thomas “thrusts” the pistol into the opening of the “red pocketbook” that “had a skin-like feel to his touch” and let off “an

²⁶² qtd. in Zuber 87. See also Desmond, *Risen Sons* 65.

unmistakable odor of the girl.”²⁶³ When Sarah catches him in the act, Thomas assumes the posture of a crucified person, nailed to an invisible cross. “Thomas stood slightly hunched, his hands hanging helplessly at the wrists as if he had just pulled them up out of a pool of blood” (593). His earlier reply to Sarah’s question, “If I killed myself I wonder would God want me?”, was “Try it and see,” has at this moment begun to play itself out (586).

As mentioned above, Thomas at first feels a revulsion for himself as he gradually turns into the girl, but later his contempt shifts. “His fury was directed not at the little slut but at his mother” (587). “I am not set against [Sarah]” Thomas tells his mother, “I am set against you making a fool of yourself” (583). Thomas is the one torn between rejecting a truth about himself that Sarah reflects in her anagogic being, and accepting his mother’s embodiment of the Christian paradox expressed by Saint Paul, “Has not God turned to foolishness the wisdom of this world?”²⁶⁴ When he places the ultimatum to his mother, “You can choose -- her or me,”²⁶⁵ he is really addressing his own dilemma in deciding the outcome of the bodily competition. Thomas can choose his old self, which is the living corpse reflected in Sarah, or a separate “me,” a new identity that distinguishes him by the possession of a soul. When he chooses to kill Sarah, his decision appears motivated by his hatred of Sarah Ham, but anagogically, his target of hatred has come full circle back to himself. Sarah “appeared to adore Thomas’ repugnance to her and draw it out of him every chance she got as if it added delectably to her martyrdom” (585). Sarah is not the

²⁶³ O’Connor, *CW* 592.

²⁶⁴ 1 Corinthians 1.20.

²⁶⁵ O’Connor, *CW* 588.

apparent martyr, yet her anagogic identity as Thomas' reflective corpse is the one that dies through his mother's sacrifice.

When the mother moves between Sarah and Thomas to save the girl, she takes the bullet. She becomes the literal corpse, the crucified Christ, the representation of the spirituality that Thomas struggled to suppress and rub out. Her selfless act of love has ironically allowed "the dead to bury the dead." Thomas may now understand his misdirected hatred. Thomas didn't want this to happen. Like Judas, he "delivered his mother over to the sheriff" (591), and perhaps also like Judas after his betrayal of Christ, "he kept hoping for another solution, for a miracle" (585). His mother had prepared herself, like Christ, for such a moment.

Some new weight of sorrow seemed to have been thrown across her shoulders, and not only Thomas, but Sarah Ham was infuriated by this, for it appeared to be a general sorrow that would have found another object no matter what good fortune came to either of them. The experience of Sarah Ham had plunged the old lady into mourning for the world. (587)

Before and after Thomas fires the gun, the consequences stack up in cosmological and eschatological proportions. "At that instant Thomas damned not only the girl but the entire order of the universe that made her possible . . . The blast was like a sound meant to bring an end to evil in the world" (593). Viewed from the anagogic perspective, Thomas has a pivotal revelation about her act: rather than destroying the evil in another person, he has exposed a living evil in himself that could only be seen in contrast to his mother's love.

Thomas loved his mother. He loved her because it was his nature to do so, but there were times when he could not endure her love for him. There were times when it became nothing but pure idiot mystery and he sensed about him forces, invisible currents entirely out of his control. (575)

O'Connor uses the mother's body and Sarah's body to give the "pure idiot mystery" and "invisible currents" form.

"The Comforts of Home" makes us uncomfortable because we suspect on the surface that this could be a nihilistic tragedy, but the corporeal aesthetic at work in the story allows the reader to hold in abeyance such a pessimistic reading of the action in the hope that on another level it offers a chance at redemption. If we trust Sheriff Farebrother's assessment at the end of the story, then Thomas is in love with Sarah, who has conspired with him to murder his mother. At first the dramatic irony makes us shudder and pour scorn on the sheriff's ignorance, but Farebrother's seemingly misconstrued conclusion may not be that far from the anagogic truth. What Farebrother, the representative of mortal justice, doesn't see, is the swift action of divine justice. Saint Paul may offer a context for envisioning what happens at the climax of the story. He writes to the Colossians:

When you were dead in your sins, he hath quickened together with him . . . he hath taken the same out of the way fastening it to the cross . . . Let no man therefore judge you [in earthly concerns]²⁶⁶ . . . Which are a shadow of things to come, but the body *is* Christ's.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁶ Paul alludes to the cleanliness and uncleanness of meat, or participation in Jewish festivals that according to him had become meaningless obligatory rituals after God's incarnation.

²⁶⁷ Col 2.13-14,16-17.

In order to uphold the redemptive integrity of the short story, Thomas' identity must be considered in the context of his birth into the body of Christ. In a letter to "A" in December of 1959 O'Connor writes that Cecil Dawkins, who read "The Comforts of Home," just "don't get the moral point." Her reaction to "A" uses language that (perhaps unconsciously) puns on what I believe is her corporeal anagogic vision. She writes:

You ["A"] understand Thomas because you know me; she doesn't understand Thomas because she just has the story to read and understand . . . I talk about Thomas in this story. What I've got to do is get Thomas to reveal himself more. A story has to have muscle as well as meaning, and meaning has to be in the muscle.²⁶⁸

One of O'Connor's artistic strengths is found precisely in her creation of characters' bodies that reveal something much more than "just . . . the story."

The Faces of Death in The Violent Bear It Away

Perhaps no other fictional work lays such importance on the idea of death supporting a life than O'Connor's second and last novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*. The school teacher, Rayber, exemplifies the spiritual plague that O'Connor perceived had swept over the modern consciousness. Amplifying the lament of scholars like Eric Heller who traced the disintegration of art's sacramental vision in *The Disinherited Mind*, *The Violent Bear It Away* recounts the struggle between a prophetic vision and its sterilization by a Cartesian dualism. It is not surprising that O'Connor presents her brain-washed and soul-expurgated antagonist, Rayber, as exceedingly inorganic, dead. "Every living thing

²⁶⁸ O'Connor, *HB* 362.

that passed through [Rayber's] eyes into his head was turned by his brain into a book or a paper or a chart . . . stench and shame . . . dead words . . . dry and seedless fruit, incapable even of rotting, dead from the beginning."²⁶⁹ Rayber's hearing aid, which consists of a "metal box" that was "joined by a cord to the plug in his ear" made Francis wonder "that his head ran by electricity" (386). Similar to Thomas in "The Comforts of Home," we witness an anagogic somatic battle, and here Francis Tarwater's body provides the battleground. Two corpses, Old Mason Tarwater and Rayber, compete for their deathly image to take hold in Francis Tarwater. "The boy knew that he would have to bury the old man before anything would begin" (336), but Rayber measures that his efforts to rid Francis of the "guilt for not burying him" is his own personal "desperate heroic struggle to free [Francis] from the old man's deathly grasp" (396). The school teacher assures Francis, "A dead man is not going to do you any good" (395).

The novel begins with the difficulties, practical and ideological, of Francis Tarwater burying the body of his great uncle, Mason Tarwater, the backwoods prophet who kidnapped Francis while an infant to raise him to be the Lord's prophet. O'Connor front loads the novel with dialogues, debates, and Old Tarwater's rubrics of a proper burial. The characters confront issues of material continuity, resurrection of the body, and post-mortem intercessions, all of which replay nearly verbatim the concerns and opinions of people living in the later Middle Ages on such matters. Caroline Walker Bynum recounts the last section of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, which discusses issues like

What age, height, and sex will we have in the resurrected body? Will all matter that has passed through the body at any point be resurrected? Must

²⁶⁹ O'Connor, *CW* 341.

bits of matter return to the particular members (fingernails or hair for example) where they once resided? Will the bodies of the damned as well as the saved rise with their defects repaired? Are aborted fetuses resurrected? . . . [What] is the usefulness of prayers for the dead.²⁷⁰

The evil disembodied voice of the Stranger that haunts Francis Tarwater nags him about the practical impossibilities for God's reconstruction of the human body. While Peter Lombard's responses, which were "mostly borrowed in fact from Augustine's *City of God* and *Enchiridon*, with bits and pieces from Gregory, Julian of Toledo, Jerome, Hugh of St. Victor, Honorius Augustodenensis and the school of Anselm of Laon thrown in,"²⁷¹ engaged the medieval curiosity of how spiritual beings would reincarnate at the final trumpet, the Stranger dismisses the soul and focuses on just the brute facts: dust.

Well now, the Stranger said, don't you think any cross you set up in the year 1952 would be rotted out by the year the Day of Judgment comes in? Rotted to as much dust as his ashes if you reduced him to ashes? And lemme ast you this: what's God going to do with sailors drowned at sea that the fish have et and the fish that et them et by other fish and they et by yet others? And what about people that get burned up naturally in house fires? Burnt up one way or another or lost in machines until they're pulp? And all those sojers blasted to nothing? What about all those that there's nothing left of to burn or bury?²⁷²

²⁷⁰ Bynum, *Fragmentation* 241-42.

²⁷¹ Bynum, *Fragmentation* 242-243.

²⁷² O'Connor, *CW* 352.

The burial of Mason Tarwater holds importance not simply because of the respectful bestowal of a body to the earth, but because on an anagogic level, the body that must die and be buried is Francis Tarwater's corpse. Burning the corpse is what Rayber would do, because Rayber's vision does not see any vestigial spirituality in the flesh. Like the Stranger, Rayber views the dead as simply matter. While an exhausted Francis digs the grave, the Stranger lays out the difference between choosing Rayber's reflective corpse or Mason's literal corpse. "[Y]ou got to bury him whole and completely by hand and that schoolteacher would burn him in a minute,"²⁷³ the Stranger tells the boy. The burial of Mason Tarwater is crucial to Francis hearing and responding to his call to be a prophet, because O'Connor establishes an interdependent spiritual salubrity between the two characters. Respect for his uncle's dead body reflects Francis' respect for his own soul. The old man told his great nephew, "Burying the dead right may be the only honor you ever do yourself."²⁷⁴ In the end, Young Tarwater's anagogic body will become a corpse that he must bury so that he can be born again as a prophet. *The Violent Bear It Away* is about Francis Tarwater becoming a corpse through his engagement with his great uncle's literal corpse and his Uncle Rayber's reflective corpse.

With both a prominent literal and reflective corpse, O'Connor's cult of the unholy relics has a vast inventory in this novel. Of the many corporeal representations, the most frequent is indisputably the face. The face conveys and concretizes Francis Tarwater's anagogic identity. One other face, and later in the novel it also becomes a corpse's face, competes for Francis Tarwater's anagogic expression. Bishop is Rayber's mentally-

²⁷³ O'Connor, *CW* 336.

²⁷⁴ O'Connor, *CW* 338.

handicapped child, and the boy is a type of Christ-figure.²⁷⁵ Tarwater balances the split-vision between the *hupokeimenon* and the Body of Christ. Scrutinizing the face from the vantage point of its role as one of O'Connor's unholy relics, gains us insight into the evolution of Francis Tarwater's corpse and his choice between his uncle's competing corpses.

How Old Tarwater wanted to be buried relates to the funerary practices of the later Middle Ages. Mason's instructions to his great-nephew may seem ridiculous, but they actually follow a thirteenth century shift in people's attitudes toward the dead body and issues of what to do with it. Philippe Ariès explains:

Around the thirteenth century, at the same time that the vigil, mourning and the funeral procession were becoming ceremonies of the Church, organized and directed by clergymen, something happened that may seem insignificant but that indicates a profound change in man's attitude toward death. The dead body, formerly a familiar object and an image of repose, came to possess such power that the sight of it became unbearable. Now and for centuries to come, it was removed from view, hidden in a box, under a monument, where it was no longer visible. The concealment of the body is a major cultural event, for like all things related to death, it is also charged with a symbolism that was primarily ecclesiastical.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ Characterizing Bishop as a Christ-figure can be supported from various descriptions of the boy in *The Violent Bear It Away*, perhaps most obviously by how his death seems to imitate the Christological prophesy of Isaiah, "he shall be led as a sheep to slaughter" (Isaiah 53.7) See George Kilcourse's discussion of Bishop as a Christ-figure based on O'Connor's 1956 review of Guardinini's essay on Dostoyvsky's *The Idiot* (Kilcourse, *Religious Imagination* 234-239).

²⁷⁶ Ariès, Philippe, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984) 168.

One prominent example from the thirteenth century that illustrates this repugnance to a dead body occurred on July 17, 1216, the day after Pope Innocent III died. Agostino Paravinci-Bagliani describes the event through Jacques de Vitry, “one of the most renowned preachers of the epoch” and later known as the bishop cardinal of Tusculum (1229-41).

The pope was not yet buried. His corpse had been displayed in the cathedral of the city, but during the night (July 16-17) some people had “furtively” stripped it of the precious vestments in which it was to have been entombed. The cadaver had been abandoned in the church almost nude (*ferè nudum*), in an advanced state of decomposition (*fetidum*).

Jacques concludes that he was thus able to confirm with his own eyes how “brief and vain [is] the illusory splendor of this world.”²⁷⁷

The concealment of the body, especially the face, became a real consideration in executing a proper burial, in showing respect for the dead. The emphasis of getting the cadaver bestowed below the ground, in a coffin instead of a sarcophagus, denoted the shift as well. If the coffin wasn’t available for the burial, there was at least a hole in the ground.

“People who were too poor to pay the carpenter were carried to the cemetery in a common coffin designed only for transport. The gravedigger removed the body from the coffin, buried it, and saved the coffin for further use.”²⁷⁸ Mason Tarwater makes his own coffin, but he doesn’t intend to lie in it (dead at least).

²⁷⁷ Paravinci-Bagliani, Agostino, *The Pope’s Body*, trans. David S. Peterson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994) 122.

²⁷⁸ Ariès 169.

Old Tarwater scratched upon the lid of the pine box "MASON TARWATER, WITH GOD," but "he didn't intend to use it. The old man was too heavy for a thin boy to hoist him over the side of a box."²⁷⁹ So alternate instructions were left with the nephew, "that if it wasn't feasible to get him into it when the time came, then just to put him in the hole as he was, only to be sure the hole was deep. He wanted it ten foot, not just eight." Mason's funerary requirements may seem just as another extension of his many idiosyncrasies, but when related to the medieval attitude toward the corpse, its significance for the spirituality of the flesh and the anagogic body of Francis Tarwater becomes apparent. Recalling the earlier discussion of the medieval notion of the corpse's liminal period and the spiritual value of its decomposition, the body in the grave suffers on God's terms for its own just reward. The corpse that is fragmented by animals or other means not natural in the process of decay is a violation of the responsibility those living owe to the dead and their transferal of the physical identity to God. If Francis doesn't take care to bury his great uncle correctly, then he has put his own soul in jeopardy because he is not giving to God his due, but allowing the world to violate the dignity of the human being. Referring to the time when his great nephew would bury him, the old man says, "You better pen up the dogs" (339). The respect that Francis shows to Mason's corpse links directly to the boy's respect towards his own soul and God. His anagogic identity, the *hupokeimenon*, must die along with Mason's material identity, in order for him to answer his call to be a prophet. When Francis tells Mason that he will be too tired to bother with all these trifles about burying the old man the way he wants, Mason rebukes him. "Trifles! You'll learn what a trifle is on the day those crosses are gathered! Burying the dead right may be the

²⁷⁹ O'Connor, *CW* 337.

only honor you ever do yourself. I brought you out here to raise you a Christian, and more than a Christian, a prophet! and the burden of it will be on you!” (338). Mason tries to drive home the interdependence of the living and the dead. His dead body shall lead the boy’s life to its spiritual destiny.

The dialogue between Mason and Francis implicitly deals with matters beyond the practical issues of putting a dead body in a hole. While still alive, Mason lies in his coffin and his stomach rises “over the top like over-leavened bread.” He proclaims, “This is the end of us all” (337), and his *all* can be construed as referring to his immediate audience, himself and the boy. Old Tarwater is the reflective corpse at this point, showing Francis his own spiritual death, his *hupokeimenon* that needs to be buried. Lying in the coffin, Mason possesses two identities in one body: his physical identity and his nephew’s anagogic identity. Young Tarwater tells him, “It’s too much of you for the box . . . I’ll have to wait until you rot a little” (337-338). Mason tells him not to wait, but to put him in the ground right away. The decomposition of the corpse is God’s business, and according to Mason’s eschatological view, that happens ten feet below the ground. The material fragmentation of Mason’s corpse parallels the anagogic decomposition of Francis’ *hupokeimenon*. Francis doesn’t see things this way. “The dead don’t bother with particulars,” he tells the old man. Mason “glare[s] into his pale face” and instructs him that “[t]he world was made for the dead. Think of all the dead there are . . . There’s a million times more dead than living and the dead are dead a million times longer than the living are alive” (339). Mason’s main point is clear: the dead have an identity and they have it for much longer than the living seem to be aware of their own. Caroline Walker

Bynum emphasizes that in the medieval vision of death saw the smallest insignificant bit of the corpse's dust possessed an identity because God had plans for it.

Dismemberment is horrible, to be sure; and even more horrifying is rotteness or decay. But in the end none of this is horrible at all . . . God's promise is that division shall be overcome, that ultimately there is no scattering. As one of the more conservative [medieval] theologians might have said: Material continuity *is* identity; body is univocal . . . no fragment can ever be lost, [one can] equate bones with body and part with whole, and treat body as the permanent locus of person.²⁸⁰

If one part of the corpse caused the most stir to medieval people it was the face. The face is the dominant corporeal fragment in *The Violent Bear It Away*, and I argue it holds a position of such importance because the corpse's face denotes the "permanent locus of person."

As medieval medical science refined techniques of embalming, the face became the benchmark of the failure or success of bodily preservation. According to Ariès, "after the thirteenth century in Latin Christendom, except for Mediterranean countries, where the old practice has persisted to this day, the uncovered face of the dead man became unbearable."²⁸¹ By the end of the fourteenth and beginning of the fifteenth century, the display of the dead face became part of the funeral ritual, an expression of people's belief in a spiritual life through a corpse. Again, perhaps one of the more striking examples of a medieval Christian's attention to a dead body can be found with the papal corpse, or in the

²⁸⁰ Bynum, *Fragmentation* 294, 295.

²⁸¹ Ariès 169.

following example an Anti-Pope, Alexander V. The papal funeral ceremony pivoted around the exposition of the corpse's face. "The deceased pope's face was covered when the body was displayed in the chapel, uncovered during public display in the church, then covered again when the corpse was laid in the coffin. At death the pope 'returns to being a man' (face covered), but his death must be 'visible' (face uncovered)."²⁸² Furthermore, "displaying the dead pope with his hands, feet, and face uncovered served above all . . . to guarantee the public authentication of his death." The "pope's mortal remains" were of "fundamental importance in the process of transferring the *potestas papae* ('power of the pope')."²⁸³

Old Tarwater's death is a transference of spiritual leadership from himself to his great nephew. Mason places upon Francis the yoke of Bishop's baptism. "If I don't get him baptized," he tells Francis, "it'll be for you to do . . . I enjoin you to do it boy."²⁸⁴ Indeed, *enjoin* is the appropriate word, not only because of its burdening denotation, but also because of its homophonic connotation that suggests the union of two identities, anagogic and physical, that seek a common spiritual destiny. Old Tarwater's corporeal image is not the only one that competes for space inside of Francis' conscience. The face of Mason Tarwater, Rayber, and even Bishop all become expressions with whom Francis enjoins. Mason prophesies that should the boy ignore his duty to his dead body, there will come another that will haunt him. "And if when I'm dead you want to turn me over to my betrayer and see my body burned, go ahead!" he admonishes Francis. "Go ahead and let him burn me but watch out for the Lord's lion after that. Remember the Lord's lion set in

²⁸² Paravicini-Baliani 135.

²⁸³ Paravicini-Baliani 136.

²⁸⁴ O'Connor, *CW* 379.

the path of the false prophet!”²⁸⁵ Bishop is the Lord’s lion, and it’s Bishop’s face that will eventually set upon Francis and begin turning him into an anagogic corpse, a reflection of his *hupokeimenon*. Francis’ acceptance of a face (whoever’s part it is that stands for the whole person of Mason, Rayber, or Bishop) provides the physical representation of a spiritual surrender. Similar to the interpretation of the pope’s funerary sequence -- when the face remains hidden, there is no tension between the whole (spiritual and physical) identity of Francis, he simply returns “to being a man.”²⁸⁶ But when O’Connor reintroduces the face, as she does continually throughout the story, she is sending her readers a signal that they must identify a “visible death,” that for all practical purposes remains invisible.

Before tracing the appearance of these deathly faces through the novel, it is important to establish that their existence bears witness to an anagogic somatic struggle, a “face-off” if you will forgive the pun. Francis Tarwater’s soul is at stake, and the tide of this spiritual battle ebbs and flows with the notion that Francis Tarwater is not just one person, but a person divided between a spiritual life and the purely physical death. If he goes over to the schoolteacher, then Francis agrees with the Stranger’s conviction that “[n]obody can do both of two things without straining themselves,” and that Francis’ dilemma is not between Jesus and the Devil as Old Tarwater has taught him, but rather, “It’s Jesus or *you*.”²⁸⁷ Mason Tarwater exhorts to the boy that following such a belief leads to the denial of life, the objectification of humanity that dismisses the key element,

²⁸⁵ O’Connor, *CW* 344. For another context of Mason’s prophesy, see 431–432 where Tarwater nearly baptizes Bishop in the shallow public fountain where “water rushed out of the mouth of the stone lion’s head.” Bishop and the lion both receive the “blinding brightness” on their faces (432).

²⁸⁶ Paravicini-Baliani 135.

²⁸⁷ O’Connor, *CW* 354.

the soul. "I saved you to be free, your own self! and not a piece of information in [Rayber's] head," he tell Francis.²⁸⁸ Rayber epitomizes what O'Connor called "the popular spirit of each succeeding generation [that] has tended more and more to the view that the mysteries of life will eventually fall before the mind of man."²⁸⁹ Rayber assures his nephew that the feelings he has have nothing to do with God, and that Francis "could not escape knowing that there was someone who knew exactly what went on inside of him and who understood it for the good reason that it was understandable."²⁹⁰ Everything about Francis is divided, even the baptism he receives as an infant. Mason baptizes the baby's head; Rayber "turned Tarwater over and poured was what left in the bottle over his bottom" and proclaimed, "Now Jesus has a claim on both ends" (366). Rayber, who "saw himself divided in two -- a violent and a rational self," desires to save Francis from the violent self that urges self-mortification all in the name of Jesus (417). "You want to avoid extremes," he tells Francis, "They are for violent people" (420). Francis, himself, inadvertently professes the violent's disposition, and ironically enough, it occurs while he defends Rayber's return to the backwoods. When Old Tarwater demands an explanation why the young Rayber would return to Mason's shack after running away, Francis explains, "Because here was less bad than there. . . Less bad don't mean good, it only means better-than" (371). If Young Tarwater is to follow in his great-uncle's prophetic footsteps, he must give his entire self to Jesus, and come to terms with the fact that it is all or nothing, Jesus or the Devil.

²⁸⁸ O'Connor, *CW* 339.

²⁸⁹ O'Connor, *MM* 158.

²⁹⁰ O'Connor, *CW* 446.

The proper burial of Mason Tarwater is the first and last means of coming to terms with his divided self. The cross above the grave has importance not only with reference to Mason's desire to be collected with the faithful at the Final Trumpet, but also in identifying Francis Tarwater as a person who *does* God's will. If Francis does not put up the cross on the grave, then he becomes like Rayber, a person who just toys with the idea of God. In a dialogue that closely precedes Bishop's drowning baptism, the boy unintentionally gives a voice to his prophet-like character. Francis rejects Rayber because his uncle can "only think," while he claims that he "can act." Rayber receives both Old and Young Tarwater's scorn in the same manner as Christ scorned the Pharisees. The link between a marked grave and an unmarked grave is made explicit with respect to the Pharisees. In the gospel of Saint Luke, Jesus says, "Wo to you, because you are sepulchers that appear not, and men that walk over, are not aware."²⁹¹ The difference between Mason and Rayber is between action and thought. Mason's every effort is to keep the boy from turning into a modern dualistic Pharisee, who loves himself and distances himself from God. "I saved you to be free from yourself,"²⁹² Mason tells Francis. "Before long you wouldn't belong to yourself, you would belong to (Rayber)" (366). When the voice of the Stranger talks to Young Tarwater while he digs the old man's grave, he insists that Francis "got to bury him whole" (345) because Mason was "a one-notion man . . . Jesus" (354). The Stranger continues, "The way I see it . . . you can do one of two things. One of them, not both" (354). If Francis buries the body whole, and does the Lord's will by marking the grave, then he sets his face toward his destiny as a

²⁹¹ Luke 11.44.

²⁹² O'Connor, *CW* 339.

prophet. If Francis burns the body like Rayber would do, then he corroborates with the popular spirit of the present age that denies the existence of God. Saint Luke follows up by quoting Jesus' exhortation to the Pharisees, "That the blood of all prophets which was shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation."²⁹³ Francis does in fact burn the corpse, and must subsequently pay his dues to the dead prophet in order to discover God and himself. The woman who works the desk at the Cherokee Lodge asks the question that summarizes the entire novel. Looking at Francis who bends down to tie Bishop's shoe, she asks, "Whose boy are you?"²⁹⁴

The woman at first rules out the possibility that there is a similarity between Rayber and the son he has claimed on the lodge's registry, Frank Rayber. "You don't look it is all," she says, but then she "began to see a likeness" (425). Rayber fills with gladness when he sees himself physically reflected in his nephew. "As he followed the outline of the face, he had realized with an intense stab of joy that his nephew looked enough like him to be his son" (391). The boy's face increases in similitude as Rayber voices his personal mission, which is to create Francis in his own image. He tells him, "A dead man is not going to do you any good, don't you know that? Now I can do something for you. Now I can make up for all the time we've lost. I can help correct what he's done to you, help you to correct it yourself . . . This is our problem together" (395). After speaking these words the schoolteacher began "seeing himself so clearly in the face before him that he might have been beseeching his own image" (395). However, Young Tarwater's face is dynamic, made up of many parts, and reflects more than a

²⁹³ Luke 11.50.

²⁹⁴ O'Connor, *CW* 426.

physical similarity; it emblemizes the present situation of his soul. In order to understand better how the face could signify so much, we can again return to some of the principal thinkers of the Middle Ages.

Saint Augustine knew the importance of a good face. In Book IV of *Confessions* he relays the struggle he had with acquiring a knowledge of the world at the expense of a knowledge of God, the same struggle Francis Tarwater experiences. Tarwater tells Rayber from the start, “I ain’t fixing to hang around here . . . I only come to find out a few things and when I find them out, I’m going” (397). Augustine recalls trying to find out some things for himself.

And what did it profit me that I, the base slave of vile affections, read unaided, and understood, all the books that I could get of the so-called liberal arts? And I took delight in them, but knew not when came whatever in them was true and certain. For my back then was to the light, and my face towards the things enlightened; whence when my face, with which I discerned the things enlightened, was not itself enlightened.²⁹⁵

Augustine suggests two particular attributes of O’Connor’s *cult of the unholy relic*: 1) the body part can represent the whole and 2) that body part can have no significance unless it relates (in either comparison, but mostly for the *hupokeimenon*, in contrast) to an expression of divinity through corporeality. “But what did this profit me,” Augustine reiterates, “supposing that Thou, O Lord God, the Truth, were a bright and vast body, and I a piece of that body? Perverseness too great!”²⁹⁶ For Augustine, you have to be a “one

²⁹⁵ Augustine, *Confessions, Basic Writings* IV.16 (1: 56).

²⁹⁶ Augustine, *Confessions, Basic Writings* IV.16 (1: 56).

notion man,”²⁹⁷ because “[o]ur good lives always with Thee (God), from which when we are averted we are perverted.”²⁹⁸ Although not made explicit, this section of *Confessions* alludes to Luke’s eleventh chapter:

The light of thy body is thy eye. If thy eye be single, thy whole body will be lightsome: but if it be evil, thy body also will be darksome . . . If then thy whole body be lightsome, having no part in darkness: the whole shall be lightsome, and as a bright lamp shall enlighten thee.²⁹⁹

Old Tarwater’s greatest fear is that the boy will become a part of Rayber’s body, specifically, “a piece of information inside his head.” According to the old man, if Rayber can win the boy to his side and deal him the darkness of dualism, then he will have corrupted Francis body and soul. Francis becomes haunted by Mason’s notion for him to beware of the face and the head. In the context of Augustine and Saint Luke’s use of the face and the image of light, Francis’ question to Rayber (who wears a hearing aide) -- “What you wired for? . . . Does your head light up?”³⁰⁰ takes on a new depth of humor and meaning.

The faces of Rayber and Mason work on Young Tarwater, but so does Bishop’s face. Rayber’s face represents what Arthur Koestler called “the ghost in the machine,” which analogously amounts to a Cartesian ethereal mind in a mechanistic body.³⁰¹ Mason’s

²⁹⁷ O’Connor, *CW* 354.

²⁹⁸ Augustine, *Confessions, Basic Writings* IV.16 (1: 57).

²⁹⁹ Luke 11.34,36.

³⁰⁰ On the note of bright faces, when Asbury’s mother grins next to Dr. Block while he diagnoses the young man with undulant fever, “[h]er smile was as bright and intense as a lightbulb without a shade” (*CW* 571).

³⁰¹ See Arthur Koestler’s *The Ghost in the Machine* (New York: Macmillan, 1967). Koestler actually borrows the term from Gilbert Ryle’s *The Concept of the Mind* (1949), but his point is clear with respect to his contemporary academics’ distaste for bodily consideration. Koestler writes, “By the very act of denying the ghost in the machine -- of mind dependent on, but also responsible for, the actions of the body

face connotes a purgatorial death and the restless countenance of dead prophets, who according to Christ's chiding of the Pharisees, long for their redemption and execution of justice even at the expense of the present age's suffering.³⁰² Bishop's face is all together different. It is the face of the new covenant, the paschal mystery, Christ. Everything about Bishop's countenance has an Augustinian luminescence associated with it. The boy's face is directed or oriented toward the light and reflects God. At the public fountain, "the light falling more gently, rested like a hand on the child's white head. His face might have been a mirror where the sun had stopped to watch its reflection" (432). Bishop's heavy breathing, the exaggeration of *spiritu* (breath), alerts Francis of his bodily presence and suggests that he incarnates a Holy Ghost. While listening to the young girl's preaching on the Incarnation, Rayber thinks to himself that Bishop "is exploited by the fact that he is alive."³⁰³ "Forget he exists," Rayber tells Francis; think of Bishop as "a mistake of nature" (403). The schoolteacher "did not believe that he himself was formed in the image and likeness of God but that Bishop was he had no doubt" (401). He firmly believes that if his nephew can look at the mentally-retarded child and see God's face there, then his notions of being a prophet will be reduced to an absurdity. "Rayber felt that once he could look the child in the eye, Francis would have confidence in his ability to resist the morbid impulse to baptize him." Staring into Bishop's face has a powerful effect on Francis. "I nurse an idiot that you're afraid to look at," Rayber admonishes Tarwater. "Look him in the eye" (419). When the boy does look Bishop in the eyes, "the revelation

-- we incur the risk of turning it into a very nasty, malevolent ghost" (202). O'Connor wrote to "A" on 19 May 1962: "I am reading Koestler's *The Lotus and the Robot*. I recommend it strongly" (HB 474).

³⁰² Luke 11.50.

³⁰³ O'Connor, CW 413.

came, silent, implacable, direct as a bullet . . . His black pupils, glassy and still reflected depth on depth his own stricken image of himself, trudging into distance in the bleeding, stinking mad shadow of Jesus” (389). The Middle Ages, with its fascination with iconography and relics, believed that looking into the face of God could change a person.³⁰⁴ Herbert Kessler notes that Saint Augustine believed that “corporeal sight can stimulate ‘spiritual vision’” whenever “we come into contact with a body by means of our bodily senses, and the image of it is immediately formed in our spirit and stored in our memory.”³⁰⁵ Saint Thomas Aquinas alludes to the power of God’s gaze when he responds to the objection that “Christ worked miracles unfittingly on men” because man’s soul is more important than his body, yet “Christ worked many miracles on bodies, but we do not read of His working any miracles on souls.”³⁰⁶

Perhaps no other section of Saint Thomas’ *Summa* could apply more pertinently to O’Connor’s dispensation of grace than this one. The very question whether God could perform a change in the soul through a change in the body is answered time and again by her stories, and of course, by Aquinas. His response is that “Christ did work some miracles on the soul of man, principally by changing its lower powers.” To prove this he quotes Saint Jerome’s commentary on Matthew 9.9, Matthew’s call to discipleship.³⁰⁷

“Such was the splendor and majesty of His hidden Godhead, which shone forth even in

³⁰⁴ Three book length studies that support this point from the medieval perspective are Hans Belting’s *Likeness and Presence*, Mitchell B. Merback’s *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel*, and Herbert L. Kessler’s *Spiritual Seeing*. Pertinent to the present analysis, see Kessler 118-124, 147-48 for his consideration of angolic vision as “bridging” this world to the next” (120); Merback 43-48, 116 (distinctions between the countenance of good thief and bad thief); and Belting’s description of head relics (300-301) and their “magical power.”

³⁰⁵ Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing* 120.

³⁰⁶ Aquinas, *Summa* Pt. III. Q.44. a.2. obj.1 (2: 2256).

³⁰⁷ Matthew 9.9: “And when Jesus passed from thence, he saw a man sitting in the custom-house, named Matthew; and he saith to him: Follow me. And he arose up and followed him.”

His human countenance, that those who gazed on it were drawn to Him at first sight.”³⁰⁸

Aquinas draws another example of Christ’s powerful face from the purging of the temple in Matthew 21.12.³⁰⁹ Again, he quotes from Saint Jerome’s commentary:

Of all the signs worked by our Lord, this seems to me the most wondrous,
-- that one man, at that time despised, could, with the blows of one
scourge, cast out such a multitude. For a fiery and heavenly light flashed
from His eyes, and the majesty of His Godhead shown in His
countenance.³¹⁰

Here, more than anywhere else in the New Testament, is the violent Christ, the one filled with a prophet’s unleashed zeal, the Messiah who goes to extremes to bring forth the Kingdom of God. It is his face that gives him the authority to act. This link between the magnificent face and action is also pertinent in understanding the importance of Bishop’s baptism and Francis’ identity.

Three times in the novel Francis Tarwater claims that he can act. He believes that his ability to act separates him from Rayber and Old Tarwater. During his car ride with Meeks, the man surmises what had motivated the boy to leave home. “You ain’t sure about what all this great-uncle of yours told you, are you? . . . You figure he might have got ahold of some misinformation.” Francis tells him that he means to find out the truth; his discernment shall come about if he can just “wait and see what happens.” When Meeks asks the obvious, “Suppose nothing don’t happen?”, the boy fires back, “Then I’ll

³⁰⁸ Aquinas, *Summa* Pt.III. Q.44. a3. obj.1. r.1 (2: 2258).

³⁰⁹ Matthew 21.12: “And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple and overthrew the tables of the money-changers, and the chairs of them that sold doves.”

³¹⁰ Aquinas, *Summa* Pt. III Q.44. a3. obj.1. r.1 (2: 2258).

make it happen . . . I can act.”³¹¹ The same conversation, nearly verbatim, occurs between Rayber and Francis. “Suppose nothing happens?” the schoolteacher asks. “Then I’ll make it happen, like I done before,” Francis retorts. Before baptizing and drowning Bishop, the boy lays out the difference between himself and Rayber. Rayber tries to convince his nephew to fight the impulse to follow through with Mason’s orders to baptize Bishop with his own intelligence. “The way we have to fight it is the same,” the uncle says. The boy explains:

It ain’t the same . . . I can pull it up by the roots, once and for all. I can do something. I ain’t like you. All you can do is think what you would have done if you had done it. Not me. I can do it. I can act.³¹²

In this context, it looks like Francis is giving a voice to Nietzsche’s nihilism. It appears on the surface that he is echoing Raskolnikov’s “will to act” in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. But as is often the case in O’Connor’s use of language and imagery, the word surrenders an implicit opposition buried within its own explicit message. Although “to act” appears to create a distance between Francis and God’s will, it draws him to another level that allows for the possibility of imitating God. Francis only wants to drown Bishop, but he couldn’t help saying the words of baptism. “I only meant to drown him,” he tells the truck driver. “They were just some words that run out of my mouth and spilled in the water.”³¹³ What makes Francis act on Bishop? Bishop’s face. If we examine the efficacy of the face and the explication of the Latin, *facere* (‘is doing’), we

³¹¹ O’Connor, *CW* 381.

³¹² O’Connor, *CW* 451.

³¹³ O’Connor, *CW* 458.

again glean a fuller understanding of O'Connor's use of this body part in the context of medieval religious thought.

The seventh chapter of Saint Anselm's *Proslogion* addresses the multiple meanings of the Latin verb, *facere*, or "is doing." The impetus for Anselm's explication is an argument against God's omnipotence. If God is supposed to be able "to do" everything, then that would mean sin would be included in that "everything." Anselm phrases the objection, "How can You (God) do all things if You cannot be corrupted?"³¹⁴ The Bishop of Canterbury answers by focusing on the verb *facere*. His position pivots around the action's ability to strengthen or to weaken.

In the same way, then, when someone is said to have the 'power' of doing or suffering something which is not to his advantage or which he ought not to do, then by 'power' here we mean 'impotence', for the more he has this 'power', the more adversity and perversity have power over him and the more he is powerless against them.³¹⁵

The reason O'Connor does not pander to nihilism is because she sees, like Anselm, the precarious efficacy of what it means to act. Anselm's argument stands in contradistinction to Nietzsche's in *Beyond Good and Evil* that the "world seen from within, the world defined and designated according to its 'intelligible character' . . . would simply be 'Will to Power,' and nothing else."³¹⁶ For Anselm it is not merely this raw nihilistic courage to act, but the consideration that the act may reflect the omnipotence of God or the

³¹⁴ Saint Anselm, *Basic Writings: Prologium, Monologium, Cur Deus Homo, Gaunilo's In Behalf of the Fool*, trans. S. N. Deane, 2nd ed. (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1991) 123.

³¹⁵ Anselm 125.

³¹⁶ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern, *Philosophy of Nietzsche* (New York: The Modern Library, 1937) 43.

impotence of sinful humanity. It all depends what face, what *facere*, it shows. In *The Violent Bear It Away*, the action of Francis' drowning and baptizing Bishop strains against the Will to Power and the Will of God. What course Francis takes seems to be determined by whose face he sees, both right before he immerses Bishop, and when he tries to run away after the act has been performed. Bishop and the Stranger's face are present at both times.

In the boat in the middle of the lake, Bishop's "grey eyes were fixed on (Francis) as if they were waiting serenely for a struggle already determined."³¹⁷ The Stranger's "violet eyes, fixed on him also, waited with a barely concealed impatience." Francis' act splits right down the middle, between murder and sanctification. Although he wants to believe in the Stranger's violet eyes and murder the child, it is Bishop's face that haunts him and that reflects his true self. When he climbs into the truck after drowning Bishop, Francis unintentionally mimics Bishop's gaping countenance. "Tarwater opened his mouth as if he expected words to come out of it but none came. He remained, staring at the man, his mouth half-open, his face white."³¹⁸ When he drinks from the bucket at the well, he sees again Bishop's face reflected on his own face. "He looked down into the grey clear pool, down and down to where two silent serene eyes were gazing at him . . . The vision stuck like a burr in his head and it took him more than a mile to realize he had not seen it."³¹⁹ He tells the truck driver he drowned a boy, to which the driver asks, "Just one?" The question, again, bounces along with sarcasm, but weighs itself down with significance because it foreshadows the making of Tarwater's anagogic corpse. As much

³¹⁷ O'Connor, *CW* 462.

³¹⁸ O'Connor, *CW* 457.

³¹⁹ O'Connor, *CW* 466.

as Tarwater would want believe in his *facere*, his Will to Power, his act of murder, his likeness to the violet eyes that stared at him next to Bishop's grey eyes -- the fact remains that he baptized the child. The act of baptism has a greater power than Tarwater's will to kill. Saint Anselm ends his seventh chapter with a praise of God's omnipotence that suggests the type of doggedness and overwhelming power that O'Connor attributes to Christ. "Therefore, Lord God, You are more truly omnipotent since You can do nothing through impotence and nothing can have Power against You," Anselm writes. The only way Tarwater will ever see his sin (his *facere* that is the murderous act) is to see himself in the Stranger's face, and to experience an evil *facere*.³²⁰ Tarwater's anagogic death, the recognition of his *hupokeimenon* and his rejection of it, result through an act of impotence represented by sodomy.

Allow me to offer one final note on *facere* that attempts to bring together the Latin verb and the word's relationship to O'Connor's depiction of Tarwater's bodily reflection. Whether or not O'Connor was familiar with Anselm's gloss on the verb *facere* is not known, but it is an indisputable fact that she would have known Jacques Maritain's discussion of the subject in *Art and Scholasticism*, and also she had heard the word used in every Roman Catholic Mass. In his third chapter of *Art and Scholasticism* Maritain separates the verbs *agibile* (or as he interprets it, "Doing") and *facitible* ("Making"). The main difference between the two is product. Maritain explains:

³²⁰ According to M. J. Charlesworth, "Saint Anselm engages in a more sophisticated analysis of 'facere'" in *Ein neues unvollendetes Werk des hl. Anselm von Canterbury*, edited by F. S. Schmidt, 1936. In this treatise he uses the example of "killing a man," doing in the sense of "enabling another," and doing in the sense of "allowing something to be done" (see Anselm 78, n#2).

In contradistinction to Doing, the Schoolmen defined Making as *productive action*, considered not with regard to the use which we therein make of our freedom, but merely *with regard to the thing produced* or with regard to the work taken itself.

Maritain's discrimination is critical, because I see it relating to the aesthetic, objective distance that the *mind-soul* attempts to preserve between the world of concept and the world of reality. Characters like Tarwater, Asbury, Tanner, O. E. Parker, consider their body from a mental distance, and exercise their *mind-soul* in an effort to create a corporeal artistic product. Tarwater wants to create Bishop as a murder victim. Asbury and Tanner want to create themselves as aesthetic corpses that impart some lesson to the living. Parker wants his body to be a beautiful canvas that radiates with its own harmony and light. None of these characters get what they intend to make. Tarwater cannot shake the truth that his murderous act actually sanctified his victim with the words of baptism. Asbury never counted on the enduring pain of undulant fever. Tanner's dream of being a dignified corpse ready to respond to his day of Judgment never comes true as his assailant configures his corpse in a position of public humiliation. Parker's tattoos come together in a beautiful work of art by a Greater Artist. These characters want to separate themselves from what they want to make. They want to deny that their actions reflect their own humanity. Maritain's contention that a person who engages in making (*facitible*) art, cannot create a human result, only a product that has the resemblance of the artists' humanity. "If art is not human in the end that it pursues, it is human, essentially human, in

it is mode of operating. It's a work of man that has to be made; it must have on it the mark of man: *animal rationale*."³²¹

So getting back to Tarwater and his *facere* that could either make Bishop a victim or a baptized child, the ultimate truth of Tarwater's act *reflects* back to himself. Bishop is *not* Tarwater, but his corpse (most notably his face) is a reflection of a part of Tarwater. The efficacy of *facere* increases when we consider how Bishop so strongly represents the presence of Christ in the novel. O'Connor was at the least familiar with the Latin word, because she would hear it every time she went to Mass and the priest raised the chalice for consecration. Immediately after the transubstantiation of the bread and wine, the priest repeated Christ's words, "*Hæc quotiescúmque fecéritis, in mei memóriam faciétis* [As often as ye *do* these things, ye shall *do* them in remembrance of me]."³²¹ The Catholic interpretation of the "do" here is the act of a living remembrance, the mysterious *making* of the transubstantiation, when the Word was made flesh, when the body and the soul become united in perfection, not simply at one particular historical moment, but repeated over again throughout time. The Body of Christ is both a reflection of God and an identifiable reality of the person who is a participant in the power of Eucharistic making. Try as he might to deny God's omnipotent power to make him a part of the Body of Christ, Tarwater cannot get rid of Bishop's face staring at him in his living remembrance.

Everything in *The Violent Bear It Away* points toward the inevitable revelation of Francis Tarwater's anagogic corpse, his *hupokeimenon*, and his acceptance of his prophetic commission. The reflection of corpses' faces upon Francis' face, the images that he sees of his own reflected body, and the decomposition of his anagogic integrity all

³²¹ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* 9.

combine to tell a story immersed in the movement of the Paschal Mystery from life to death to rebirth. By decomposition of his *hupokeimenon*, I mean that the narrative conveys the lack of Francis' soul's integrity through bodily fragmentation and pain, both of which purvey imagery akin to a transi-tomb. In the medieval religious understanding, the breaking apart of the body has a purgatorial effect when it is associated with pain. The same interpretation applies to O'Connor's stories. Certainly, the reassembling of Old Tarwater's bones for proper burial affects Francis; apparitions and visions of the old man and his face reappear throughout the novel to haunt Tarwater's (and even Rayber's) conscience. Almost immediately, Mason's literal corpse works on the boy. At the breakfast table, Tarwater "continued to sit across from the corpse, finishing his breakfast in a kind of sullen embarrassment as if he were in the presence of a new personality and couldn't think of anything to say."³²² Ironically, the reason Mason's literal corpse has this liminal period of anagogic influence and revelation is because Francis does not allow the cadaver to decay in God's good time. "It was as if there would have to be dirt over him before he would be thoroughly dead," the boy thinks to himself (336). The Stranger's mocking words, "You have to bury him whole," implicitly and unintentionally allude to the power of the fragmenting corpse. Until Old Tarwater's body can break apart under God's system of purgatorial justice, then Young Tarwater will have to struggle with finding his identity as a prophet through a similar fate. When the boy becomes an anagogic corpse, he will fragment and decay, and then see God's face.

Francis' corpse and its reflections bounce between his great-uncle's dead image and Rayber's reflective corpse. Rayber's anagogic corpse appears to feel no pain, keeps

³²² O'Connor, *CW* 336.

itself together by not going to violent extremes. It does not disintegrate because Rayber preserves it through indolence. Rayber is drawn into loving Christ through Bishop, who could overwhelm his father with a sudden rush of “horrifying love” (400) that was “powerful enough to throw him to the ground in an act of idiot praise” (401). Rayber recognizes this strong affection for his child as a “hated love” (418) and a “horrifying love” (442). In order to release himself from its power “he would have to anesthetize his life” (443). His lack of sensitivity accommodates his characterization as a machine, an automaton plugged in through his ear. The ability to turn on and off the hearing aid, especially during Carmody’s sermon on the Incarnation and the time during which he sleeps while Tarwater drowns Bishop, concretizes his ability to keep out the spiritual which for him is painful. While lying on the bed in the Cherokee Lodge, Rayber summarizes his ethics.

All he would be was an observer. He waited with serenity. Life had never been good enough to him for him to wince at its destruction. *He told himself that he was indifferent even to his own dissolution.* It seemed to him that this indifference was the most that human dignity could achieve, and for the moment forgetting his lapses, forgetting even his narrow escape of the afternoon, he felt he had achieved it. *To feel nothing was peace.*³²³

This is the corpse that Francis Tarwater aspires to be, but will not achieve because it is rooted in an impotent power, an evil *facere*, that can never overcome God’s omnipotence.

³²³ O’Connor, *CW* 454 (*emphasis mine*).

Before becoming any anagogic corpse, Francis possesses his true face as an infant. This same face is the one that Bernice Bishop, the social worker who married Rayber, rejects.

If there had not been something repellent in its face, she said, her maternal instinct would have made her rush forward and snatch it . . . but the child's look had frozen her. It was the opposite of everything appealing. She could not express her exact revulsion, for her feeling was not logical. It had, she said, the look of an adult, not of a child, and of an adult with immovable insane convictions. Its face was like the face she had seen in some medieval paintings where the martyr's limbs are being sawed off and his expression says he is being deprived of nothing essential. She had had the sense, seeing the child in the door, that if it had known that at that moment all its future advantages were being stolen from it, its expression would not have altered a jot. The face for her had expressed the depth of human perversity, the deadly sin of rejecting defiantly one's own obvious good. [Rayber] had thought all this was possibly her imagination but he understood now that it was not imagination but fact. She said she could not have lived with such a face; she would have been bound to destroy the arrogant look on it.³²⁴

Unlike Rayber who exercises an indifference to the spiritual considerations of life or death in order to become immune to physical or psychological pain, the infant Tarwater expresses an indifference to material comforts, the very preservation of his physical being,

³²⁴ O'Connor, *CW* 442.

with some enigmatic spiritual confidence. Here is the holy relic that has been long forgotten, displaced by fragments and reflections of Francis' *hupokeimenon*. The memory of his infant face ties together the scriptural passage that harkens to the permanence of truth so as to firm up a martyr's courage:

For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed : nor hidden that shall not be known . . . Be not afraid of them who kill the body, and after that have no more they can do. But I will shew you whom ye shall fear: fear ye him who after he hath killed, hath power to cast into hell. Yea, I say to you, fear him.³²⁵

As time approaches for Francis to baptize Bishop, his face reflects his long-forgotten infant face. When Rayber returns with Bishop to the lodge, "the boy was still lying on the cot, his face set in a deadly calm as if his eyes had not moved since they left. Again Rayber had a vision of the face his wife must have seen and he experienced a moment's revulsion for the boy that made him tremble."³²⁶ Tarwater's face expresses an indifference towards the school teacher, as one who can only, like Luke's Gospel phrases it, "kill the body." At dinner that night Tarwater "was looking directly at [Rayber] with an omniscient smile, faint but decided . . . [that] seemed to mock him from an ever-deepening inner knowledge that grew in indifference as it came nearer and nearer to a secret truth about him" (448). The martyr, like Saint Stephen being stoned to death, can look into Christ's face and find a peace there, making him indifferent to his physical destruction. Rayber tells Tarwater, "I notice that you've begun to be able to look Bishop in the eye.

³²⁵ Luke 12.2,4-5.

³²⁶ O'Connor, *CW* 446.

That's good. It means you're making progress but you needn't think that because you can look him in the eye now, you've saved yourself from what's preying on you. You haven't. The old man still has you in his grip. Don't think he hasn't" (449). The anagogic tug-of-war between Old Tarwater's literal corpse and Rayber's reflective corpse intensifies as Bishop's baptism nears. The result is the fragmentation and eventual reflection of Francis' *hupokeimenon*.

While on their fishing trip, Rayber desires to rid Francis of Mason's memory once and for all and resolves to create the boy in his own image. What occurs on the lake or near the lake carries the most significance in defining Francis' new anagogic body, and it nearly always has to do with decomposition and fragmentation. "You need to be saved right here now from the old man and everything he stands for," his uncle tells him; "And I'm the one who can save you" (438). At the height of Francis' struggle between Mason and Rayber, the boy vomits into the lake. The act of vomiting works on many levels;³²⁷ relative to the present argument is its reflection of Tarwater's split anagogic corporeal composition and a symptom that the death of his *hupokeimenon* is near. In the spirit that the violent bear away God's kingdom, that the violent go to extremes, that the violent oppose modern spiritual indifference -- Tarwater must not stay in the middle if he is to have his destiny realized with the omnipotent power of God. The answer to "Whose boy are you?" is foreshadowed when the boy gets sick on the lake, because it follows the same standard as the Judgment expressed in *Revelations*: "I know thou works, that thou are

³²⁷ Norton's vomiting at the beginning of "The Lame Shall Enter First" falls under the same type of characterizing division and divine judgement. See Chapter Three for analysis of Norton's sickness. In *The Violent Bear It Away* the vomit also supports Francis' repugnance and insatiable appetite for nothing except the Bread of Life.

neither cold, nor hot. I would thou wert cold, or hot, But because thou are luke warm, and neither cold, nor hot, I will bring thee to vomit thee out of my mouth.”³²⁸ The vomit is a good thing, since it signals the hope of a spiritual recovery in bodily terms. John of Mirfield wrote in the late fourteenth-century “concerning the signs of evil portent,” or symptoms that a medieval physician should look for that signaled death. He writes, “All vomiting of whatever description, if it occur after the symptoms of the maturation of the disease, and which bring alleviation to the patient, is good and praiseworthy, since it comes as a cleansing agent.”³²⁹ John of Mirfield follows this hopeful diagnosis with a symptom that often signals that death is imminent: worms.

According to Mirfield, if the worms are still alive then “this is an evil symptom, because it signifies that the corruption of the body is so great that the worms have been unable to bear with it.”³³⁰ Twice the school teacher suggests to him that “[s]omething’s eating you on the inside and I can tell you what it is.”³³¹ The first time Tarwater responds by telling Rayber to die and fragment his own mechanical being. “Why don’t you pull that plug out of your ear and turn yourself off?” In disgust Rayber says, “Every day you remind me more of the old man. You’re just like him. You have his future before you” (439). If we consider the language in this passage implying not just the memory of Mason Tarwater, but his actual literal decaying corpse, then the anagogic somatic struggle becomes even more clear. The second time Rayber says to his nephew, “You can’t eat because something is eating you. And I intend to tell you what it is,” Tarwater hisses out,

³²⁸ Revelation 3.15-16.

³²⁹ qtd. in Grant, Edward, ed., *A Source Book in Medieval Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974) 757.

³³⁰ qtd. in Grant 757.

³³¹ O’Connor, *CW* 439.

“Worms” (449-450). Francis’ anagogic body decomposes before, and especially after, Bishop’s baptism. Rayber’s decomposition of his reflective corpse can only occur as the boy rudely pointed out, by making the mechanical hearing aid dysfunctional. Rayber is a “bloodless wired reflection” (407) who proclaims, “my Guts are in my head” (437). In this sense, the school teacher is a corporeally dislocated, fragmented representation of Francis. After Bishop’s drowning and baptism, Francis tries to think of himself as Rayber’s fragmented corpse. “He recalled [Rayber’s] words: ‘My guts are in my head.’ My guts are in my head too, the boy thought” (465). Because the boy does not see the evil in his uncle’s reflective corpse, nor the spiritual purgatorial value in properly bestowing his great-uncle’s body to the grave, he must see his own corpse, his *hupokeimenon*, reflected by the Stranger.

Before the critical *facere* that holds the potential for murder and sanctification, Francis Tarwater’s body appears to undergo a defleshing. Perhaps one of the most striking portrayals of Francis losing his body comes from the school teacher’s vantage point. Rayber looks across the lake and sees Francis, a “thin rigid figure on the dock” that “seemed no more than a wraith-like column of fragile white-hot rage, materialized for an instant, the making of some pure unfathomable passion” (439). After Bishop’s drowning-baptism and on his way back to Powderhead, the boy’s “bones felt brittle as if they belonged to a person older than himself” (464). Similar to the time “he had looked to the side and seen his own form alongside of him in a store window, transparent as a snakeskin” that “moved beside him like some violent ghost who had already crossed over

and was reproaching him from the other side,” he sees again in a vision³³² “the ghost who had been born in the wreck and who had fancied himself destined at that moment to the torture of prophecy” (429, 465). Shortly after his vision of his own ghost, the boy’s “skin seemed to have shrunk from his bones from dryness” (469). Yet, it is during his direct encounter with the Stranger when Tarwater begins to fall apart.

In the Stranger’s car Tarwater’s *hupokeimenon* begins to appear both on his own person and reflected in the deadly Stranger, “a pale, lean, old-looking young man with deep hollows under his cheekbones” (469). Ignoring his great-uncle’s assertion that “liquor would dissolve a child’s gut,” Francis prepares his own embalming by taking the Stranger’s bottle, which he can drink, the Stranger tells him, only “if there’s no flies on you” (359, 470). Tarwater, who professed a desire to have his “guts in his head” like Rayber, drinks the liquor that “heats his whole body” and makes his “thoughts heavy . . . as if they had to struggle up through some dense medium to reach surface of his mind” (471). Francis’ *hupokeimenon* and his body become one lifeless entity. When the Stranger opens the door to take him out of the car, the body “fell out of it like a loosely-filled sack,” like a cadaver sewed up in its burial shroud (471). In the later Middle Ages, “shortly after death and right at the place of death, the body of the deceased was sewn into a shroud from head to foot, so as to be completely unrecognizable,” Philippe Ariès explains.³³³ The shroud was the most necessary funerary element to hide the face. When Tarwater is raped by the Stranger, his old-self that strove to imitate Rayber’s reflective

³³² The vision centers around Francis’ disrespect for his great-uncle’s corpse. Tarwater “imagined with a careful deliberateness how he would pick up any burnt bone that he might find in the ashes of the house and sling it off into the nearest gully” (CW 465).

³³³ Ariès 169.

corpse, and his desire to be a part of the Stranger, dies. The act of sodomy is impotent to convert the boy into the likeness of Rayber's spiritual indifference or the Stranger's evil. The rape is an evil incarnation of his own evil word, "the obscenity" that he shrieks out toward the woman who tells him that his very existence "shames the dead."³³⁴ When he says the foul words, he tries to assure himself that he was "intolerant of unspiritual evils and with those of the flesh he had never truckled."³³⁵ His evil word becomes flesh, yet, it bears no evil fruit, because it has no power to hinder Francis' participation in the Paschal Mystery. Francis becomes a new spiritual creation, expressed in the corporeality of his face. His old self dies after the Stranger violates him, and after he sees that his great-uncle is buried in the ground with a cross marking the grave.

Tarwater is born again in the spirit and his face reflects that of a prophet like Isaiah and Jesus Christ. "His scorched eyes no longer looked hollow or as if they were only to guide him forward. They looked as if, touched with a coal like the lips of the prophet, they would never be used for ordinary sights again."³³⁶ Like Jesus, who Saint Luke says when "it came to pass, when the days of his assumption were accomplishing, that he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem," Francis Tarwater "moved steadily on, his face toward the dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping."³³⁷ Advancing forward to claim the city for God, Tarwater has put on the face of Christ.

The Dead That Don't Stay That Way in Wise Blood

³³⁴ O'Connor, *CW* 468, 467.

³³⁵ O'Connor, *CW* 468.

³³⁶ O'Connor, *CW* 473.

³³⁷ Luke 9.51; *CW* 479.

Powderhead is not the only place O'Connor's corpses haunt. Other examples would include Tanner's evolution as a corpse and his subsequent effect on his daughter in "Judgment Day"; the fragmented Holocaust victims that live in Mrs. McIntyre's ("The Displaced Person") conscience; or the creation of the General's corpse in "A Late Encounter with the Enemy." Throughout her works, literal and reflective corpses 'pop up,' and bodily fragmentation signals the imminent appearance of the *hupokeimenon*. My argument on the ubiquity of corpses would not be complete without a consideration of their appearance in *Wise Blood*. Relying upon the points made from my earlier analysis, I will briefly examine O'Connor's first novel with a view of providing conclusive evidence that the anagogic corpse, its medieval religious signification, and its relationship to the *hupokeimenon* are not simply isolated occurrences, but instead form part of a recurring and consistent vision in O'Connor's works.

Reflective corpses and literal corpses are around nearly every corner of Tulkington, Tennessee, the setting of O'Connor's novel, *Wise Blood*. Solace Layfield, Onnie Jay Holie's puppet preacher who sets up across the street from Hazel Motes, is the most obvious reflection of Hazel Motes' dead nihilistic soul. The "True Prophet," as he is called, is "gaunt and thin," "hollow-chested," and although Haze "had never picture himself that way before" people group the two men together as "twins" (94). The mummified pygmy that Enoch Emery believes is the new Jesus whom Hazel Motes desires for his Church Without Christ, reflects most plainly the deathly state of Motes' soul. According to Sabbath Lily Hawks, the mummy had "something in him of everyone she had ever known, as if they had all been rolled into one person and killed and shrunk and dried"

(104). The mummy's "trace of a grin covering his terrified look" appears as a "slight reflection of the same grin" on the girl's face (104). Sabbath, like Leora Watts before her, becomes an allegorical mother of sin and death to oppose Hazel's Christian mother's restless corpse.

The list of restless corpses in *Wise Blood* includes Hazel's early memories of his grandfather, Sabbath's parable about the murdered daughter who "Jesus made beautiful to haunt her [mother]" (28), his own conscious corpse in his dreams of being buried alive in the train's berth and his Essex, and finally his mother's wandering spirit (14, 91). When he goes back to his "skeleton of a house" in Eastrod, Haze "wondered if she walked at night and came there ever." He imagines her "with that look on her face, unrested and looking; the same look he had seen through the crack of her coffin" (13, 14). In *The Violent Bear It Away* the Stranger asks, "What do we want with the dead alive?" In *Wise Blood*, Motes proclaims that in his 'church' "the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way" (59). Like Old Mason Tarwater and Bishop, Hazel's mother (and especially the memory of her face) stands for the Christ who hunts down his lost sheep. In the same fashion as Francis Tarwater, Haze struggles ultimately to recognize the features of Christ on his own face.

Both novels emphasize the anagogic body and face that reflects the struggle of the spirit. "Where in your time and body has Jesus redeemed you?" Motes cries to the street crowd. He continues: "Show me where because I don't see the place. If there was a place where Jesus had redeemed you that would be the place for you to be, but which of you can find it?" (103). Immediately following his rhetorical questions he sees Solace

Layfield across the street. Before Layfield dies Haze stares closely into the man's face and tells him, "Two things I can't stand . . . a man that ain't true and one that mocks what is" (115). Haze's own face resembles that of his grandfather, a wild circuit preacher. His grandfather "had a particular disrespect for him because his own face was repeated almost exactly in [Haze's] and seemed to mock him" (11). Haze sees his face reflected against the mummy's face and his mother's face (56, 106). In the end, his body reflects the death of his *hupokeimenon*, and his corpse's face, "the outline of a skull [that] was plain under his skin and the deep burned eye sockets" (131) leads Mrs. Flood closer and closer toward her own salvation. "She sat staring with her eyes shut, into his eyes, and felt as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn't begin" (131). Similar to Young Tarwater who sets his face like Christ toward his own Jerusalem, Hazel Motes takes on the face of Christ that can effect a miraculous transformation in Mrs. Flood. She sees the light at the end of the tunnel, indeed a "pin point of light" that in an earlier context equated to the star of Bethlehem, which in the final scene of the novel leads her to Christ through a contemplation of Haze's face (131, 123). The body has its own magnificence and truth when understood as an expression of the soul that lies beneath the skin. This a point Saint Thomas Aquinas heartily affirms in the *Summa Theologica* when he attests to the fact that the face of Christ can miraculously touch the soul through bodily means.³³⁸ O'Connor's characters attempt to look away from the face of Christ because there is a transformative power in such a countenance. They continually fail, like Tarwater who "tried when possible . . . to keep his vision on an even level . . . in front of his face and to

³³⁸ Aquinas, *Summa* Pt. III. Q.44. a.2. obj.1 (2: 2258).

let his eyes stop at the surface of that.”³³⁹ Instead, the O’Connorian grace-recipient eventually succumbs to the anagogic vision of his body as spiritually dead and his new body as full of salvific potential.

Final Thoughts of Asbury, Tanner, and General Sash

I have tried to show how the corpse plays a central role in O’Connor’s artistic vision that directs her characters and her readers toward her belief in Christ’s Redemption. To conclude this chapter I want to discuss the corpses in “A Late Encounter with the Enemy,” “Judgment Day,” and “The Enduring Chill” to solidify further my argument that the corpse is a key integral in O’Connor’s plan to save her characters.

Three characters could not be more different in their attitudes toward death than General Poker Sash, W. C. Tanner, and Asbury Fox. Sash cannot imagine himself dead, Tanner imagines himself in a casket but not dead, and Asbury imagines his death continuously as the culminating action of his intelligence. “Living had got to be such a habit” for the one-hundred-four-year-old General Sash, “that he couldn’t conceive of any other condition” (252). Tanner dreams of being delivered in a casket to his home in Corinth, Georgia,³⁴⁰ and when his two friends unload the box off the train, he would push off the lid and exclaim, “Don’t you two fools know that it’s Judgment Day!” (692).

³³⁹ O’Connor, *CW* 343.

³⁴⁰ O’Connor’s choice of Corinth, Georgia as Tanner’s final resting place has significance since it alludes to the early Christian Church at Corinth, and that community’s struggles in understanding the body on earth, the body in the grave, and the body in heaven. Karl Barth’s *The Resurrection of the Dead* (1933) explicates at length Saint Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians on this precise polemic. The living person, the corpse, and the resurrected being all have an identity associated with God. Barth writes: “Paul asserts the identity of the perishable and mortal body with the *spiritual* body, with the man who is God’s. But this identity is not given. Between it and the *natural body*, that which we *know* as “*flesh and blood*,” is the miracle of God, the most severe, the most destructive judgment and the hope that is unique” (206).

Coleman, his black friend, would know that Tanner's mind was so sharp it could even fool Death. He describes the white man's resurrection: "This here one of his tricks" (691). Asbury also keeps death at a conceptual distance. "He had become entirely accustomed to the thought of death," but not a death at his mother's house (548). The mentally immortal Sash becomes a literal corpse. Tanner's triumphant homecoming trick never transpires, but instead his corpse poses in a New York stairwell like a punished criminal. Asbury fails in his attempt to make his mother "see death on his face," which he believed would have resulted in her "painful realization" (554) that she suffocated him with her love. Instead, his plan comes full circle and he gets a painful revelation that he would not die, but "that for the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring, he would live in the face of a purifying terror" (572).

Asbury is actually conscious of his corpse's didactic potential, yet, he becomes the reflective target of his somatic lesson. Early in the story, after Asbury catches a glimpse of "his pale broken face . . . from the pier mirror" (553), he begins to meditate on his plan to make his mother feel her guilt for stifling his creative life. At the end of the story, he again sees a reflection of himself, but now knowing that his plan was doomed, his cadaverous face presents an image of his spiritual hollowness. "The eyes that stared back at him were the same that had returned his gaze every day from that mirror but it seemed to him that they were paler. They looked shocked clean as if they been prepared for some awful vision about to come down on him" (572). At the end of the story the young man sees his *hupokeimenon*, his spiritually dead self, and prepares for the descent of the Holy

Ghost in the form of the water-stained frightful bird which will make him “a New Man” (550).

Unlike Asbury, who becomes his own reflective corpse, General Sash and Tanner are paired with their granddaughter and daughter respectively, upon whom their corpse catalyzes a conversion. Sally Poker Sash’s image of herself is deeply rooted in her grandfather. “She wanted the General at her graduation because she wanted to show what she stood for, or as she said, ‘what was all behind her’” (252). In her dreams she orders the audience, “See him! See him!” in an implication that they would actually be seeing her. But her dreams foreshadow and relate her anagogic identity.

One night in her sleep she screamed, “See him! See him!” and turned her head and found him sitting in his wheel chair behind her with a terrible expression on his face and with all his clothes off except the general’s hat and she had waked up and had not dared to go back to sleep again that night. (253)

During Sally’s graduation ceremony, the General does in fact die. “If he had died before Sally Poker’s graduation, she thought she would have died herself” (257). Her moment of grace and the revelation of her *hupokeimenon* is suspended in the dramatic irony of her imminent encounter with “the corpse” waiting “in the long line a the Coco-Cola machine” (262). Tanner’s daughter also experiences an ‘off-stage conversion’ due to her father’s corpse.

Tanner wants his daughter to bury him in Georgia, not New York. Fixing his eyes “on her like the eye of an angry corpse” he warns her, “Bury me here and burn in hell!”

She replies, “Don’t’ throw hell at me. I don’t believe in it. That’s a lot of hardshell Baptist hooey” (678). “Judgment Day” relates to *The Violent Bear It Away*, where a ‘proper burial’ plays a haunting role in the fulfillment of a character’s being. The story concludes:

She buried him in New York City, but after she had done it she could not sleep at night. Night after night she turned and tossed and very definite lines began to appear in her face, so she had him dug up and shipped the body to Corinth. Now she rests well at night and her good looks have mostly returned. (695)

The woman’s “good looks” may not just refer to her cosmetic beauty, but to something that occurs on a deeper level. We may recall Sabbath Lily Hawk’s parable from *Wise Blood* about the “woman who didn’t have nothing but good looks” (28) and was haunted by the corpse of her child. Tanner’s daughter follows through on her promise to bury her father in the South. Her good act, even if it is motivated by her desire to rest (at night) in peace, seems to suggest that she has more than good looks to keep her from burning in hell.

In the framework of the unholy relic, all three characters fragment. The General’s “feet were completely dead . . . his knees worked like old hinges, his kidneys functioned” but “there was nothing about him to indicate that he was alive” (256-57). Tanner “began to shake, his hands, his head, his feet” (678). Asbury’s feels a thud in the back of his head “as if his heart got trapped in it and was fighting to get out” (556). He turns “his thudding head from side to side as if he wanted to work it loose from his body” (567). He experiences “a new chill as if death were already playfully, rattling his bones” (563).

Eventually Asbury's "limbs that had been racked for so many weeks by fever and chill" become "numb" (572). According to Father Finn from Purgatory, the only thing that can keep him together is the Holy Ghost. The priest tells Asbury, "You must pray to the Holy Ghost . . . Mind, heart and body. Nothing is overcome without prayer" (566).

O'Connor's stories are *wholesome* in the sense that they unite body and soul, life and death, all around the image of the corpse. Through the unholy relic of their dead body, as it represents the domination of a *mind-soul*, O'Connor's characters can come to know their state of spiritual death. General Sash eventually succumbs to his death through the infiltration of his past into his *mind-soul*. While he imagines the words attacking his very identity, his memory becomes physically real as "the entire past opened up in him out of nowhere and he felt his body riddled in a hundred places with sharp stabs of pain" (261). In Coleman, Tanner sees "before him a negative of himself," and that means "a stinking skin full of bones" and "a doubled-up shadow" (683, 679). Tanner makes Coleman a pair of glasses because the white man says, "I hate to see anybody can't see good" (683). Tanner is the one whose vision sharpens with that small act of charity. He sees himself as a corpse, not only in some future imaginative trickery, but in his present reality. When Doctor Foley comes to kick him out of his squatter's shack, Tanner knows that he "ain't got a thing to hold up to him but the skin you come in, and that's no more use to you now than what a snake would shed" (680). Tanner's assessment is a true testament to his reckoning the weakness of his *mind-soul* in bodily terms. He admits seeing his unholy relic, and although he knows his *mind-soul's* impotence against Foley, he tries to employ what he still thinks is his white superior brains by telling him that "the

governmint ain't got around yet to forcing white folks to work for the colored" (684).

But after Foley leaves, Tanner realizes the failure of his *mind-soul*, and he "continued to look across the field as if his spirit had been sucked out of him into the woods and nothing was left on the chair but a shell" (685). In order to become a whole person, body and soul, the *mind-soul* must be evicted from the character. O'Connor realizes the power of the *mind-soul* is in abstraction, and therefore, to engage this melee on solid footing, she concretizes the *mind-soul* as a part of the human body. That is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Piè Fermo and the *Mind-soul*: O'Connor's Limping Souls

In the preceding chapters I have aimed to establish the pivotal point that Flannery O'Connor's characters possess a body that signifies a spiritual death. Drawing from the objective distance Cartesian dualism delivers and combining such a philosophical position with a nihilistically-based *hubris*, her characters promote the powers of their mind to the point of self-deification. They subordinate the body's relevance and dismiss spirituality originating from a higher source. Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* maxim nourishes the false *mind-soul* that manipulates O'Connor's wayward character's use of free will. From O'Connor's perspective, classical dualism, spawned by Descartes and stretched to its limits by nihilism, blankets the modern consciousness to such an extent that her characters, who snuggle under the comfort it offers during the cold winters of a suffering world, can hardly detect its presence. In the words of Jacques Maritain, "The world sighs for deliverance; it sighs for wisdom, for the wisdom, I say, from which the spirit of Descartes has led us astray, for the wisdom which reconciles man with himself and, crowned with a divine life, perfects knowledge in charity."³⁴¹ As abstract as the Cartesian *mind-soul* may be, I discern in O'Connor's fiction an attempt to engage the contemporary philosophical undercurrents, which she perceived had eroded the modern person's will to believe, by concretizing her character's *mind-soul* as a part of the human body: the foot. In this chapter I consider the medieval context of the foot as a symbol of the soul, and then show

³⁴¹ Maritain, *Three Reformers* 89.

how O'Connor is indebted to that theological aesthetic in the treatment of the *mind-soul/body* split in her fiction.

One of the best efforts to trace the religious signification of the foot-soul dynamic in the Middle Ages is carried out by John Freccero in his essay, "The Firm Foot on a Journey Without a Guide." Freccero examines the foot's symbolism with respect to the enigmatic line in Dante's first Canto of the *Inferno*: "I took up my way across the desert strand, so that the firm foot (*piè fermo*) was always lower."³⁴² By drawing on Freccero's analysis of this trope in the religious rhetoric of the Middle Ages, I hope to show how the *mind-soul's* appearance in O'Connor's twentieth-century stories opens up a new way to appreciate her corporeal aesthetic.

There are many different ways to discuss the foot and its relevance as a metaphor of the soul, and Freccero seems to span the spectrum of possible interpretations. With regard to O'Connor's works I find two elements fit for explaining why the foot could operate as a medieval metaphor for the Christian soul, and then as the non-Christian soul in her stories. First, Plato described nurturing the soul through education with the metaphor of a walking man, and this description resonates with the characteristics of the *mind-soul*. Second, thirteenth-century scholars drew inspiration from Aristotle's philosophy in *De anima* to compare metaphorically the twin powers of the soul, *intellectus* and *affectus*, to walking. Within the framework of such a model, religious writers affirmed that the feet of the soul suffered the respective wounds of Adam's sin,

³⁴² qtd. in Freccero, John, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986) 33. In a letter to "A" on 10 November 1955, O'Connor expressed her admiration for Dante when she says that as far as Catholic writers are concerned, "For my money Dante is about as great as you can get" (*HB* 116).

ignorance and concupiscence. The image of the ‘walking soul’ aligns with my analysis of the O’Connorian character as the false Prime Mover, the one who establishes her or his own system of moral judgment and existential truth. The crux of my argument echoes a shared conviction of religious writers like Saint Ambrose, Saint Gregory the Great, and Saint Augustine, who stated in various ways that if one wanted to get closer to God, one had to get their feet off the ground.

Grounding the Foot of the Soul Metaphor

Although O’Connor’s creation of the *mind-soul* may find a more comprehensive affinity with thirteenth-century scholars, who discovered in Aristotle’s metaphor a simplified way to explain psychological and spiritual processes, it is necessary to give our attention first to Plato and his assertion that the basis of virtue is knowledge. In the *Timaeus* Plato offers a metaphorical description of the soul more akin to the dualistic *mind-soul*. For so many of O’Connor’s characters -- especially her intellectuals like Joy-Hulga, Sheppard, Asbury, Julian, and Rayber -- the mastering and meaning of life comes from the knowledge acquired in their education. According to Plato, if a person comes under the influence of “some right nurture [that] lends help towards education, he becomes entirely whole and unblemished, having escaped the worst of maladies; whereas if he be neglectful, he journeys through a life halt and maimed and comes back to Hades uninitiated and without understanding.”³⁴³ Freccero points out that Chalcidius’ interpretation of the same passage prompted him to offer the following commentary:

³⁴³ Plato, *Plato’s Cosmology: The Timaeus of Plato*, ed. and trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997) 44C (150). In O’Connor’s personal library is a heavily annotated volume of *Plato and Aristotle*. She check marked the passage, “The soul may become

For he made man out of soul and body. The few who take care for both will be whole and strong; he who cares for neither will be maimed and crippled; he who cares for one of the two will limp. Therefore the uneducated man who devotes his attention to the body will surely limp through life; and the soul of the man whose opinions are true, but who has not been initiated into the rites of the secrets of the intellect, will likewise be lame.³⁴⁴

For Plato, and later, Descartes, the brain is paramount. Plato describes the body “carrying at the top of us the habitation of the most divine and sacred part.”³⁴⁵ In this guise, Plato’s *foot-soul* and Descartes’ *mind-soul* have a strong symmetry. However, if O’Connor left the metaphor on the level of pure intellect, then her characters, who tended to their education as the most sacred act of their existence, would not suffer any ‘spiritual’ infirmity. They would walk upright and stride evenly away from hell, rather than run toward it. For O’Connor’s stories to operate on the level of redemption, there must be something which signals her characters’ struggle “to walk,” their difficulty in getting along in the world on just their brains. Diminished by their over-confidence in their minds, her characters’ lack of faith in God makes them spiritually crippled. Saint Augustine integrated faith into the “walking soul” image, and thus added a Christian step to Plato’s metaphorical ambulation.

the scene on which a drama is enacted” and underlined, “The myth remains the legitimate expression of the fundamental movements of the soul” (Kinney #458, 143).

³⁴⁴ qtd. in Freccero 38. Freccero provides the translation of the passage as “he will pass his life free from all confusion and grief . . . if he neglects it, slowly limping down the path of life with his habitual folly, he is faintly called back to hell” (38).

³⁴⁵ Plato, *Timaueus* 44E-45A (151).

Saint Augustine advanced Plato's metaphor of walking virtuously when he described a person's journey to God. In *De peccatorum meritis et remissione* the Bishop of Hippo writes:

Let us hold true to what we have attained. This walking is not performed by corporeal feet, but by affections of mind and habits of life (*mentis affectibus et vitae moribus*) in order that they might be perfect possessors of righteousness who, advancing on the upright path of faith, renewing themselves from day to day, finally become wayfarers (*viatores*) in justice.³⁴⁶

In Plato's description of virtue, it is the person who fails to nurture his mind with a solid education that hobbles hell-bound. For Saint Augustine, moving toward heaven means "advancing on the upright path of faith." In Saint Augustine's discourse on the Psalm 35 (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*), a psalm that draws much of his attention in explaining the verse, "Let not the foot of pride come to me," he asserts two types of knowing, one which education cannot feed.³⁴⁷

For it is one thing when a man strives to understand something and through the frailty of the flesh is unable, because as the Scripture declares in a certain place: *The corruptible body is a load upon the soul, and the earthly habitation presseth down the mind that museth upon many things.* It is quite another when, what is much worse, the human heart acts against its own interests, so that what it might understand, given a good will, it

³⁴⁶ qtd. in Freccero 38.

³⁴⁷ In O'Connor's personal library is annotated copy of Saint Augustine's *Nine Sermons of Saint Augustine on the Psalms*, trans. Edmund Hill (see Kinney #99, 41).

fails to, not because the matter is difficult but because the will is set against it.³⁴⁸

Saint Augustine, although steeped in Neoplatonism, moves closer in this interpretation of Psalm 35 to the model of the soul employed by medieval religious writers. He relates the actions of the soul in terms of the foot and walking. Of special interest is how the heart and mind appear to walk according to different beats. The psalmist depicts the human rejection of God as a stepping away from Yahweh's holiness with the "foot of pride" (v.12), of which Augustine remarks, "Why has he called it the foot? Because pride has led man to forsake and depart from God. His foot denotes his passions . . . What does this signify? . . . Keep safe what is within, and you will have no fear of what is without."³⁴⁹

Saint Augustine made a similar point when he wrote his discourse on Psalm 9, "Their foot hath been taken in the very trap which they hid" (v.16). In this discourse he sets the metaphor strongly down for his readers: "The foot typifies the soul's affection, which when depraved is termed cupidity or lust, but when upright, love or charity."³⁵⁰ The foot (or the soul) is what becomes ensnared, both in Augustine's explanation of the psalm, and commonly (as we shall see) in O'Connor's stories.³⁵¹ Augustine explains:

Hence the sinner's foot, that is to say their affection, gets caught in the trap they have secretly laid. When the deception is followed by pleasure, and God gives them over to the desires of their hearts, then the pleasure holds

³⁴⁸ Saint Augustine, *Saint Augustine On the Psalms (Enarrationes in Psalmos)*, trans. Scholastica Hebin and Filicita Corrigan, 2 vols (New York: Newman Press, 1960-61) 2: 224.

³⁴⁹ Augustine, *On the Psalms* 2: 247, 246.

³⁵⁰ Augustine, *On the Psalms* 1: 123.

³⁵¹ The most obvious example of a foot ensared in a self-laid trap occurs in "Good Country People" (a story which will be discussed at more length later in this chapter), where Joy-Hulga's confidence in her intellectual capabilities and its symbolic absorption into her wooden leg leads her into its entrapment by a red-neck Bible salesman.

them fast so that they dare not tear away their affection and set it upon something worth while. For when they attempt to do so, they suffer *pain of mind* as a man would in trying to free his foot from a fetter.³⁵²

As effective as the foot of the soul metaphor may be for Saint Augustine, he still shifts his philosophical allegiance to Neoplatonism that privileges ideas over physicality. In the same discourse on Psalm 9, amid his corporeal explanations of how lust cripples the foot of the soul and charity nourishes it, he makes the point that “Love is the magnet which draws the soul toward its goal,” however, “this goal is not in any kind of space such as is occupied by the body, but consists in fruition, to which the soul rejoices that love has led it.”³⁵³ Granted, a metaphor cannot be read literally, but Augustine is not wasting words with such a tautology. Rather, what he declares here concerns the vulnerability and burden of the body on the soul.³⁵⁴ The separation of physical and spiritual with regard to the *foot of the soul* carries over into perhaps one of the most intriguing passages of biblical exegesis by Saint Gregory the Great.

John Freccero notes that when Saint Gregory the Great interpreted Jacob’s wrestling with an angel (Genesis 32.22-32), he identified “the feet as love of God and love of the world.”³⁵⁵ Differing slightly from Saint Augustine, who locates the foot of the soul

³⁵² Augustine, *On the Psalms* 1: 124.

³⁵³ Augustine, *On the Psalms* 1: 123.

³⁵⁴ Again using foot imagery, Saint Augustine in *Confessions* gives a brief discourse on the importance and complexity of the metaphor. In framing his spiritual journey with Psalm 142.10 (“who shall *lead me on till I find sure ground under my feet?*”), he makes explicit the Scripture’s anagogic richness along with his humble recognition of his limited hermeneutical skills. Augustine writes: “Could anything that you were to reveal by those words to readers in later times have been hidden from your Holy Spirit, even though the man through whom they were spoken may have had in mind only one of many true meanings? And if he had only one meaning in mind, let us admit that it must transcend all others.” (Pine-Coffin trans., XII.32 [309]).

³⁵⁵ Freccero 40.

as love subject to good or evil intentions, Saint Gregory's symbolic equation designates a type of love for each individual foot. Quoting from Gregory's commentary, Freccero explains that

After contact with the absolute, Jacob limps, for his love for the world decays, just as the soul which holds on to the angel "supports itself, with all virtue, on the foot of the love of God alone. And it stands on that foot alone because it now holds suspended above the earth the foot of the love of the world which it had been accustomed to placing on the ground."³⁵⁶

Whatever the case, whether it is Plato's flight of the soul, Saint Augustine's assertion that our progress toward God is a journey made with the non-corporeal foot of the soul that must avoid snares set for 'the foot of pride,' or Saint Gregory's remarks about getting the 'foot of love of the world' tripped by God, one common theme surfaces: if one wants to walk with God, he or she has to get their feet off the ground. No one made this point more explicit than Saint Ambrose.

According to Freccero, Saint Ambrose in *De sacramentis* attributes the wounding of the foot with the residual effect of original sin after baptism. Freccero explains, "For St. Ambrose, original sin was the bite of the serpent, and he tells us that if we wish to avoid a repetition of the fall in our own lives, we must get our spiritual feet off the ground, 'so that the serpent cannot find our heel here on earth and wound it.'"³⁵⁷ Saint Ambrose's metaphoric exhortation, I believe, resonates in every short story and novel Flannery O'Connor wrote. Every character who is destined for the offering of grace gets her or his

³⁵⁶ Freccero 40.

³⁵⁷ Freccero 39.

physical feet off the ground. In order to understand best how spiritual and corporeal feet leave the ground in O'Connor's fiction, we must first examine the *foot-soul* metaphor in the thirteenth-century context, when Aristotle captured the attention of scientists and theologians alike. Aristotle's writings on human ambulation fed the medieval religious imagination that had already a strong tradition of relating the soul to the foot.

The Walking Soul

It is not the mere act of walking in *De anima* that interests Aristotle, nor one of his most careful readers, Saint Thomas Aquinas. As the title of Aristotle's work suggests, the soul and its existence comes under scrutiny. Unlike Plato's metaphor that nebulizes the walking soul by locating it on a journey into Hades, Aristotle grounds the soul in the physical. He places the soul with the body to offer proof of the soul's existence through the body. When the Greek philosopher addresses the question whether affections can be attributed only to the soul and not to the body and soul together, he responds:

If we consider the majority of them (affections), there seems to be no case in which the soul can act or be acted upon without involving the body; e.g., anger, courage, appetite, and sensation generally. Thinking seems the most probably exception; but if this too proves to be a form of imagination or to be impossible without imagination, it too requires a body as a condition of its existence.³⁵⁸

In trying to define the effects of the soul, Aristotle had to consider not merely the affections and thinking that infer the existence of the soul, but also an attribute that most

³⁵⁸ Aristotle, *De anima* I. 1.403a.5-10 (536-537).

interested Saint Thomas Aquinas, movement. Engaging the many traditional philosophical views that philosophers like Pythagoras, Plato, Anaxagoras, and Democritus held of the soul, Aristotle surmises that “all seem to hold the view that movement is what is closest to the nature of the soul, and that while all else is moved by soul, it alone moves itself. This belief arises from their never seeing anything originating movement which is not first itself moved.”³⁵⁹ Saint Thomas Aquinas’ commentary on this section of Aristotle’s *De anima* summarizes the philosopher’s position and sets up a framework for his fundamental assumption in the *Summa Theologica* that the Prime Mover is God. Saint Thomas remarks,

Now there are two evident respects in which things with soul differ from things without it: *sensing* and *moving*. For what has soul seems to differ from what does not have soul above all through both movement (since, that is, such things move themselves) and sense (or cognition). That is why [these philosophers] believed that when they knew the principles behind these two things, they would know what soul is. Hence they struggled to know the cause of movement and sense, so that through this they might know the nature of soul. For they believed that the cause of movement and sense is the soul.³⁶⁰

Aquinas’ remarks about the ancient philosophers (some of whom, as Aristotle points out with Democritus, believe that the “soul and mind . . . are one and the same thing”³⁶¹) show

³⁵⁹ Aristotle, *De anima* 404a.20-24 (539).

³⁶⁰ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *A Commentary on Aristotle’s De anima*, trans. Robert Pasnau (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1999) 23.

³⁶¹ Aristotle, *De anima* 405a9-10 (540).

an affinity with O'Connor's remarks about her own characters and the audience to whom she attests her art is addressed. As discussed in earlier chapters, the character in O'Connor's fiction sees himself as his own Prime Mover, deified in his imagination by his own intellect. From the character's unconscious perspective, he or she is all *mind-soul*. The body is unnecessary and only gains attention when it is wounded. O'Connor represents the *mind-soul* in her stories as the foot, the member which moves the being itself. Just as the ancient philosophers missed the point, when according to Aristotle they said "that [the soul] is what moves (or is capable of moving itself),"³⁶² so too her characters make the mistake of seeing their own motion, their own autonomous self, moving toward a destiny that has nothing to do with a Prime Mover that is not themselves. The errant characters' motion is arrested in O'Connor's stories when grace trips them up, and gets their feet off the ground. How they walk, hobble, or limp signifies their need for a good tripping. The later medieval religious commentary on the walking soul sheds some light on the possible anagogic relevance of this particular physical infirmity.

Medieval scholars like Albertus Magnus, Godfrey Admontensis, and Hugo de Sancto Caro borrowed from Aristotle's specific discussions on motion, and applied his philosophical motivation and actuation for walking to what Albertus called the twin powers of the soul, *intellectus* (apprehensive faculties) and *affectus* (appetitive faculties).³⁶³ In *De anima* Aristotle describes motion of the body and soul together in accord with the body and soul's reaction to apprehended stimuli and appetitive

³⁶² Aristotle, *De anima* 406a.1-2 (542).

³⁶³ Freccero 40.

motivation. Saint Bonaventure splices the twin powers of the soul and Aristotle's analysis of motion to yet another, more refined, metaphorical depiction of the *foot of the soul*. In one of his sermons Saint Bonaventure presents the "syllogism of sin" as four short steps:

Our internal movements are short paths leading quickly to death because they contain only four steps by which the feet of the soul run to death. One foot is the movement of reason, the other the movement of appetite; the first is on the right, the second on the left, since the right foot is moved first, and the left afterward, for "apprehension precedes appetite," according to the Philosopher. The first step of the right foot is awareness of the sin, the second, that of the left foot, is desire, the third, of the right foot, deliberation, and the fourth of the right, choice.³⁶⁴

With each successive religious writer, the *foot of the soul* metaphor becomes more specific and complex. Saint Bonaventure's sequential explication of the soul's advancement toward sin provides those steps that lead up to when the "foot hath been taken in the very trap which they hid," of which Saint Augustine elaborated upon from the ninth psalm.³⁶⁵ Under the thirteenth-century scholar's fervent acceptance of Aristotelian reductionism, the feet that Saint Gregory the Great had identified generally as 'the foot of love for God' and 'the foot of love for the world,' became associated as the twin powers of the soul (*intellectus* and *affectus*), and their corresponding wounds, as assigned specifically to the feet by Saint Ambrose: *ignorance* and *concupiscence*. Freccero suggests that the religious ramifications from Aristotle's philosophy, combined with the tradition of the *foot*

³⁶⁴ qtd. in Freccero 42.

³⁶⁵ qtd. in Augustine, *On the Psalms* 1: 224.

of the soul metaphor, influenced Dante when he imagined a limping pilgrim on his way to visit Hell. Freccero writes, "The figure of man in the act of walking was quite literally the incarnation of the act of choice, for walking was simply choosing brought down to the material plain . . . What better way to represent a struggle which goes on in the soul, than to observe the effects of that very struggle upon the body."³⁶⁶ My reading of O'Connor highlights her representation of a similar struggle in the soul of her characters.

In the following discussions, I analyze O'Connor's use of the *foot of the soul* metaphor, and how the foot signifies, not a Christian soul, but the false *mind-soul*. Sometimes the foot accrues meaning within a particular story, and at other times, the foot has significance because of its compiled appearances in multiple stories, all of which seem to demand our attention to its possible relevance in the larger story of redemption that O'Connor always professed existed in her works. It is therefore important to recognize her repeated use of the foot as an effective metaphor of the *mind-soul*. In a letter to Cecil Dawkins in 1958 O'Connor wrote, "I agree with you that you shouldn't have to go back centuries to find Catholic thought, and to be sure, you don't. But you are not going to find the highest principles of Catholicism exemplified on the surface of life."³⁶⁷ True to her anagogic vision (a cousin to the anagogic vision that according to her was alive and well in medieval interpretations of the Bible and medieval life in general), O'Connor creates her character's bodies, and specifically, their feet, with a significance that may escape us if we fail to examine closely how they move her characters. "It is what is invisible that God sees and that the Christian must look for," she continued in her letter.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁶ Freccero 42.

³⁶⁷ O'Connor, *HB* 307.

³⁶⁸ O'Connor, *HB* 308.

How do her characters live, move, and have their being? Where do their feet take them?
Where is it that the lame shall enter first? Heaven or Hell?

In her two novels and the short stories in her two main collections, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, O'Connor places her characters in a situation where their feet must leave the ground. Sometimes they are bowled over by an agent of grace, and at other times they are incapacitated and separated from the ground by their state. Many characters stamp the ground, picking up one foot and placing another one down, in a show of their division between being earthly sinner and providential messenger, or the recipient of grace. Characters in need of grace often struggle to walk, and their limp signifies, as it did in the Middle Ages, that their soul is in combat with opposing forces. An examination of the posture, ambulation, and lack of sure-footedness in O'Connor's stories illuminates a pattern of signification that carries an accumulative anagogic message. The message is this: the character's *mind-soul* represented by the foot must be exposed as the false soul since, in the words of Aristotle (and repeated by Saint Thomas Aquinas), the soul is not capable of moving itself.³⁶⁹ Therefore, in the spirit of Saint Ambrose's metaphor, these characters must get their 'false' spiritual feet off the ground or suffer the consequences of a life vulnerable to the woundings of repetitive sin. In the case of O'Connor's characterizations, repetitive sin is not restricted to moral infractions such as stealing, lying, or killing; but rather, the sin that gravely endangers the character is one of not fully recognizing herself or himself as a human being who is made up of a body *and* a soul. The sin is magnified when characters misconstrue holiness as self-adoration. To some people, self-adoration may seem rather innocuous when

³⁶⁹ Aristotle, *De anima* 406a.1-2 (542).

compared with stealing, lying, or killing, but it is a violation of the Mosaic First Commandment. In addition, because it not only rejects God but displaces him with a consciousness made worthy of worship by a self-appointed sanctification, the character's sin could be interpreted as "the sin against the Holy Spirit," which according to Christ is unforgivable.³⁷⁰ The willful or unconscious rejection of the soul spells doom for O'Connor's characters.

In order to provide an analysis that illustrates O'Connor's anagogic vision of the *foot-soullmind-soul* metaphor, I take three different tactical approaches. First, I will analyze the stories collectively and show how her characters' feet leave the ground and discuss the cumulative signification of this action. Second, I will turn my attention to the wounded foot as seen in *Wise Blood* and "A View of the Woods." Third, I will engage some specific medieval meanings attributed to the *foot of the soul* in two stories, "The Lame Shall Enter First" and "Good Country People."

Getting Their Feet Off The Ground

As mentioned above, the metaphorical feet as described by Plato have a strong similarity to the attributes of the *mind-soul*. For Plato, education that stresses the contemplation of ideas, and not the physicality of the world, allows a man to walk uprightly and avoid the path to hell. In O'Connor's stories, characters who share Plato's disposition toward intellectual development or whose interpretation of the world fails to see the divine in the physical, usually limp away from heaven. Little Bevel ("The River"),

³⁷⁰ Mark 3.29, "But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost, shall never have forgiveness, but shall be guilty of an everlasting sin."

at “four or five,” has been set on a path without God by his carousing, non-believing parents.³⁷¹ The boy moves “very slowly, deliberately bumping his feet together as if he had trouble walking” (158). Mr. Tom T. Shiftlet in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” cannot walk upright: “His gaunt figure listed slightly to the side as if the breeze were pushing him” (172). Ruby Hill’s swollen ankles give her trouble as she attempts to climb the stairs to her apartment in “A Stroke of Good Fortune (192). The lost Mr. Head (“The Artificial Nigger”) “walked on as if he had drunk poison” (228), and the Grandmother (“A Good Man Is Hard to Find”) “limped out of the car” (145). Joy-Hulga stomps her wooden stump in “Good Country People,” and Hazel Motes finds his own gait with shards of glass in his shoes. Johnson’s club foot makes very distinct tracks in “The Lame Shall Enter First.” At the end of “Parker’s Back,” O. E. Parker’s “knees went hollow under him” and he staggered up” (674). Near his death in “Judgment Day,” Tanner’s “body felt like a great heavy bell whose clapper swung from side to side but made no noise” (693). When he attempts to walk, “he pushed one foot forward,” and when he does not rely upon the wall for support, “all at once his legs disappeared” (693).

In O’Connor’s fiction, a physical infirmity quite often signals a lack of spiritual integrity. The limp is just such a signal. Saint Bonaventure’s analogy of the steps of sin, and Freccero’s conclusion that walking represents the struggles of the human soul, contribute to understanding O’Connor’s *homo claudus*. However, I perceive that the limp consistently signifies the character as the self-proclaimed Prime Mover. As discussed in Chapter One and mentioned again above, the character is in need of grace to destroy the frame of mind that she or he is in complete control, a god unto herself or himself. In

³⁷¹ O’Connor, *CW* 155.

preparation for the moment of grace, the character enters into a Heraclitian vision, a world of external motion, indeterminacy, mystery. In this engagement the character often is static. The application of medieval theology and its metaphorical language to the O'Connorian *foot soul* explains why the anagogic feet become still before they get lifted off the ground. If the foot represents the soul, and according to Aristotle and Saint Thomas, the soul cannot move by itself but requires some greater source called *the Prime Mover* to give it motion, then the false *mind-soul* represented by the feet must lose its ability to deceive the person by moving the person. O'Connor counters the pre-Aristotelian and anti-Thomist contention that the soul has a quality that allows it to move itself, by freezing the motion of her characters. When her characters limp, they struggle against the opposing forces of a static Christian soul that is dependent upon God and the body he created for it for its motion. In a way, it is like Jacob wrestling with the angel, the attempt, according to Saint Gregory the Great, to lift the *foot of the love of the world* off the ground so as to plant the *foot of the love of God*. O'Connor's characters struggle physically to move in this type of spiritual contest.

In "The Comforts of Home," Thomas faces the disruption brought about by Sarah-Ham's boarding at his house. He hears his dead father's voice telling him, "Put your foot down" (582, 585) and kick Sarah-Ham out of the house. Feeling the influence of his father's evil intention and the frustration of his mother's seemingly foolish Christian charity, Thomas decides to walk out on both. As a result of his decision he becomes physically static: "Standing in the center of his room now, realizing that he had reached the point where action was inevitable, that he must pack, that he must leave, that he must

go, Thomas remained immovable” (586-87). Even when he starts to obey his father’s voice, (“Idiot! The criminal stole your gun! See the sheriff! See the sheriff!”), Thomas “seemed unable to take the first step that would set him walking to the closet in the hall to look for a suitcase . . . he seemed stunned” and he “stood where we has for at least three minutes, then turned slowly like a large vessel reversing its direction” (588, 589). Other characters in O’Connor’s fiction experience a similar immobility. Before getting shot by the Misfit in “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” Bailey “was squatting in the position of a runner about to sprint forward but he didn’t move” (147). When the Grandmother attempts to escape the Misfit she mumbles her disbelief in the Resurrection and “sank down in the ditch with her legs twisted under her” (152). Mrs. Flood’s possible salvation at the end of *Wise Blood* is described as her first being “blocked a the entrance of something” and then seeing Hazel Motes as a light like the star of Bethlehem “moving farther and father away” (131) from her. Mrs. Ruby Turpin gets stopped in her tracks at the end of “Revelation.” She sees the procession of white trash, blacks, “battalions of freaks and lunatics” all marching toward heaven, yet, in “a moment the vision faded and but she remained where she was, immobile” (654). “Judgment Day” begins with Tanner intending to return home to Corinth for his own burial, as he wanted “to walk as far as he could get and trust to the Almighty to get him the rest of the way” (676). The story nears its conclusion with Tanner “standing a moment, swaying until he got his balance,” and then making a few shuffled steps to the stairwell, muttering as he goes, “The Lord is my shepherd . . . I shall not want” (693).

This recurring physical paralysis is an essential feature of O'Connor's anagogic vision since it reveals the Heraclitian world of mystery. Ruby Hill cannot move on the see-sawing steps and has to take on directly the charging Hartley Gilfeet at the end of "A Stroke of Good Fortune." When Julian's mother is dying of a heart attack in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," he is "stunned" and watches as "she lurched forward again, walking as if one leg were shorter than the other" (500). He attempts to run for help, but the street lights seems to drift further and further away from him and "his feet moved numbly as if they carried him nowhere" (500). Mr. Fortune experiences a similar Heraclitian vision at the end of "A View of the Woods," when after killing his granddaughter he "managed painfully to get up on his unsteady kicked legs and to take two steps," but then falls on his back and "felt as if he were running as fast as he could." Mr. Fortune remains still while the "gaunt trees had thickened into mysterious dark files that were marching across the water and away into the distance" (546). It is little surprise that Mr. Paradise, the scoffer in "The River," can never run fast enough to catch the free floating Bevel as rides the stream toward "the Kingdom of Christ" (170). Perhaps two of the most explicit examples are found in "The Enduring Chill" and "Greenleaf." Asbury "moved his arms and legs helplessly as if he were pinned to the bed by the terrible eye" of Father Finn from Purgatory. The young atheist can only watch in a state of near paralysis as the water stain on the ceiling descends upon him as the terrifying gift of the Holy Ghost. Mrs. May shares a similar experience. Before being gored by the Christ-like bull in "Greenleaf," Mrs. May "remained perfectly still, not in fright, but in freezing unbelief" (523).

Frequently, characters lift their feet off the ground and place them back down again, pawing the earth as would a charging bull. Characters who exhibit this type of behavior suggest their middle state, struggling between their earthly sinfulness and their call to accept God's grace as either its recipient or agent. The Misfit walks deliberately, "placing his feet carefully so that he wouldn't slip" (146), but shortly after reaching the bottom of the ditch he "pointed his shoe into the ground and made a little hole and then covered it up again" (147). The subtle action foreshadows the burial of the old *mind-souls*, both his and the Grandmother's in the dual moment of grace at the end of the story, and it also mimics the stamping action of a Greenleaf bull who prepares for an O'Connorian violent encounter with God. When Thomas ("The Comforts of Home") prepares to tell his mother that Sarah Ham must be evicted from their house, he "began like a bull that, before charging, backs with his head lowered and paws the ground" (582). In "The Artificial Nigger," the train passenger, who is forced to listen to Mr. Head's educational philosophy, "gazed down at his swollen feet and lifted one about ten inches from the floor. After a minute he put it down and lifted the other" (218). Before Mrs. McIntyre watches the tractor roll over Mr. Guizac's spine, "[s]he stood watching Mr. Guizac, stamping her feet on the hard ground, for the cold was climbing like a paralysis up her feet and legs" (325). Similarly, when Tanner's daughter "stamped the booted foot on the floor" (692), she made her last physical gesture before seeing her father's corpse in the stairwell. Mrs. Flood tries to figure out Motes' enigmatic personality, and especially his bizarre but faithful regimen of walking during certain times of the day. In her mind, Haze "could have stayed in his room, in one spot, moving his feet up and down" (123).

Without knowing yet that Haze's shoes are lined with shards of glass and rocks, she reckons that he could have been "one of them monks" (123) who just keeps to themselves in a weird other-worldly way. Ruby Hill stamps her feet on every step in her apartment building, ascending to where she lives and discovering along the way a new way to live. The preacher in "The River" also stamps his feet before baptizing the boy who seems to share his name. Before he starts to preach he is "[l]ooking down at the water and shifting his feet in it," and then he "shifted his feet again" (161). As his sermon begins the "preacher lifted one foot and then the other," and listens to a high voice in the congregation testify that he had cured a woman once: "Seen that woman git up and walk out straight where she had limped in!" (162).

Lucynell Crater is also an agent of grace in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," consistent with the foot stompers, yet as the story unfolds she evolves into a character whose feet never seem to touch the ground. Upon seeing Thomas T. Shiftlet, Lucynell Crater "jumped up and began to stamp and point and make excited speechless sounds" (172). As the story progresses, two things become evident about the young woman and her feet: Lucynell's feet are off the ground more and more frequently, while her entire body is still. When her mother tries to sell the idea that Mr. Shiftlet should marry her daughter, "she pointed to Lucynell sitting cross-legged in her chair, holding both feet in her hands" (178). Mr. Shiftlet spouts his philosophy of motion and the soul:

A man is divided into two parts, body and spirit . . . A body and a spirit . . .

The body, lady, is like a house: it don't go anywhere; but the spirit lady, is like a automobile: always on the move, always . . . (179).

Shiftlet contradicts the Aristotelian-Thomist argument that the soul is the part that does not move by itself. He continues, "a man's spirit means more to him than anything else . . . I got to follow where my spirit says go" (179-180). Indeed Shiftlet does just that, and abandons the body of his newly wed wife, Lucynell Crater, at The Hot Spot, and takes on down the road in his swindled automobile. While she sleeps, sitting on a stool, with her feet dangling above the ground, the boy at the counter remarks, "She looks like an angel of Gawd" (181). Identified as a creature of pure spirit and one at rest, Lucynell Crater reverses Shiftlet's philosophy about choosing the moving car over the static spirit. Shiftlet realizes this as he speeds away from the diner. He confesses to the hitchhiker, "I never rued a day in my life like the one I rued when I left that old mother of mine . . . my mother was a angel of Gawd . . . He took her from heaven and giver to me and I left her" (182-183). Similar to walking characters who are stunned with some form of paralysis before their revelation, the narrator informs us that "the car was barely moving" (183).

Another foot-stomper who gains our attention is the child in "The Temple of the Holy Ghost." Unlike other stories where there is a physical encounter with an agent of grace, in this story the child's imagination works to concretize such a person and event. This follows what was quoted above from Aristotle's argument in *De anima* that the soul needs the body, even for thinking, because thought is dependent upon imagination.³⁷² The child imagines the hermaphrodite described by the two teenage girls, and this sets her toward a revelation about what is sacred, not merely in the world of ideas, but also in reality. While she claims to have a superior intelligence and seems to have a greater

³⁷² Aristotle, *De anima* 403a.5-10 (536-537). "Thinking seems the most probable exception; but if this too proves to be a form of imagination or to be impossible without imagination, it too requires a body as a condition of its existence."

propensity for moral introspection than any other character in the story, her deficiency is in her Platonic faith in knowledge as a virtue. "I'm not as old as you all," the child tells the teenagers, "but I'm about a million times smarter." One girl responds, "There are some things . . . that a child of your age doesn't know."³⁷³ The child believes she can move smoothly through life if she nourishes her mind. Yet, she has a spiritual side to her that draws her away from the purely intellectual. She maintains a conviction that her intelligence could be put to practical use in the world, but that "[s]he would have to be much more than just a doctor or an engineer. She would have to be a saint because that was the occupation that included everything" (204). With such a strongly split consciousness of being, O'Connor seems to make the association of the *mind-soul* to the foot much more explicit. In the story her head is often displaced with where her foot should be. When she tells the teenagers that a rabbit gives birth to babies by spitting them out of its mouth, "her face appeared over the footboard" (207). When she spies on the teenagers with the boys, she stands on a barrel with "her face on a level with the porch floor" (201).

While still professing a faith in God, the girl follows the Platonic tradition by not believing in the physicality of God. No other character in the story has the intelligence or the faith fit to engage her directly on such a difficult conversion, so she must rely upon the power of her own imagination to reveal to her the true action of grace in her soul. She must be her own agent of grace, and in a story that frequently integrates foot imagery with a character who recognizes her own difficulty in obeying her mother and doing God's will, we could expect some foot-stomping to signal the struggle between loving the world and

³⁷³ O'Connor, *CW* 206.

loving God. The child demonstrates just such an action in a scene that pits her intellectual pride against her Catholic piety. Appalled by one boy's guess that the teenage girls' singing of Saint Thomas Aquinas' Latin hymn to the Eucharist, *Tantum Ergo*, "must be Jew singing," the child "stamped her foot on the barrel" (202). As is typical with an agent of grace in O'Connor's story, he or she usually brings death, if not physical, almost always anagogical. The *hupokeimenon* with its *mind-soul* must be done away with some how. If the child is to be her own agent of grace, the expectant result would be some form of spiritual suicide.

The young girl believes that the only way that she could become a saint is if "she could be a martyr if they killed her quick" (204). She imagines that martyrdom would not come easy to her. The only way her oppressors could finish her off would be if they "cut off her head very quickly with a sword and she went immediately to heaven" (204). A key tableau that O'Connor seems to present in the story suggests a guillotine scene. Before going to bed and after running through the Apostle's Creed, she "hung by her chin on the side of the bed, empty-minded" (205). She adopts a similar pose when she explains the obstetrics of rabbits with her head resting on the footboard of the teenager's bed. The next morning, on the trip back to Saint Scholastica's convent she rides in the car, and risks decapitation as she "held her head out of the window" (208). When she enters the convent, she muses that once "you put your foot in their door . . . they got you praying" (208). It is in the convent, kneeling with her feet off the ground in front of the monstrance, which contains the sacred host, that she gets her revelation of being "in the presence of God" (208).

Along with foot-stomping and near paralysis, one other characteristic of the foot consistently appears. In nearly every one of O'Connor's stories the character's feet leave the ground in preparation for their revelation. Sometimes they do so suddenly and briefly, as when a character jumps. A case in point is the scene in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" when the Grandmother lets the literal cat out of the bag, and the stowaway feline escapes because the old woman tips its basket when "her feet jumped up" (144). When Hartley Gilfeet ("A Stroke of Good Fortune") shakes the house with his slamming of doors and rumbling up the steps toward Ruby Hill, "[s]he jumped" (195). Two jumps occur in "The Lambe Shall Enter First," one 'off-stage' and one 'on-stage'. Sheppard's jump concerns us in this present discussion, and Norton's a bit later. Simultaneously realizing his guilt and tremendous love for his son, Norton, Sheppard, "jumped up and ran to his room, to kiss him, to tell him that he loved him, that he would never fail him again" (632).

Usually, though, the characters' feet stay off the ground for a longer period, like the kneeling child in "The Temple of the Holy Ghost." More examples abound in O'Connor's stories. After the policeman rolls his Essex over the embankment, Hazel Motes' "knees bent under him and he sat down on the edge of the embankment with his feet hanging over" (118). Tanner falls down the stairs, but that is not the end of his misery. The black man configures him such that "his feet dangled over the stairwell like those of a man in the stocks" (695). Bevel enters the river and is caught by the current so that "his feet were already treading on nothing" (171). There are also characters, who by their physical weakness, have their feet off the ground nearly all the time. General Sash in "A Late Encounter With The Enemy," Asbury in "The Enduring Chill," and Mrs.

McIntyre at the conclusion of “The Displaced Person” remain in a posture that makes them vulnerable to the descent of grace. However, the most common event in O’Connor’s fiction is the providential dispensation of grace that typically knocks her characters off their feet.

So many characters get bowled over. Mrs. May gets lifted from the earth by the Greenleaf’s bull. Mary Grace dives over the coffee table in the doctor’s waiting room to throttle Ruby Turpin in “Revelation.” O. E. Parker goes head over heels when his tractor hits the tree. “The first thing Parker saw were his shoes, quickly being eaten by the fire; one was caught under the tractors, the other was some distance away, burning by itself. He was not in them” (665). Some characters are physically lifted off the ground by other characters. Before baptizing Bevel, the preacher “swung him upside down and plunged his head into the water” (165). The policemen who find Hazel Motes at the end *Wise Blood* carry him into the squad car. After drowning Bishop, Francis Tarwater takes to the highway and “began to walk, putting his feet down hard on the ground. His legs and his will were good enough” (463). Tarwater’s feet lack the ability to walk away from the Stranger, who “picked him up and carried him into the woods” to rape him. Ruby Hill, who professes three times in “A Stroke of Good Fortune” that the only way she would go to a physician is if they carried her, has a messenger of *the* Physician pay a house call when Hartley Gilfeet knocks her off her feet and begins her spiritual cure. Although Thomas listens to his father’s dead voice in “The Comforts of Home,” and attempts to “put his foot down,” the story ends with the image of Thomas “about to collapse” (594) into Sarah-Ham’s arms.

Getting their feet off the ground anagogically exposes the failure of the attempt to substitute the *mind-soul* for the Christian soul. Characters who once thought they were the Prime Mover, now find themselves suspended helplessly, both physically and spiritually. Sometimes the full impact of the *mind-soul*'s impotence is not understood until the character actually sees another character with his feet off the ground. In "Revelation" we get a glimpse of how the *mind-soul* restores itself in terms of its identity as a self-mover. Recovering from Mary Grace's attack, "Mrs. Turpin's head cleared and her power of motion returned" (645). It is not until the end of the story when she has a vision of "a vast horde of souls . . . rumbling toward heaven" on a "vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire" (654) that her motion has become arrested and her contemplation of the mysterious parade can begin. As previously discussed, Mr. Shiftlet most likely holds the image of his deserted wife sleeping on the bar stool at the Hot Spot when he laments how he rejected his God-given "Angel of Gawd." Feet are an integral part of what the dying Mrs. May sees in "Greenleaf." When she looks toward Mr. Greenleaf running to save her from the "bull [that] had buried his head in her lap," the man appears approaching her with "nothing under his feet" (524). The starkest revelation comes in "The Lane Shall Enter First," when Sheppard races up the steps to find his son, Norton, hanging from the attic beams, "from which he had launched his flight into space" (632). Suspended feet, by whatever the means, appear consistently to signal a preparation for acceptance or rejection of grace. Two stories in particular demand special notice because the feet are the specific target for suffering, and perhaps even more bizarre, it appears that the characters accept their feet's afflictions willingly. Mary Fortune Pitts in

“A View of the Woods,” and Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* get their feet off the ground on their own painful terms.

Mary and Motes' Suffering Feet

“A View of the Woods” is a story that resembles “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” in its representation of a character, Mary Fortune Pitts, who seems to accrue more salvific significance the less frequently her feet are found touching the ground. Like Lucynell Crater in “The Life You Save,” Mary evolves to something more purely spiritual, her own type of ‘Angel of Gawd.’ I believe that this change is made evident through Mary’s feet, and so I trace her spiritual transformation by examining closely this particular body part.

The face of Mr. Fortune’s granddaughter, Mary Fortune Pitts, is “a small replica of the old man’s,” (525) and she “had to a singular degree, his intelligence, his strong will, and his push and drive” (526). The *mind-soul* narcissistically dominates Mr. Fortune’s apprehension of his granddaughter’s virtue. The intelligent shrewdness Mary displays bolsters his pride in her, as he sees a reflection of himself. “He meant to teach the child spirit by example” (533), and the lesson he has in mind is the selling of the property in front of her house for the erection of a gas station. By Mr. Fortune’s estimates, this business move would please her and show her how he would never impede “Progress” that “had set all this in motion” (527). He thought they were of the same mind; “he liked to think of her as being thoroughly of his clay” (528). The old man believes that his real estate deal will bond them even closer together, for “[t]hough there was seventy years’

difference in their ages, the spiritual distance between them was slight” (526). But his educational tactic backfires when Mary rejects him because the gas station would impair her “view of the woods,” the place of her suffering. In the dark pines she clings to a tree while her father, Mr. Pitts, whips her ankles with his belt. The spirituality of Mr. Fortune and his granddaughter split because of the woods and the suffering that goes on there.

Through the story Mary’s feet, representative of her *mind-soul*, change from being grounded purely on her grandfather’s spiritual soil, to their touching the ground only briefly, to not at all. The old man parks his car up on an embankment, and he and Mary watch the bulldozers and excavators dig up the land that he sold for the development of a fishing club. “He sat on the bumper and she sat on the hood with her bare feet on his shoulders” (528). They appear as one creature, melded together and pressed into their concerns for profit and the earth. In terms of Saint Gregory the Great’s exegesis of Jacob’s feet, they plant both feet firmly on the earth, in a sign of their love of the world. Mary watches with a greedy eye that ensure the bulldozer does not trespass onto her grandfather’s property. But there is a potential for a change in both characters, and the narrative foreshadows such a change by the possibility that their feet could get suspended from the earth even while watching the machines. “If he had moved his feet a few inches out, the old man could have dangled them over the edge” of the embankment (528). When Mary sees the bulldozer bump the stob that demarcates the property line she runs along the edge of the embankment. “Don’t run so near the edge,” her grandfather warns her. “She even walked the way he did, stomach forward, with a careful abrupt gait, something between a rock and a shuffle” (529). Mary’s jaunt along the lip of the ditch

and the description of her deliberate stride recall the Misfit who steps cautiously down the slope toward the Grandmother. The difference is that the girl's path seems to involve taking a greater risk: "She was walking so close to the embankment that the outside of her right foot was flush with it" (529). When she reunites with her grandfather she takes up the same pose, and "climbed back onto the hood without a word and put her feet on his shoulders where she had had them before, as if he were no more than a part of the automobile" (529). Tom Shiftlet's philosophy applies here, as she connects her *mind-soul* to that mistaken "spirit . . . that is like a automobile" (179). Mr. Fortune likes to have her feet on his shoulders, grounded in his spirit of progress that sets everything in motion. In contrast, Mary's father, Mr. Pitts, whips his daughter's ankles and gets them off the ground.

Mr. Fortune believes that "[t]here were some children . . . whom he thought should be whipped once a week on principle, but there were other ways to control intelligent children" (529). For no clear reason, Mary's father took her out in the woods where "the child clung to a pine tree and Pitts, as methodically as if he were whacking a bush with a sling blade, beat her around the ankles with his belt" (530). The girl "jumped up and down as if she where were standing on a hot stove" (530). After her beating Mary's body imitates Lucynell Crater's pose, who sat cross-legged in her rocking chair "holding both feet in her hands" (178). At the base of the tree, the whipped girl takes "both feet in her hands and rocked back and forth" (530). When her grandfather approaches her after watching the abuse, he asks her, "Where's your spirit?" The granddaughter retorts, "Nobody is here and nobody beat me . . . Nobody's ever beat me in

my life and if anybody did, I'd kill him. You can see for yourself nobody is here" (530).

If we take the girl's denial in its anagogic sense, especially in the context that her whipped feet represent her *mind-soul*, then we can appreciate her response to the question,

"Where's your spirit?"

Although I may not apply Joanne Halleran McMullen's linguistic techniques, I agree with her that there exists a "deliberate mystery O'Connor has so cleverly and abstrusely concealed throughout her fiction with her careful language choices."³⁷⁴ When Mary Fortune Pitts says, "no body" is here and "no body" has beat me, it is as if she were saying, 'my *mind-soul* was the target, and my *mind-soul* has been the thing that has made me suffer.' Mr. Pitts doesn't figure into her answer to the question "Where's your spirit?". Mary's feet are the target of her father's irrational temper. He punishes her dualistically fueled *mind-soul* that has as its implicit *credo*: "No body is here." Her choice of words paradoxically suggests that the whipping did not touch her physically, while at the same time, the object whipped is indisputably her feet, thus her *mind-soul*. Following the scourging she recognizes the weakening influence of her *mind-soul*, as related by her assessment that "Nobody has ever touched me."³⁷⁵ Mr. Fortune expresses his disappointment in her lack of spirit in terms of her feet leaving the ground. "You never did a thing but hang onto that tree and dance up and down a little and blubber," (530) he reprimands. His hope for her is that one day, after he has died and has left her his inheritance, that "Mary Fortune could make the rest of them (Pitts family) jump" (527) with the shrewd intelligence that he had worked so hard to groom. Instead, the girl just

³⁷⁴ McMullen 2.

³⁷⁵ O'Connor, *CW* 533.

takes the punishment and doesn't "do a thing but blubber a little and jump up and down!" (532). What infuriates him the most is the sense that she likes to be beaten.

Scripture illuminates Mary's acceptance of her beatings. As difficult as it is to accept, O'Connor presents us with her most brutal scene of violent love, as drawn against the backdrop of 1 John 4.18: "Fear is not in charity: but perfect charity casteth out fear, because fear hath pain. And he that feareth, is not perfected in charity."³⁷⁶ From Mr. Fortune's perspective, the girl is terrified of her father and gives herself up to the abuse. According to Fortune, when Pitts tells her to come with her and she follows in his steps while he loosens his belt, her face has "a look that was part terror and part respect and part something else, something very like cooperation."³⁷⁷ From Mary's perspective (especially after her beating), she shows no fear. "Nobody's ever put a hand on me and if anybody did, I'd kill him" (533). The weakening of her *mind-soul* through the physical abuse of her feet gives her the courage to become more perfect in loving what is good and not shrewd. Again, as Saint John phrases it, perfect charity removes fear, because fear has to do with pain, and any one who fears painful punishment is not perfect in loving. Mr. Fortune's sense of perfection differs entirely because he wants to restore the integrity of her *mind-soul* and protect her feet. "If he could have taught her to *stand up* to Pitts the way she *stood up* to him, she would have been a *perfect child*, as *fearless* and *sturdy-minded* as anyone could want; but it was her one failure of character" (533, *emphasis*

³⁷⁶ The Douay-Rheims annotations on this verse read as follows: "Ver. 18. *Fear is not in charity, &c.* Perfect charity, or love, banisheth *human fear*, that is, the fear of men; as also all *perplexing fear*, which makes men mistrust or despair of God's mercy; and that kind of *servile fear*, which makes them fear the punishment of sin more than the offence of God. But it in no ways excludes the wholesome *fear of God's judgments*, so often recommended in holy writ; nor that *fear and trembling*, with which we are told to work out of our salvation."

³⁷⁷ O'Connor, *CW* 530.

mine). The place of Mary's failure, the woods, is what Mr. Fortune's business sense hopes to eclipse. However, it is his business deal that gives Mary the rage and the motive to begin her own conversion and knock her grandfather off his feet.

On another day while watching the bulldozers, Mr. Fortune announces to Mary his plan for Tilman's new gas station in front of the woods. Her rejection of the plan infuriates the old man so much "he jumped up" (532). She coolly responds to his heated repartees, "You fall off that embankment and you'll wish you hadn't" (532). The strange affection between the pair becomes strained, and the very meaning of their relationship seems to rise like the temperature of their encounters. Leading up to his disclosure about the business deal, the girl "stamped his shoulders with her feet" (531). In a debate over the new gas station Mary quotes a passage from Matthew, "He who calls his brother a fool is subject to hell fire" (Matthew 5.22), that has a strong resemblance to the verses that follow the excerpt above from John's first epistle: "If any man say, I love God and hateth his brother; he is a liar. For he that loveth, not his brother, whom he seeth, how can he love God whom he seeth not?"³⁷⁸ "Do you call me a liar or a blindman!" Mr. Fortune shouts at his granddaughter.³⁷⁹ Although the old man does not really see the conversion of Mary Fortune, he unconsciously signals the turning point in the story when he tells his daughter "That child is an angel! A saint!" (534). After speaking those words, Mary Fortune's feet begin to leave the ground more frequently. Like the Angel of Gawd in "The Life You Save," Mary becomes the agent of grace for Mr. Fortune, who like Tom

³⁷⁸ 1 John 4.20.

³⁷⁹ O'Connor, *CW* 530.

Shiftlet loves only himself. Mary, the narcissistic subject of his affection, evolves into his fatal attraction.

After Mr. Fortune calls Mary an angel, she appears in the story with her feet seldom touching the ground. She “was sitting astride his chest,” or “sitting with her feet drawn up on the seat” (535), or “sitting in the swing” (537). Usually she awoke him every morning, but on the morning of their final violent encounter “[s]he was sitting in the swing on the front porch” (539) because “she preferred the sight of the woods” (539). He asks her, “Why are you so up-in-the-air about me selling my own lot?” (537). He tries to diagnose her morose behavior, but he “could not believe that a child of her intelligence could be acting this way over the mere sale of a field,” so he concludes “I think she must be *coming down* with something” (540). Layered in his joke to have her put on shoes since he would not take a barefoot woman into town is the operation of anagogic messages that suggest his intent to hide Mary’s feet, especially since she has suddenly become more conscious of them. Shoes do not distract her. “All the way into town, she sat looking at her feet, which stuck out in front of her, encased in heavy brown school shoes. The old man had often sneaked up on her and found her alone in conversation with her feet and he thought she was speaking with them silently now” (540). Mary’s heavy shoes call to mind Johnson’s club foot in “The Lame Shall Enter First” that looked “like a weapon” (601). Indeed her use of those school shoes at the end of the story fits well with Johnson’s warning, “if I kick somebody . . . with this, it learns them” (603). The lesson that has to be imparted is the question posed by the old man to the soul of his nine-year-old replica: “Are you a Fortune . . . or are you a Pitts? Make up your mind” (541).

Mr. Fortune seals the deal with the snake-like Tilman, and believes that blocking the view of the woods for the sake of progress was the right thing to do. "He felt that he had acted on principle and that the future was assured" (542). As the handshake between the two men ends, Tilman exits like a devil sent back into hell; "he disappeared completely under the counter as if he had been snatched by the feet from below" (542). Mary hurls bottle after bottle toward her grandfather and his business partner, until the old man charges toward her and "lifted her" (543). In the back seat of the car she curls like an embryo, "rolled into a ball in the back corner of the seat," (543) her feet clearly off the floor of the car. The grandfather realizes that her lack of respect for him is due to the fact that he had never beaten her. So, like Pitts, he races into the woods to whip the child. From his perspective, Mary struggles to understand the scourging she is about to receive. "What he had in mind to do appeared to come very slowly as if it had to penetrate a fog in her head" (544). When she realizes that he means to beat her, she attacks the old man with "the jabs of her feet" and the "weight of her whole solid body" (544). At this point, Mary's rejection of Mr. Fortune signifies her acceptance of a Christian soul and body. That means, in effect, that Mary's *mind-soul* is gone; her *hupokeimenon* is dead. Her feet, which have been off the ground more and more in the latter part of the story, are no longer grounded in a spiritually-dead way of looking at the world. Now, with her grandfather taking his belt off to whip her, she is a totally different person. If her feet are attacked, the assault is against her Christian soul because it is attached to her body. Mary uses her feet in her attack against Mr. Fortune, as if the very thing which he attempted to make perfect in his own image (Mary's *mind-soul*) has become the weapon which now

destroys him. She makes him “dance on one foot” while “her feet mechanically battered his knees” (545). In the manner of Mrs. May’s encounter in “Greenleaf,” she charges her grandfather and “roared like a bull” (545). Toppled and pinned by the girl, he hears her boast, “You’ve been whipped . . . by me . . . and I’m PURE Pitts” (542). Mr. Fortune does not accept his defeat by his angel. He still wants to move on his own, to keep his feet planted in the love of the world and not in the love for God. The purity of the character’s composition as either Pitts or Fortune relates directly to their perfection in understanding charity, perfect charity that loves God and man, perfect charity that has no fear of punishment. Rather than accepting the lesson taught by the wild wielding of Mary’s school shoes, Mr. Fortune summons a raging fury that denies punishment and returns vengeance. Beyond the hope for her grandfather’s redemption, Mary does not respond to this vengeful violence; her violence is purely one of charitable edification. As she says earlier, “I don’t want no quarter of yours.”³⁸⁰ He beats her head on a rock and kills her. The old man tries to walk away from the murder scene, but his feet that strive to maintain his motion as the Prime Mover are arrested. “He managed painfully to get up on his unsteady kicked legs and to take two steps, but the enlargement of his heart, which had begun in the car was still going on” (546). In a Heraclitian vision he sees the entire landscape move and come toward him, including the lake “riding majestically in little corrugated folds toward his feet” (546) to drown him. In the end, he is motionless. The “progress” that he had set in his mind and soul that would sustain him and his granddaughter becomes reflectively epitomized by the only entity that could help him:

³⁸⁰ O’Connor, *CW* 540.

“one huge yellow monster which sat to the side, as stationary as he was, gorging itself on clay” (546).

In O'Connor's corporeal anagogic vision, the painful punishment of Mary's feet prepare her to see them for what they are, the *mind-soul*, a dangerous lethal weapon. Her attack on Mr. Fortune is like “putting a mirror in front of a rooster and watching him fight his own reflection” (531), not only because the old man and child have a physical symmetry, but more significantly, because they share an anagogic infirmity, their dependence upon the *mind-soul*. In the beginning of the story “the spiritual distance between them was slight” (526), but by the end of the story, Mary's acceptance of grace through her acceptance of her *mind-soul*'s punishment administered by her father, allows her to discover herself. Like the Grandmother who “would have been a good woman if it had been somebody to shoot her every minute of her life” (153), Mary also becomes a good person because she accepts grace in the face of her father's evil punishing persistence. “She's mine to whip and I'll whip her every day of the year if it suits me,” Mr. Pitts tells Fortune (531). Mary does not fear her father's punishment, because she accepts the grace offered in a similar fashion to a martyr at the moment of their greatest persecution. However, rather than losing her physical life under her father's continual abuse, she loses her false soul, and finds her true life of body and soul, and a perfect charity that casts out fear.

Hazel Motes, on the other hand, seeks out pain for his feet. The issue of pain and suffering in *Wise Blood* (and all of O'Connor's stories for that matter) is the character's apprehension, both in terms of fear and understanding, of the source of the physical or

psychological torment. Mary Fortune Pitts never explains explicitly that her father's abuse is an evil thing; that should be obvious to anyone. Her tolerance and use of her whipping as a means toward spiritual change, however, is a result of an implicit grace, a power to separate the evil of the world from the omnipotent God who created the world. The evil logic that invades O'Connor's characters persuades them that God is really at the heart of all the pain in the world, or else God is simply impotent compared to the Devil's power to make humans suffer. As Mrs. McIntyre states it in "The Displaced Person," the devil was really in charge of everything and God was just a "hanger-on" (294). Hazel Motes stuffs his shoes with shards of glass, both as a boy and as a blinded man nearing death. The first time he cuts his feet in this practice of apparent self-mortification, he uses the pain to drive a distance between himself and Jesus Christ, whom he imagines pursues him like a wild and ragged figure. The second time he walks on glass, Motes accepts Asa Hawks' exhortation that "You can't run from Jesus . . . Jesus is a fact" (28). He makes his mature feet bleed, not because he is indignant towards a God whom he perceives causes suffering, but as a sign of solidarity with a God who shares his own suffering.

Thomas Merton³⁸¹ offers some insight into the kind of argument that sways O'Connor's characters, especially Hazel Motes, into believing that pain comes from God.

³⁸¹ Merton and O'Connor were two contemporaries, whom I believe shared a similar vision in many respects. Robert Giroux, the mutual publisher and friend of Thomas Merton and Flannery O'Connor, acted as a liason between the two spiritually-focused writers. Giroux relates, "When I got to the O'Connors', Flannery was curious to hear about Gethsemani [Merton's monastery]" (Giroux, Robert, introduction, *Collected Stories*, by Flannery O'Connor [New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971] xiv). See also *Collected Stories* (xiii-xv); *HB* 89, 380; Merton's "Flannery O'Connor: A Prose Elegy" in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 37-42; Kilcourse's "O'Connor and Merton: Icons of True Self in a 'Christ-Haunted' World," *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 23 (1994-1995): 119-136; and Kilcourse's *Flannery O'Connor's Religious Imagination* 1-13; 164-166.

In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton presents what he calls “the moral theology of the Devil.” He assumes the voice the Devil to explain how such a belief system works:

Indeed, says this system of theology, God the Father took real pleasure in delivering His Son to His murderers, and God the Son came to earth because he wanted to be punished by the Father. Both of them together seek nothing more than to punish and persecute their faithful ones The theology of the devil is really not theology but magic. “Faith” in this theology is really not the acceptance of a God who reveals Himself as mercy. It is a psychological, subjective “force” which applies a kind of violence to reality in order to change it according to one’s own whims We hear that faith does everything. So we close our eyes and strain a bit, to generate some “soul force.” We believe. We believe. Nothing happens. We close our eyes again, and generate some more soul force. The devil likes us to generate soul force. He helps us to generate plenty of it. We are just gushing with soul force. But nothing happens. So we go on with this until we become disgusted with the whole business . . . We get tired of this “faith” that does not do anything to change reality. It does not take away our anxieties, our conflicts, it leaves us prey to uncertainty. It does not lift all responsibilities off our shoulders. Its magic is not so effective after all. It does not thoroughly convince us that God is satisfied with us or that we are even satisfied with ourselves.³⁸²

³⁸² Merton, Thomas, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 90,94-96.

Haze preaches with the voice of the Devil. He asserts that suffering, especially Christ's suffering, is senseless, and if nothing else, points to the fact that God is sadistically cruel. He yells at the crowd: "Sweet Jesus Christ Crucified . . . I want to tell you people something. Maybe you think you're not clean because you don't believe. Well you are clean, let me tell you why if you think it's because of Jesus Christ Crucified you're wrong. I don't say he wasn't crucified but I say it wasn't for your sake."³⁸³ Haze gives words to a feeling he internalized as a boy when his mother filled him with guilt and told him "Jesus died to redeem you." The boy mutters back, "I never ast him" (36). True to the theology of the Devil, he aims to prove his mother wrong by filling his shoes with stones and small rocks, lacing them up tight, and going for a walk in the woods where he would placate this God who demands suffering. "That ought to satisfy Him," Haze thinks, and he waits for recognition from this God who loves to see His own Son bleed. But, "Nothing happened. If a stone had fallen he would have taken it as a sign" (36). Had he received a sign and validated his suffering, it would have had an effect opposite to Mary Fortune Pitts' wounded ankles. Whereas her suffering diminished her false beliefs inside her *mind-soul*, Haze's suffering attempts to fortify his denial of a Christian soul. It is not until after his moment of grace, with his feet dangling over the embankment where his Essex rolled to its destruction, that he understands the value of suffering, not in spite of Christ, but with and for Christ.

Recalling the "cost" of the Essex, which according to Slades' boy is "Jesus on the cross, Christ nailed" (38), offers yet another way of understanding Haze's subsequent acceptance of suffering as a way of truly paying for his car. As discussed previously,

³⁸³ O'Connor, *CW* 30.

some characters believe that the car shelters their true spirit and gives it life. Ironically, the same characters speak, think or dream about the car as a coffin.³⁸⁴ The car gains the trust in varying degree of characters like Shiftlet, Fortune, and Young Tarwater who believe it will get them where they need to go. Their destination usually moves them closer to an encounter with intense suffering and the pain of recognizing their estranged Christian soul.

A direct connection can be made between Haze's self-inflicted suffering and what could be called his 'car payments.' "What do you walk on rocks for," Mrs. Flood asks him. "To pay," Motes replies (125). Mrs. Flood feels like she is cheated by her boarder, as if there are payments going somewhere she is not. "You must believe in Jesus or you wouldn't do these foolish things," (127) she tells him. Haze gets his feet off the ground when he walks on rocks and glass. Unlike the time in his boyhood when he looked for a sign, he is now blind and accuses Mrs. Flood of not seeing when she admonishes him for punishing his feet. In the twilight of his living days, Haze sees himself, not God, as unclean. Mrs. Flood doesn't share the same type of vision, especially when she tells him that his hurting himself has resulted in "blood on that night shirt." Haze corrects her, "That's not the kind of clean," but she asserts, "There's only one kind of clean," (127) and that would be a visible sign. When he walks away from Mrs. Flood's house, he is found near death in a ditch by two policemen who arrest him because he "ain't paid his rent" (130). His final payment is made when one policeman hits him in the head with his new billy club and orders the other one, "You take his feet" (131).

³⁸⁴ Hazel Motes dreams about the Essex as his coffin (91) and Shiftlet tells Lucynell's mother when she tells him that he will have to sleep in the broken car, "Lady, the monks of old slept in their coffins!" (176). O'Connor wrote: "The car is a kind of death-in-life symbol" (*MM* 72).

Hazel Motes reverses the theology of the Devil through his acceptance of pain, not as the means of a demented God who desires to bully his Creation, but as a pathway that a compassionate God did not deny, but instead submitted Himself to suffering in order to allow his Creation to see Him in its likeness. With rocks in his shoes, his *mind-soul* dies so his true soul can unite with his body in becoming like Christ. He gets his feet off the ground and returns to God whose only power comes through compassion, like the father in the parable of the prodigal son. God can not force Hazel Motes to love Him. Like the waiting father who longs to hold again his wayward son, we can sense the Father's sentiment in Mrs. Flood's words to Hazel's corpse: "Well, Mr. Motes, I see you've come home" (131).

The suffering feet of Mary Fortune Pitts and Hazel Motes indicate in a very concrete manner the somatic struggle for the Christian soul's survival. O'Connor's anagogic vision manifests its multiple layers of signification in another, slightly more complex way, in "The Lame Shall Enter First." In this story O'Connor employs the technique of the reflective corpse, which was discussed at length in Chapter Two, to represent the crippled soul of Sheppard through Johnson's club foot. Another element in the story that is uniquely yet enigmatically emphasized is the recurrence of Sheppard's not knowing his "left" from his "right." Contextualized with the medieval *foot soul* metaphor, the specificity of "left" or "right" are markers that point to the difficulties in Sheppard's soul in recognizing the perfect charity that loves both people and God.

Reflections of the Left and Right Foot in "The Lame Shall Enter First"

“The Lame Shall Enter First” is a story about the split self and its inability to distinguish the left from the right. The story’s opening sentence describes Sheppard sitting “on a stool at the bar that divided the kitchen in half.” From the other side of the bar, Sheppard’s son, Norton, looks toward his father with “a kind of half attention” with eyes that seemed “slightly too far apart.” A middle-aged widower and single-parent, Sheppard despises his son’s selfishness. “All he wanted for the child was that he be good and unselfish and neither seemed likely” (595). He shifts his hope toward a juvenile delinquent named Rufus Johnson, and invests his every effort into tapping the boy’s intellectual potential. Sheppard’s rejection of one boy and seemingly altruistic efforts toward the other exemplify the inner struggle for his own soul’s survival. Through Norton and Johnson, Sheppard’s spiritual depravity are reflected and anagogically signified. Most striking is O’Connor’s representation of Sheppard’s *mind-soul* through Johnson’s clubfoot.

Norton reflects his father’s narcissism. Johnson’s clubfoot reflects particularly what Sheppard loves so much about himself, his *mind-soul*. Sheppard’s false spirituality operates through a narcissistic altruism that feeds upon the dualistic separation of the physical and the spiritual. In this way, Sheppard and Mr. Fortune are not that much different in character. Mr. Fortune believes he does right to groom his granddaughter for financial security at the expense of rejecting a higher purpose and morality. Sheppard believes he tries to do right to groom Johnson for making an intellectual contribution in the “space age” at the expense of rejecting his son Norton, who seeks a higher purpose and morality through the promise of new life for his dead mother. Like Mr. Fortune, who

rejects any love for his granddaughter by claiming, “There’s not an ounce of Pitts in me” (545), while he cracks her skull, Sheppard fails to see his own flaw reflected in his son Norton, until it’s too late and he too looks upon a corpse. Disgusted at what he views as his son’s natural bent toward selfishness, Sheppard says in exasperation, “Norton, do you have any idea what it means to share?” Norton stops gorging himself on chocolate cake to deliver a response that holds up the anagogic mirror to his father: “Some of it’s yours of course” (595).

Sheppard shifts the grammar to Johnson: “Some of it’s, *his*.” The language operates beyond the level of chocolate cake. Sheppard feels the tension the two boys create in his soul. Repelled by Norton’s selfishness and attracted to Johnson’s intelligence, he tries to keep himself together by forming both boys in the image of his own *mind-soul*. Sheppard denies God’s existence, and even Norton’s existence, so that he may nurture a vision of himself through his righteous, humanitarian efforts to save Johnson’s intelligence for the good of society. On the anagogic level, the boys’ words and actions attempt to teach Sheppard something about himself, but he rejects the lessons. In every circumstance he puts his own didactic spin on his endeavors to raise Johnson’s low self-esteem and break Norton’s selfishness. When the two boys come together under Sheppard’s roof, he explains to Johnson, that “Norton here has never had to divide anything in his life” (608). Sheppard makes the choice to have Johnson help him shape his son’s soul the right way, while Sheppard attempts to mold Johnson into an atheistic intellectual. “Rufus is going to help me out and I’m to help him out and we’re both going to help you out” (609) he tells his son. Although Sheppard attests that Johnson’s

assistance will help him out, the end objective is not a personal change in Sheppard, but the creation of a third person, Norton, in Sheppard's own image.

If we frame Sheppard's intentions with Plato's pagan soul represented as a walking man in the *Timaeus*, then his efforts should make them all walk uprightly toward Heaven. But Plato's *mind-soul* always hinders the full potential of the individual in O'Connor's fiction. Sheppard desires to cultivate in himself and the two boys an exclusively educationally-hungry *mind-soul*. As his name suggests, he comes across on the surface as the caring Good Shepherd, but his goodness masks the pride of his self-deification. Johnson even rages, "He thinks he's Jesus Christ!" (609). Sheppard is only the 'Good' Shepherd in the material world, but in the sphere of spiritual stewardship he has no authority. He leads his followers into the "valley of death," but, lacks the vision to find his way back to the "verdant pastures" of Paradise. True to Plato's *Timaeus*, the lame shall enter first, but their destination is hell. A healthy Platonic *mind-soul* cripples, in the divine economy, the progress of the Christian soul.

As John Freccero points out in summarizing Saint Bonaventure's syllogistic steps of sin, what better way to represent the struggle to choose the right thing than walking, or rather limping? Penetrating O'Connor's anagoric depiction of Sheppard's metaphysical conflict requires a close examination at how the foot and the limp accrue meaning in the story. Most obvious is Johnson's foot, but closely connected to it is the distinction between *left* and *right* as understood from the medieval interpretation of the soul's powers and residual wounds of Original Sin. Even though Johnson is the one who physically limps, his physical deformity bears witness to Sheppard's spiritual handicap.

Between being the City Recreational Director during the week, Sheppard volunteered without payment as a counselor at the reformatory on weekends. There he met Johnson with his IQ test score of 140, and concluded that he “was the most intelligent boy . . . and the most deprived” (597). Norton’s indifference to Johnson’s plight and his father’s generosity maddens Sheppard. He exhorts his son: “Think of everything you have that he doesn’t! . . . You have a healthy body . . . You’ve never been taught anything but the truth. Your daddy gives you everything you need and want. You don’t have a grandfather who beats you. And your mother is not in the state penitentiary” (597). In the laundry list of Johnson’s unfortunate circumstances, there is one that attracts Sheppard the most: Johnson’s clubfoot. Sheppard believes that the boy’s foot relates directly with Johnson’s refusal to engage his 140 IQ intelligence. “Suppose you had a huge swollen foot and one side of you dropped lower than the other when you walked?” he asks Norton. Johnson’s limp almost perfectly mimics Dante’s pilgrim as he takes up his journey toward Hell, “so that the firm foot was always lower.”³⁸⁵ What can be made of such a loping stride? The answer lies in the deepest recesses of Sheppard’s soul.

First, let’s revisit the idea presented earlier that thirteenth-century religious writers assigned the twin powers of the soul, *intellectus* and *affectus*, to the right and left feet respectively. According to the model derived from Aristotle in *De anima* (Book 3), walking occurs when a person apprehends something and then moves his body toward it through the exercise of his will. In the middle of this process the spirit (*pneuma*), that Freccero explains is “mysterious substance which is the locus of contact between body and

³⁸⁵ qtd. in Freccero 33 (Singleton’s translation).

soul,” moves from the heart into the tendons and muscles to make the person move.³⁸⁶

Upon this model medieval religious writers based their understanding of the steps of the soul. Saint Bonaventure and others worked this metaphor to such an extent that it became customary to assume that as often as people led with the right foot, so their soul first had to exercise the *intellectus* power and apprehend what it wanted to move toward, goodness or evil. Then, the heart with its *affectus* exercised its will over the body through the movement of the spirit into the biological tissue, thus emphasizing the importance of physical movement.

In “The Lame Shall Enter First,” Sheppard moves in ways that seem noble. In a show of trust and seeming generosity, he gives his house key to a homeless juvenile delinquent. He dedicates his services free of charge to assist in the psychological healing of his community’s scarred youth. Little League baseball uniforms litter his house. What money he makes goes toward buying telescopes and microscopes to feed Johnson’s insatiable intellectual curiosity (which he believes is on the verge of blooming). But for all his acts of ‘charity,’ he is nonetheless a very flawed character by O’Connor’s standard. The “truth,” which he tells Norton, is that his dead mother, “doesn’t exist.”³⁸⁷ Sheppard’s problem is one of seeing and understanding. Like an athletic blindman who takes long strides in the direction of a pit, Sheppard’s progress is unquestionable, but his destination is dramatically ironic and tragic. His flaw is in the *intellectus*, the right foot, the one that should initiate the motion of his soul. Like Johnson’s limp, Sheppard drags his soul’s foot because he inflicts its respective wound with his own willful ignorance of spiritual truth.

³⁸⁶ Freccero 41.

³⁸⁷ O’Connor, *CW* 612.

The notion that Sheppard does “not know his left from his right” surfaces five times in the story.³⁸⁸ Johnson makes the recurring point. The right foot represents the *intellectus*, and while O'Connor never specifies which foot is Johnson's clubfoot, the evidence points to the right-side if we view Johnson's afflicted body as reflecting Sheppard's spiritual infirmity. In an interview with the boy, Sheppard asks the question, “What's important to you?” and subsequently Sheppard's “eyes dropped involuntarily to the foot” (600). He believes in the foot. He believes that Johnson's “mischief was compensation for the foot” (600), and that “where there was intelligence anything was possible” (601). If he could only remove the stigma of Johnson's foot that lowered his self-esteem and made the body believe such things as the statement, “Satan . . . he has me in his power” (600), then he could help him shed “his old ignorance” (601) and discover the utility of his intelligence in the world. He mistakenly assumes that Johnson has a misguided intellect. Ironically, Sheppard is the one with the misguided intellect, which the right-sided clubfoot perfectly mirrors.

The right *foot of the soul's* power, *intellectus*, has its corresponding wound, ignorance. In the *Summa Theologica* Saint Thomas Aquinas took up the question of whether or not ignorance is a sin. The very clear distinction he draws between *ignorance* and *nescience* in his response applies directly to the different situations Johnson and Norton find themselves in. Saint Thomas writes:

Ignorance differs from nescience, in that nescience denotes mere absence of knowledge . . . On the other hand, ignorance denotes privation of knowledge, i.e., lack of knowledge of those things that one has a natural

³⁸⁸ O'Connor, *CW* 604, 608, 616, 624, 630.

aptitude to know. Some of these we are under an obligation to know, those, to wit, without the knowledge of which we are unable to accomplish a due act rightly. Wherefore all are bound in common to know the articles of faith, and the universal principles of right, and each individual is bound to know matters regarding his duty or state.³⁸⁹

Because of his father's atheism, Norton can hardly be held responsible for not knowing the articles of faith. He is clearly nescient. However, one particular scene in the story employs foot imagery to convey Norton's coming-of-age. While Sheppard and the two boys take turns looking through the telescope in the attic, Norton learns from Johnson bits and pieces about believing in God, and what happens (by Johnson's estimation) to someone who doesn't believe. This new knowledge about spiritual matters seems to have a physical effect on Norton, and it is the young boy's feet that relate a deeper meaning to Johnson's impromptu lesson.

Johnson, who understands spiritual subjects such as forgiveness, judgment, and the afterlife, becomes the boy's tutor. Before his first unexpected spiritual lesson, Norton found a rope in the attic and "wound [it] around his legs from his ankles to his knees."³⁹⁰ When Johnson begins talking about Hell, "Norton lurched up and took a hobbled step toward Sheppard." As he asks whether his mother is burning in hell, he "kicked the rope off his feet." Sheppard cuts Johnson's teaching short by explaining, "Your mother isn't anywhere. She's not unhappy. She just isn't" (611). The physical response to Sheppard's knowledge is the image of a hung corpse: "Norton's face began to twist. A

³⁸⁹ Aquinas, *Summa* Pt.I-II. Q.76. a.2 (1: 931).

³⁹⁰ O'Connor, *CW* 610.

knot formed in his chin.” Sheppard’s denial of a spiritual reality becomes reflected in the strangled countenance of his son, whose feet were previously coiled in a rope. The boy’s curiosity is insatiable and he peppers questions to his newly found teacher, Johnson. Johnson explains that heaven is “On high . . . in the sky somewhere . . . but you go to be dead to get there. You can’t go in no space ship” (612). Sheppard again attempts to silence Johnson, promoting the idea that man is soon to set foot on the moon. “Heaven and hell were for the mediocre,” Sheppard thinks, and he is above that type of nonsense (613). Johnson assures Norton that he will tell him all about Hell tomorrow “when Himself (Sheppard) has cleared out” (613).

Stars become a common focus for both Sheppard’s intellect and Norton’s curiosity about Heaven. For Sheppard, the universe held infinite possibilities for developing Johnson’s mind. “Instinctively he concentrated on the stars. He wanted to give the boy something to search for besides his neighbor’s goods. He wanted to stretch his horizons. He wanted him to *see* the universe, to see that the darkest parts of it could be penetrated” (601). Stars and the mystery of human existence provide a common focus in Flannery O’Connor’s story and in the philosophy of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin found in his *The Phenomenon of Man*.

As discussed in Chapter One, Teilhard’s emphasis is on *seeing* the universe, the same goal Sheppard puts before Johnson. But the type of vision differs greatly. In his Foreword (titled “Seeing”) to *The Phenomenon of Man*, he writes, “*Seeing*. We might say that the whole of life lies in that verb -- if not in the end, at least in essence . . . To *see* or to *perish* is the very condition laid upon everything that makes up the universe.”³⁹¹ At

³⁹¹ Teilhard, *Phenomenon* 31.

the root of seeing, for Teilhard and O'Connor, is the Prime Mover. Sheppard could never have guessed that the telescope he purchased for Johnson would motivate his neglected son, Norton, to search for his mother in Heaven. "I've found her!" the boy tells his father, and in the same words of Jesus calling his apostles he commands him to "Come and look!"³⁹² Sheppard reprimands the boy and tries to correct his vision: "Norton, you don't see anything in the telescope but star clusters" (629). Teilhard scientifically traces the true phenomenon of man, our very existence back to "the stuff of the universe." While his language courts the facts of science, it implicitly builds up the argument for what C. S. Lewis called "the fountainhead of facts,"³⁹³ the existence of God. Teilhard explains that humans have changed into beings of a greater complexity. He poses the rhetorical question, If we want to track down our origins, then where should we look? "But *where*, then do these metamorphoses take place, beginning, let us say, with the framework of molecules? Is it indifferently at any point in space? Not at all, as we all know, but only in the heart and on the surface of the stars The stars are laboratories in which the evolution of matter proceeds."³⁹⁴ To Teilhard stars represent the starting point on a continual "ascent of consciousness" that advances to "*the consciousness of finding itself in actual relationship* with a spiritual and transcendent pole of universal convergence," which he calls "the Omega Point."³⁹⁵ Sheppard's understanding of evolution goes back to "the first fish crawling out of the water onto land billions and billions of years ago," and

³⁹² John 1.38-39. "Rabbi . . . where dwellest thou? He saith to them: Come and see." O'Connor, *CW* 629.

³⁹³ See Lewis, *Miracles* 263-64 where he elaborates upon this description of God when he addresses the idea that "Heaven is a state of mind."

³⁹⁴ Teilhard, *Phenomenon* 49.

³⁹⁵ Teilhard, *Phenomenon* 298.

rushes forward to what he perceives as the pinnacle of its development, “Astronauts!”³⁹⁶ “Why you boys may be spacemen,” he tells Norton and Johnson. Although Sheppard attempts to sift God out of the boy’s consideration of the universe, he fails. Try as he might, Sheppard cannot escape God, neither in the science light-years away, nor in the scripture-screaming juvenile delinquent under his roof, who accuses him in front of the police as making “immor’l suggestions.”³⁹⁷

Sheppard’s *intellectus* does not apprehend the universe correctly. His own intelligence manifests a de-evolution that Teilhard alludes to in *Phenomenon*. He explains: “Taken in the full modern sense of the word, knowledge is the twin sister of mankind. Born together, the two ideas (or two dreams) grew up together to attain an almost religious valuation in the course of the last century. Subsequently they fell together into the same disrepute.”³⁹⁸ Sheppard’s knowledge of the world, not only scientific but also moral, appears to have a solid integrity. Who can dispute with the logic and sentiment that no boy should be eating out of garbage cans as Johnson does? And while he offers the homeless boy shelter, clothes, food, books, and an opportunity to feel loved as part of a family, Sheppard’s good will cannot overcome his faulty misunderstanding of the human soul, which condemns him as one who makes “immor’l suggestions.” To put Sheppard’s condition in terms of the foot-soul metaphor: his affection-based left foot fails to carry his soul uprightly because his intellect-based right foot limps due to his lack of faith. Sheppard’s wounded *intellectus* does not remain an isolated, ideological flaw, but instead spreads to infect the way his left-side of the soul acts toward Norton. In the beginning of

³⁹⁶ O’Connor, *CW* 612, 611.

³⁹⁷ O’Connor, *CW* 630.

³⁹⁸ Teilhard, *Phenomenon* 248.

the story he tells Norton that he is fortunate that he knows the truth, no one beats him, and his mother is not in jail. As the story unfolds, Norton questions whether his father has been lying to him all along about his mother, who might be in a place far worse than a state penitentiary. In addition, Norton now has a father who, although he did not believe in “whipping children, particularly in anger,” puts aside his reservation and beats Norton in a rage with “good results.”³⁹⁹ When Norton tries to defend his dad by telling Johnson that he is good, Johnson snorts back, “Good! . . . I don’t care if he’s good or not. He ain’t *right!*” (604). Sheppard’s own self defense, “I’m stronger than you are and I’m going to save you. The good will triumph,” draws another similar response from Johnson. “Not when it ain’t right,” Johnson retorts (624). Salvation in the mind of Sheppard comes as a new shoe on the clubfoot of Johnson. If he could only get the boy in a new shoe, then he would win the boy over to see the way he sees. He feels the need to correct Johnson by changing his foot. Johnson treated “the foot as if it were a sacred object” (610). “Thank God for the shoe!” (616) Sheppard says to himself in implicit gratitude.

The old shoe matches Johnson perfectly, not in the physical sense, but because it signifies Johnson’s superior knowledge. “The foot was in a heavy black battered shoe with a sole four or five inches thick. The leather parted from it in one place and the end of an empty sock protruded like a grey tongue from a severed head” (600). The description calls to mind the decapitated John the Baptist, who like Johnson, seemed to possess “a fanatic kind of intelligence” (599). The first time Sheppard goes to the brace shop to replace the old shoe, the clerk mismeasures Johnson’s foot. He muses that “the foot had seemed to acted on some inspiration of its own” (616). On the second visit, the clerk

³⁹⁹ O’Connor, *CW* 610.

exclaims, "Got her right this time!" (620). Indeed the shoe fits and Johnson stops limping. Johnson's 'corrected' stride metaphorically animates Plato's flight of the soul; his feet seem to be off the ground. "With this shoe . . . you won't know your walking. You'll think you're riding," the clerk brags. He has so much confidence in the new shoe, which moves Johnson on a "power glide," that he swears the boy "won't know he don't have a normal foot" (620, 621). But Johnson doesn't want a new shoe. Looking through the anagogic lens, Johnson's rejection of the shoe has significance, not just in how it relates to Johnson, but more importantly, in how it relates to Sheppard.⁴⁰⁰ Healing the clubfoot's limp would change his *foot soul*. Wearing the shoe means adopting the *mind-soul*, and admitting Sheppard has no flaw. When he rejects the orthopedic shoe the clerk says in exasperation, "Boy, is your trouble in your foot or in your head?" (621). Johnson retains his former shoe on his abnormal foot, which Sheppard cannot look at directly.⁴⁰¹ He chalks up Johnson's reaction as childishly immature, and concludes in frustration that the boy simply doesn't know enough yet.

However, "[s]ecretly, Johnson was learning what he wanted to learn" (611).

Sheppard attempts to build his confidence. "I believe you've got brains," he tell him. "I believe you can make anything of yourself that you set your mind to . . . There not the

⁴⁰⁰ In Kelly S. Gerald's essay, "Thank God for the shoe!": The Emblematic Shoe in O'Connor's Fiction" (*The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 23 [1994-1995]: 91-118), Gerald examines the indication of "penance, baptism, burial, and purgation" (92) associated with the appearance of shoes in O'Connor's fiction. Gerald aims to prove that "shoes are more than the appropriate signs of a character's personality," and through a comparison with Heidegger, shoes are "emblematic" of O'Connor's "sacramental view of the world" (116).

⁴⁰¹ When Johnson takes his shoe off for the fitting, the clerk "removed the old shoe as if he were skinning an animal still half alive . . . The unsheathed mass of foot in the dirty sock made Sheppard feel queasy. He turned his eyes away" (*CW* 620). The line parallels another line in "Good Country People" that equates the foot to the soul. Joy-Hulga "took care of [her wooden leg] as someone else would his soul, in private and almost with her own eyes turned away" (281).

least trace of doubt in my mind” (619). Johnson’s knowledge is on a different plane.

“Those space ship ain’t going to do you any good unless you believe in Jesus,” Johnson teaches Norton. Sheppard counters such a claim, saying that the Bible is “for cowards, people who are afraid to stand on their own feet” (627). He challenges the boy by saying that he is “too intelligent” to believe the Bible. “I ain’t too intelligent,” the boy mutters; “You don’t know nothing about me. Even if I didn’t believe it, it would still be true.”

In a display of his prophet-like “fanatic intelligence,” Johnson eats pages of Scripture in front of Norton and Sheppard. “I’ve eaten it like Ezekiel and I don’t want none of your food after it nor no more ever,” he yells (628). Sheppard rejects Johnson because he can not accept the kind of intelligence that appears to him like the ravings of a lunatic. From his vantage point, he sees how he underestimated the boy’s lack of self-esteem due to his physical affliction. When Sheppard asked Johnson during the weekend interview what was important to him, and the man inadvertently stared at the foot, Johnson told him, “Study it and get your fill” (600). The more he tried to understand the clubfoot with his *mind-soul’s* vision, the less he understood. “The pieced together shoe appeared to grin at him with Johnson’s own face,” and “a chill of hatred shook him. He hated the shoe, hated the foot, hated the boy” (624). The sudden wave of hatred overwhelms Sheppard and he “caught the boy’s shoulder and gripped it fiercely as if to keep himself from falling.” The shoe, the foot, the boy all work together to reflect the Sheppard’s spiritual infirmity. When Sheppard stares into Johnson’s face, the face just previously described as the pieced-together shoe, he draws back. “The boy’s eyes were like distorting mirrors in

which he saw himself made hideous and grotesque.” Johnson says the words that give strength to the anagogic undercurrents of the entire story: “I’ll show you” (624).

Meditating on his failed efforts with Johnson, Sheppard realizes his mistakes. “His image of himself shriveled until everything was black before him.” His heart, which has the *affectus* as its seat, “constricted with a repulsion for himself so clear and intense that he gasped for breath.” He struggles to suck in the spirit that according to Aristotle connects the body with and soul. Characteristic of the death of the *hupokeimenon*, the false Prime Mover becomes completely still, and he “sat there paralyzed and aghast.” When he rushes up the stairs to show his charity for his neglected son, he understands only too late the significance of the right foot, the soul, he should have nourished all along. Nearly losing his balance, he “reeled back like a man on the edge of a pit” and beholds the sight of Norton’s feet, dangling above the attic floor. Norton took a leap of faith from “which he had launched his flight into space.” Sheppard sees the corpse of the son whom he had called selfish, at the moment when he realizes that he, himself, “had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton” (632). The narrative gives the impression that he has charged forward to the entrance of Hell. How and what step he will take at this point is dependent upon the soul he chooses. If he reverts back to his own *mind-soul*, then the lame shall enter first.

The foot in all the stories discussed above accrues meaning, a meaning that I contend O’Connor borrows from the medieval religious imagination. There is one story in her corpus that inarguably is her *tour de force* of the foot’s signification, “Good Country

People.” In this story, we can see the *mind-soul* as artificial, obstructive, and steeped in the medieval *foot of the soul* metaphor.

Good Country People with Heart Conditions Walking Off Together

My reasons for in suggesting that “Good Country People” is the quintessential story of the *foot soul* stem from O’Connor’s own reflections on the story. In her essay, “Writing Short Stories,” O’Connor addressed the fact that Joy-Hulga’s wooden leg infers a physical and spiritual handicap.

I once wrote a story called “Good Country People,” in which a lady Ph.D. has her wooden leg stolen by a Bible salesman whom she has tried to seduce. Now I’ll admit, that paraphrased in this way, the situation is simply a low joke. The average reader is pleased to observe anybody’s wooden leg being stolen. But without ceasing to appeal to him and without making any statements of high intention, this story does manage to operate at another level of experience, by letting the wooden leg accumulate meaning. Early in the story, we’re presented with the fact that the Ph.D. is spiritually as well as physically crippled. She believes in nothing but her own belief in nothing, and we perceive that there is a wooden part of her soul that corresponds to her wooden leg. Now of course this is never stated. The fiction writer states as little as possible. The reader makes this connection from things he is shown. He may not even know that he makes the connection, but the connection is there

nevertheless and has its effect on him. As the story goes on, the wooden leg continues to accumulate meaning. The reader learns how the girl feels about her leg, how her mother feels about it, and how the country woman on the place feels about it; and finally, by the time the Bible salesman comes along, the leg has accumulated so much meaning that it is, as the saying goes, loaded. And when the Bible salesman steals it, the reader realizes that he has taken away part of the girl's personality and has revealed her deeper affliction to her for the first time.⁴⁰²

O'Connor goes on in the essay to say that Joy-Hulga's wooden leg is not the result of a conscious decision to sit down and write a story about a Ph.D. with a wooden leg, but the result of her personal investment into her art, "what Maritain calls 'the habit of art'."⁴⁰³ Inspired by Maritain's view of the Christian artist, she invokes the idea that an artist's learning and experiences naturally get transferred into the work of art, such that it has the potential to transmit and inculcate a similar vision in the reader. O'Connor writes: "I think it is more than just a discipline, although it is that; I think it is a way of looking at the created world and of using the senses so as to make them find as much meaning as possible in things."⁴⁰⁴

I intend to find as much possible meaning in Joy-Hulga's leg as far as my ability as a close reader of O'Connor's corporeal aesthetic allows. In my reading of "Good Country People," the actions of the human soul become animated with characters who appear on the surface to be simple participants in "a low joke." The story ends with Mrs. Freeman

⁴⁰² O'Connor, *MM* 99.

⁴⁰³ O'Connor, *MM* 101.

⁴⁰⁴ O'Connor, *MM* 101.

stating her judgment of Manley Pointer, “Some can’t be that simple,” and her ironic conclusion seems to be normative.⁴⁰⁵ Without a doubt the wooden leg accumulates meaning in the story, but just how much meaning is behind that artificial limb is the subject of my final analysis of O’Connor’s *foot soul*.

Certain aspects come immediately to the forefront. An artificial leg would make any person limp, and in O’Connor’s stories the limp, as we have seen, signals a struggle on more than just the earthly plain. A woman whose leg is stolen can no longer move herself, so therefore the arrest of the false Prime Mover and the impotence of the false *mind-soul/foot soul* become inevitable. Joy-Hulga’s wooden leg is directly related to her wooden soul, not only by O’Connor in the essay, but in the story as well (“she took care of it as someone else would his soul”).⁴⁰⁶ What O’Connor leaves ambiguous is exactly how the leg accumulates meaning. It is one thing to provide the metaphor in the narrative, but it is entirely another to build enough significance behind the physical object so that it can be open to metaphysical considerations. In his discussion of the “habit of art” Jacques Maritain makes the point, “Art is not concerned with our life, but only with such or such particular and extra-human ends, which are an ultimate end in relation to it.”⁴⁰⁷ In light of such a vision of art, I will argue that the lumbering Joy-Hulga and the light-footed Manley Pointer walk off to the woods together, united in their weak heart conditions, to enact more than a low joke, but the very deliberations and actions of the human soul.

⁴⁰⁵ O’Connor, *CW* 284.

⁴⁰⁶ O’Connor, *CW* 281.

⁴⁰⁷ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* 15. The context of this quote is Maritain’s assertion that the Spirit of God gives saints “eagles wings to help them walk on earth” (15).

This is perhaps the best place to recall the particular ‘steps’ of the walking soul, as suggested by Aristotle in Book 3 of *De anima*, commented upon by Saint Thomas Aquinas, and applied to the soul by Saint Bonaventure. According to Aristotle, of the soul’s twin powers, *intellectus* (mind) and *affectus* (appetite), only appetite is the source of movement. “For if there had been two sources of movement -- mind and appetite -- they would have produced movement in virtue of some common character,” Aristotle explains.⁴⁰⁸ The assumption, which is so key to understanding this model of how the human soul acts, is that the “mind is always right, but appetite and imagination may be either right or wrong” and “can originate movement contrary to calculation, for desire is a form of appetite.”⁴⁰⁹ Saint Thomas Aquinas’ commentary on Aristotle’s *De anima* summarizes the influences of one side of the soul to the other. Saint Thomas interprets Aristotle as follows:

We do not find that intellect produces movement without appetite, since the will, in virtue of which intellect produces movement, is a kind of appetite . . . But appetite produces movement without reason, as is clear in the case of those that are moved by concupiscence. For concupiscence is a kind of appetite.⁴¹⁰

So how does all this relate to a really smart middle-aged woman with a wooden leg? Understanding the twin powers of the soul, and how they act in relation to each other through the metaphor of physical movement, allows us to see Joy-Hulga’s lumbering vulnerabilities in a way that has metaphysical significance. Joy-Hulga is a virgin, who

⁴⁰⁸ Aristotle, *De anima* III:10, 433a.23-25 (598).

⁴⁰⁹ Aristotle, *De anima* III.10, 433a.25-27 (598).

⁴¹⁰ Aquinas, *Commentary* 406-407.

attempts to use seduction to demonstrate the power of her intellect. She has a weak imagination and no experience in manipulating a man's desire and controlling her own. Aristotle asserts that "[a]ppetite and imagination can either be right or wrong," but even more dangerous, is the corruption of Joy-Hulga's intellect by Aquinas' standards of reason.

Aristotle's logic appeals to Aquinas in that "it is plain . . . that the object of appetite always produces movement" and "this object of appetite is either truly good, when [one] is made to abide in the judgment of right intellect, or the apparent good, when [one] is made to stray from the judgment of right intellect because of appetite or phantasia."⁴¹¹ In the Christian vision of the human soul, Joy-Hulga's intellect has a major defect. She does not see God anywhere. "I'm one of those people who see through to *nothing*," she tells the seemingly love-sick Bible salesman. Her "judgment of right intellect" strays largely because of what Aristotle calls *phantasia*, or as Richard McKeon translates it, "imagination."⁴¹² Behind her sexual naïveté, Joy-Hulga's next most prominent weakness is her imagination. Joy saw her legal name, Hulga, "as the name of her highest creative act."⁴¹³ Her creative triumph is easily defeated when Mrs. Freeman and Manley Pointer say her name and she feels "as if her privacy had been intruded upon" (266). She falls for Pointer's "two-day-old chicken" joke, after she "had considered it from

⁴¹¹ Aquinas, *Commentary* 407.

⁴¹² Note: Richard McKeon uses *imagination* in place of *phantasia*. For the sake of clarity and consistency of terms with Saint Thomas' commentary on *De anima*, I have chosen to use *phantasia*. More than a matter of semantics between translations, *phantasia* has a different interpretation from Aristotle to Aquinas. Robert Pasnau makes the point that in "his theological works Aquinas consistently speaks of phantasia as an inner sensory power that . . . preserves prior sensory impressions . . . [and] 'serves as a storehouse for forms received through the senses' [I. Q.78.a.4c]. Aquinas also views phantasia creating new images "by putting these sensory forms together in novel ways," while Aristotle casts phantasia in a "direct role in sensory experience," not merely dealing with "leftover images" (*Commentary* xx).

⁴¹³ O'Connor, *CW* 267.

all angles” (275). Her plot to seduce the boy is purely a product of her imagination; the word “imagined” is used five times in the five sentences that lay out her plan. But nothing goes as she imagined. She figures that “[t]rue genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind. She 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). Such a conversion occurs, but the shoe is on the other foot, and she is the one who has the inferior mind. Following the imagined success of Joy-Hulga the genius, the seduction plan gets underway in the manner of a fool. “She didn’t take any thing to eat, forgetting that food is usually taken on a picnic” (276-77). Aristotle provides us with further insight into the most significant aspect of Joy-Hulga’s weak imagination.

In *De anima* Aristotle defines both what *phantasia* (or imagination) is and what it is not.⁴¹⁴ Two conclusions about *phantasia* concern us in the present discussion. First, concisely stated by Saint Thomas, is the idea that “phantasia is a kind of movement” and movement results because one thing is moved by another thing.⁴¹⁵ “Phantasia is a kind of movement caused by actualized sense and that this movement does not exist without sense, nor can it be in things that do not sense.”⁴¹⁶ Second, the etymology of *phantasia* shall provide us an important link in understanding the movement of physical bodies, the philosophical intellect of Joy-Hulga, and the manifestation of grace in “Good Country People.” Aristotle supports his word choice by stating, “As sight is the most highly developed sense, the name *phantasia* (imagination) has been formed from *phaos* (light)

⁴¹⁴ See Aristotle, *De anima* III:5 -III:6 (591-593).

⁴¹⁵ See Aristotle, *Physics* VIII:4, 256a4.13 (367)

⁴¹⁶ Aquinas, *Commentary* 337.

because it is not possible to see without light.”⁴¹⁷ Joy-Hulga “sees through to nothing,” and has the boldness to scream at her mother, “Woman! do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are *not*? God! . . . Malebranche was right: we are not our own light. We are not our own light!”⁴¹⁸

There is a family of philosophers in “Good Country People”: Malebranche, Heidegger, Aristotle, Aquinas, and even one contemporary, Etienne Gilson, whose insights on Malebranche expose how dysfunctional these four can be when they try to coexist. In *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* Gilson’s assessment of Malebranche’s philosophy sheds some light on how the seduction at the end of the short story exploits Joy-Hulga’s weak *foot soul*, both in her wounds to her *intellectus* and *affectus*. The bringing together of two physical bodies, Joy-Hulga’s and Manley Pointer’s, in a near sexual encounter anagogically illustrates the destruction of Joy-Hulga’s former *mind-soul*, not only in her wooden leg’s dismemberment, but within the actions of kissing and bodies pressed one against the other. Joy-Hulga has one wooden leg that signifies a soul that has two afflicted powers. Her intellect is led astray by her weak imagination, and her *affectus* cannot function because it is suppressed by her mind. Therefore, when she tries to use seduction, a matter for the *affectus*, to impart to an inferior mind her philosophical genius of believing in nothing, she misaligns the proper soul power to the expected effect. Furthermore, her soul’s power, both in intellect and appetite, are impotent because of the wounds of *ignorance* and *concupiscence* to her *feet of the soul*. To understand both

⁴¹⁷ Aristotle, *De anima* III:3, 429a.3-5 (589). See also Saint Thomas’ *Commentary* on 339-340 and Pasnau’s foot note on 340 regarding Aquinas’ knowledge of Greek. It would appear that McKeon’s translation (*phaos* = light) follows the same translation error of Saint Thomas, if Pasnau’s assertion that *phaos* actually means “lamp or torch” is correct.

⁴¹⁸ O’Connor, *CW* 268.

defects requires understanding the body and the mind together, and how Joy-Hulga's *mind-soul* attempts to separate them in the same way that Malebranche did.

Joy-Hulga's invocation of Malebranche as a chiding to her mother sets up her mother's discovery of Martin Heidegger's underlined passage on "Nothing." Malebranche develops an argument in his *Conversations on Metaphysics and on Religion* that (in the words of Gilson) "[b]odies cannot be directly perceived by our minds," and we cannot draw the conclusion that bodies are drawn from the nature of God, because they are rather of a "free decision of His will." Malebranche therefore suggests an approach to the *phantasia* that roots itself in God. Gilson explains, "Since [Malebranche] had already proved that we receive our sensation directly from God, he was bound to consider sensations themselves as a type of natural revelation."⁴¹⁹ Aristotle and Aquinas agree that *phantasia* is "sometimes true and sometimes false,"⁴²⁰ but Malebranche's position can be construed as allocating infallibility to such a power. In the soul of Joy-Hulga, who mixes such a belief with Heidegger's existential denial of God, the philosophic cocktail is pure poison for the Christian soul. Mrs. Hopewell comes across Joy's open book and reads the words underlined in blue pencil that work on her like "some evil incantation":

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 phantasm? If science is right, then one thing stands firm: science wishes to know nothing of

⁴¹⁹ Gilson, *Unity* 192.

⁴²⁰ Aquinas, *Commentary* 338. Aristotle, *De anima* III:3, 428b17-429a2 (588-89).

nothing. Such is after all the strictly scientific approach to Nothing. We know it by wishing to know nothing of Nothing.⁴²¹

If Joy-Hulga lives the philosophy that she attests contains the truth, then her remarks to Pointer, “I don’t have illusions” and “I’m one of those people who see *through* to nothing,” would have a literal connotation as well. Malebranche says that every sensual experience we have is a result of natural divine revelations, which Heidegger says at the divine source is “Nothing.”⁴²² Her existence is entirely constructed in her *mind-soul*. The mutual seduction of Pointer and Joy-Hulga in the hayloft presents the situation where two bodies, two physical bodies, act upon one another. The event should provide satisfactory evidence that Joy-Hulga’s imagined plot succeeded, but instead, what the event unfolds is the deconstruction of Joy-Hulga’s resistance to belief through her misguided imagination, and the awakening of her *affectus* after years of suppression by her intellect.

The kiss is critical. When the bodies touch, what the reader would expect is an arousal of carnal desire. What O’Connor’s narrator delivers is just the opposite.

The kiss, which had more pressure than feeling behind it, produced that extra surge of adrenaline in the girl that enables one to carry a packed trunk out of a burning house, but in her, the power went at once to the brain. Even before he released her, her mind, clear and detached and ironic

⁴²¹ O’Connor, *CW* 269. Quote comes from Martin Heidegger’s “What is Metaphysics?” in *Existence and Being*.

⁴²² Peter Kreeft (*Three Philosophies of Life: Ecclesiastes, Job, & Song of Songs*, [New York: Ignatius Press, 1989]) has explicated this paradoxical ambiguity over the word “nothing” in his analysis of its appearance in Hemmingway’s short story, “A Clean Well-Lighted Place.” In that short story Hemmingway portrays the duality of “nothing” by toying with the word in a solemn religious context (“Our nada, who are in nada, nada be thy name . . . Hail nothing, full of nothing, nothings is with thee). Kreeft explains, that “[f]or the great mystics, God is so full of Being that he is no-thing; for the modern nihilist, being is so empty of God that it is Nothing. For the theistic mystic, nothingness is only a name for Being; for the nihilist, being is only a name for Nothingness” (27).

anyway, was regarding him from a great distance, with amusement but with pity. She had never been kissed before and she was pleased to discover that it was an unexceptional experience and all a matter of the mind's control.⁴²³

Joy-Hulga's reaction has even more meaning when we compare it to Malebranche's philosophy as explained by Etienne Gilson:

According to Malebranche, the first step to the conclusion that bodies cannot act upon bodies is the realization that we have no idea whatsoever of what such an action could be. As a true Cartesian he insists that we consult the idea which we have of bodies, and always remember that "one must judge things by the ideas which represent them." Now the idea of an action exerted by a body upon another body does not represent anything to our mind; we simply have no such idea; consequently, there is no such action.⁴²⁴

Before being kissed, the action of a kiss never existed for Joy-Hulga because the event would "not represent anything" to her mind, as Malebranche would put it. But the kiss did happen. Even though Joy-Hulga's mind tries to control the event in her *mind-soul*, she has begun to participate in the actions that occur in a new territory of her soul and body. Everything in this story is ironic, because so much of it is constructed from the perspective of Joy-Hulga's mind, which is "ironic anyway."⁴²⁵ She argues that she sees through to *nothing*, and yet, Heidegger uses the same word to refer to the Divine. She

⁴²³ O'Connor, *CW* 278.

⁴²⁴ Gilson, *Unity* 212.

⁴²⁵ O'Connor, *CW* 278.

suspends reality through her dualistic *mind-soul*, and yet Malebranche's ultimate conclusion does sneak in the idea that her carnal knowledge somehow opens the way for God's existence. Gilson summarizes Malebranche's conclusion, "It is therefore one and the same thing to say that God's will is preserving the existence of a certain body, and to say that it preserves that same body as existing in the very place where it actually is."⁴²⁶ On their way to the barn Pointer says to Hulga, "I guess God takes care of you," to which she clarifies what part of Malebranche's philosophy she buys into: "No . . . I don't even believe in God." The boy just whistles and stands still in astonishment, while Joy-Hulga moves toward the barn, "walking fast."⁴²⁷

The first kiss differs from the later kisses that get planted in the barn. This metamorphosis occurs because of the signification of Joy-Hulga's physical dismemberment and Manley Pointer's shortness of breath. In Chapter Two I discussed how the heavy breathing of Bishop in *The Violent Bear It Away* suggests the presence of the Holy Spirit, derived from *spiritus* (breath). A similar idea can be attached to the movements of Manley Pointer, who is perpetually "panting at her side," "breathing as if he had run a great distance to reach her," "breathing heavily upon her," and "catching his breath."⁴²⁸ A delightful ambiguity exists in understanding Manley Pointer's breathing as *spiritus*, which can be seen as both his personal lack of the Holy Ghost and his expulsion of it in the way of a backward blessing. But if we consider his breath from one more possible angle, that is "as Aristotle's *pneuma*, the *spiritus* of the scholastics," then the kiss Joy-Hulga gives to

⁴²⁶ Gilson, *Unity* 213.

⁴²⁷ O'Connor, *CW* 277.

⁴²⁸ O'Connor, *CW* 278, 275, 279. See John 20.21-22, "He said therefore to them again: Peace be to you. As the Father sent me, I also send you. When he had said this: he breathed on them: Receive ye the Holy Ghost."

Manley Pointer represents the migration of the “mysterious substance which is the locus of contact between body and soul.”⁴²⁹

Recapitulating the metaphor of the walking soul per Aristotle’s ‘steps,’ the sequence goes as follows. Step 1) The mind (*intellectus*) apprehends some object toward which it wants to move. Step 2) The mind informs the will (*affectus*) of the object. Step 3) The will takes the mind’s response and translates it to the spirit, which is located in the heart. Step 4) The spirit moves from the heart into the muscles and tendons of the body to make the body move toward the object first apprehended by the mind.⁴³⁰ When the object apprehended by the mind is morally corrupt, then sin, according to Saint Bonaventure, follows in Aristotle’s footsteps. “The first step of the right foot is awareness of the sin, the second, that of the left foot, is desire, the third, of the right foot, deliberation and the fourth, of the left foot, choice.”⁴³¹ When Joy-Hulga attempts to seduce Manley Pointer she is hardly aware of him (simply consider the non-event of their first kiss), nor of the fact that her attempts at arousing his lust is a sin, but instead a necessary element of teaching him an intellectual lesson. Using Aristotle’s metaphor and its the morally-refined model of Saint Bonaventure one can conclude that Joy-Hulga’s experiment of intellectual seduction doesn’t just start off on the wrong foot, it just doesn’t quite start.

In the hayloft, she begins to return Pointer’s kisses. The physical contact -- although still obfuscated by her mental power -- begins to weaken because of what occurs with her spirit on the anagogic level. “She reached his lips and remained there, kissing him

⁴²⁹ Freccero 41.

⁴³⁰ Freccero 41.

⁴³¹ Freccero 42.

again and again as if she were trying to draw all the breath out of him.”⁴³² Certainly this action could be interpreted as her unconscious hunger for the Holy Spirit, but also what occurs, I suggest, is a stirring of the spirit that connects the soul to the body, the spirit that connects the last step of the intellect with the first step of appetite. The spirit, before rushing into the physical body to initiate motion, resides in the heart. Freccero makes the point that the vital spirit rushes from what Dante calls the “*lago del cor*,” or the “lake of the heart.” When Dante’s pilgrim sees the sunlight, “then only did terror start subsiding / in my heart’s lake.”⁴³³ Saint Thomas Aquinas equates the spirit with heat, and explains in the *Summa Theologica* that fear freezes the spirit in the heart.

In fear there takes place a certain contraction from the outward to the inner parts of the body, the result being that the outer parts become cold; and for this reason trembling is occasioned in these parts, being caused by a lack of power in controlling the members: which lack of power is due to the want of heat, which is the instrument whereby the soul moves those members as stated in *De Anima*, ii.4.⁴³⁴

Like Dante’s pilgrim who feels assured when he sees the sun-basked hill in front of him, Joy-Hulga’s fears seem allayed in the barn that sits just beyond “a sunlit hillside.”⁴³⁵ In the hayloft as she lays down in a “wide sheath of sunlight, filled with dust particles” that “slanted over her” (279). Without fear, the vital spirits that reside in the ‘lake of the heart’ are free to move into the body when appetite prompts them. While her body responds

⁴³² O’Connor, *CW* 279.

⁴³³ Dante, Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970) I.19-20.

⁴³⁴ Aquinas, *Summa* Pt.I-II. Q.44. a.3 (1: 774).

⁴³⁵ O’Connor, *CW* 278.

with vigorous kisses, “[h]er mind, throughout this, never stopped or lost itself for a second to her feelings” (279). Joy-Hulga steps out of sequence. Her intellect should move first, but it remains planted firm in her *mind-soul*’s resistance to accepting the physical reality of her amorous encounter. Therefore, the second step, taken by appetite with its corresponding wound, *concupiscence*, moves her into uncharted spiritual territory. After her brief episode of passion, her vital spirits that connect her body and soul seem to be on the move, even though her mind forces itself to remain stagnant. Although she “seldom paid any close attention to her surroundings,” Joy-Hulga notices through the hayloft door “two green swelling lakes,” at the same moment her new boy-friend, who professes to share with her “a heart condition,” demands that she say she loves him (280).

Unlike many of O’Connor’s characters, Joy-Hulga seems to be given an explicit chance to profess a change of heart, before something far more drastic occurs. Pointer begs the woman to admit her love, but she refuses, and gives the response of her self-deifying *mind-soul*:

In a sense . . . if you use the word [‘love’] loosely, you might say that. But it’s not a word I use. I don’t have illusions. I’m one of those people who see through to *nothing*. . . . You poor baby . . . It’s just as well you don’t understand . . . We are all damned . . . but some of have taken off the blindfolds and see that there’s nothing to see. It’s a kind of salvation.
(280).

She refuses to relinquish the power of her *mind-soul*, so the only option left for her true salvation is its complete removal. When Pointer smothers her with kisses, she finally

answers the question, “You love me or don’tcher?” with “Yes, yes” (280). The words come from an inundation of the vital spirits due to a surge of appetite; the swelling lake of her heart spills over, but her mind remains unaffected because the actions of her soul have been out of sequence from the beginning. When the boy commands her, “Show me where your wooden leg joins on,” he approaches her soul with backward steps (280). Going through her physical response, up through the spirits collected in the lake of the heart, to her intellect, he hopes to touch her wooden soul. “No one ever touched it but her,” and so Joy-Hulga says, “No.”

When she does say, “All right,” her permission is also an unconscious recognition, that everything about her soul was on the *right* foot, the *mind-soul’s* purely speculative intellect that suffered the wound of willful ignorance. In the beginning of *Art and Scholasticism*, Jacques Maritain explains that intellect of the *speculative* order dismisses considerations for good and evil. The speculative intellect’s “*sole end is to know*.”⁴³⁶ Speculative intellect is hardly ever enough in this world. Maritain explains: “The speculative intellect will have its perfect and infinitely superabundant joy only in the *intuitive* vision of the Divine Essence . . . It is very rarely exercised in absolute liberty on this earth, save in the Man of Wisdom.”⁴³⁷ Manley Pointer becomes that Man of Wisdom. “This boy, with an instinct that came from beyond wisdom, had touched the truth about her.”⁴³⁸ When she obeys Pointer’s command and shows him where “her wooden leg joins on,” her obedience is an act of faith. She no longer desires just *to know*. Thomas Merton explains the connection between faith and obedience in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

⁴³⁶ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* 5 (*emphasis mine*).

⁴³⁷ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* 7.

⁴³⁸ O’Connor, *CW* 281.

Faith is by no means a mere act of choice, an option for a special solution to the problems of existence. It is birth to a higher life by obedience to the Source of Life: to believe is thus to consent to hear and to obey a creative command that raises us from the dead We *believe*, not because we want to *know*, but because we want to *be*.⁴³⁹

The story's narrative at Joy-Hulga's critical moment strongly resonates with Merton's reflection: "'All right,' it was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his."⁴⁴⁰ Pointer's command and her obedience ushers in faith through the back door. With her body conquered, her spirits over-flowing with desire, all that is left is the mind, and at the moment of obedience or rejection "she felt as if her heart had stopped and left her mind to pump her blood."⁴⁴¹ He takes the leg off and sets "it on its foot out of her reach," then "her brain seemed to have stopped thinking altogether and to be about some other function that it was not very good at" (282). Pointer escapes with her *mind-soul*, and she sees him as a "blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake" (283). The lake of her heart did indeed get stirred up by him, with potential success, and her countenance, described as a "churning face," suggests the fluid movement of her vital spirits between her body and soul (283).

A Final Foot Note

⁴³⁹ Merton, *Conjectures* 19.

⁴⁴⁰ O'Connor, *CW* 281.

⁴⁴¹ O'Connor, *CW* 281.

In discussing the religious significance of the foot, I would be remiss not to acknowledge the foot's appearance in Scripture beyond just the particular passages that Saint Augustine *et al* offered their exegetical skills.⁴⁴² Although the foot appears less often in the New Testament, the story of Jesus' washing of Peter's feet (John 13.8-10) drew much commentary by medieval religious writers. Saint Augustine interprets the act in connection with baptism. Freccero summarizes the Bishop of Hippo's meaning, "even the man walking to God gets the dust of this life upon his feet."⁴⁴³ In this context, all of O'Connor's characters are pilgrims who have gathered dust on their feet.

Rather than explore in depth the particular manifestations of the foot in the Bible here, I shall instead reference a conclusion by Eliot R. Wolfson that I think has a certain synthesizing appropriateness to this chapter's discussion. Wolfson writes, "Within the diverse textual layers of the Bible, one can discern several different images surrounding God's feet. Yet, all of these occurrences can be grouped into two categories: theophany . . . or execution of divine judgment . . . From a careful analysis of the relevant material, therefore, it may be concluded that in ancient Israelite culture, God's feet served as a *topos* for divine revelation."⁴⁴⁴ As other critics have noted, O'Connor's anagogic vision

⁴⁴² Given the story just previously discussed, it would seem that Manley Pointer's con aligns perfectly with Saint Augustine's redactic version of the passage in Saint Matthew's gospel, "If thy leg offend thee, cut it off . . . for it is more expedient to you to enter the kingdom of God with one foot than to enter into eternal fire with two." Freccero's analysis within the context of Augustine's gloss locates the passage as Matthew 8.8, but in the Douay-Rheims (and other Bible translations) the quote is Matthew 5.30: "And if thy right *hand* scandalize thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is expedient for thee that one of thy members should perish rather than thy whole body go into hell."

⁴⁴³ Freccero 39.

⁴⁴⁴ Wolfson, Eliot R., "Images of God's Feet: Some Observations on the Divine Body in Judaism," *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*, ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1992) 144. Wolfson lists the following passages of scripture as relevant for theophany (Exod.24:9-10; Deut. 33:3; 2 Sam 22:10; Ps. 19:10) and for execution of divine justice (Isa. 41:2; Hab. 3:5; Lam. 3:34; Nah. 1:3; Ps. 74:3, 77:20; cf. Mic. 1:3).

dips toward the side of the Old Testament imagination. It is not surprising that Tresmontant's *A Study of Hebrew Thought* was an annotated volume in her personal library. It is beyond the scope of my thesis to appreciate the influence of the Hebrew imagination on O'Connor manifesting theophanies and executions of divine judgment with the human foot; however, I believe it is a possibility not be overlooked. "One has to either got to be a Jew or stop reading the Bible. The Bible cannot make sense to anyone who is not 'spiritually a Semite,'"⁴⁴⁵ Thomas Merton claimed. In the same vein O'Connor wrote: "The Hebrew genius for making the absolute concrete has conditioned the Southerner's way of looking at things."⁴⁴⁶ O'Connor expressed her sacramental vantage of the world through her anagogic vision with its multiple layers of signification. Her goal was to create art that reflects the Infinite, even in the most immediate thing. In her stories characters experience God's Judgment as close as their own feet. When she practiced her habit of art, a lot crossed over from artist to ink to paper. To her the medieval anagogic way of reading nature "included the most possibilities."⁴⁴⁷ She understood her art very well: "A story that is any good can't be reduced, it can only be expanded. A story is good when you continue to see more and more in it, and when it continues to escape you."⁴⁴⁸ To the Jews of the Old Testament, the Christians of the Middle Ages, and the characters in O'Connor's stories, the essence of life or death could be found even in a foot.

⁴⁴⁵ Merton, *Conjectures* 14.

⁴⁴⁶ O'Connor, *MM* 202.

⁴⁴⁷ O'Connor, *MM* 72.

⁴⁴⁸ O'Connor, *MM* 102.

Up to this point in the dissertation I have focused on the first signified body and how its limitations are exposed through the actions of grace. Now I direct my attention to particular agents of grace, who, often by their mere presence and sometimes words, aid others to recognize the truth about themselves. What is striking about these Christ-figures, is that they are frequently women. Their appearance in these recognition scenes holds significance for the medieval context of O'Connor's corporeal aesthetic.

Chapter 4

"Jesus Another Woman": O'Connor's Transgender Transfigurations

Although the title of this chapter might suggest that O'Connor adopted unequivocally a feminist stance in her writings, her treatment of gender needs to be contextualized. Richard Giannone, in his essay, "Displacing Gender: Flannery O'Connor's View of the Woods," suggests that in retrospect O'Connor "may turn out to be a feminist," but this "would be a feminist despite herself for she avows fidelity to a patriarchal church and culture."⁴⁴⁹ I don't go as far as Giannone in labeling O'Connor a feminist, even a reluctant one, but I do take an interest in how she addresses the issue of gender in an effort to increase the reader's awareness of the transcendent dimension of her fiction. Giannone argues that rather than shaping her characters in stereotypical gender molds (male toughness/female weakness, domestic crises), O'Connor's characterizations break the gender paradigms so as to align her characters with a "God, who is without gender."⁴⁵⁰ Her characters' destiny is a condition described by Saint Paul in Galatians 3:27, where "there is no longer male or female." Giannone explains:

The thrust of O'Connor's displacing gender is to show that personhood is not a property of another person or a social structure or a piece of property but a property of creation. Looking beyond gender enables O'Connor to assert human worth as a function of divine activity. Her writing is then

⁴⁴⁹ Giannone, Richard, "Displacing Gender: Flannery O'Connor's View from the Woods," *Flannery O'Connor New Perspectives*, ed. Sura P. Rath and Mary Neff Shaw (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996) 73.

⁴⁵⁰ Giannone 76.

able to claim a form of feminism that adheres not in political struggle or theoretical debate but in mystical insight.⁴⁵¹

If writing with mystical insight can be construed as a form of feminism, then I can relinquish my resistance to giving O'Connor the title of a feminist. Giannone frames his analysis with reference to current political and theoretical debates about gender, concluding that O'Connor nullifies "power relations" and the "paradox of economic power [that] applies to gender relations."⁴⁵² In this chapter, I want to advance Giannone's notion that O'Connor writes with a gendered mystical insight by moving that discussion outside the sphere of sociological concerns, and into the sphere of religious signification. O'Connor's characters eventually discover a God, who, while not being male or female, can still be considered as possessing either masculine or feminine qualities. I contend that to better appreciate O'Connor's corporeal anagogic vision, we should examine closely the gender of those characters who act (sometimes quite subtly) as agents of grace. These particular characters often appear in her stories as female Christ-like figures, or, in other words, analogous representations of the Incarnation.

To speak of the feminine aspect of Christ was, in fact, a common feature of the medieval corporeal aesthetic. The Middle Ages understood Christ's *corpus* from many different interpretative angles, but one which I find most appropriate to O'Connor's use of women figures is the notion that Christ's body can be metaphorically understood as a woman's body. While the early part of this chapter attempts to set up a medieval frame through which we may approach the idea of a metaphorical feminized body of Christ, I

⁴⁵¹ Giannone 94.

⁴⁵² Giannone 90, 86.

also draw into my literary analysis the insights of Julian of Norwich. Julian of Norwich was arguably the Middle Ages' strongest advocate for understanding Christ as a woman. Even though it is not known with certainty whether or not O'Connor read Julian of Norwich, I believe, along with Richard Giannone, that "O'Connor could respond to God as mother" and that "this understanding is part of an honored tradition with which O'Connor was familiar." Giannone further suggests that O'Connor, as "a woman spiritual writer would find the maternity of God a source of insight, as did Julian of Norwich."⁴⁵³ Giannone does not develop this insightful point, but I hope to expand the idea of O'Connor's appreciation of God's maternity by examining her fiction.

I identify three different styles of the feminized Jesus in O'Connor's stories: 1) Tough Mothers 2) Suffering Mothers and 3) Tender Mothers. Rather than creating characters who play into the narrowly-scripted critical term, "Christ-figure," O'Connor depicts the maternal characteristics of Jesus over many stories and through multiple characters. If O'Connor's women are examined collectively, then what at first appears to be an aggregate of female personalities eventually emerges as an artist's unified expression of God. In her work O'Connor stippled points of divine light through a varied array of feminine radiance, and regardless of their dimness or brightness, all converge at an infinite point brought forward by Julian of Norwich who saw just "how our Mother mercifully acts to all his children who are submissive and obedient to him."⁴⁵⁴

Mother Jesus in the Middle Ages

⁴⁵³ Giannone 77.

⁴⁵⁴ Julian of Norwich 138 (*LT* ch.58).

So much has been written on the medieval notion of Christ's feminine flesh that my brief introduction to the concept shall hardly do the subject justice.⁴⁵⁵ Nevertheless, some description of its place in religious history is necessary in order to understand this aspect of the medieval sensibilities O'Connor was so much in tune with. Before we proceed any further, however, I need to clarify some terms with respect to Christ's feminine flesh. When I discuss Christ's body as feminine, three possible methods of interpretation present themselves: 1) analogical 2) metaphorical and 3) anagogical. The analogous use of Christ's feminine flesh fits with Saint Thomas Aquinas' Aristotelian modified model of the body (feminine matter) with the soul (masculine form). As discussed in Chapter One, Christ received his fleshly matter from Mary's womb, and therefore in the context of medieval philosophy and embryology, Jesus's blood, hair, nails, skin, and bones can be considered feminine.⁴⁵⁶ The metaphorical use of Christ's feminine flesh alludes to His maternity. The main focus of this chapter is on establishing how Christ could be metaphorically construed in medieval religious thought as having such maternal characteristics as tenderness, compassion, as well as toughness. Finally, the anagogical use of Christ's feminine flesh constellates with both the analogical and metaphorical interpretations, but also stands separate in that O'Connor's Mother Jesus-figure makes explicit the union of body and soul in the person. When the character who is destined for

⁴⁵⁵ For detailed discussions on the medieval interpretation of Christ's metaphorical body, see Bynum's *Fragmentation and Redemption*, *Holy Feast Holy Fast*, and *Jesus as Mother*, Bauerschmidt, Frederick Christian, "Seeing Jesus: Julian of Norwich and the Texts of Christ Body," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 27.2 (Spring 1997): 189-214; Beckwith, Sarah. *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁴⁵⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum recognizes that Julian of Norwich would have also understood such a gendered biological assumption. Bynum explains in *Fragmentation and Redemption*: "The physiological role of the mother, whose uterine lining provides the stuff of the fetus (according to medieval medical theory) and whose blood becomes breast milk, clearly underlies Julian's sense that, if gender is to be used of God at all, Christ is mother more than father when it is a matter of talking of the Incarnation" (97).

the offering of grace encounters the Mother Jesus-figure, what underscores their meeting is that the Mother Jesus-figure possesses an identity that must be reckoned with. In O'Connor's stories, characters may encounter a Tough Mother, a Suffering Mother, or a Tender Mother. Let's examine these characteristics from the vantage point of the Middle Ages, and let's begin with what seems to be the most obvious maternal characteristic, tenderness.

Perhaps surprisingly, medieval religious men espoused the idea of Jesus as a tender mother. One of the leading experts on the medieval notion of Mother Jesus is Caroline Walker Bynum. Bynum counts men, specifically Cistercian and Benedictine monks like Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, Aelred of Rievaulx, Guerric of Igny, Isaac of Stella, Adam of Perseigne, William of St. Thierry, and Anselm of Canterbury, in the circle of religious writers who borrowed the idea of mother Jesus to describe the Abbot and his pastoral duties.⁴⁵⁷ The writings of these men typically inculcate the idea of Christ's maternal love - sheltering, nursing, fearing for her children's safety. The abbot's responsibility to those under his spiritual care should be no less than Christ's mothering care. Saint Bernard refers to himself many times as a mother in his letters. To the parents of Geoffrey of Péronne, for example, he writes: "Do not be sad about your Geoffrey . . . I will be for him both a mother and a father;" to the Abbott Baldwin of Rieti: "As a mother loves her only son, so I loved you, when you clung to my side pleasing my heart;" and in his absence from his own monks: "Behold this is the third time, unless I am mistaken, that my sons have been torn from my heart, little ones I weaned before their time."⁴⁵⁸ These male

⁴⁵⁷ Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1982) 112.

⁴⁵⁸ qtd. in Bynum, *Jesus as Mother* 116.

writers did not conceive of a completely new idea in thinking of God as Mother, since Saint Augustine had written in his *Confessions* about the comfort that “Mother Charity” offers to her children. Of course women too, especially Julian of Norwich, emphasized how Jesus fulfills the role of a tender mother.⁴⁵⁹ Julian explains in her *Revelations* that the Incarnation “could undertake the work and care of motherhood in all things” since a “mother’s care is the closest and nearest and surest for it is the truest.” This motherly care, Julian insists, “never would, nor could, nor should be fully done except by [Christ] alone.”⁴⁶⁰

The medieval view asserts that Christ’s maternal tenderness, paradoxically, is made possible only through suffering. When Christ is described as nurturing his children, his breasts are depicted as giving the blood of the Crucifixion rather than milk.⁴⁶¹ In a letter Saint Bernard makes explicit the motherhood of God by relating it to the Crucifixion. He writes: “Do not let the roughness of our life frighten your tender years. If you feel the stings of temptation . . . suck not so much the wounds as the breasts of the Crucified He will be your mother, and you will be his son.”⁴⁶² In medieval paintings, the blood that pours from Jesus’ side fills Eucharistic chalices, emphasizing the reality of Christ’s

⁴⁵⁹ For a further discussion and organization of Julian’s theology see especially Brant Pelphry’s *Christ Our Mother: Julian of Norwich* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1989) 164-167 where he outlines the three ways that Julian sees Christ as Mother.

⁴⁶⁰ Julian of Norwich (*LT* ch.60).

⁴⁶¹ One variation of a mother’s milk not associated with the crucifixion in Saint Bernard’s allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs where the Biblical eroticism gives way to the intimate bonds between Christ and the soul, and then later to the pastoral leaders’ obligation to secure the salvation of souls by “pressing the milk of encouragement without intermission from the breast of joyful sympathy, the milk of consolation from the breast of compassion” in an act of “maternal instinct” (qtd. in Bynum, *Jesus as Mother* 118).

⁴⁶² qtd in Bynum, *Jesus as Mother* 117.

suffering as physical and spiritual nourishment.⁴⁶³ Saint Catherine of Siena presses her lips into a vision of Christ's bleeding side, and receives a knowledge beyond human capacity to articulate.⁴⁶⁴ Saint Catherine adopts a similar metaphor in one of her letters:

We cannot nourish others unless we nourish ourselves at the breasts of divine charity . . . We must do as a little child does who wants milk. It takes the breast of its mother, applies its mouth, and by means of the flesh it draws milk. We must do the same if we would be nourished. We must attach ourselves to the breast of Christ crucified, which is the source of charity, and by means of that flesh we draw milk. The means is Christ's humanity which suffered pain, and we cannot without pain get that milk that comes from charity.⁴⁶⁵

Women like Catherine of Siena and Julian of Norwich desired Christ's milk through suffering. While I agree with Richard Giannone's suggestion that Julian of Norwich has a perception of Christ to which O'Connor can relate, I believe that we should not dismiss the violence that is inherent in Julian's approach to understanding God. Giannone remarks that "the feminine side of O'Connor's theology remains obscured from our immediate appreciation by the spectacular violence through which grace operates."⁴⁶⁶ Julian of

⁴⁶³ Kieckhefer offers an excellent discussion in his fourth chapter, "Devotion to the Passion" in *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 89-123.

⁴⁶⁴ Recounted in Kieckhefer 92.

⁴⁶⁵ qtd. in Bynum, *Fragmentation* 96.

⁴⁶⁶ Giannone 77,78. I am firmly convinced that Giannone understands O'Connor's use of suffering as a means to redemptive ends; that is evident in his insightful works *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); "Violence and the Christian Mystery: A Way to Read Flannery O'Connor" (*Literature and Belief* 17.1-2 [1997]: 129-147); and "The Redemptive Quality to Suffering in 'The Artificial Nigger'" (*Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* XII [Autumn 1983]: 5-16). I take contention with any inference that violence is non-feminine within the context of Julian of Norwich's appreciation of a maternal Christ.

Norwich believed that the way to Jesus was through the violence of the Cross. The opening lines of Julian of Norwich's *Revelations* detail her three-fold desire for "a vivid perception of Christ's Passion," then "a bodily sickness," and finally "three wounds."⁴⁶⁷ To have compassion, as the etymology of the word indicates, means "to suffer with" someone. What Giannone calls the "spectacular violence through which grace operates" is in fact a feature of her writing that reflects an affinity with the approach taken by medieval women towards divine suffering. Bynum recounts some examples:

Angela of Foligno, whose asceticism was less intense than that of some of the northern nuns, drank scabs from lepers' wounds and found them "as sweet as communion." Common ascetic practices included thrusting nettles into one's breasts, wearing hair shirts, binding one's flesh tightly with twisted ropes, enduring extreme sleep and food deprivation, performing thousands of genuflexions and praying barefoot in winter . . . and . . . rolling in broken glass.⁴⁶⁸

Hazel Motes would have fit very well into such a female community, or "a monkery" as Mrs. Flood puts it.⁴⁶⁹ When he performs his most intense acts of self-mortification, Motes has the company of a woman who somehow feels like she is being milked by him, that in his suffering body is "something valuable hidden near her, something she could not see."⁴⁷⁰ In the medieval understanding of physiology, a mother's milk was some kind of refinement of blood, and therefore blood and milk unite in a symbol of creation and salvation. This

⁴⁶⁷ Julian of Norwich 3 (*ST* ch. 1).

⁴⁶⁸ Bynum, *Fragmentation* 132.

⁴⁶⁹ O'Connor, *CW* 123.

⁴⁷⁰ O'Connor, *CW* 120.

symbolism can also be seen at work in “The Enduring Chill.” For all the self-inflicted torture he applies to himself through his own imagination, there is a deep irony in that the source of Asbury’s suffering is bad milk.

Christ’s suffering on the cross not only suggests the image of a lactating God, but of a laboring God, one who gives birth. In one illustration in a thirteenth-century bible, the open side of Christ gives birth to the Church as represented by a small child emerging from Christ’s body with Mary as the midwife.⁴⁷¹ Marguerite of Oingt gives this image depth with her reflection:

My sweet Lord . . . are you not my mother and more than my mother? . . .
For when the hour of your delivery came you were placed on the hard bed
of the cross . . . and your nerves and all your veins were broken. And truly
it is no surprise that your veins burst forth when in one day you gave birth
to the whole world.⁴⁷²

I will come back later to this point on Christ’s labor pains when I discuss the conflict between O’Connor’s Mother Jesus and Nietzsche’s self-impregnated Higher Men. For now, it is important to make a final point about this last characteristic, toughness, which seems directly at odds with the first characteristic, tenderness. The link between toughness and tenderness is suffering, not only in relation to the laboring, sweating, bleeding Mother Jesus, but also for the shared suffering of all of God’s children.

The complementary nature of these maternal features was clearly evident to Julian of Norwich. Almost everything that is written about Julian emphasizes her theological

⁴⁷¹ see Bynum, *Fragmentation* Figure 3.6 (99), “Detail from a French Moralized Bible.” Also note Figures 3.10, 3.11, 3.14.

⁴⁷² qtd. in Bynum, *Fragmentation* 97.

portrait of a compassionate Christ. Little reference has been made, however, to a key passage in her explanation of Christ's motherhood. The anchoress writes:

The kind, loving mother who knows and recognizes the need of her child, she watches over it most tenderly, as nature and condition of motherhood demands. And as it grows in age her actions change, although her love does not. *And as it grows older still, she allows it to be beaten to break down vices so that the child may gain in virtue and grace. These actions, with all that is fair and good, our Lord performs them through those by whom they are done.* Thus he is our natural mother through the word of grace in the lower part for love of the higher part.⁴⁷³

According to Julian, God allows his children to suffer because a mother who loves her children will allow her children to suffer. 'Tough love' seems to be part of that maternal care Julian attests that only God could, would, or should give to His children. This 'tough love' perspective seems to come from the top-down, in other words, from the distance of a loving yet objective divine parent who watches His children mature. However, from the very beginning of *Revelations* Julian reinforces the bottom-up idea of suffering as a means of communion with God. She "believed in all the torments of Christ" and "longed to be shown him in the flesh" so that she "might have more knowledge of our Lord and Saviour's bodily suffering . . . and that of all his true friends who have believed in his pain." Not only does Julian want knowledge of Christ's suffering, she wants to join Him in his suffering. "I wanted to . . . suffer with him . . . I longed for these two things -- the

⁴⁷³ Julian of Norwich 141-142 (*LT* ch.60) (*emphasis mine*).

Passion and the sickness.”⁴⁷⁴ But we must make a distinction here between suffering and ‘tough love’ in Julian’s discussion. She empathetically desires to suffer (along with Saint Catherine of Siena, Angela of Foligno, Marguerite of Oingt, *et al*) so as to enter into Christ’s Passion in an attempt to know the Savior better. Such an entry into the Passion is often expressed in terms of a mother’s labor pains, either entering Christ’s womb-like wounds, or sucking from a bleeding breast. Jesus, “our true mother” as Julian calls Him, “sustains us within himself in love and was in labour for the full time until he suffered the sharpest pangs and most grievous sufferings.” Whereas a natural mother “can lay the child tenderly to her breast . . . mother Jesus . . . can familiarly lead us into his blessed breast through his set open side, and show . . . the joys of heaven.”⁴⁷⁵ Through his suffering Jesus gives birth to a new identity in each human being, and allows that person to become reborn in Heaven. According to Julian, when humans enter into that Passion here on earth, they also have the opportunity to be recreated in the image of God. So when God allows for ‘tough love’ he is allowing it because it nurtures the children of God to come to know whom Jesus Christ is through the suffering Passion, which will open a vision for them to the joys of heaven. With the exception of a humbled Hazel Motes or a dramatic Mrs. Greenleaf, most of O’Connor’s characters do not share Julian’s understanding of suffering’s spiritual benefaction. Julian insists that “we can never attain full knowledge of God until we first know our own soul clearly,” and she sees quite certainly “that we must needs be in a state of longing and suffering until the time when we are led so deeply into God that we really and truly know our own soul.”⁴⁷⁶ The result of an encounter with a

⁴⁷⁴ Julian of Norwich 3,4 (*ST* ch.1).

⁴⁷⁵ Julian of Norwich 141-142 (*LT* ch.60).

⁴⁷⁶ Julian of Norwich 134 (*LT* ch.56).

Tough Mother Jesus-figure in O'Connor's stories is that they will soon experience a longing and suffering so that they may know their own soul and Christ.

Mother Jesus versus Nietzsche's Self-Impregnated Higher Man

From the very beginning of my thesis I have tried to demonstrate that O'Connor uses the body in her stories in order to overcome the dualistic power that divides body from soul. Friedrich Nietzsche deployed dualism on two fronts in order to denounce Christianity and morality. On the one front, he taps the fervor of heretical Christians like the medieval dualists, the Cathars, who held the extreme view that the female body was intrinsically evil. Implicating such exaggerated interpretations of Christianity, Nietzsche argued that religion has always pitted itself against the reality of the human condition. On the other front, Nietzsche arms himself with Descartes' *cogito er sum*, on which he braced his confidence in an individual's will to power. Despite his critique of religion as an illusion, Nietzsche's own teleology elevated the self to a god who transcends good and evil. This new 'religion' produces the Higher Man, who impregnates himself with his own work and judgment. I suggest that O'Connor's depiction of the Incarnation through Mother Jesus-figures in her fiction directly opposes the dualistic power of Nietzsche's Higher Man.

Unification of body and soul epitomizes Mother Jesus. Julian of Norwich explains:

I saw that as the second Person is mother of our essential being, so that the same well-loved Person has become mother of our sensory being, for God makes us double, as essential and sensory beings. Our essential being is the

higher part, which we have in our Father, God almighty; and the second Person of the Trinity is our mother in nature and in our essential creation, in whom we are grounded and rooted, and he is our mother in mercy in taking on our sensory being. And so our Mother, in whom our parts are kept unparted, works in us in various ways⁴⁷⁷

As I mentioned before, O'Connor's recipients of grace encounter a Mother Jesus figure, whose image and identity must be reckoned with. The character has fought to sustain a vision of himself that denies the existence of his soul, and when he sees a reflection of himself -- dominated by his *mind-soul* -- he appears as a corpse. However, during an encounter with a Mother Jesus figure, the character comes face to face with an anagogic representation of the unified body and soul, indeed the Incarnation itself. Although the character tries to avert his eyes, his line of vision is usually drawn to the Mother Jesus figure. For example, Tarwater doesn't want to look at the woman at the filling station, yet her presence and stare attract his gaze. Nelson in "The Artificial Nigger" cannot tear his eyes away from the black woman whom he has asked for directions. Julian's mother ("Everything That Rises") actually found it easier to look at Carver's mother than her own son. In Mother Jesus the character's "parts are kept unparted" as Julian of Norwich phrases it. The anagogic signification of Mother Jesus as the Incarnation directly opposes the Cathars' dualism on two accounts. First, the Cathars held the belief that Christ was an angelic being who neither was born of woman nor suffered and died. Second, the idea that God's flesh could be interpreted metaphorically as feminine repelled the Cathars'

⁴⁷⁷ Julian of Norwich 138 (LT ch.58).

assertion that the female flesh was intrinsically evil.⁴⁷⁸ Nietzsche's misdirected charge that Christianity hates the flesh in order to elevate the world of the spirit could have been based on heretical notions embraced by the Cathars. However, such a position is weakened by the signification of Mother Jesus, who as Julian argues "is our mother in nature and in our essential creation, in whom we are grounded and rooted."⁴⁷⁹ This position was in keeping with mainstream Christian thought on the subject that found its classic expression in Tertullian's aphorism, *caro est cardo*: salvation hinges on the flesh.⁴⁸⁰ Julian believed that God came down to the level of humans, whereas Nietzsche insisted that humans must raise themselves higher than God.

In contrast to Julian's Mother Jesus, who gives birth through suffering to all women and men because of His great love for them, Nietzsche's "higher man" gives birth only to his own will and desire. Through the mouthpiece of his Immoralist, whom "had more courage in his body than any other thinker before or after him,"⁴⁸¹ Nietzsche writes in *The Spake Zarathustra*: "Ye creating ones, ye higher men! One is only pregnant with one's own child . . . Where your entire love is, namely with your child, there is also your entire virtue! Your work, your will is *your* "neighbor": let no false values impose upon

⁴⁷⁸ In their own redactionism of Genesis, the Cathars wrote that the "the devil . . . poured out upon [the woman's] head a lust for sin and Eve's lust was like a glowing oven. Forthwith the devil in the form of a serpent came out of the reeds and sated his lust on her with the serpent's tail" (qtd. in Biller, Peter "Cathars and Material Women," *Medieval Theology and the Natural Body*, Minnis, eds. A. J. and Peter Biller [London: York Medieval Press, 1997] 85).

⁴⁷⁹ Julian of Norwich 138 (*LT* ch.58).

⁴⁸⁰ Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* in *The Early Christian Fathers*, ed. and trans. Harry Bettenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956) 144. For a discussion that explores Tertullian's statement and early Christian thought that led up to Saint Augustine's *Confessions* see Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa's "Caro salutis cardo: Shaping the Person in Early Christian Thought," *History of Religions* 30.1 (August 1990): 25-50.

⁴⁸¹ qtd. in Förster-Nietzsche, Elizabeth, introduction, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, by Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, trans. Thomas Common (New York: The Modern Library, 1937) 21.

you.”⁴⁸² The labor pains Nietzsche condones are self-serving, and the begotten child is an abstract product of his own will and work. In *Beyond Good and Evil* the German philosopher maintains that only weak-minded fools engage in moral considerations, and this occupation actually makes them less real. According to Nietzsche, moralists are dislocated by their lofty spiritualism:

The practice of judging and condemning morally, is the favourite revenge of the intellectually shallow on those who are less so . . . it is an opportunity for acquiring spirit and *becoming* subtle . . . They are glad in their inmost heart that there is a standard according to which those who are over-endowed with intellectual goods and privileges, are equal to them; they contend for the “equality of all before God,” and almost *need* the belief in God for this purpose . . . lofty spirituality [is] . . . the beneficent severity which knows that it is authorized to maintain the *gradations of rank* in the world.⁴⁸³

Nietzsche’s exercise of transvaluation and his call for a Superman plays dualism from both sides. He accentuates the burden of moral considerations (which the Cathars’ self-mortifications could offer effective examples to his counterpoints), and he implicitly bases the individual’s power on what Etienne Gilson called the “*unguarded use of a principle of unity present in the human mind*.”⁴⁸⁴ O’Connor frequently splices in her characters Nietzsche’s notion of “gradations of rank”, along with the humiliation of physical wounding, to show indeed the ‘equality before God’ that Nietzsche ridicules. In

⁴⁸² Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* 290.

⁴⁸³ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 144.

⁴⁸⁴ Gilson, *Unity* 312.

summarizing her brother's sentiment toward Christianity, Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche wrote: "He assumes that Christianity, as a product of the resentment of the botched and the weak, has put in ban all that is beautiful, strong, proud, and powerful, in fact all the qualities resulting from strength, and that, in consequence, all forces which tend to promote or elevate life have been seriously undermined."⁴⁸⁵ O'Connor's characters eventually discover that their superiority is a gift given to them by God. They typically view themselves as being beautiful, strong, proud, and powerful -- all the qualities Nietzsche claimed Christianity suppressed. Once they encounter the Incarnation in the form of a woman, they become lower and participate in the Paschal cycle, a willingness to surrender rank and life to a higher form of degradation. In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche provides an epithet to describe his own abhorrence of such self-denial: "Christianity, the *Denial of the Will to Live*."⁴⁸⁶

O'Connor has the *gradations of rank* present in so many of her characters' minds. Ruby Turpin "occupied herself at night naming the classes of people."⁴⁸⁷ The Grandmother reduces a "cute little pickaninny" to a mere subject of art, and explains to her grandchildren that "[l]ittle niggers in the country don't have things like we do" (139). She would never willingly place herself close to the man the newspaper called 'The Misfit' because she "couldn't answer to her conscience" (137) if she did. Ruby Hill views her mother as horribly ignorant, and herself as "the only one in the family who had been different, who had any get" (185). The girl in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" attests to her superiority even under the threat of physical humiliation. "God could strike you deaf

⁴⁸⁵ qtd. in Wright, Williard Huntington, introduction, *Philosophy of Nietzsche* 11.

⁴⁸⁶ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Clifton P. Fadiman, *Philosophy of Nietzsche* 126.

⁴⁸⁷ O'Connor, *CW* 636.

dumb and blind . . . and then you wouldn't be as smart as you is," the cook tells the girl. She answers back: "I would still be smarter than some" (203).

Many of O'Connor's characters deem themselves superior by virtue of their work ethic. Characters like Mrs. Cope, Mrs. Shortley, Mrs. McIntyre, and Mrs. May demonstrate a human arrogance in concert with a spiritual barrenness, because the child for whom they labor is their farm. They adhere to Nietzsche's exhortations that "One is only pregnant with one's own child" and that child is "your work," which is equal to "your will" and "your neighbor."⁴⁸⁸ In other words, "Love your work as your self." It is on O'Connor's fictional southern farms that "neighbor" is consistently objectified within the context of "work." In "A Circle in the Fire" Mrs. Cope "worked at the weeds and nut grass as if they were an evil sent directly by the devil to destroy the place," and from her vantage point, "[h]er Negroes were as destructive and impersonal as nutgrass."⁴⁸⁹ Mrs. Shortely debuts in "The Displaced Person" as "the giant wife of the country side" who "stood on two tremendous legs, with the grand self-confidence of a mountain" (285). From her superior position she can tell her husband, "I have a heap of pity for niggers and poor folks . . . I say ain't I always been a friend to niggers and poor folks?" (298). She justifies her 'love' for her Black *neighbor* to her employer, Mrs. McIntyre: "You can always tell a nigger what to do and stand by until he does it" (299). When confronted with the possibility that one of her black farmhands might marry a white immigrant, Mrs. McIntyre reinforces her concern over such a marriage in terms of labor: "Mr. Guizac . . . I will not have my niggers upset. I cannot run this place without my niggers. I can run it

⁴⁸⁸ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* 290.

⁴⁸⁹ O'Connor, *CW* 232, 233.

without you but not without them” (314). One final example serves to demonstrate a tension between physical mortification, spiritual equality, and the obsession with the virtue of industriousness. When Mrs. May encounters Mrs. Greenleaf “sprawled on her hands and knees off the side of the road, her head down” and shrieking “Oh Jesus, stab me in the heart!”, she considers her own beliefs and reprimands the woman according to her standard of virtue. Mrs. May “thought the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom. She was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true” (506). She scolds Mrs. Greenleaf: “Jesus . . . would be *ashamed* of you. He would tell you to get up from there this instant and go wash your children’s clothes!” (507).

The concept of motherhood is pivotal to understanding O’Connor’s counter-Nietzschean view of the nature of creation. To Nietzsche, the dualism of Christianity aspires to suppress the physical world and perpetuates a dream where one can only achieve full existence by the seemingly ludicrous obedience to self-degradation and the subordination of personal will to a Higher will. In order to avoid such a trap, Higher Men must become pregnant with a singular purpose, the Power of the Will, and elevate themselves (much in a Cartesian manner) so as to view everything (including God) objectively. Higher Men shall bear abundant fruit by separating their souls from the necessity of suffering so inherent in the Paschal Mystery, and claiming for themselves their self-impregnated child, which is their love of self-determination and work. O’Connor understood the difficulties in conveying a different sense of “creating” to her readers, who, by her estimation, were nihilism-breathing disciples of Nietzsche. Through an appropriate

acceptance of suffering, O'Connor's characters have an opportunity to know, as did Julian of Norwich, who asked God for a terminal sickness and three wounds, that God nurtures us, restores us, indeed mothers us to become an eternal *higher men and higher women*. Nietzsche's 'Higher Mother' is a 'Higher Man' who gives birth continually to himself. O'Connor's 'Higher Mother' is *the* 'Highest Man' who gives birth continually to the world. The fruit of the Nietzschean 'Higher Man' is made possible by recognizing pain as an adversary that can be conquered. The fruit of O'Connor's 'Higher Mother' is engendered by recognizing pain as a way of obedience so as to make the claim recorded in the gospels: "In the world you will have distress; but have confidence, I have overcome the world."⁴⁹⁰ Julian of Norwich affirms this notion when she writes that Mother Jesus "reforms and restores us . . . through the power of his Passion and his death and rising again . . . This is how our Mother mercifully acts to all his children who are submissive and obedient to him."⁴⁹¹ Submission is not an easy thing for O'Connor's characters. O'Connor confessed that "their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work"⁴⁹² except for some strong persuasion. That's what tough mothers are for.

Tough Mothers for Jesus

Tough Mother Jesus figures possess certain powers. In O'Connor's stories, those female characters who 1) make a judgment, 2) preface or immediately effect pain and suffering on the judged, and 3) actualize the words expressed in the character's dialogue, are what I call 'Tough Mothers.' The third quality, the actualization of the spoken word,

⁴⁹⁰ John 16.33.

⁴⁹¹ Julian of Norwich 138 (*LT* ch.58).

⁴⁹² O'Connor, *MM* 112.

is one that I consistently find associated with this particular type of character without specific reference to the medieval Mother Jesus figure. The Tough Mother Jesus-figure who shows up in O'Connor's stories catalyzes actions that contribute to the character's spiritual rebirth. On the anagogic level, the words spoken by or to the Tough Mother Jesus become (in a sense) enfleshed. What I mean is that when the Tough Mother speaks, her words of judgment do not simply *fall to the ground* as the Hebrew expression goes, but instead become a physical reality. The Old Testament prophets prefaced and ended their exhortations with "Thus says the Lord" not only to give their preaching authority, but to warn their audience that unless the people listened to the words that they spoke, God's judgment shall come to pass. Saint John begins his gospel by gathering up all the Old Testament's "thus says the Lord's" and locating them inside the Incarnation: "The Word became Flesh and dwelt among us."⁴⁹³ It is also important to remember that O'Connor's characters deify themselves like a "big tin Jesus," to borrow Johnson's epithet from "The Lame Shall Enter First."⁴⁹⁴ Therefore, when a character like Hazel Motes proclaims through the lingering image of his mother's face that he has faith in his Essex, or when Tarwater puts stock in his obscenity hurled toward the woman at the filling station, these words need to be shown for what they are against the presence of the Incarnation: empty and impotent. Subsequently, the characters' empty words become a menacing part of their physical existence and expose the true power of the divine Word. I shall examine three Tough Mother Jesus figures: Mrs. Motes from *Wise Blood*, the black woman at the

⁴⁹³ John 1.14.

⁴⁹⁴ O'Connor, *CW* 630.

filling station in *The Violent Bear It Away*, and the black woman on the bus in "Everything That Rises Must Converge."⁴⁹⁵

Hazel Motes' mother possesses the three characteristics of a Tough Mother. She judges her son, and punishes him with physical pain. The words she speaks to her son and the words Motes speaks to her (and later to her reflected image on his face) become key events in his redemption. Upon returning from a carnival peep-show, the young Hazel encounters his mother's guilt-raising stare.

His mother was standing by the washpot in the yard, looking at him, when he got home. She wore black all the time and her dresses were longer than other women's. She was standing there straight, looking at him. He moved behind a tree and got out of her view, but in a few minutes, he could feel her watching him through the tree . . . He stood flat against the tree, waiting. She left the washpot and came toward him with a stick. She said, "What you seen?"⁴⁹⁶

While Haze feels the weight of her stare, he recalls the naked woman lying in a coffin-like box at the carnival. Advertised as "SINsational," the boy remembers that the woman with the "cross-shaped face" was too small for the box since "her head stuck up at one end and her knees were raised to make her fit." The answer to Mrs. Motes' question, "What you

⁴⁹⁵ In addition to Laverne from "A Stroke of Good Fortune," who has been previously discussed, I identify three other characters, all who share the names of the Mother of God -- Mary Grace ("Revelation"), Mary George ("The Enduring Chill"), and Mary Fortune Pitts ("A View of the Woods") -- and who also fit my description of a Tough Mother figure. I believe the analysis of Mrs. Motes, the filling-station woman, and Carver's mother suffice to show O'Connor's pattern of this particular female Christ figure. Mary Fortune Pitts' words to her grandfather, "If anybody did beat me I'd kill them" vouches for her as a Tough Mother. How Mary Grace's "warthog from hell" comment works on Ruby Turpin is quite evident in "Revelation." Mary George tells her mother that her brother needs some "shock treatment" to get the "artist business" out of his head. All three Marys speak words that ring with prophetic truth.

⁴⁹⁶ O'Connor, *CW* 35.

seen?" is the condensed archetypal representation of evil and death: a lustful woman squeezed into a coffin. The woman in box at the carnival was "squirming a little," suggestive of the serpent's successful conquer of the female body in Eden.⁴⁹⁷ Two women, the naked woman and the black-clothed mother, represent the forces of evil and good. Pulled into two directions by the memory of his voyeurism and his mother who demands a confession and exacts a punishment, Hazel Motes' soul experiences the tension between evil and the harsh violence of good in the midst of evil. In this particular scene, Mrs. Motes places the emphasis on the Crucifixion by reminding her son that "Jesus died to redeem" him. Mrs. Motes beats her son "across the legs with the stick,"⁴⁹⁸ demanding that he tell her what he has seen. In a reflection of the Crucifixion, Hazel "was like part of the tree" during his punishment. To Mrs. Motes' justification, "Jesus died to redeem you," the boy replies, "I never ast him." More than his sneaking into a peep-show tent, it is those four words, which reject the significance of Christ's suffering, that become Hazel's more grievous sin. After voicing his indifference to the Crucifixion, he "forgot the guilt of the tent for the nameless unplaced guilt that was in him."⁴⁹⁹ His expiation of the 'nameless unplaced guilt' takes the form of walking in stone-lined shoes into the woods. Hazel mortifies his flesh, not because the flesh is evil, as the woman in the box symbolized, but, because his mother's punishment directly associates the wounding of the flesh with the sacrifice at Golgotha. Motes does not yet fully comprehend the significance of the

⁴⁹⁷ O'Connor, *CW* 35.

⁴⁹⁸ Suffering from a wound on the legs is another allusion to the Crucifixion, but here it refers to the thieves. This was an explicit detail that was frequently painted in medieval pictures of the Crucifixion. See Mitchell B. Merback's discussion of medieval artist's depictions of the crucified thieves' broken legs in *The Thief, the Cross, and the Wheel* 104-120.

⁴⁹⁹ O'Connor, *CW* 36.

Crucifixion, as his later preaching directly relates (“Where has the blood you think you been redeemed by touched you?”); however, as he approaches his moment of grace he encounters his mother once more (58). Again, his mother appears in contrast to another evil woman, Sabbath Lily Hawks. And again, the message conveyed deep inside Haze’s conscience is that Jesus died to redeem him.

The mother of death and Mother Jesus appear together near the end of the novel. Holding the mummified pygmy that Enoch Emery firmly believes is the new Jesus Hazel Motes needs for his Church without Christ, Sabbath Lily Hawks proclaims, “Call me Momma now” (106). At the moment of Sabbath’s maternal debut, Haze looked into the mirror and “saw his mother’s face in his.” Here is the *transgender transfiguration*, the epiphany of a Tough Mother Jesus who longs for the death of sin, even if it requires a painful obedience. With his mother’s glasses still on, Haze smashes Sabbath’s baby doll. She screams at him: “I seen you were mean enough to slam a baby against a wall. I seen you wouldn’t never have no fun or let anybody else because you didn’t want nothing but Jesus!” (107). The memory of his mother’s face still floats through the dialogue, largely because Haze still wears his mother’s glasses. He retorts to Sabbath: “I don’t want nothing but the truth! . . . and what you see is the truth and I’ve seen it! . . . I’ve seen the only truth there is!”⁵⁰⁰ The words Hazel speaks become actualized in his very appearance. Wearing his mother’s glasses, Haze’s face looks like the face of his Tough Mother Jesus. Her haunting words, “What you seen?”, come back into the reader’s mind as Haze vehemently insists that he has seen the truth. The reader can infer the truth in her image and her words, “Jesus died to redeem you.” After screaming at Sabbath, an exhausted,

⁵⁰⁰ O’Connor, *CW* 107.

wheezing Haze comes back to himself and professes with a weakened voice that he still has a car, and he puts faith in his Essex. These words, spoken through the image of his mother, become actualized in his imminent punishment. Haze's word is destined for destruction. When he can embrace the Word spoken by his Tough Mother, "Jesus died to redeem you," then he is destined for salvation.

His full conversion does not occur as long as the Essex remains, but when the highway policeman rolls the car over the embankment, he returns to the only "truth there is," a suffering God. His Grandfather preached that

Jesus was so soul-hungry that he had died, one death for all, but he would have died every soul's death for one! Did they understand that? Did they understand that for each stone soul, he would have died ten million deaths, had His arms and legs stretched on the cross and nailed ten million times for them . . . Did they know that even for that boy there [Hazel], for that mean sinful, unthinking boy standing there with his dirty hands clenching and unclenching at his side, Jesus would die ten million death before he would let him lose his soul? He would chase him over the waters of sin!

(11)

In the end, Haze wraps barbed wire around his chest, and lines his shoes with shards of glass because he finally accepts his Tough Mother Jesus' declaration that Christ died to redeem him. The Grandfather's sermon repeats the message Julian of Norwich receives from her Mother Jesus:

Jesus thinks nothing of all his hardship and his bitter suffering and his cruel shameful death. And in these words, "If I could suffer more, I would suffer more", I saw truly that if he might die once for each man who shall be saved as he died once for all, love would never let him rest until he had done it.⁵⁰¹

After seeing his mother's reflection and testifying to seeing the truth, Hazel tries to collect his old sinful self, but with the destruction of his automobile he realizes the emptiness of his existence. Hazel Motes chooses the way of the Cross with quick lime, barbed-wire, and broken glass. Like Julian's Christ, Motes seems to "think nothing of all his hardships and his bitter suffering."⁵⁰² Sabbath leaves him because "she hadn't counted on no honest-to-Jesus blind man."⁵⁰³

In her second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, women (especially mothers) are noticeably absent. A woman appears in a memorable scene, however, that occurs after Francis Tarwater has drowned Bishop. At this moment Francis, who has set his mind to reject his Grandfather's memory and its entanglement with Jesus, encounters a woman who seems to pivot the story. The woman has no name, but runs "a patched-together store and filling station on the far side of the crossroad" (467). The imminent encounter with this woman makes Tarwater uneasy, but he is drawn nonetheless to her because of his intense thirst, and the magnetism of her eyes. "She spotted him across the highway and although she did not move or raise her hand, he could feel her eyes reeling him in." Like Mrs. Motes' stare that seemed to turn trees translucent, the woman's eyes "were

⁵⁰¹ Julian of Norwich 19 (ST ch.12).

⁵⁰² Julian of Norwich 19 (ST ch.12).

⁵⁰³ O'Connor, *CW* 121.

fixed on him with a black penetration.” She was a “large woman who stood in the door of the place . . . and she filled almost the whole entrance.” Her “granite-like face” possessed “all knowledge” and the “fold of her arms indicated a judgment fixed from the foundations of time.” She appears other-worldly, and the narrator suggests that “huge wings might have been folded behind her without seeming strange” (467). Her “tongue persistent to question” attempts (like Hazel’s mother) to draw out a confession. She scolds the boy, “The niggers told me how you done . . . It shames the dead” (468). He wants his retort to articulate perfectly his *credo*, his belief in nothing.

The boy pulled himself together to speak. He was conscious that no sass would do, that he was called upon by some force outside them both to answer for his freedom and make bold his acts. A tremor went through him. His soul plunged deep within itself to hear the voice of his mentor at its most profound depths. He opened his mouth to overwhelm the woman and to his horror what rushed from his lips, like the shriek of a bat, was an obscenity he had overheard once at a fair. Shocked, he saw the moment lost. (468)

In a familiar pattern from *Wise Blood*, the Mother Jesus scene plays against the background of the Crucifixion. While engaged with the woman, Tarwater’s body reflects the crucified Christ, beginning with Jesus’ declaration on the cross, “I thirst.”⁵⁰⁴ The boy rushes down his *via dolorosa*, toward far end of the *crossroad*. “He hastened on in anticipation of the drink he was going to buy, his thirst growing by the second.” When he sees the woman standing in the door, his “thirst increased but his enthusiasm fled.” After

⁵⁰⁴ John 19.28.

the boy voices an obscenity toward the woman and tells her “Sell me a purple drink,”⁵⁰⁵ his skin, especially his face, takes on an unnatural dryness: “There were circles under his eyes and his skin seemed to have shrunk on the frame of his bones from dryness.” When Julian of Norwich sees the crucified Christ, what she sees is also a dry face.

Christ showed me part of his Passion when he was near death. I saw that dear face as if it were dry and bloodless with the pallor of death; and then it went more deathly, ashen and exhausted, and still nearer to death it went blue, then darker blue, as the flesh mortified more completely; all the pains that Christ suffered in his body appeared to me in the blessed face as far as I could see . . . And I thought that the drying of Christ’s flesh was the greatest agony, and the last, of his Passion. And in this dryness the words that Christ spoke were brought to mind: ‘I thirst’; and I saw in Christ a double thirst, one bodily and the other spiritual.⁵⁰⁶

Tarwater at this point unconsciously shares that double thirst. He must discover the features of the Incarnation within himself in order to satiate his thirst. As discussed in Chapter Two, Tarwater sees Bishop’s face reflected in the well just prior to his arrival at the filling station. Even though Bishop is a very concrete character, his signification (heavy breathing, unintelligibility, luminescent white hair) reflects abstract qualities about the figure of God. The woman at the filling station represents the fleshy Mother Jesus, whose words about shaming the dead, and scorning the Resurrection and the Life carry a certain weight. Her opaqueness -- depicted with her giant-like stature and “stony face” --

⁵⁰⁵ O’Connor, *CW* 467,468.

⁵⁰⁶ Julian of Norwich 15-16 (*ST* ch.10).

blocks the entrance to a place where Tarwater can quench his bodily thirst. No luminosity is present in her “black-eyed” countenance, only a “dark look” that has the power of “a black penetration.” When the boy looks into her face, he looks into the solid face of God. If Tarwater is to embrace God, just as Hazel Motes did, then that face must become part of his own.

Both in *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*, the Mother Jesus-figure’s face reflects onto the face of the grace-destined character. Before Tarwater’s face assumes its crucified dryness, he turns from the woman’s direct stare with “his look as dark as hers.”⁵⁰⁷ At first, Tarwater cannot look the woman in the face, but instead scowls at “a neutral space between her chin and shoulder.” Eventually, “he was obliged to direct a glance upward at her eyes.” When Tarwater tears away his fixation on the woman’s face, he opens the way for evil. Julian of Norwich explains her experience:

I wanted to look away from the cross, but I dared not, for I well knew that while I contemplated the cross I was safe and sound; therefore I was unwilling to imperil my soul, for beside the cross there was no safety, but the ugliness of fiends.⁵⁰⁸

The temptation to be tortured by demons comes to Julian in the form of “a friendly voice” who advises her to look away from the cross, and “Look up to his Father in heaven.”⁵⁰⁹ Tarwater hears a similar temptation in the Stranger’s voice, the ‘friendly voice’ that haunts him from the fringes. The Stranger’s Voice is easily identifiable from the first chapter of the novel as the voice of the Devil. The boy “didn’t search out the Stranger’s face but he

⁵⁰⁷ O’Connor, *CW* 468.

⁵⁰⁸ Julian of Norwich 17 (*ST* ch.10).

⁵⁰⁹ Julian of Norwich 17 (*ST* ch.10).

knew by now it was sharp and friendly and wise, shadowed under a stiff broad-brimmed Panama hat that obscured the color of his eyes.”⁵¹⁰ Although the boy doesn’t search out the Stranger, by the end of the novel, the Stranger, decked out even with his “Panama hat,” finds him. Tarwater eventually encounters his demon, who figuratively stands outside the vision of the Cross.

The rape of Tarwater (which can be interpreted symbolically as his crucifixion) comes about because Tarwater, like Motes, at first pursues sin instead of redemption. Tarwater takes his eyes off the Mother Jesus, who stands in Judgment and punishes him by her refusal to quench his thirst. Just as Hazel Mote’s rejection, “I never ast him,” brings to the surface a “nameless unplaced guilt,” that only years later Motes could expiate with his self-mortifications, Young Tarwater spews an obscenity toward his Mother Jesus, which he later regrets. While looking like his bespectacled mother, Hazel Motes claimed to “have seen the truth,” and those words follow with the consequences of an extreme somatic communion with the truth. Tarwater’s obscenity directed toward the woman also follows with similar consequences, but the “truth” he accepts is as vulgar and as shallow as the word he chose to reject Mother Jesus. The boy chooses that word over the divine Word. The obscenity became incarnated in a physically brutal actuality. Hazel Motes (still wearing his mother’s glasses) professes his rejection of Mother Jesus by saying that he can preach his own truth to another city because “I got a car to get there in” (107). His words convert into his subsequent moment of grace with the destruction of the Essex. When his car no longer exists, Motes rejects the sinful flesh symbolized by the naked writhing woman in the casket, and chooses the way of his mother, the punishment

⁵¹⁰ O’Connor, *CW* 352.

accepted for Mother Jesus who died to redeem him. Tarwater, on the other hand, voices his rejection of Mother Jesus' judgment and punishment, not with his faith in a car, but with something far more difficult to purge, himself.

The obscenity is unretractable. The words are imperative, and Tarwater's verbal attack returns to haunt him. He hoped to defeat the woman with words, but he fails. The boy "felt his victory sullied by the remark that had come from his mouth. He thought of turning and going back and flinging the right words at her but he had still not found them."⁵¹¹ After leaving the woman, he draws closer to his own crucifixion, and experiences what Julian of Norwich called, "the double thirst."⁵¹² "He hungered now for companionship as much as food and water. He wanted to explain to someone what he had failed to explain to the woman and with the right words to wipe out the obscenity that had stained his thought."⁵¹³ The "double thirst" for bodily and spiritual renewal is corrupted by the obscenity because it stands in the way of accepting Mother Jesus' judgment and punishment. Tarwater ponders how it is possible to sponge away the words that he slung in hate toward the face of that woman. How can he overcome the punishing thirst he has, and justify his rejection of Mother Jesus? At this point there is only one way to salvation and justification, and that is through the cross. Tarwater's head is more thick than Julian of Norwich's. She chooses the way of the cross, but Tarwater chooses the demonic friendly voice.

⁵¹¹ O'Connor, *CW* 468.

⁵¹² Julian of Norwich 16 (*ST* ch.10).

⁵¹³ O'Connor, *CW* 468.

Julian of Norwich rejects the friendly demonic voice that tells her to look away from the Crucified Jesus to the Father sitting in splendor in Heaven. She responds to her demons by answering Jesus directly:

‘No, I cannot, for you are my heaven.’ I said this because I did not wish to look up, for I would have rather suffered until Judgment Day than have come to heaven otherwise than by him; for I well knew that he who redeemed me so dearly would unbind me when he wished.⁵¹⁴

Tarwater does not want Heaven or pain. He wants only to justify his rejection of both in a manner that expresses the obscenity in its fullness. His desire is to live a life without obedience to anyone but himself. That is what he wanted to tell the woman, to “answer for his freedom.”⁵¹⁵ Tarwater differs completely from Julian, who understands that only Christ can “unbind her when he wished.” When the Stranger picks him up, Tarwater tells him that he is going “to where I live . . . I’m in charge there now . . . It’s only me. I take care of myself. Nobody tells me what to do.”⁵¹⁶ It seems that Tarwater is on the road to his desired autonomy. He has found a companion, and he offers the boy a drink. But the thirst intensifies. When he drinks the whiskey offered by the Stranger it “burned his throat savagely, and his thirst raged anew so that he was obliged to take another and fuller swallow.” The mind, which asserts itself as the soul, surrenders itself first to the evil which violates him. “He felt himself presently deprived of responsibility or the need for any effort to justify his actions. His thoughts were heavy as if they had to struggle up

⁵¹⁴ Julian of Norwich 17 (*ST* ch.10).

⁵¹⁵ O’Connor, *CW* 467.

⁵¹⁶ O’Connor, *CW* 469.

through some dense medium to reach the surface of his mind.”⁵¹⁷ With his mind defeated, the boy’s body surrenders. The Stranger takes his unconscious *corpus* to the woods and rapes him.

This shockingly brutal scene seems to discount the possibility of salvific grace acting on Tarwater’s soul. However, the startling words from Christ that Julian of Norwich professes to hear can illuminate this difficult paradox: “Sin is befitting.”⁵¹⁸ Julian explains that sin is “nothing” and Christ is “everything.”⁵¹⁹

With this word ‘sin’ our Lord brought to mind the whole extent of all that is not good: the shameful scorn and utter humiliation that he bore for us in this life and in his dying, all the pains and sufferings of all brought to nothing and should be brought to nothing as our master Jesus was, until we are fully purged: that is to say until our own mortal flesh is brought completely to nothing, and all those of our inward feelings which are not good.⁵²⁰

Tarwater’s rape is “befitting,” since it purges him and obliterates his desire to be his own person without Christ. The obscene words he chose as his *credo* manifest their meaning in this violent crime. When he uttered the words, the boy thought they were shallow. When he realizes he has been a victim in the manner of the words he chose, he sees that they were really nothing. “Nothing,” Julian of Norwich explains, is the description of sin, since

⁵¹⁷ O’Connor, *CW* 471.

⁵¹⁸ Julian of Norwich 21 (*ST* ch.13).

⁵¹⁹ Julian builds upon the tradition and teaching of Augustine who write in Chapter XII of his *Confessions* that “evil . . . is not any substance” (102). Saint Thomas Aquinas follows up on Augustine’s conclusions when he defines sin as the “privation of good” in the *Summa Theologica*. Pt.I-II. Q.72. a.1 (1: 902).

⁵²⁰ Julian of Norwich 21 (*ST* ch.13).

sin “has no substance or portion of being,” however, when it causes us great suffering “it purges us and makes us know ourselves and pray for mercy.”⁵²¹ After the rape Tarwater feels purged. He knows himself and his God more clearly. More than anything else, his eyes appear the most changed.

His eyes looked small and seedlike as if while he was asleep, they had been lifted out, scorched and dropped back into his head. . . His scorched eyes no longer looked hollow or as if they were meant only to guide him forward. They looked as if, touched with a coal like the lips of the prophet, they would never be used for ordinary sights again.⁵²²

How could an encounter with the Devil pave the way for achieving such an intimacy with God? Julian of Norwich again offers some insight into the question.

Julian expands upon Christ’s words to her, that “sin is befitting,”⁵²³ in a later vision. She writes:

God also showed me that sin is not shameful to man, but his glory; for in this revelation my understanding was lifted up into heaven; and then there came truly into my mind David, Peter and Paul, Thomas of India and the Magdalene -- how they are famous in the Church on earth with their sins as their glory. And it is no shame to them that they have sinned, any more than it is in the bliss of heaven, for there the badge of their sin is changed

⁵²¹ Julian of Norwich 21 (ST ch.13).

⁵²² O’Connor, *CW* 473.

⁵²³ In *Julian of Norwich’s Showings: From Vision to Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) Denise Nowakowski. Baker argues that Julian’s teleological approach to sin reinforces her writing’s dominant theme that with God “all shall be well.” Although O’Connor never explicitly gives us such a comforting message, its implication surfaces when we see just how changed Francis Tarwater becomes at the end of the novel.

into glory. In this way our Lord God showed them to me as an example of all others who shall come there.⁵²⁴

O'Connor follows this logic in her stories. She wrote of the Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find": "I don't want to equate the Misfit with the devil. I prefer to think that, however unlikely this may seem, the old lady's gesture, like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in the Misfit's heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become."⁵²⁵ Sin becomes turned into glory because O'Connor's characters recognize sin as "nothing" and Christ as "everything." That is why the Misfit can say at the end of the story, "It's no real pleasure in life."⁵²⁶ Grace floods in to fill the void where the nothingness of sin existed for so long. O'Connor introduced the second edition of *Wise Blood* with this very thought:

That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a stumbling block for readers who prefer to think it a matter of no great consequence. For them, Hazel Motes' integrity lies in his trying with such vigor to get rid of the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind. For the author, his integrity lies in his not being able to do so.⁵²⁷

Just as Motes cannot run away from Jesus in his Essex, so too Tarwater fails to separate himself from Jesus by running into the arms of the Devil. Tarwater tests the truth of St. Paul's statement: "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities,

⁵²⁴ Julian of Norwich 26 (*ST* ch.17).

⁵²⁵ O'Connor, *MM* 112-113.

⁵²⁶ O'Connor, *CW* 153.

⁵²⁷ O'Connor, *MM* 114-115.

nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor might, Nor height, nor death, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Jesus Christ our Lord.”⁵²⁸ O’Connor avoids ambiguity and makes clear that her backwoods prophet upholds the Pauline vision of love.

When Tarwater awakes from the rape, he has accepted the judgment and punishment of his Mother Jesus. He no longer thirsts but hungers for the Bread of Life. “His hunger was so great that he could have eaten all the loaves and the fishes after they were multiplied.”⁵²⁹ His face and eyes reflect the face of the woman. Just as her eyes with their “dark penetration “ had reeled Tarwater in, “the boy’s vision seemed to pierce the very air,” and when Buford stares into Tarwater’s face, he “trembled and felt suddenly a pressure on him to great to bear.” The expurgation of the boy’s obscenity through its full horrible manifestation, silenced the Stranger’s impotent voice and allowed him to hear God’s potent command “GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY,” with each word a silent seed “opening one at a time in his blood.”⁵³⁰

As daunting as Mrs. Motes and the woman at the filling station may appear, they are still less so than the black woman on the bus in “Everything That Rises Must Converge.” O’Connor loads up that short story with Mother Jesus figures, one of each type: a tough mother, a suffering mother, and a tender mother. It is hardly surprising that the son’s name is Julian.⁵³¹ Like “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” “Everything That Rises”

⁵²⁸ Romans 8.38-39.

⁵²⁹ O’Connor, *CW* 478.

⁵³⁰ O’Connor, *CW* 477.

⁵³¹ I allude, of course, to Julian of Norwich. I hope to show that the allusion has some validity. His name has also been associated by John Desmond to Julian the Apostate (see Desmond’s “The Lesson’s of History: Flannery O’Connor’s: ‘Everything That Rises Must Converge,’” *Flannery O’Connor Bulletin* [Fall 1972]: 39-45; *Risen Sons*, 69-70).

ends with a double offering of grace made possible because the characters can see Christ through, not just one, but three women. The composite representation of Christ seems appropriate since the mother and son complement each other in their faults.

Julian and his mother best summarize their complementary defective nature in their conversation toward the bus stop. "True culture is in the mind, the *mind* . . . the mind," Julian insists. "It's in the heart,"⁵³² she replies. The fuller meaning of this dialogue becomes evident if we return to the explanation in Chapter Three of *intellectus* and *affectus*, and how these twin powers of the soul relate to the *mind-soul*. Both the mother and Julian cultivate their *mind-souls*, and live within their imagination. Julian frequently withdraws

into the inner compartment of his mind where he spent most of his time. This was a kind of mental bubble in which he established himself when he could not bear to be apart of what was going on around him. From it he could see out and judge but in it he was safe from any kind of penetration from without. It was the only place where he felt free from the general idiocy of his fellows. His mother had never entered it but from it he could see her with absolute clarity. (491)

Likewise, the mother "lived according to the laws of her own fantasy world, outside of which he had never seen her set foot" (491). Holding on to her aristocratic past that gives her the confidence to say, "I know who I am," the mother's pride bursts forth in condescending graciousness (487). Her ego-inflating gregariousness that allows her to go to a "reducing class" at the Y with people whom she tells her son "are not our kind of

⁵³² O'Connor, *CW* 489.

people,” contrasts sharply with Julian’s cynically proud isolationism. Julian clings to his aristocratic past as well, in the memory of their old Southern mansion. He dreams of owning a “place where the nearest neighbors would be three miles away on either side” (486). Like Joy-Hulga, Julian can reside in his mental bubble without his heart. He strains out his mother’s affection. His pure *intellectus* prevents him from being “blinded by love for her as she was for him.” His intellectually-dominated *mind-soul* has enough power to “cut himself emotionally free of her” and allows him to “see her with complete objectivity” (492). The mother preserves her self-esteem in the belief that she had won a victory over suffering (reduction in income) because her son “had turned out so well.” Julian was “good looking (her teeth had gone unfilled so that his could be straightened), intelligent (he realized he was too intelligent to be a success), and with a future ahead of him (there was of course no future ahead of him)” (491).

Mother and son form a vicious circle of spiritual degradation and destitution. She invests her love into the image of her aristocracy as it has its potential concentrated in her son’s intelligence and good looks. He plugs his intellect for its own worth, and from that impenetrable mental fortress he rejects his mother’s love. She considers herself a martyr for the preservation of her class in “the world in the mess it’s in” where “the bottom rail is on the top” (487). She said “it was fun to struggle,” because she draws her martyr’s courage from her love of herself expressed in the image of her son. For Julian, his smallest actions of love, such as riding on the bus with her to the Y, feel like torture. He waits upon her like “Saint Sebastian” anticipating “the arrows to begin piercing him” (485). There is no mention of God explicitly in this story, and thus Julian’s intellect appears to

operate independently of religious or spiritual considerations. In “the midst of his martyrdom he had lost his faith” (486). He makes multiple moral judgments from the position of his secular autonomy. In this light, Julian operates his *intellectus* in the purely human sphere of Prudence, as Jacques Maritain explains in *Art and Scholasticism*.

“Prudence, the virtue of the practical intellect . . . stands entirely in the human sphere,” however, “Prudence perfects the intellect only presupposing that the will is straight in its own line as human appetite, that is to say, with regard to its own proper good.”⁵³³

Julian’s practical intellect makes moral judgments against the standard of what he sees as his mother’s idiocy. The mother’s idiocy results directly from the pleasure she gets in loving him as an image of herself. Julian has no heart, so he bases his appetite (*affectus*) on his mother’s misaligned affections for him. The mother has no real heart because her appetite is for her son’s *intellectus* to validate her affections of her own aristocratic image.

This horrible dislocation of the *intellectus* and *affectus* requires a double conversion. The mother cannot be saved without the son and *vice versa*. When Julian imagines himself loving a black woman to spite his mother, he forms a single body and soul with his imagined bride. He imagines defending his choice to marry a “suspiciously Negroid woman”: “There is nothing you [mother] can do about it. This is the woman I’ve chosen. She is intelligent, dignified, even good, and she’s suffered and she hasn’t thought it *fun*. Now persecute us, go ahead and persecute us. Drive her out of here, but remember, you’re driving me too.”⁵³⁴ Julian’s fantasy foreshadows his mother’s encounter with a Tough Mother Jesus as well as his own. Both mother and son shall be drawn into

⁵³³ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* 8, 16

⁵³⁴ O’Connor, *CW* 494.

such an intimate relationship with Mother Jesus and each other that the overall effect reawakens and realigns the proper powers of their respective souls.

Ultimately Julian and his mother shall respond to a Suffering Mother Jesus and a Tender Mother Jesus, but first they must confront the Tough Mother Jesus. To see the “giant of a woman” who gets on the bus as Mother Jesus, three very interdependent points have to be addressed: 1) her reflective similarity to Julian’s mother 2) the role that her son, Carver, plays in signaling the presence of a Christ-like figure, and 3) how the words spoken by this woman resist being nullified by Julian’s mother’s haughty mental defense. The fact that Julian and his mother have their spiritual defects knitted together in their mother-son relationship adds a degree of complexity to unpacking the complete signification of their encounter with Mother Jesus. I will begin by addressing the first point, that the black mother reflects the white mother, but in a manner that is not quite so obvious.

The black woman whose appearance mirrors the old white lady’s, has every attribute of a *doppelgänger*, and Julian’s explanation to his mother, “that was your black double,” certainly lends strength to those who would want to make that argument.⁵³⁵ But Julian’s judgment only scratches the surface. His interpretation is on the level of societal change, not personal spiritual change. He tells her,

⁵³⁵ For discussions of O’Connor’s use of doubles, I refer my reader to Frederick Asals’ *Flannery O’Connor: The Imagination of Extremity* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982); Suzanne Paulson Morrow, “Apocalypse of Self, Resurrection of the Double: Flannery O’Connor’s *The Violent Bear It Away*,” *Flannery O’Connor: New Perspectives* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996) 121-138; Claire Kahane, “Comic Vibrations and Self Constructions in Grotesque Literature,” *Literature and Psychology* 29.3 (1979): 114-119; Claire Rosenfield, “The Shadow Within: The Conscious and Unconscious Use of the Double,” *Daedalus* 92 (Spring 1963): 326-344; Donald Gregory “Enoch Emery: Ironic Doubling in *Wise Blood*,” *Flannery O’Connor Bulletin* 4 (1975): 52-64; and Marion Montgomery “Cloaks and Hats and Doubling in Poe and Flannery O’Connor,” *South Carolina Review* 11 (1979): 60-69.

Don't just think that was just an uppity Negro woman . . . That was the whole colored race which will no longer take your pennies . . . What all this means is that the old world is gone. The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness isn't worth a damn . . . You aren't who you think you are. (499)

Julian's evaluation rings true to the social context of the times. His mother is a bigot, *but* her far more severe fault, (from what I believe would be O'Connor's perspective), is her extreme love of herself projected in the image of her son. When he tells her, "You aren't who you think you are," the words could apply directly to himself, because after the black woman's assault, his mother "swapped sons" (495) on a spiritual level. This leads to the second point, that the Tough Mother Jesus is accompanied by her son.

The *doppelgänger* argument weakens, and the identity of the black woman as Mother Jesus strengthens, I think, because of the little black boy, Carver. Julian and his mother become paired off with the black mother and son who board the bus, but they are not exactly doubles of each other, largely because of how the four characters encounter each other. The sequence of actions that occur on the bus make it difficult to pinpoint an explicit reflexivity between the mothers and their sons. It is a rather complex relationship, and the narrative traces the complexity of their encounter by who looks at whom and who speaks to whom. Julian's mother first "smiled at the little boy as he climbed on the seat" next to her, and then she sees the black woman's hat and her "eyes widened." When Julian notices the similarity, his mother "turned her eyes on him slowly," but after his laugh, "[h]er eyes shifted to the woman" because "[s]he seemed unable to bear looking at

him and to find the woman preferable” (496). Ultimately, it is the little black boy, Carver, who seems to have the potential to rescue Julian’s mother from an awkward situation. Her attention and vision bounces from Carver, to Julian, to the black mother, then back to Carver. Carver gives her hope that she will prevail with superior white Southern grace in this encounter with her inferiors. Carver, from the old lady’s perspective, holds the key to her escape from the reality of the situation. Like Tarwater, in a sense, she implicitly places her trust in the words she can say to keep her position of superiority. Rather than muttering an obscenity (which would be far beneath her white Southern manners), she uses words as a weapon in a different way to struggle for control. She fails. Her loftiness gets leveled by a Tough Mother Jesus who makes a judgment, and delivers a punishment when she actualizes the words expressed in the character’s dialogue.

When the white mother speaks, she directs her comment about the black boy, “Isn’t he cute?” to the other white woman on the bus. Julian knows “his mother lumped all children, black and white, into the common category, ‘cute,’ and she thought little Negroes were on the whole cuter than little white children” (495). The mother’s remark gives voice to her spiritually-dead objectified view of the world. Chapter One explained that the *hupokeimenon*, the spiritually-dead anagoric body, speaks with the voice of culture. Robert Con Davis analyzes the configuration and the progression of Aristotelian discourse as it is organized by the hierarchy of the person who speaks first. Davis notes “that the voicing of the *hupokeimenon* [is] aligned with assigned values that actually anchor and identify aspects” of the dominant culture. This dominant voice of culture originates from the first person to speak, because in the progression of Aristotelian

dialogue, the first speaker can subsequently objectify the person to whom he speaks. Davis explains that “the first position of the speaking subject” (or the ‘I who speaks’) has “a hierarchically privileged position in that what follows: 2. *that which I address* 3. *that which addresses me* 4. *I who speak about myself (as an object)*.” Ultimately the “that which I address” becomes enveloped into the cultural context and submits to the authority of the first speaker. The speaker can even reinsert himself back into that cultural context as an object to affirm his primary hierarchical position.⁵³⁶ In other words, Julian’s mother initiates a conversation in which she speaks from a position of hierarchical authority that lumps all children into the category of ‘cute.’ The boy has become an object that advances her own authority and reaffirms the cultural platform from which she speaks. The black mother attempts to cut off this opportunity by calling Carver to cross the aisle and be with her, but the boy just curls up closer on the seat next to the white mother. “I think he likes me,” Julian’s mother said to the woman with a “smile she used when she was being particularly gracious to an inferior.” Carver eventually joins his mother. The black mother scolds the child to “Be-have,” but the little boy peeps through his fingers toward the white mother who plays along by saying, “I see yooooooooo!” The black mother’s next to last remark, “Quit yo’ foolishness . . . before I knock the living Jesus out of you” is made when she slaps the boy’s hand down from his face. If the white mother is successful in her use of words to keep her position of authority, then the dialogue should progress away from her, objectifying everything that comes subsequent to her initiation of the conversation, and then she can arrange, namely, the child as the object, into her

⁵³⁶ Davis 42,43.

hierarchical and cultural system. Giving the little black boy a penny would ratify her successful *logos*. But the conversation does not flow in that way.

The reason the white mother fails in the dialogue is because there truly is no *dialogue*. Just as Julian and his mother complement each other to create an interdependent (actually mutually parasitic) union of spiritual defects, so the black mother and her son (who appear to be dysfunctional) actually represent a unified being of spiritual integrity. On the purely literal side, the black woman reprimands her son. However, experiencing the 'dialogue' with an anagogical ear results in hearing the black mother speak, not to her child, but instead to Julian's mother. The white mother tries three times to initiate the conversation and place herself in a position of cultural authority: "Isn't he cute?"; "I think he likes me"; "I see yooooooooo!". Never does she get a response to *her* remarks. Instead, she hears the black woman initiate commands that on the anagogic level could be addressed toward her: "Come heah!"; "Be-have"; "Quit yo foolishness before I knock the living Jesus out of You"⁵³⁷ The "living Jesus" inside of the Julian's mother is her idolatrous worship of her son's potential to salvage their aristocracy. She does not see herself as needing any "living Jesus" knocked out of her. The black woman's threat addressed to Carver does not seem to ruffle Julian's mother one bit. Like Hazel Motes' mother, who beats her son's legs with a stick asking him, "What you seen?", the black mother gives "the child a sharp slap across the leg" and the white mother playfully says to the abused child, "I see yooooooooo" (35, 497). Julian's mother seems absolutely indifferent to the boy's suffering, just as she is to her own suffering because from her mentally-secured superior position, she thought "it was fun to struggle" (491). Her

⁵³⁷ O'Connor, *CW* 496, 497.

attempt to give the boy a penny is her gesture of great value on her false spiritual scale. It is the widow's mite given from her great storehouse of arrogance. The black mother's vehement rejection of the penny is her third and final counter to take control of the 'conversation,' and her establishment of her spiritual authority.

Although Julian tries to prevent his mother from giving Carver a penny, her determination wins out. Yet, that is her last victory before her old way of living completely dies. The old woman holds the coin out for the boy, and Carver's mother knocks her off her feet with a mighty swing of her enormous red pocketbook. "He don't take nobody's pennies!" she shouts toward the white woman. Her statement places the white mother and the black boy in a well-known gospel scene, since it alludes to the question posed to Christ, "Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or no?". Jesus responds, "Render therefore to Caesar what are Caesar's: and to God the things that are God's."⁵³⁸ Julian received all the tribute his mother had to offer. The old woman idolized her son, and invested her love and image, not in God, but in the future success of her son once he "got on his feet."⁵³⁹ The black woman did indeed 'knock the living Jesus out' (497) of her, because when the beaten old woman "leaned forward and her eyes raked [Julian's] face . . . she found "nothing familiar about him" (499).

As mentioned before, grace in this story comes in a double portion at the end, and the face is one of the mediums through which it is channeled. Julian (like his mother) stares "into a face that he had never seen before" (500). The face is so critical to understanding many of O'Connor's offerings of grace and her characters' transformations.

⁵³⁸ Luke 20.21-25.

⁵³⁹ O'Connor, *CW* 485.

Examples of facial transformations abound in her fiction. Mrs. Flood seems to be nearing that critical change as she stares into the corpse's eyes. Tarwater's face becomes dried and stretched like the crucified Christ, but takes on an unearthly look with its scorched prophetic, seedlike eyes. Sheppard imagines Johnson's face leering at him from the darkness, but the face of Norton moves his heart to rush up the stairs, to repent and to love. O. E. Parker's conversion makes the point explicitly. The Grandmother first recognizes the face of a criminal, who she professes later to be the face of one of her own children. Julian's mother, who early in the story expresses her pity for "the ones who are half white," (488) has her own face appear later in the story "almost gray . . . as if she had suddenly sickened at some awful confrontation."⁵⁴⁰ (495). Redemption quite often appears in O'Connor's stories at a moment of intense pain concentrated in a countenance.

Julian from "Everything that Rises" and Julian of Norwich share a name for a definite reason. Both Julians look into their mother's dying face and experience a life-changing love. The suffering and dead face of Christ leads Julian of Norwich to explain her theology of Christ's Motherhood through His Passion. Christ's motherhood converts evil into good, suffering into the possibility of great joy. The anchoress claims "that wickedness has been allowed to rise and oppose goodness" but at some point in its elevation it converges with "Jesus Christ who does good for evil" from whom "we have our being . . . where the ground of motherhood begins."⁵⁴¹ The point of convergence and conversion occurs in Christ. As I mentioned at the beginning of my analysis of this story, O'Connor loads "Everything That Rises Must Converge" with all three types of Mother

⁵⁴⁰ O'Connor, *CW* 488, 495.

⁵⁴¹ Julian of Norwich 139 (*LT* ch.59).

Jesus-figures. The Tough Mother Jesus sets up the appearance of a Suffering Mother and a Tender Mother, and it is through these last two types that Julian and his mother come to know, like Julian of Norwich, a higher purpose to their suffering.

Carver's mother did indeed knock 'the living Jesus' out of Julian's mother, and thereby allowed the true Christ to enter in. After being hit by the purse, the old white woman's face contorts and shows the suffering condition of a person nearing death, much like the face of the crucified Christ. "Her face was fiercely distorted. One eye, large and staring, moved slightly to the left as if it had become unmoored. The other remained fixed on him, raked his face again, found nothing and closed."⁵⁴² It is this face that Julian sees that makes him realize, like Julian of Norwich, who it is that he loves so dearly. Before the assault the mother saw everything in her idolized son, but now she finds nothing, nothing even recognizable. Julian has a Suffering Mother to guide him toward the path of redemption, but his mother, now with her false idol gone, relies upon a distant memory of a Tender Mother to lead her to salvation, or as she puts it, to take her home. She faces "a few realities for a change" and draws closer in her soul to the image of a Tender Mother Jesus, Caroline, "the old darky who was [her] nurse" of whom she asserts, "[t]here was no better person in the world."⁵⁴³ The dying woman tells her son, "Tell Caroline to come get me," and the veil lifts for Julian. When he finally sees, like his namesake Julian of Norwich, his mother's suffering face, he cries "Mother! . . . Darling, sweetheart . . . Mamma, Mamma!"⁵⁴⁴, and feels the weight of his redemptive contrition.

⁵⁴² O'Connor, *CW* 500.

⁵⁴³ O'Connor, *CW* 488.

⁵⁴⁴ O'Connor, *CW* 500.

Once again, allow me to recognize the position of those who may object to my association of a Tough Mother Jesus with Julian of Norwich, since so much that has been written about the medieval mystic relates how she emphasized Christ's mother-like qualities of suffering and tenderness. I agree. I don't argue that O'Connor writes her stories over a Julian of Norwich template. If all of O'Connor's characters were like Mrs. Greenleaf, who shared Julian's appreciation for ascetic somatic spirituality, then perhaps there would be a more direct match to Julian of Norwich's theology of Christ's Motherhood. O'Connor desires her characters to move closer to Mrs. Greenleaf's Julian-like appreciation of the redemptive quality of suffering, but in order to awaken such a disposition, they must (as Julian explains) be reformed and restored "through the power of his Passion" that "unites us to our essential being."⁵⁴⁵ O'Connor's introduction of a Tough Mother Jesus in her stories moves her characters who struggle to stay outside of the "power of his Passion," to feel the suffering necessary for the union of their body and soul. Certainly, the other two categories of Mother Jesus, Suffering Mothers and Tender Mothers, seem more in line with Julian of Norwich's theology, but this is only because the preparatory work has been done by means of 'tough love' to allow the O'Connorian character to feel the reformatory power of the Passion by witnessing suffering or longing for tenderness. In "Everything that Rises" Julian's spiritual conversion begins when he sees his mother's suffering face, and his mother finds Christ in her longing for the tenderness of her old black nurse, Caroline. Neither character could have experienced such a spiritual metamorphosis if O'Connor hadn't provided them first with the figure of a Tough Mother Jesus.

⁵⁴⁵ Julian of Norwich 138 (*LT* ch.58).

In The Face of Suffering Mothers

Besides Julian's mother's suffering face, four other characters rise to the top of the Suffering Mother Jesus list: Mrs. Greenleaf, Ruby Hill's mother ("A Stroke of Good Fortune"), Thomas' mother ("Comforts of Home"), and the Grandmother ("A Good Man is Hard to Find"). Analysis of these characters' grace-bearing effect is not as complicated as the Tough Mother Jesus figures because they do not have to coerce the spiritually-resistant characters under the power of Christ's passion. Often times, it is simply the character's memory of a Suffering Mother Jesus that makes the moment of grace have its full significance. The fanatic Mrs. Greenleaf lays prostrate on the ground over newspaper clippings of "women who had been raped and criminals who had escaped and children who had been burned" and moans and groans, "Oh Jesus, stab me in the heart!"⁵⁴⁶ Before being gored by the bull, Mrs. May recalls telling Mr. Greenleaf, "I'm afraid your wife has let religion warp her" (522). "Greenleaf" ends with Mrs. May literally warped, "bent over" the Christ-like bull that has stabbed her in the heart, "whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear" (524). Ruby Hill mirrors her suffering mother, who bore eight children and had "got deader with every one of them." At thirty-four her mother "had looked like a puckered-up old yellow apple, sour" (186). Before being stampeded by Hartley Gilfeet, Ruby Hill reflects upon her mother.

It couldn't be any baby. She was not going to have something waiting in her to make her deader, she was not . . . She shuddered and held her head tightly over her mouth. She felt her face drawn puckered: two born dead

⁵⁴⁶ O'Connor, *CW* 505, 506.

and one died the first year and one run under like a dried yellow apple no
she was only thirty-four years old, she was old. (195)

After Hartley Gilfeet crashes into her, she feels the roll inside of her that signals the immediate presence of the unborn baby and the new awakened life of her soul.

Thomas' mother in "The Comforts of Home" and the Grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," follow in this tradition of a Suffering mother, but their appearance in the story is not to offer a mirroring image that suggests the character has finally entered into the Passion of Christ, but instead, to evoke a sincere act of repentance in their paired-character (Thomas and the Misfit). O'Connor's stories require contrition on the part of the protagonist so that the mercy and restoration of Christ's Passion may ensue. To better understand this idea of penitence and Christ's Passion, it helps to draw insight from two works with which O'Connor was familiar: Father William Lynch's *Christ and Apollo* and C. S. Lewis' *Broadcast Talks*.⁵⁴⁷ I do not wish to repeat the points made in Chapter One regarding Lynch's emphasis on how the Incarnation expanded the significance of human existence through analogy, but I will back fill such a point in order to get a clearer understanding of how O'Connor can represent Christ in so many different ways, namely through tough, suffering, and tender mothers. Comprehending the imaginative use of analogy in connection with the Christian tragedy (as explained by Lynch and Lewis), can help the reader discern how O'Connor can make the influence of Christ's Passion felt through an array of representations.

⁵⁴⁷ Lewis's *Broadcast Talks* is a volume in O'Connor's personal library (see Kinney #108). I introduced Lynch's *Christ and Apollo* in Chapter One, but for further discussions of Lynch's influence on O'Connor see John Desmond's *Risen Sons* 17-20; Kilcourse's *Religious Imagination* 108-123.

Let's begin with Lynch's assertion that existence descends analogously, and in a line of unification that leads back to the original analogical idea. If we place Jesus Christ with his Divinity and perfect humanity at the top of this line of analogous descent, then, as Lynch points out, God "can have no divisions in Himself . . . no separation into subject and object."⁵⁴⁸ Humans, found lower on the line, are obviously a different case, yet share a similarity with the source. As human existence descends from such a unity, we, by nature fragment. Lynch writes:

But, in the human consciousness there is certainly some division, no matter how shadowy the introspective act which grasps this inferior way of knowing or being present to the self. But here let us look intently, for here • is the crux of the matter. What is this separateness and division in man of self as subject and self as object which differentiates his self-consciousness from that of God? It is precisely consciousness. It is the one original, *unifying* form which now steps in as the differentiating factor. The same and the different are caught up in one and the same act, whether the act be that of being or that of thought.⁵⁴⁹

What Lynch is saying is that the human consciousness simultaneously links us to the one Undivided God of whose infinite nature we could never reflect in totality, and yet this finite inadequacy manifests itself in an seemingly infinite array of possibilities and variations of the human consciousness. Since God remains fixed as the source, he allows for multiple mortal interpretations of his divinity. God can be seen and understood in the

⁵⁴⁸ Lynch 152.

⁵⁴⁹ Lynch 152.

human consciousness through concepts that seem to be directly opposed to each other. Consider the following examples: the Suffering Servant and the King of the Universe, the Good Shepherd and the Lamb of God, the Prince of Peace who “has come to cast fire on the earth.”⁵⁵⁰ And one more example I propose, relevant to our discussion here, man or woman. In her discussion of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Dorothy L. Sayers makes the point that Dante’s loving praise for Beatrice comes in “words which establish her as a type of the Incarnate.” According to Sayers, Dante

abandons himself to the contemplation of that Image in which all other images are included and fulfilled; Christ our Father, Christ our Mother, Christ our Love and Spouse, Christ our Friend, Christ our Brother, Christ our Child -- Christ the one Archetypal Pattern, of whom all patterns and relationships are but the ectypes.⁵⁵¹

O’Connor loads her Mother Jesus-characters with the most potent analogical, metaphorical, and anagogical signification. Her female Christ-figures convey the message that, *here*, in this character who most likely differs greatly from Dante’s Beatrice, is nonetheless another representation of the Incarnation.

O’Connor’s female Christ-figures not only represent the multifaceted characterizations of Christ, but also reflect the aspect that Jesus is the Word made flesh. To put it another way, O’Connor’s Mother Jesus-figures speak words that seem to have (on a higher level) authority, truth, and a message that tenaciously clings to the

⁵⁵⁰ Luke 12.49.

⁵⁵¹ Sayers, Dorothy L., introduction, *The Comedy of Dante Alighiere The Florentine: Cantica II*, by Dante Alighiere (New York: Penguin Books, 1988) 38.

protagonist's conscience until its full meaning is manifested in a moment of grace.⁵⁵²

There are many examples of the spiritually potent speech of these female characters. Mrs. Greenleaf prays in front of Mrs. May for Jesus to “stab her in the heart,” and later Mrs. May becomes gored by a Christ-like bull. Carver's delivers parental scoldings in the presence of Julian's mother, who later begins to “Be-have” because she got the “livin' Jesus knocked out” of her. The grandmother babbles seeming nonsense about the Misfit being one of her babies. Thomas' mother persists with her irrational notion that Sarah Ham might be her son. The *logos* of Mother Jesus has a vitality all of its own, a haunting life that echoes throughout the story and finds its full meaning at the story's end. Words like Mrs. Motes', “What you seen?” linger, from the SINsensation carnival tent, to Mrs. Flood staring into Hazel's corpse's burned out eye sockets.

Neither Mrs. Motes, Mrs. Greenleaf, Carver's mother nor any of the female Mother Jesus characters match up perfectly to the original unity of God, since they themselves are only analogous representations of such perfection. Readers of O'Connor may find it difficult to tag a subliminal “thus says the Lord” to the front or back of what Carver's mother says. What O'Connor's Mother Jesus figures say may be interpreted in one direction as pointing to the divine and in another as bearing witness to humanity's fallen nature. But the double significance of what they say does not stop these characters from being representations of Christ. Their characterization follows what Lynch calls “contraries in analogy which makes both for its obscurity and its glory.”

⁵⁵² The effect of O'Connor's female Christ-figures' language resonates with a passage from Saint John's gospel: “He that despiseth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day” (John 12.48).

Its obscurity: for it is impossible to abstract the same from the different so that they become two clearly demarcated univocal ideas. Its glory: for it through this obscure but actual interpenetration that by living in the world of men, with all its weaknesses, we can live with knowledge in the world of God.⁵⁵³

The Mother Jesus characters descend analogously into O'Connor's fictional existence, and rescue her characters from their self-entrapment. Analogy is the medium through which an anagogic signification can act effectively. Seeing the world as descending from this analogous point means that spiritual salvation can come through Creation, indeed the body. "We need not jump out of our skins to get to Him," Lynch contends. O'Connor marks her character's bodies the imprint of the Incarnation in the hope that her readers may realize, as Lynch would contend, that "[i]f analogy is a fact, then we need have no religious or imaginative resort to Manichaeism."⁵⁵⁴

O'Connor's characters may not have to jump out of their skins to get to God, but they do have to make a move toward God by bridging their self-absorbed consciousness to Him. Approaching God through one's consciousness means dying to self, and this is expressed through a sharp feeling of contrition. C. S. Lewis explains the situation:

Now what was the sort of 'hole' man had got himself into? He had tried to set up on his own, to behave as if he belonged to himself. In other words, fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he's a rebel who must lay down his arms. Laying down your arms,

⁵⁵³ Lynch 152.

⁵⁵⁴ Lynch 152.

surrendering, saying you are sorry, realising that you've been on the wrong track and getting ready to start life over again from the ground floor -- that is the only way of our 'hole'. This process of surrender -- this movement full speed astern -- is what the Christian calls repentance. Now repentance is no fun at all. It is something much harder than merely eating humble pie. It means unlearning all the self-conceit and self-will that we have been training ourselves into for thousands of years. It means *killing* part of yourself, undergoing a kind of death. In fact, it needs a good man to repent.⁵⁵⁵

Lewis point is dramatized in "A Good Man Is Hard To Find." The Misfit is in a literal hole, the road ditch, when he tells the Grandmother his *credo* for setting himself up as a rebel. After shooting the Grandmother he silences Bobby Lee by telling him, "It's no real pleasure in life," and makes a similar point as Lewis: "Now repentance is no fun at all." We know, as was quoted earlier, that O'Connor saw the Grandmother's final action as bearing enough grace to make the Misfit turn into the prophet he was destined to become. The Grandmother, who earlier rejects the Incarnation herself, becomes for the Misfit a Suffering Mother Jesus. Through both her words and her wounds she starts the Misfit on a path toward salvation. If the Grandmother does not signify a Mother Jesus, then the story ends promoting Manichaeism and Pelagianism, two ideologies that conflict with O'Connor's Christian vision.

Lynch explains that modern tragedy has reconstituted the old heresies of Manichaeism and Pelagianism in new ways. The "tragic finite" which he defines as "the

⁵⁵⁵ Lewis, C. S., *Broadcast Talks* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1948) 54-55.

will and personality of the human actor” moves “through and within the infinite which take the ordered and significant form of a march through different phases, culminating in the final *instrument* of death and helplessness.”⁵⁵⁶ According to Lynch, artists who rally behind the “new Manichaeism” wish to show that the infinite, “the whole world of being and situations in which the actors live” is nothing but an absurdity, a construction of evil-intent, and that the actors have to wake up and face the facts. The Pelagianists, who try “to translate the energy of the human will into an infinite,” corrupt the idea of the infinite.⁵⁵⁷ Then there is the Christian artist, who recognizes the role tragedy plays in human existence as well as in art. Here is the rank and file in which O’Connor marches her characters. Lynch writes:

There is still a deeper level of human existence, a place where the human spirit “dies” in frequent and real helplessness; and this we may call the really tragic level of existence.

This is the region of the soul into which Christianity descends in order to operate its unique effects. For example, the theologian says that it is the place of faith. By this he means that there is a point to which the mind must come where it realizes it is no match for the full mystery of existence, where therefore, it suffers a death; it is only at this point that it will consent to put on the mind of God -- as that mind is given us through the revelation of the Christian mysteries -- and thus rise to a higher knowledge and insight. Here the points of death and life coincide in the one act. In this

⁵⁵⁶ Lynch 76.

⁵⁵⁷ Lynch 78.

sense Christian faith has the tragic at its very core and is never a simple or easy intellectual act. It is always an extremely complicated mixture of dying and living; at no stage in the whole life of faith can death be screened out.⁵⁵⁸

Trying to save her life, the Grandmother screens out death by denying the Resurrection. Right before the point where her "mind realizes it is no match for the full mystery of existence"⁵⁵⁹ she mumbles, "Maybe he didn't raise the dead."⁵⁶⁰ But then her "head cleared for an instant" and at that moment, as Lynch contends, when the person "suffers a death . . . to put on the mind of God . . . and thus rise to a higher knowledge and insight,"⁵⁶¹ her words become the words of a Suffering Mother Jesus: "You're one of my own children!"⁵⁶² Her acceptance of the Misfit as one she must accept in the body and soul of Christ, allows her to ascend and unite with the Source. The Grandmother, now in the form of Mother Jesus, erases the Misfit's earlier regret, "It ain't right I wasn't there because if I had of been there I would of known . . . and I wouldn't be like I am now" (152). He sees her, Mother Jesus, and shoots her. If O'Connor's short story could be played out on the Manichaeian and Pelagianistic stage, the Misfit's cold-blooded act expressed his courage to face the facts, either to reject the world as corrupt, or to have the will power to conquer it. But O'Connor does not resign her character to such a resolution. Instead, the Misfit moves through the infinite tragedy, and he becomes the good man who repents.

⁵⁵⁸ Lynch 79.

⁵⁵⁹ Lynch 79.

⁵⁶⁰ O'Connor, *CW* 152.

⁵⁶¹ Lynch 79.

⁵⁶² O'Connor, *CW* 152.

The Suffering Mother Jesus that haunts Mrs. May and Ruby Hill prefigures their unique entrance into the Passion, but the effectiveness of the Suffering Mother Jesus manifested in the face of Julian's mother, the Grandmother, and Thomas' mother depends upon these women's ability to arouse an intense pain of contrition in their 'sons.' Julian of Norwich best explains the healing power that comes from realizing that greatest pain Christ suffers on the cross is the pain of a rejected love. The Suffering Mother Jesus' power differs from that of the Tough Mother Jesus. The Suffering Mother Jesus does not judge or actualize words into a punishment, but rather, she creates either a comparative context or a startling situation where the empathy for a rejected love becomes felt physically in a pain that is "worse than bodily death," as Julian of Norwich described it.⁵⁶³ The last type, the Tender Mother Jesus, is the most abstract of all O'Connor's characterizations of God's motherhood. The Tender Mother Jesus frequently remains 'off-stage', or if she does step into the scene, she is unapproachable. Her power lies in patient love.

The Distance of Tender Mothers

The presence of the Tender Mother Jesus is not easy to apprehend in O'Connor's stories, but she is there. The black woman in "The Artificial Nigger," Tom Shiftlet's mother in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Norton's mother in "The Lame Shall Enter First", and the young Polish girl in "The Displaced Person" represent a Tender

⁵⁶³ Julian of Norwich 67 (*LT* ch.17). "This showing of Christ's pain filled me with pain . . . for I thought that it was worse than bodily death, my pain . . . But of all the pains which lead to salvation, this is the greatest pain: to see your love suffer." In a similar vein, O'Connor wrote: "I think there is no suffering greater than what is caused by the doubts of those who want to believe" (*HB* 353).

Mother Jesus. The Tender Mother Jesus has three main characteristics: 1) she represents unconditional love, 2) her love contradicts the grace-destined character's conception of her, and 3) she is at a physical or conceptual distance from the same character.

Only one Tender Mother Jesus actually appears 'on-stage,' the black woman whom Nelson asks for directions. Mr. Head decides to take his grandson, Nelson, into the city so that the boy can see black people, with what the old man assumes, will be the utmost disgust and fear. "The thing to do with a boy . . . is to show him all that it is to show,"⁵⁶⁴ the grandfather explains to a city-bound train passenger. While in the city, the two get lost in a black neighborhood. Mr. Head, frustrated with the fact that he is lost, tells the boy that he was born in this part of Atlanta, and "Anybody wants to be from this nigger heaven can be from it" (222). Nelson takes Mr. Head's contemptful suggestion to ask one of the black people for directions. He purposefully chooses a black woman.

Nelson was afraid of the colored men and he didn't want to be laughed at by the colored children. Up ahead he saw a large colored woman leaning in a door way that opened onto the sidewalk. Her hair stood straight out from her head for about four inches all around and she was resting on bare brown feet that turned pink on the sides. She had on a pink dress that showed her exact shape. (222)

He asks her how to get back to town, and the woman responds playfully, "You in town now" and "You can catch a car" (223). The woman's words and presence erase Nelson's fears and prejudicial conceptions. Her "rich low tone . . . made Nelson feel as if a cool spray had been turned on him." Before he and his grandfather left for the city, his

⁵⁶⁴ O'Connor, *CW* 215.

grandfather warned him, “You may not like it a bit . . . It’ll be full of niggers,” and the “boy made a face as if he could handle a nigger” (212). Now face to face with what he had conceived in his imagination as the enemy, Nelson is overwhelmed with an opposite reaction.

He stood drinking in every detail of her. His eyes traveled up from her great knees to her forehead and then made a triangular path from the glistening sweat on her neck down and across her tremendous bosom and over her bare arm back to where her finders lay hidden in her hair. He suddenly wanted her to reach down and pick him up and draw him against her and then he wanted to feel her breath on his face. He wanted to look down and down into her eyes while she held him tighter and tighter. He had never had such a feeling before. He felt as if he were reeling down through a pitchblack tunnel. (223)

The abstract idea of a black person melts away, and Nelson takes in every physical detail. Although she stands not far from him, the space between them and his desire for physical contact seem immense. She calls Nelson, “Sugarpie,” and tells him how to get to the railroad station. The boy “would have collapsed at her feet if Mr. Head had not pulled him roughly away” (223). Nelson’s reaction to her nearly pushes over the boundary of worship. She represents unconditional love; she extends charity even for the lost. Mr. Head interrupts his grandson’s epiphany, growling, “You act like you don’t have any sense!” (223). Nelson senses everything about God’s mercy and love in this woman. In her presence, he experiences a glorified reality, and his spiritual vision takes in the

woman's physicality in the triangular pattern suggestive of the Christ's Motherhood in the context of the Trinity.⁵⁶⁵ His higher knowledge comes about through his brief negation of his worldly conceptions, that allows him to ask for directions. Face to face with Mother Jesus, nothing is held back for Nelson, and he gains his knowledge like a mystic. Mr. Head's moment of grace arrives in the exact opposite way. He sees a statue of a black man, what he calls "an artificial nigger," and he realizes how he had objectified God. The old man becomes aware of his prejudice because he finally sees in the plaster statue God's patient, suffering mercy. The black figure "was meant to look happy . . . but the chipped eye and the angle he was cocked at gave him a wild look of misery instead."⁵⁶⁶ Mr. Head's vision leads him to acknowledge his own years of bigotry as a source for black people's suffering and God's sadness. On the other hand, Nelson's "fierce fresh raw hate" (216) toward the "coffee-colored man" (215) on the train easily melts away in the presence of the black Tender Mother Jesus. Like Peter denying Christ, Mr. Head claims not to know his own grandson when the scared boy accidentally knocked down a woman, who yelled that she would sue for her injury. Mr. Head did not see the suffering Christ in his own child, but he sees it in the plaster Negro that "was about Nelson's size." Although not stated in the story, the momentum established by the final narrative, which makes the change in Mr. Head so explicit, can give the reader enough imaginative inertia to see that the grandfather will confess to his grandson his grievous errors, and try to fill the intense desire Nelson felt for a merciful, loving, and knowing Mother.

⁵⁶⁵ cf. Julian of Norwich's *LT* ch.58.

⁵⁶⁶ O'Connor, *CW* 229.

Norton's mother and Thomas T. Shiftlet's mother both lack a physical body and live only in their memories. The memory of Mrs. Sheppard and Mrs. Shiftlet contrasts with the personal philosophy of Sheppard and Tom Shiftlet. Just as Nelson's hateful conception of black people reverses in the sight of the black woman, so too can we witness a stark difference between Sheppard's existentialism and his wife as an object of faith, and Shiftlet's Machievellian tactics and his mother's self-sacrificial love.

Under Johnson's spiritual coaching, Norton imagines his mother as living with Jesus "On high . . . in the sky somewhere" (612). He longs to be with her, but the distance is so great. Johnson tells the boy, "You can't get there in no space ship" but instead, "you got to be dead to get there" (612) and "if you live long enough you'll go to hell" (613). Sheppard counters Johnson's lesson, telling him that his mother "isn't anywhere" that "[s]he's not unhappy" but instead "she just isn't . . . she doesn't exist" and that that is "the truth" (611-612). Sheppard's last memory of his son alive is of him looking through the telescope and exclaiming that he finally found his mother in some constellation. Moved by an overwhelming love for his son, Sheppard promises to himself that from now on "he would be mother and father" to the boy (632). While his love for his son is sincere, his idea of being "mother and father" to him still does not acknowledge his wife's existence in an afterlife, but supports his humanitarian theory of immortality. He tells Norton, "Your mother's spirit lives on in other people and it'll live on in you if you're good and generous like she was" (612). Sheppard has moved closer to his conversion, but in O'Connor's demanding standard of spiritual economics, the atheist has not yet paid a large enough price to make him surrender his non-believing assets.

To think of it in another way, Sheppard has successfully purged his home of Johnson, and while that action has drawn him to realize how he has ignored Norton, it also translated into a renunciation of Johnson's truthful assessment that Sheppard is a "big tin Jesus" (630). Johnson's parting shot, "The lame'll carry off the prey!" (631) echoes the taunt of the Jebusites to King David, whose troops advanced on the Jebusites' city, Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5.1-10). "You cannot enter here: the blind and the lame will drive you away!" the Jebusites yell to the attacking Hebrews.⁵⁶⁷ David's military campaign is successful, and he establishes Jerusalem as his home. Sheppard has successfully recaptured his home with the eviction of Johnson, but his spiritual lameness remains. When he finds that Norton has hung himself in order to be with his mother, Sheppard will undoubtedly face that his denial of heaven left him with a ghastly scene from hell. Like Mrs. Flood at the end of *Wise Blood* who "felt as if she were blocked at the entrance of something," Sheppard stands frozen like "a man at the edge of a pit" seeing his spiritually-crippled son carried off, and himself feeling the Jebusite's taunt: "You cannot enter here."⁵⁶⁸ The Tender Mother Jesus, Norton's astronomical discovery like Mrs. Flood's pin point of light, now beckons Sheppard to a reunion.

In "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Mr. Thomas T. Shiftlet has all but forgotten his Tender Mother's unconditional love. He and the old Mrs. Lucynell Crater mirror each other's Machiavellian ruthlessness, as they both use Lucynell Crater as a means to their desired ends. It is the girl's removal from their lives which may initiate a conversion in both characters. As discussed in Chapter Three, Lucynell Crater evolves

⁵⁶⁷ 2 Samuel 5.7 (NRSV).

⁵⁶⁸ O'Connor, *CW* 131, 632; 2 Samuel 5.7.

more and more into an abstraction, a purely spiritual (angelic) being. At the end of the story, she is morally as well as physically distant from Shiftlet (and Mrs. Crater). After Shiftlet abandons her at the Hot Spot, he delivers his exhortation on a mother's unconditional love to the hitchhiker he picked up.

It's nothing so sweet . . . as a boy's mother. She taught him his first prayers at her knee, she give him love when no other would, she told him what was right and what wasn't, and she seen that he done the right thing. Son . . . I never rued a day in my life like the one I rued when I left that old mother of mine. (182)

When Shiftlet makes the connection of his new abandoned bride, whom the boy working the Hot Spot's counter described as "an angel of Gawd" (181), to his own Tender Mother, he becomes aware of his sin. He tells the hitchhiker: "My mother was a angel of Gawd . . . He took her from heaven and giver to me and I left her" (183). Lucynell Crater's character accrues a new signification by the end of the story. She is the Tender Mother Jesus whose innocence contrasts with her 'son's' iniquity, and who although at a great physical and spiritual distance, inspires a painful longing for a reunion.

In "The Displaced Person" there is one more Tender Mother Jesus, who is far more abstract than even Lucynell Crater or Mrs. Sheppard. She is Mr. Guizac's cousin, the sixteen-years-old girl who has survived three-years of Nazi concentration camps. The Polish farmhand has arranged for her to marry one of Mrs. McIntyre's black workers. Finding the idea abhorrent, Mrs. McIntyre tells the Pole: "Mr. Guizac . . . that nigger cannot have a white wife from Europe. You can't talk to a nigger that way. You'll excite

him and besides it can't be done. Maybe it can be done in Poland but it can't be done here and you'll have to stop. It's all foolishness" (314). The girl exists only in pictures and as a concept, one that not only opposes directly Mrs. McIntyre's prejudice, but even more to the core, her belief in *work ethic* as the highest of all virtues. She tells Mr. Guizac that she cannot run her farm without her black hired help, and she "will not have [her] niggers upset" (314). If Mrs. McIntyre can welcome this Tender representation of Jesus, who waits at a great distance for a loving union, whose unconditional love is best described by Mr. Guizac, "She no care black" (314), then Mrs. McIntyre has a hope for conversion.

The truly "displaced person" in the story is Jesus Christ. Mrs. McIntyre has no love loss for Father Flynn, an old Catholic Priest who sets up the opportunity for Mr. Guizac's employment on Mrs. McIntyre's farm. Although Mrs. McIntyre is hostile to his visits, the old priest gathers courage to venture to her farm. Although "[s]he had not asked to be instructed," he tries to force "a little definition of one of the sacraments or some dogma into each conversation" (320). His attempts at catechesis only frustrate her, and she says, "Father Flynn! I want to talk to you about something serious" (320). Mr. Guizac's marriage arrangement has led the farm woman to some conclusions. She tells the priest:

As far as I'm concerned Christ was just another D. P. . . . I'm going to let that man go . . . I don't have any obligation to him. My obligation is to the people who've done something for their country, not the ones who've just come over to take advantage of what they can get. (320)

Mr. Guizac aggravates her, but the real threat to her authority is the displaced person of Jesus Christ, subtly represented as the innocent girl standing outside the borders of Mrs. McIntyre's self-serving love. Although she spins her justification with patriotic rhetoric, the country she really implies is her farm. If she can get rid of Mr. Guizac, then she believes that she can return her farm and her mind to its normal working state. Without the threat of having that girl immigrate, she keeps things the way they are. Father Flynn returns and begs: "Dear lady, I know your tender heart won't suffer you to turn the porrrrr man out. Think of the thousands of them, think of the ovens and the boxcars and the camps and the sick children and Christ Our Lord." Mrs. McIntyre responds: "He's extra and he's upset the balance around here . . . and I'm a logical woman and there are no ovens here and no camps and no Christ Our Lord . . . Just one too many" (322). When the tractor rolls over Mr. Guizac's spine, she gets rid of him, but there is still "one too many," because she now has to confront the real person whom she felt threw things out of balance, Jesus Christ in the image of the displaced Polish girl.

When she witnesses the death of Mr. Guizac, "she was too shocked by her experience to be quite herself" (326). Through Mr. Guizac's death, Mrs. McIntyre crosses an immense distance to have a communion with the Tender Mother Jesus. Mrs. McIntyre becomes the D. P. "She felt she was in some foreign country," and "she watched like a Stranger" the dead man being carried away. The event that occurs on the literal level is Father Flynn's final dispensation of Holy Communion to the dead man, but Mrs. McIntyre's "mind was not taking hold of all that was happening." She, herself, unwittingly and perhaps unwillingly, participates in a Holy Communion, an encounter with

her greatest fear, the one who can throw everything out of balance, the Tender Mother Jesus. Mrs. McIntyre, in the position of the D. P. as one who abided among people who “were natives,” seems to be the catalyst now that begins to throw everything out of balance. She affects everyone. Sulk who earlier “never felt no need to travel,” was now “taken with a sudden desire to see more of the world” (324, 326). Mr. Shortley, whose insecurity about employment on the McIntyre farm should have been dispatched permanently with the Pole’s death, “left without notice for a new position” (326). After staring into Mr. Guizac’s dead face, a nervous affliction strikes Mrs. McIntyre, and the greatest alteration occurs in herself. She sees “that the place would be too much for her to run now” (326). The virtue of work crumbles under her own physical and economic dependence, and a spiritual need rises from her farm’s figurative ashes. She becomes like the girl, helpless, isolated in the country, and in need of love, indeed a strong bonding love like in a marriage. Only two people nurse her, “a colored woman” and Father Flynn, who like a faithful husband stays by her bedside to “explain the doctrines of the Church” (327).

O’Connor ends the story with two related images. The first is the old priest’s devotional love in sickness and in health, and second is the presence of the peacock that Father Flynn comes to feed. The relationship of these two allude to the fulfillment of O’Connor’s anagogic vision for the story. Earlier in the story, when the old priest sees the bird’s tail fanned out as it does to attract a mate, he tells Mrs. McIntyre, “Christ will come like that!” (317). He calls the peacock’s exhibition, “The Transfiguration” (317). At the end of the story, Christ has been revealed in a transfiguration, a *transgender transfiguration* of the Tender Mother Jesus. Mrs. McIntyre, after figuratively swapping

places with the displaced Polish girl, is now in the position of the D. P., the feminine Christ-figure. Furthermore, like the girl who waited upon a marriage, Mrs. McIntyre appears to have found a mate, Father Flynn. Although she reverses the genders, O'Connor presents a resolution which is consistent with the apocalyptic metaphor of the Bridegroom coming for his Bride. Christ and His Church unite, and a marriage, which a *pre-transfigured* Mrs. McIntyre had stated "can't be done" (314) exists with a fidelity beyond her control.

O'Connor's Mother Jesus-figures appear in various ways, but there is one story where a Mother Jesus-figure is notably absent, and yet nearly all the main characters are women. I interpret the end of a "A Circle in the Fire" as putting together fragmented pieces of Christ as in a mosaic to make a single image of Him through three very different women. Perhaps it is best expressed by one of the mischievous visiting boys, who upon seeing the third female in the story says, "Jesus . . . Another woman" (242).

Three Women and One Face of Christ in "A Circle in the Fire"

"A Circle in the Fire" presents a very interesting anagogic possibility. In this short story Mrs. Cope tries to raise her daughter, Sally Virginia, and run her farm with the help of Mrs. Pritchard. Each of these three females carry an imperfect aspect of Jesus' Motherhood, as O'Connor frequently portrays it. Mrs. Cope is the Tender Mother, willing to feed three vagabond boys (in the hope that food will satiate them and they will leave). Sally Virginia is the Tough Mother who sees through to the boys' mischief, makes judgments on their characters, (and in her runaway pride attempts to punish them). Mrs.

Pritchard is the Suffering Mother who endures the physical pain of four abscessed teeth (and gets a certain satisfaction when she hears of other people suffering). None of the women fill out the descriptions given above of O'Connor's Mother Jesus figures; they all fall short. However, Mrs. Cope, Sally Virginia, and Mrs. Pritchard cross into each other's dominant characteristics of toughness, suffering, and tenderness to create by the end of the story a composite picture of Mother Jesus, indeed a shared portrait of the Crucified's face.

Like Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. May, Mrs. Cope elevates her work ethic as her crowning virtue. She idolizes her farm, and her greatest fear is that a fire will destroy it. Her fear becomes reality when three boys visit her. In a twist from the biblical story of the three upright brothers, Shadrach, Meshacc, and Abednego who risked the punishment of death in a furnace rather than bowing to Nebuchadnezzar idolatry, O'Connor's three malicious boys set fire to Mrs. Cope's woods effecting a potential change in her Babylonian heart. True to O'Connor's ethical vision, charitable actions that do not have God as their source are destined for disaster. Mrs. Cope's hospitality turns into a nightmare, not because feeding the hungry goes against Christ's commandment, but rather, because Mrs. Cope does not see Christ anywhere in these least ones. Her dominant concern is that they do not smoke in "her woods." The small boy, Harper, says to Mr. Pritchard, "Man, Gawd owns them woods and her too" (243). Mrs. Cope sets up her own system of theology, based on giving thanks to God because, as she says, "we have everything" (234). She appears to be a woman of great spiritual integrity, but in reality, she puts herself at the core of her belief. Etienne Gilson explains, "In theology . . . the main question is not to be pious, but to be right. For there is nothing pious in being

wrong about God.”⁵⁶⁹ Mrs. Cope exorcises evil by weeding her border beds, pulling nutgrass out like “they were an evil sent directly by the devil to destroy the place.”⁵⁷⁰ She exerts every effort and anxious moment to preserve her farm, and fears nothing for her own soul which is satisfied with itself.

Julian of Norwich describes four types of fear. “Doubtful fear” is the one type of fear “that God hates” since it could “be seen as a sort of despair.” The three other types of fear -- fear of attack, fear of punishment, and reverent fear -- may all bring a person closer to God. Mrs. Cope, Mrs. Pritchard, and Sally Virginia each possess a corrupt relationship with their particular type of fear. Mrs. Cope dreads the destruction of her farm, and when this fear “suddenly comes to a man (or woman) through weakness,” it “does good, for it helps to purify, just like bodily sickness . . . for all such suffering helps if it is endured patiently.”⁵⁷¹ On the one hand, Mrs. Pritchard seems indifferent to a punishment, and advises Mrs. Cope that if she was suddenly overwhelmed with trouble, “it wouldn’t be nothing you could do but fling up your hands.”⁵⁷² On the other hand, Mrs. Pritchard, a macabre cynic, stokes Mrs. Cope’s anxiety because “she required the taste of blood from time to time to keep her equilibrium.”⁵⁷³ Mrs. Pritchard epitomizes Tacitus’ maxim, “They terrify lest they should fear.”⁵⁷⁴ The *fear of punishment*, Julian of Norwich explains, “moves us to seek the comfort and mercy of God.”⁵⁷⁵ Mrs. Pritchard’s suffering roots itself in the purely physical discomfort (toothaches), and in her inability to enjoy life

⁵⁶⁹ Gilson, *Unity* 52.

⁵⁷⁰ O’Connor, *CW* 232.

⁵⁷¹ Julian of Norwich, 38, 39 (*ST* ch.25).

⁵⁷² O’Connor, *CW* 235.

⁵⁷³ O’Connor, *CW* 246.

⁵⁷⁴ qtd. in C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) 77.

⁵⁷⁵ Julian of Norwich 37 (*ST* ch.25).

without miserable company. Sally Virginia seems almost fearless. She most notably lacks a *reverent fear*, “the only fear which pleases God” because “it is very sweet and gentle because of its greatness of love.”⁵⁷⁶ When she storms out of the house on a mission to kick Powell, Harper, and Garfield out of her mother’s woods, her zealous sense for justice dissipates and exposes her bravado. Under the circumstance, it might appear that her toughness would actually be a means of communicating her love for her mother, who suffers in the hands of the juvenile arsonists, but what the story reveals is their spiritual kinship and destitution. The story ends with a suggestion that mother and daughter may experience a reverent fear for each other, because the attack on their farm has purified them of false idols, and made them feel that punishing fear which prompts a person to seek God’s comfort, most immediately in each other.

It is the image of the suffering face that brings Mrs. Cope, Mrs. Pritchard, and Sally Virginia into one Christ-like being. After the girl leaves on her mission to the woods, Mrs. Pritchard arrives at the house. She reports on her own affliction, “I got the misery in my face today . . . Theseyer teeth. They each one feel like an individual boil” (248). Meanwhile in the woods, Sally Virginia catches sight of the boys and furtively goes about gaining knowledge of their plan. She hides herself “behind a pine trunk” with “the side of her face pressed into the bark” (249). In a helpless daze “with the imprint of the bark embossed red and white on the side of her face,” she watches the boys ignite the matches (250). She rushes out of the woods toward her mother, and upon reaching her, the girl “stared up at her face as if she had never seen it before. It was the face of the new misery she felt, but on her mother it looked old and it looked as if it might have belonged

⁵⁷⁶ Julian of Norwich 38 (*ST* ch.28).

to anybody, a Negro or a European or to Powell himself' (250-51). Like the fractured face of the Black statuary in "The Artificial Nigger," or Julian's mother at the end of "Everything Rises," or the Grandmother's teary-eyed adoption of the Misfit -- the redemptive suffering face of Christ appears on Mrs. Cope's face. "All the pains Christ suffered appeared to me in the blessed face," Julian of Norwich wrote.⁵⁷⁷ The fire has realigned the three women's corrupt relationships with fear through a healthy respect for suffering. When smoke billows over the tree tops, Mrs. Pritchard's superior indifference appears far removed, as in her panic she charges down the road shouting for help. Sally Virginia empathetically stands by her mother. The girl interprets in her mother's face a new misery that has freed her from her self-possessing fear of attack. Mrs. Cope looks toward the dark line of trees, and like the Hebrews in exodus, leaves her place of spiritual and physical bondage, as she watches God in a column of smoke leading her to a new promised land.

The Hermaphrodite and Nietzsche

The story that undoubtedly makes the idea of Christ as a transgendered being the most explicit is "A Temple of the Holy Ghost." This story has a complexity and a theological message that has been investigated by many scholars often within the framework of O'Connor's strong belief in the Eucharist.⁵⁷⁸ One could anticipate from my analysis thus far that I will draw on O'Connor's use of a hermaphrodite as a

⁵⁷⁷ Julian of Norwich 15 (ST ch. 10).

⁵⁷⁸ See HJB 125, for O'Connor's strong conviction about her sacramental vision (In a conversation regarding the Eucharist as a symbol, O'Connor remarked, "Well, if it's a symbol, the hell with it").

representation of the Body of Christ, but this is not the critical path I intend to follow here.

While an in-depth analysis of the full medieval context lies outside the scope of my thesis, I want nevertheless to underline the importance of the hermaphrodite as a figure of Christ's dual sexuality. As discussed above, the blood of Christ's wounds, especially the lancing of his side, corresponds in a medieval interpretation with a lactating breast. Medieval and Renaissance artists, who were carried along in the momentum of the Middle Ages' somatic Christian imagination, portrayed Christ as "unsexed" (with crossed feet nailed to the *suppendeanaeum* such that his naked thighs hid his genitalia),⁵⁷⁹ or with gorged breasts.⁵⁸⁰ Leo Steinberg has called such an androgynous depiction, "Christ's immaculate body."⁵⁸¹ Caroline Walker Bynum, as noted above, explores the multiple and frequent interpretations of Christ's body as feminine in her work, *Jesus as Mother*. In another book, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, Bynum examines how women especially reinforced "[l]ate medieval theology and piety [that] emphasized Christ as suffering and Christ's suffering body as food."⁵⁸² I could follow this path of analysis as well in O'Connor's "The Temple of the Holy Ghost," and lead to the predictable conclusion that, just as Christ's feminized body in the Middle Ages was transubstantiated both in the Mass and in the imagination as Heavenly Food, so too does the hermaphrodite's juxtaposition

⁵⁷⁹ Merback 70, see Figure 23 *Christ on the Cross*.

⁵⁸⁰ See Bynum, *Fragmentation*, esp. note #88 (381) that discusses Jan Gossaert's depiction of Jesus as an infant with engorged breasts. Hermaphrodites interested Gossaert, and he made them the subject of his art.

⁵⁸¹ qtd. in Merback 71. Leo Steinberg's main point, however, focuses on Christ's masculinity, namely his phallic representation in artistic and religious thought in the Renaissance. For a response to Steinberg's argument in the context of medieval religion see Bynum's *Fragmentation and Redemption* 79-118.

⁵⁸² Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Holy Feast Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) 260. See also Bynum's *Fragmentation* 119-150, 181-238.

with the monstrance at the end of the story. The link between the hermaphrodite and the Body of Christ, is a valid one, but I want to take a closer look at how O'Connor draws on the rich medieval context to depict the process by which the girl herself in the story arrives at such a sacramental view of her experience. What I would like to propose is that her approach to understanding God through a hermaphrodite directly opposes Nietzsche's mind-body dualism.

The girl in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" runs a serious spiritual risk, not because she rejects the existence of God or thinks that she has no need of His mercy, but rather, because she does not recognize God's presence in other people. If she does not change her course, her strong intellect may surrender itself to a Nietzschean pattern of placing all people (including herself) at a purely conceptual distance from herself. The beginning of such an epistemological trajectory is the viewing of people as objects; the destination is the dismissal of a belief in God in favor of one's own god-like vision of the world. James W. Horton makes the girl's ability to "objectify" the world around her the critical element of his argument in his essay, "Flannery O'Connor's Hermaphrodite: Notes Towards a Theology of Sex." Horton carefully defines what he means when he uses the adjective, *objectified*. He makes a point to screen out the synonyms of "objective" such as "impartial" or "disinterested." Horton focuses instead on the opposite characteristics associated with being the *subject* or "a conscious being possessing perception, desire, will, and thought."⁵⁸³ I am drawn to agree with Horton's analytical emphasis on the girl's efficacy to objectify the world around her, especially as he relates it to a dualist's

⁵⁸³ Horton, James W., "Flannery O'Connor's Hermaphrodite: Notes Towards a Theology of Sex," *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, 23 (1994-1995): 31.

separation of mind/body, but I also see that such an objectified vision of the world intrinsically lends itself to those synonymous connotations of impartiality and indifference. When Nietzsche's mad man claims that "God is dead," his proclamation refers primarily to the way human beings have killed God in their perception and understanding of Him. The mad man asserts: "*We have killed him* -- you and I. But how did we do this? how could we drink up the sea? Who have us the sponge to wipe away an entire horizon?"⁵⁸⁴ The answer to this question "how did we do this?" lies in an objectified view of the world, one which filters out divine mystery so as to face, Nietzsche would say, the cold hard facts of our existence. But rather than be crushed under such a hopeless vision of life, Nietzsche proposes that one must elevate oneself above life. The mad man speculates and then answers his own questions in an avocation of just such a principle:

How shall we comfort ourselves, the murders of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed to great for us? Must we not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?⁵⁸⁵

Nietzsche's philosophy calls for the emergence of Higher Men, human beings who can scoff at the theological concept of God and at other people. O'Connor's introduction of the hermaphrodite and its association with the Body of Christ stimulates the girl's awareness of God's physicality, not only in the Eucharist, but also in someone like Mr.

⁵⁸⁴ Nietzsche, *Philosophical Writings* 147.

⁵⁸⁵ Nietzsche, *Philosophical Writings* 147.

Cheatam, the old Farmer who admires Miss Kirby. To see why Mr. Cheatam holds such importance in the girl's life is to understand how her spiritual flaw progresses toward her disbelief in God because of her rejection of people.

The story begins around the lunch table. The girl, the two visiting teenage girls, and Miss Kirby, a boarding school teacher, listen to the girl's mother despair at her inability to entertain her two teenage guests, "since she didn't know any boys their age."⁵⁸⁶ The scene that follows sets up the girl's flaw that shall later be mended by her vision of the hermaphrodite:

At this, the child, struck suddenly with genius, shouted, "There's Cheat! Get Cheat to come! Ask Miss Kirby to get Cheat to come and show them around!" and she nearly choked on the food she had in her mouth. She doubled over laughing and hit the table with her fist and looked at the two bewildered girls while water started in her eyes and rolled down her fat cheeks and the braces she had in her mouth glared like tin. She had never thought of anything so funny in her life.⁵⁸⁷

The girl's behavior appears on the surface as ill-mannered, but her haughty and cruel laughter signifies a much deeper vice. In Chapter Three I discussed how the girl's intelligence feeds her sense of dualism, which eventually succumbs to the vision of the Incarnation at the end of the story, but now I want to address a more insidious side of her philosophical dualism. Her rejection of God's physicality manifests itself in terms of a condescending observation and objectification. James Horton points to this scene:

⁵⁸⁶ O'Connor, *CW* 197.

⁵⁸⁷ O'Connor, *CW* 197-198.

During the lunch near the beginning of the story the child's attitude towards other people is, clearly, that they are simply something to be watched, for amusement if possible. The child views the two girls, as well as Miss Kirby, Cheatam, and Alonzo, as humorous spectacles.

In each case there is a kind of separation involved not only between subject and object, spectator and performer, but also between head and body, a division that occurs within the subject.⁵⁸⁸

Horton's description of the girl as a split subject not only supports the spiritually-sterilizing vision of the *hupokeimenon*, but also identifies a critical element in achieving the aesthetic distance suggested by Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*. Horton's contention that people become mere performers for the girl's entertainment resonates with Nietzsche's appreciation of art's potential for achieving an objectified isolation. The German philosopher believes that not only should a person view other people at such an objective distance, so as to step beyond the moral inclinations that impede human will power, but furthermore, that the observer should even project her own identity to such a distance. He writes:

As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still *bearable* for us, and art furnishes us with eyes and hands and above all the good conscience to be *able* to turn ourselves into such a phenomenon. At times we need a rest from ourselves by looking upon, by looking *down* upon, ourselves and, from an artistic distance, laughing *over* ourselves or weeping *over* ourselves . . . We should be *able* also to stand *above* morality -- and not

⁵⁸⁸ Horton 31.

only to *stand* with the anxious stiffness of a man who is afraid of slipping and falling any moment, but also to *float* above it and *play* . . . as long as you are in any way *ashamed* before yourselves, you do not yet belong with us.⁵⁸⁹

Even though the child can objectify everyone in her vision, she does not possess the strength to distance herself aesthetically from her own self in the Nietzschean sense. This 'weakness' allows her to still recognize her own shame in her moments of introspection, especially in her prayerful moment in front of the monstrosity when "her ugly thoughts stopped" and she asks God: "Hep me not to be so mean . . . Hep me not to give her so much sass. Hep me not to talk like I do."⁵⁹⁰ Her sin is measured in the distance she tries to preserve between herself, others, and God. From her isolated vantage point, she has the confidence to say to the teenage girls, "I'm not as old as you . . . but I'm about a million times smarter" (206), and to the cook, that even if she were deaf and dumb, "I would still be smarter than some" (203). Nowhere does the child flaunt her sin more than when she laughs. When Miss Kirby, "not in the least understanding that this was a joke," replies that Mr. Cheatam will be out of town for the weekend, the child explodes with such a grotesque scene, it mimics an exorcism: "[T]he child was convulsed afresh, threw herself backward on her chair, fell out, rolled on the floor and lay there heaving" (198). Her laughter implies not only an objectification, but also a temptation to adopt a nihilistic superiority, to become one of Nietzsche's "us" who laughs *over* people (people like Cheatam) without shame.

⁵⁸⁹ Nietzsche, *Philosophical Writings* 144-145.

⁵⁹⁰ O'Connor, *CW* 208.

There is a real paradox in the fact that the girl understands what virtue is, and yet, still yields to vice. She perceives that the best way to avoid becoming 'bad' is to maintain an intellectual superiority over what is 'good.' It is, however, in her intellectual superiority, that she has the greatest potential to sin. The girl does not want to be like the 'idiotic' teenage girls who come to visit her. Her recognition of *their* sin, their stupidity, inflates her pride. As long as she does not acknowledge that these two flighty girls know something she does not, the girl can hold to her superior moral (and intellectual) position. However, as the story progresses, the girl realizes that there is something they know that she doesn't: *carnal knowledge*. From the child's perspective, the teenagers seemed to have acquired this knowledge by looking upon a person at a fair who raised its dress to expose that it was both a man and a woman. The temptation to sin becomes concentrated in the dilemma of whether the girl should dare to stoop to the teenager's level and look upon the hermaphrodite's genitalia, and thus acquire the *carnal knowledge* necessary to close the gap in her wounded intellectual pride. If the girl could look upon the hermaphrodite, and laugh at the human oddity from her objective aesthetic distance, then she believes she could maintain her superiority over the teenagers. Such laughter would not improve her spirituality, but instead prove that her mind could not only objectify the teenagers, her mother, and Mr. Cheatam, but also the hermaphrodite. In the moral paradigm O'Connor sets up, if the girl laughs at the hermaphrodite, just as she laughs at Mr. Cheatam, then she would move closer to becoming a Nietzschean scoffer.

The mere idea that the teenage girls have a superior knowledge works toward weakening her Nietzschean arrogance. *Carnal knowledge* -- the one thing the teenage

girls can tell her, “There some things . . . that a child of your age doesn’t know” -- is an appropriate term to describe the medium through which the girl may become aware of her spiritual vulnerabilities (206). She knows in her heart that her boast of being “million times smarter” than them has lost its veracity by a certain order of magnitude. When Susan, one of the teenagers, tells the girl, “it was a man and woman both,” the “child wanted to ask how it could be a man and woman both without two heads but she did not” (206). Instead she uses her imagination to picture what such *carnal knowledge* could be like. Unlike the young Hazel Motes who sees the naked woman in the coffin, and knows by his mother’s question, “What you seen?” that he encountered sin, the child asks herself the same question and comes up with a different answer: “I am the temple of the Holy Ghost” (207).

The girl imagines seeing the hermaphrodite, and what strikes her to the core is his calling himself, a “Temple of the Holy Ghost.”

She lay in bed trying to picture the tent with the freak walking from side to side but she was too sleepy to figure it out. She was better able to see the faces of the country people watching, the men more solemn than they were in church, and the women stern and polite, with painted-looking eyes, and standing as if they were waiting for the first note of the piano to begin the hymn. She could hear the freak saying, “God made me thisaway and I don’t dispute hit,” and the people saying, “Amen. Amen.”

“God done this to me and I praise Him.”

“Amen. Amen.”

"He could strike you thisaway."

"Amen. Amen."

"But he has not."

"Amen"

"Raise yourself up. A temple of the Holy Ghost. You! You are God's temple, don't you know? Don't you know? God's Spirit has a dwelling in you, don't you know?"

"Amen. Amen."

"If anybody desecrates the temple of God, God will bring him to ruin and if you laugh, He may strike you thisaway. A temple of God is a holy thing.

Amen. Amen."

"I am a temple of the Holy Ghost." (207)

O'Connor subtly shifts the dialogue so that the repeated proclamation, "I am a temple of the Holy Ghost," may come from either the hermaphrodite or the girl. The temptation for the girl is to laugh, but that phrase abruptly stops her haughty laughter. At the lunch table scene at the beginning of the story, the teenagers, giggling without control, tell the mother that if a boy was to make a sexual advance toward them, they were to say, "'Stop sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!' and that would put an end to it." The girl, who was laying on the floor from her own convulsive laughter at Mr. Cheatam's expense, "sat up off the floor with a blank face" and "didn't see anything so funny in this." She reflects: "What was really funny was the idea of Mr. Cheatam or Alonzo Myers beaung them around. That killed her" (199). During her vision of the hermaphrodite the girl maintains

a solemnity that opposes the Nietzschean gay science. Her resistance to sin in this way opens her capacity to receive more grace and a revelation about the deeper significance of the hermaphrodite.

In the chapel at Mount St. Scholastica, the girl kneels in front of the monstrance and begins “to realize that she was in the presence of God” (208). She becomes contrite and asks God to mend her ways. She then experiences another epiphanic moment:

Her mind began to get quiet and then empty but when the priest raised the monstrance with the Host shining ivory-colored in the center of it, she was thinking of the tent at the fair that had the freak in it. The freak was saying, “I don’t dispute hit. This is the way He wanted me to be.” (208-209)

The equation of the hermaphrodite with the Body of Christ is important because it helps to heal the dualistic division exercised by the girl’s intellect, and also because it helps to heal the spiritual wound of pride that is being discussed here. The girl must begin to narrow her objective distance from other people. She must somehow realize that her scornful laughter is directed not only at others, but at the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Ghost, and that means even herself. Like Sally Virginia whose confidence gets shaken at the end of “A Circle in the Fire,” and moves closer to her mother while the imprint of the pine bark is still on her face, a similar pattern of reconciliation occurs in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost.” Upon leaving the convent, the nun smothers the girl in a parting hug, and her crucifix mashes into the side of the girl’s face. On the ride home from Mount St. Scholastica, with the fresh imprint of the Cross on her, the girl moves closer to

understanding her sin of laughing at Mr. Cheatam. She looks through the car window and sees that the “sun was a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood and when it sank out of sight it left a line in the sky like a red clay road hanging over the trees” (209). The narrator tells us near the beginning of the story that the “unpaved roads” kick up a “red clay dust” (198). The sun, the Host, and the Hermaphrodite unite with one more image, “the red clay road” that leaves the final impression that all of these truths may be found in Mr. Cheatam’s face, that “was nearly the same color as the unpaved roads and washed like them with ruts and gulleys” (198). The girl laughed at Mr. Cheatam because she did not see him as a Temple of the Holy Ghost, as a part of the Body of Christ. As the object of a joke, Mr. Cheatam “killed her.” But there was nothing funny about “the Temple of the Holy Ghost.” Now at the end of the story, where the Body of Christ is evoked in the symbol of a setting sun, sinks out of sight, all the girl can see is that the impression the Body of Christ left on the sky looks indeed like Mr. Cheatam’s face.

An Irksome and Not-so Irksome Conclusion

O’Connor pushes the gender boundaries in her artistic depictions of *the* most important body to a Christian-conscious writer, the Incarnation. I cannot finish my argument about O’Connor’s gender signification without referencing her own comments that might seem to efface any interest she had in writing with a consciousness to gender. In her 22 September 1956 letter to “A” O’Connor writes: “On the subject of the feminist business. I just never think, that is never think of qualities which are specifically feminine or masculine. I suppose I divide people into two classes: The Irksome and the Non-Irksome without regard to sex. Yes and there are the Medium Irksome and the Rare

Irksome.”⁵⁹¹ Since I argue that O’Connor’s work places an importance on gender with respect to her Christ-figures, I suggest that we consider O’Connor’s classification of Irksome and Non-Irksome with respect to Jesus Christ’s personality. Christ is both Irksome and Non-Irksome. The gentle rabbi who lays out the Beatitudes on the Mount may seem either as the Prince of Peace who mollifies human ambition and suffering with the promise of divine justice, or an annoying ‘Do-Gooder’ whose message of “praying for those who persecute you” comes across as an irritating idealism. The Christ who beats the money-changers out of the temple is certainly Irksome to those whose tables are upturned. Even when he is dying on the cross, one thief becomes sincerely annoyed at Jesus’ complicity in the face of such injustice. Irksome is not always a bad thing, especially to O’Connor. She seldom equates villain and protagonist around whether they are Irksome or Non-Irksome. She seldom writes any character off as a villain or hero, since (except perhaps for a few extreme characterizations) everyone has a chance at redemption. Women can be just as irksome as men. Women and men can become like Jesus by being Irksome or by being Non-irksome. I have argued that in her stories Christ appears in the female flesh, as Tough Mothers who judge, punish, and bring to life the word; as Suffering Mothers who either prefigure the grace-destined character’s painful moment of grace or evoke in the character a sharp contrition; and as Tender Mothers whose unconditional love travels across the distance to break down spiritually degenerative misconceptions. In “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” O’Connor’s hermaphrodite assists a girl in jeopardy of nurturing a dangerous distance from her humanity and thus her God. The truth signified time and again in O’Connor’s fiction is

⁵⁹¹ O’Connor, *HB* 176.

that the Body of Christ exists in man and woman together, because the Holy Ghost takes its place irrespective of gender, in both the Irksome and the Non-Irksome.

Chapter 5

Julian of Norwich and O. E. Parker in 'One Wondrous Volume'

In the previous four chapters, I have tried to convince my reader that O'Connor conveys through the human body a message about the character's spiritual health. Her religious corporeal aesthetic culminates in one of her final stories, but in a way that differs from the rest of her fiction because of its conscious continual spotlight on the body. Perhaps no other story makes as explicit the possibility of redemption through the acceptance of Christ's corporeality than "Parker's Back." Other than Joy-Hulga's bizarre affection for her prosthesis, O. E. Parker's excessive consciousness of his body sets him apart from O'Connor's other dualistically-driven characters. Unlike other characters whose *mind-soul* buries their identity in a fantasy about their intellect, farm, race, or social class, and who often become aware of their spiritual hollowness through some wounding to their body, Parker's idol presents a different case. Parker's obsession with his flesh both preserves his *mind-soul's* ignorance of self, and becomes a means for revealing the mystery of his existence and God's. Despite his concentration on his body, he still possesses a *mind-soul* that distances himself from himself. The objective distance which the *mind-soul* works to establish begins as close as Parker's skin. His character undergoes an epistemological evolution that disables the *mind-soul* and restores the unity of body and soul. Parker may seem like a bumbling idiot, but of all the characters O'Connor creates, he comes the closest to murdering Nietzsche's God.

This chapter examines closely how Parker comes to know God through his body. This type of knowledge is evolutionary, and I as I interpret it, it goes through three subsequent mediums of knowing that are described by Julian of Norwich as “bodily sight, . . . words formed in my understanding, and . . . spiritual sight.”⁵⁹² Parker’s tattooed body reflects his deathly fragmentation and its transformation into his ultimate unity within himself and with God.⁵⁹³ The tattoos that cover his body evolve on the surface as “something haphazard and botched” (659), to penetrating “inside him in a raging warfare” (659), and finally from the inside-out, to creating “his spider web soul” into “a perfect arabesque of colors, garden of trees and birds and beasts” (673). At the end of the story, his body and soul unite in a harmonious depiction of a pre-lapsarian Eden. The entire story of Creation and Salvation is written on his body. Parker is reminiscent of Queequeg in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*. Queequeg’s

tattooing had been the word of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by those hieroglyphic marks, had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining the truth; so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle

⁵⁹² Julian of Norwich 11 (*ST* ch.8).

⁵⁹³ The tattoos attract a variety of critical attention. Preston Browning, Jr. shares to some degree my identification of O'Connor's double signification. Browning writes: “What seems to me especially striking about this story is that in it Miss O'Connor has used the most unlikely expression of contemporary secularism — tattooing — as a kind of analogue for the sense of the Other . . . the awful presence of the numinous (the Holy)” (“‘Parker’s Back’: Flannery O’Connor’s Iconography of Salvation by Profanity,” *Studies in Short Fiction* 6 [1969]: 526). André Bleikasten “can not see the point in endlessly embroidering the pattern of interpretation which O’Connor wanted to impose on her audience” (9), so Bleikasten concludes that “what seems to be at stake in this crises is above all [Parker’s] *body*” (“Writing on the Flesh: Tattoos and Taboos in ‘Parker’s Back’” *Southern Literary Journal* 14.2 [Spring 1982]: 11). David R. Mayer’s anthropological approach concedes to both religious and secular signification of the tattoos as he compares “Parker’s Back” within the cultural framework of the art of ancient Japanese tattooing, in “Outer Marks, Inner Grace: Flannery O’Connor’s Tattooed Christ” (*Asian Folklore Studies* 42 [1983]: 117-127).

to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read though his own live heart beat against them.⁵⁹⁴

At the end of "Parker's Back," Obadiah Elihue can read the mystery of his existence with God. He becomes the "wondrous work in one volume," but the knowledge of how to read the truth that is contained within himself requires Julian of Norwich's three different mediums of comprehension.⁵⁹⁵ Parker's concentration on his tattooed body prepares his bodily sight to read the mystery of his flesh. Following the moment of grace that comes when he runs the tractor into the tree, he hears an inner voice telling him what to do. Finally, as bizarre as it may seem, Sarah Ruth, Parker's wife, helps him to achieve a spiritual sight by her erroneous dualistic vision of God. Although her assertion that "God don't *look* . . . He's pure spirit" conflicts directly with the truth of the Incarnation, her heretical faith is necessary to save her husband.⁵⁹⁶ Even Sarah Ruth seems to lack a carnality from Parker's perspective. "She was plain, plain," and was "a woman he could not see."⁵⁹⁷ Parker "thought he was losing his mind" because he "could not for a minute believe that he was attracted to a woman like this" (661), the only woman "who was not attracted to" his tattoos (657). Although unconscious of it, it is Sarah Ruth's exaggerated spiritual vision that draws Parker into a relationship with her, and enables her to act as a corrective force to Parker's excessive materialism.

⁵⁹⁴ Melville, Herman, *Moby Dick* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1967) 399.

⁵⁹⁵ Sue Walker's view of how the body (especially of a character like Parker) functions in O'Connor's fiction complements my argument that the flesh is the preferred medium to convey spiritual mystery. Walker writes: "The body, an inscriptive surface, is the semiotic manifestation of Being. We read it and see -- in and on "Parker's Back"/back (anatomy and text) how the body signifies and is signified, how it is peered at and into, how information is extracted from it, and how it is constituted -- sick and well, appropriate and inappropriate" (52).

⁵⁹⁶ O'Connor wrote to "A" in 25 July 1964: "Sarah Ruth was the heretic -- the notion that you can worship in pure spirit" (*HB* 594).

⁵⁹⁷ O'Connor, *CW* 655, 656.

To O. E. Parker, the flesh defines his existence. As a boy he visits the fair and sees a man covered with tattoos, such that “his skin appeared to have a subtle motion of its own” (657). Parker implicitly translates ‘skin’ to ‘soul,’ and consistent with the heretical idea of the self-moving soul,⁵⁹⁸ he begins a life-time effort to mirror the image of his spirituality. “Until he saw the man at the fair, it did not enter into his head that there was anything out of the ordinary about the fact that he existed” (658), but following this vision of bodily sight, Parker held the conviction that he could make something out of his existence. He seeks out tattooists to fill up the space of his body, but rather than achieving a communion with life-changing vision of the carnival’s tattooed man, a “huge dissatisfaction” (659) came over him. Parker “had no desire for [a tattoo] anywhere he could not readily see it himself,” (659) and this left his back an empty canvas, outside the range of his bodily sight. Although he would “make an idiot of himself” by putting a tattoo on his back and looking at himself between two mirrors (662), Parker chooses the face of Christ as his final subject, in order “to bring Sarah Ruth to heel” (665). He believes that his wife “would not be able to resist” (664) looking at the image of Jesus. Parker holds to his plan to form a submissive wife until the very last scene. However, before his bodily sight changes into a spiritual vision, he goes through the second medium of knowledge, “words formed in his understanding.”⁵⁹⁹ After he wrecks the tractor, he encounters an inexplicable new urgency and purpose for getting the Byzantine Christ tattooed on his back.

⁵⁹⁸ See Chapter One and Three regarding discussions of the soul having a motion of its own.

⁵⁹⁹ Julian of Norwich 11 (*ST* ch.8).

Words form in Parker's understanding after he wrecks the tractor. As he hits the tree and flies into the air, the first words that come out "in an unbelievably loud voice" are "GOD ABOVE!"⁶⁰⁰ Although he "did not allow himself to think," he "knew there had been a great change in his life, a leap forward into a worse unknown, and that there was nothing he could do about it" (666). In a counter move, Parker seeks out what he knows; he visits the tattooist. As he flips through the pages of the tattooist's book, he hears in the silence, the *Logos*. "There was absolute silence" that "said as plainly as if silence were a language itself, GO BACK" (667). He returns to a picture of Christ with "all demanding eyes" (667) and tells the tattooist that he wants that portrait, "Just like it is . . . just like it is or nothing" (667). Parker spends the night at the Haven of Light Christian Mission and recalls "the eyes in the book" that "said to him distinctly GO BACK, and at the same time did not utter a sound" (669). He tries to force himself to believe that "all his sensations of the day and night before were those of a crazy man and that he would return to doing things according to his own sound judgment." However, when he speaks using his own sound judgment, the words possess no force or life. Parker, whose "throat felt salty and dry" (like Tarwater and the crucified Christ), tells the tattooist, "A man can't save his self from whatever it is he don't deserve none of my sympathy," but "[t]hese words seemed to leave his mouth like wraiths and to evaporate at once as if he had never uttered them" (669). Parker imagines that when his wife sees the tattoo of Christ she "would be struck speechless by the face" (670). When the tattooist forces Parker to look at the face, "Parker said nothing" (671). At the barroom Parker examines his soul, and again, the words that form in his understanding share the common message, GO BACK. Parker thinks

⁶⁰⁰ O'Connor, *CW* 665.

about Sarah Ruth and realizes that she “would clear up the rest of it,” that she would make sense of his dissatisfied soul. “It seemed to him that, all along, that was what he wanted, to please her” (672). Parker’s knowledge of himself has evolved from bodily sight, to words formed in his understanding, and now, with Sarah Ruth, only one more medium of knowledge remained: spiritual vision.

It is when he begins to say his own name, “Obadiah Elihue,” that the words formed in his understanding come to their fruition, and a spiritual vision can begin. Margaret Earley Whitt explains the significance of Parker’s first two names, which translate into “God’s servant” and “God is He.” Whitt notes that the “closing scene in the story is a symbolic transformation of Parker to God, giving ‘Elihue’ its literal meaning.”⁶⁰¹ Before he says his name, Parker falls “back against the door as if he had been pinned there by a lance” and experiences a crucifixion of light that “burst over the skyline” emanating from a “tree of light.” As he says his name, “all at once . . . he felt the light pouring through him turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors.”⁶⁰² Parker is moving closer to having a fuller knowledge of his body and soul, but one thing still remains, his desire to please his wife with his skin, which she at first interprets as sex. He wants to show her that he can be all man and all God to her. Parker has not yet come to realize the full significance of the sun’s rays that began his spiritual vision. Not until he encounters his wife’s chastising all-too-spiritual vision does Parker calibrate his comprehension of self.

His final attempt to get Sarah Ruth to look at him carries more significance than winning a marital spat. I suggest that the notion, “God is dead,” thematically haunts the

⁶⁰¹ Whitt, Margaret Earley, *Understanding Flannery O’Connor* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1995) 152.

⁶⁰² O’Connor, *CW* 673.

story's last scene; and that O'Connor manipulates the nihilistic message such that it turns in on itself to reveal the true life of the Divine in Obadiah Elihue Parker. If Sarah Ruth heels to the image on his back then Parker has achieved a nihilistic victory. Sarah Ruth's acceptance of the tattoo would have recognized that Parker had captured God on his flesh, that Parker's bodily sight would have sufficed to explain the mystery of God's existence, and that her husband was not only the winner of one of their many fights, but even more significantly, a self-made Nietzschean Superman. O'Connor pushes the recognition of Parker's nihilism even further than his empty words to the tattooist that professed his Nietzschean *credo*. The final scene alludes to Nietzsche's mad man, who lights a lantern in the middle of the day, and to Nietzsche's prophet, Zarathustra, who preaches the doctrine of the Superman that reinforces the mad man's conviction that *God is dead*. "Trembling, Parker set about lighting the kerosene lamp," and his wife reprimands him, "What's a matter with you, wasting that kerosene this near daylight. I ain't got to look at you." Sarah Ruth does look at her husband, and what results are words that express both her and her husband's sin: "Idolatry! Enflaming yourself with idols under every green tree! I can put up with lies and vanity but I don't want no idolator in this house!"⁶⁰³ Her inability to see the truth of the Incarnation motivates her judgment against idolatry; yet, her accusation of Parker's idolatry rings with truth, because if his final attempt to silence her had succeeded, then he would have implicitly created a meaningless idol in the image of God. Without Sarah Ruth's rejection and scourging, Parker's tattooed back would have been a visible testament to the death of God. When Zarathustra begins his preaching, "Lo, I teach you the Superman," he attacks pity, or

⁶⁰³ O'Connor, *CW* 674.

another archaic name for it "ruth": "What good is my pity! Is not the pity the cross on which he is nailed who loveth man? But my pity is not a crucifixion."⁶⁰⁴ If Sarah Ruth does not pick up her broom and re-crucify Jesus, Parker would not be able to reach the necessary point of conversion.⁶⁰⁵ O'Connor would not let that happen in her art:

Parker was too stunned to resist. He sat there and let her beat him until she had knocked him senseless and large welts had formed on the face of the tattooed Christ. Then he staggered up and made for the door . . . she looked toward the pecan tree . . . There he was -- who called himself Obadiah Elihue -- leaning against the tree, crying like a baby.⁶⁰⁶

Through his suffering Parker reaches the terrifying light of a spiritual truth, that his bodily sight and the words formed in his understanding have lead him to a new life. He discovers the union of his body and soul. He bears the marks of Christ on his body, the *stigmata*, especially as understood in the scriptural and early medieval sense of the word.

The word *stigmata* typically suggests the mimicking of Christ's wounds suffered during the Crucifixion, such as depicted most popularly on Saint Francis of Assisi.⁶⁰⁷ If we recognize the violence of the lancing light and his wife's physical abuse as Parker's crucifixion, then it is a manageable anagogical leap to see, that whatever physical wounds result from such a beating, they could signify a type of *stigmata*. However, the fact that

⁶⁰⁴ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* 29.

⁶⁰⁵ Acknowledging Teilhard's influence in "Parker's Back," M. E. Whitt calls this point of conversion "The Omega Point" (Whitt 150-159).

⁶⁰⁶ O'Connor, *CW* 674-675.

⁶⁰⁷ Both René Biot and Giles Constable note that after the miracle of Mount Alverna in 1224, where Saint Francis received the marks of the crucifixion on his hands and feet, over 300 reports of similar stigmata appear. Biot, René, *The Riddle of the Stigmata*, (London: Burn & Oates, 1962) 18; Constable, Giles, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 201.

Parker bears a specific and detailed image of Christ on his body makes the issue of *stigmata* one worth spending a bit more time exploring. Saint Paul's assertion to the Galatians, "From henceforth, let no man be troublesome to me. For I bear the marks of the Lord Jesus in my body"⁶⁰⁸ has been interpreted as denoting "the marks of the blows he has received as painful guerdon of the witness he bore to his membership in Christ, and that the word he uses -- in Greek, *stigmata* -- had not the specialized sense it has since acquired."⁶⁰⁹ Giles Constable also notes that "[u]ntil at least the twelfth century, the term *stigmata* was used in a general sense, rather than with specific reference to Christ's wounds, and an allegorical interpretation was given to Christ's sufferings."⁶¹⁰ Even a "principle advocate" for the literal imitation of Christ's wounds, Saint Peter Damian, "who wanted passionately to suffer for Christ and who mortified his own flesh because he could not be a martyr" and ultimately "became his own executioner and a self-martyr who willingly imposed suffering and even death on himself," recognized Saint Paul's "figurative use of term *stigmata*" as alluding to Saint Paul's living expression of "the cross in his life."⁶¹¹ While the term *stigmata* allows for a certain flexibility in its interpretation, there is one aspect of its association with Saint Francis' experience on Mount Alverna, where the monk received the wounds of Christ on his hands and feet, that certainly cannot be ignored, especially with regard to "Parker's Back." Mitchell B. Merback explains that

⁶⁰⁸ Galatians 6.17.

⁶⁰⁹ Biot 18.

⁶¹⁰ Constable 199. See esp. 199-204.

⁶¹¹ Constable 202, n#343. Constable makes an interesting and relative notation regarding another interpretation of *stigmata*. Coincidentally, in his eighteenth sermon Peter Damiani's figurative interpretation of Saint Paul's *stigmata* results because of Damiani's response to the *stigmata of the face* found on a flagellating priest, Dominic *Loricatus* who displayed the "'the banner of the cross' on his brow and limbs.

Saint Francis' "trend-setting miracle" validated the idea, "*meditatio* became *imitatio*."⁶¹²

Meditating upon the image of the suffering Christ had physical and spiritual effects upon the medieval viewer. Julian of Norwich begins *Revelations* by professing her firm belief "in all the torments of Christ as the Holy Church reveals and teaches them, and also in the paintings of crucifixes that are made by God's grace in the likeness of Christ's Passion, according to the teaching of the Holy Church as far as human imagination can reach."⁶¹³

Parker flips through the pictures in the tattooist's book, rejecting one that "showed a gaunt green face streaked with blood" and another that "was yellow with sagging purple eyes."⁶¹⁴ These images of a crucified Christ he rejects, because, unlike Francis and Julian, who are prepared to participate in an "experiential continuity" with the *Andachtsbilder*, a gruesome *devotional* image of "Christ's bodily pain" that "exerted an antagonistic pressure upon the mind of the beholder that veered towards the unbearable,"⁶¹⁵ Parker chooses one that is powerful, alert, and demanding. Instead of a Suffering Servant, the Byzantine icon resonates with the image of a Superman. Parker's attraction to the image infuses him into an "experiential continuity" that brings him and the picture to life; his *meditatio* becomes *imitatio*. After Sarah Ruth beats him on the back with her broom, he and the picture change into a suffering servant. We may recall that Julian of Norwich's spiritual vision of God's immense love comes through Christ's suffering face on the cross. Parker is transformed from a man who wanted to prove he could put God on his back and

⁶¹² Merback 226.

⁶¹³ Julian of Norwich 3 (*ST* ch.1).

⁶¹⁴ O'Connor, *CW* 667.

⁶¹⁵ Merback 70.

carry him, to one who feels the weight of his *hubris*, and leans his bruised image against the tree in a near perfect *imitatio Christi*.

My final point goes back to the idea that Parker's body and soul has become "one wondrous volume." The idea of God as Author and Cosmos as Book was well-recognized in the Middle Ages, as David Lyle Jeffrey explains in *By Things Seen* by quoting Alanus of Insulis:

All the world's creatures, as a book and a picture, are to us a mirror: in it our life, our death, our present condition and our passing on are faithfully signified.⁶¹⁶

The picture from the book Parker chooses reflects indeed everything about him, especially this middle ground of his present condition, between life and death. This middleness of perspective is akin to the view of the medieval person who saw his own story as part of a grander narrative.⁶¹⁷ The most striking example of this idea occurs in one of the final images of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in which Dante, the Pilgrim, sees "the cosmos as a book read by the light of the Mind of God."⁶¹⁸ The Pilgrim reports: "In its profundity I saw -- ingathered / and bound by love into one single volume -- / what, in the universe seems separate, scattered (*Paradiso* 33.85-87)."⁶¹⁹ Parker's spiritual vision of "his spider web soul" turning "into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and

⁶¹⁶ qtd. in Jeffrey 6.

⁶¹⁷ See Jeffrey 6: "Man is invited, in medieval Christian thought to taste and to see, to compare, to evaluate, to read, to interpret, and then to grow toward understanding . . . he is invited to begin where he is in the middle, and to come by exploration and discovery to a place where, by reference to another text, he can affirm the design of the Book, which is written, not merely his own small chapter."

⁶¹⁸ Nolan, Edward Peter, *Now Through a Glass Darkly: Specular Images of Being and Knowing from Virgil to Chaucer* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990) 256.

⁶¹⁹ qtd. in Nolan 257.

beasts''⁶²⁰ epitomizes this cosmic encapsulation, and the Pilgrim's putting on the mind of God. Following Parker's terrifying and intoxicating revelation, he becomes part of the Body of Christ, the Word made flesh in one wondrous volume.

⁶²⁰ O'Connor, *CW* 673.

Conclusion

My approach to O'Connor's corporeal aesthetic has engaged patterns that surface not only in a single story, but also in the whole of her work. Discerning her anagogic vision of the body through a medieval lens affirms that O'Connor's characters possess an infinite potential inside of their earthen vessels. The immediacy of one's own body is difficult to deny, although her characters continually flex their *mind-soul's* powers to establish a distance from themselves, others, and God. The degree of distance varies from character to character, but it seems to have a starting point in the character's inflated self-perception that either borders or crosses into the level of self-deification. Her characters' worship of their Cartesian consciousness surfaces as the recognizable standard of sinfulness. Characters like the grandmother, Ruby Turpin, the girl from "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," whom we may think are only slightly on the wayward path, may actually be following a trajectory that leads them toward a vehemently nihilistic resolve, such as Hazel Motes struggles to keep. In Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamozov*, Ivan Karamozov begins his explanation for his rejection of God by confessing to his brother Alyosha, "I could never understand how one can love one's neighbors. It's just one's neighbors, to my mind, that one can't love, though one might love those at a distance."⁶²¹ O'Connor's stories tell of the destruction of the *mind-soul's* influence to keep the character at the center of a spiritual vacuum and project everything else at a distance. The grandmother originally has the safe distance of a newspaper clipping to place between herself and the

⁶²¹ Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, *The Brothers Karamozov*, ed. Ralph E. Matlaw (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976) 217.

Misfit. Ruby Turpin has an imaginary hierarchy. The girl from "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" can laugh in the space between herself and her inferiors. Asbury believes he has the promise of his imminent death to cement his relationship with his mother. Parker has to learn to love himself as himself, not as some artist's canvas. Ruby Hill denies the possibility that she could have conceived a child, as if even sexual love occurred at a distance. Francis Tarwater has a prophet's commission that he thinks is separated from himself by his great-uncle's grave. Bevel has a sense that getting away from his apartment means getting closer to the Kingdom of Christ. By using the body as the medium through which to close this objective distance, O'Connor brings her characters to a recognition of their true selves, connected with the rest of humanity and God, by their possession of a human soul. They witness their own bodies in states of corporeal decay analogous to their spiritual death. What happens to their feet reflects their dependence upon a false *mind-soul*, which leads them further away from the path of salvation. They encounter the Incarnation in transgender transfigurations. O'Connor guides her self-deified characters to a conclusion that marks the beginning of their newly discovered lives. At the end of her stories we may imagine a new kind of mad man running through the market place, telling anyone who will listen, "god is Dead! Long live God."

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