

**Vital Grace: Bodies and Belief in American Fiction**

by

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## Abstract

My dissertation *Vital Grace: Bodies and Belief in American Fiction* challenges a persistent association of religious thought with an emphasis on transcendence that denies the importance of bodies. The authors whose work I explore—Flannery O’Connor, John Updike, Andre Dubus, and Marilynne Robinson—are all interested in the mystery of bodies and the relationship between temporal experience on the one hand and spiritual experience on the other. Considering elements of these authors’ personal theologies, I arrive at a deeper understanding of how belief informs differences in narrative praxis and contributes to their distinct aesthetics of embodied experience. Chapter 1 pairs O’Connor’s reverence for Thomas Aquinas and Henry James with Gérard Genette’s theory of focalization to illuminate how O’Connor uses shifts in narrative perspective to embody sin and spiritual growth for her characters. Chapter 2 examines how Updike’s adolescent and elderly characters discover grace in their material surroundings even as their growing or aging bodies force changes in their physical orientation toward the world. Chapter 3 considers Dubus’s Catholic understanding of ritual as vital to a physically, ethically, and psychologically sound existence, and Chapter 4 examines how Robinson, informed by a Calvinist belief in total depravity and human sacredness, depicts existence as a physical and spiritual wilderness, in which human particularity creates the need and means for interpersonal forgiveness, understanding, and love. The range of bodies represented in these texts is diverse, and my project makes plain the extent to which these authors embrace varieties of religious thinking that include intense, nuanced, and vividly rendered interest in the physical world.

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## Introduction: Bodies, Belief, and Narrative

The title of my dissertation is taken from Edward Taylor’s “Upon a Wasp Chilled with Cold,” in which the poet considers how we glimpse “sparkes” of God’s divinity in the intricate and meticulously constructed body—the “small Corporation”—of a thawing wasp (31, 33). There is an important double meaning to Taylor’s use of the phrase “vitall grace” (38). On the one hand, it signifies the delicacy of a Creator’s attention to the title insect’s constitution, His deftness at forming the tiny creature’s “petty toes, and fingers ends,” her “velvet Capitall” and the “tiny brain pan” Taylor likens to “A volume of choice precepts cleare;” on the other, the phrase suggests the necessity of divine grace to the existence and continued operation of physical life (7, 14-6). The authors I discuss in the pages that follow—Flannery O’Connor, John Updike, Andre Dubus, and Marilynne Robinson—are fiction writers, all of whom lived centuries after Taylor. Even so, they are similarly interested in the mystery of bodies and of how human lives, which exist in a form and universe governed by physical laws, fit into or intersect with the larger spiritual reality that each author views, in his or her particular way, as the broader existential context in which being takes place.

This relationship between physical and spiritual realities presents a unique and interesting set of problems, but before we go further, I should stipulate that, to the extent that my discussion engages the ethical dimensions of such problems, my readings of these authors is concerned with what James Phelan describes as “the ethics of the told” and “the ethics of the telling,”<sup>1</sup> a set of

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<sup>1</sup> Phelan first laid out his theory regarding four general approaches to narrative ethics in his book *Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration* (2005), in which he described what he would later call “the ethics of writing/producing” and “the ethics of reading/reception” in addition to the two ethical approaches I mention here (“Narrative Ethics”). The introduction to his later book *Experiencing Fiction: Judgements, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative* (2007) employs these same ideas, alongside others regarding narrative aesthetics and progression, to arrive at Phelan’s “seven theses about narrative judgments” (6). For the most straightforward discussion of the distinctions between these terms, see Phelan’s entry on “Narrative Ethics” for the *Living Handbook of Narratology*, an online encyclopedia of narratological terms and concepts maintained by Hamburg University.

narrative questions addressed to “text-internal” relationships among characters, narrators, narratees, implied authors, and the beliefs that inform the fictive worlds in which these figures participate (*Experiencing* 12; “Narrative Ethics”). I say this to clarify that my intent in this dissertation is not to justify the beliefs of the authors I discuss but to examine how their thinking about the nature and problems of embodied existence shape the stories they tell. My goal is to understand how body and belief, as perceived by each author, function as symbiotic contributors to narrative praxis (*Experiencing* 10). Beginning with the different aesthetics of embodied experience we read in their fiction, I hope to arrive at a fuller understanding of how beliefs about physical reality determine the kinds of embodied experience authors create for their characters.

The moment in Robinson’s *Gilead* when John Ames, remembering how he held his first and short-lived child, says, “there is nothing more astonishing than a human face” would never occur in an O’Connor narrative for the same reasons that none of Updike’s characters mount a Dubusian internal wrestling match with the mysteries of sacramental confession (66). Religious thought, like regional identity, personal history, or political orientation, both inspires and restricts the imagination in ways unique to individual writers. The precise character of these liberties and limitations often depends as much on what a particular author “is able to make live” as on the specific tenets of his or her faith (O’Connor *MM* 27). All of the authors addressed in this dissertation share the conviction that encounters with spiritual reality take place in the physical world, that divine love and grace are mediated through the body, yet they all depict fictional universes that, while recognizably human and theologically inflected, are unmistakably their own, each representing a unique vision of where grace is found and how it functions. For O’Connor, grace is almost always violent; for Updike, it is often un-looked-for; for Dubus, it is embedded in physical practices that help us to cope with or make sense of our existence, and for

Robinson, it is a gift of healing to be shared, an exhortation to forgive in active, tactile ways because all human beings are flawed and sacred simultaneously.

My discussion of belief and embodiment includes two Catholic authors—O'Connor and Dubus—and two Protestants—Updike and Robinson—, but there are several ways in which readers could further subdivide these figures, each with its own implications for how we read and understand their narratives. Two are women; two are men. Two ultimately experienced physical disability; two did not.<sup>2</sup> Generationally, O'Connor (born in 1925) and Updike (born in 1932) form the earlier pair, having both achieved literary success in the early 1950s, O'Connor with the publication of her novel *Wise Blood* in 1952 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux and Updike with the first of his Olinger stories appearing in the *New Yorker* in 1954. Robinson and Dubus belong to the next writerly generation, having been born in the years 1943 and 1936 respectively and having published their first significant works of fiction—*Housekeeping* (1980) and the collection *Separate Flights* (1975)—only five years apart. This generational distinction is somewhat obscured by the fact that neither O'Connor nor Dubus lived to see the twenty-first century. The fact that O'Connor died at thirty-nine years old (and in 1964) while Updike lived and continued writing well into old age, his final collection of short stories appearing posthumously in 2009, allows us to think of O'Connor as living much earlier in time, her fiction never addressing a world beyond the Cold War or the Civil Rights Movement.

A look at the kinds of worlds these authors do address and envision provides interesting, if complicated, insight into the relationship between personal theology and the creative process. Whether this has to do with the historical moment in which they began writing fiction or whether

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<sup>2</sup> O'Connor completed most of her fiction after being diagnosed with systemic lupus erythematosus, a disease which eventually confined her to Andalusia (her family's farm in Milledgeville, Georgia) and led to her death at only thirty-nine years of age, while Dubus (as I discuss more fully in my third chapter) suffered the loss of one leg and the paralysis of the other after being struck by a car less than a month before his fiftieth birthday.



it is simply a matter of upbringing, personal inclination, or something else entirely, both Robinson and Dubus depict characters who are explicitly religious and who struggle with what it means to be a believing person with a physical body, particularly in a world where so much—on a spectrum from pleasure to pain—can befall that body, whether through loving relationships, contentious ones, individual choices (for good or bad), forces of nature, the passage of time, illness, acts of legislation, etc. The characters who face this existential struggle are substantially, if imperfectly, self-aware, conscious of the value of rituals or religious ideas, but often at a loss for how to implement them in specific situations. There are also important differences in how these two authors handle spiritual and physical dilemmas. Dubus, like O'Connor, is more frequently attuned to the human capacity for violence, depicting characters who either turn away from spiritual truth in committing violent acts or who turn to sacrament as a means of transcending either their guilt or the harm that has been done to them. Robinson, like Updike, is much more attentive to the moments in which grace surprises in gentle, life-affirming ways, moments her characters typically observe or receive somewhat passively.

The comparative harshness of O'Connor's narration suggests both her dark, Southern sense of humor and a view of life lived in relation to spiritual truth as largely a series of experiences in which our erroneous assumptions about reality are continually exploded by hard actualities, incidents that push her characters (ready or not) toward deeper understanding. O'Connor's characters are often not self-aware, those professing religious affiliation among her most grotesquely obtuse, because the drama of her narratives depends on the painful, sometimes life-ending, realization of previously unconsidered reality. Updike's narratives, by contrast, depend less on dramatic events than on his characters' rapt attention to what might otherwise seem the mundane minutiae of embodied life. Apart from David Kern in "Pidgeon Feathers,"

few of Updike's characters grapple with religious ideas to the degree that we see in Robinson or Dubus, but they all display a level of personal observation which leads them to surprised realizations concerning the existential reassurance available in such otherwise unexciting phenomena as tap water or broken glass.

The range of bodies represented across these authors' narratives is also vast and varied, reflecting their attention to physical sensations and experiences including childhood, old age, sexual desire, poverty, pain, illness, disability, as well as race and gender. My hope is that this dissertation will illuminate the extent to which American Catholic and Protestant authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have addressed the materiality and mystery of existence with wonder, nuance and artistry. British novelist Ian McEwan has asserted that religion "does curtail your sense of curiosity, your sense of wanting to unwrap [the] mysteries [of existence]," and critics interested in discussions of embodiment have often viewed religion as privileging transcendence over lived experience ("Interview").<sup>3</sup> If nothing else, I am confident that considering O'Connor, Updike, Dubus, and Robinson alongside each other will reveal the unreality of McEwan's claim and complicate our collective understanding of the ways in which Catholic and Protestant writers, at least in fiction, address the mysteries of embodiment and transcendence. As my chapters demonstrate, all four of these authors display, among other qualities, a considerable interest in the physical world, and if anything, their belief that, behind it all, lurks a framing consciousness—an ultimate if inaccessible source of grace and truth—has

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<sup>3</sup> In their introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature* (2015), David Hillman and Ulrika Maude write that "In Christian and Humanist traditions, [the body] has often been seen as a mere auxiliary to the self, a vehicle or object that houses the mind or the soul" (1). Jack Reynolds, in *Merleau-Ponty and Derrida: Intertwining Embodiment and Alterity* (2004) describes the ascendancy of mind over body as an "ethico-religious" phenomenon, while Mark Johnson, in *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (2007), writes that "most Christian traditions" affirm mind-body dualism by teaching that "a person's 'true' self is not of this world of the flesh" (Reynolds 30, Johnson 7).

only deepened their appreciation for the complexity and significance of embodied life and its many encounters with vital grace.

My chapters are arranged chronologically, considering intersections of belief and body in Catholic and Protestant American fiction from the middle of the twentieth century to now. Chapter One examines O'Connor's neo-Thomist understanding of material bodies as crucial to knowledge and spiritual maturity and how her fiction unites this idea to the narrative theories of Henry James. Using Gérard Genette's concept of focalization to describe the behavior of O'Connor's "Fierce Narrator," I consider how O'Connor uses shifts in narrative perspective to embody the otherwise intellectual sins of her protagonists as well as internal moments of salvation and spiritual growth (Gordon 32). Chapter Two considers Updike's earliest and latest short stories, focusing on his narratives set in Olinger, Pennsylvania, and on his posthumous collection *My Father's Tears* (2009). After discussing the phenomenological slant to Updike's Protestant theology, I examine how the children and young men of Olinger make sense of their maturing bodies and how Updike's elderly characters struggle with physical process of aging. This discussion follows how Updike's view of embodied grace evolves over time and demonstrates that, while he is often noted (sometimes ridiculed) for his interest in sex, sexual experience accounts for only part of Updike's interest in the body. Chapter Three explores ritual's importance to Dubus's Catholic imagination, tracking how Catholic and non-Catholic characters understand their bodies in relation to the world he creates. Dubus's Catholics illustrate the extent to which Dubus viewed religious structure as a necessary means of addressing physical and spiritual problems, while his non-Catholic characters reveal how the difficulty inherent in these existential issues is increased when ritual and religious structure are absent. Finally, Chapter Four considers how Robinson conceives of embodied existence as a physical

and spiritual wilderness, in which human particularity creates both the need and means for love, understanding, and grace among her characters. The physical ways in which Robinson's characters learn to care for and forgive each other allow us insight into how her Calvinist theology has shaped instances of suffering and redemption in her fictional world.

## **“All These Things with a Body”: Embodying Sin and Salvation in Flannery O’Connor’s Short Fiction**

In the epilogue to *Flannery O’Connor* (2000), Sarah Gordon shares a flowchart developed by Man Martin while a student in her Flannery O’Connor course at Georgia College and State University. Martin’s chart, entitled “The Flannery O’Connor Computer,” invites readers to create their “own O’Connor masterpiece” by combining a list of grotesque character attributes and plot points in a variety of permutations, suggesting, as Gordon notes, that many of O’Connor’s stories “appear to follow a similar pattern” (246). Jordan Cofer, in his own recent study of O’Connor, sees Martin’s chart as a continuation of past critical accusations that paint O’Connor as a “formulaic” writer, guilty of “gimmicky repetition” (2). Cofer characterizes such shared narrative traits as “liturgical,” arguing their repetition is analogous to the layout of Catholic services (2). While liturgy may account for some thematic similarities across O’Connor’s fiction, the essential mechanism of her narratives—a character who exhibits a flawed perception of the world has that perception contradicted in an immediate (often violent) way that provides an opportunity for new insight—seems to have been motivated less by the rituals of her faith than by her interest in the body as discussed by St. Thomas Aquinas and the neo-Thomist writers of the early Twentieth Century.

O’Connor marked several introductory passages in her copy of Anton C. Pegis’s *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas* (1945), including a section in which Pegis explains that “man as a knower needs a body” because it is “through the senses of his body”—through the “sensible act of being in things”—that he begins to comprehend aspects of material existence,

which, for Aquinas, is a creation and extension of God's own being (Pegis xxvi-xxvii).<sup>4</sup> Étienne Gilson, one of the neo-Thomists O'Connor most admired,<sup>5</sup> explains the relationship between God and existence in this way:

Why, Saint Thomas asks, do we say that *Qui est* is the most proper name among all those that can be given to God?...because it signifies “to be”: *ibsum esse*. But what is it to be? In answering this most difficult of all metaphysical questions, we must distinguish between...*ens*, or “being,” and *esse*, or “to be.” To the question: What is being? The correct answer is: Being is that which is, or exists. If...we ask the same question with regard to God, the correct answer would be: The being of God is an infinite and boundless ocean of substance. But *esse*, or “to be,” is something else and much harder to grasp because it lies more deeply hidden in the metaphysical structure of reality. The word “being,” as a noun, designates some substance; the word “to be”—or *esse*—is a verb, because it designates an act...we first conceive certain beings, then we define their essences, and last we affirm their existences by means of a judgment. But the metaphysical order of reality is just the reverse of the order of human knowledge: what first comes into it is a certain act of existing which, because it is *this* particular act of existing, circumscribes at once a certain essence and causes a certain substance to come into being...In Saint Thomas' own words: *dictur esse ipse actus essentie*—“to be” is the very act whereby an essence is. (Gilson 63-4)

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<sup>4</sup> Information regarding O'Connor's marking of this passage, as well as the notations she made in numerous other texts within her private library, is available in Arthur F. Kinney's *Flannery O'Connor's Library: Resources of Being* (1985). This quote from Pegis's introduction appears on page 72 of Kinney's book.

<sup>5</sup> In a letter to Betty Hester, O'Connor remarks, “Gilson is a vigorous writer, more so than Maritain,” and in a later letter to Cecil Dawkins, she names Gilson among the philosophers who helped her to “discover the Church” and the truth of Catholic doctrine as she saw it (*HB* 107, 231).

Gilson later explains that, because “existence is not a thing, but the act that causes a thing to be and to be what it is,” there is “in our human experience...no thing whose essence is ‘to be,’ and not ‘to-be-a-certain-thing’” (70-1). This means, in turn, that “the essence of any and every thing is not existence itself, but only one of the many possible sharings in existence” (70). For Gilson, as for Aquinas, God alone can be designated “to be” because ours is “A world where ‘to be’ is the act par excellence, the act of all acts,” which means that the Catholic God, who gives his name to Moses as “I am,”<sup>6</sup> is a “supremely existential God” and that existence itself “is the original energy whence flows all which deserves the name of being” (64-5).

For O’Connor, who shares both the belief that our limited existence is an extension of God’s being—our (and all Creation’s) essences depending on and proceeding from God’s own primary and supreme existence—and that embodied knowing—which is both contingent upon and structurally opposite to what Gilson terms “the metaphysical order of reality”—is crucial to participation in the “Divine life,”<sup>7</sup> the combination of these ideas becomes an aesthetic imperative. Of short story craft she observes, “The fiction writer has to realize that he can’t create compassion with compassion, or emotion with emotion, or thought with thought. He has to provide all these things with a body; he has to create a world with weight and extension” (*MM* 92). Physical descriptions allow readers to imagine O’Connor’s characters and the world they inhabit, but these concrete details do more than ground the story in a vividly rendered space. They assume a narrative centrality. O’Connor’s characters continually struggle to negotiate and renegotiate the relationships between their own bodies and their material environments. General

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<sup>6</sup> See Exodus 3:14.

<sup>7</sup> O’Connor uses this term at least three separate times in her nonfiction: once in a letter to T.R. Spivey, once in her essay “The Nature and Aim of Fiction,” and once in “On Her Own Work” (*HB* 303; *MM* 72, 111). Each time she connects this idea to participation, suggesting that embodied life, while distant from God’s own reality nevertheless shares in the essential reality of his being.

Sash, who appears in “A Late Encounter with the Enemy” (1953) is physically “as frail as a dried spider” but cannot recall his past nor bring himself to care about the future and, therefore, imagines his 104-year-old body existing outside of time in an eternal “now” (*CS* 140, 142). Another of O’Connor’s early characters, Nelson Head in “The Artificial Nigger” (1955) has never seen a person of color before his trip into the city and embarrasses himself at his first encounter. O.E. Parker, from the late story “Parker’s Back” (1965), has his back covered with a Byzantine Christ in a misguided attempt to make his tattooed body more acceptable to Sarah Ruth. Characters’ understanding of their physical place in the world is frequently at odds with the narrator’s understanding of that same relationship, and this tension illuminates the absurdity of characters’ self-perceptions. As characters see themselves in grander terms than the narrator supports, readers recognize in them a posture that Marshall Bruce Gentry describes as “banal self-righteousness” (21).

Gentry’s phrase encapsulates an important aspect of O’Connor’s narrative praxis and is useful for understanding one of her principal variations on the modernist narrative tradition. For O’Connor, this tradition begins with Henry James. “James,” she writes in a letter to Betty Hester, “started this business of telling a story through what he called a central intelligence” (*HB* 157). This invented consciousness, O’Connor argues, is crucial to the “dramatic unity” of a fictional text because it supplies an “omniscient narrator” who, in turn, allows the author to “know who’s seeing what” in a given moment and thus enables the text to maintain its sense of reality as long as the narrator’s vantage point is not vacated or violated in some way (157). J. Hillis Miller suggests that James’s preferred brand of omniscient narrator “might be defined as a consciousness of the consciousness of others” but is quick to point out that what we mean when we discuss consciousness in fiction is really “only the representation of consciousness in words”



(124-5). Miller also explains that James's central intelligence is a formal device that may easily be understood in terms of Gérard Genette's theory of focalization.

In *Narrative Discourse* (1980), Genette outlines three basic kinds of focalization: *nonfocalization* or *zero focalization*, in which "the narrator knows more than the character, or more exactly *says* more than any of the characters knows," *internal focalization*, in which "the narrator says only what a given character knows," and *external focalization*, in which "the narrator says less than the character knows" (Genette 189-90). Throughout James's fiction, narratives tend to fall (with a few notable exceptions) into the first of Genette's categories. The nameless, faceless "I" who does the telling in works like *Daisy Miller* or *The Portrait of a Lady* comes much closer to a nonfocalized omniscience than to either of the remaining narrative perspectives, and even in a story like "The Real Thing" (1892), which is told from the internally focalized view of a painter who hires the central characters to work in his studio, James manages to create the sense that his narrator possesses a greater awareness of the world's complexities than do his other characters. While there are several moments in O'Connor's fiction when the narrator's perspective and a character's seem to merge—at the start of "Good Country People" (1955), for example, readers find a description of Mrs. Freeman's "forward and reverse" facial expressions that we can easily read as seen and understood by Mrs. Hopewell—O'Connor's narrator is predominantly nonfocalized since readers could never reasonably assert that her narrator displays knowledge that is equal to or lesser than that of her characters (CS 271).

For both James and O'Connor, the distance between the narrator's superior consciousness and their characters' mistaken perceptions yields a dramatic irony significant to the action of the story, yet in spite of this similarity in narrative mechanism, these two authors produce noticeably different work. If we examine the end of James's "The Real Thing," we notice that readers feel

far more pity for the Monarchs than they are ever invited to feel for one of O'Connor's protagonists. James's narrator has repeatedly demonstrated the absurdity of the Monarchs' insistence that they are "the *real* thing" (in the sense that they are genuine English nobility), a fact that not only fails to mitigate their destitution but that actually works against them as they struggle to find and maintain employment (James 40). The narrative they have constructed for themselves in order to understand their material place in the world assumes that nobility carries social value regardless of financial status. Both narrator and reader know this assumption to be a sham, but there is little pleasure, if any, in seeing this truth revealed to the Monarchs. Even with previous knowledge of their misunderstanding, we recognize this final blow as a poignant moment in which two people clinging to an increasingly untenable position have acknowledged the indignity to which life has finally brought them and which they did not previously imagine possible. In the end, James writes, "They had accepted their failure but they couldn't accept their fate. They had bowed their heads in bewilderment to the perverse and cruel law in virtue of which the real thing could be so much less precious than the unreal; but they didn't want to starve... 'Take us on,' they wanted to say—'we'll do *anything*,'" (57).

The contrast between the Monarchs' realization and the realizations commonly experienced by O'Connor's characters underscores the banality of self-righteousness in O'Connor's fiction. The Grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" (1953), Mrs. May in "Greenleaf" (1956), Sheppard in "The Lame Shall Enter First" (1962), and nearly all other O'Connor protagonists assume that their position relative to the world of the text is both just and secure as a result of its fundamental rightness. As a result, they act with a sense of moral conviction that is inevitably opposed and negated by a narrator who wields the observational authority of a Jamesian central intelligence and whose Aquinas-inflected Catholic paradigm

gives her moral vision a coherence not found in the private justifications O'Connor's characters espouse. As the narrator moves in and out of various perspectives, readers become aware of the extent to which characters have misjudged the material realities of their world, including their own bodies and the physical ramifications of their problematic ideas and attitudes. Scholars have often noted the conflict between O'Connor's narrator and her characters, but the material importance of this conflict has not been fully explored. In this chapter, I argue that the narrator's shifts in focalization consistently direct readers' attention to details which undermine the way characters think about themselves, their world, and narrative events. I argue also that these contradictions turn the bodies of O'Connor's characters into sites of dramatic irony and that this irony gives "weight and extension" to the spiritual crises her characters experience by revealing sins like pride or anger—sins commonly regarded as errors of thought—to be physical phenomena with material consequences. Finally, I hope to demonstrate that this singular embodiment of intellectual and spiritual processes spans O'Connor's work, appearing in her earliest collected stories as well as in late stories like "Revelation" (1964) and "Parker's Back" (1965), where spiritual growth and salvation are also given bodies.

### *The Early Stories*

O'Connor's interest in the body as a site of contradiction between characters' perceptions and the reality her narrator endorses is evident as early as "A Stroke of Good Fortune" (1949), the only story in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955) to predate the publication of O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood* (1952). Though O'Connor would eventually consider this narrative one of her weakest offerings,<sup>8</sup> Ruby Hill is an important character because she anticipates the majority of

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<sup>8</sup> In a letter to Cecil Dawkins dated 15 February 1961, she writes, "I have been sorry that I let 'A Stroke of Good Fortune' be in my collection. I don't guess it made too much difference, but I do have the sense that it is not

O'Connor's later protagonists. Also, as with many later stories, the beginning of this narrative contains some illuminating shifts in narrative perspective. Certain details seem to reflect Ruby's view—her contempt for the collard greens she has just carried home from the grocery store and the disgust she feels toward her brother Rufus for requesting them—but, when she slumps down, exhausted, on top of her shopping bags, her head is compared to “a big florid vegetable at the top of the sack,” a description that seems more consistent with the narrator's sense of humor than with Ruby's sense of herself (*CS* 95). In fact, Ruby regards herself with utmost seriousness throughout the narrative, while her behavior—like earnestly consulting the palmist Madame Zoleeda for life advice—cues readers to the unreliability of Ruby's self-knowledge. When Ruby looks in the mirror, it is not certain whether the “stony unrecognition” attributed to her gaze is the narrator's criticism of Ruby's limited perception or Ruby's reaction to significant changes in her own physique (95). Either way, Ruby fails to see the fact that she is now “shaped nearly like a funeral urn” as evidence of her pregnancy (95). She remains obstinately unaware of herself until almost the final page of the narrative, repeatedly expressing disdain for children and pregnant women until her ignorance begins to seem incredible.

The scene at the mirror is the first of many in which we, as readers, notice details that Ruby fails to properly contextualize. While most of the narrative remains internally focalized, the narrator frequently directs reader attention to aspects of Ruby's outlook that are absurd in their extremity. Thinking of her own mother's eight children, she can imagine no motive other than “[t]he purest of downright ignorance” for suffering through so many pregnancies, and when confronted by the steps in her apartment building, she resents them, feeling that “they reared up and got steeper for her benefit” (97, 96). Ruby's exhaustion leads her to attribute antagonistic

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up to the rest of them,” and in letter to Betty Hester from 6 September 1955, she calls it “much too farcical to support anything” (*HB* 433, 101).

motives to a staircase, but her self-righteous myopia prevents her from adequately examining her own body for potential causes of fatigue. She considers herself far too modern and intelligent to have fallen victim to a fate as banal as unplanned pregnancy, and the irony of her predicament is compounded by her refusal to see a doctor on the grounds that, at thirty-four, she “had done all right doctoring herself all these years” (98). Rather than heed her own physical symptoms or trust the knowledge of medical professionals, Ruby chooses to rely on her husband Bill and his supply of “Miracle Products” for her body’s upkeep (96). When her neighbor Lavern finally says, “you’re swollen all over” and insists that this change is the result of a baby, the revelation is made harsher by Ruby’s earlier judgements concerning motherhood, and while Ruby protests that “Bill Hill couldn’t have slipped up,” the “little roll” she feels inside her body ultimately confirms Lavern’s diagnosis (105-7). The story’s last image is of Ruby alone on the stairs, forced to acknowledge a new reality that is both a negation of her previous beliefs and a permanent material change in her existence.

The feeling of isolation Ruby Hill experiences, an isolation created by the disparity between past smugness and new realization, seems to affirm the narrator’s sense of justice, and this kind of ending is a recognizable feature of O’Connor’s fiction. Sometimes this isolation leads to spiritual evolution, as when Mr. Head arrogantly loses his way in “The Artificial Nigger” (1955) and ends up “judging himself with the thoroughness of God,” and sometimes it does not, as when Tom T. Shiftlet, having deceived and abandoned Lucynell Crater in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” (1953), is aware that “the rottenness of the world was about to engulf him” but decides to keep driving rather than return to Lucynell and make amends (269, 156). In most of O’Connor’s narratives, however, this isolation accompanies physical catastrophe. After insisting that the family leave the main road to visit a country house, the

Grandmother in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” (1953) is too proud to tell her son that she has given everyone bad directions. Instead, the narrator shifts mid-sentence from an internally focalized account of the old woman’s realization—“The thought was so embarrassing”—to an externally focalized description of the ways in which her body registers that shame—“she turned red in the face and her eyes dilated and her feet jumped up, upsetting her valise” (125). When the cat leaps from the valise to startle Bailey, who then crashes the vehicle, the full consequence of the Grandmother’s pride is to strand her family on a remote backroad at the mercy of the Misfit. Similarly, the theft of Joy/Hulga’s wooden leg at the end of “Good Country People” (1955) subverts her intellectual snobbery, affirming the Bible salesman’s assertion—“you ain’t so smart”—and leaving her physically isolated on the farm she loathes and dependent on the very people whom she has ridiculed (291).

“A Temple of the Holy Ghost” (1954) differs from these other early narratives in that the interplay of spiritual and physical experience is (as the title suggests) handled much more explicitly and in that it follows a child protagonist whose ultimate physical shock is promised rather than played out at the end of the text. Many critics have discussed the story’s hermaphrodite as a key symbolic figure—Gentry writes that the hermaphrodite’s blue dress resembles “clothing traditionally associated with the Virgin [Mary],” while Christina Bieber Lake argues that “the hermaphrodite’s body represents the Eucharist”—but the narrator seems to focus primarily on the Child’s body and naïve yet self-assured understanding (or misunderstanding) of human physical and spiritual experience (Gentry 66; Lake 66). Like many aforementioned O’Connor characters, the Child is too certain of her ill-formed assumptions, and much of the narrative turns on her failure to properly envision bodies and experiences that lie beyond her own immediate knowledge. It is worth noting that, when a work of fiction follows a

child's point of view, that child is often narrator and main character both—like the girl in Alice Munro's "Walker Brothers Cowboy" (1968)—or is actually an adult remembering formative childhood moments—like the boy in Robert Penn Warren's "Blackberry Winter" (1947) or Harper Lee's Scout Finch—but, in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," the presence of O'Connor's nonfocalized narrator produces a different effect. Though the narrator consistently reports the Child's thoughts, she also directs our attention to information that either escapes the Child's notice or is not a primary object of the Child's concern. This means that readers do not have to rely on the Child's articulation of what she thinks, feels, or remembers and that they are, therefore, allowed a more complete view of the Child's physical experience (and inexperience) than she has herself.

The story begins with Susan and Joanne "shaking with laughter" each time they address each other as "Temple One and Temple Two," an inside joke at the expense of Sister Perpetua, who, lecturing the girls of Mount St. Scholastica on the subject of sexual purity, had advised them to counter the advances of young men with an adamant, "Stop sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!" (CS 236, 238). Far from seeing the situation as humorous, the Child, who is both morally serious and prepubescent, fails to understand the joke's sexual subtext but becomes fascinated by the concept of the body as temple. Thinking of her own body as a holy site makes the Child feel "as if somebody had given her a present," and she has received enough Catholic religious instruction to understand that this idea applies to all bodies, reflecting that her mother's boarder Miss Kirby "[is] a Temple of the Holy Ghost too" (238-239). Even so, she seems to regard all other bodies as more or less similar to her own. She recognizes that Wendell and Cory, the Church of God boys who escort the older girls to the fair, belong to a different gender than she does, but her knowledge of sexual difference seems confined to her observations that the

boys “wear pants” and that they “sat like monkeys” on the porch banister (239-40). When she pretends to have seen a pregnant rabbit deliver its young to impress the older girls, she tells them, “It spit them out of its mouth...six of them” (246). Susan and Joanne, who are just beginning to learn about their own sexuality, do not know enough to contradict the Child, but for readers, the irony of these moments is glaring.

The Child’s certainty regarding bodies seems to go hand-in-hand with the certainties of her faith, and both are challenged when Susan and Joanne return from the fair, claiming that they have seen “a freak with a particular name” who was “a man and a woman both” and who “pulled up its dress and showed [them]” (245). Here again, the Child receives information that means less to her than it does to the reader. Without any knowledge of male and female genitalia, the Child can only think to ask “You mean it had two heads?” to which the older girls answer in the negative (245). From this moment forward, the Child is simultaneously fascinated and frustrated by the hermaphrodite she can never quite envision. O’Connor writes, “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” (246). Here, the narrator describes a failure of imagination, a young girl’s inability to give shape to a state of being—a body—that she did not know existed and for which she has not yet discovered any frame of reference. This failure forces the Child to confront the limits of her own understanding, especially when she considers the hermaphrodite’s speech: “God made me thisaway and if you laugh He may strike you the same way. This is the way he wanted me to be and I ain’t disputing his way” (245). Hearing that a person whose body is beyond her imagination has echoed her own conviction that God is the creator of bodies and of physical experience is unsettling to her because, while she accepts the principle’s inelasticity, she is beginning to realize that what



constitutes a body is broader and more complex than she had originally thought. She hears the hermaphrodite saying “I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost,” and much of her thinking thereafter is concerned with reconciling the hermaphrodite’s unimaginable body with that spiritual reality (246).

Readers may resolve this tension for themselves by accepting Miles Orvell’s assertion that “The Word made flesh makes a temple of even the most grotesque of bodies,” but this idea does not seem to adequately summarize the hermaphrodite’s impact on the Child (46). In church, she “[was] well into the *Tantum Ergo*,” O’Connor writes, “before her ugly thoughts stopped and she began to realize she was in the presence of God...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 that fair that had the freak in it” (247-8). Readers are clearly meant to observe some parallels between the Host and the hermaphrodite in this scene, but for the Child, it is not until her final vision that these images come together. In this scene, the Host is incidental to her thinking about the circus tent that she rightly suspects of housing a profound mystery. Rather than providing her with a point of “identification”—for which some successful imagination seems necessary—as critics have suggested, the hermaphrodite remains elusive, resisting definition and continuing to trouble the Child’s thoughts (Gordon 157). After the Child confronts her own inadequate understanding of the relationship between the physical and the spiritual, Lake characterizes her as “displaced...to a position of exceptional spiritual openness and potential fecundity,” (137). Ideally, she would return home with her expanded understanding of the body as temple and display a much more respectful attitude toward the people she encounters, yet when she takes her seat in Alonzo’s car, she “observe[s] three folds of fat in the back of his neck” and notes “that his ears were pointed almost like a pig’s” (CS 248). This

observation suggests the Child's superior attitude has not entirely vanished, but her final vision of the sun "like an elevated host drenched in blood" that "left a line in the sky like a red clay road above the trees" seems to indicate some interest (if not humility) in the face of mystery. She seems to understand that she is on the verge of important insight even if she cannot quite identify it, and we know even if she does not that, as she enters puberty, her own body will disclose new knowledge to her and, with it, other mysteries (248).

### *"The Displaced Person"*

Of O'Connor's early work, the story that best represents her artistic objectives might be "The Displaced Person" (1954), a story O'Connor revised substantially between its original publication in the *Sewanee Review* and its inclusion in *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1955). In that interval she added Mrs. McIntyre's narrative, establishing the "counterpointing style" that now distinguishes this story from the majority of O'Connor's short fiction (Sessions 62). While the primary point-of-view character changes halfway through the text, the latter sections build on the first in important ways. Mrs. Shortley's narrative (the entirety of the original story) establishes life on the McIntyre farm as a degenerative system in which flawed thinking produces a spiraling series of harmful spiritual and physical outcomes, and Mrs. McIntyre's narrative continues this series until the entire system reaches critical mass. Both women come to view Mr. Guizac, the Polish refugee displaced to the McIntyre farm by Hitler's occupation of Eastern Europe, as a threat, and the fear and hostility they harbor lead each woman to her own physical apocalypse.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator's view of Mrs. Shortley is externally focalized. As the peacock follows her up the hill, readers are told, "they looked like a complete procession"

(CS 194). This assessment is not Mrs. Shortley's (or the peacock's), and there is not yet another character who could be watching her. It is the narrator, therefore, who likens Mrs. Shortley to "the giant wife of the countryside" and observes that "She stood on two tremendous legs, with the grand self-confidence of a mountain, and rose, up narrowing bulges of granite, to two icy blue points of light that pierced forward, surveying everything" (194). Patricia Yaeger describes Mrs. Shortley as one of "the South's gargantuan women" who "lay claim to a dense materiality" to acquire power, and the narrator's description indicates that the character's imposing physical size supports a gaze that is aggressive, invasive, and directed everywhere (115). While Mrs. Shortley often uses her unforgiving stare to intimidate other characters, however, readers soon discover that it is not as careful or insightful as she supposes. She and others consider her a formidable investigator—following her death, Mr. Shortley remarks, "You couldn't put nothing over on her"—but the narrator undermines this fiction by granting readers access to Mrs. Shortley's erroneous thinking and by directing our attention to details she either ignores or misses altogether (CS 233). As she scans the McIntyre farm with her domineering posture, the narrative perspective shifts, and we observe the arrival of the Guizacs through Mrs. Shortley's eyes, a view laced with obvious prejudice. Watching Mrs. McIntyre greet the newcomers, Mrs. Shortley is disgusted by what she perceives to be her employer's hypocrisy, recalling that "She and Mrs. McIntyre had been calling them the Gobblehooks all week while they got ready for them" and observing "Yet...here [Mrs. McIntyre] was, wearing her best clothes and a string of beads" along with "her largest smile" (195-6, 194). Beyond exposing Mrs. McIntyre's insincerity, Mrs. Shortley's observations actually reveal her own lack of feeling (and even contempt) for the displaced family.

Mrs. Shortley sees Mr. Guizac as “only hired help” but ironically sees herself as belonging to a higher status, equating Mr. Guizac to Astor and Sulk and imagining that the farm’s black workers will eventually be replaced by the inevitable influx of foreign laborers she begins to dread (195). Even as she notices (with some surprise) that the Guizacs “looked like other people,” acknowledging that “the woman had on a dress she might have worn herself and the children were dressed like anybody from around,” Mrs. Shortley continues to view the Poles as an inferior species, using her piercing vision, as Lake puts it, to “[determine] her bodily distance from people” rather than building community on the commonalities she observes (CS 195, Lake 41). She thinks of “a newsreel she had seen once of a small room piled high with bodies of dead naked people all in a heap, their arms and legs tangled together, a head thrust in here, a head there, a foot, a knee, a part that should have been covered up sticking out, a hand raised clutching nothing,” but instead of reacting with compassion, she reacts with fear and anxiety, thinking of the refugees as invaders and denying their victimization (CS 196). She attributes the scene’s brutality not to totalitarian oppression but to some kind of general foreignness, a vague non-American set of values and cultural practices that made genocide possible “over there” (196). “Watching from her vantage point,” O’Connor writes, “Mrs. Shortley had the sudden intuition that the Gobblehooks, like rats with typhoid fleas, could have carried all those murderous ways over the water with them directly to this place” (196). This denial of the Guizacs’ humanity parrots Nazi rhetoric as well as earlier American forms of xenophobic, nativist, and white-nationalist discourse<sup>9</sup> and ironically places Mrs. Shortley in the ideological territory responsible for the “murderous ways” she fears.

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<sup>9</sup> The use of such rhetoric by Germany’s Nazi party is well known, and numerous examples, from propaganda films like *Der Ewige Jude* (1940) to pamphlets like *Der Jude als Weltparasit* (1944) are widely available online. Examples of Ku Klux Klan pamphlets from the 1920s decrying the “mongrel” influence of immigrants on American society may be found with similar ease, but recent studies have often traced a longer and

Mrs. Shortley does not seem to realize that this kind of thinking can have terrible physical ramifications for the powerless. Nevertheless, she feels the need to justify her hostility on religious grounds and turns to the Bible, as Ralph C. Wood explains, “to condemn and reject, rather than to succor and save” (45). Looking at Father Flynn, the priest who arranged Mr. Guizac’s employment, Mrs. Shortley is “reminded that these people did not have an advanced religion” and thinks, “There was no telling what all they believed since none of the foolishness had been reformed out of it” (CS 197-8). Her distrust leads to a reinvigoration of Mrs. Shortley’s fundamentalist beliefs, but in her fixation on Mr. Guizac as spiritual adversary, she misses several opportunities for genuine spiritual insight as well as several opportunities to improve her family’s standing with Mrs. McIntyre. When Mrs. McIntyre, thrilled with her new worker’s productivity, says of Mr. Guizac, “That man is my salvation!”—one of many instances in which the narrative implies a parallel between the Polish refugee’s suffering and that of Christ—Mrs. Shortley views the remark as a slight against her own husband (203). Instead of considering that Mr. Shortley (who smokes in the barn against his employer’s wishes and spends much of his day running a secret still at the edge of the property) might need to improve his work habits, she calls Mr. Guizac “the devil” (203). She reflects that “The trouble with these people was, you couldn’t tell what they knew,” and O’Connor writes that “Every time Mr. Guizac smiled, Europe stretched out in Mrs. Shortley’s imagination, mysterious and evil, the devil’s experiment station” (205). While biblical notions of good and evil provide Mrs. Shortley with a way of privately articulating and validating her prejudices, her fears have a clear physical component. What she

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broader history of anti-immigration rhetoric in the United States, indicating that the depiction of immigrants as invasive and inferior species was not restricted to explicit hate groups. In his book *Not Fit for Our Society* (2010), Peter Schrag notes that “In almost every generation, nativists portrayed new immigrants as not fit to become real Americans: they were too infected by Catholicism, monarchism, anarchism, Islam, criminal tendencies, defective genes, mongrel bloodlines, or some other alien virus” (4). While Schrag traces this trend back to America’s founding, one notable example he provides is that of Madison Grant, whose book *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) employs these same terms and became popular among American eugenicists of the early Twentieth Century.

describes to herself as the “stinking power of Satan” is really the idea that foreign beliefs and practices disguised in familiar bodies are waiting to infiltrate America through the South and the South through the McIntyre farm (209). In an “inner vision,” she imagines herself in opposition to these forces as “a giant angel with wings as wide as a house” sent to warn “the Negroes” that they would soon be displaced themselves by “the ten million billion of them [European refugees] pushing their way into new places over here” (200). To Mrs. Shortley, American whiteness and physical magnitude are evidence that God has appointed her to an exalted purpose.

The narrator invalidates this “inner vision” by turning reader attention to the peacock. Like the people of Taulkinham in *Wise Blood* (1952), who are not “paying any attention” to a night sky alive with “the whole order of the universe” because they are more interested in the products displayed in local store fronts, Mrs. Shortley fails to notice the intricate beauty of the peacock because her attention is turned inward, focused on self-congratulation rather than on self-analysis (*WB* 38). The narrator focusses especially on the bird’s tail “full of fierce planets with eyes that were each ringed in green and set against a sun that was gold in one second’s light and salmon-colored in the next” and tells us that, if she were not so distracted by private anxieties, Mrs. Shortley “might have been looking at a map of the universe” (*CS* 200). Scholars have devoted significant energy to exploring the peacock’s symbolic potential,<sup>10</sup> but the narrator presents the bird primarily as evidence of divine mystery, suggesting that the universe is a vast and complex creation meticulously ordered, that this order eludes total human comprehension,

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<sup>10</sup> Gentry offers the most thorough discussion of the peacock’s numerous symbolic associations, covering O’Connor’s own interest in the birds, their use in St. Augustine’s *City of God* and other Christian texts, their appearance in Greek mythology, and the numerous references to the peacock from the story itself, including the analogy Father Flynn draws between the peacock with its tail fanned and “The Transfiguration” as well as the resemblance between the peacock and the angelic figure in Mrs. Shortley’s later vision with its “fiery wheels with fierce dark eyes in them” (*CS* 226, 210). This discussion can be found in *Flannery O’Connor’s Religion of the Grotesque*, 24-8, 30. Other useful accounts of the peacock’s significance can be found in Gordon’s *Flannery O’Connor*, 184-5, 192, and in Lake’s *The Incarnational Art of Flannery O’Connor*, 45-6.

and that Mrs. Shortley—by looking at the wrong things in the wrong ways—has misjudged her place in it. Though she believes that renewed biblical study has brought her to a “deeper understanding of her existence,” the narrator shows us that this thinking is problematic (209). Rather than recognize Mr. Guizac either as a fellow member of the Body of Christ or as a fully human part of the global community in which she also participates, Mrs. Shortley continues to view him as a malicious interloper and magnifies herself to angelic status, concluding that “the Lord God Almighty had created the strong people to do what had to be done” and that her individual physical strength has ensured her “a special part in the plan” (209).

In the end, the physical dominance Mrs. Shortley has trusted for her security is also revealed to be less robust than she imagines. Before her final vision, O’Connor writes, “She paused after an incline to heave a sigh of exhaustion for she had an immense weight to carry around and she was not as young as she used to be. At times she could feel her heart, like a child’s fist, clenching and unclenching inside her chest, and when the feeling came, it stopped her thought altogether” (210). Her body’s size and age result in weakness rather than the authority she has previously claimed. These forces acting in concert bring her to a standstill, and this physical immobility clears her mind. Noticing the activity of the sky for the first time in the narrative, Mrs. Shortley envisions an angelic figure out of Ezekiel who commands her to “Prophecy!” (210). The vision is so intense that Mrs. Shortley has to “shut her eyes in order to look at it,” and her prophecy recalls the earlier newsreel footage—“Legs where arms should be, foot to face, ear in the palm of hand”—before leaving her with an important question: “Who will remain whole? Who?” (210). Lake reads this prophecy as “nothing but a declaration of the unified self” in opposition to a European other, but it is distinct from Mrs. Shortley’s earlier vision in that it forces her to close her eyes (rather than direct them at someone she mistrusts)

and ends with uncertain contemplation instead of an assumption of fact (44). We see, even if Mrs. Shortley does not, that she is implicated in the “wicked nations” she imagines, and the question she poses indicates her own anxieties concerning evil as a global and inescapable reality, suggesting, as Gentry notes, “a general victimization” that could include her even if she does not immediately associate this victimization with the possibility of her own physical displacement (*CS* 210, Gentry 30).

When she hears Mrs. McIntyre tell Father Flynn that Mr. Shortley will soon be fired, Mrs. Shortley realizes that she will be displaced even before the farm’s black workers, recognizing at last that she is no better in Mrs. McIntyre’s eyes than the “trashy people” the two women used to ridicule together (*CS* 203). This realization touches off a series of events recounted through sudden shifts in narrative perspective. These shifts both subvert Mrs. Shortley’s previous views and suggest her possible redemption. By trying to detect nefarious motives in the Guizacs rather than examining her own shortcomings, Mrs. Shortley unwittingly contributes to her own displacement, and while she tries to maintain a measure of control by packing up her family and leaving before they can be officially dismissed, the stress of her predicament induces a stroke, robbing her of the ability to control even her own body. Her eyes, which originally “pierced” and were later “shut” by prophetic vision, ultimately display “a peculiar lack of light” as if, according to the narrator, “All the vision in them might have been turned around, looking inside her” (213). In a moment of explicit identification with European victims, she suffers a seizure in which “She suddenly grabbed Mr. Shortley’s elbow and Sarah Mae’s foot at the same time and began to tug and pull on them as if she were trying to fit the two extra limbs onto herself” (213). As Mrs. Shortley dies, the narrator shifts attention from her perceptions to those of her children, who note that their mother’s face displays “a look of



astonishment” but remain ignorant of the fact “that she had had a great experience or ever been displaced in the world from all that belonged to her” (214). In the instant before her death, Mrs. Shortley appears to have subjected herself to the same scrutinizing gaze she has aimed at others for much of the narrative and consequently to have discovered some of the problems with her previous thinking. How complete this discovery has been is uncertain, but she does seem to acknowledge a kinship with the Guizacs, seeing herself as a potential victim of the world’s cruelty rather than as God’s champion. While her realization comes too late to save her life or livelihood, it, like the Grandmother’s acceptance of responsibility in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” looks to be “the right gesture” (*MM* 112).

With Mrs. Shortley out of the narrative, the narrator’s perspective changes again, aligning predominantly with Mrs. McIntyre’s point of view for the remaining sections. Like Mrs. Shortley, Mrs. McIntyre possesses an “intense stare” that she uses to assert her authority over other characters. She also sees herself as an indomitable constant who must protect her farm from the economic concerns that threaten its operations, and her eventual collusion in Mr. Guizac’s murder is motivated by this objective even though it brings a physical end to the system of prejudices revealed in the narrative’s first section. To Astor, she says, “Do you know what’s happening to this world? It’s swelling up. It’s getting so full of people that only the smart thrifty energetic ones are going to survive” (216). Mrs. McIntyre does not have Mrs. Shortley’s mountainous physical presence, but she nevertheless views her own “small stiff figure” as a vital and enduring force whose energy, intelligence, and thrift distinguish her from poor whites and people of color she employs (220). Mrs. McIntyre’s powers of perception are thrown into further doubt by her memories of the Judge, her first husband. Not only is Mrs. McIntyre deceived by the Judge’s appearance of wealth only to discover after his death that he is bankrupt, but she also

regards his decision to leave her with few resources (having sold all of the property's timber before he died) as poetic rather than selfish, thinking, "It was as if, as the final triumph of a successful life, he had been able to take everything with him" (218). Orvell notes that "the picture we get of the Judge in this section seems ironically to go beyond [Mrs. McIntyre's] understanding of him," so that her reverence for her former husband—alongside readers' acknowledgement of his failures—reveals her interpretive ineptitude (147).

Mrs. McIntyre's perception of her place in the world also suffers from its own internal contradictions. To Astor, she says, "What you colored people don't realize...is that I'm the one around here who holds all the strings together. If you don't work, I don't make any money and I can't pay you. You're all dependent on me but you each and every one act like the shoe is on the other foot" (CS 217). Mrs. McIntyre insists that her workers are dependent on her for payment while acknowledging in the same breath that her ability to pay requires their participation. She fails to see the symbiotic nature of the farm-owner-farm-hand relationship, characterizing her employees as hardships that must be endured. An important moment of internally focalized narration reveals how Mrs. McIntyre understands her relationship to the people around her:

She survived a succession of tenant farmers and dairymen that the old man [the Judge] himself would have found hard to outdo, and she had been able to meet the constant drain of a tribe of moody unpredictable Negroes, and she had even managed to hold her own against the incidental bloodsuckers, the cattle dealers and lumber men and the buyers and sellers of anything who drove up in pieced-together trucks and honked in the yard. (218)

Mrs. McIntyre envisions herself as a lone figure against the world, adopting, in another echo of Mrs. Shortley, an adversarial posture toward those outside herself, all of whom she suspects of trying to exploit her farm and all of whom, therefore, must be survived, if not defeated.

Even the displaced person comes under suspicion, and Mrs. McIntyre, who initially praises his productivity, comes to feel that he “had probably had everything given to him all the way across Europe and over here” and that he “probably not had to struggle enough” (219). As a typical, self-righteous O’Connor protagonist, Mrs. McIntyre senses none of the irony in this appraisal, and her misunderstanding of Mr. Guizac’s experiences develops from trivialization of his suffering to dehumanization of the man himself when she uncovers his plan to bring his sixteen-year-old cousin to the U.S. by marrying her to Sulk. Stunned by this discovery, Mrs. McIntyre exclaims, “Mr. Guizac! You would bring this poor innocent child over here and try to marry her to a half-witted thieving black stinking nigger! What kind of monster are you!” (222). Though Mr. Guizac explains the conditions of the European camps have eradicated any racial misgivings his cousin may have had, Mrs. McIntyre cannot see beyond her own unapologetic belief in the inherent disparity of virtue between black and white bodies. Instead of responding with compassion, she allows Mr. Guizac’s marriage plot to deepen her suspicions (reminiscent of Mrs. Shortley’s) that the displaced Pole might intend to corrupt American decency with his foreign liberalism (223). She not only refuses to bring his cousin to the United States but also threatens to send Mr. Guizac away if he continues to discuss the matter. “This is my place,” she tells him, “I say who will come here and who won’t” and insists, “I am not responsible for the world’s misery” (223).

While her first claim asserts control of the situation and, with it, power over literal bodies and their access to her space, Mrs. McIntyre’s second claim rejects the ethical burden which that

power entails, and she turns to patriotism (rather than religion) to defend the contradiction. She rehires Mr. Shortley, deciding “*her* moral obligation was to her own people, to Mr. Shortley, who had fought in the world war for his country and not to Mr. Guizac who had merely arrived here to take advantage of whatever he could” (228). Despite the moral tone of this justification, Mrs. McIntyre remains hostile to religious thinking about the nature of the world, ethics, or the plight of the displaced and, by extension, hostile to the narrator’s sense of justice and divine order. Father Flynn’s fascination with the peacock recalls the narrator’s earlier vision of the material world as one of complex (and beautiful) design, but when the priest attempts to discuss Catholic doctrine with Mrs. McIntyre, she interrupts, stating, “I’m not theological. I’m practical!” and insisting that they leave that topic for “something serious” (225, 229). Echoing the Misfit’s complaint about Christ in “A Good Man is Hard to Find,”<sup>11</sup> she tells the priest that she would like to dismiss Mr. Guizac, explaining that “He’s extra and he’s upset the balance around here” (231).

Gordon observes that “in the microcosmic world of the farm exists the same capacity for the denial of the humanity of others that exists in the world at large,” and Mrs. McIntyre’s participation in Mr. Guizac’s murder is both a culmination of her dehumanizing suspicions and the event that triggers the collapse of the farm she hopes to protect. Mrs. McIntyre’s role in Mr. Guizac’s death is passive. She observes and says nothing, yet the narrator characterizes her inaction as conspiratorial. We are told that “She heard the brake on the large tractor slip and, looking up, she saw it move forward, calculating its own path” and that “She had felt her eyes and Mr. Shortley’s eyes and the Negro’s eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever, and she had heard the little noise the Pole made as the tractor wheel broke his

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<sup>11</sup> The Misfit tells the Grandmother, “Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead...and He shouldn’t have done it. He thrown everything off balance” (CS 132).

backbone” (234). Just as she rejects the opportunity to assist those still living in camps overseas, Mrs. McIntyre, who sees the tractor rolling downhill in plenty of time to intervene, makes herself an accomplice when she does nothing to alert Mr. Guizac to the impending danger. Unlike the suffering of those in Europe, however, Mr. Guizac’s death occurs right in front of her, and the sight and sounds of his destruction are too immediate and unsettling to ignore. She is thrown into a state of bodily shock, and as Mr. Shortley and the other workers subsequently leave the farm, she experiences “a nervous affliction” and a steady decline in physical health that leaves her bedridden (235). Because she has trusted her own physical permanence and superiority to sustain her instead of cultivating human relationships, she loses everything—integrity, health, workers, property—until her only remaining companion is the priest, who “would come in and sit by the side of her bed and explain the doctrines of the Church” (235). The failure of Mrs. McIntyre’s body is a result of private moral failures, and the purgatorial<sup>12</sup> state to which this failure confines her provides her with a final opportunity for insight into the problems of human suffering and the value of compassion.

### *Later Stories*

Throughout O’Connor’s second collection *Everything that Rises Must Converge* (1965), readers see further attention to problems like self-righteousness, racism, the misapprehension of reality, and others, most narratives progressing in much the same way as O’Connor’s earlier stories. “The Enduring Chill” (1958), however, stands out as a structural anomaly. Instead of waiting to reveal the physical impact of Asbury Fox’s sins, “The Enduring Chill” begins (unlike

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<sup>12</sup> In a letter to Betty Hester dated 25 November 1955, O’Connor writes that the kind of Purgatory into which Mrs. McIntyre finally enters is “not Purgatory as St. Catherine would have it (realization) but Purgatory at least as a beginning to suffering” (*HB* 118).

any O'Connor narrative since "A Stroke of Good Fortune") with the result of Asbury's past errors—in this case, illness—in full swing and works back from his present condition to reveal its origins. As he steps off the train in Timberboro, Asbury's illness elicits a "shocked look" and a "little cry" from his mother, but more striking than the obvious severity of Asbury's condition are his feelings about the scene itself (357). "He was pleased," O'Connor writes, "that she should see death in his face at once. His mother, at the age of sixty, was going to be introduced to reality and he supposed that if the experience didn't kill her, it would assist her in the process of growing up" (357). Asbury has come home to die, and his contempt for his mother is so robust that he is glad to suffer a fatal illness if it gives him a chance to spite her. In any O'Connor narrative, nastiness and immaturity this extreme are enough to make readers doubt a character's perspective, but in "The Enduring Chill," the narrator further complicates narrative structure by inhabiting an additional perspective in the text's early moments. While most of the narrative is told from Asbury's point of view, there are several internally focalized passages that convey Mrs. Fox's interpretation of events. When, for example, Asbury tells his mother that his condition is "way beyond" the family doctor, the narrator states, "His mother knew exactly what he meant: he meant he was going to have a nervous breakdown" (360). This is not Asbury's assessment of his mother's perception, and there is an extent to which the comical nature of her definitive worry undermines her son's serious regard for his own suffering. Mrs. Fox's perspective is not always correct—the assessment just quoted, in fact, is false—but the narrator's occasional switching between vantage points creates a kind of dialogue between perspectives that prevents Asbury's view from establishing authority.

This dialogue is especially important when Asbury remembers his summer work in his mother's dairy, and it is he who will eventually face reality when what he thinks is his impending

death is revealed to be undulant fever, a recurring sickness he contracted by drinking unpasteurized milk against his mother's orders. He recalls that he took the job because he was "writing a play about the Negro" and hoped to discover how Randall and Morgan, Mrs. Fox's black employees, "really felt about their condition" (CS 368). Asbury considers himself an enlightened champion of racial equality, but he is totally insensitive to the ways in which his presence (as both a white man and the son of their employer) changes the dairy's social atmosphere. Expecting his good intentions to be more warmly received, Asbury is frustrated to discover that Randall and Morgan are reluctant to look him in the eye, addressing him "as if they were speaking to an invisible body located to the right or left of where he actually was," and that "after two days working side by side with them, he felt he had not established rapport" (368). Asbury also mistakes his mother's rules governing dairy work for a form of racial oppression rather than seeing them as practical regulations intended to facilitate the success of the dairy's daily operations. He begins to break these rules, encouraging the two black men to follow suit. After coaxing them to smoke with him, he congratulates himself for orchestrating "one of those moments of communion when the difference between black and white is absorbed into nothing" (368). Asbury's interpretation of this moment is undermined by his mother's earlier recollection that "the Negroes had put up with him," but Asbury remains oblivious, and when that day's milk is returned "because it had absorbed the odor of tobacco," he righteously defends Randall and Morgan instead of accepting the purpose behind the restriction he violated (361, 369). For his next attempt at resistance and interracial bonding, Asbury drinks a jar of unprocessed milk, ignoring Randall's warning—"That's *the* thing she don't 'low"—and infecting himself with the illness to which the story's title alludes (369).

In addition to misreading the purpose of his mother's workplace regulations, Asbury also misreads the reasons for his artistic failures and the power of his affliction to redeem those shortcomings. As one of O'Connor's "would-be intellectuals," Asbury is convinced not only that he is dying but that "Death was coming to him legitimately, as a justification" (Orvell 47, O'Connor CS 370). O'Connor writes, "He had failed his god, Art, but he had been a faithful servant, and Art was sending him Death" (373). Asbury has spent his life trying to transcend his upbringing, resenting the place in which he was raised and its inhabitants, including the members of his own family, and he blames his mother for his inability to produce quality art after leaving home. This blame is not attached to any specific trauma but to Asbury's feeling that "Her way had simply been the air he breathed and when at last he had found other air, he couldn't survive in it" (365). In the hands of another author, the plight of an aspiring artist who is able to recognize genuine achievement but unable to produce quality art himself might inspire reader sympathy, but O'Connor's narrator repeatedly calls our attention to the pomposity and pretension with which Asbury regards his predicament. Unable to produce fiction of Kafkaesque brilliance, he has "filled two notebooks" with "such a letter as Kafka had addressed to his father" (364). Asbury intends this absurdly long letter to serve as his *magnum opus*, and in a move reminiscent of Nikolai Gogol, he has "destroyed everything else he had ever written" (365). The letter itself is predictably melodramatic. Quoting Yeats's "The Second Coming," he explains that he went to New York to "escape the slave's atmosphere of home," to "liberate [his] imagination" and "set it 'whirling off into the widening gyre'" but that his creative ambitions were doomed from the outset: "I have no imagination. I have no talent. I can't create. I have nothing but the desire for these things. Why didn't you kill that too? Woman, why did you pinion me?" (364).



Lake observes that the root of Asbury's trouble is what Jacques Maritain<sup>13</sup> called the "double disease" of "emotionalism" and "shallow intellectualism" in modern art, noting that Asbury's lack of artistic ability stems from his desire to reject rather than embrace the ways in which he feels limited by his birthplace (185). Readers familiar with O'Connor's essay "The Fiction Writer and His Country" (1957) will recall her statement that "To know oneself is to know one's region" and that "The writer's value is lost, both to himself and to his country, as soon as he ceases to see that country as a part of himself" (*MM* 35). By rejecting the material realities of his home town and refusing to embrace their influence on his perception of the world, Asbury deprives his work of the "weight and extension" that art—as O'Connor's understands it—requires. Without drawing on the concrete details most familiar to him, his efforts yield a lifeless collection of idea-driven texts unfit for publication. Mrs. Fox also displays a notably flawed understanding of what constitutes genuine art, thinking that the quality of a novel is determined by its length and proposing that Asbury write "another good book like *Gone With the Wind*," but her insistence that she has always had her "feet on the ground" suggests a better understanding of the physical realities of life than her son possesses (*CS* 370, 361). Her clear recognition of existence as material rather than purely intellectual leads the narrator to privilege Mrs. Fox's perspective over her son's, and when she finally asks Asbury, "Do you think for one minute...that I intend to sit here and let you die?," the story's differing perspectives produce a contest of wills that favors Mrs. Fox (372).

Readers can guess that Mrs. Fox will win out over her son because none of Asbury's expectations have been rewarded from the start of the narrative, and in the latter half of the text,

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<sup>13</sup> Maritain's thinking was highly influential to the development of O'Connor's artistic philosophy. Of his book *Art and Scholasticism* (1930), she writes, "It's the book I cut my aesthetic teeth on" (*HB* 216). This notion of the "double disease" comes from his later book *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (1953), and Lake notes that "O'Connor underlined the words *emotionalism* and *shallow intellectualism* in her copy" (Maritain 195, Lake 185).

he is further thwarted by both Dr. Block, the family physician, and the Jesuit priest he invites to the house in part to antagonize his mother. Most of the passages describing Block are delivered from Asbury's perspective, but even so, the narrator calls attention to the doctor's jovial (if somewhat silly) persona and his "cold clinical nickel-colored eyes" that "indicated intelligence" and "hung with a motionless curiosity over whatever he looked at" (366). Block displays a genuine capacity for insightful observation and has embraced his rural practice. He also resists drawing hasty conclusions from his observations. When Asbury insists that his condition is "way beyond" the doctor's comprehension, Block responds, "Most things are beyond me...I ain't found anything yet that I thoroughly understood," but this admission does not keep him from methodically monitoring Asbury's condition (367). Rather than ask Asbury for an explanation of his symptoms, Block takes a blood sample, telling the patient, "Blood don't lie," a remark that suggests to both Asbury and to us that the information provided by Asbury's external symptoms likely contradicts the young man's assumption that he is dying, let alone his notion of death as a form of moral justice (367). In this moment, body has authority over mind rather than the other way around, and when Block's visit is followed by the Jesuit, Asbury's expectations are explicitly contradicted by embodied reality. Having met a quiet, worldly-seeming Jesuit in New York, Asbury is horrified when the priest who enters his room is large and loud and stares at him intensely through a single "terrible eye" (377). This Jesuit has never read (or even heard of) James Joyce, and when Asbury shows no familiarity with the catechism, the priest calls him "a very ignorant boy," challenging Asbury's knowledge and maturity (376).

Block's final diagnosis forces Asbury to confront illness and death as physical realities rather than narrative constructs and to realize that his desire to disavow his mother's influence over his life has both damaged his body irrevocably and confined him to her home for the rest of

his life. He is not sick because Art has sent him Death as vindication; he is sick because his petulant disregard for his mother's instructions led him to undulant fever through a jar of unpasteurized milk. Gentry points out that Asbury's ultimate redemption is more "evident" than is often the case with O'Connor's characters, but as Lake asserts, this redemption comes only after Asbury has been made to recognize his "embodied dependence upon others" (Gentry 54, Lake 200). Unlike Ruby Hill, Asbury understands the physical changes he observes in his dresser mirror, noting that his eyes "looked shocked clean as if they had been prepared for some awful vision," and out the window he sees the tree line, "black against the crimson sky," as "a brittle wall, standing as if it were the frail defense he had set up in his mind to protect him from what was coming" (CS 382). As he falls back beneath the bird-shaped water stain above his bed—an unambiguous symbol for the Holy Ghost that has been descending along the wall for his entire life—O'Connor writes, "He saw that for the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring, he would live in the face of a purifying terror" (382). In one sense, Asbury's illness and resultant confinement could be read as penance for the spite, arrogance, and intellectual shallowness he has displayed throughout the text, but his fate will also force him to acknowledge and interact with the material realities he has tried to abandon and, in this way, his recurring condition may be viewed as a form of grace, a fresh opportunity to achieve real artistry by paying real attention to his physical origins and environment.

While "The Enduring Chill" is one of many stories in *Everything that Rises Must Converge* (1965) to focus on disagreements between family members, it is unique among these narratives in that both Asbury and Mrs. Fox are still alive at the end of the text. Most of the collection's other stories depicting filial conflict conclude with the death of one family member, and typically, that character's demise is the physical result of the other's failures. The

grandfather in “A View of the Woods” (1957), driven by anger and anxiety over the continuation of the Fortune family line kills his granddaughter when he slams her head against the ground. Thomas in “The Comforts of Home” (1960), trying to live up to his father’s memory and assert his own masculine authority, accidentally shoots his mother with a gun he found in his father’s desk. Sheppard in “The Lame Shall Enter First” (1962) fails to invest emotionally in his son Norton or even to properly supervise him, and the end result of this neglect is the child’s suicide. In each of these stories, death isolates the surviving characters in ways that resemble O’Connor’s early work. Julian, by contrast to these other protagonists, is not directly responsible for his mother’s death at the end of “Everything that Rises Must Converge” (1961), but her sudden departure does quickly reverse his feelings of moral superiority and independence. Gordon identifies Julian as “the object of O’Connor’s fiercest satire,” a condescending figure “[s]mug in his own shallow liberalism,” and the narrator mainly allows Julian’s foolishness to speak for itself (57). The same sense of humor and of justice that readers encounter in other O’Connor stories is present in this narrative, but in this text, the narrator seems to downplay her own presence with uncommon frequency, typically recounting events from an internally focalized point within Julian’s perspective.

Preparing to take his mother to her “reducing class,” Julian envisions himself “waiting like Saint Sebastian for the arrows to pierce him” (405). He is able-bodied and physically well, yet he imagines this banal inconvenience as equivalent to a martyr’s suffering, thinking of their regular Wednesday outing as a time in which “he would be sacrificed to her pleasure” (406). Julian’s opposition to their scheduled time together is especially unreasonable in light of the fact that he lives in his mother’s house and, as a recent college graduate, depends on her financially. Instead of expressing gratitude for the stability his mother provides, the narrator points out that

“Julian did not like to consider all she did for him,” though he is aware that his mother “had struggled fiercely to feed and clothe and put him through school” (405-6). His reluctance to contemplate how much he owes her comes from his resentment of her refusal to see that their family’s economic decline demands a change in her racist attitudes and social behaviors. Julian, like Asbury, wants to teach his mother a lesson, and while the narrative directs our attention to the problems with her racist perspective, it also reveals Julian’s hypocrisy as a character who, despite his self-congratulatory sensitivity to racial inequality, yearns for his family’s former affluence and values people of color not as human beings but as pawns with which to attack his mother and her childish opinions.

Not content merely with the role of martyr, Julian also considers himself a Christ figure sent to atone for his mother’s social transgressions, but his sanctimonious support of racial equality reveals his own racism. “When he got on a bus by himself,” the narrator explains, “he made it a point to sit down beside a Negro, in reparation as it were for his mother’s sins” (CS 409). Julian fails to recognize the extent to which his own physical reality—the fact of his body as a white man’s—implicates him in the South’s history of racial oppression and, at the same time, manages to wildly overestimate the importance of his decision to share a bus seat with a person of color. Echoing Asbury, he is later frustrated when his clumsy attempt to generate conversation with a black man reading a newspaper is met with “an annoyed look” rather than gratitude or friendliness (413). In actuality, Julian’s desire to talk to this man has less to do with good will than with humiliating his mother. Shortly thereafter, he runs through a series of fantasies in which people of color are made to serve his spiteful purposes. In a moment of subtle foreshadowing, Julian “imagine[s] his mother lying desperately ill and his being able to secure only a Negro doctor for her,” but his favorite fantasy is the one in which he decides to bring

home “a beautiful suspiciously Negroid woman,” a scenario he refers to as “the ultimate horror” (415). These fantasies depict an exploitative relationship to people of color that contradicts the superior harshness with which he regards his mother’s views. Julian’s dream scenarios dehumanize both the woman and the doctor he imagines by valuing them only for the shock their bodies might inflict. Julian also trivializes genuine oppression when he treats suffering as a personal ambition, imagining a conversation in which he tells his mother, “This is the woman I’ve chosen. She’s intelligent, dignified, even good, and she’s suffered...Now persecute us, go ahead and persecute us” (415). Whatever racial sensitivity he may attribute to himself, it is clear that Julian has no desire to interact with people of other races in any real way. None of this, of course, lessens the hideous nature of the racism Julian’s mother embodies, but despite her nostalgia for the Pre-Civil-Rights South, readers know from the title of the story that avoiding the racial other is no longer possible.

This title, taken from the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin,<sup>14</sup> seems (in the narrative) to grow out of the moment in which Julian’s mother asserts that black people were “better off” under slavery and that “They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence,” a statement that evokes the “separate but equal” doctrine that governed American legal procedure until *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) was overturned by *Brown v. Board* in 1954 (408). Even if readers do not approach this text with that knowledge already in place, the conflict between that doctrine and the events of the narrative is clear. As people of color “rise” in civil liberties and socio-economic status, the overlap between black and white lives inevitably increases. Though Julian

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<sup>14</sup> In a letter to Roslyn Barnes, dated 29 March 1961, O’Connor writes, “I have...sold to *New World Writing* a story called ‘Everything That Rises Must Converge,’ which is a physical proposition I found in Pere Teilhard and am applying to a certain situation in the Southern states & indeed in all the world,” and later she writes (again to Barnes), “Can you tell me if the statement: ‘everything that rises must converge’ is a true proposition in physics? I can easily see its moral, historical and evolutionary significance, but I want to know if it is also a correct physical statement” (*HB* 438, 443).

longs for the family mansion “as his mother had known it,” he recalls that “Negroes were living in it” on the one occasion in which he personally saw the place, and though their current residence is located in what “had been a fashionable neighborhood forty years ago,” his mother cannot ignore the area’s growing black population or avoid the integration of public transit (408, 406). When she boards a bus half full of exclusively white passengers, she remarks, “I see we have the bus to ourselves,” and another woman answers, “For a change,” adding, “I come on one the other day and they were thick as fleas—up front and all through” (410). The narrative’s most unambiguous moment of convergence occurs when a heavy black woman, physically as large as or larger than Julian’s mother, steps onto the bus wearing the same ugly hat that Julian’s mother purchased before the story’s events. As the black woman and her own son take seats on opposite sides of the aisle, Julian notices that his mother and the woman “had, in a sense, swapped sons” and that his mother’s eyes have filled with “a look of dull recognition...as if she had suddenly sickened at some awful confrontation” (415). Julian finds the similarities between his mother and this woman of color amusing, feeling that “Justice entitled him to laugh,” and as his mother reels from her final confrontation with this woman—who “seemed to explode like a piece of machinery” when his mother offered the young black child one of her “condescending pennies”—he cannot resist pointing out to her that she has met her “black double” and that “all this means...that the old world is gone” (416, 418-9).

Here, at the end of the narrative, the nonfocalized narrator reasserts herself, showing readers the disparity between what is happening and what Julian understands. Julian does not initially realize, in the wake of his mother’s confrontation with her “black double,” that his own world has come to an end as well. The narrator reports that while his mother is “breathing fast” and walking steadily on “as if she had not heard him,” Julian continues to lecture her about her

need to “face a few realities” and scolding her for acting “Just like a child” (419-20). By the time Julian realizes that his mother is suffering from a stroke, she is nearly dead, and he is forced to abandon the idiotic personal fictions he has nursed from the story’s beginning. He has resented his mother’s “presence,” which he felt was stiflingly “borne in upon him,” but while the physical consequence of her racist condescension is catastrophic physical shock, the consequence of Julian’s former arrogance is that he is unprepared to face life alone (406, 409). His self-righteous lecture on America’s changing racial climate is interrupted by the sight of his mother’s face “fiercely distorted,” and he watches as “One eye, large and staring, moved slightly to the left as if it had become unmoored” while the other “remained fixed on him, raked his face again, found nothing and closed” (420). This moment ironically reveals Julian’s own childishness, and afraid for the first time, he cries, “Mama! Mama!” before his panic drives him to seek help from the community to which he earlier attributed a “general idiocy” (420, 411). While his mother’s death is necessary for Julian to enter full-fledged adulthood, he realizes that he is less well equipped for this transition than he previously realized, that he is more emotionally dependent on her than he knew. In a final, nonfocalized observation, the narrator, still speaking largely from Julian’s perspective, forecasts the “world of guilt and sorrow” that awaits the character though Julian himself cannot yet see that world with total clarity (420).

In “Revelation” (1963), the last story published during O’Connor’s life, the protagonist Ruby Turpin displays many qualities of earlier O’Connor characters: like Mrs. Shortley and Julian’s mother, Ruby Turpin is another large southern woman; like the Child in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” she has a genuine (and flawed) religious paradigm; and like almost all of the other characters discussed in this chapter, she possesses a moral certainty regarding her relationship to the world of the narrative in which she appears. Unlike Mrs. Shortley, Mrs.



McIntyre, Asbury, or Julian, however, the posture that Ruby adopts relative to her story's other characters is not overtly confrontational. Instead, she reserves most of her judgments concerning others for her constant interior dialogue with them and with the version of Christ she imagines. Susan Srigley observes that Ruby Turpin is also "markedly different" from a variety of other O'Connor protagonists—Hazel Motes from *Wise Blood* (1952), Tom T. Shiftlet from "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" (1953), Francis Marion Tarwater from *The Violent Bear It Away* (1961), Sheppard from "The Lame Shall Enter First" (1962), and several others—who feel they can either outrun God or bring about their own salvation, noting that Ruby "takes it for granted that her religious beliefs keep her in right relation to God, but she lacks the proper relation to herself" (137). I would add to Srigley's assertion that Ruby also lacks "the proper relation" to other characters and that Mary Grace's eventual assault on Ruby serves as the protagonist's turning point because it gives Ruby's misperceptions concerning God, herself, and other people a physical presence in the text.

Ruby's observations regarding other characters are sometimes highly critical, often relieving the narrator of the burden of harsh description. Ruby's religious outlook is at odds with the narrator's Catholic vision, but while the narrator opposes Mrs. Shortley by directing reader attention to the peacock and contradicts Asbury Fox with his mother's version of events and Block's diagnosis, the narrator's tactics in this text are closer to those deployed in "Everything that Rises Must Converge." As in that story, the narrator in "Revelation" is relatively restrained, allowing Ruby's own assumptions and assertions to reveal themselves as extreme or inadequate to varying degrees. One exception to this rule is the story's opening sentence, in which the narrator observes that "The doctor's waiting room, which was very small, was almost full when the Turpins arrived and Mrs. Turpin, who was very large, made it look even smaller by her

presence” (CS 488). By the next sentence, however, the narrative focalization enters Ruby’s perspective, concluding with her judgement that the size of her body serves as “a living demonstration that the room was inadequate and ridiculous” (488). Ruby is aware that her sizeable body commands attention, and she seems to have developed a large, garrulous personality to match it. The externally focalized narrator returns momentarily to note that Ruby’s husband Claud, after being ordered to his seat by his wife, “sat down as if he were accustomed to doing what she told him to,” and Ruby later jokes about her own weight, prompting the “stylish lady” to respond, “I don’t think it makes a bit of difference what size you are. You just can’t beat a good disposition” (488, 490). This remark pleases Ruby, increasing her deep sense of self-satisfaction.

The stylish woman’s praise is one of many factors that give Ruby a sense of assurance concerning her privileged place in the South’s social hierarchy, a system she treats like her own Great Chain of Being. As Ruby gazes around the room, O’Connor writes:

Sometimes Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people. On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them—not above, just away from—were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had

to rent and then there were colored people who owned their homes and land as well. (491)

The trouble with Ruby's thinking is almost exactly opposite of Asbury's failures. Where he failed to recognize the significance of his material surroundings, Ruby seems to invest the material realities of her own life with too much significance, treating advantages like wealth and whiteness as evidence of essential goodness (except for in a few cases of people she knows are personally worse than their class suggests). As she introduces her own judgements to a system she initially thinks will provide a straightforward means of understanding life, the nuances of that system overwhelm her to the point that she dreams these classes "moiling and roiling around in her head" are all finally "in a box car, being ridden off to a gas oven" (492). Nevertheless, Ruby remains certain that, whatever the final standings, she and Claud rank relatively high in life's pecking order.

The complexity which results from Ruby's scrutiny of her own proposed system is proof (to readers) that her way of looking at the world is an oversimplification, and genuine attention to humanity reveals flaws both in the hierarchy Ruby imagines and in how she envisions her place within it. When Ruby theorizes that, if God had made her a woman of color, "he would have made her a neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black," we see her assumption (that a change in race would have made no significant impact on her point of view) as naïve, yet Ruby continues to see herself as the embodiment of a predetermined wholesomeness (491). She takes the fact that she was not created black as a sign that she has been favored by God. "Her heart rose," we are told, as she sits envisioning the order of creation, "[God] had not made her a nigger or white-trash or ugly! He had made her herself and given her a little of everything. Jesus, thank you! she said. Thank you thank you thank you!" (497). Like Mrs. Shortley, Ruby sees her

very personality as evidence of her special place in the divine plan, but rather than making her charitably disposed to those around her, this outlook makes her judgmental. Her judgments are not so aggressive that, like Asbury or Julian, she feels compelled to teach those around her a lesson, but they do form a series of unkind thoughts about the story's other characters. Of Mary Grace, a young woman reading a textbook entitled *Human Development* whose face is "blue with acne," Ruby thinks "how pitiful it was to have a face like that at that age," and of the white trash woman with "snuff-stained lips," she thinks, "Ought to have got you a wash rag and some soap," feeling that the woman displays a deplorable lack of hygiene (490, 492). The only person in the waiting room (besides herself and Claud) that Ruby regards positively is the "stylish lady," with whom she holds a racist conversation reminiscent of Julian's mother.

When Mary Grace, who finds this conversation insufferable, finally sends her textbook sailing into Ruby's face, the incident shocks Ruby into new awareness. "The book struck her directly over her left eye," O'Connor writes, "at almost the same instant she realized the girl was about to hurl it," and the pandemonium that ensues is relayed to us through the series of physical experiences Ruby suffers in response to the impact (499). As Mary Grace's hands close around Ruby's neck, the older woman begins to see events "as if they were happening in a room far away, or as if she were looking at it through the wrong end of a telescope," and as the girl releases her throat, O'Connor writes, "Mrs. Turpin's vision suddenly reversed itself and she saw everything large instead of small," a process that leaves her disoriented and incapacitated to the point that she "could not have moved a finger" (499-500). Ruby's shock is understandable given the sudden violence of this action, but she has also ignored several gentler warnings that might have preempted the confrontation. Aside from Mary Grace's own tacit indications that Ruby's point of view is deeply flawed—she glares at Ruby almost from the story's beginning, and her

grip on the textbook grows increasingly tight as Ruby talks—there are also moments like the white trash woman’s criticism of hogs as “nasty, stinking things,” a criticism that suggests Ruby’s perspective as a hog farmer is not the only means of looking at life or of interpreting human experience (493). The violence of the book and subsequent throttling are less easily dismissed.

This violence not only surprises Ruby but stops her physically, rendering her large body powerless for the first time in the text, and this temporary powerlessness affords Ruby a moment of clarity. Leaning over Mary Grace, who had previously been glaring at her so fiercely that Ruby thought “The girl might be confusing her with someone else,” Mrs. Turpin is horrified to discover “There was no doubt in her mind that the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition” (500). Ruby is completely vulnerable at this instant, unable to summon either her imposing body or “good disposition” to protect herself from the challenge she views in Mary Grace’s “fierce brilliant eyes” (500). When Mary Grace calls Ruby “an old wart hog” and tells her to “go back to hell,” Ruby is forced to recognize that there are people in the world who not only reject the notion that she is a woman of unimpeachable goodness but who actually see her as a bad person (500).

This thought unsettles Ruby’s previous ideas about created order, and Mary Grace’s words remain with Ruby for the rest of the narrative. The problem that arises for Ruby is that her earlier interpretation of created order, placing her and Claud at the center of divine consideration, requires her to think of Mary Grace as God’s messenger. Once at home, she finds herself thinking, “She had been singled out for the message, though there was trash in the room to whom it might justly have been applied...The message had been given to Ruby Turpin, a respectable, hard-working, church-going woman,” and her thoughts evolve from self-pity to a kind of

“wrath,” in which “Occasionally she raised her fist and made a small stabbing motion over her chest as if she was defending her innocence to invisible guests who were like the comforters of Job, reasonable-seeming but wrong” (502-3). The passages in which Ruby wrestles with the “message” conveyed to her through Mary Grace are internally focalized, and while the narrator sees Ruby making these little stabbing motions, it is Ruby who, defending her own innocence, sees herself as a Job-like figure, struggling with God in the midst of unfair tribulation without any clear sense of the reason for her suffering. The narrator does not support this assessment and readers recognize it as melodrama. Only the workers of color that she and Claud employ respond with sympathy to Ruby’s experience, speaking “as if they all knew that Mrs. Turpin was protected in some special way by Divine Providence,” but she dismisses their pitying words as “Negro flattery” and heads for the “pig parlor” alone with “the look of a woman going single-handed, weaponless into battle” (504-5). Divested of the notion that her physical traits and behaviors have rendered her righteousness obvious to all and questioning for the first time her place in creation, Ruby demands of God, “How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?” (506).

Unlike Ruby’s imaginary conversations with Christ, in which, as Cofer points out, “Jesus consults her” in unambiguous terms, God’s answer to Ruby’s question comes in the form of a vision (117). This vision, which readers see through Ruby’s still-angry, critical eye essentially inverts the hierarchy she values at the story’s beginning:

There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like

herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right...They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. (CS 508)

Cofer considers this vision the most “drastic” of O’Connor’s ironic reversals and a moment that alters Ruby Turpin “paradigmatically” (111). Seen in the light of this heavenly procession, her devout faith in respectability appears as ridiculous and inconsequential to Ruby as it has to Mary Grace and to readers as well. The very bodies Ruby has despised for their race or filth have been placed at the head of the train, while those who have paid the strictest attention to the rules of politeness and public decency must enter Heaven last, purified of all the accomplishments they valued on Earth. Readers familiar with the Gospels will likely recall Matthew 20:16—“So the last shall be first, and the first last”—a verse that Ruby, as a “church-going woman” will have heard many times, apparently without understanding its implications (CS 502). Her surprise at this ultimate vision suggests the depth of her miscalculation, but her ability to recognize her ilk at the back of the line suggests hope for her character in the concluding moments of the narrative. As with many O’Connor characters, Ruby contemplates her unexpected vision in a state of stillness and isolation, but she remains alive and physically healthy, suggesting that her life moving forward will be improved, if a little painfully, by this final recognition of her powerless smallness in relation to the “whole order of the universe” (WB 38).

If “Revelation” combines many of O’Connor’s most familiar themes in a strangely optimistic package, “Parker’s Back” (1965)—the last narrative to be published independent of her second collection—departs even more noticeably from the tone of O’Connor’s earlier stories.

Scholarly consensus on this point is such that Cofer remarks, “critically speaking, ‘Parker’s Back’ has become a dead issue” (99). No discussion of O’Connor’s interest in the embodiment of spiritual and intellectual struggles, however, could be complete without some analysis of how “Parker’s Back” furthers the author’s pursuit of that aesthetic objective, and critical opinion concerning the narrator’s role in this text has been somewhat divided. Gordon observes that, while this narrative “brings together most of the concerns of O’Connor’s canon,” the text contains “less, far less, of the fierce narrator of her earlier work,” but Donald E. Hardy contends that “explicit narrative commentary” is essential to our understanding of Parker and his narrative (Gordon 248; Hardy 111). I would argue that, compared to narratives like “Revelation” or “Everything that Rises Must Converge,” the voice of the nonfocalized narrator—narrator as interpreter as well as outside observer—actually appears more frequently and that, if we want to account for the seeming lack of harshness in this narrative, it is necessary to consider other factors. One of these factors is the set of mistakes embodied by the main character’s experiences. While O.E. Parker’s personal arrogance, lies, and laziness often have minor physical consequences (his run-ins with his boss, for instance), the central errors in his thinking arise primarily from his failure to properly identify the correct source of life’s order and purpose and from his repeated attempts to locate this longed-for stability in bars and tattoo parlors. The other key factor is Parker himself. Unlike O’Connor’s menagerie of problematically confident characters, Parker expresses a considerable amount of regret and self-doubt. This dissatisfied, questioning posture is not the result of violent revelation but is present from the start of the text, and the opening paragraph’s examination of his marriage to Sarah Ruth Cates ends with the sentence, “He was puzzled and ashamed of himself” (CS 510).



Carol Shloss describes Parker's story as "a search for the roots of personal dissatisfaction," and this dissatisfaction predates the narrative's beginning (114). If it is possible to say that Asbury Fox's story is a series of subverted assumptions, Parker's may be characterized as a series of attempts to search out (even without knowing it) the missing link to the purpose and coherence he feels his life is lacking. This search begins when Parker, then a "heavy and earnest" boy who, according to the narrator, was "as ordinary as a loaf of bread," sees a heavily tattooed man at the fair, "flexing his muscles so that the arabesque of men and beasts and flowers on his skin appeared to have a subtle motion of its own" (CS 513). The narrator describes the impact of this image as follows:

Parker had never before felt the least motion of wonder in himself. Until he saw the man at the fair, it did not enter his head that there was anything out of the ordinary about the fact that he existed. Even then it did not enter his head, but a peculiar unease settled in him. It was as if a blind boy had been turned so gently in a different direction that he did not know his destination had been changed.

(513)

Nearly every article that discusses "Parker's Back" employs this passage, but few address the role the narrator plays in this moment. With a short phrase—"Even then it did not enter his head"—the narrator conveys Parker's incomplete understanding of his own reaction to the tattooed man, asserts her presence as an observing entity, and gives weight to the idea that human existence should be viewed with wonder. Parker approaches this insight but arrives at unease instead of realization, and the metaphor of the blind child suggests that the course of Parker's life has been altered in ways he has yet to perceive. His own acquisition of tattoos physically represents the yearning for coherence and significance that this moment at the fair

instills in him, yet when Parker surveys his own body over time, he is disappointed to discover that “the effect” of his many tattoos “was not of one intricate arabesque of colors but of something haphazard and botched” (514).

As each new tattoo fails to bring unity to the overall conglomeration, Parker seeks additional relief from his deepening unease in institutions like the military and, later, his marriage. Of his five years in the navy, O’Connor writes that he “seemed a natural part of the gray mechanical ship, except for his eyes, which were the same pale slate-color as the ocean and reflected the immense spaces around him as if they were a microcosm of the mysterious sea” (513-4). Here again, as Hardy reminds us, the narrator makes us aware that “Parker is clueless about his own motivations” (111). It is not Parker who describes his eyes as microcosms of the sea. Instead, the narrator calls attention to this vast, natural, material mystery reflected in Parker’s gaze so that, when Parker later muses that “long views” of nature are depressing because “You look out into space like that and you begin to feel as if someone were after you, the navy or the government or religion,” we understand that the order Parker claims to fear is also what he deeply desires (CS 516). His trouble is that he does not have a clear idea of what this order is, where it comes from, or how to find it, so he looks for institutions commonly associated with stability. When Sarah Ruth first touches his hand, he feels “jolted back to life” by this physical contact but finds, once they are married with a child on the way, that “Marriage did not change Sarah Ruth a jot” though it has made him “gloomier than ever” (512, 518). Readers know that Parker cannot sustain this kind of depression because, when the “chronic and latent” dissatisfaction he experienced in the navy “had become acute and raged in him,” he went AWOL, earning a dishonorable discharge (513). When daydreams of his next tattoo lead Parker

to crash his employer's tractor into a tree, he deserts again, fleeing the scene of the accident for a tattoo parlor in the city.

The tractor incident is a pivotal moment in the narrative. Similar to the case of Mrs. McIntyre's peacock, plenty of scholarly energy has been devoted to the parallels between Parker's collision with the tree (which catches fire) and God's conversation with Moses via the burning bush.<sup>15</sup> As a narrative moment, however, this scene is significant because it recalls Parker's reaction to the tattooed man at the fair, and Parker rises from the wreck certain that the experience has changed him. He "did not allow himself to think on the way to the city," O'Connor writes, "He only knew that 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" (521). This time, though Parker does not fully understand the nature of his transformation or allow himself much opportunity to contemplate it, his certainty that a change has taken place differs substantially from the imperceptible awakening and vague unease he felt at the fair. Not only is he aware that life will be different for him from now on, he understands (if incompletely) that the "unknown" toward which he is being drawn is larger and more complicated than his previous dissatisfaction. Parker's decision to get a new tattoo immediately following the accident is partly a continuation, as Shloss observes, of "the programmed, mechanical solution that he has had for all of his internal anguish," but as he leafs through that tattooist's art book, Parker experiences the kind of stillness that often comes to O'Connor characters in advance of revelation, and an "absolute

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<sup>15</sup> Cofer and Lake offer two of the more thorough discussions of these parallels. Cofer, in *The Gospel According to Flannery O'Connor* (2014), argues that this episode and the story's later references to Jonah cast Parker as a "synthesis of biblical prophets" and provides direct references to the passages in Exodus that this incident and later events in the narrative evoke (103-6). Lake, in *The Incarnational Art of Flannery O'Connor* (2005), writes that the "biblical symbolism" of this moment "reinforces what happens physically to Parker," likening Parker's sudden realization to the way in which "God's ontological certainty" answers Moses's self-doubt (228-9).

silence,” speaking “as plainly as if silence were a language itself” directs him to the “all-demanding eyes” of a “flat stern Byzantine Christ” (Shloss 114, *CS* 522).

The physical representation of Christ on Parker’s back is full of religious implications,<sup>16</sup> and the tattoo itself makes Parker directly accountable for his growing convictions, forcing him to defend himself against the repeated accusation that he has found salvation. He tells the tattooist, “I ain’t got no use for none of that. A man can’t save his self from whatever it is he don’t deserve none of my sympathy,” but he notices that these words “leave his mouth like wraiths...to evaporate at once as if he had never uttered them” (*CS* 524-5). When his friends at the bar tease him for “witnessing for Jesus,” Parker starts a brawl, fighting until they throw him out of the bar like “Jonah...cast into the sea” (526-7). Outside, alone, he has another important moment of realization. O’Connor writes:

Parker sat for a long time...examining his soul. He saw it as a spider web of facts and lies that was not at all important to him but which appeared to be necessary in spite of his opinion. The eyes that were now on his back were eyes to be obeyed. He was as certain of that as he had ever been of anything. Throughout his life, grumbling and sometimes cursing, often afraid, once in rapture, Parker had obeyed whatever instinct of this kind had come to him—in rapture when his spirit had lifted at the sight of the tattooed man at the fair, afraid when he had joined the navy, grumbling when he had married Sarah Ruth. (527)

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<sup>16</sup> Lake refers to this image as “O’Connor’s most mature expression of the grotesque beauty of art driven by the Incarnation and of the human body as validated by it” (222). In much of Lake’s analysis, one finds echoes of Karl-Heinz Westarp’s widely cited article, “Teilhard de Chardin’s Impact on Flannery O’Connor: A Reading of ‘Parker’s Back’” (1983), in which Westarp reads Parker’s tattoos as progressing toward the ultimate expression of Parker’s desires in the image of the Byzantine Christ and compares this progression to Teilhard’s discussion of humanity’s evolution toward Christ. Wood, in *Flannery O’Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (2004), discusses the historical/theological significance of this image, which he identifies as “the Pantocrator, the Orthodox icon of the Lord of the universe, the Master of all things visible, He Who Is” (48-9).

In this moment, Parker joins a small number of O'Connor protagonists who approach total self-awareness.<sup>17</sup> He recognizes the lies he has told himself and sees his most recent tattoo as an important step toward the order and purpose he has desired for much of his life. The image of the Byzantine Christ makes God a material reality in Parker's life, and Parker senses that his salvation depends on his obedience to a power outside himself. The narrator does not interject to inform readers that Parker has missed anything but says, as Parker goes home to show his tattoo to Sarah Ruth, "his dissatisfaction was gone, but he felt not quite like himself. It was as if he were himself but a stranger from himself, driving into a new country though everything he saw was familiar to him" (527).

Despite the vitality of Parker's increasing faith, there is another lesson waiting for him at home, where he expects that his religious wife, earlier described as "forever sniffing up sin," will know "what he had to do" with his newfound spirituality (510, 527). Sarah Ruth's faith, however, turns out to be a dogmatic Gnosticism, and she refuses to acknowledge the image on Parker's back as a physical representation of God. Hitting him repeatedly with a broom, she chases him from the house, yelling "Idolatry!" (529). Parker is stunned by his wife's reaction, and Wood explains the story's final image of Parker "leaning against a tree, crying like a baby" as the character's realization "that the *via dolorosa* is a path all Christians must sooner or later travel" (CS 530, Wood 48). The idea of suffering for faith is certainly relevant to Parker's experience, but again, this final incident recalls some of the story's earlier moments as Parker is thrown from his house (and possibly his marriage) in the same way he is formerly expelled from

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<sup>17</sup> While characters like Mrs. Shortley, or the Grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," or Sheppard in "The Lame Shall Enter First" all arguably experience moments of clarity, the only other O'Connor character who seems to achieve such a full acknowledgement of his relationship to spiritual reality appears to be Mr. Head in "The Artificial Nigger," whose final encounter with grace is described as follows: "Mr. Head stood very still and felt the action of mercy touch him again...He understood that it grew out of agony, which is not denied to any man and which is given in strange ways to children. He understood that it was all a man could carry into death to give his Maker and he suddenly burned with shame that he had so little of it to take with him" (CS 269).

the bar and discharged from the navy. He learns that his struggle with faith, like his struggle with sin, is never totally settled but is an uncertain, individual, and ongoing process, as fraught with physical difficulty as the sins embodied by other O'Connor protagonists. Parker's greatest moment of spiritual revelation occurs independent of Sarah Ruth, when, standing at their door, he identifies himself by his full name—Obadiah Elihue. "All at once," the narrator explains, "he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts" (528). In this moment, the longing Parker has felt since boyhood is fully realized, and while the narrative continues to subvert his expectations, he is unique among O'Connor's protagonists in that he has already accepted the reality to which future subversions promise to direct him.

### *Narratives Never Written*

Whatever the protagonist's physical condition—pregnant, prepubescent, overweight, ill, or tattooed—and whatever his or her spiritual and intellectual shortcomings—pride, selfishness, irrational fear, racism, dishonesty, spite—O'Connor's narrator presents a world in which sin, knowledge, and redemption all happen in the body, and the narratives discussed in this chapter reveal various methods by which O'Connor endeavored to render spiritual dilemmas concrete. Perhaps more importantly, however, they also reveal methods she never attempted, at least in published fiction. O'Connor seems to have had no interest in telling stories from a pure internally focalized perspective, just as she never chooses a narrator whose focalization is purely external. The reason for the first is likely that she valued the interpretive authority that a nonfocalized "mind" provides (James, "Preface" 1093). As long as a story is told *about* a character rather than *by* a character, readers are not likely to accept the character's interpretation of reality over the

narrator's. In this way, Mrs. Shortley's rationale for despising Mr. Guizac becomes a method by which she justifies her hateful ideas to herself rather than an explanation she offers to us in the hope of securing a sympathetic audience. On the other end of the spectrum, a focalization that is purely external would render the narrator unable to dramatize internal struggle in the very ways that make "Revelation" and "Parker's Back" simultaneously comic and compelling.

In her "Introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*" (1961), O'Connor asserts that "The creative act of the Christian's life is to prepare his death in Christ. It is a continuous action in which this world's goods are used to the fullest" (*MM* 223). Since this is clearly the perspective of O'Connor's narrator, this statement, considered in relation to O'Connor's narrative praxis, is illuminating. Though some stories fluctuate freely between internal and external perspectives while others fluctuate very little, the narrator's nonfocalized presence is felt in readers' awareness of an underlying coherence, a sense that the story conveys of how its fictive world is meant to function and of how different protagonists try to contradict, escape, deny, and, in a few cases, understand it. This world is, in all of O'Connor's fiction, one of "continuous action," in which characters are brought (sometimes suddenly, sometime slowly) toward Christ by material means, often at the expense of their health and even their lives. While the overall perspective of the narrator cannot be evaded, changes in narrative focalization allow readers to witness this process from all angles, connecting characters' thoughts and beliefs with the physical harm or good that results from them.

## **Olinger Gets Old: Aging Bodies and Unexpected Grace in John Updike's Final Narratives**

Embodied spirituality in John Updike's short fiction functions differently from the embodiment readers find in Flannery O'Connor. Though grace in his stories often surprises, it never shocks, never maims, shoots, gores, nor otherwise punishes his protagonists, most of whom are reassured by the grace they experience and all of whom live to at least consider (if not benefit from) the new insights they have acquired by the end of their narratives. When the Catholic Book Club awarded Updike the Champion Medal in 1997, his remarks gestured toward the reasons for this distinction: "[T]he Christian faith," he said, "has given me comfort in my life and, I would like to think, courage in my work. For it tells us that truth is holy, and truth-telling a noble and useful profession; that the reality around us is created and worth celebrating; that men and women are radically imperfect and radically valuable" ("Remarks" 4). Updike set this perspective against O'Connor's and against that of other Catholic writers like Muriel Spark, whose work he regarded as "dark" and, therefore, alien to his own experience of Christianity (4). Though the notion of fiction as an exercise in truth-telling is consistent with O'Connor's thoughts on writing, Updike's emphasis on the value of human imperfection is miles from the "startling" grotesquerie of her world, in which narrative corrects and unsettles rather than celebrating human nature (O'Connor, *MM* 34). Updike deepens this contrast by admitting that he has borrowed from multiple traditions<sup>18</sup>—specifically "Lutheran, Congregational, Episcopal"—to distill the view of faith and art he espouses ("Remarks" 4). This pieced-together perspective is thoroughly Protestant, valuing an individual relationship to God, the world, and to life experience over the authority of any one Church or any one theological tradition and reflecting a

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<sup>18</sup> O'Connor, by contrast, located herself within a Roman Catholic—and, even more specifically, within a Thomist—intellectual lineage. She was especially fond of Neo-Thomist Jacques Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism* (1920), praising that text as one that "dwells on St. Thomas' definition of art as a virtue of the practical intellect" (O'Connor, *HB* 221).



Reformation desire to place access to God in the hands of individuals. In spite of their clear theological differences, however, Updike's posthumous short story collection *My Father's Tears* (2009) reflects an interest in materiality present from his earliest narratives—eleven of which were collected in his *Olinger Stories* (1964) anthology<sup>19</sup>—and depicts a narrative context in which the body—in this case, the aging body—is every bit as important as it is to O'Connor's fictive universe.

When critics discuss bodies in Updike's fiction, the emphasis typically falls on his middle-aged characters' numerous infidelities and on these characters' suggestion that extramarital sex is a vehicle for grace, a sensual experience that, by its urgency and secrecy, supplies what Jerry Conants in *Marry Me* (1976) calls, “an unprecedented and unsuspected second life” (2). Jerry later says of his mistress in that text, “Whenever I am with her, no matter where...I feel I'm never going to die,” and Updike's most famous novel protagonists—characters like Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom of the Rabbit Tetralogy<sup>20</sup> or Reverend Tom Marshfield in *A Month of Sundays* (1974)—express similar convictions, leading reviewers like Kathleen Verduin to observe that Updike treats adultery as “an act of faith” (140, “Fictional” 29). While several of Updike's short stories contain adulterous characters—among whom Richard Maple is likely the best-known example—many, especially those written at the beginning of his career and at the end of his life, reveal that Updike's view of embodied grace is considerably more complex than his cheating husbands alone suggest.

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<sup>19</sup> *Olinger Stories*, published by Vintage in 1964, was a collection of earlier stories set in the fictional Olinger, Pennsylvania. Updike wrote in his foreword to the Vintage edition, “if of my stories I had to pick a few to represent me, they would be, I suppose, for reasons only partially personal, these” (*Olinger* 15). Though Updike would qualify that statement several years (and several stories) later, he also maintained, “They hold up for me,” explaining that, of all his short fiction, the Olinger narratives “do have, I think, the most love in them” (*Conversations* 166). By the time Updike's *Early Stories: 1953-1975* was published in 2003, *Olinger Stories* had been out of print for several years. It was re-released in 2014 as part of Alfred A. Knopf's Everyman's Pocket Classics series.

<sup>20</sup> *Rabbit, Run* (1960), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), *Rabbit at Rest* (1990).

Nevertheless, the attempt to reconcile Updike's philanderers to his Protestant faith persists, often dividing readers into two critical camps, one that doubts the author's sincerity and another that attempts to trace the explicit theological lineage of the ideas these characters embody. Thomas F. Haddox, following the lead of Mary Gordon and David Foster Wallace,<sup>21</sup> refers to Updike's theological position as "Christian American Narcissism," describing it as a blend of Karl Barth's theology—leading Updike's characters to struggle with "the remoteness of God"<sup>22</sup>—and an "American ideal of innocence" that his characters confirm by "plunging into carnality and emerging unscathed" (95, 90). For Haddox, Updike's occasional characterization of fiction "as testimony to the splendor of God's creation" only "obscures the narcissism of his writing" (88). Wallace goes further still, accusing Updike of solipsism.<sup>23</sup> At the other end of the critical spectrum, scholars like James Yerkes treat Updike's stated interest in the spiritual dimensions of ordinary life as genuine and focus their critical energies on uncovering the specific connections between Updike's faith and his depictions of physical existence. Yerkes sees in Updike's thinking a combination of Barth's ideas regarding God's incomprehensible nature and

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<sup>21</sup> Haddox cites M. Deiter Keyishian's 1988 interview with Mary Gordon, in which Gordon expresses her disgust at Updike's treatment of women in his fiction before denouncing him as "a liar, stylistically and morally" (Gordon 67). Gordon also takes aim at Updike's discussion of theological issues: "When he starts talking about theology, I really want to jump out the window because he's such a coarse theologian" (67). This interview first appeared in *Literary Review* and has since been collected in *Conversations with Mary Gordon* (2002), edited by Alma Bennett. Haddox also references David Foster Wallace's "now legendary" and scathing review of Updike's late novel *Toward the End of Time* (1997), the most famous line from which is likely Wallace's assurance that he has heard women readers under 30 refer to Updike as "Just a penis with a thesaurus" (Haddox 86; Wallace 52). The review was originally published by the *New York Observer* in 1997 under the title "John Updike, Champion Literary Phallicrat, Drops One; Is This Finally the End for Magnificent Narcissists?" and is now available in Wallace's essay collection *Consider the Lobster* (2005), where it has been softened somewhat and retitled "Certainly the End of Something or Other, One Would Sort of Have to Think." It is worth noting that Haddox does not display the same disdain for Updike that Gordon does, nor is he willing to go as far as Wallace in his critique of Updike's self-centeredness. Though he sees a "deliberate rhetoric of narcissism" as "central to [Updike's] work," he is unwilling to regard Updike as a "merely solipsistic writer" (Haddox 86).

<sup>22</sup> This is Haddox's paraphrase for Barth's belief that God is "absolutely unique in His relation to man and the world, overpoweringly lofty and distant, strange yes, even wholly other" (Barth 37). Barth borrows the notion of an "'infinite qualitative distinction' between God and man" from Kierkegaard, and it becomes an essential component of his own theological writing (Barth 42).

<sup>23</sup> Wallace describes *Toward the End of Time* (1997) as Updike's "clunky and self-indulgent" exploration of "the apocalyptic prospect of his own death," stating, "When a solipsist dies... everything goes with him" (51-2).

Martin Luther's theology, arguing that, while Updike "always alludes to Barth's writings... favorably," the author has also confessed—in a 1976 interview with Jeff Campbell—that he is "not a good Barthian" and that, concerning the question of "the limit of natural human ability to experience and interpret the truth of God's reality in nature and culture," Updike's view is closer to Luther's emphasis on "an experientially personal way"<sup>24</sup> to comprehend God's graciousness (Yerkes 28; *Conversations* 103). Yerkes considers this Lutheran influence a key factor in Updike's talent for identifying the "motions of Grace"<sup>25</sup> amid "life's terrifying ambiguities" (30).

Updike's treatment of the "terrifying ambiguities" of old age will ultimately concern me in this chapter, and my own reading of his final stories will veer away from the increasingly popular image of Updike as endlessly self-involved and toward T. C. Boyle's description of Updike's interest in the visible world as "phenomenological." I hope to challenge a long-held view among Updike critics that the self in Updike's fiction is essentially a "perceiving consciousness that confirms creation's value" by demonstrating that the spiritual dilemmas his central characters experience are rooted always in an embodied context and that these characters derive their conclusions from (rather than foisting them on) the visible world (Haddox 124). This distinction can be viewed in an illuminating moment from Updike's episodic memoir *Self-*

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<sup>24</sup> Darrell Jodock, in his essay "What Is Goodness?: The Influence of Updike's Lutheran Roots," agrees with Yerkes's analysis, claiming that "in those key areas where Lutheran tradition diverges from the Calvinist, Updike's outlook reflects the Lutheran pattern of thought," a pattern of thought he then describes as emphasizing (among other things) "the character of the God-human relationship," "God's radical adoption of sinful persons by grace," and "the presence and activity of God in the world" (121-3). To underscore this last point, he later cites volume 37 of *Luther's Works*, in which Luther maintains that God's power is "essentially present at all places, even the tiniest tree leaf" (qtd. In Jodock 133).

<sup>25</sup> This concept is taken from Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* (1670), number 507, which appears as the epigraph to Updike's novel *Rabbit Run* (1960). The entirety of the thought reads, "The motions of grace; the hardness of heart; external circumstances." While Pascal does not elaborate on his thinking about these ideas or the connections between them, Updike stated, in a 1990 interview with Melvyn Bragg, that his *Rabbit* novels reflect his belief that "our life is a mixture of these things" (228).

*Consciousness* (1989), in which the author recounts a boyhood memory of huddling under porch furniture to watch a downpour:

I would crouch, happy almost to tears, as the rain drummed on the porch rail and rattled the grape leaves of the arbor and touched my wicker shelter with a mist like the vain assault of an atomic army...[T]he experiencer is motionless, holding his breath as it were, and the things experienced are morally detached from him: there is nothing he can do, or ought to do, about the flow, the tumult. He is irresponsible, safe, and witnessing: the entire body, for these rapt moments, mimics the position of the essential self within its jungle of physiology and its moldering tangle of inheritance and circumstance. Early in his life the child I once was sensed the guilt in things, inseparable from the pain, the competition: the sparrow dead on the lawn, the flies swatted on the porch, the impervious leer of the bully on the school playground. The burden of activity, of participation, must plainly be shouldered, and has its pleasures. But they are cruel pleasures. There was nothing cruel about crouching in shelter and watching phenomena slide by: it was ecstasy. The essential self is innocent, and when it tastes its own innocence knows that it lives forever. If we keep utterly still, we can suffer no wear and tear, and we will never die. (34-5)

Haddox reads this passage as “an extraordinarily pure distillation of Updike’s rhetoric of narcissism” with a “Cartesian implication”—Updike’s desire to remain a motionless, unadulterated consciousness distinct from the body it inhabits—that is “difficult to describe as Christian” (92). Though Updike does seem to long for this kind of dual (even gnostic) existence, this passage ultimately denies the possibility of that desire, indicating that such consciousness—

what Updike calls “the essential self”—cannot exist independent of the body or of physical experience. This rainy-day moment achieves its unique quality for Updike because his “entire body” has been absolved of the responsibility to act by forces—“the tumult”—that are beyond his control. In this position his body is restricted to an observational posture in which it “mimics” consciousness, leading Updike to ponder an ideal, hypothetical scenario in which he could experience life without having to play an active role in it, but this, of course, is impossible, and “the burden...of participation, must plainly be shouldered” (35). This burden’s pleasures are “cruel” because they carry accountability and mortality, but the burden remains necessary all the same. In this way, Updike’s observations seem to contain a little of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that “Insofar as, when I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because...the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world” (408).

Michial Farmer suggests that Updike’s phenomenological aesthetic owes less to “Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger” than to “protoexistentialist” Søren Kierkegaard (17). “We can easily imagine the David Kern of ‘Pigeon Feathers’ and ‘Packed Dirt’ avidly reading the opening paragraph of *Sygdommen til Døden* (The Sickness unto Death, 1849),”<sup>26</sup> Farmer writes, arguing that, for Kierkegaard, “To be a self is to manage a balance between the infinite and the finite—in Sartrean terms, to learn to live as *l’être-pour-soi* surrounded by *l’être-en-soi*” and that “The self is thus not a stable thing but an eternal struggle” (17). Farmer understands this existential struggle as the central tension in Updike’s early fiction, and if we revisit the rainy-day passage from Updike’s memoir with Kierkegaard in mind, we see that what some might read as affirmation of Descartes’s *cogito* could just as easily be read as young Updike’s desire to remain

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<sup>26</sup> Farmer specifically identifies Kierkegaard’s assertion that “A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity” (*Sickness unto Death* 13).

in what Kierkegaard termed the “aesthetic” stage of life, a stage in which the immature individual views “obligation”—or “burden,” in Updike’s terms—as offensive and seeks to construct a “hiding-place” from real life by avoiding genuine action and interaction behind a “mask” of “bucolic sentimentality” (*Either/Or* 56, 163). The characters who populate *My Fathers Tears* resemble those of the Olinger narratives in that they continue the struggle for a genuine understanding of their relationship to the visible and invisible worlds with one important difference: they are old. Their aging bodies often thwart their expectations for physical performance and return them to memories of youth and considerations of death, which they, in customary Updike fashion, investigate under the assumption that truth (by degrees) is available somewhere within subjective experience.

Here again, Updike’s fiction is shaped by Kierkegaard, who argues in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846) that, for human beings, truth—by which he means specifically “the truth that is related essentially to existence”—is necessarily subjective (199). Since human beings *exist* (unlike God, who *is*), our lives, according to Kierkegaard, are simultaneously finite and continually “in the process of becoming” (unlike God, whose being is stable throughout eternity), and we, therefore, lack the infinite perspective needed to fully conceptualize, let alone discover, objective truth (190). He asserts that, while people may *think* objectively in fields like mathematics and the hard sciences, any objective *knowledge* pertaining to existence is God’s exclusively. “Modern speculative thought,” he writes, “has mustered everything to enable the individual to transcend himself objectively, but this just cannot be done. Existence exercises its constraint” (197). As a creature who exists in time, the individual person’s best hope of approaching “eternal truth” is thus to examine his or her own “inwardness” and “to immerse oneself, existing, in subjectivity” (192). Because ourselves are the only beings whom we can

know immediately and because we are inescapably temporal and becoming, any comprehension of existence must begin with our own experiences and must remain incomplete. Regarding our relationship to the world around us, Kierkegaard writes, “I observe nature in order to find God, and I do indeed see omnipotence and wisdom, but I also see much that troubles and disturbs,” an observation which leads him to conclude that “the highest truth there is for an *existing* person” is an “objective uncertainty” (203-4).

The uncertainties that most often trouble, excite, or otherwise interest Updike’s narrators and central characters tend to relate to life in the body—growing up, growing old, death’s inevitability, the various forms and facets of sexual interaction, etc.—and to the pleasure and pain that comes from living among (and trying to understand) people who are not ourselves, who lack access to our own inward, embodied lives and who cannot really grant us access to their own. Rather than adopting the solipsist’s skepticism toward the validity of others’ experiences, Updike’s protagonists (though frequently selfish) find other people genuinely interesting, turning to their own thoughts and bodies with the phenomenologist’s desire to better understand the mysteries of general existence as well as the connections they have made or missed among their fellow human beings.

In this pursuit, his narrators and central characters are almost indistinguishable from one another, and while changing focalization plays an important role in O’Connor’s short fiction, narrative focalization in Updike’s stories is universally internal, his stories told either by their protagonists or by narrators whose information is so rarely wide of the protagonist’s immediate perspective that readers may justifiably conclude that it is not actually outside the character’s knowledge.<sup>27</sup> Even stories that represent a formal departure for Updike, such as “From the

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<sup>27</sup> In the story “Free” (2001), for example, the narrator tells us, “[Henry’s] mother had never warmed to his wife: Irene was too citified, too proper, too stoical” (28). While the narrator provides this information about Henry’s

Journal of a Leper” (1976), which is told in a series of journal entries, or “The Varieties of Religious Experience” (2002), which switches among several protagonists, the narrator never shifts focus from the central character (even when he or she is only the central character of a single section). This concurrence of perspectives is occasionally signaled by the narrator’s use of the central character’s names for other characters in the story, as in the case of “The Guardians” (2001), in which a heterodiegetic narrator routinely refers to Lee’s father as “Daddy” and his grandparents as “Granny” and “Grampop” (61).

Critics also commonly point out that Updike’s narrators and central characters tend to resemble their author as much as they resemble each other, and few readers seem able to resist the impulse, as Nicholson Baker puts it, to “project Updike’s self onto the heroes of his stories” (112). This is not—given the insights Updike himself deploys in numerous essays, reviews, etc.—a wholly unreasonable choice,<sup>28</sup> but it is also important to remember that Updike’s characters are first and foremost artistic creations and that the decision to interpret them as blatant alter-egos can have a limiting impact on our readings of the texts in which they appear. In the absence of an omniscient and authoritative narrative presence, readers have some freedom in how they judge Updike’s characters, and I would argue that this freedom suggests that we are meant to regard his protagonists as provocateurs intended to probe aspects of consciousness and physical life rather than as the author’s final word on experiences of mind and body.

Though his earliest short fiction remains his best regarded and most widely known, *My Father’s Tears* contains some of Updike’s most poignant and penetrating narratives, returning to the author’s established milieu with the concerns of old age. David Kern of “Pigeon Feathers”

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mother, it is just as likely that this information represents conclusions that Henry has already drawn himself, and the distinction (apart from potential minor implications about Henry’s overall perceptiveness) is ultimately irrelevant.

<sup>28</sup> Adam Begley’s recent biography *Updike* (2014) offers an especially thorough account of the extent to which Updike’s characters resemble their author.



(1960) and “Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, A Dying Cat, A Traded Car” (1961) reappears in two stories—“The Walk with Elizanne” (2003) and “The Road Home” (2005)—, and most of the other narratives contain flashbacks to times and settings that evoke Olinger even when not explicitly set in Pennsylvania. His elderly characters in physical decline, like his young characters physically maturing, struggle with God’s apparent inaccessibility in the face of life’s immediacy. Forced out of the comfortable repetitions of American suburban existence by time and its impact on the body, they revise their expectations for pleasure, receiving new insight and revived hope from unsuspected sources. This chapter will examine how Updike’s late characters react (often with remarkable optimism) to the losses and limitations of age. I will read some of his Olinger stories with particular attention to characters’ realizations about the delights and dilemmas of embodied existence before turning to *My Father’s Tears*, in which the author’s reinvocation of Olinger parallels his late characters’ revisitation and revision of the narratives by which they understand their lives. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate that Updike’s last collection is a text in which grace is physically felt even amid the absurdities age inflicts on the human body and in which aging bodies alternately clarify and complicate how people make meaning from experience.

### *Existence in Olinger*

In *Olinger Stories*, the value Kierkegaard places on immersive subjectivity is reflected in the material elements—“the horse-chestnut trees, the telephone poles, the porches, the green hedges”—that Updike considered central to his own “subjective geography” and that comprise the narrative world his characters inhabit (*Olinger* 13). It is toward these details that Updike’s characters direct their attention, especially when wrestling with the difficulties of belief. His

characters “long,” as Verduin puts it, “for a physical and tangible manifestation of the divine” or—more specifically—of divine grace (“Fatherly” 261). As is demonstrated at the end of Updike’s first story<sup>29</sup> “Friends from Philadelphia” (1954)—when John Nordholm, a teenage boy who seeks the neighbors’ help in securing a bottle of wine for his mother’s out-of-town guests, discovers that Mr. Lutz has supplied a more expensive bottle than anticipated—the grace Updike imagines tends to surprise, often affirming characters’ tenuous faith in God’s benevolence toward humanity, or to teach in ways that lead characters to remorse or discovery without harming them physically or irreparably. These mundane and physical affirmations are typically what is meant by critics who acknowledge Updike’s “religious sense of the sacredness of life itself” or his interest in “the mysterious relationship between natural reality and man’s imaginative consciousness,” but it is necessary to discuss the narrative importance of these ideas with greater specificity (Mizener 47; Hunt 215). In Olinger, grace, whether as temporary affirmation of faith or as deepening appreciation of life’s momentary rewards, occurs not only when characters notice specific details about their world but also when they come to understand something new about the relationship of those details to their own physical experiences, their own bodies. Locating their physical position in the visible world, they learn and are occasionally reassured about their place in eternity.

While grown-up David Kern’s stated loss of faith in “Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, A Dying Cat, A Traded Car” indicates that material affirmation of belief does not permanently settle the matter of doubt for Updike’s characters, teenage David’s crisis of belief in “Pigeon Feathers”

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<sup>29</sup> In *The Early Stories: 1953-1975*, a collection of Updike’s short work edited by the author himself, “Friends from Philadelphia” is considered Updike’s second story with “Ace in the Hole” dated 1953, but while Updike finished “Ace in the Hole” in 1953, he did not publish it until 1955. “Friends from Philadelphia” is—as Updike himself explains in the introduction to that collection—the first Updike story the *New Yorker* accepted and the first he ever published.

may provide the most unambiguous example of this reassurance. David's anxiety begins after his parents move their family to rural Firetown from the marginally more cosmopolitan Olinger, a "move from town to country," as Robert Detweiler observes, that changes David's surroundings materially—"things were upset, displaced, rearranged"—and turns him into both a "geographical refugee" as well as "a spiritual outsider" (Detweiler 49, *ES* 13). In the family's smaller country house, David is closer to and more aware of his parents' arguments, and his efforts to counteract the "disorientation" he feels following the move are what lead him to the books that first unsettle his faith (Updike, *ES* 13). Shocked by H.G. Wells's characterization of Christ as "an obscure political agitator" and "a kind of hobo" around whom a cult and later a myth developed, David begins to search his environment for any evidence he might use to refute Wells's claims (14). The narrator then articulates what is clearly David's own fear, that such evidence may be nonexistent, that Wells may be correct and that "hope bases vast premises on foolish accidents, and reads a word where in fact only a scribble exists" (15). David begins to consider the horrifying consequences of death in a universe ungoverned by a deity who values and sustains human existence until, in the dark of the outhouse, he realizes that the "extinction" (or nonexistence) which must await him in a godless universe would have to be "qualitatively different" from any other "threat" he had ever experienced or imagined (17). The closest he can come to a vision of this state is a dream of the tactile experience of being buried and of time's eventual impact on the corpse: "a long hole in the ground, no wider than your body, down which you are drawn while the white faces above recede...your arms are pinned. Shovels pour dirt into your face...in time no one will remember you, and you will never be called by any angel. As strata of rock shift, your fingers elongate, and your teeth are distended sideways in a great underground grimace...And the earth tumbles on" (17).

In the face of this grim discovery, David wants a physical assurance of eternal life. He turns first to the dictionary, where the soul is defined as “the essence, substance, animating principle, or actuating cause of life...separate in nature from the body and usually held to be separable in existence,” but while the notion of transcendence embedded in the dictionary’s definition is enough to calm David for an evening, it ultimately proves insufficient to restore his peace of mind (19). He wants to know that life after death will include a body, and that night he prays for a physical sign:

Though the experiment frightened him, he lifted his hands high into the darkness above his face and begged Christ to touch them. Not hard or long: the faintest, quickest grip would be final for a lifetime. His hands waited in the air, itself a substance, which seemed to move through his fingers; or was it the pressure of his pulse? He returned his hands to beneath the covers, uncertain if they had been touched or not. For would not Christ’s touch *be* infinitely gentle? (20)

David’s desire for a tangible indication, however slight, that embodied life is possible in eternity leads him to beg for Christ’s actual touch and makes the motion of air or the pressure of his own pulse into possible candidates. He is subsequently mortified to discover that neither Reverend Dobson—who suggests, along with David’s mother, that one might think of Heaven “as the way in which the goodness Abraham Lincoln did lives after him”—nor any of the other adults in his life believes in the Resurrection of the Body as a literal reality (23). Having found, in the context of his parents’ arguments, that “Just by staying in the living room” when his mother had left it “he associated himself with his father,” David’s “quest for faith” is not aimed at moving mountains (*ES* 19; Verduin “Fatherly” 262). He needs only enough hope—only a “hint” or “nod”

of hard evidence—to restore his former association with Christ’s promise of a tangible eternity and to escape the dread that haunts him for most of the narrative (*ES* 27).

The pigeons David shoots at the end of the story may seem a strange vehicle of tangible reassurance, but it is also worth noting that—because the narrator’s perspective is David’s perspective—the logic of David’s return to faith—“broken” though it may be, in Detweiler’s words, “by numerous forensic short circuits”—is a teenager’s logic and that all of David’s previous attempts to secure a physical reason for renewing his belief in a benevolent Creator and embodied eternity have built toward his experience in the barn (50). We know this last scene is the story’s crucial moment both because of Updike’s propensity for ending stories on a parting thought or revelatory moment<sup>30</sup> and because the feathers that, in the closing paragraphs, occupy David’s attention merit mention in the narrative’s title. Scrutinizing the bodies of the dead birds, he notices a physical nuance for which he can imagine no explanation other than design. Their feathers seem especially intricate: “each filament was shaped within the shape of the feather, and the feathers in turn were trimmed to fit a pattern that flowed without error across the bird’s body...And across the surface of the infinitely adjusted yet somehow effortless mechanics of the feathers played idle designs of color, no two alike, designs executed, it seemed, in a controlled rapture” (*ES* 33). In this intricacy, David sees not only design but care, and at the same time, he knows himself to be more complex and valuable—even qualitatively so—than these creatures that number “in the millions” and are frequently “exterminated as pests” (33). He has killed these birds himself, seen how easily and ridiculously they died, and the knowledge of their complexity

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<sup>30</sup> See, for example, the final sentence of “You’ll Never Know, Dear, How Much I Love You,” in which the narrator provides a way to understand the young protagonist’s recent experience, stating, “Thus the world, like a jaded coquette, spurns our attempts to give ourselves to her wholly,” or the ending of Updike’s most anthologized story “A & P,” in which the narrator says, “my stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me from here on in” (*ES* 6, 601).

in the aftermath of that experience leaves him “robed in this certainty: that the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever” (33). David feels assured that his own body—which, throughout the narrative, is sensitive to the sights, sounds, and smells that surround him—and the complexity of his own lived experience surpasses theirs, and the grace of this small discovery is sufficient to restore David’s hope.

David’s restoration resembles the sense of promise that motivates both William Young in “A Sense of Shelter,” who feels the materiality of his high school environment and his developing body confirm “the happy future predicted for him,” and Allen Dow in “Flight,” who must weigh the “special destiny” his mother insists is waiting for him against the familiar community and genuine love Molly Bingaman represents. Though these protagonists are often paired as adolescents who ultimately fail in their romantic pursuits, the weight of this promise and the physical realities acting on each character result in much different endings to their respective narratives. William, who is aware, perhaps more than any other Olinger resident, of his own body, draws such self-assurance from the accumulated details surrounding him that he performs even the mundane task of washing his hands in the school restroom “with exaggerated care, enjoying the lavish amount of powdered soap provided for him in his civic castle” (47). Despite his stutter and the past derision he has experienced on its account, he feels physically “regal” and “trembling with happiness” (42). Allen Dow, by contrast, finds the physical details of his own world so stifling that he ultimately characterizes his family’s house—haunted by a dying grandfather whose cough, “like a dry membrane tearing,” can be heard in every room—as “a black mass of suffering” and comes to value Molly, with her “powdery fragrance” and “lucid cool skin,” for the sensual escape she provides (64-5). Torn between Molly’s earnest love and his

mother's insistence that he one day leave Olinger behind, Allen ultimately hardens his heart as all connections to his hometown dissolve in bitterness.

On some level, the difference between "A Sense of Shelter" and "Flight" is the difference between a narrative of adolescent awakening and a narrative about early and important sexual discoveries understood in hindsight. William Young begins his narrative sharpening pencils while snow falls outside, and the passage is rich in sensory details: "The window was open a crack, and a canted pane of glass lifted outdoor air into his face, coating the cedar-wood scent of pencil shavings with the transparent odor of the wet windowsill. With each revolution of the handle his knuckles came within a fraction of an inch of the tilted glass, and the faint chill this proximity breathed on them sharpened William's already acute sense of shelter" (41). The security William feels here registers bodily, and his body's development, in turn, heightens his optimism. Updike writes, "he had come late into his inheritance, but this summer it had arrived, and he at last stood equal with his large, boisterous parents, and had to unbutton his shirt cuffs to get his wrists through them, and discovered he could pick up a basketball with one hand" (42). These feelings of physical and spiritual fortitude ultimately motivate his embarrassing confession of love to Mary Landis, a confession that, propelled by conversational awkwardness, ends in his proposing marriage. Mary, who has developed socially and physically ahead of William, challenges his optimism about the high school experience and rejects his affection as superficial, yet this moment of failure does not become the crisis of faith or identity that other Updike characters experience. Though William's connection to his "civic castle" is momentarily soured—"The cloistered odors of paper, sweat, and, from the woodshop at the far end of the basement hall, sawdust no longer flattered him" and "the tall green double lockers appeared to study him critically"—he is ultimately able to compartmentalize Mary's rejection, imagining his

“humiliated, ugly, educable self” crawling into the dark space inside his locker and restoring himself to the felt optimism of the story’s beginning (51). Updike writes, “Through the length of his entire body, he felt so clean and free he smiled. Between now and the happy future predicted for him he had nothing, almost literally nothing to do” (51). William’s momentary shame suggests a lesson learned, but he feels too physically good to dwell on what this lesson might be. The exact nature of his failure is not yet clear or substantial enough to override the physical health and youth that promise him access to other pleasures.

Unlike William, Allen Dow assumes the responsibility of narrating his own story, becoming that Olinger “hero”<sup>31</sup>—like the John Nordholm of “The Happiest I’ve Been” or the unnamed narrator of “The Blessed Man of Boston, My Grandmother’s Thimble, and Fanning Island”—whom Updike describes as “always returning” from far-flung regions of adulthood (*Olinger* 15). Allen remembers how his relationship with his mother was strained by her “impulsive and romantic and inconsistent” belief in his exceptional future as well as by her harried response to her father’s failing health (*ES* 53). He also recalls how Molly Bingaman, whom he found sexually appealing and who loved him in spite of both his lower socioeconomic status and her mother’s disapproval, “administered reassurance with small motions and bodily adjustments,” becoming a positive, physical relationship in an environment that, for Allen, was marred by tension and physical decay (60). Though she is ultimately left behind, a casualty (along with the rest of Olinger) of the final confrontation between Allen and his mother, she remains a fond, if regretted, memory whose influence in Allen’s adult life is instructive rather than escapist. Allen takes flight at the end of the story, disengaging from Olinger’s material

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<sup>31</sup> Readers especially fond of drawing out the biographical content in Updike’s work often stress that, in the foreword to *Olinger Stories*, Updike states that the stories “have been arranged in order of the hero’s age,” explaining that “He wears different names and his circumstances vary, but he is at bottom the same boy, a local boy” (11).



artifacts, but he confesses, “When I have finally forgotten everything else—her powdery fragrance, her lucid cool skin, the way her lower lip was like a curved pillow of two cloths, the dusty red outer and wet pink inner—I’ll still be grieved by this about Molly, that she came to me” (64). If William Young is able to look beyond momentary awkwardness to pending pleasure, Allen Dow spends his narrative looking backward from the vantage point of realized promise with some remorse about how he treated Molly and with retrospective appreciation for the unselfish love she embodied.

The unnamed narrator of “In Football Season” shares Allen Dow’s retrospective orientation but with William Young’s capacity for discovering sensory pleasure in the quotidian. This story, the last in the Olinger collection, may seem, as Donald J. Greiner observes, “more a meditation than a conventional story,” but this is because the narrator does not set out to recount a single incident but to revisit an adolescent ritual, to explain why he views his former hometown as, again in Greiner’s words, a “special province of innocence and grace” (130). He begins with the question, “Do you remember the fragrance girls acquire in autumn?” before describing the “olfactory” delights organic to Olinger High’s Friday night football games (*ES* 122-3). At “that innocent age, on the borderline of sixteen, when damnation seems a delicious promise,” he remembers how he, his buddies, and the girls they found alluring would be “crushed together” in the stadium, “like flowers pressed to yield to the black sky a concentrated homage, an incense, of cosmetics, cigarette smoke, warmed wool, hot dogs, and the tang, both animal and metallic, of clean hair” (124, 123). The narrator’s senses are engaged, his body stimulated, and he derives a genuine thrill from interacting with other people, other bodies. Following the game, he and his friends revel in the fact that they, who as students regularly have their bodies restricted, subjected to “a tight world of ticking clocks and punctual bells,” are free on these nights to

indulge in the “luxurious sense of waste” they feel walking their dates slowly home (124). When he returns to the house where his father and other men from the Olinger High athletic department are counting the night’s proceeds, “the gold of beer [standing] in cylinders beside their hairy wrists,” these adults greet him with ginger ale rather than a reprimand, and as he watches them work, the scene acquires a spiritual significance: “Silently counting and expertly tamping the coins into little cylindrical wrappers of colored paper, the men ordered and consecrated this realm of night into which my days had never extended before. The hour or more behind me, which I had spent so wastefully in walking...and so wickedly, in blasphemy and lust, was past and forgiven me; it had been necessary; it was permitted” (125). Time, its weight suspended by the excitement of the game, the sights and smells of youth, and by these men, whose ordering of the late night realm includes a space for tardiness and for the reckless pleasure of adolescent sexual discovery, ultimately removes the narrator from this setting, however, and he laments that the “air of permission” here described has since “fled the world” (125).

As elegiac as the narrative’s ending may be, it would nevertheless be a mistake to think this lack of access to youthful grace suggests separation from grace in other physical manifestations, even if the narrator himself seems to think so in the moment. In the previous narrative “Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, A Dying Cat, A Traded Car,” David Kern, returning to narrate several episodes from his adult life, demonstrates that the grace embodied in the quotidian remains available, if less liberally dispensed, to adult characters. David, even more explicitly than the narrator of “In Football Season,” is aware that to be human is to live as a body in time and that the body is perishable. Shades of his boyhood spiritual conflict return when thinking about Christ’s warning that lust is tantamount to adultery leads him to reflect, “The universe that so easily led me to commit adultery” is “a universe that would easily permit me to

die” (110). This thought weighs less heavily on him than the “qualitative difference” he touched in “Pigeon Feathers,” and as readers we have, from the narrative’s beginning, a sense of how David will ultimately reassure himself. In fact, he uses the word “reassured” in the opening paragraph, stating that this is “always” his reaction to the packed dirt of the story’s title. “The sight of bare earth that has been smoothed and packed firm by the passage of human feet,” he says, leaves him “reassured, nostalgically pleased” in part because, as he later explains, “it recalled...a part of the path that long ago had led down from my parents’ back yard to the high-school softball field” and in part because he feels, “As God’s forested legacy to us dwindles, there grows, in these worn, rubbed, and patted patches, a sense of human legacy” (102-3). The “Packed Dirt” section of the narrative is short, but it foregrounds three key ideas that, by the end of the text, form the center of David’s thinking: that human activity can outlast individual life, that the impact of such actions is often material, and that narrative is an important means of contextualizing embodied experience.

In the last section, David’s return to Olinger, prompted by his father’s health problems, becomes clarifying. He does not find *permissive* grace, but he does find pleasure and a kind of peace in his material surroundings even as his father’s worsening physical condition leads David to contemplate the nature of human mortality. That David has earlier confessed to losing his faith does not preclude his finding relief from “the improvised cities of New England” in the comparatively quaint Olinger and Alton or feeling that “The world” he discovers (or rediscovers) in Pennsylvania is “an intricate wonder displayed for [his] delight with no price asked” (115-6). Before departing, David has one more short conversation with his father, which he describes as follows: “It took him a moment, it seemed, to realize that by my home I meant a far place, where I had a wife and children, dental appointments and work obligations...it has since occurred to me

that during that instant when his face was blank he was swallowing the realization that he could die and my life would go on” (120). Reflecting on the movement of time (and the relatively brief space human lives occupy within it), David considers his relationship to his soon-to-be-traded car and all the cars his father traded when he was a boy, and this consideration makes him sentimental. Giving the car credit for having “completed the journey safely”—Updike’s way of representing a contemplative David’s reliance on muscle memory for the last leg of his trip—he becomes uneasy about how “cleanly” human beings are able to dispense with such a valued object (121). David’s realization that “We in America need ceremonies,” that we are dependent on habitual actions and significant events—on narrative—for meaning, that without them time and death would dismiss us as easily as an old car “without a blessing, a kiss, a testament, or any ceremony of farewell,” provides a potential lens for interpreting the whole Olinger collection, and it is in this context that “In Football Season” should be read, the narrator offering his reminiscence as a defense against a world that no longer seems to him “steeped in grace” (121, 125). In memory, he can revisit the grace of adolescent discovery just as David Kern, physically returning to Olinger’s specific material details, revives “that old sense, of Pennsylvania knowingness” (113). Though Updike, in 1964, considered *Olinger Stories* his farewell to that particular narrative locale, he too, as several narratives in *My Father’s Tears* plainly demonstrate, is ultimately unable to leave Olinger for good.

### *Old Age and My Father’s Tears*

In *My Father’s Tears* (2009), Updike maintains the reflective acuity that makes his early depictions of childhood and adolescence remarkable. Except for the first narrative “Morocco” (1979), all stories in the collection were written in the last decade of Updike’s life—beginning

with “Personal Archaeology” (2000) and ending with “The Full Glass” (2008)—and explore the difficult subject of growing old. In a 2015 article for *The New Yorker*, Ceridwen Dovey poses the question “What does it feel like to be old?” before recounting her own struggle (and the struggle of numerous other writers) to create fictional characters that are simultaneously old and believable. Dovey cites, among others, British author Penelope Lively (born almost exactly one year after Updike), who, in her essay “So This Is Old Age,” writes that one reality of aging that has made the experience “a danger zone” for most authors is that, while old age is “[a] common experience,” the elderly often have “nothing much in common except the accretion of years, a historical context, and a generous range of ailments from which we have probably been allocated two or three.” As a collection, Updike’s final narratives present a nuanced picture of old age as a human condition, making use of the commonalities Lively identifies without suggesting that they represent old age in its totality. His stories demonstrate that bodies in time inevitably become afflicted bodies, yet the individual suffering of various characters resists monolithic description. T.C. Boyle refers to Updike, with unironic admiration, as “our spy in the house of the old,” and the appellation is well deserved. Drawing, as always, from personal experience, Updike creates a set of narratives that, in eloquence and artistry, merits consideration alongside his best-remembered works.

Adam Begley observes that, of the eighteen narratives that comprise *My Father’s Tears* (2009), “more than a third...circle back” to Updike’s fictional Pennsylvania (10). Some of these returns occur in thought—as when Benjamin Foster in “The Laughter of the Gods” references his mother’s Firetown origins or when the narrator of the collection’s title story remembers leaving for college from the Alton train station—while others happen physically—as when David Kern (now in his seventies) attends his fiftieth Olinger High School reunion. In *My Father’s Tears*, as

they did in *Olinger Stories*, David's experiences identify some of the larger text's central ideas. These ideas seem to me divisible into three categories, each addressed to a particular aspect of growing old: the isolation felt at the various losses of age, the physical deterioration time inflicts on aging bodies, and the availability of grace despite age's varied forms of suffering.

### Aging as Isolation

David's return to Olinger begins both "The Walk with Elizanne" and "The Road Home," and in each narrative, the changes he observes in his hometown suggest time's power to transform the familiar into the strange. In "The Walk with Elizanne," Updike writes that David's class "had graduated from Olinger High in 1950, a few years before the name was regionalized out of existence," and at the start of "The Road Home," we are told that David "exited from the Pennsylvania turnpike at a new tollbooth and was shot into an alien, majestic swirl of overpass and underpass" and that "For some alarming seconds, he had no idea where he was; the little village of Morgan's Forge—an inn, two churches, a feed store—which should have been on his left, had vanished behind a garish stretch of national franchises and retail outlets" (*MFT* 38, 170). Time and the commercial progress that, in America, often accompanies it have rendered what should be well known territory unrecognizable, and though David's sense of disorientation recalls his family's move in "Pigeon Feathers," the shock he feels as an old man is more immediate, his momentary confusion evoking the senility that some of Updike's other elderly characters experience explicitly. By the end of "The Road Home," he not only feels lost but actually gets lost on his way to meet old friends and must follow them, like "some out-of-town moron," back to better-remembered parts of town (192). The peculiar sensation of struggling to navigate what should be (and once was) a known environment isolates David not only from

younger Olinger residents, who are likely an influential factor in these changes he encounters, but also from his former classmates, whose guidance he comes to resent.

The kind of old-age alienation David experiences, though motivated in different narratives by different forces, is felt by several characters across *My Father's Tears*. Martin Fairchild in "The Accelerating Expansion of the Universe," a character who "had not hitherto really believed in his own aging," feels "islanded" by science's "many revisions to cosmic theory," revisions that he has followed for his entire life and that, in contrast to his former faith narratives, suggest "we are riding an aimless explosion to nowhere" (137-8). These many revisions underscore the extent to which science, as an ever-evolving body of knowledge, resists stability, and Fairchild's sense of the world's inconstancy is heightened by dissolving social connections like "his old golf foursome," who "had been dispersed to infirmity and Florida if not to the grave" (147). In "The Guardians," Lee is the last surviving member of his family, the "only" person "left to remember" family stories and experiences in the face of death's "unbelievable nothingness" (63, 62). Of all the narratives in the collection, however, "Personal Archaeology," the second story to appear, begins with a particularly straightforward account of this alienated feeling. Craig Martin, the story's central character, considers age an "increasing isolation" attributed to "elderly golfing buddies dead or dying, his old business contacts fraying, no office to go to, his wife always off at her bridge or committees, his children as busy and preoccupied as he himself had been in middle age" (16). Time, by its natural progression, has carried Craig into loneliness and boredom, and this isolated state prompts the kind of reflection for which he was too busy as a younger man. Turning serious attention to the previously unexamined details of his environment, Craig develops "an interest in the traces left by prior

owners of his land” and begins walking the property with a garbage bag to collect the junk items discarded by previous eras (16).

For the next several pages, Craig’s narrative becomes a catalogue of sorts, discussing the various natural features and abandoned artifacts he discovers on his property as well as the previous eras to which he dates them. Craig initially finds these accumulated materials depressing, and in dreams and memories, he revisits the sensory details of numerous parties he attended as a younger man. “The parties,” he recalls, “had been vehicles for flirtation and exploration” at a time when “he and his friends were in the prime of their lives and expected that, as amusing and wonderful as things were, things even more wonderful were bound to happen” (21). He also recalls a deeper dimension to these gatherings, a level of interaction at which minor physical gestures—“eye-glance and whisper, hand squeeze and excessive hilarity”—communicated any number of covert arrangements between lovers, including “canceled assignments or agreed upon abortions” (22). In these various former interactions, Craig perceives a vitality not only diminished by age but doomed by time to the same fate visible in the discarded objects—“Mason jars, flower pots, shotgun shells, rubber tires half sunk in the leaf-mold,” a “molar-shaped boulder,” a “charred work glove,” the “handle of a teacup,” and endless other “organic oddments”—he has unearthed on his land (19-20). He begins to feel, as Fairchild articulates when considering the accumulated items of his own narrative, that “Everything decays and sinks and fails under the dominion of time” (151).

Craig’s perspective begins to change when, after waking from a dream, his attention comes to rest on an old family painting and on several other items dating back to “his boyhood world” in Pennsylvania. These objects, which “had been with him in the abyss of lost time, and survived less altered than he,” seem to him “fraught and weighty...with the mystery of his own



transient existence” because they seem to embody the various homes Craig’s family occupied during his childhood, places from which he is now far removed, and because they evoke a collection of memories that predate even the parties Craig has revisited in his dreams. That these items have endured time’s passage becomes a source of comfort in the midst of aging’s isolation. Remembering one childhood home and his exploration of its wooded surroundings, Craig envisions the “old family dump” in which he discovered “a mound, nearly grown over, of glass bottles with raised lettering, as self-important and enduring as the lettering on tombstones” and recalls that “the broken glass bore the raised names of defunct local bottling works” (25). This sight, Updike writes, “had frightened little Craig, as a pile of bones would have done, with its proof of time’s depths,” but alongside this sense of dread, the broken bottles also provide “a kind of glittering, obviously cheerful company,” a hint that this discarded glass, like the “Packed Dirt” of *Olinger Stories*, represents both the ravages of time and the enduring imprint of human activity (25-6). Thinking about the dual significance inherent in human refuse, Craig returns to the garbage accumulated on his current property with new eyes. He finds several “half-buried golf balls, their lower sides stained by immersion in the acid earth” that he himself had driven to the far edges of his land and that “he had never expected to find” (26). For Craig, these small artifacts represent a surprising grace, and he views them as the markers “of *his* era” in the life of the place, tangible evidence of his one-time presence in that space, an enduring link between his individual experience and the larger living world.

### Physical Deterioration

Craig Martin’s experience with grace is one of many that I intend to discuss, but for now, I would like to examine another striking moment from Craig’s narrative, a moment that also

exhibits thematic kinship with the collection's other stories. It is the moment in which Craig visits Al, his "corpulent golfing buddy," who is laid up in the hospital following a heart attack (24). Al's physical deterioration is vividly depicted, and this scene is one of many that convey Updike's interest in the decline and failures of aging bodies. I want to begin my discussion of this interest by presenting a few of the collection's longer and more graphic passages addressed to this phenomenon so that their cumulative effect within the larger text might be made apparent. Craig's visit to Al in "Personal Archaeology" is the first such moment to appear and is described as follows:

Al lay with tubes up his nose and into his mouth, breathing for him. His chest moved up and down with a mechanical regularity recorded by hopping green lines on the monitor on the wall: a TV show, *Al's Last Hours*. It was engrossing, though the plot was thin, those lines hopping on and on in a luminous sherbet green. Al's eye lashes, pale and furry, fluttered when Craig spoke, in too loud a voice, as if calling from the edge of a cliff. "Thanks for all the laughs, Al. Just do what the nurses and doctors tell you and you'll be fine." Al's hand, as puffy as an inflated rubber glove, wiggled at his side, on the bright white sheet. Craig took it in his, trying not to dislocate the IV tubes shunted into the wrist. The hand was warm, and silky as a woman's, not having swung a golf club for some years, but didn't seem animate, even when it returned the pressure. Our bodies, Craig thought, are a ponderous residue the spirit leaves behind. (24-5)

When, in "The Walk with Elizanne," David Kern and his wife Andrea visit his former schoolmate Mamie Kauffman in the hospital, they learn that Mamie has been "critically ill" for

six weeks, “her bones too riddled with cancer for her to walk” (38). Mamie recounts how she discovered her affliction:

She described getting out of bed and hearing her hip snap, feeling herself tossed into a corner like a rag doll, and reaching for the telephone, which luckily was on the floor, with her cane. She had used one for some time for what she had been told was rheumatoid arthritis. At first, she meant to call her daughter, Dorothy, two towns away. “I was so mad at myself, I couldn’t think of Dot’s phone number, though I dial it every other day, and then I told myself, ‘Mamie, it’s two-thirty in the morning, you don’t want Dot’s number, what you want is nine-one-one. What you want is an ambulance.’ They came in ten minutes and couldn’t have been nicer. One of the paramedics, it turned out, had been one of my second-graders twenty years ago.” (39)

Henry’s proximity to cancer, in the story “Free,” is even closer than David’s, his wife having died of it “in her sixties” (31). After her death, he remembers her illness and the terrible closeness her suffering fostered between them:

For two years he had lain beside Irene feeling her disease growing like a child of theirs. He had stayed awake in the shadow of her silence, marveling at the stark untouchable beauty of her stoicism. In the dark, her pain had seemed an incandescence. Toward the end, in the intervals when the haze of painkillers lifted, she spoke to him as she never had, lightly, as to another child whom she did not know well but with whom she had been fated to spend a long afternoon. “I think they might have been just kidding us,” she confided one time. “Suppose you don’t get to take a trip up to heaven?” Or again, “I knew I was boring to you, but I

didn't know how else to be." In her puzzlement at his tears, she would touch his hair, not quite daring to touch his face. (36)

For all of this, however, the most grim and explicit of Updike's attempts to capture the bodily failures of old age might be the moment when Jim Werley, narrator of "My Father's Tears," describes his father-in-law at the end of life:

He was to be brought low, all dignity shed, before he died. Alzheimer's didn't so much invade his brain as deepen the benign fuzziness and preoccupation that had always been there. At the memorial service for his wife, dead of cancer, he turned to me before the service began and said, with a kindly though puzzled smile, "Well, James, I don't quite know what's up, but I guess it will all come clear." He didn't realize that his wife of forty-five years was being memorialized.

With her gone, he deteriorated rapidly. At the nursing home where we finally took him, as he stood before the admission desk he began to whimper, and to jiggle up and down as if bouncing something in his pants, and I knew he needed to urinate, but I lacked the courage to lead him quickly to the lavatory and take his penis out of his fly for him, so he wet himself and the floor. (201)

In addition to these longer excerpts, passing references to the terrible possibilities of declining health abound, whether in Fleischer's concern with "precancerous cells" in "Blue Light" or in Lee's memory of his grandfather, who, in "The Guardians," "believed the bed was on fire, and, in escaping it, fell dead on the floor" or in the phone call from Jim's mother in "My Father's Tears" to tell him that his own father had died of a heart attack, that "he had fought real hard at the end," and that "It was ugly" (244, 62, 211). Read individually, within the context of their respective narratives, these moments are poignant and evocative representations of human beings

in decline, but viewed collectively, they convey a state of being rather than individual narrative moments, a state including the range of potential horrors that await elderly people at the end of life. In these bedside moments, time applies its irreversible pressure, and equally irreversible, these afflictions—sudden heart attacks, metastatic cancers, and obliterating dementia—exert their debilitating force. This force’s impact, gradual or not, is total, finally depriving the body of energy, stability, and function, to say nothing of privacy, independence, and dignity.

In these accumulated moments, readers also notice two important recurrences: first, that death is a continual presence in each scene, brought close to afflicted characters by the physical catastrophes they have endured, and, second, that these afflictions tend to be witnessed rather than experienced by Updike’s central characters. Ultimately, these two repeated phenomena are interrelated. While death looms large in hospital rooms, bedrooms, doctors’ offices, and nursing homes, its presence weighs less immediately on the central characters themselves. Not having suffered in the same manner as their friends and family members, these protagonists have a power to observe and describe the symptoms of age and physical suffering in ways that “the haze of painkillers,” the oppression of endless tubes and monitors, and the bare facts of dementia disallow. At the same time, Updike’s central characters are themselves old—older, in all likelihood than the average reader—and, therefore, offer an inside perspective on the relationship of aging to considerations of death and to anxieties over health’s increasing uncertainty, a perspective sharpened by the possibility that they might find themselves similarly afflicted before the end. Craig Martin, David Kern, Henry, and Jim supply detailed insight into the problems of old age, inviting readers to confront not only human mortality but also the eventual, disturbing fragility bodies acquire over time.

Updike's lifelong concern with aging and death is evident in *Olinger Stories* and in later collections—not only via David Kern's existential crisis but also through numerous grandparental figures or aging parents as well as through his many married and philandering protagonists who feel, as David muses in "The Walk with Elizanne," that "for a man there is no antidote to death but a woman"—, but *My Father's Tears* depicts end-of-life suffering with disturbing realism, a realism that complicates Updike's (and his characters') traditional interest in sexual relationships (52). George W. Hunt names sex among the "great secret things" that inform Updike's consciousness as a writer, and (as David Kern's experience with extramarital lust foreshadows) the sexual discovery enjoyed by Olinger's adolescents becomes, in Updike's later fiction, the various consummations and infidelities of his middle aged characters<sup>32</sup> (7). Katie Roiphe asserts that "Updike writes constantly about cheating as an antidote to death," arguing that, for him, "sex is about grasping at life," at the "near mystical source of vitality" his male characters often find "located in women's bodies" (119-20). "The idea, crudely noted," she writes, "is something like 'philandering = being alive'" (121). While this does often seem the perspective of Updike's middle aged suburban men, and while several of his elderly protagonists attempt to embrace the same philosophy, *My Father's Tears* is a text in which extramarital sexual endeavors are continually frustrated.

This frustration is most explicit in the story "Outage," a humorous narrative in which the central character's liaison with his younger neighbor is thwarted when electricity is restored to her house and, with it, the lights, phones, and burglar alarm, making their age difference and

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<sup>32</sup> One of Updike's most powerful explorations of these themes appears in his series of short stories (distributed across several collections) featuring Joan and Richard Maple, who—in narratives like "Snowing in Greenwich Village" (1956), "Wife-Wooing" (1960), "Your Lover Just Called" (1966), "Nakedness" (1974), "Separating" (1975), "Divorcing: A Fragment" (1979), and "Grandparenting" (1994)—struggle to navigate the tensions involved in marriage, separation, divorce, and family life thereafter.

infidelity impossible to ignore. Elsewhere in the collection, however, old age seems to frustrate sexual objectives either by demystifying the future—replacing youthful anticipation and promise with the knowledge that life, as Fleischer in “Blue Light” observes, “*has been mostly lived*”—or by creating—via the suffering that either afflicts or haunts elderly bodies—an intimacy that, while terrible, binds couples more tightly than sexual ecstasy (*MFT* 263). For Henry Milford in “The Apparition,” knowledge of his own physical limitations confines sex with a younger woman to the realm of fantasy. Vacationing in India together, Milford and his wife Jean fall in with a younger couple in their touring group, and because his wife and the younger man are both intensely interested in what the tour guide has to say, Milford and Lorena, the younger woman, form their own “default alliance of willful ignorance,” exchanging “sideways glances and half-smiles” throughout the day (235). Milford notices Lorena’s body—different from his wife’s “not only by thirty years’ less use but by being expensively toned”—but “at his age” prefers “to embrace her with a wry sideways attention,” recognizing that “She was beyond his means in every way” (234, 237). By the end of the story, he is able to view his sexual desire for Lorena in positive terms, as “one body’s adoration of another,” but while he “rejoice[s] to be tasting lust’s folly once more,” Milford’s final vision of himself lying on top of a “dark shape” that “fitted to him exactly” turns out to be “that of his body in its grave” (243). He and Lorena have developed chemistry, but the difference between her middle-aged vitality and his closeness to death prevents intimacy even in Milford’s dream.

That suffering could prove more powerful than sex to establish intimacy is not an idea that occurs often, if at all, among Updike’s early protagonists, but in both “Free” and “Delicate Wives,” readers encounter central characters whose previous enthusiasm for infidelity is dulled and whose marital relationships are deepened when their wives develop cancer. “Free” begins

with Henry's memories of his regular affair with Leila when they were both middle aged. He remembers a particular autumn day when he and Leila swam naked in a local lake, recalling of this "erotic contest" that the water had been so cold "his submerged body felt swollen and blazing, as if lightning had struck it" (29). It is impossible to know with certainty if a younger Updike would have employed the phrase "swollen and blazing" to describe the shock of jumping into cold water or if these are words an older writer—himself no stranger to hospitals or to the task of describing for doctors the precise nature of aches and pains—found more readily than others, but Henry, old and more conscious of pain and ill health than he was as a younger man, remembers feeling that their clandestine swim "was one of those moments...when a life reaps the benefits nature has stored up" (29). Thinking of Leila young and naked, he concludes, "This was health: that little wet head, those bright otter eyes, that tufted, small-breasted body at his disposal," even as he acknowledges—possibly in light of age's health problems—that the stress of maintaining this adulterous relationship gave him gastritis (29). When he and Leila reconnect late in life, after Irene's death and Leila's divorces, Henry thinks of himself as free, but reflecting on his and Irene's final experiences (cited among the suffering passages previously listed), he decides against renewing their old sexual interaction. Henry realizes, "Since her death, she had been wrapped around him like a shroud" and that he enjoys "The repose he found in imagining her still with him" (36). When Leila reminds him that he is free now, he responds, "Well, what is free?...Looking back at us—maybe that's as free as things get" (37). After watching his wife slowly succumb to cancer, after accompanying her to hospitals and through treatments, Henry feels closer to her than he did at the beginning of their marriage. Though a renewed relationship with Leila would no longer constitute infidelity, he finds his enthusiasm for their former association diminished and would rather spend the evening remembering Irene.



Les Merrill of "Delicate Wives" senses affliction's capacity to generate this kind of intimacy even as a young man. Learning that his neighbor Veronica, with whom he had recently carried on a summer-long affair, has been saved by her husband Gregor from a near-fatal bee sting, Les—in his late twenties at the narrative's beginning—is unable to stifle his intense, even comical jealousy, feeling that "by the rights of love he should have been the one to be with her and to save her heroically" (127). While Les is at least self-aware enough to admit that, in the same situation, he may not have acted with Gregor's "practical-minded" decisiveness, he defends his selfishness with the thought that "her emergency," under his less capable direction, "would have acquired and forever retained a different kind of poetry...more congruent with a doomed summer love. For what was more majestically intimate even than sex but death?" (128-9). Despite the farcical, ostentatiously self-absorbed nature of Les's imagined melodrama, his rhetorical question acknowledges a tension important to the narrative and to the collection overall. On the one hand, the sharing of bodies leads to the sharing of lives, as illustrated by Les's memory that he and Veronica "had shared, along with sex, concerns about their children, and memories of their parents and upbringings" (131). On the other, this intimacy (which Les feels compelled to end in order to protect his marriage) is less alluring than the intimacy offered by vulnerability, which, in his initial youth and myopia, Les is only able to conceive of in romantic terms. As a young man, he wants to save Veronica from her husband, and as an older man, he wants to rescue a "more fragile and needy Veronica" from her pending divorce and recent lupus diagnosis (134). When he approaches his wife Lisa about a divorce, he justifies the request by asserting that he can no longer "keep up" with her and that she has "become self-sufficient" (134).

By the end of the narrative, they are not sharing a bed, but when Lisa discovers a lump in her breast, she calls Les into their former bedroom to help her check it: “Come on,” she says in response to his hesitation, “I can’t ask a child to do it, or a friend. You’re all I’ve got” (136). This final conversation gives the story’s ending a surprising poignancy. Les again accepts that he will not leave his wife, but this acceptance is devoid of the romance he formerly attached to physical tragedy. “This was the bee sting,” he realizes as he feels her breast for irregularities, “the intimacy he had coveted, legitimately his at last; but he felt befouled by things of the body and wanted merely to turn away, while knowing he could not” (136). This, finally, is old age’s crowning absurdity, that after time has isolated aging individuals, afflicted their bodies with illness and dysfunction, and replaced the sensory pleasures of sex with myriad pains, Updike’s elderly characters find themselves not only alienated from the world but from their own bodies too. This alienation can be seen in the opening line of “The Full Glass,” in which the narrator states, “Approaching eighty, I sometimes see myself from a little distance, as a man I know but not intimately” as well as in Craig Martin’s earlier assertion that “our bodies are a ponderous residue” from which relief, if not salvation, is needed (276).

### Unexpected Grace

“[T]ime consumes us,” Jim Werley observes, and the aging bodies of *My Father’s Tears* demonstrate the many painful ways and terrible slowness with which this occurs. Yet, in spite of the horrific physical deterioration that awaits any who live long enough to be old, Updike’s characters remain committed to prolonging life, however hampered, as much as possible and retain their ability to experience embodied, unexpected grace. Henry’s discovery at the end of “Free,” while cognizant of youth’s greater freedoms, is not entirely melancholy since the

intimacy he ultimately shares with Irene (though painful) brings him closer to her, and he cherishes this closeness after she is gone. Craig Martin and Martin Fairchild each find in unexpected sources—for Craig, the half-buried golf balls at the edge of his property, and for Fairchild, a past mugging and the eventual collapse of his personal clutter—tangible relief from their concerns about dying. In the collection’s title narrative, however, Updike’s surprising grace assumes one of its more beautiful forms as Jim, the narrator, describes a chance deviation from his typical flight routine: “Flying from Boston to New York, my habit is to take a seat on the right-hand side of the plane, but the other day I sat on the left and was rewarded, at that hour of mid-morning, by the sun’s reflection on the waters of Connecticut—not just rivers and the Sound, but little ponds and pools and glittering threads of water that for a few seconds hurled silver light skyward into my eyes” (206). Here, as in all of Updike’s fiction, grace is unearned, a Connecticut sunrise reflected momentarily in water, a discovery that could not have been made intentionally, and for Jim, this sight evokes the powerful memory for which the narrative is titled, the water catching the light in the same way his father’s tears glittered on the day Jim left for college. These tears, along with the socially acceptable “manly contact” of his father’s parting handshake, seem to Jim both an indication of his father’s love and the older man’s acknowledgment that time was necessarily and irrevocably changing their lives and their relationship to each other (193).

Memory plays a complicated role in *My Father’s Tears*. Often it seems, for Olinger heroes especially, to preserve past experience, but Updike also frequently acknowledges memory’s capacity to revise history, to amplify, distort, reframe, or reinterpret events that only late in life acquire deep significance. In the collection’s title story alone memory serves simultaneously as the narrator’s link to a past physical expression of paternal love—one that

occasionally asserts itself unexpectedly—and, in the case of his father-in-law’s Alzheimer’s, as a target of time’s assault on physical life. When Jim reflects, “It is easy to love people in memory; the hard thing is to love them when they are there in front of you,” this thought can be read as both a clear admonition of his own failures to love his father-in-law materially when doing so would have had value (if only the value of sparing the older man age’s most public indignities) and, in a less obvious way, as praise of memory’s power to facilitate love by magnifying an individual’s most endearing qualities while minimizing his or her negative attributes (202). The greatest tragedy of Alzheimer’s in the narrative, however, seems to be that the patient loses what is elsewhere an important resource for counteracting such old-age problems as elderly isolation and the feeling of purposelessness that often accompanies such loneliness. Jim refers to the high school trivia celebrated at his Olinger reunions as a “long-hoarded treasure of useless knowing,” but this knowing represents memories agreed upon—stories rooted in shared physical experience—that make a room full of old people into a community, creating a spiritual connection among them that spans the separating distances of daily life and transcends even aging itself (208). He acknowledges that they are all visibly old—“the class beauties have gone to fat or bony cronehood; the sports stars and non-athletes alike move about with the aid of pacemakers and plastic knees”—but also observes that “we don’t see ourselves that way, as lame and old. We see kindergarten children—the same round fresh faces, the same cup ears and long-lashed eyes... We see in each other the enduring simplicities of a town rendered changeless by Depression and then by a world war whose bombs never reached us, though rationing and toy tanks and air-raid drills did” (207). As their numbers decrease over time, it becomes increasingly clear to Jim that this shared past is its own generational intimacy and that the now-elderly members of his high school class embody a specific variety of American experience.

David Kern has his own experience with the surprising grace of memory in “The Walk with Elizanne.” He too appreciates the communal vitality of his Olinger High reunions and, following his visit with Mamie Kauffman, arrives at a function room that seems to him “full of human noise” in which “gleeful greetings and old-fashioned kidding” stand opposed to the fact that “life was mostly over” (43). On an evening devoted to memories from his adolescent past, David is surprised when the reunion’s coordinator introduces him to Elizanne, whom he does not readily remember. He feels as if she is being “presented as a treat, a delicacy, a rarity,” and this is, in fact, the only reunion Elizanne has attended in fifty years (44). While their initial meeting is awkward, Elizanne makes a point of finding David before her departure. “[T]here’s something I’ve been wanting for years to say to you,” she tells him, “You were very important to me. You were the first boy who ever walked me home and—and kissed me” (46). David is “shocked...by this remembrance of...their true, fumbling, vanished selves,” and Elizanne’s revelation remains with him for days after the reunion (46). While, at first, he can only remember the most basic tactile impressions left by their teenage relationship—the fact that Elizanne had seemed “dewy” or that she had “a fuzz on her upper lip” that “made two little smudges”—, his retrospective vision, filtered “through the distorted lens of old age,” eventually magnifies their walk (with its resultant kiss) into “one of the most momentous acts of his life,” leading David, the prototypical Olinger protagonist, to relive and revel in the fact that “she had let him kiss her” (47, 49-51). Regardless of the years that have passed since that kiss, the moment retains and may even increase its original grace, imbued by memory with an almost miraculous aura.

Elizanne’s confession also prompts David to view the reunion’s significance in a new light, and he begins to contemplate what he terms “*this enormity of our having been children and now being old*” (52). The past he shares with others seems suddenly important, and while he

struggles to identify exactly how or why this is the case, he senses that the secret lies, for himself and for other men, in the company of women. The narrative ends with a clear account of the walk in question, so clear, in fact, that it is difficult to say beyond doubt whether David has remembered or reimagined it or whether the final scene might even be a break from David's consciousness altogether, recounted by an uncharacteristically detached narrator purely for the reader's benefit. Unlikely as this last option seems in light of Updike's typical narrative *modus operandi*, the moment is, in any case, a familiar depiction of Olinger youth, evoking the reminiscences of "In Football Season" or "A Sense of Shelter," though the youthful promise conveyed in the final line now contains an ironic flavor. When teenage David tells Elizanne, "We have t-tons of time," readers are aware of David's present age and proximity to death. This awareness sharpens our sense of life's brevity, causing us to perceive David's youthful optimism as extravagance, but even so, elderly David's ability to revisit youth's physical sensations (with any degree of specificity) is, among age's myriad burdens, its own spiritual relief.

"The Full Glass," the last narrative to appear in the collection, represents all the various forms of embodied grace—material objects, memories of the tangible past, present sensory experience—explored in *My Father's Tears* and valued throughout Updike's work. The story's title comes from its nearly eighty-year-old narrator's evening routine, which he describes as follows:

At night, having brushed my teeth and flossed and done the eyedrops and about to take my pills, *I like to have the water glass already full*. The rational explanation might be that, with a left hand clutching my pills, I don't want to fumble at the faucet and simultaneously try to hold the glass with the right. Still, it's more than a matter of convenience. There is a small but distinct pleasure, in a life with the

gaudier pleasures levelled out of it, in having the full glass there on the white marble sink-top waiting for me, before I sluice down the anti-cholesterol pill, the anti-inflammatory, the sleeping, the calcium supplement (my wife's idea, now that I get foot cramps in bed, somehow from the pressure of the top sheet), along with the Xalatan drops to stave off glaucoma and the Systane drops to ease dry eye. (277, Updike's emphasis)

His list of ailments and corresponding treatments calls reader attention (albeit in a gentler way than in the collection's other passages) to age's deteriorations and to the constant maintenance aging bodies require, but in the midst of these concerns, the simple joy of a glass filled with water becomes an important symbol of grace within the narrative, uniting object materiality with sensory pleasure. This pleasure's simplicity is, to some extent, a result of the body's limitations—life's "gaudier pleasures" having moved out of reach—, but at the same time, its mundanity (as is often the case in Updike) only accentuates its significance. The narrator explains, "that healthy sweet swig near the end of the day has gotten to be something important, *a tiny piece that fits in*: the pills popped into my mouth, the full glass raised to my lips, the swallow that takes the pills down with it, all in less time than it takes to tell it, but bliss" (278 Updike's emphasis). This nightly moment of physical, quotidian grace becomes a jumping off point for memory as the narrator, attempting to identify the reasons for this pleasure, theorizes that "The bliss goes back...to moments of thirst satisfied in my childhood," and from this point forward, the narrative becomes a series of recollections intended "to locate in [the narrator's] life other moments of that full-glass feeling" (278, 281).

We further see the peculiar grace of memory at work in the aging narrator's ability to identify fresh significance in events that transpired when he—as recently as middle age—was

“young enough to live in the present, thinking the world owed [him] happiness” (281). Because “The Full Glass” is an Updike narrative, it is not surprising that the narrator’s attention returns first to the material realities of boyhood. Thinking back to the “public drinking fountains” in Pennsylvania “municipal buildings and department stores,” to the “glasses of ice water” or “Alka-Seltzer” served at luncheonettes and soda fountains, and to the “long-nosed copper faucets” in his grandparents’ house, he marvels at the restorative and communal significance of ordinary tap water (278). “Filling a tumbler with water at the old faucet,” he muses, “connected you with the wider world. Think of it: pipes running through the earth below the frost line and up unseen from the basement right through the walls to bring you this transparent flow, which you swallowed down in rhythmic gulps” (278). The narrator is not immune to old age’s alienation—he later observes, “It has taken old age to make me realize that the world exists for young people”—, but his reflection on the connective importance of water reveals the delight of consuming a clear, refreshing substance so freely and invisibly bestowed (283). This grace, enjoyed frequently and recklessly in boyhood, remains accessible in spite of old-age hindrances, and if delight in “rhythmic gulps” must now be accompanied by pills, it is also experienced with enhanced appreciation. Among the narrator’s other cherished memories is, of course, time spent with a former lover, a woman with “long oval hands” and “painted lips” whose voice, he recalls, “slid past me almost palpably, like a very fine grade of finish sand paper, caressing away my smallest imperfection” (282). Following her death from ovarian cancer, she joins those enjoyments time has placed beyond the narrator’s grasp, but memory allows his occasional return to the cleansing, physical pleasure of their dalliance.

The story’s concluding section begins when the narrator’s bedtime ritual turns his mind to thoughts of his grandfather, whom the narrator only ever knew as an old man. He recalls, “As



a child, I would look at him and wonder how he could stay sane, being so close to his death. But actually, it turns out, Nature drips a little anesthetic into your veins each day that makes you think another day is as good as a year, and another year as long as a lifetime” (289). In his own old age, he has discovered what he could not have fully comprehended in youth: that life, even as its remaining time grows short, retains its value, that bodily suffering must reach extremes before the desire to continue fades.<sup>33</sup> The narrator of “The Full Glass,” like Updike’s other central characters, maintains his perceptive capacity, his memory, and (with the minor hindrances previously enumerated) his mobility, all of which, in the context of an aging body, constitute forms of—or provide access to—grace. While he confesses that “The routines of living—the tooth-brushing, the pill-taking, the flossing and the water glass, the matching of socks and the sorting of the laundry into the proper bureau drawers—wear you down,” he is still able to view (and describe) his life as “one brimming moment after another” (289, 281). Boyle characterizes the story’s ending as “slyly affecting,” and there does seem to be a fitness to the words that end not only the collection but also Updike’s life as a short fiction writer. Looking out over Boston Harbor, the narrator says, “My life-prolonging pills cupped in my left hand, I lift the glass, its water sweetened by its brief wait on the marble sink-top. If I can read this strange old guy’s mind aright, he’s drinking a toast to the visible world, his impending disappearance from it be damned” (292). Considering his own actions with the analytical distance age’s physical distortions have occasioned, the narrator interprets his decision to take his medication as appreciation of the visible world—of embodied life—and as his expressed intention to enjoy the time remaining to him.

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<sup>33</sup> Mamie Kauffman, who, dying of bone cancer, confesses to David Kern, “At times I’ve felt a little impatient with the Lord,” exemplifies this kind of extreme suffering (39).

*Time, Subjectivity, and the “Snug Opaque Quotidian”*

His many novels and poetry collections notwithstanding, the short story was likely the medium in which Updike made his most compelling literary contributions. Robert M. Luscher writes that, while critics have often looked to Updike for “a big, important book on a controversial subject,” several have failed to consider “that the cumulative weight of his short fiction may embody an achievement on par with the one they seek—and in a form...more congenial to the author’s gifts,” noting that Updike, especially in the short narratives, “has succeeded admirably in illuminating the corner of existence he has chosen to delineate” (154-5). Luscher also observes that “while [Updike’s] stories consistently possess an elegiac quality, they never succumb to the tone of a lament” and that “characters’ epiphanies, even when tinged with irony, are finally redemptive moments of perception presented with authorial sympathy” (155). Were it not for the fact that Luscher’s study of Updike was published in 1993, he might easily have been describing *My Father’s Tears*. In Updike’s final collection, the author addresses the realities of old age with especial eloquence, repeatedly demonstrating how the ideas that motivated his earliest narratives become more complicated over time.

By returning to Olinger so frequently, Updike reminds readers that, though age may alter an individual’s perspective, issues of death, dread, alienation, and divine grace are perpetual concerns of embodied existence—of bodies in time. While some readers continue to feel that Updike’s stories are often, as Ralph Wood writes of “Pigeon Feathers,” “more vignette and meditation” than they are “embodied action,” the tension between such ideas as dread and grace are worked out physically: some failure of bodies (the central character’s or someone else’s) threatens a character’s sense of purpose, and some unexpected memory, material object, or sensory pleasure restores hope (194). In the section of *Self-Consciousness* entitled “On Being a

Self Forever,” Updike writes, “Truth is anecdotes, narrative, the snug opaque quotidian” (234). This articulation, quoted frequently by Updike scholars, might justifiably be paraphrased to say that truth is individual, occurs over time, and consists of everyday life’s material artifacts, difficult as it may be to glimpse within that context. Updike’s fiction seeks to synthesize all of these elements into an accurate representation of lived experience, and for him, the key to discovery lies in rapt attention to life’s mundane details, not because attention confers legitimacy but because failure to observe the world is failure to live. In his Protestant way, he suggests that, missing opportunities to observe and participate in our environments, we deny ourselves access to the beauty, reassurance, and grace that a benevolent God dispenses according to his own unknowable pleasure.

## “Running Naked in the Dark”: Embodiment and Ritual in the Fiction of Andre Dubus

Andre Dubus may be the least widely known of the authors considered in this dissertation, yet his fiction addresses the consequences of faith for embodied life more explicitly than any other. Moreover, while his devotion to the short story form<sup>34</sup> and loyalty to the small publishing house that released his first collection<sup>35</sup> may have left Dubus with a comparatively small readership, many American authors continue to regard Dubus as an important and influential writer.<sup>36</sup> Some of these authors place Dubus’s writing “among the strongest...in American fiction,” and several of the tributes published since his death praise the “complicated human lives” he wrote (Gornick 159; Dubus III 13). Dubus’s characters, like John Updike’s, are ordinary people in an ordinary, material world. His fiction, like Flannery O’Connor’s, directs our attention to the importance of embodied action. In Dubus’s world, however, mundane realities are less objectively benevolent than in Updike’s, often threatening to overwhelm his characters rather than serving as vehicles for grace, and the narrative voices that appear in his fiction are kinder than O’Connor’s, never inviting readers to perceive justice or humor in his characters’ suffering. Even in narratives like “The Pretty Girl” (1983) or “Out of the Snow” (1996), two

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<sup>34</sup> On receiving the Nobel Prize for literature in 2013 for her own short fiction, Alice Munro noted that the short story is “often sort of brushed off...as something that people do before they write their first novel” and expressed her desire to see the medium “come to the fore” of public literary consciousness.

<sup>35</sup> David R. Godine, Publisher (a small firm located in Boston, Massachusetts) published Dubus’s first story collection *Separate Flights* in 1975 and continued to handle his work through the publication of *Broken Vessels* (1991). It was only to cover the cost of medical bills resulting from a near-fatal car accident that Dubus eventually sold his work to Vintage (an imprint of Knopf Doubleday), who then published *Selected Stories* (1988), *Dancing After Hours* (1996), and *Meditations from a Movable Chair* (1998). Godine, in a piece written for a 2001 book of tributes to Dubus published by Xavier Review Press, describes his own company as “a small, struggling independent house of uncertain future” and Dubus as “a man of fierce and passionate loyalties,” noting that “When he did leave us for Knopf, which had made him a most generous offer at a time when he desperately needed the money, he did so with obvious regret, genuine affection, and my complete blessing” (51).

<sup>36</sup> In an article for the *New York Times Magazine* entitled “The Lives they Lived” (2000), Cynthia Ozick describes Dubus as an author who has often been designated a “Writer’s Writer,” noting that he (along with Gina Berriault) possessed “a brave and enduring faith in the short story—in its clarity, concentration and winged cutting force—at a time when there were few outlets for short fiction.” At the 2011 *New Yorker* Festival, Jhumpa Lahiri, on a panel with Jeffrey Eugenides and Nicole Krauss addressed to the subject of “The Writer’s Writer,” echoed Ozick’s characterization, including Dubus in her list of authors who have been influential in her own reading and writing life.

stories in which women defend themselves violently against would-be rapists,<sup>37</sup> the women's reactions to their own capacities for violence discourage readers from enjoying the physical damage they inflict on their assailants. Dubus's characters think regularly and intensely about how to live in the world, about what it means to experience pleasure, navigate relationships, to suffer pains both physical and emotional. Many of them narrate their own stories. Many have their stories told by a sympathetic omniscience. In either case, they approach embodied existence as a problem in itself, a mystery from which they continually struggle to extract a narrative that will help them to reconcile consciousness—awareness, understanding, values, and beliefs—with the body's "ungovernable aspects," and successful or not, their repeated efforts to make sense of physical action and choice ultimately affirm the body as essential to any real understanding of human spirituality (Grubgeld, "Body" 46).

Dubus's efforts, as a Catholic, to define the relationship of thought and belief to his own physical choices account for what Thomas E. Kennedy calls his "existential Christian vision" and are largely represented in Dubus's two essay collections *Broken Vessels* (1991) and *Meditations from a Movable Chair* (1998) (Kennedy ix). Out of the many episodes of pain and individual trauma these essays discuss—his sister's rape, the accident that left him physically handicapped,<sup>38</sup> his struggles with mobility and vulnerability thereafter—, ritual sacraments emerge as the tool Dubus considers most useful for combatting the despair that life's various

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<sup>37</sup> Readers familiar with Dubus will remember that Polly, the title character in "The Pretty Girl," has actually been raped by her ex-husband Ray (before the narrative's present) and, fearing a second attack, shoots him after he has broken into her bedroom.

<sup>38</sup> After stopping to assist two people (Luz and Luis Santiago) who were stranded on I-93 in Wilmington, Massachusetts, Dubus and Luis were struck by another car. Olivia Carr Edenfield writes that "Luis had died instantly," and Dubus, who later woke up in the hospital with no memory of the impact, found that it had "crushed his right leg and necessitated the removal of his left leg above the knee" (ix). Other accounts of the accident and of Dubus's injuries are widely available in print and online. In the introduction to her recent book *Moving Toward Redemption: Spirituality and Disability in the Late Writings of Andre Dubus* (2017), Andrea Ivanov-Craig describes the accident in much greater detail, and the perspective of Dubus's friends, family, and doctor may be found in Edward J. Delaney's 2009 documentary *The Times Were Never So Bad: The Life of Andre Dubus*.

difficulties and death's universal certainty invite and for formulating a healthy response to these realities. "Since we are all terminally ill," he writes in "On Charon's Wharf" (1977), "each breath and step and day one closer to the last, I must consider those sacraments which soothe our passage" (*BV* 77). Mark Osteen observes that ritual may also be "*the* essential structural pattern in all [Dubus's] fiction," arguing that "Again and again Dubus's characters recoil from or reflect upon a traumatic experience and then engage in a rite of reenactment through which they hope to convert the experience and gain control over it" and that "Through these rites of performance, purgation, and consolation, the characters lose their former identities and emerge anew," even if many of these "new selves" appear "inchoate, crippled, or alienated" (Osteen's emphasis, 74). "I am calling the behavior of his characters rituals," Osteen explains, "because they are designed and performed as such: methodically, meticulously, and with a spiritual or psychological purpose that is 'not entirely encoded [that is, consciously understood] by the performers,'" (74).<sup>39</sup> This definition leads Osteen to conclude that, in the case of several of "Dubus's adult males," rituals "fail to absolve, elevate or transcend the original crime" because these rituals often consist of violent actions that "merely replicate the original trauma in a different register" (75).

Osteen's analysis is illuminating, but his emphasis on the ceremonial elements of ritual allows for some slippage among terms like *ritual*, *rite*, and *sacrament*, slippage that risks a muddled understanding of the spiritual consequences that result from characters' physical actions. I hope to draw a clarifying distinction between the institutional sacraments practiced in a church setting and the kinds of individual rituals at work in Dubus's fiction. There is definite

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<sup>39</sup> Osteen quotes the definition of *ritual* supplied in Roy A. Rappaport's final book *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999). Rappaport's complete definition reads as follows: "I take the term 'ritual' to denote the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers" (24). While I do not suspect Osteen of intentionally obscuring Rappaport's definition, I do think he misses and consequently downplays that these "sequences of formal acts and utterances" are described as "invariant," suggesting not only that method and intention are necessary components of ritual but that these factors must also, as I argue hereafter, be "more or less" repetitive.

overlap between these categories, but I would contend both that repetition is implicit in the concept of ritual and that the specific repetition involved distinguishes the institutional from the individual. All sacraments are ritualistic in that they follow a prescribed liturgy each time they are enacted, but some are only performed ritually within the broader context of the Church. The Catholic Church performs Baptism in a consistent, recognizable way, but a person is baptized only once. For the church this makes baptism a ritual, while for the individual it is only a rite or a ceremony, albeit a sacramental one. Other sacraments, like Confession, become individual rituals, repeated by a single person as often as he or she needs to reenter the state of grace.

This understanding of the human relationship to grace as an active one—of grace as a state from which human beings continually fall and into which they are continually readmitted via sacrament—is decidedly Catholic,<sup>40</sup> and while Confession figures in narratives like “If They Knew Yvonne” (1969) and “Adultery” (1977), the most important personal ritual for Dubus is the Eucharist. In his essay “Bodily Mysteries” (1991), Dubus writes, “For a Catholic, the Eucharist is the body and blood of Jesus Christ in the form of bread and wine. Since I was a boy, this sacrament has sustained my belief in God, who joined us here on earth...For most of my life, I have tried to receive the Eucharist daily” (*MMC* 101). Dubus considers this sacrament significant because it allows him to feel the reality of Christ’s incarnation through the performance of a physical action, the bread and wine engaging his senses of taste and touch. The Eucharist also sustained Dubus in later life as a “cripple”<sup>41</sup> who had to re-learn how to move

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<sup>40</sup> The Catechism of the Catholic Church, in defining the characteristics of faith, states that “Believing is possible only by grace and the interior helps of the Holy Spirit. But it is no less true that believing is an authentically human act. Trusting in God and cleaving to the truths he has revealed is contrary neither to human freedom nor to human reason,” and, citing St. Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*, that “In faith, the human intellect and will cooperate with divine grace: ‘Believing is an act of the intellect assenting to the divine truth by command of the will moved by God through grace’” (47-8).

<sup>41</sup> In a 1991 interview, Eleanor Wachtel asked Dubus why he chose to refer to himself as a “cripple” both in conversation and in essays. Dubus answered, “My crippled buddies call themselves ‘disabled,’ but I don’t think of

around in physical space and who daily remembered what it was like to have a pair of fully functioning legs (*MMC* 119). In his essay “Sacraments” (1998) he explains, “I cannot feel joy with my brain alone. I need sacraments I can receive through my senses. I need God manifested as Christ, who ate and drank and shat and suffered, and laughed” (*MMC* 87). This need for sensory experience—for tactility—extended even into Dubus’s private, writerly rituals. Of his creative process, he said, “I have to get tactile. I have to work through a character’s senses,” and Brennan O’Donnell observes that there are “countless analogues for Eucharist that pervade [Dubus’s] work” (Lyons and Oliver 148; O’Donnell 117).

While the Eucharist is officially a sacramental and institutional ritual, it is also an individual one, and many of the analogues O’Donnell references are not explicitly religious. In “Sacraments,” Dubus offers a broader understanding of the term than the Catholic church provides: “A sacrament is physical, and within it is God’s love,” he writes, and “in the Catholic church there are seven. But, no, I say, for the church is catholic, and the world is catholic, and there are seven times seventy sacraments, to infinity” (*Mediations* 85). Such sacramental actions include placing ice chips on his dying father’s dried tongue or making sandwiches for his daughters’ school lunches, and these actions, when performed repeatedly, become individual rituals, their religious significance apparent only when narratorial insight or character perception (or misperception) calls reader attention to the spiritual significance involved in them. “On Tuesdays,” he writes, “when I make lunches for my girls, I focus on this: the sandwiches are sacraments” (*MMC* 89). As long as “someone makes it for you,” he explains, “and gives it to you with love; even harried or tired or impatient love, but with love’s direction and concern...then God’s love too is in the sandwich” (*MMC* 85). Dubus sees these myriad, mundane rituals as

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*cripple* as pejorative. I think it’s because I’m a writer; I don’t like euphemisms. I don’t like words designed to cheer me up” (*Conversations*, 142).



necessary to human existence, powerful to restore our energy for life, our attention to God, and our investment in each other. Dubus asks readers to reconsider the nature of tasks we likely perform without thinking from one day to the next, to view them not as “the miracle of transubstantiation” but as motions that nevertheless are “certainly parallel with it, moving in the same direction” (*MMC* 89). Sacraments require love. They are, in fact, love’s embodiment, and healthy ritual in Dubus’s fiction occurs when expressions of love acquire repetitive, thoughtful motion.

Dubus’s observation that the love embodied in sandwiches moves “in the same direction” as the miracle of the Eucharist echoes Simone Weil’s discussion of obedience, sin, suffering, and love in her essay “The Love of God and Affliction” and suggests Weil’s influence on Dubus’s thinking about the mechanisms of sacramental grace. Dubus takes the epigraph for his story “Adultery” from that essay’s final pages—“love is a direction and not a state of the soul”—, and O’Donnell points out that “In context, the distinction in the epigraph is for Weil the ‘only necessary’ thing to know when one is in the grip of ‘affliction’ (*malheur*),” adding that the term *affliction*, as Weil uses it,<sup>42</sup> “means something that goes well beyond ordinary suffering” (*AOC* 129; O’Donnell 124). Weil conceptualizes love as dynamic rather than static, a series of actions or movements united by purpose instead of a fixed state or isolated event, and the maintenance or perseverance of this purpose—this active, directional love—in the midst of affliction joins the suffering party to the crucified Christ. As she explains it, “The infinity of space and time separates us from God... We cannot take a step towards the heavens. God crosses the universe

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<sup>42</sup> In point of fact, Weil, writing in French, does not really use this term at all. The term *affliction* is used by the translator Emma Craufurd as a substitute for (as O’Donnell suggests) the French word *malheur*. When explaining her choice to use this term Craufurd notes that “No English word exactly conveys the meaning of the French *malheur*. Our word *unhappiness* is a negative term and far too weak. Affliction is the nearest equivalent but not quite satisfactory. *Malheur* has in it a sense of inevitability and doom” (63).

and comes to us” (75). For Weil, the reality of Christ’s incarnation and sacrifice are remarkable because in these actions God himself crosses the distance of time and space that we alone (in our finite existence as creatures) cannot traverse, ultimately making it possible for us to transcend our own temporality, and affliction is one method by which God brings us into communion with this miracle. “Affliction,” she writes, “is a marvel of divine technique...which introduces into the soul of a finite creature the immensity of force, blind, brutal, and cold. The infinite distance which separates God from the creature is entirely concentrated into one point to pierce the soul in its centre” (77). In other words, when human beings suffer the simultaneous “physical pain, distress of soul and social degradation” that affliction entails, they share materially in the Crucifixion, and those who are able to remember that “love is a direction and not a state of the soul” are able to endure this suffering without despair or else, having weathered suffering with the help of love, discover this truth in the process (77).

It is impossible to talk about how Dubus (or Weil for that matter) understands the mechanisms of grace or about how this understanding is significant without acknowledging the gravitational pull of life’s daily repetitions, the physical routines his characters often struggle to overcome. Though Dubus repeatedly addresses affliction’s capacity to interrupt these routines, many of his characters find the repetitions themselves frustrating, stifling, even cruel. The character Greg Stowe in *Voices from the Moon* (1984) refers to these banal repetitions as “the knee-deep bullshit of the world,” and Dubus theorizes that, without “actions which restore our focus, and therefore ourselves,” these patterns can reinforce the terrible “lethargy of self” to which many of us are tempted, “this part of ourselves that does not want to get out of bed and once out of bed does not want to dress and once dressed does not want to prepare breakfast and

once fed does not want to work” (*VM* 36; *BV* 79). Without rituals to counteract this inertia, characters drift continuously (even cyclically) in a state of aimless dissatisfaction.

In this vision too, Dubus resembles Weil, who sees the laws that govern matter as part and parcel of God’s ordering of the universe. “Matter,” she writes, “is entirely passive and in consequence entirely obedient to God’s will” (72). She also theorizes that humanity is incapable of operating outside of this order, that the notion of human autonomy is illusory, impossible, that, obedient or not, human beings live always in relation to God and within frameworks of existence he has devised. “If we examine human society and souls closely,” she claims, “we see that, wherever the virtue of supernatural light is absent, everything is obedient to mechanical laws as blind and as exact as the laws of gravitation,” and anyone who “turns away from God,” therefore, “simply gives himself up to the law of gravity” (71). The omnipresence of this blind “necessity” reduces the range of human spiritual choice to a binary:

Men can never escape from obedience to God. A creature cannot but obey. The only choice given to men, as intelligent and free creatures, is to desire obedience or not to desire it. If a man does not desire it, he obeys nevertheless, perpetually, in as much as he is a thing subject to mechanical necessity. If he desires it, he is still subject to mechanical necessity, but a new necessity is added to it, a necessity constituted by laws belonging to supernatural things. Certain actions become impossible for him, others are done by his agency, sometimes almost in spite of himself. (72-3)

Because Weil understands the nature of reality in this way, she conceives of human spirituality as a process by which we learn to perceive divine order at work in the world and understands suffering as a vital element in this process. “As one has to learn to read, or to practice a trade,”

she explains, “so one must learn to feel in all things, first and almost solely, the obedience of the universe to God,” and “[e]ach time we have some pain to go through, we can say to ourselves quite truly that it is the universe, the order and beauty of the world, and the obedience of creation to God which are entering our body” (74-5).

Elizabeth Grubgeld writes that “[t]he body has always been central to the work of Andre Dubus” as “a site where sacraments are enacted and a boundless God enters the terrible confines of human life,” and Weil’s understanding of bodies as recipients and functions of God’s order and beauty is precisely what Dubus’s characters struggle to identify, achieve, or maintain, as they work to overcome or endure life’s many obstacles, which include not only repetitive banalities but more extreme and singular forces, such as terminal illness, disability, or acts of violence, that intrude extraordinarily on everyday existence (“Body” 34). In “Waiting” (1979), Juanita Creehan’s husband has been killed in action overseas, while late stories like “Sunday Morning” (1990) and “The Colonel’s Wife” (1993) respectively contain a family who survived a violent shark attack and a retired Marine officer whose broken legs have left him confined to the first floor of his house. These and many other Dubus characters suffer what Robert P. Lewis describes as “metaphysical anxiety, provoked by our bodily fragility before the universe,” and this anxiety and fragility require the development of actions which fortify characters by giving life a significance that transcends the bare acts themselves (36). These actions may be as small as sharing a meal or a phone call, but it is worth noting that, for Dubus, they surpass mere representation. Thinking about feeding crushed ice to his dying father, Dubus explains that, while readers might interpret that action as “symbolic of their silent love,” it is not, asserting instead that “it is their silent love” (*Conversations* 25). Just as sacraments like the Eucharist return mindful participants to the state of grace, these smaller, everyday rituals restore a sense of

purpose for Dubus and his characters and keep many from collapsing beneath the weight of trauma and tragedy or from surrendering to the blind necessity that otherwise governs existence.

In other words, Dubus's world is one in which the dual reality of physical bodies and spiritual longing necessitates ritual, and just as regular exercise strengthens muscles and prevents atrophy, physical practice of healthy rituals stabilizes and repairs existence physically, emotionally, spiritually. On the other hand, characters who are not able to find or devise good rituals—rituals that embody sacramental love—or who step away from ritual entirely often spiral out, self-destruct, or otherwise come to grief. For Dubus's explicitly Catholic characters, the Church provides a script for the integration of ritual into lived experience, and while his Catholics occasionally take issue with the script, often finding religious ritual puzzling, problematic, or inadequate to its desired purpose, they nevertheless return to it in moments of trouble or uncertainty. By considering these characters first, I hope to show how Dubus understands embodiment and our physical engagement in ritual as integral to any deep or useful understanding of spiritual life. My discussion of his non-Catholic characters will then consider how the absence of any religious structure makes their relationships to purpose, satisfaction, and stability more difficult to negotiate, how characters who seek meaningful action apart from any kind of pre-existing ritual apparatus find redemption hard-won, if not beyond their grasp, and how those who cannot determine how to act decisively tend to surrender to life's blind repetitions, redeeming themselves only when sudden external events interrupt their habitual apathy. Hopefully, reading these narratives in these categories and in this order will reveal that the individual rituals central to Dubus's fiction involve a repeatable union of thought and physical action to produce meaning and that these rituals (achieved or not) are crucial to the

happiness of Dubus's characters, making life livable by simultaneously rendering spirituality physical and giving embodied action spiritual significance.

### *Dubus's Catholic Characters*

I refer in this chapter to Dubus's characters as *Catholic* or *non-Catholic*, but the case could be made that all of Dubus's characters are Catholic in the sense that they reflect their author's wholly Catholic paradigm. On more than one occasion, Dubus acknowledged his inability to view the world or life in it through any lens separate from his Catholicism, even as he acknowledged his imperfect adherence to that vision.<sup>43</sup> When I refer to Dubus's Catholic characters, however, I mean to specify those characters who claim the Catholic faith, who acknowledge, however reluctantly, the Church's doctrines as real and authoritative and who try to live according to its precepts. His non-Catholic characters are, therefore, those who do not claim a religious affiliation or who are familiar with religion only by associating with religious characters or as lapsed Catholics who may acknowledge the impact of the Church on their thinking but who do not feel the stirrings or assurances of faith.

Dubus's Catholic characters are aware of their bodies and physical actions, take sin seriously, and formulate ideas about God, spirituality, and ethics that are often informed by a religious upbringing, but they are not theologians, working instead to define a personal philosophy that allows them to live and act with "certainty" in the world.<sup>44</sup> For Dubus's younger

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<sup>43</sup> In a 1987 interview with Patrick Samway, S.J., for *America*, Dubus said of his Catholicism, "I think it pervades my writing," explaining, "my Catholicism has increased my sense of fascination and my compassion," and adding later that "I see the whole world as a Catholic" (qtd. in Kennedy 126-7). In 1993, Dubus told a class of creative writing students at Texas State, "If I could live by lines that I have written and truth that I have discovered, I would not be thrice divorced," and later stated, "I'm a Catholic writer because I can only see the world as a Catholic...I was brought up in a system of mysteries which are not to be understood, of the importance of ritual, much of which has left our culture, and to believe in sacraments."

<sup>44</sup> The word *certainty*, in fact, appears in almost all of the narratives discussed in this section, characters often valuing ritual for its ability to provide certainty where it is lacking or to restore it where it has been lost.

Catholics—Paul Clement, in “An Afternoon with the Old Man” (1972), “The Bully” (1975), and “Contrition” (1976), Walter in “The New Boy” (1982), and Richie Stowe in *Voices From the Moon* (1984)—, questions of personal ethics are often complicated by having parents of two different faith traditions (typically a Catholic mother and an Episcopalian father), by parents’ moral compromises (often the use of condoms or other birth control), or by the more jarring realities of divorce, re-marriage, or infidelity. Like Jackie in “Bless Me, Father” (1983), Dubus’s younger characters must learn that a person can “still have the faith” even when “enclosing a mortal heart” (*FGA* 64). Because Dubusian Catholics of every age are almost universally as moved by the Eucharist as Dubus was himself,<sup>45</sup> Eucharistic analogues in their narratives become evident. Not all of these analogues are explicitly religious (as when the repetitive exercises of Marine Corps boot camp in “Cadence” (1974) lead Paul to physical epiphany), but they all involve realizations about how to understand their spirituality in the context of physical life. The specific characters examined in this section address a wide spectrum of experience, including teenage sexual impulses, terminal illness, and love in various forms as well as ethical dilemmas related to marital fidelity, paternal responsibility, and self-defense. In each case, characters use their experience of Church life and institutional ritual to reinterpret or redirect the natural inclinations of their bodies, often arriving at a new understanding of themselves and of their place in the world.

Having reached the far side of adolescence only recently, Harry Dugal, the narrator-protagonist of “If They Knew Yvonne” (1969), reflects on his boyhood moral seriousness and pubescent bodily discovery, his attempts to comprehend his changing body’s relationship to sin

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<sup>45</sup> The one notable exception being Polly Comeau, the eponymous character of “The Pretty Girl” (1983), who does not participate in sacraments like the Eucharist or Confession but views Mass as the “one religious act she could perform” and whom Dubus once described as “maybe the only morally and intellectually lazy person I’ve ever written” (*TNSB* 26; Dubus qtd. in Kennedy 106).

and grace anticipating many of the ideas and experiences Dubus's later Catholic characters encounter. Harry recalls a Catholic education that closely resembles Dubus's own,<sup>46</sup> in which the priests instill in him an understanding of ritual as a tool of spiritual self-preservation. Brother Thomas explains that masturbation or "self-abuse" is a "desecration" of the body, "a mortal sin that resulted in the loss of sanctifying grace" and prescribes several deliberate physical actions young men can take to avoid going to hell for committing this grave transgression: "go out and play ball, or cut the grass, or wash your dad's car," he tells them, "Do *anything*, but use up your energy...take your rosary to bed at night and say it while you're going to sleep" (99-100). When explaining the Eucharist, the priest likewise extols the personal "benefits gained" by participating in it: "sanctifying grace, which helped us fight temptation; release from the temporal punishment of purgatory; and therefore, until we committed another mortal or venial sin, a guarantee of immediate entrance into heaven" (100). The priest then adds, "In a way...you'd actually be doing someone a favor if you killed him when he had just received the Eucharist'" (100). This is not the Eucharist presented in Dubus's essays as a physical activity that allows people to participate bodily in Christ's sacrificial love and performed for the sake of communing with God. As a result of this instruction, Harry matures with a knowledge of ritual as an important, even integral, part of life but with a flaw in his thinking about why or how it is significant. As he has been taught to do, Harry thinks of both sin and sacrament in selfish, transactional terms, a kind of spiritual *quid pro quo*. Harry, therefore, participates enthusiastically in the rituals of Catholic faith as a matter of survival, but as adolescent sexual discovery begins, he finds these rituals increasingly unsatisfying or else fears partaking of them while his body and soul remain unclean.

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<sup>46</sup> Dubus was raised in Lake Charles, Louisiana, and attended (as does Harry Dugal) "a boys' school taught by the Christian Brothers, a Catholic religious order" (AOC 99).



After he has masturbated for the first time, he is immediately terrified by the potential spiritual ramifications of what he has done and is haunted by visions of “the awful diaphanous bulk of God” descending to issue judgement (101). Harry’s guilt and fear over physical pleasure are so pronounced that he begins to despise his own boyhood. Recalling an afternoon when he masturbated after receiving the Eucharist, he says, “I could not stop crying, and I began striking my head...I spoke aloud to God, begging him to forgive me, then kill me and spare me the further price of being a boy” (106). Harry’s failed efforts to subordinate his body’s automatic and irresistible urges to his beliefs about right and wrong lead him to experience what Paul J. Contino describes as, “a gnostic division between flesh and spirit,” and his grief is so intense in this moment that, for an instant, he actually considers castration as a potential remedy (56). “Then something occurred to me: an image tossed up for my consideration,” he says, with the misguided drama one might expect from a morally serious teenager, “I saw myself sitting on the bed, trousers dropped to the floor, my sharp-edged hunting knife in my right hand, then with one quick determined slash cutting off that autonomous penis and casting it on the floor to shrivel and die” (*SF* 106). Michael Cocchiarale attributes Harry’s decision against self-mutilation to the triumph of “rational thinking,” but the fact that this notion suggested itself at all speaks both to the extremity of Harry’s investment in his religious paradigm and to the level of self-loathing—manifested as contempt for his own body—that paradigm has inspired (108).

Yvonne Millet presents Harry with his first opportunity to learn about the transcendent power of love though Harry realizes this only after their relationship has ended. While they are dating, he appreciates her only as an outlet for sex, which he continues to conceptualize only in terms of his own ejaculate. The pleasure of achieving orgasm with Yvonne relieves him of the need to masturbate and replaces that gravest of all mortal sins with the less shameful sin of

fornication. Despite the advice of Father Grassi (a priest whom readers recognize as genuinely compassionate and, therefore, morally authoritative in Dubus's world) that he test his love for Yvonne in ways other than sex, Harry continues to exploit her as his moral end-around, and finally, as Lewis observes, "Yvonne's emotional generosity, and her claim on Harry for love and emotional exchange, unsettle him far more than the sexual guilt which he has learned to manipulate" (37). Shortly after Yvonne complains that sex "is all we ever do," their relationship ends, and Harry is left to his former spiritual dilemma and to the contemplation of his relationship's recent failure (*SF* 113). He confesses their relationship to Father Broussard but is unsatisfied with that priest's pronouncement that "sexual intercourse was given by God for procreation of children and we had stolen it and used it wrongfully, for physical pleasure, which was its secondary purpose," explaining that this assessment "fell short and did not sound at all like what I had done with Yvonne. So when I left the confessional I still felt unforgiven" (114). This unforgiven feeling eventually inhibits Harry's relationship with the rituals of his faith, and while he initially continues to confess his subsequent masturbations in order to receive the Eucharist, he stops when he realizes that he no longer feels genuine remorse for that activity.

Harry's sister Janet offers the story's most straightforward challenge to the thought patterns Harry has internalized, and it is Janet who sets Harry on the path toward improved understanding both of sex and of ritual's role in religious life. Earlier in the text, Janet suggests that the primary reason for sex is love, a notion which Harry, still preoccupied with the grave sinfulness of pleasure, finds incomprehensible. "This sort of talk scared me," he says, "She said the church was wrong. Several times she used the word love, and that night in bed I thought: love? love? For all I could think of was semen" (104). Now, in the aftermath of her failed marriage, Janet confides to Harry that she continued to receive the Eucharist in spite of the fact

that the Church had not recognized her union. “I don’t think the Church is so smart about sex,” she tells him, “Bob wouldn’t get the marriage blessed, so a priest would have told me to leave him. I loved him, though...so I stayed with him and tried to keep peace and bring up my sons. And the Eucharist is the sacrament of love and I needed it very badly those five years and nobody can keep me away” (117). For Janet, the Eucharist is a genuine source of spiritual sustenance, and the only time she stopped receiving was during a brief affair of her own. She recognizes the affair as wrong, not “because I was married,” she says, but “because I hurt the guy,” and of Harry’s Catholic education, she says, “Too many of those celibates teach sex the way it is for them. They make it introverted, so you come out of their schools thinking that sex is something between you and yourself, or between you and God. Instead of between you and other people” (118). Janet introduces Harry to the idea that love is the centerpiece of both human relationships and religious life, that the tactility of the Eucharist and the tactility of bodies are most powerful when experienced in the pursuit of true communion.

Though Harry is still uncomfortable with his sister’s “renegade” approach to religion and sexuality, it is clear that her thinking has helped Harry to put his spiritual predicament into words. Harry confesses to Father Grassi that he mistakenly thought “semen was the most important part of sex” and says of his sexual relationship with Yvonne, “We were lovers. Or she was, but I wasn’t. I was just happy because I could ejaculate without hating myself, so I was still masturbating, you see, but with her” (119-20). The priest applauds Harry’s perception of sin, acknowledging that in Catholic circles “there is often too much talk” of masturbation as “self-abuse” and that “even the term is a bad one” (120). He instructs Harry to “say alleluia three times” as penance, a seemingly light sentence that Kennedy reads as “a religious celebration of a boy’s recognition and acceptance of the naturalness of his own sexuality” (*SF* 120; Kennedy 7).

Father Grassi also calls Harry's attention to a verse from John's gospel<sup>47</sup> that prefigures the ethical struggles later Dubus characters will face. In that verse, Christ, "praying to the Father," says, "I do not pray that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from evil" (120). By coming to understand sex as a physical manifestation of love and by recognizing self-centeredness as sin, Harry has learned a paradigm-altering lesson about what it means both to live in an embodied world and to resist evil. Through this lesson he is reconciled both to his own body and to the ritual of the Eucharist, and more than that, his new insight becomes a prayer that his sister's children will understand their own bodies without his misperceptions or missteps. Watching Janet's sons play on the wharf (and thinking of Yvonne), he says, "I hoped they would grow well, those strong little bodies, those kind hearts" (121).

In the later novella "Adultery"<sup>48</sup> (1977), Dubus recasts the motions of everyday life as rituals outside of the Church or any other explicit superstructure. The narrative follows Edith Allison, who (along with her husband Hank) first appeared in the novella "We Don't Live Here Anymore" (1975), and her affair with Joe Ritchie, a defrocked Catholic priest who is dying of cancer. Though Edith, an Episcopalian by upbringing—"Christian by skin color and pragmatic in belief"—who considers her present religious outlook one of "belief, but not faith," is the story's central character, Joe's Catholic philosophy permeates the text (168, 152). Through her relationship with Joe, Edith has learned to view everyday actions as spiritually significant and to see, as Claire in the later novella "Molly" (1986) will eventually opine, that "love is a vocation" (*LWE* 125). This education, foreshadowed by the narrative's epigraph,<sup>49</sup> eventually allows Edith

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<sup>47</sup> John 17:15.

<sup>48</sup> Some scholars (like Andrea Ivanov-Craig or Madonne Miner) italicize the titles of Dubus's novellas, but because these novellas are included in larger collections, and because I mention both, I have decided to place novella titles in quotes, not wanting readers to confuse the narrative "Adultery" with an abbreviated title of the collection in which it appears or "Finding a Girl in America" with the collection of the same name.

<sup>49</sup> As I mention in the introduction of this chapter, the epigraph comes from Simone Weil's essay "The Love of God and Affliction" and reads, "...love is a direction and not a state of the soul" (*AOC* 129).

to cope with Joe's death and to achieve the certainty of action necessary to extricate herself from her "poisoned marriage" (Kennedy 67).

"Adultery" begins near the very end of this process (on the night before Joe's death), and the present tense narration of the novella's opening and closing sections makes ritual a structural as well as thematic element of the narrative, giving special weight to Joe and Edith's final interactions but also illuminating the regularity of their meetings and spotlighting the ritual elements of their relationship. "She likes cooking for Joe," Dubus writes, not only because she is cooking for him at the narrative's beginning but because Edith has done it many times before and would like to go on doing it, because "she does it as often as she can" (*AOC* 130). This cooking, in another context, might qualify merely as routine, and Edith acknowledges that in the beginning of her and Joe's relationship, this act of apparent service was repeatedly motivated by "vengeful images of Hank" (130). "Since Joe started to die," however, the grace involved in this mundane gesture has been brought into sharper focus by a shift in her motivation, the "uncertainty and loss" of the kitchen's "meaningless steam and smells" replaced by her awareness of a spiritual and ritual significance at work in her "sense of giving" (130). Against the backdrop of Joe's terminal illness, "She feels again what she once felt as a wife: that her certain hands are preparing a gift" (130). The present tense narration assures readers that this new certainty has become consistent, that Edith has come to think in these terms habitually just as she has adapted to the fact that her and Joe's physical intimacy is now defined, at least in part, by the terrible privacy of his pain.

On nights when health complications make Joe unable to eat the food Edith has prepared—a smaller recurring reality within the larger, more frequent one of her cooking for him—their lovers' rituals include her applying a heating ointment to his ailing body. In a

momentary break from the present tense, she recalls that “The first time she rubbed his back they were silent because he had not wanted to ask her to but he had anyway...and her flesh had winced as she touched him, and he had known it and she had known that he did” but that “After that, on nights when she sensed his pain, or when he told her about it, she rose from the bed and got the ointment and they were silent, absorbing the achieved intimacy of her flesh” (134). The emergence of this new physical intimacy, an intimacy of necessity rather than desire, imbues Edith’s repeated efforts toward Joe’s physical relief with ritual importance and a clear sense of purpose as the performance of these efforts provide both parties with physical and emotional sustenance. Edith’s application of Joe’s ointment, like her cooking, is a gift—a moment of grace—intended to alleviate his pain while simultaneously communicating her love for him through touch.

In the love he shares with Edith, Joe, though still faithful to his Catholicism, finds a fulfillment of longing that, for him, was absent from the priesthood, which he describes as “a difficult vocation,” explaining that “it demanded a marriage of sorts with God who showed himself only through the volition, action, imagination and the resultant faith of the priest himself” (*AOC* 162). When he, therefore, “failed to create and complete his union with God,” the failure was a personal one that “thrust [Joe] back upon himself and his loneliness (162). He initially takes comfort in the Eucharist but later finds that, while he is “absorbed by the ritual” during mass to the point of feeling that “the ritual became him,” he finally realizes that “there was no other act during the day that gave him that completion, made him feel an action of his performed in time and mortality had transcended both and been received by a God who knew his name” (164, 163). After this realization, Joe adopts a “dutiful” approach to his other priestly tasks, performing them with “a commitment that nearly always lacked emotion,” and in the void

of this emotional lack, he begins to “yearn” for the intimate (and romantic) company of women (164). Physical interaction with Edith, especially while he is still healthy, is pleasurable and exciting, but more than that, the love that grows between them provides a more constant sense of purpose than Joe was previously able to find.

After he and Edith begin their affair, Joe stops receiving the Eucharist, not because he feels guilty about their having sex but because he feels that Edith’s reluctance to leave her stifling marriage prevents their love from rising to the status of sacrament. Dubus describes Joe’s complicated moral vision as follows:

[A]lthough he knew it was rarely true, he maintained and was committed to the belief that making love could parallel and even merge with the impetus and completion of the Eucharist. Else why make love at all, he said, except for meat in meat, making ourselves meat, drawing our circle or mortality not around each other but around our own vain and separate hearts. But if she were free to love him, each act between them would become a sacrament, each act a sign of their growing union in the face of God and death, freed of their now-imposed limitations on commitment and risk and hope. Because he believed in love, he said. With all his heart he believed in it, saw it as a microcosm of the Eucharist which in turn was a microcosm of the earth-rooted love he must feel for God in order to live with certainty as a man. And like his love for God, his love for her had little to do with emotion which at times pulsed and quivered in his breast so fiercely that he had to make love with her in order to bear it; but it had more to do with the acts themselves, and love finally was a series of gestures with escalating and enduring commitments. (169)

Joe sees his and Edith's sexual encounters as a ritual of love that parallels the Eucharist and elevates their encounters beyond the physical reality of "meat in meat," but at the same time, he feels her lack of freedom limits the extent to which she and Joe can justifiably commit, risk, and hope together even in the context of their mutually affirming love. This kind of love, he feels, is necessary for living and acting with certainty in the face of death, which is to say in the face of our having bodies which are subject to injury, illness, and time. For Joe, the urgency of mortality, the encompassing love of God, and the commitment implicit in gestures like cooking and the application of ointment make love a firmly embodied reality. As much as sexual touch establishes emotional connection, the emotions of love acquire reality only when enacted in and through the body, through "a series of gestures with escalating and enduring commitments." Narration confirms the wisdom of Joe's insights by informing readers that he offered them before his diagnosis, and their truth acquires weight as Edith's touch becomes less erotic and more like that of a caregiver.

The intimacy Edith experiences with Joe and her revived sense of certainty replace what she has lost in her marriage to Hank, whose rationalization of his numerous, emotionally empty infidelities stands in stark opposition to Joe's search for genuine human connection. Kennedy characterizes Hank's thinking (either charitably or ironically) as a "*philosophy of infidelity*," while Cocchiarale describes it as an "insidious fiction" that paints "the institution of marriage rather than [Hank] himself as the source of the problem" (Kennedy 67; Cocchiarale 111). Whether, as readers, we see Hank's explanation of his initial affair as a genuine belief or as "warped logic" designed to help him duck accountability, the double impact of his justification remains devastating (Cocchiarale 111). When Hank draws a distinction for Edith between monogamy and fidelity—"he did not believe in monogamy. Fidelity, she said. You see? he said.



You distort it”—it is, in fact, Hank who distorts the nature of a marriage to which Edith believed mutual fidelity had been essential (*AOC* 148). When he further insists that he has been “a faithful husband” because “he kept his affair discreet,” that “He loved her and had taken nothing from her,” Hank suggests that sexual pleasure and emotional intimacy—two experiences she had taken to be coterminous—are actually unconnected (148). This revelation alienates Edith from the activities which she had previously considered a natural, useful part of married life, and like Joe in the priesthood, she feels her energy evaporate. Where she had previously performed acts of daily domesticity with ease and even cheer, she now “requires an act of will” to get out of bed, and this “dread disconnection between herself and what she was doing” extends to the bedroom, where the joy she had previously felt with her husband has been replaced by “mute and dreary anger” brought about by her conviction that “merely sharing bodies,” as O’Donnell observes, “is a meaningless and mechanical degradation of love” (*AOC* 149, 151; O’Donnell 128).

The narrative’s final section returns readers to Edith’s gestures of love toward Joe. On the day he dies, she cleans his apartment while he “watches the push and pull of her arms, the bending of her body, the movement of her legs,” paying close attention to the physicality of a woman he will never hold again as a lover (174). O’Donnell characterizes Edith’s nearly final gesture as “a series of movements the significance of which is not limited to the realm of necessity but which spills over in obedience to that higher necessity Weil speaks of—the necessity to *decide* to love in the face of death—to become an expression of love” (O’Donnell’s emphasis, 127). This performance of love *is* love itself, and having relocated such love and significance in actions as mundane as housework, Edith ultimately finds her relationship with Hank unsustainable. Rejecting his attempts to initiate sex, she tells her husband, “Just please don’t. It doesn’t mean anything anymore. It’s my fault too. But it’s over, Hank. It’s because he’s

dying...But you're dying too. I can feel it in your chest just like I could feel it when I rubbed him when he hurt. And so am I: that's what we lost sight of" (176). Edith's words on this occasion mirror Joe's earlier thinking about love and death and reflect her desire to live with greater purpose and awareness in the face of her own mortality. Though this decision fills Edith with greater "fear and grief" than Joe's death, she is certain that this action is not only good but necessary, and as readers, we are invited to weigh Edith's misgivings against Joe's final words on the subject of ritual. Having expressed concern over whether or not his final confessor will understand his and Edith's relationship, Joe later explains, "I realized he didn't have to. It's something I forgot with all my thinking: It's what ritual is for: nobody has to understand. The knowledge is in the ritual" (176). Having learned from her relationship with Joe how to make daily behaviors into rituals of love, Edith knows that a genuinely loving sexual relationship is among her possible futures.

Luke Ripley, the narrator-protagonist of "A Father's Story" (1983), thinks, even more explicitly than Joe and Edith, about ritual and its place in daily existence even while demonstrating that the certainty provided by steady consciousness and practice of ritual does not always resolve life's conflicts in a tidy or morally coherent way. Luke is a wealthy and regretful divorcee who owns a stable and several horses, whose best friend is his priest Father Paul, and who begins his narrative by drawing a distinction for readers between his public and private lives. Of the stable and the daily responsibilities associated with its upkeep, he says, "I call it my life because it looks like it is, and people I know call it that, but it's a life I can get away from when I hunt and fish, and some nights after dinner when I sit in the dark in the front room and listen to opera" (*TNSB* 159). "My real life," he confides to us, "is the one no one talks about anymore, except Father Paul," a religious life in which Luke acknowledges and marvels at "the

necessity and wonder of ritual” (159, 165). Offering a clearer picture of what ritual is and where it comes from than any other Dubus character up to this point, Luke describes his own morning routine as follows:

I go to bed early and sleep well and wake at four forty-five, for an hour of silence. I never want to get out of bed then, and every morning I know I can sleep another four hours, and still not fail at any of my duties. But I get up, so have come to believe that my life can be seen in miniature in that struggle in the dark of morning. While making the bed and boiling water for coffee, I talk to God: I offer Him my day, every act of my body and spirit, my thoughts and moods, as a prayer of thanksgiving... This morning offertory is a habit from boyhood in a Catholic school; or then it was a habit, but as I kept it and grew older it became a ritual. Then I say the Lord’s Prayer, trying not to recite it, and one morning it occurred to me that a prayer, whether recited or said with concentration, is always an act of faith. (*TNSB* 162)

Kennedy describes Luke as a character with a surprisingly “direct and functional relationship to his religion,” and the seeds of that relationship are evident here (76). For Luke, the habitual morning prayers of boyhood have acquired significance over time, helping him to sustain the momentum of getting out of bed and to avoid that “lethargy of self” that Edith suffers at the news of Hank’s affair and that Luke himself fell into following his divorce. Devotion has ritualized this “offertory,” and even when it becomes difficult to focus on the Lord’s Prayer (words he also would have memorized in Catholic school), Luke feels the physical act of praying itself demonstrates his faith. At Mass, which he attends daily, he is reminded that “ritual allows those who cannot will themselves out of the secular to perform the spiritual, as dancing allows the

tongue-tied man a ceremony of love” and that the Eucharist provides “the peace of certainty” even when true contemplation remains elusive (*TNSB* 165).

In this way, Luke’s understanding of ritual builds on Joe Ritchie’s assertion that the mere performance of ritual is sufficient to restore grace even when our best human efforts are spiritually or ethically inarticulate. Unsurprisingly, Luke’s moral vision revolves around the notion that “the grace of the Eucharist,” as Contino observes, “can extend into the quotidian” via deliberate action, and while his personal morality includes other concerns of religious life (such as which charitable efforts deserve his monetary support or the spiritual implications of marriage), Luke thinks most heavily about the focus ritual provides (55). This focus is achieved, in part, by accepting the moment as the basic unit of embodied time and by paying attention to how one behaves in each moment individually rather than by worrying about how numerous moments might play out in sequence. “It is not hard to live through a day, if you can live through a moment,” Luke explains, reflecting on the period of depression which followed his divorce, “What creates despair is the imagination, which pretends there is a future, and insists on predicting millions of moments, thousands of days, and so drains you that you cannot live the moment at hand” (*TNSB* 167). Expressing a wish that he and his former wife could have known enough about ritual to have “performed certain acts together every day, no matter how we felt,” Luke arrives at an idea that is both central to his personal morality and problematic in the context of the narrative’s subsequent events, namely that “the essences of love” is to “subordinat[e] feeling to action” and that ritual facilitates this process (167).

When Luke’s daughter Jennifer, after drinking with friends, hits a pedestrian with her car and leaves him on the side of the road, Luke subordinates action to feeling, and the particular certainty Luke has developed as a lifelong devotee of ritual ultimately leads him to cover up

Jennifer's crime, an action that introduces unprecedented tension between the rituals Luke cherishes and his private—"real"—life. His daughter's hit-and-run also alters the light in which readers view Luke's earlier depiction of himself as a man living two lives, a man who has had to "face and forgive [his] own failures," and thereafter the narrative becomes the vehicle through which Luke tries to reconcile his private beliefs with his physical actions on that night (165). Ultimately, however, Luke feels the isolation to which the coverup has consigned him. "I do not feel the peace I once did," he says, "not with God, nor the earth, nor anyone on it," and though he is conscious of his many sins—"of failure to do all that one can to save an anonymous life, of injustice to a family in their grief, of deepening their pain at the mystery and chance of death by giving them nothing—no one—to hate"—, he has resolved to confess them only to the reader and to God, with whom he now argues as part of his morning ritual (179).

As justification for the incoherence between what he believes and what he has done, Luke offers only that a father's love for his daughter is unique. "I would do it again," he confesses, "For when she knocked on my door, then called me...what rose from the bed was not a stable owner or a Catholic or any other Luke Ripley I have lived with for a long time, but the father of a girl" (179). At first glance, this might seem to some like the uppermost extreme of Dubus's own philosophy, a love so immense that it trumps law and even creed, but as Tobias Wolff explains in his own reading of the narrative, Luke's fatherly intervention is problematic, less for "concealing his daughter's culpability" than for "removing her from the process of confession and acceptance of punishment that is her only road back into the human community" (203). Luke seems instead to see his own assumption of guilt as his daughter's absolution, likening his alienation from the world to Christ's in the garden of Gethsemane, and in his imagined dialogue with God, we read the following exchange:

He says: I am a Father too.

Yes, I say, as You are a Son Whom this morning I will receive...And as a Son  
You made Your plea.

Yes, he says, but I would not lift the cup.

True, and I don't want You to lift it from me either. And if one of my sons had  
come to me that night, I would have phoned the police and told them to meet us  
with an ambulance at the top of the hill.

Why? Do you love them less?

I tell Him no, it is not that I love them less, but that I could bear the pain of  
watching and knowing my sons' pain, could bear it with pride as they took the  
whip and nails. But You never had a daughter and, if You had, You could not  
have borne her passion.

So, He says, you love her more than you love Me.

I love her more than I love truth.

Then you love in weakness, He says.

As You love me, I say, and I go with an apple or carrot out to the barn. (*TNSB*  
180)

Wolff calls Luke's argument "unwittingly arrogant" while Grubgeld characterizes it as  
"sophistry," suggesting that Luke feels "immune from the judgment of a God who only had a  
son" (Wolff 203; Grubgeld, "Living" 28). From a different critical vantage point, Paul Doherty  
asserts that Luke's argument implies women "are weaker [than men], and should therefore be  
judged more leniently" and that it simultaneously "denies" Jennifer "moral agency" (153-4, 156).  
This imagined conversation between Luke and God, however, ends not only with Luke's

acknowledgement of his own weakness in responding to Jennifer's hit-and-run but also with a comparison of himself to Jennifer as a recipient of God's love and mercy. While it might indeed seem arrogant for Luke to compare his suffering even metaphorically to that of Christ, it is worth noting that the impulse to spare his daughter earthly judgement for her mistake is at least parallel to the love that God, as understood by Catholic doctrine, extends to humanity, a love so extreme and incomprehensible that its physical expression was Christ's crucifixion.

These various readings are further complicated by the fact that Luke's earlier present-tense narration has all taken place in the wake of Jennifer's accident, meaning that his insights into the healing power of ritual have actually grown, at least in part, out of this experience. "I am Luke Ripley," he tells us at the outset, and slips into the past tense only when discussing events as far back as his divorce, Father Paul's kind efforts to dig him out of depression, and the experiences (including the hit-and-run) that he has shared with his daughter as she has grown up (159). This shift in tense helps us to see that when Luke, thinking about his former marriage says, "I wish I knew then what I know now"—that "ritual would have healed us...perhaps even kept us healed"—the "now" he mentions is the life we see at the end of the narrative (167). This means that Luke's daily argument with God, arrogant and misguided though it may be, is a ritual that nevertheless has brought him peace in the midst of his isolation. His chance at human community has been reduced to his daughter, but this ritual (along with the morning prayers, confession, Eucharist, and other daily practices) has allowed him a sense of purpose in the secrecy of their collusion, so that ultimately there is at least one aspect of Luke's analogy between God's behavior and fatherhood that rings true: As he receives the Eucharist on the morning he has wrecked Jennifer's car to hide her accident, he feels God watching him "as I have watched my sons at times in their young lives when I was able to judge but without anger,

and so keep silent, while they, in the agony of their youth, decided how they must act,” recalling that, in these moments, “[t]heir reasons were never as good or as bad as their actions, but they needed to find them, to believe they were living by them, instead of the awful solitude of the heart” (179). Luke acknowledges in this moment that his rationale for acting on Jennifer’s behalf may not be accurate to God’s ethical reality—may not ultimately be justified even by Luke’s own standards—but this rationale, and his repeated articulation of it to an imagined God, allows him to continue living in his body and to preserve some commitment to moral action however imperfect his efforts or understanding may be.

If Joe Ritchie and Luke Ripley allow readers to see that ritual functions despite their failures to articulate sin or uphold their own sense of ethics, LuAnn Arceneaux reminds us that, in Dubus’s fictive universe, true contemplation and understanding are always preferable to ritual-by-rote. LuAnn is the last explicitly Catholic character to appear in Dubus’s collected fiction, becoming the central figure of what Andrea Ivanov-Craig has termed “The LuAnn Cycle” (52).<sup>50</sup> This cycle is published entirely in Dubus’s final collection *Dancing After Hours* (1996) and consists of the three stories in which LuAnn appears as protagonist—“All the Time in the World,” “The Timing of Sin,” and “Out of the Snow”—as well as the earlier story “Falling in Love,” in which LuAnn is not a character but in which the central protagonist is her future husband Ted Briggs. In both “Falling in Love” and “All the Time in the World,” Ted and LuAnn, independently of each other, have grown disenchanted with the casual sexual encounters which have characterized their early dating lives and are exhausted by their own repetitive,

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<sup>50</sup> Andrea Ivanov-Craig’s *Moving Toward Redemption: Spirituality and Disability in the Late Writings of Andre Dubus* (2017) is only the second book-length study of Dubus’s fiction—the first being Thomas E. Kennedy’s *Andre Dubus: A Study of the Short Fiction* (1988)—, and in the section of that text devoted to the LuAnn narratives, Ivanov-Craig writes, “I am using the term ‘cycle’ to refer to the LuAnn stories because they emanate from a time of renewal and rebirth for Dubus. In addition, apart from any biographical context, the four stories move LuAnn and Ted through literal stages from single life to marriage” (53). She calls this movement “comedic” after Northrop Frye’s definition of comedy in his essay “The Archetypes of Literature” (1951).



uncritical approaches to these relationships. Having fallen in love with a career actress who decides to terminate her pregnancy rather than marry him and raise their child, Ted, who is not particularly religious at this point in his life, quotes and then paraphrases Chief Joseph to the friend who has come to console him: "I want to have time to look for my children and see how many I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead...I am tired; my heart is sick and sad...You know what I say, Nick? From where the sun now stands I will ejaculate no more forever in the body of a woman who will kill our child" (*DH* 41). When Nick suggests that Ted date women he knows are on "the pill," Ted replies, "The pill isn't a philosophy. I need a philosophy to go out there with...I can't just go out there with a cock, and a heart" (42). Ted realizes that the failure of this most recent relationship is his own for not critically examining his own desires, expectations, and decisions. He tells Nick that the mystery of love and sexual intimacy is one he has "fucked" but never "looked at," and the narrative ends with his resolution to achieve greater consciousness moving forward (43).

LuAnn begins her own similar journey with greater and explicitly Catholic awareness, feeling, like nearly all of Dubus's devout Catholics, that Mass allows her to be "all of herself, and only herself, forgiven and loved," largely through the ritual of the Eucharist, without which the Church "would be only ideas she could get at home from books" (84, 90). Outside the Church, however, LuAnn faces an American culture in which sexual "passion," including her own, "burned without vision" and recalls the difficulty of naming her succession of lovers as a phenomenon (84). "She needed a name for what she was doing," Dubus writes, "sometimes she called it naked dating: you went out to dinner, bared your soul and body, and in the morning went home...But she needed a word whose connotation was serious and deep, so she used the word everyone else used, and called it a relationship...veterans of many relationships stopped

using the word, and said things like: *I'm seeing Harry*, and *Bill and I are fucking*" (Dubus's emphasis, 87). Like Ted at the start of "Falling in Love," the men she dates have no philosophy about sexual intimacy or love or about the value of either, only a desire to have sex, which, divorced from any larger paradigm, is really only a desire to ejaculate inside her body. (That the semen-centric view of sex these men, including Ted, espouse resembles Harry Dugal's juvenile outlook cannot be accidental.) This lack of substance eventually leads LuAnn to address her final pre-Ted lover with a "tired homily"—on the difference between getting milk and buying the cow—as clichéd as the series of casual, dead-end romances that have driven her to it (Ivanov-Craig 56). Her readiness for the committed love that a newly awakened Ted embodies is signaled by her reception of the Eucharist on the morning they meet. LuAnn's frustration since college has been that she feels as if "only time and the age of her body had advanced, while she had stood on one plane, repeating the words and actions she regarded as her life," but during the ritual, she feels "in harmony with the entire and timeless universe" (*DH* 90-1). In LuAnn's response to the Eucharist, readers see that her stagnant condition can be transcended, and when Ted shows that he thinks more deeply about sex, love, and commitment than her former lovers, LuAnn herself feels that condition beginning to fall away.

This is not to say that LuAnn's marriage to Ted is a morally straightforward happily-ever-after. As Joe Ritchie and Luke Ripley have already suggested, marriage is not an end but the beginning of a vocation,<sup>51</sup> one that requires as much devotion, attention, and ritual as a priestly calling. In "The Timing of Sin," the title of which "suggests," as Ivanov-Craig observes, "that no character retains unassailable virtue" in Dubus's world, LuAnn finds her fidelity to Ted

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<sup>51</sup> This idea too comes right out of Dubus's Catholic schooling. He told Lori Ambacher in 1993, "The Christian Brothers taught us there were only two vocations: the religious life, and marriage," and Joe Ritchie parrots that line to Edith in "Adultery" (*Conversations* 195; *AOC* 162).

tested by her physical attraction to Roger Sibley, the director of the girls' home where she volunteers (60). A rare instance of purely external focalization for Dubus, in which readers essentially watch a conversation between friends, the narrative consists largely of LuAnn telling the story of her brush with adultery to Marsha. Since readers know from the beginning that LuAnn's desire remains unconsummated, the story becomes an examination of why she did not follow through rather than a telling of how she betrayed her husband, its central tension coming from LuAnn's realizations about the mysteries of sexual attraction and about the relationship of timing and apparent chance to sin and grace. Thinking about how she avoided the sin referenced in the narrative's title, she arrives at a vision of God as less directly concerned with human action than what Luke Ripley imagines: "It was the jeans that saved me," She tells Marsha, "If I had been wearing a skirt... There wouldn't have been those seconds when I was only touching my own skin. And you can't be saved by jeans. So it was God, grace; and I don't think of Him with eyes, glancing away from all the horror and seeing what I was doing and stopping me before He turned away again... I don't know how it happens" (*DH* 168). This understanding of God allows LuAnn to approach confession with peace and insight that characters like Harry Dugal and Joe Ritchie acquire only at the end of their respective narratives. "I am always being forgiven," she tells Marsha, "But I'll get strength from it... It's a very simple language. I'll say I placed myself in the occasion of sin, and I nearly committed adultery, and I don't want that to happen, ever" (167). Marsha is surprised to discover that LuAnn "rehearse[s]" her confessions, but the ritual allows LuAnn, through practice and simple language, to name, confront, and manage her temptation so that engaging in this ritual becomes a more conscious choice of fidelity (the choice to acknowledge and preserve her marriage and her love for Ted) over her attraction to Roger and

the complicated string of subsequent choices her sin would have involved. In this way, redemption becomes thoughtful, physical action.

LuAnn's most complex understanding of the intersections between spirituality and embodied action appears in her final narrative "Out of the Snow." The second-to-last narrative in Dubus's last collection, "Out of the Snow" is the story of an incident in which LuAnn, returning from the grocery store, discovers that she has been followed by two men who attack her in her kitchen, an incident which violates the "harmony" of "the spirit with the flesh" that LuAnn has cultivated via heightened consciousness and the commitment to ritual she has displayed both in previous narratives and in the early pages of this one (192). After fighting the two men off with a skillet, LuAnn cannot accept Ted and her children's assertion that her response was justified and insists on confronting what Lewis calls the "unplumbed roots of violence in herself" (44). She realizes, as she later tells her husband, "I didn't hit those men so I could stay alive for the children or for you. I hit them so my blood would stay in my body; so I could keep breathing. And if it's that easy, how are we supposed to live?" (*DH* 193). As in the case of Harry Dugal's masturbation, LuAnn's lack of control over her body's impulse to defend itself amazes and frightens her, and she cannot accept her body's automatic response to danger as a matter of little spiritual consequence. In the immediate aftermath of her near-rape and potential murder, she—breaking the tradition Lucy Ferriss identifies in earlier Dubus narratives of an "absence of female dialogue with God"—prays, "Thank you...that I didn't get killed. That I didn't get raped. That I didn't miss his balls. That I didn't miss him with the skillet. That I didn't beg for their mercy. That I didn't kill anyone," and it is this last possibility that she works to reconcile with her sense of personal morality and identity (Ferriss 229; *DH* 190).

The possibility of killing someone reactively—with little thought behind the physical action itself—bothers LuAnn because, as a Catholic woman, wife, and mother, she has built a philosophy of daily ritual identical to what Dubus articulates in “Sacraments.” Like Edith, who turns acts of hospice into rituals of love, LuAnn discovers through caring for Ted and her children that ritual is not just an antidote to life’s embodied repetitions but has the power to transform them, by consideration and belief, into something more meaningful so that even the action of preparing breakfast becomes sacred. “[T]he essence of life,” she tells herself, “was in the simplest of tasks, and in kindness to the people in your life,” and as she fixes breakfast for her family, she thinks that “this toast and oatmeal were a sacrament, the physical form love assumed in this moment” and that “When she was able to remember this and concentrate on it, she knew the significance of what she was doing” (177). Not only is LuAnn able to identify spiritual significance in daily activities, but ritualizing them in this way provides the same sense of certainty Dubus’s other Catholics experience when their physical actions have taken on a higher purpose.

It is this certainty that she feels has been jeopardized by her own efforts at self-defense, but as much as her own capacity for violence troubles her, both the violence and her reaction to it suggest that her original orientation toward ritual remains necessary, that the need to identify and practice rituals is ongoing, never completed or perfected, that life always contains further ambiguities that must be faced and managed. LuAnn’s insistence on talking about the attack and about the insights that have come to her since—“I have to know this, and remember this, and tell it to the children”—also suggests a measure of hope (193). Talking with Ted about the importance of returning a shopping cart “Because somebody has to take them in”—the action she was performing when the two men noticed and decided to follow her—LuAnn maintains her

commitment to the idea that this kind of embodied action is good and that it deserves contemplation: “[I]f you know that, and you do it for that one guy, you do something else. You join the world. With your body. And for those few moments, you join it with your soul. You move out of your isolation and become universal” (191-2). She recognizes that this philosophy is an essential part of her identity even if she cannot square it with her own violent knee-jerk reaction. The extent to which LuAnn is troubled and her commitment to both remembering what she feels and sharing that information with her children reassert her devotion to true contemplation even as they confirm for readers that life in the body—with its limitations, vulnerabilities, and instincts—places full understanding beyond human reach.

#### *Dubus's Non-Catholic Characters*

When Beth Harrison, the lapsed Catholic protagonist of “Separate Flights” (1970), catches her teenage daughter Peggy having sex, she briefly laments the loss of moral certainty and spiritual structure that a ritual like confession provides. She tells Peggy, “If I were still a Catholic, then you’d be one too and all I’d have to do is send you to the priest tomorrow...But we’re not Catholics or anything else, so that leaves us with clichés” (*SF* 182). The problem with clichés, Beth explains, is that “a cliché is an out...it saves you from having to think” (182). Instead of imposing a religious ethical framework on her daughter, Beth gives Peggy birth control pills, which turn out to be their own kind of pressure when Peggy’s boyfriend interprets Beth’s decision as an endorsement of sex and Peggy comes to feel that the freedom the pills provide will lead other boys to see her as sexually permissive—“a girl who *screws*” (Dubus’s emphasis, 200). Having alienated Peggy, Beth, who has earlier fantasized about having an affair with a man she met on an airplane, decides, in the case of her own broken marriage, that

infidelity of desire is as bad as physical cheating, but having no rituals of atonement at her disposal, she is not relieved by confessing this sin to her husband and ends the narrative with the frustrated and spiritually directionless assertion that “it does matter and it doesn’t matter and it does matter...there’s nothing true” (206).

For Dubus’s non-Catholic characters, the intersection of thought and physical action is no less important than it is for his Catholics, but because these characters do not operate within a specific or systematic religious philosophy, their struggles to locate peace, satisfaction, or stability—what Dubus’s Catholic characters know as “certainty”—unfold without the aid of any pre-existing religious structure or ritual template. Like Beth Harrison, they enter a world of clichés and banal repetitions without spiritual resources. Nevertheless, the need for ritual remains and typically presents itself within three common scenarios. Because these scenarios are capable of wide variation and because more than one may appear in a given narrative or be true for a given character simultaneously, I am not suggesting that they be viewed as discrete or inviolable narrative categories. Instead, I would like them to function similarly to Isaiah Berlin’s distinction between foxes and hedgehogs, a dichotomy he acknowledges as “over-simple” and that “becomes, if pressed, artificial, scholastic, and ultimately absurd,” but which nevertheless offers “a starting point for genuine investigation” that, if not taken too strictly, yields illuminating possibilities (437). My proposal, therefore, is that these narrative scenarios be seen to represent basic conditions under which the need for ritual among Dubus’s non-Catholic characters is often made apparent. Broadly speaking, they are situations in which: 1) the repetitions, routines, or rituals a character has previously trusted as healthy or useful fail, 2) a climate of chaos prompts a character to consider what is necessary for stability and to actively seek it out, or 3) a character surrenders either to the weight of circumstance or to the inertia of banal existence. In some

narratives, the line between each of these situations becomes so thin that it nearly disappears,<sup>52</sup> but there are many others in which one or two of these scenarios predominate.

### Failure of Secular Ritual

Many Dubus characters rely on physical exercise as a way to clear their minds, and many narratives address the limitations of this ritual. Ray Yarborough, part-time protagonist, part-time villain in “The Pretty Girl,” says of weightlifting, “I don’t know how I feel till I hold that steel” (That is, in fact, the first line of the novella.), and for many of Dubus’s men—Hank Allison, Jack Linhart, the title character in “The Doctor,” Peter Jackman, and others—running is an essential part of their daily routine (*TNSB* 3). Marsha, LuAnn’s friend in “The Timing of Sin,” goes so far as to compare her exercise regimen to the ritual of Catholic Confession: “I go to the gym. I work on those machines till I’m not me anymore. In the shower, I’m me again, but the part of me I couldn’t stand is dead. It’s in the gym, draped over a Universal” (*DH* 157). Except for Marsha, whose perspective readers never really enter, however, all of these characters have their peace of mind disturbed by events that physical exercise will not allow them to transcend. When this happens, Ray becomes violent, while the others experience gradations of apparent depression or post-traumatic stress, all of which seem to confirm what Osteen calls “the ultimate ineffectuality...of secular rites” (76). For Louise, the title character of “The Fat Girl” (1977), abandoning “her ritual and her diet” may ultimately constitute a move toward greater

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<sup>52</sup> Hank Allison, for example, experiences all of these to some degree as the protagonist of “Finding a Girl in America,” a novella in which news of an ex-girlfriend’s secret decision to abort their lovechild sends him into an emotional spiral from which neither his routines as a writer nor the physical exercise he values can extricate him. Hank then goes on to acknowledge his destructive pattern of dating younger women (a pattern he began with infidelity to Edith) as something he merely accepted and at which he has never looked critically. He ultimately accepts the love of his present girlfriend Lori as a first step toward the genuine rituals of love that Edith has already learned to cultivate. Reflecting on his past relationships, he tells Lori, “I can’t do that again. Ever. With anyone. Unless both of us are ready for whatever happens. No more playing with semen and womb if getting pregnant means solitude and death instead of living” (*FGA* 182).



psychological peace since she realizes by the end of the narrative that her devotion has been motivated by a desire to join “the pleasures of the nation” by “slimming her body” so that she can acquire and maintain the affection of a husband whose love for her is superficially tied to her physique (*AOC* 51, 55). Even so, Louise’s story builds to the moment when this ritual fails to satisfy her.

For some, the notion that Peter Jackman’s narrative arc relies on the failure of familiar rituals might not seem wholly accurate. Different readers might see all three scenarios at work in these stories, depending on how they choose to approach and order them. For my part, I intend to examine these narratives in the order of their appearance in Dubus’s story collections. This means that I read “Going Under” (1975), the middle story in terms of Peter’s personal evolution, first because it appears in Dubus’s earliest collection *Separate Flights* (1975) and that I follow it with “At St. Croix” (1979), which is last in narrative sequence but which appears in the middle of *Finding a Girl in America* (1983), and then “The Winter Father” (1980), which, though first chronologically, appears toward the end of that same collection.<sup>53</sup> Read in this order, Peter’s narratives suggest that his need for and experience of ritual most clearly involve the failure of previously trusted rituals, a failure which, in turn, leads him to search for new ways of living in the world. If Peter’s life has been characterized by apathy or passivity, most of this has taken place before the present in which his narratives are set, likely contributing to the death of his marriage.

Peter is another Dubusian father who, unlike Jack Linhart (whom I discuss in the following section), is unable to recommit to his wife Norma and, unlike Luke Ripley, has neither

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<sup>53</sup> My rationale for ordering the stories in this way is that this is the order in which they were originally published, and anyone wanting to read his or her way through Dubus’s collected fiction would experience the narratives in this order.

morning prayers nor the Eucharist to help him cope with and move beyond his post-divorce anxieties. “Going Under” recounts the darkest period in Peter’s life. Norma has remarried and relocated, along with David and Kathi (her and Peter’s children) to Colorado. Peter, who lives in Massachusetts, quickly discovers that he misses the bodily proximity of his children, feels their physical absence from his life as a profound and unnerving grief that underscores his failures as a father and husband and that leaves his heart feeling “heavy and dead” (*SF* 125). The anxieties that grow out of this grief are intangible, indefinite, and oppressive, so much so that Peter thinks of them as “demons” which disappear only when he is having sex with a lover or busying himself with either physical exercise or the motions of his job as a radio disk jockey (124). Running—specifically “the absolute privacy of his body staking its claim on a country road...pumping blood, pounding up hills”—restores Peter’s peace of mind, and he wants to invest emotionally in Miranda (the younger lover he is with at the story’s beginning), feeling that “a purifying love...if he could sustain it, would save him,” but when their relationship ends, his demons become physically debilitating (127, 134). On his way to see Jo Morrison, an understanding fellow divorcee who will become his next lover, Peter finds he is unable to step outside his front door to cross the lawn: “His body stands spiritless and abandoned, it feels as though it has neither bone nor muscle, it is only shivering flesh inside clothing that does not belong to him” (139). Peter returns to the house and to the phone, where Jo is waiting to talk him through a series of attempts to exit the house, turn on the car, and drive across town to her apartment. Jo’s ability to talk Peter through an incremental series of embodied behaviors gives readers insight into the psychological difficulties she too has struggled to overcome and provides Peter with the structure and temporary certainty—the makeshift ritual—he needs to transcend the anxieties that have rendered him immobile. The story ends with Peter’s recognition that “love is

time” and that, through a series of committed physical actions, he and Jo can provide for each other the “great strength and new relief” he has felt on this occasion (147).

The opening passage of “At St. Croix” confirms that Peter and Jo have survived the winter together and that each is now ready to move beyond the state of emotional and psychological need that defined their early days together, but it also indicates that Peter feels “at times” that “their love had grown only from shared pain,” suggesting that he doubts their ability to maintain their connection (or the rituals that occupied their winter) as they each become healthier emotionally (*FGA* 65). Whether these misgivings are substantial enough to end things or whether they are only another obstacle with which the couple will have to contend is not entirely clear, but as he and Jo take a boat to the island of St. Croix, readers are allowed a glimpse into Peter’s thoughts: “He tried to care whether she was getting seasick or sunburned or was uncomfortable in the sea-spray, but he could not: his effort seemed physical, as though he were trying to push an interior part of his body out of himself across the boat to Jo” (67). It would seem in this moment that the gestures of love that saved Peter during the winter now seem taxing enough that even a purely mental, emotional effort feels like physical strain, and throughout the narrative, the one physical contact Peter seems to desire is to embrace his children. Peter experiences panic as he attempts to confront his fear of deep water by snorkeling to a reef off the island, but when he and Jo make it back to their hotel, he seeks comfort not in her arms, as he had done during the previous winter, but on the beach, where he thinks about past summers bodysurfing with his children. Remembering an instance in which he overcame his fear of the ocean (without thinking) to rescue Kathi from a rip current, Peter recalls “pressing her flesh against his,” and Dubus writes, “he received that vision with a certainty as incarnate as his sunburned flesh...He was waiting for June: their faces at the airport, their voices in the car, their

bodies with his in the sea” (73). It becomes clear in this moment that, whether or not he and Jo will remain together, Peter’s beach visits with David and Kathi will be the treasured ritual of his life, and it is anticipation of these visits that finally calms him, heals him, and gives him a more permanent sense of purpose than Jo alone has supplied.

While Peter only recognizes the staying power of this ritual at the end of “At St. Croix,” the beach visits he remembers precede “Going Under.” In “The Winter Father,” Dubus takes readers back in time to the months immediately following Peter and Norma’s divorce, when Peter first feels himself haunted by “the distracting, debilitating phantoms of past and future” that plague many of Dubus’s characters (Contino 53). Though the divorce is more amicable than Peter’s marriage had been, he still feels, after leaving for a town “fifteen miles inland,” like “a man who had survived an accident which had killed others” and comes to think of the roads that join his new town to that of his children as “parts of his body: intestines, lung, heart-fiber lying from his door to theirs” (*FGA* 110-1). His need for the company of his children is physical in a way he now realizes his desire for women is not—“He had assumed...that his need for a woman was as carnal as it was spiritual. But now...when he imagined a woman, she was drinking with him, eating dinner. So his most intense and perhaps only need for a woman was then”—, but while he looks forward to the time he can spend with David and Kathi, he soon discovers that the unsettling realities of divorce have left him unsure of how to interact with them (118). His default instinct is to try to keep them entertained and spends the winter shuttling them to movies and museums, but he senses beneath these various activities a kind of “cowardice” that, while “urbane, mobile, and sophisticated,” has also prevented them from connecting deeply with each other and kept their conversation “evasive, fragile, contrived,” while reminding them all of the

unspoken truth: that these outings would not be necessary if Peter and Norma had remained together (116, 119).

Contino observes that “something like Eucharistic harmony emerges” as Peter and the children continue to share meals and weekends, and the arrival of summer strengthens this harmony tremendously (63). Summer makes beach visits possible, and while playing with David and Kathi in the waves, Peter discovers that their new-found ritual of ice chests, sandwiches, bodysurfing, and alternating post-beach showers is able to revive his feelings of “peace and father-love” by allowing him to spend time interacting with his children in a context that does not evoke the divorce and the separateness it has imposed on their lives (*FGA* 128). Readers who have encountered Peter’s earlier narratives know that this peace will not hold, that he is headed for greater separation and, with it, greater pain, loneliness and confusion, but we also know that he will come out the other side of that suffering with a firmer, more enduring peace, recognizing these summer days—these rituals—as a source of comfort, purpose, and, therefore, of emotional stability.

#### Search for Ritual in Chaos

In contrast to Peter Jackman, Jack Linhart, narrator of the early novella “We Don’t Live Here Anymore” (1975), struggles to find some route by which to redeem his toxic marriage. As a narrator, Jack is just honest enough to let readers see his choices without necessarily presenting a fair assessment of his motives. The morning after he and his wife Terry have had a fight, Jack recognizes her attempt to be conciliatory and admits, “For an instant I was tender and warm and wanted to help her with a cheerful line,” but he decides against it, later referring to this decision as a “poison” but also reminding readers of Terry’s deficiencies as a housekeeper and domestic

accountant as he drives to meet Edith Allison, with whom he is having an affair<sup>54</sup> (*SF* 7, 11). Jack sees his marriage to Terry as the series of events that followed their decision to keep Natasha—“the love child who bound us”—rather than terminate Terry’s pregnancy (9). That decision led to others and those to others again until the unexamined momentum of their daily actions has resulted in a narrative present full of anger, infidelity (mostly Jack’s), and dissatisfaction, in which the only solution for Jack, who enjoys fatherhood and does not want to hurt his children, is to recommit consciously to Terry, to participate in the physical actions of marriage—having sex, sharing meals, raising Natasha and Sean, avoiding infidelity—until healing is achieved. Unlike Billy Wells, who in “The Pitcher” chooses baseball over marriage and in “After the Game” (1983) laments that none of the women he has met since have been “the kind you marry,” Jack chooses the work of love over escape, but while he seems certain of his choice—“I knew that I would grow old with Terry”—, he finds living with this decision difficult, complaining at the end of the narrative that Terry displays “the virtues she has always had” while “her failures, like my own, have not changed” (*LWE* 63; *SF* 68, 71). For Dubus, marriage (and its rituals) are a Catholic sacrament even if its participants do not see it as such, so Jack and Terry’s recommitment does bring healing and lasting stability, but readers learn this only in the later novella “Finding a Girl in America” (1980), when Jack tells Hank Allison that he is “glad” he and Terry “stuck it out” (*FGA* 180).

If Jack Linhart (and Peter Jackman, for that matter) reveals that a person, without initial faith or even much good will, can find his way to ritual healing and stability without the guidance of a religious paradigm, Matt Fowler, another Dubusian father and the protagonist of

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<sup>54</sup> One could easily argue that Jack treats his regular trysts with Edith as a kind of ritual, looking to their love to save him from the turmoil of marital acrimony, and that the failure of this ritual more closely resembles the first scenario, but I think it is more accurate to say that the affair, occurring only after the marriage went bad, is one stop on Jack’s quest to restore meaning to his life through action.

“Killings” (1979),<sup>55</sup> illustrates how the search for restorative ritual can end in disaster, how a character can mistake premeditated action for the kind of redemptive behavior other Dubus characters are able to find only in acts of love. At face value, the killings in the narrative’s title refer to the two murders that take place within the text, but the title may also be read as reference to the ways in which the murder of Matt’s son Frank by Richard Strout, estranged husband of Mary Ann, with whom Frank was involved romantically, reverberates through other lives, including that of Matt, his wife Ruth, their older son Steve, Mary Ann and her children, Strout himself, whom Matt eventually kills in a deliberate and carefully-planned act of vengeance, and Matt’s friend Willis Trottier, who becomes his accomplice. By the time the Fowlers have gathered to bury Frank, Strout is out on bail. Steve remarks after the funeral, “I should kill him,” and Matt later tells Willis, “He walks the Goddamn streets...Ruth sees him. She sees him too much...She can’t even go out for cigarettes and aspirin. It’s killing her” (FGA 4). This moment becomes the genesis of what Grubgeld terms “Matt’s doomed efforts to protect his wife,” efforts that only worsen “[t]he loneliness and suffering of everyone in the story” as Matt contends with “inward spiritual conditions that are beyond [his] capability to construe” (“Living” 22). Matt hopes to alleviate his grief and Ruth’s by removing Strout from their lives forever, but in the end, he finds himself cut off from hope and grace by the violence of this action as well as by the moral compromises he commits in the process of turning his plan into reality.

Osteen considers the murder of Strout a “ritual revenge,” arguing that Matt “undertakes a ritual reenactment of the original killing” and that he thereby “commits a form of spiritual suicide” (85, 83-4). While I agree with Osteen that Matt “confuses body and spirit, mistaking material vengeance for the true comfort of forgiveness,” I also think there is critical value in

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<sup>55</sup> This narrative is the basis for the film *In the Bedroom* (2001), directed by Todd Field.

distinguishing Matt's actions at the end of the narrative from ritual as depicted elsewhere in Dubus's fiction (85). In every other narrative this chapter has examined, ritual—whether as Eucharist, Confession, sex, meal preparation, returning shopping carts, or trips with children to the beach—has consisted of embodied action that is either repeated consciously (with purpose or focus) or that promises conscious repetition in the future. It is true that Matt imagines killing Richard Strout beforehand and later revisits the killing in memory, but that action, once it becomes embodied, becomes final in the sense that it is physically unrepeatable, even if its psychological impact remains. At the moment “[t]he gun kicked in Matt’s hand,” Dubus writes, “the explosion of the shot surrounded him, isolated him in a nimbus of sound that cut him off from all his time, all his history,” and as Matt tells Ruth about it later, he discovers that “the words had no images for him, he did not see himself doing what the words said he had done” (*FGA* 18, 20). Matt feels removed not only from redemption but from reality itself, and this new isolation suggests that he has not only been confused about the intersection between body and spirit but also about the nature of ritual, which allows human spiritual needs to become material and, therefore, addressable through performance and practice. In his desire to save Ruth (and himself) from the anguish of Frank’s death and of seeing Strout around town, Matt, rather than turning toward his wife and working with her to find or define practical methods of managing their grief, resorts to murder, a final action that places redemption out of reach. The physical reality of his crime is, in fact, so devastating that it separates him from Ruth as well, and as she tries to embrace him at the story’s end, Dubus writes that “he wished he could make love to her but he could not” and that ultimately Matt “shuddered with a sob he kept silent in his heart” (20).

Surrender to Circumstance or Banal Inertia



The most striking instances of the third scenario occur in narratives like “Miranda Over the Valley” (1975), in which Miranda, without language to explain why she would rather marry her boyfriend than abort their baby, succumbs to the advice (and pressure) of her parents, terminates her pregnancy, and spends the rest of the narrative “wish[ing] for courage in the past” and contending with the feelings of alienation that arise from her decision; “Townies” (1977), in which the momentum of Mike’s moral compromises over time lead him to feel that “he had lived too long in his body” before culminating in the murder of his most recent lover, a murder committed out of rage rather than premeditation; “The Misogamist” (1980), in which Roy Hodges finds he “could not imagine himself performing the concrete rituals of marriage,” and leaves his fiancée Sheila standing at the altar so that he can return to “the normal pattern” of military service, a choice which leaves him feeling as bodiless and insubstantial as a “love-rooted ghost” as he attempts to draft a goodbye letter; “Leslie in California” (1983), in which the young wife of a serially abusive husband narrates her own acceptance of a world “where nothing moves” and the apathy that prevents her from leaving despite the physical danger she knows he poses her; and “The Curse” (1986), in which Mitchell Hayes, a bartender who, having witnessed a violent gang rape he did not stop, feels his inactivity has made him an accomplice to the crime and, lacking any ritual of atonement, wishes “he could kneel and receive” the curse under which he feels he must now be living (*SF* 159; *FGA* 46, 52, 63; *TNSB* 85; *SS* 382). In his discussion of “Miranda Over the Valley,” David M. Hammond writes, “We become by deciding,” later stating that Dubus’s fiction often reveals “sacrifice and pain” as “the cost of personal authenticity” (163, 168). By abdicating her own agency, like the other characters who comprise this list, Miranda surrenders to other forces at work in her narrative climate, and the spiritual damage she sustains keeps her from reestablishing the community she has lost.

Joyce Carol Oates, in a *New York Times* review of Dubus's fourth collection *The Times are Never So Bad* (1983), describes the characters who populate that text as "People to Whom Things Happen," and in the story "Anna" particularly, readers meet a protagonist whose passive reception of life's events makes plain her need for ritual. At work, Anna experiences "the kind of fatigue that comes from confining the body while giving neither it nor the mind anything to do" and, at home, finds the apartment she and her boyfriend Wayne share unsatisfactory (*TNSB* 138-9). When Wayne pulls Anna into a robbery from which they make a clean getaway, she is unable to parlay their extra money into a break from her workaday routine. They return to their favorite bar, buy a vacuum cleaner for the apartment, and slip back into their regular schedule largely from lack of imagination. As Madonne Miner observes, Anna "acts in the present tense, without any awareness of past patterns or future ramifications" (22). If Luke Ripley must learn to focus on the moment to avoid despair, Anna's inability to think beyond the present robs her actions of any intention or direction. She, like non-Catholic characters who experience comparable indecision or passivity, is caught in exactly the kind of blind mechanism Weil likens to the law of gravity, and without any ritual to free her from life's repetitive patterns or to give those patterns meaning, she remains there. Her story ends with a trip to the laundromat, where, in a final, striking metaphor for her life and relationship, Anna watches her clothes (and Wayne's) tumble in the machine "like children waving from a ferris wheel" (*TNSB* 158).

Occasionally, a character who has surrendered to a destructive, cyclical passivity is pushed to the point of action, and in such moments, an opportunity for redemption does present itself. The title character of "Rose" (1985), having, as the narrator says, "neither a religion nor a philosophy" and, therefore, falling uncritically into the destructive patterns of an abusive marriage, eventually responds to "chance, and its indiscriminate testing of our bodies, our wills,

our spirits” with an unprecedented act of maternal heroism (*LWE* 195, 212-3). Though Rose identifies herself and her husband Jim as lapsed Catholics, the narrator insists that “they were never truly members of that faith” and that “their philosophies were simply their accumulated reactions to their daily circumstance, their lives as they lived them from one hour to the next” (195). He suggests that it is this lack of personal and philosophical awareness that leads Rose to accept, for years, the physical abuse of her husband and to passively observe as he abuses their children. The “small jolt” that finally knocks Rose out of this pattern is the moment her husband breaks their young son’s arm (213). After carrying the boy to the car, she returns for her daughters only to find the girls trapped in a burning apartment. This propels Rose to her only true moment of action in the narrative. Running through the fire, she rescues her daughters, puts them unharmed into the car, and drives over her husband several times rather than escaping, an action that simultaneously saves them all from future abuse and costs Rose custody of her children.

In Rose’s story, the unnamed narrator plays a particularly important role. A fellow regular at her local bar, he serves almost as her confessor, hearing her sins and pronouncing (for our benefit) her absolution. Grubgeld likens him to Luke Ripley, describing him as, “one of those treacherous, seductive first-person narrators that Dubus uses to confound the reader’s ethical positioning in the story,” but at the same time, his view provides us with an affirmative framework in which to interpret Rose’s final acts of courage and to weigh them against her earlier inaction (“Living” 26). He provides a sympathetic ear for Rose, giving her a dramatic reason to tell her story, while, at the same time, freeing her narrative from the guilt-ridden, self-imposed moral judgements that lead her to conclude she does not deserve her children. “If Dubus were to allow Rose herself to tell her story,” Miner observes, “we readers might be tempted to follow her cue and denigrate her; by giving her story a sympathetic narrator, Dubus provides us

with a model of more sympathetic reading” (28). The narrator has already informed us of his interest in narratives about “the human spirit” and of his tendency to approach them with “the awe of...boyhood,” and his efforts to make sense of Rose’s experiences (efforts that would not be organic to an impersonal omniscience) provide readers with the interpretive structure that ritual supplies in other narratives (*LWE* 181). The closest Rose ever comes to rituals of her own are her conversations with the narrator, and though he makes a point of telling us “I am not a Catholic,” he brings to those tellings and retellings the contemplative focus of some of Dubus’s most devout Catholic characters (195). At the start of his essay “Grace,” Dubus writes, “Often we receive grace without knowing it,” and Rose (like Peter Jackman on his initial trips to the beach) performs her confessions without understanding their ritual significance, acknowledging her inactivity as complicity in her children’s early suffering and expressing regret, if not remorse (*MMC* 59). The narrator’s final reading of Rose’s experience is that “the life she chose slowly turned on her, pressed against her from all sides, invisible, motionless, but with the force of wind she could not breast” and that, in her final moment of heroic action, “she reentered motherhood,” that “she did, and does” deserve her children and “redeemed herself, with action, and with less than thirty minutes of it” (214). While Rose seems to have reentered a pattern of spiritual lethargy, resigning herself to the loss of her children and returning regularly to the bar, the fact that she, in one crucial moment, embodied grace for her daughters absolves her of the sins of prior and later passivity, giving her life a significance beyond itself and rendering her “touched and blessed by flames” in the narrator’s imagination (214).

Emily Moore in “Dancing After Hours” (1996), the last of Dubus’s collected stories and the title narrative of his final collection, is yet another protagonist who, having surrendered to the mundane patterns of existence, finds redemption without seeking or expecting it. Emily is a

former English teacher turned bartender, who left her previous profession because her “passion dissolved” in student apathy, a slow process that ultimately left her feeling, “like a woman standing at a roadside, reading poems aloud into the wind as cars filled with teenagers went speeding by” (*DH* 210). Emily is more self-aware than Rose and enjoys her work, but, at forty years old, she feels isolated from love and not particularly attractive. As a result, Emily fears that “Love did not bring happiness, it did not last, and it ended in pain,” and “no matter how hard she tried,” Dubus writes, “she could not achieve some new clarity” (201, 196). This begins to change when Drew, a quadriplegic man, comes into the bar with his friend and caretaker Alvin, both of whom stay after hours to talk and laugh and dance with Emily, her boss Jeff, and the bar’s other employees. Emily recognizes Drew’s embodied experiences—the actions he must take to live in and move through a flesh-and-blood world that caters to the physically able—as wholly different from her own, and in the face of that recognition, Dubus writes, “She was afraid. She had never imagined herself being crippled, and now, standing behind the bar, she felt her spine as part of her that could be broken” (212). This awareness of her own bodily fragility is reminiscent of Joe Ritchie’s, but as she thinks about Drew and Alvin’s relationship, she decides that what troubles her most “was not the shit”—the physical reality of one person needing another to clean him—but “the spiritual pain that twisted her soul: Drew’s helplessness, and Alvin reaching into it with his hands” (210). This regular, invasive gesture of love is echoed in Emily’s memory of Roland Kirk, a blind musician whom she once saw in concert. Dancing with Kirk on that night, she recalls how “she could feel the sound of the saxophone in her body” and thinks, “*It would be something like that...something ineffable that comes from outside and fills us; something that changes the way we see what we see; something that allows us to see what we don’t*” (215). This

thought marks the beginning of Emily's transformation and promises her ability to transcend the spiritual malaise of the narrative's beginning.

Between Kirk's blindness and Drew's paralysis, "Dubus uses the disabled body," according to Ivanov-Craig, "as a trope to mediate a transformative, aesthetic vision," and Lewis reads Drew's openness about the realities of his condition as a Eucharistic analogue, referring to his interactions with Emily as "saving bread" (Ivanov-Craig 91; Lewis 50). Emily's imagination of quadriplegic life does lead her to envision situations she has never previously considered, and her new thinking about love and mortality "emboldens Emily to encourage Jeff's timid, tentative gestures of affection" (Lewis 51). Where she had previously felt disillusioned about the possibility of romantic love, she now seems hopeful, and the narrative ends with her not only planning to go fishing with Drew, Alvin and Jeff after the weekend but with her and Jeff agreeing to meet at his place later that day for lunch. Thinking about Kirk, she considers what it would mean to "love without the limits of the flesh," which seems ultimately to mean without allowing the reality of bodies to limit how we love or whether we choose to do so (*DH* 219). Thinking about Drew's lack of privacy, about how his relationship with Alvin is characterized by "an intimacy babies had" and that only "the ill and dying" know to a comparable degree, she recalls how she has "heard married women speak with repugnance of their husbands: their breath, their farts, their fat stomachs and asses, their lust, their golf, their humor, their passions their loves," and when she squeezes Jeff's hand at the end of the text, this parting gesture seems to constitute a physical acceptance and even an affirmation of these realities as part of embodied love (218). She and Jeff have not yet explored or begun to define any of love's rituals, but Emily's new willingness to share her life—to participate physically in someone else's—promises to move her beyond life's current, muddled repetitions toward love.

*Running Naked in the Dark*

In his *New Yorker* review of *Voices from the Moon* (1984), Updike writes that “amid the self-seeking tangle of secular America, the Church still functions,” for Dubus, “as a standard of measure, a repository of mysteries that can give scale and structure to our social lives” (97). Indeed, Dubus’s view of spiritual and embodied life rests on the notion that “the world is catholic” or, at least, that it operates according to rules consistent with the narrative of Christ’s suffering and redemption. Dubus sees these rules not as confining but as generous and adaptive, capable of enfolding the entire range of human experience. In *Voices from the Moon* itself, Joan tells her son Larry, “we don’t have to live great lives, we just have to understand and survive the one’s we’ve got,” but Richie Stowe, Joan’s younger son and the novel’s central protagonist, sees this struggle somewhat differently: “he saw the world as a tangle of men and women and boys and girls, thick and wildly growing...some embraced and some struggled, while all of them reached upward for air and rain and sun. He must somehow move through it, untouched by it, but in it too, toward God” (120, 91). These two perspectives represent the two essential orientations of characters to the world in Dubus’s fiction, and yet all characters, regardless of belief, must navigate a world wildly growing, must struggle and embrace, must move in and through the world toward or away from God. For Dubus’s Catholics, the “scale and structure” of religion lead them to discover or create Eucharistic analogues out of the circumstances that surround them, often infusing their actions with a clarity of purpose his non-Catholics rarely, if ever, achieve. Even so, many of Dubus’s non-Catholics do find stability, revealing that actions as simple as bodysurfing or barstool conversation can carry redemptive power, and those for whom

redemption remains elusive confirm the validity of the Church as “standard of measure” by demonstrating the cost of operating outside its dictates.

Dubus repeatedly affirms that bodies are necessary for spiritual understanding, and the power of individual rituals in his fiction is that they allow people to give their spiritual concerns—fear, temptation, grief, rage, and insecurity, but also kindness, attraction, forgiveness, kinship, and love—a body and imbue the physical gestures that express these otherwise ineffable realities with meaning that transcends the purely physical. Dubus’s essay “Communion” compares human beings collectively to the unnamed man in Mark’s Gospel who, fleeing those who arrested Christ, “entered history...as a man running naked in the dark” (*MMC* 156). “He is us,” Dubus writes, explaining that, as we run, we are met in the world by Christ, who “kept eating with people after He was dead” and “still does,” and that, because the Eucharist remains with us in ordinary, beautiful simplicity, we can receive it “with wandering minds, and distracted flesh, in the same way we receive the sun, the moon and earth, and breathing” (158-9). Dubus’s narratives assert that the journey toward truth is ongoing, filled with reversals and course corrections. Like Harry Dugal, we must remain in the world, and this means confronting the friction that will inevitably rise among our bodily impulses, spiritual needs, and notions of ethics, a friction that will frequently prompt us to ask, with frustration akin to LuAnn Arceneaux’s, “how are we supposed to live?” As Weil has already put it, “one must learn to feel in all things, first and almost solely, the obedience of the universe to God,” and Dubus’s characters, regardless of religious outlook or affiliation, come closest to God when they love and move closer still when they are able to express their love in repeatable, purposeful, and embodied ways.



## Marilynne Robinson's *Errand into the Wilderness: Human Particularity and Interpersonal Grace in the Gilead Trilogy*

In Marilynne Robinson's novel *Home* (2008), Glory Boughton, the narrative's point-of-view character, recalls one of her father's recurring sermons: "You must forgive in order to understand...If you forgive, he would say, you may indeed still not understand, but you will be ready to understand, and that is the posture of grace" (45). Glory recognizes this insight as most immediately applicable to her wayward brother Jack, the one Boughton child to leave family and faith behind—"Her father had said this more than once, in sermons, with appropriate texts, but the real text was Jack, and those to whom he spoke were himself and the row of Boughtons in the front pew"—but the notion that we, as human beings, can (and should) adopt a "posture of grace" in order to better understand each other is common to all of Robinson's novels, especially her trilogy set in Gilead, Iowa (45).

This is not to say that Robinson's fiction is reducible to an extended polemic on the virtues of forgiveness. The idea that forgiveness is good, even necessary, is one of many values that inform what Ray Horton calls the "background of religious conviction"<sup>56</sup> that informs Robinson's fictional world (120). Robinson's concern with forgiveness has to do with why and how this posture of grace is vital to embodied life. In all three Gilead novels *Gilead* (2004), *Home* (2008), and *Lila* (2014), Robinson's "theopoetic" vision "activates concentrated aesthetic attention to quotidian moments, sharpening the minutest perceptions of contingent materiality," and this heightened attention to quotidian beauty steers her characters toward a fuller recognition

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<sup>56</sup> Horton explains that his use of the term *background* "draws on Charles Taylor's reading of Heidegger" and that "Following Heidegger, Taylor contends that the phenomena of experience cannot be distended from their perceptual and interpretive background; rather, experience is rendered meaningful against such a background" (121). The result is that Horton claims not only that Robinson's novels contain religious characters or ideas but that the world of the text actually functions by rules consistent with the author's belief. Later in this chapter, I explain how the narration of Reverend John Ames helps to make aspects of that background explicit to readers.

and exercise of interpersonal grace, by which I mean a character's willingness to extend forgiveness, understanding, and/or love to another human being (Horton 120). I intend to demonstrate that each of the three narrators in Robinson's Gilead trilogy explore the relationship of interpersonal grace to embodied life with distinction and nuance, but before we can understand the narrative power of these different perspectives, it is necessary to consider two other important elements of Robinson's religious aesthetic, namely that she conceives of existence itself as a physical and spiritual wilderness and that her view of individual subjectivity is shaped both by the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity and by a belief in the sacredness of human beings.

While eco-political readings have linked Robinson's depictions of wilderness spaces to the nineteenth-century nature writing of Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau as well as to mythic and socio-historical conceptualizations of the American frontier,<sup>57</sup> Robinson concludes her essay "Wilderness" (1998) with the suggestion that romantic ideas about natural space should be abandoned in an effort to rekindle a general respect for civilization. "Wilderness has for a long time figured as an escape from civilization and a judgment upon it," she writes, "I think we must surrender the idea of wilderness, accept the fact that the consequences of human presence in the world are universal and ineluctable, and invest our care and hope in civilization, since to do

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<sup>57</sup> In their introduction to *A Political Companion to Marilynne Robinson* (2016), Shannon L. Mariotti and Joseph H. Lane, Jr. note that "In her essay 'Wilderness,' Robinson identifies herself powerfully with Frederick Jackson Turner's familiar thesis that 'pioneer roots' shape the American identity" (4). They also offer a brief overview of Robinson's nineteenth-century literary influences—an elaborated version of which appears in Lane's essay "Our Home in the Wilderness: The American Experience with Wilderness and Frontier Democracy in Marilynne Robinson's Fiction and Essays"—and quote an interview in which Robinson compares Sylvie from her novel *Housekeeping* (1980) to the heroic "outsider" characters in Whitman, Thoreau, and American Westerns (10). My goal here is not to dispute their reading. Robinson, in fiction and essays alike, demonstrates an obvious appreciation for the beauty and importance of nature. I wish only to point out that the end of Robinson's essay seems to lead readers toward a different set of ideas about the relationship of human beings to natural space, one that sees celebration of wilderness as secondary to (and, indeed, only possible in the wake of) renewed interest in the wellness of other human beings. For her, the reversal of these two aims promises disaster.

otherwise risks repeating the terrible pattern of enmity against ourselves” (*DA* 254). It would be difficult (if not impossible) to avoid associating Robinson’s appeal for greater social and civic awareness with America’s Puritan settlers, whose emphasis on democracy and “do[ing] justice” to one’s neighbor<sup>58</sup> Robinson has praised in other essays and whose “errand into the wilderness” included the vision of a charitable “city upon a hill” (Danforth 1; Winthrop 103). Robinson does not seriously share Puritan characterizations of wilderness as “the Devil’s territories,”<sup>59</sup> but her novels depict the sparsely inhabited reaches of the American Midwest as alternately beautiful and perilous (Mather xi). The fact that society itself can be dangerous to Robinson’s characters suggests that many still fail to regard “peace and order as values” or to “see our own well-being in our neighbor’s prosperity,” yet whenever the environment—natural or social—surrounding her characters becomes wild, uncertain, or hostile, the beauty, grace, and importance of caring gestures intensifies (*DA* 253).

This duality gives wilderness a powerful metaphorical significance in Robinson’s novels. When, in *Gilead*, narrator-protagonist John Ames tells how his grandfather departed for the wilds of Kansas and how Ames later accompanied his father in search of the old man’s grave, he recalls that he (then a child) and his father lost their road and presents a harrowing account of their journey: “Never before in my life had I wondered where I would come by my next drink of water, and I number it among my blessings that I have not had occasion to wonder since. There

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<sup>58</sup> In her essay “Puritans and Prigs” (1996) particularly, Robinson identifies the notion of doing justice as an important Puritan concept, citing a 1743 sermon by Jonathan Edwards—in many ways a theological descendent of Puritan thought—in which he took his congregation to task for failing to properly address the wider community’s material needs, stating “Christian people are to give to others not only so as to lift him above extremity but liberally to furnish him” (*DA* 151).

<sup>59</sup> While Robinson does write that attempting to care for the environment without first caring for each other “stirs a sad suspicion in me that we are of the Devil’s party, without knowing it,” this seems a largely tongue-in-cheek way of expressing the extent to which our priorities as human beings have become distorted (*DA* 253). Later sections of this chapter will reference specific moments in Robinson’s fiction in which natural spaces and phenomena prove fruitful sources of intellectual stimulation and spiritual insight.

were times when I truly believed we might just wander off and die” (11). The immediate impact of this frightening and physically painful uncertainty is Ames’s profound appreciation for the food and shelter supplied by a woman—that region’s solitary resident—toward the end of their travels. “I loved that woman like a second mother,” he says, “I loved her to the point of tears...we ate standing there at the stoop in the chill and the dark, and it was perfectly wonderful” (12). The beauty of a stranger’s hospitality is especially stark in the midst of Ames’s desperation and in contrast to the “parched and sun-stricken” land through which he and his father have wandered (13). Wilderness, as Ames experiences it here, creates a context of material need in which simple—even quotidian—kindness assumes the dimensions of grace, and situations of this kind repeat not only in *Gilead* but throughout *Home* and *Lila* as well. Glory and Jack Boughton try with varying success to make their childhood home an outpost in their own metaphorical wildernesses, while Lila, reflecting on the fact that “Existence can be fierce” and trying to reconcile her burgeoning religious life with the harshness of previous lived experience, records a verse from Ezekiel that reminds her of “the wildness of things,”<sup>60</sup> her way of remaining alert against the potential hunger and calamity she feels still lurking outside the love and security she has found in Gilead (*Lila* 106).

Joseph H. Lane, Jr. observes that Ames’s wilderness wanderings serve not only as metaphor for the untold difficulties that wait abroad in the physical world, but on a more personal level, “as the metaphor that defines his understanding of what it means to be human and what it means to be lost” (81). Ames’s own observation that some human beings seem to constitute “a kind of wilderness unto themselves” is rooted in the Calvinist doctrine of total

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<sup>60</sup> The lines she records—“The fire went up and down among the living creatures; and the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning. And the living creatures ran and returned as the appearance of a flash of lightning”—come from Ezekiel 1:13-4 (KJV).

depravity (*Gilead* 119). In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin writes, “there exists in man something like a world of misery, and ever since we were stripped of the divine attire, our naked shame discloses an immense series of disgraceful properties, every man being stung by the consciousness of his own unhappiness” (4). This fallen status entails “depravity and corruption” but it also includes more mundane feelings of “ignorance, vanity, want, weakness,” all of which Calvin sees as universal to human existence (4). Robinson, in turn, reminds us that *depravity*, in this context, means “warping or distortion” and that Calvin’s use of this term “was directed against casuistical enumerations of sins” and toward shared recognition of the fact that “we are all absolutely, that is equally, unworthy of, and dependent upon, the free intervention of grace” (*DA* 155). She acknowledges that human fallibility is complicated by the diverse circumstances of embodied experience—“life makes goodness much easier for some people than for others”—but maintains that “The belief we are all sinners gives us excellent grounds for forgiveness and self-forgiveness” (156).

Robinson also finds grounds for forgiveness in her belief that human beings, as recipients of divine creation, attention, and love, are sacred. This idea too has roots in Calvin, who insists that “the image of God...exists in all,” and that every person, therefore, is “worthy of yourself and all your exertions” (453). Robinson draws from this same section of Calvin’s *Institutes* to explain Jonathan Edwards’s definition of justice, and in her recent essay “The Sacred, the Human” (2016), she adds to Edwards’s assertion that “God distinguished man from the beasts,” explaining that “Edwards’s thought is loyal to a tradition that does not believe our works in life can merit any reward in heaven. Instead, he sees whatever is good or gracious or beautiful in any human act or thought as an emanation of the divine beauty, sacredness itself” (*WWDH* 67). This means that, for Robinson’s characters, adopting a posture of grace is a process

important to temporal existence, one that is “strongly connected,” as Emily C. Nacol describes it, “to the experience of wonder at the complexity of other human beings” (133). Characters hone their capacity for wonder by learning to pay careful attention to the visible world and especially to other people in their lives. This difficult and perpetually incomplete process is a central focus of Robinson’s protagonists and consequently forms the central action of the stories they tell.<sup>61</sup>

Though Robinson considers depravity and sacredness universal aspects of humanity, her fiction also acknowledges that the individual, private nature of embodied existence obstructs our view of these ideas, obscuring the good intentions and suffering of others as well as the virtues and vices we ourselves possess. Ames, Glory, and Lila embody vastly different lived experiences and, by extension, different relationships to family, community, and religious life. This chapter will examine how these three distinct, subjective narrators explore the complicated relationship between embodiment and awareness. Moving through the novels more or less chronologically, I hope to show how each narrator’s efforts to navigate America’s (and Robinson’s) existential wilderness allows him or her particular insight into the nature of forgiveness, understanding and love, teaching them how to make spiritual connections in the flesh-and-blood world. More than that, I hope to make evident what, to me, seem two of the most important ideas in Robinson’s fiction: first, that the conditions of embodied life create a need for interpersonal grace and, second, that the route to interpersonal grace lies not in transcending fleshly concerns but in embracing our bodies and ministering to the physical needs of other people.

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<sup>61</sup> In a 2009 interview with Rebecca M. Painter, Robinson, addressing the slow pacing of her novels, remarked, “I feel that people create themselves from a fabric of postures and gestures and expressions...that in watching these things you learn who they are. This is what fascinates me about character—to the detriment of plot, I have been told. But to my mind, the movement from estrangement to trust, for example, means much more than some contrived event...I love loyalty and trust, and courtesy, and kindness, and sensitivity...They require alertness and self-discipline and patience. And they are qualities that sustain my interest in my characters” (492).

*Robinson's Existential Wilderness*

The conceptualization of existence as physically and spiritually wild has been a feature of Robinson's fiction since her earliest novel *Housekeeping* (1980). Set in the remote western town of Fingerbone, Idaho, a lakeside community from which "wilderness...stretched away...on every side," *Housekeeping* is a narrative teeming with examples of material loss, whether in the form of death—by accident, suicide, or old age—or of the natural world's reclamation of human possessions by weather, flood, use, decay, or other forms of organic assault and encroachment (18). Following their mother's spectacular suicide (she drove her car off a cliff and into the lake) the novel's narrator Ruth and her sister Lucille become permanent residents of Fingerbone, itself haunted by a history in which a train (conducted by Ruth's grandfather) derailed, landing in the lake and losing everyone on board to the freezing water. The girls live with their grandmother until her death (of natural causes) leaves them in the custody of two great-aunts. These elderly women soon determine that their fraying nerves and aging bodies are unequal to the youth of their charges or the comparatively rustic conditions of life in Fingerbone and return to Spokane, entrusting Ruth and Lucille to their itinerant (but much younger) Aunt Sylvie. Recounted in this way, the novel's progression begins to seem almost comical, but *Housekeeping* is a narrative thoroughly—even patiently—attentive to the physical difficulties of rural American life and to the complicated ways in which loss and memory inform human relationships.

Toward the end of the novel, Ruth's contemplation of her own family's losses leads her to assert that the unavoidable and often unpredictable reality of loss, especially in the form of sudden death or other family separations, produces a wild pain, pain which is continuous, unreasoning, and incomprehensible. "Cain murdered Abel," she muses, "and blood cried out from the earth; the house fell on Job's children, and a voice was induced or provoked into

speaking from a whirlwind; and Rachel mourned for her children; and King David for Absalom,” concluding that “the force behind the movement of time is a mourning that will not be comforted” (192). Ruth sees all this suffering as echo of the world’s “first event,” by which she means Adam and Eve’s “expulsion” from the Garden of Eden into the wilderness, an event that has reverberated “through a thousand generations...all of them transients,” until the entire world “however sad and wild” has been wholly tainted with a “pungency and savor” that is “clearly human” (192-3). To be human, as Ruth understands it, is to be transient by nature, doomed to wander through a wilderness world irrevocably marred by the selfishness and sorrow we inherit, and our transient experiences in this space are, for her, as well as for Robinson’s later characters, simultaneously physical, uncertain, and lonely.

#### Physical Vulnerability as Consequence of Time and Place

The background of Robinson’s Gilead trilogy, in addition to being theologically inflected, is also informed by a deep consciousness of physical peril in all its varieties, from forces of nature to human atrocities. In *Gilead*, Reverend John Ames is seventy-six years old (seventy-seven by the novel’s end) and the third in a line of John Ameses, all of whom have been preachers. Born in 1880, Ames has personally lived through both world wars and grown up among people who remembered the American Civil War. His memories, therefore, allow him to address a broad spectrum of catastrophic world events, ranging from the systemic evils of slavery to more random calamities like local lightning strikes or Spanish influenza. All of these events raise important ethical/spiritual concerns<sup>62</sup> and contribute to the sense of wilderness in

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<sup>62</sup> Ames’s grandfather was a radical abolitionist and “an acquaintance of Jim Brown,” with whom he somehow participated in Bleeding Kansas (*Gilead* 47). Ames’s father, by contrast, was a pacifist, disgusted by how his own father “preached his people into the war, saying while there was slavery there was no peace...so the God of peace calls us to end it” and appalled at the idea that “those women” in his father’s congregation “could believe the



Robinson's fiction, of the world, depicted beautifully in many of the novel's key passages, as a potentially dangerous and cruel place, one we must inevitably face. In *Home*, the tensions and experiences of the Boughton family play out against a backdrop of nuclear anxieties and America's civil rights movement,<sup>63</sup> while Ames's wife, the narrator and title character of *Lila*, recalls an earlier life walking Dust Bowl roads in search of work during the Great Depression.

John Ames most immediately experiences the physical reality of wilderness as an old man in failing health. Unlike Ruth, whose narrative is something of a *bildungsroman*, Ames is at the far end of his life, observing the nuanced motions of a world he will soon be leaving, and despite his insightful, often exuberant, appreciation of physical life, he is also frequently troubled by his own body's limitations and mortality. Though Ames insists that he "was a fine, vigorous old man" until just before the novel's beginning, he is now afflicted with "angina pectoris," a condition at once certain—Ames will die soon—and uncertain—no one can say exactly how much (or little) time "soon" encompasses (*Gilead* 17). Ames is accompanied in old age and declining vitality by his lifelong friend and fellow reverend Robert Boughton, who has lost mobility to crippling arthritis. Their long association, full of memories, in-jokes, and shared sorrows, calls special attention to embodiment as a state of being subject to the inexorable, often unconscious, influence of time and place. In *Home*, Glory observes the way the old men sit together, sharing stories that, to any outside observer, would seem to culminate in non-event:

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world was in any way purer for the loss of their own sons and husbands" (101, 99). The debate over whether violence was justified as a vehicle of abolition rages between the two men for most of Ames's childhood. Later in life, Ames experiences his own struggle regarding whether to preach on the Spanish influenza pandemic as plague and punishment for America's warmongering during the First World War. After deciding against it, he says, "my courage failed, because I knew the only people at church would be a few old women who were already about as sad and apprehensive as they could stand to be and no more approving of the war than I was" (42).

<sup>63</sup> Jack follows "The protests in Montgomery" on television, and in a conversation that almost echoes the older debate between Ames's father and grandfather, he discusses these "non-violent" demonstrations with his father Reverend Boughton, who sees them as "provok[ing] violence" and who dismisses them with a paraphrase of Matthew 26:52—"Live by the sword and die by the sword" (*Home* 204).

“that was the whole story,” she thinks of one anti-climactic narrative, “but it always made them laugh. The joke seemed to be that once they were very young, and now they were very old, and that they had been the same day after day and were somehow at the end of it all so utterly changed” (28). Expected though such afflictions may be among the elderly, Ames’s new heart condition makes death imminent, affirming the wild nature of embodied existence and providing the narrative impetus for the novel, which is intended as a letter from the ailing pastor to Robby, his seven-year-old son.

Unlike his grandfather, whom Ames describes as a wild Nazarite<sup>64</sup> figure, “afire with old certainties” and convinced that life should be lived “at a dead run,” Ames does not find the forced patience of old age at odds with his own natural inclinations (*Gilead* 32). While it is true that the “decidedly embodied experience” of aging regularly frustrates him, the observational posture forced by his body’s degeneration is also a heightened, if somewhat grotesque, version of Ames’s already perceptive orientation toward the world (Nacol 120). This quality of Ames’s character, likely enhanced by his training as a minister, is evident in three separate observational moments that appear early in the novel:

I passed two young fellows on the street the other day. I know who they are, they work at the garage. They are not churchgoing, either one of them, just decent rascally young fellows who have to be joking all the time, and there they were, propped up against the garage wall in the sunshine, lighting up their cigarettes...They were passing remarks back and forth the way they do and laughing that wicked way they have. And it seemed beautiful to me. It is an amazing thing to watch people laugh, the way it sort of takes them over.

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<sup>64</sup> Nazarites were Israelites consecrated to God’s service by a specific vow laid out in Numbers 6:1-21. The most famous of these Israelites was Samson, whose narrative appears in the book of Judges, Chapters 13-16.

Sometimes they really do struggle with it...So I wonder what it is and where it comes from, and I wonder what it expends out of your system, so that you have to do it till you're done. (5)

I saw a bubble float past my window, fat and wobbly and ripening toward that dragonfly blue they turn just before they burst. So I looked down at the yard and there you were, you and your mother, blowing bubbles at the cat, such a barrage of them that the poor beast was beside herself at the glut of opportunity...Some of the bubbles drifted up through the branches, even above the trees. You were too intent on the cat to see the celestial consequences of your worldly endeavors. They were very lovely. Your mother is wearing her blue dress and you are wearing your red shirt and you were kneeling on the ground together with Soapy between and that effulgence of bubbles rising, and so much laughter. Ah, this life, this world. (9)

[Thinking of Feuerbach's take on baptism<sup>65</sup>] That mention of Feuerbach and joy reminded me of something I saw early one morning a few years ago, as I was walking up to the church. There was a young couple strolling along half a block ahead of me. The sun had come up brilliantly after a heavy rain, and the trees were glistening and very wet. On some impulse, plain exuberance, I suppose, the

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<sup>65</sup>Ames quotes the following passage from Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* (1841): "Water is the purest, clearest of liquids; in virtue of this natural character it is the image of the spotless nature of the Divine Spirit...it is on account of its natural quality that it is consecrated and selected a vehicle of the Holy Spirit. So far there lies at the foundation of Baptism a beautiful, profound natural significance," concluding that "Feuerbach is a famous atheist, but he is about as good on the joyful aspects of religion as anyone" (*Gilead* 24).

fellow jumped up and caught hold of a branch, and a storm of luminous water came pouring down on the two of them, and they laughed and took off running, the girl sweeping water off her hair and her dress as if she were a little bit disgusted, but she wasn't. It was a beautiful thing to see, like something from a myth...it is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing, and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash...This is an interesting planet. It deserves all the attention you can give it. (27-8)

Ames describes numerous other instances, equally mundane and equally beautiful, throughout *Gilead* as well as several moments in which he identifies this or that aspect of existence as “a remarkable thing to consider” (7, 45, 49, 104). Ames’s sensitivity to the beauty of the visible world, his gentle and generous scrutiny of other human beings, and his belief in the value of curiosity and observation in themselves endear Ames to readers and increase his credibility as a narrator whose genuine interest in reality we trust to yield carefully considered conclusions about the nature of existence. The empathy evident in these scenes helps to convince us that Ames is indeed a loving father intent on (and capable of) leaving useful insights to his son regarding the operation of grace in the physical world.

In spite of Ames’s capacity for wonder at the beauty of existence, his aging body is also a source of vexation, particularly in relation to the comparative youth of his family. “I don’t want to be old,” he says, “I certainly don’t want to be dead. I don’t want to be the tremulous old coot you can barely remember” (141). This worry is aggravated by the arrival of John Ames—Jack—Boughton, the reverend’s namesake and godson, whom Ames distrusts with a vehemence that seems to contradict his otherwise generous spirit. This distrust leads him to think of the younger man as a potential rival, and the notable difference in health between their two bodies makes

physical comparison inevitable. On seeing Jack for the first time after many years, Ames remarks, “I swear it was as if I had stepped right into a hole, he was so much taller than I than he’d ever been before. Of course I knew I’d been losing some height, but this was downright ridiculous” (92). Ames is also struck by how close in age Jack is to Lila and by how much Robby enjoys it when Jack calls him “little brother” (92). Alex Hobbs suggests that Ames’s misgivings in this moment stem from “comparison to the middle-aged and vital John Ames Boughton,” a comparison made especially “humiliating” by the fact that Ames is “measuring himself against...normative masculinity, and finds himself wanting” (120-1). I would contend that Ames is not necessarily invested to any great extent in traditional masculinity as such, but he is undoubtedly embarrassed to have his own lack of vitality so instantly and obviously on display. “It didn’t sit well with me,” he says, remembering the look on Lila’s and Robby’s faces when Jack “hoisted” him out of the porch swing, and he concludes his discussion of that encounter with an exasperated confession: “How I wish you could have known me in my strength” (92-3). As Jack grows closer to Ames’s family—becoming friendly with Lila, playing catch with Robby in the street—, Ames cannot help fearing that Jack will take his place once Ames has died, a fear readers share until Ames discovers (to his relief and ours) that “Jack Boughton [already] has a wife and a child” (217).

Thinking about how little else he will leave his family and addressing the grown-up son he will never see, Ames says, “I regret very deeply the hard times I know you and your mother must have gone through, with no real help from me at all, except my prayers” (4). Ames feels particularly guilty because launching his family into physical (and fiscal) uncertainty for no reason other than the inexorability of bodily failure seems a poor recompense for the blessing they have been to him in his old age, and his thinking about existence as wilderness leads him to

the Old Testament narrative of Hagar and Ishmael.<sup>66</sup> “That is how life goes,” he says, “we send our children into the wilderness. Some of them on the day they are born, it seems, for all the help we can give them. Some of them seem to be a kind of wilderness unto themselves. But there must be angels there, too, and springs of water” (*Gilead* 119). Ames reminds us—and himself—that “[e]ven that wilderness, the very habitation of jackals, is the Lord’s,” and is, therefore, pocked with instances of grace and places of refuge (119). Even so, the sense and severity of wilderness in Robinson’s *Gilead* novels intensifies with characters’ realizations that none of us can fully or effectively protect those whom we most wish to shield from the numerous hazards that plague temporal existence, and the image of children being sent out into a potentially harsh and desolate world is one which returns throughout all three *Gilead* novels.

The physical hostility of Robinson’s wilderness is most clearly illustrated by the numerous lost children that appear across these three novels. We learn in *Lila* that, in addition to sharing his name with his father, grandfather, and godson, John Ames shares his name with an older sibling, one of three children—including two sisters—who died of diphtheria before Ames was born. In *Gilead*, Ames explains that his first wife Louisa, died in childbirth and that their daughter Rebecca died shortly thereafter, baptized by Reverend Boughton in the narrow window between her birth and death. “I saw the baby while she lived,” he says, “and I held her for a few minutes, and that was a blessing,” but this loss is largely responsible for the feeling of homelessness Ames describes having felt before his marriage to Lila (17). Jack’s first child has also died prematurely, born to a rural girl, whom Jack subsequently abandoned without acknowledging the child as family or even as his responsibility. Ames finds Jack’s behavior repugnant, marveling at the apparent injustice of circumstance, “That one man should lose his

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<sup>66</sup> The narrative of Hagar and Ishmael appears in Chapters 16 and 21 of the book of Genesis, the story of their exile taking place in Genesis 21:8-20.

child and the next man should just squander his fatherhood as if it were nothing” and saying, against his own pastoral principles, “I don’t forgive him. I wouldn’t know where to begin” (164). Lila could easily have been such a child herself, had it not been for the intervention of grace in the form of a woman named Doll, and Glory, who grieved deeply for Jack’s daughter, loses her own opportunity for children when the failure of her one serious romantic relationship forces her to confront the heartbreaking fact “that she would never open a door on that home, never cross that threshold, never scoop up a pretty child and set it on her hip and feel it lean into her breast and eye the world from her arms with the complacency of utter trust” (*Home* 102). The knowledge that children can and do die makes the prospect of having and raising children an anxious one, and both John Ames and Jack Boughton worry about the kind of world their sons will grow up in.

Jack is the trilogy’s spiritual lost child, and his tendency toward mischief has led to a kind of self-imposed alienation from his family. This alienation is partially the result of shame over his past and partially of fear that his family will react negatively to the news that he has married a woman of color, that they have a child, and that America’s anti-miscegenation laws and the opposition of his wife’s family have made it difficult for the three of them to find a home together. Jack struggles for the courage to mention Della and their son Robert, but his father’s age and memory prevent the closeness such courage requires. Late in *Home*, a somewhat addled Reverend Boughton has to be reminded that Jack has returned and is, in fact, sitting at the table with him, at which point the old man begins to lament Jack’s historical failures. When Glory suggests that her father be kinder, Reverend Boughton replies:

Kinder to him! I thanked God for him every day of his life, no matter how much grief, how much sorrow—and at the end of it all there is only more grief, more

sorrow, and his life will go on that way, no help for it now. You see something beautiful in a child, and you almost live for it, you feel you would almost die for it, but it isn't yours to keep or to protect. And if the child becomes a man who has no respect for himself, it's just destroyed till you can hardly remember what it was...It's like watching a child die in your arms. [Then, to Jack] Which I have done. (295)

Robinson has said that she considers Jack “the major theological problem of his father’s life,” and throughout *Home* we see Reverend Boughton’s desire for reconciliation—his paternal love—assert itself only to be thwarted by an impulse to correct and a reluctance to forgive Jack’s absence from their lives (“Conversations”). His remarks on this occasion reveal both that he has not been able to forget the sins of Jack’s youth and that he views his son’s departure from home, family, and faith as a kind of death, as arbitrary, inexplicable, and devastating as the death of any child. It from Ames that Jack, feeling himself adrift between his old and new families and anxious to know if Gilead can be a home to his wife and son, eventually receives some hard-won sympathy and support.

Glory Boughton, the central character of Robinson’s *Home*, feels a kind of affinity with her brother’s sense of alienation, and the fact of coming home, with all the anxiety and embarrassment she feels as a result, brings the wilderness nature of embodied existence into sharp focus. Though the novel’s narrative voice is heterodiegetic, the story is focalized mainly, if not entirely, through Glory’s perspective. If Ames’s physical reality and rhetorical situation in *Gilead* is largely that of an elderly reverend, husband, father, and friend speaking to his son at an imagined, future stage of adulthood, Glory’s position as point-of-view character is that of an unwed, middle-aged woman, dutiful daughter and sister, practicing Christian, former teacher,



and jilted lover returning to her childhood home for the first time in many years to both care for her elderly father and reexamine her place in a world whose wildness has unsettled the possible futures she envisioned for herself as a younger woman. For Glory, perhaps even more than for Jack, this is a difficult homecoming. By showing us Gilead through Glory's eyes and intellect, Robinson underscores the limits of Ames's perspective—a perspective that readers of Gilead have come to regard as possessing a certain narrative authority—as well as the impossibility of any one person or narrative accounting fully for the lives and experiences of other people. While often frustrated by recurring filial tensions and awkwardness, Glory is also observant, considerate, and introspective, and her angle on the Boughton family (especially Jack) allows us to see parts of their lives that Ames either misses in his own telling or could not possibly know.

Glory's conversations with Jack provide us with greater insight into how Jack views his own relationship to Ames, and her attention to her brother's physicality offers greater insight into the difficult life Jack has lived away from home. "Old Ames doesn't think the world of me," he tells her, "That's why I thought of going [to Ames's church] in the first place. I can't think of another approach...I'll sit under his preaching, as they say, and maybe his feelings toward me will soften a little" (159). In this moment, Jack shows himself to be an accurate reader of other people and to be genuinely interested in rehabilitating his relationship with Ames. Later in the conversation, Jack says, "I've been a torment to his dearest friend for forty-three years, give or take. He's sick of me. He doesn't want to be, but he is. I would be too" (159). The mixture of self-awareness and self-pity in this moment highlights how crucial Glory's perspective is for shining a sympathetic light on Jack's predicament without the scathing self-recrimination with which Jack views himself. We see his understanding of and sensitivity to Ames's internal struggle largely because Glory is willing to listen to and construe Jack's motives from a position

of love and sisterly understanding. Seen through Glory's eyes, Jack becomes a more sympathetic figure than he would likely appear in his own account of himself.

In addition to providing an important narrative perspective, Glory is *Home's* primary protagonist, learning by narrative's end to view her initially bleak-seeming circumstances in a more positive light (289). The novel reveals that Glory's homecoming is not the result of a collapsed marriage as reported in *Gilead* but that the marriage was, instead, a fiction designed to obscure the fact that Glory was engaged for years to a married man to whom she had ultimately given a good deal of money and with whom she had exchanged 452 love letters. Glory eventually (and wryly) characterizes this relationship as "horrible enough to be funny" and confides to Jack that she is deeply ashamed of having been deceived (119). "Stupidity isn't a sin, so far as I know," she tells him, "But it ought to be one. It feels like one. I can forgive myself all the rest of it" (120). Her private humiliation at having invested years of life and affection in a grifter makes her return to Gilead feel like failure, the unchanged materiality of her parents' house reifying the irretrievability of former dreams. Her father, the elderly Reverend Boughton, is thrilled to welcome Glory back to a house that, for him, "embodied...the general blessedness of his life," but Glory does not share her father's appraisal of the house's significance (3). "She had dreamed of a real home for herself and the babies, and the fiancé," Robinson writes, "a home very different from this good and blessed and fustian and oppressive tabernacle of Boughton probity and kind intent" (102). Glory's imagination of the family home as a tabernacle, an impermanent structure to be remembered fondly from the comfort of the "real home" in which she would one day start a family of her own, means that returning is a refutation of that vision, confirmation that the house is a more permanent part of her story than she would have wanted and that the future she once imagined will not be her life.

Glory's investment in that life and disappointment at its having eluded her are inseparable from the reality of her sex—the fact of her body as a woman's body—and from the rigidity of social expectation both in the middle twentieth-century United States and within her own church community. Though she is by no means the only character in Robinson's world affected by the social realities of her historical moment, her family's attitudes, and especially her father's, have had a material impact on what potential lives Glory has been willing to envision for herself. "If she had been a man, she might have chosen the ministry," she thinks, but "She seemed always to have known that, to their father's mind, the world's great work was the business of men, of gentle, serious men well versed in Scripture and eloquent at prayer... They were the stewards of ultimate things. Women were creatures of a second rank, however pious, however beloved, however honored" (*Home* 20). Instead of a minister, she became a teacher, a job she enjoyed but later quit as one in a series of ill-made decisions that have led her to the narrative's present. Alone in the evenings, she thinks, "I am thirty-eight years old... I have a master's degree. I taught high school English for thirteen years. I was a good teacher. What have I done with my life? What has become of it? It is as if I had a dream of adult life and woke up from it, still here in my parents' house" (20). Glory feels herself stranded in the land of her childhood, and it is only after she has learned the truth of Jack's situation that she begins to invest her material surroundings with fresh significance.

Lila's experiences as both a woman and resident of Gilead differ sharply from Glory's, reflecting, as Dianne Johnson observes, "the damage to the human personality done by poverty, neglect and abandonment." As in the previous two novels, existence in *Lila* is a wild and inescapably embodied condition, and Lila recalls how Doll came to her "like an angel in the wilderness," stealing her (then a child) from a neglectful family and sentencing the pair of them

to life on the road (*Lila* 30). This life is one of extreme poverty, constant movement, and hypervigilance, with Doll disappearing periodically to evade or combat those who come searching for Lila. Having grown up with hunger, manual labor, and other daily difficulties and among people (apart from Doll) whom she could trust only to safeguard their own self-interests, Lila has adapted her habits of mind to a way of living that is difficult to forget, even after her marriage to John Ames (who loves her deeply and whom she loves in turn) has secured her a “settled life” in the community of Gilead (*Gilead* 202). Remembering the particularly bleak experience of looking for work in the Dust Bowl, Lila thinks:

How could the world go on the way it did when there were so many people living the same and worse? Poor was nothing, tired and hungry were nothing. But people only trying to get by, and no respect for them at all, even the wind soiling them. No matter how proud and hard they were, the wind making their faces run with tears. That was existence, and why didn't it roar and wrench itself apart like the storm it must be, if so much of existence is all that bitterness and fear?...The quiet world was terrible to her, like mockery. She had hoped to put an end to these thoughts, but they returned to her, and she returned to them. (*Lila* 112)

By this point in her narrative, Lila is pregnant and thinking about her own child, but the peace of Gilead still disturbs her, still seems fragile, if not unreal, in comparison to what came before. As she tells her story, she finds it difficult to shake this distrust of safety, feeling that she may one day have to take to the road again with her child.

Narration in *Lila* is strange. The story is told both in third person and in Lila's voice, so that a seemingly nonfocalized narrator makes observations like “Her arms were all over scratches” or “If there was anyone in the world the child hated worst, it was Doll” (3-4).

Robinson's decision to relay the narrative in this way suggests her protagonist's simultaneous desire to have her story told and discomfort at having to talk about herself. But there is no one else to tell Lila's story. Ames makes a few passing references to her history in *Gilead*, but his respect for his wife and his choice of intended audience prevent him from sharing any specific details related to her life before they met. So it is not until *Lila* that anything like a coherent picture of her past emerges, and as with Glory, a story from Lila's perspective reveals the extraordinary depth of suffering, perception, experience, etc. concealed by the embodied specificity of a single person, who, were it not for this novel, would remain a minor character. Lila's perspective is also important because, for her, unlike Ames or Glory, experience predates belief. While she ultimately comes to accept Ames's thinking about how physical and spiritual realities intersect, what she has seen or heard or felt as a wanderer in the world becomes the lens through which she evaluates the truth of biblical passages, discovering religion's power to make sense of experience only after testing its claims against what she has previously known. Though she has not received advanced formal education like Ames or Glory, Lila is also every bit as observant and insightful as they are, and seeing embodied life from her particular vantage point widens our view of Robinson's existential wilderness while affirming the physicality to which her prior novels have attested.

As a child, Lila is made aware of her own body by the conditions and concerns of outdoor life. She recalls how Doll "washed her down with a rag and a bit of soap, scrubbing a little where the cats had scratched her, and on the chigger bites and mosquito bites where she had scratched herself" until "her whole body shivered with the cold and the sting" (7). Lila endures this experience and later, more severe experiences with hunger, uncertainty, and inclement weather, helped along by Doll's continual care and guidance, and her memories of Doll vacillate

between appreciation for how Doll saved and sustained her and wonder at the hardness and suspicion with which Doll seemed to regard the rest of the world. Toward the end of the novel, Lila thinks about the knife Doll gave her for self-defense and about Doll's warning that she should resist any impulse to trust outsiders. "Doll was hard that way," she remembers, "All of them were. Talking to strangers was putting yourself within the reach of sudden harm. What might they say? What might they seem to be thinking? Then you were left with it afterward...and nothing to do about it except to hate the next stranger a little more. Those times she used to think, I have a knife in my garter, and you don't know how you're pressing up against the minute I decide to use it" (253-4). Years later, when Doll is wounded in a knife fight with one of Lila's still-searching relatives, Lila, struggling to clean Doll up and dress her wound, faces a familiar anxiety over "How to live through the next damned hour" (174). "That has to be the worst feeling there is," she thinks, "It was her body going on. Her body, her hands remembering how Doll used to comfort her" (174). Lila keeps the knife Doll gave her, carries it with her into Gilead and into marriage, in part as a reminder of where she has been but also as a form of insurance against hard times.

Lila's nomadic upbringing has not burdened her with the same sense of social obligation that kept Glory from choosing ministry over education. This might account for certain moments of boldness in the text, not least among them her proposal to Ames via a direct "You ought to marry me," with which she surprises even herself (80). This is not to say, however, that Lila is ignorant of popular notions regarding sexual difference. Thinking about her marriage to Ames and the way it is perceived locally (even by a family friend like Reverend Boughton<sup>67</sup>), she says,

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<sup>67</sup> When Lila and Ames arrive at Boughton's house holding hands, he says to Ames, "There are three things which are too wonderful for me, yea, four which I know not," a joke in reference to Proverbs 30:18-19, a text which concludes, "The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a maiden" (*Home* 18-9).

“They were laughing because he was an old preacher and she was a field hand, or would be if she could just find her way back to that time. And she was old, too. For a woman being old just means not being young, and all the youth had been worked out of her before it had really even set in” (19). Elsewhere, she thinks, “She had worked herself tough and ugly for nothing more than to stay alive” (47). This awareness of her own body as neither particularly pure nor particularly desirable is clearly at odds with Ames’s own perception—even had we not read how he thinks of her in *Gilead*,<sup>68</sup> she herself admits to liking “the way he stood next to her as if there was a pleasure for him in it,” to say nothing of several tender moments of physical touch they share—but remains a perception cemented in her self-imagination by past experience (18). After Doll died, Lila worked in a St. Louis whorehouse, where the other women “made a sort of game” of “trying to pretty her up,” saying “Just *pretend* you’re pretty” and laughing at her subsequent attempts to do so (34). Lila’s realization that she enjoys Ames’s touch surprises her in ways I will discuss later, and his gentle, commonplace affections offer her a vision of erotic love—as something wholesome and enjoyable—that she has never really known before.<sup>69</sup>

Pregnancy also introduces Lila to a new physical reality. Robinson writes, “Now motherhood was forcing itself into Lila’s breasts. They ached with it,” and as Lila considers this

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<sup>68</sup> In Ames’s description of his initial attraction to Lila, it is clear that the sexual interest he feels is powerful and genuine and in no way lessened by what she perceives as her own physical flaws. He recalls feeling, the first time he saw her, “as if my soul were being teased out of my body,” later remarking, “I really didn’t understand what it was that made people who came to me so indifferent to good judgment, to common sense...I know now that it is passion” (204). By invoking the word passion here, Ames compares his love for Lila with that of the martyrs for God, explaining, “I might seem to be comparing something great and holy with a minor and ordinary thing, that is, love of God with mortal love. But I just don’t see them as separate things at all. If we can be divinely fed by a morsel and divinely blessed with a touch, then the terrible pleasure we find in a particular face can certainly instruct us in the nature of the very grandest love” (204).

<sup>69</sup> Lila’s only previous, up-close exposure to marriage is her acquaintance with Doane and Marcelle, the couple who led the group with which she and Doll traveled. Lila recalls that Doll said to her, “They’re married people” but that she (a child at the time) “had no particular notion of what the word ‘married’ meant, except that there was an endless pleasant joke between them that excluded everybody else and that all the rest of them were welcome to admire. It was that way before times got hard. After that, Doane seemed almost angry at Marcelle because there wasn’t much he could spare her” (*Lila* 75).

new bodily condition, she remembers Doll and the physical effort Doll put into keeping her alive. She thinks, “Maybe [Doll] never would have been so fierce if she hadn’t been set on keeping the child she’d stolen” (175). Lila also recalls how they never mentioned Doll’s crime to each other but how, as a child, she “felt the thrill of the secret whenever she took Doll’s hand and Doll gave her hand a little squeeze, whenever she lay down exhausted in the curve of Doll’s body” (13). The thought of life—a child—growing inside her own body feels to Lila like a similar kind of intimacy. She enjoys this feeling to the point that she considers stealing her child the way Doll took her, leaving Ames’s house so she and the baby could be their own community of two, “so she could have him to herself and let him know about that other life” (17). She never openly shares this thought with Ames, and when she imagines him calling after them in a voice so sad “You wouldn’t even know your body had a sound like that in it,” she decides to stay (17). As Lila becomes increasingly aware of the extent to which she loves her husband, she also becomes increasingly aware of the first Mrs. Ames and of how her death has made the reverend aware of the physically precarious—the wild—nature of pregnancy. These thoughts are not far from Lila’s mind either. “She just wished it was over,” she thinks toward the end of her term, “and she had a child or no child and she could stop thinking how hard it would be for him if it came down to old Boughton again, struggling up those stairs to weep and pray and dampen a small brow...But then her husband smiled at her, and she could see in his face that he had had every one of these thoughts, that he knew everything about them” (231). This anxiety over pregnancy—their shared awareness of its risks—is a powerful, if brutal, source of intimacy for Ames and Lila and a testament to the wildness of embodied existence.

Awareness of physical wilderness informs Lila’s interest in the Bible. While her lack of familiarity with the text produces the occasional misreading—as when she becomes “a good deal



less interested” in the book of Job after learning that it is not pronounced like *job* and has nothing to do with employment or the virtues of hard work—she is struck by how true-to-life certain passages seem (171). “It could be,” she muses, “that the wildest, strangest things in the Bible were the places where it touched earth,” and her affinity for passages in Ezekiel and Job surprises Ames, who remarks that she has “a way of finding the very hardest parts [of scripture]—for somebody starting out. For anybody” (226, 171). Her reading of Job seems to confirm for Lila both the unpredictability of her own pregnancy and the general, physical uncertainty that is part and parcel of life in the world. Considering Job 1:19—“And, behold, there came a great wind out of the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men, and they are dead”—, Lila thinks:

She’d heard of that happening, plenty of times. A wind could hit a town like Gilead and leave nothing behind but sticks and stumps...It used to be that when the sky filled up with greenish light Doane would start looking around for a low place where they could lie down on the ground if the wind started getting strong. A barn was nothing but flying planks and nails if the wind hit it. The house fell upon the young men, and they are dead...There was one time the wind came with thunder and rain and scared them half to death. The ground shook. There was lightning everywhere. Leaves and shingles and window curtains sailed over them, falling around them...There were things never meant to fly, books and shoes and chickens and washboards, caught up in the wind...for the next few days they heard that farms had been swept away, children and all, and for a while they minded Doane more than they usually did. Nobody knew what to say about sorrow like that. (175-6)

In the Bible, Lila finds language and images for experiences she has known her whole life, and her insight into disasters of this kind differs from what either Ames or Glory is able to say on the subject of life's inherent perils and general volatility.

### The Problem and Value of Spiritual Uncertainty

Lila's efforts to comprehend what she is reading in the Bible foreground the problem of spiritual uncertainty endemic to Robinson's wilderness world. Nearly all of Robinson's characters, but especially Ames, Glory, Jack, and Lila raise questions about the relationship of God to embodied life, a relationship that often appears dialectical if not paradoxical and which Ames engages in sermons and moments of personal reflection addressed to the "mystery of existence" (*Lila* 178). Ames's approach to this mystery may appear especially complicated, if not puzzling, to some readers in that, despite his own familiarity with pain and loss, Ames generally speaks warmly of existence, referring to it as "the most remarkable thing that could ever be imagined" (*Gilead* 53). At one point, he says, "I have been so full of admiration for existence that I have hardly been able to enjoy it properly," adding that, while the visible world "is all apparition compared to what awaits us," its flawed finitude gives physical existence a "human beauty" (56-7). "I can't believe that, when we have all been changed and put on incorruptibility, we will forget our fantastic condition of mortality and impermanence, the great bright dream of procreating and perishing that meant the whole world to us," he says, speculating that "In eternity, this world will be Troy...and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets. Because I don't imagine any reality putting this one in the shade entirely, and I think piety forbids me to try" (57). In fact, Ames repeatedly acknowledges his own inability to properly imagine or accurately perceive transcendence and

eternity, reserving his descriptive energies for the portions of physical existence he finds particularly moving.

Ralph C. Hancock writes that Ames “is constantly undermining and reconfiguring” the apparent “dualism between this world and the other,” and Ames’s reverence for the human beauty of existence reminds us that, in the aging reverend’s view, “the very habitation of jackals”—the wilderness in which every imaginable suffering threatens our existence—is also the territory of “angels...and springs of water” (Hancock, 227; *Gilead* 119). Looking at a sunset moon, Ames is struck by the potential metaphor of “Light within light,” saying, “It seems to me to be a metaphor for the human soul, the singular light within the great general light of existence. Or it seems like poetry within language. Perhaps wisdom within experience. Or marriage within friendship and love” (119). Ames’s thinking about discrete phenomena or experiences as individual moments within a larger existential framework is an important aspect of his personal theology, and in this particular instance, his thinking leads him back to Hagar and Ishmael, whose “time in the wilderness” begins to seem “like a specific moment of divine Providence within the whole providential regime of Creation” (119). So suffering and joy, exile and restoration, often occur within the same experience, inextricable from embodied existence, which is itself inextricable from Providence.

Ames’s thoughts concerning Providence grow out of Calvinist thinking about God’s simultaneous sovereignty and absolute otherness.<sup>70</sup> Of God’s sovereignty, Calvin writes, “God is deemed omnipotent...because, governing heaven and earth by his providence, he so overrules all things that nothing happens without his counsel” (115). By insisting that a wilderness which houses both jackals and angels is entirely “the Lord’s,” Ames presents a vision of existence—

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<sup>70</sup> Like John Updike, Ames admires Karl Barth, who characterizes the difference between God and humanity as one of “infinite qualitative distinction” (Barth 42).

bodies, consciousness, space, and time—as operating wholly within and contingent upon the will of a God whose exact nature and “counsel” remain hidden from us, an idea that, for Ames, is a source of tremendous reassurance and allows him to consider the narrative of Hagar and Ishmael “a story full of comfort” (*Gilead* 119). Ames views the unfathomable magnitude of God’s otherness as a beautiful mystery, one that fills him with awe and appreciation for creation’s scope and diversity. Attempting to describe God’s being in relation to human existence, Ames compares human perception of the world (complete with anxieties over “the Dictatorship of the Proletariat and the Manhattan Project”) to that of Soapy, the family cat, but then thinks better of it: “I don’t want to suggest a reality that is just an enlarged or extrapolated version of this reality,” he says, “If you think how a thing we call a stone differs from a thing we call a dream—the degrees of unlikeness within the reality we know are very extreme, and what I want to suggest is a much more absolute unlikeness” (143). Returning to related concerns later in the text, he says, “We participate in Being without remainder...And yet no one can say what Being is...Then God is at a greater remove altogether—if God is the author of existence, what can it mean to say God exists? There’s a problem in vocabulary. He would have to have had a character before existence which the poverty of our understanding can only call existence” (178).

This vision of divine being is further complicated by Ames’s conviction—drawn from George Herbert’s assertion that “Preservation is a Creation, and more, it is a continued Creation, and a Creation every moment”<sup>71</sup>—that God’s sovereign will includes an “intimate attention”

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<sup>71</sup> Ames is quoting here from chapter 31 of Herbert’s pastoral handbook *A Priest to the Temple, or The Country Parson* (1652). Herbert’s insight echoes Calvin’s assertion that “If one falls among robbers, or ravenous beasts; if a sudden gust of wind at sea causes shipwreck; if one is struck down by the fall of a house or a tree; if another, when wandering through desert paths, meets with deliverance; or, after being tossed by the waves, arrives in port, and makes some wondrous hair-breadth escape from death—all these occurrences, prosperous as well as adverse, carnal sense will attribute to fortune. But whoso has learned from the mouth of Christ that all the hairs of his head are numbered (Matthew 10:30), will look farther for the cause, and hold that all events whatsoever are governed by the secret counsel of God” (Calvin 115).

even to individual human bodies, specifically, in Ames's case, to "the re-creation of an old man as an old man, with all the defects and injuries of what is called long life faithfully preserved in him, and all their claims and all their tendencies honored, too, as in the steady progress of arthritis in my left knee" (111, 115). Ames is careful to point out that the notion of Providence does not justify cruelty—"I have always worried that when I say the insulted or the downtrodden are within the providence of God, it will be taken by some to mean that it is not a grave thing, an evil thing, to insult or oppress. The whole teaching of the Bible is explicitly contrary to that idea"—, but his depiction of God as other, omnipotent, and yet attentive to specific human lives is less reassuring to other characters, who feel that the existence of such a God raises questions about the reasons for human suffering (130). Reading in Ezekiel, Lila encounters an image that seems analogous to her own experience and, if we are willing to stretch the metaphor, to Jack's and Glory's as well. "There's a baby cast out in a field, just thrown away. And it's God that picks her up," she tells Ames, who explains that the situation is a parable, the baby a stand-in for the children of Israel, but Lila wonders, "if God really has all that power, why does he let children get treated so bad? Because they are sometimes. That's true" (*Lila* 129). Ames takes some time getting back to Lila on this question, and though it is a question he has often received, he returns to it several times within his own novel too.

He recalls that his grandfather, the first Reverend Ames, once told him that "being blessed meant being bloodied," and while Ames acknowledges that etymologically there is "no scriptural authority" to that statement, he does favor the inverse and slightly softer notion that suffering often serves as a vehicle for grace (*Gilead* 36). When Ames remembers how his father, helping to clear the ruins of a church that had been burned by a lightning strike, once handed him a biscuit made bitter by the ash on his father's hands, he thinks the taste "might resemble the

bread of affliction, which was often mentioned in those days,” and seems taken with this image that implies blessing—grace that nourishes—in the midst of hardship (95). Ames responds to Lila’s initial questions about suffering with a letter, in which he writes:

*My faith tells me that God shared poverty, suffering, and death with human beings, which can only mean that such things are full of dignity and meaning, even though to believe this makes a great demand on one’s faith, and to act as if this were true in any way we understand is to be ridiculous. It is ridiculous also to act as if it were not absolutely and essentially true all the same. Even though we are to do everything we can to put an end to poverty and suffering. (Lila 77)*

In a later conversation, returning to the question/metaphor of God’s love in relation to Israel’s suffering, Ames says, paraphrasing Calvin, that “people have to suffer to really recognize grace when it comes” (131). Ames admits to not knowing “quite what to think about that” in relation to human experience broadly, but he also applies this notion to his relationship with Lila, saying, “I’ve had my time of suffering. Not much by Ezekiel’s standards...But at least I’ve had enough to know that this [sitting with his arm around Lila] is grace” (131-2). In *Gilead*, his thinking about “the bread of affliction” leads Ames to remark, “‘Strange are the uses of adversity.’ That’s a fact,” and he cautions his son against despair by saying, “My point is that you never know the actual nature even of your own experience. Or perhaps it has no fixed or certain nature” (95).

Despite the prevalence of suffering in Robinson’s existential wilderness, her characters repeatedly discover that no moment of adversity can be evaluated or understood purely on the basis of the pain it has caused or entailed. Thinking about the loss of his first wife and child, Ames wants to make sense of that pain in the context of his present joy, to say something definitive about it for Robby’s benefit, but finds this a difficult task: “Here I am trying to be

wise, the way a father should be, the way an old pastor certainly should be. I don't know what to say except that the worst misfortune isn't only misfortune" (56). Glory makes a similar observation regarding the loss of Jack's first child. "[T]here was so much more than shame in all that, or wrongdoing or whatever," she tells him, insisting that "we're glad she was born. We enjoyed her life. I believe she enjoyed it too, I know she did" (*Home* 150). Glory seems to feel that it is better to exist, for however brief a time, than not to exist, and despite the pitiful circumstances in which Jack's daughter lived and died, despite the terrible grief Glory herself experienced at the child's passing, she is glad to have encountered that life, to have known that little girl. In a way, Lila's story gives weight to Glory's thinking about Jack's daughter, her own upbringing having been spent in comparable poverty, different because of Doll and the rootlessness of their life together, yet Lila attributes her reluctance to share the details of her childhood to the fact that "She knew it would sound very sad, and it wasn't, really" (4). As much as she and Doll endured together, their togetherness was more grace than not to her.

Glory has her own concerns about suffering and about the action of grace in the physical world, especially as applied to the mystery of salvation. Pondering "[w]hat a strange old book" the Bible is, Glory returns to some of her father's familiar teachings, and in a moment of insight reminiscent of Herbert's "The Pulley,"<sup>72</sup> she thinks, "How oddly holiness situated itself among the things of the world, how endlessly creation wrenched and strained under its own significance...All bread is the bread of heaven, her father used to say. It expresses the will of God to sustain us in this flesh, in this life. Weary or bitter or bewildered as we may be, God is faithful. He lets us wander so we will know what it means to come home" (*Home* 102). Glory

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<sup>72</sup> In Herbert's poem, the speaker describes God at the moment of humanity's creation and God's decision to withhold "Rest" from human beings when pouring out other blessings—"strength first made a way; / Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honor, pleasure"—ensuring that the human creature would be "rich and weary, that at least, / If goodness lead him not, yet weariness / May toss him to My breast" (10, 6-7, 18-20).

admits to herself that, in spite of her Presbyterian upbringing and her continued devotion to that set of ideas, she does not actually have any “certain notion of what a soul is” and suspects that her current interest in that mystery has to do with her renewed proximity to Jack, the only person she’s ever known “who felt, or admitted he felt, that the state of his soul was in question” (111). Her father’s understanding seems to be that physical suffering exists to steer wayward souls back to their creator, and she does speculate that the “cankered” condition of her brother’s soul may be what “gave him awareness of it,” but the individuality implied by the concept of a soul is difficult for her to reconcile with her father’s sermons, which “treated salvation as a thing for which they could be grateful as a body, as if, for their purposes, the problem had been sorted out between the Druids and the Centurions at about the time of Hadrian” (111-2).

Jack’s interest in these same spiritual questions concerns the difficulty of understanding salvation in relation to the Calvinist concept of predestination, and he wonders if his own suffering and the suffering he has brought on others might have caused or been caused by his sense of personal perdition. Speaking to Ames and his father about his “history with [this] question,” he says, “I have wondered from time to time if I might not be an instance of predestination. A sort of proof. If I may not experience predestination in my own person. That would be interesting if the consequences were not so painful” (225). Both Ames and Reverend Boughton assure Jack that this is not possible, but neither is able to provide a definitive answer to “how the mystery of predestination could be reconciled to the mystery of salvation” (227). This conversation takes place in both *Home* and *Gilead* with specific contributions varying slightly in accordance with who is telling the story and without the overall meaning of these contributions differing to any great degree. The conversation ends with Lila, however, whose input is both the closest thing to reassurance Jack receives and one of only a few instances in which the language



of both accounts is identical: “A person can change. Everything can change” (227). Lila’s response suggests a certain identification with and concern for Jack, and her apparent certainty on this point indicates that her own spiritual perspective has developed beyond where we leave her at the end of her own novel, where her embrace of salvation as a concept still seems new and somewhat reluctant.

Lila’s original anxieties about the nature of sin and salvation grow out of her love for Doll and her concern (albeit to a lesser extent) for the rest of the people she knew in “that other life” before Gilead. At one point, she tells Ames, “I’ve been tramping around with the heathens. They’re just as good as anybody, as far as I can see. They sure don’t deserve no hellfire,” and after listening to Reverend Boughton talk about the “Last Judgment,” Lila begins to fear that Doll, having killed the man who wounded her, may have “died with darks sins on her soul” (225, 101, 98). She imagines “Souls just out of their graves having to answer for lives most of them never understood in the first place. Such hard lives. And there Doll would be, whatever guilt or shame she had hidden from all her life laid out for her, no bit of it forgotten. Or forgiven,” and decides that she “hated the thought of resurrection as much as she had ever hated anything. Better Doll should stay in her grave, if she had one. Better nothing the old men said should be true at all” (101). When Lila discusses these misgivings with Ames, she finds his response less than satisfying: “I don’t really know what to say about it,” he tells her, “There are other things I believe in. God loves the world. God is gracious. I can’t reconcile, you know, hell and the rest of it to things I do believe...So I don’t talk about it very much” (99). Ames follows this confession with an analysis of the problematic implications of hell as a concept for daily life. He explains, “Thinking about hell doesn’t help me live the way I should...And thinking that other people might go to hell just feels evil to me, like a very grave sin...You can’t see the world the way you

ought to if you let yourself do that. Any judgment of the kind is a great presumption” (101).

Ames’s thinking on this point, while not what Lila expects, is very much in line with Robinson’s own thinking about religion as lived experience.

Neither Ames nor Robinson arrive at anything like a doctrinal certainty when discussing issues of condemnation or, for that matter, redemption. This is partly because both view theological reality as more complicated and less ultimately knowable than any supposedly hard set of inviolable truths and prefer, instead, to contemplate what Amy Hungerford calls “behavior within the life of belief” (121). We see this in the way Ames turns our attention from the consideration of hell as potential spiritual reality toward consideration of how that belief risks hindering our grasp of other biblical teachings addressed to our habits of mind and actions within the physical world, specifically how we think about and treat other people. This resistance of dogmatic pronouncement in favor of healthy religious praxis is closely tied to Robinson’s thinking about humanity’s relationship to knowledge and experience more generally. Aligning herself with William James, Robinson advocates the position that “what we know about anything is determined by the way we encounter it, and therefore we should never assume that our knowledge of anything is more than partial” (*GT* 229). This idea that human beings, from their embodied, finite position within the measurable universe, can only ever know in part forms the basis of Ames’s view that human efforts to explain God or “the mystery of existence” in any definitive or useful way are ultimately futile, if not absurd, and that our focus is better directed toward such mundane concerns as “do[ing] justly” and “lov[ing] mercy” (Micah 6:8, KJV).

Ames sets out to articulate his views on the limitations of human perspective and divine mystery largely out of affection for Lila, whom he would like to set at ease regarding spiritual matters and from whom he cannot bear to be parted in whatever transcendent, incomprehensible

future waits on the other side of death. The closest he comes to a coherent vision of why things happen, how they are related, or what they mean is the following sermon, shared as a “very rough” work-in-progress over breakfast:

‘Things happen for reasons that are hidden from us, utterly hidden for as long as we think they must proceed from what has come before, our guilt or our deserving, rather than...from a future that God in his freedom offers to us.’...you really can’t account for what happens by what has happened in the past, as you understand it anyway, which may be very different from the past itself. If there is such a thing. ‘The only true knowledge of God is born of obedience,’ that’s Calvin, ‘and obedience has to be constantly attentive to the demands that are made of it, to a circumstance that is always new and particular to its moment...Then the reasons that things happen are still hidden, but they are hidden in the mystery of God...misfortunes have opened the way to blessings you would never have thought to hope for, that you would not have been ready to understand as blessings if they had come to you in your youth, when you were uninjured, innocent. The future always finds us changed.’ So then it is part of the providence of God...that blessing or happiness can have very different meanings from one time to another. ‘This is not to say that joy is a compensation for loss...Sorrow is very real, and loss feels very final to us. Life on earth is difficult, and grave, and marvelous. Our experience is fragmentary. Its parts don’t add up’...I don’t mean to suggest that experience is random or accidental...‘we have no way to reconcile its elements, because they are what we are given out of no

necessity at all except God's grace in sustaining us as creatures we can recognize as ourselves.' (*Lila* 222-4)

Ames argues, not only that our embodied status precludes even a partial conceptualization of the mechanisms by which divine grace operates, but that we are also incapable of accurately perceiving the meaning of our own experiences as they relate to each other, in part because we cannot predict the future but mainly because our understanding of the past has "no fixed or certain nature" over time and because any ultimate meaning these experiences might have remains "hidden in the mystery of God." Lila summarizes her husband's argument by saying, "Near as I can tell, you were wanting to reconcile things by saying they can't be reconciled," and this ultimate lack of resolution has been a source of tension among Robinson's readers (224).

Some of Robinson's more adamant critics have questioned her use of Calvin or her approach to history,<sup>73</sup> while others seem to regard her characters' spiritual uncertainty as the author's refuge from decision,<sup>74</sup> an artful dodge concocted to allow Robinson to have her

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<sup>73</sup> Christie L. Maloyed, in her essay "The Death of Jeremiah?: Marilynne and Robinson and Covenant Theology" (2016) offers an overview of contemporary debate on this subject, citing, among other texts, Todd Shy's "Religion and Marilynne Robinson" (2007) and William Deresiewicz's "Homing Patterns: Marilynne Robinson's Fiction" (2008) and arguing that "When it comes to Christian history, [Robinson] sanitizes the unsavory bits. When secular history is involved, she tends to either build straw men out of complicated and contested dialogues...or to ignore secular contributions to progressive movements" (202). In his book *If God Meant to Interfere* (2016), Christopher Douglas similarly complains that *Gilead* ignores "what Frederick Douglass called 'Christian Slavery'" as part of the "novel's strategy of lionizing a heroic Christian past against which modern times are found wanting" (86, 97). It seems to me that both of these readings misunderstand Robinson, whose engagement with history aims not at constructing a comprehensive view of the past but at identifying historical moments, movements, and ideas that were ethical, honorable, or useful but have since been lost to popular consciousness through the oversimplification of historical narratives. Robinson writes in her introduction to *The Death of Adam* (1998), "I do not wish to suggest...that the past was better than the present, simply that whatever in the past happens to have been of significance or value ought to be held in memory, insofar as that is possible, so that it can give us guidance" (5).

<sup>74</sup> In the section of his book *Hard Sayings* (2013) entitled "The Liberal Calvinism of Marilynne Robinson," Thomas F. Haddox characterizes "Robinson's use of Protestant Christianity" as "slippery," consisting of "a use of orthodoxy more than a commitment to it" (187-8). Haddox argues that Robinson's (and Ames's) refusal to endorse or deny the truth of Calvinist ideas like double predestination reflects "religious thinking grounded in the primacy of certain individual experiences" rather than in "the question of whether Christian orthodoxy is true" and results in a fictional religious landscape that is "spiritual" rather than recognizably "Christian" (194, 202, 200). Douglas also asserts that "*Gilead*'s preference for Christian experience over Christian doctrine suggests a conceptual separation" (115).

theological cake and eat it too. Readings of Robinson's Gilead novels would be remiss, however, if they did not afford the author's own claims about the value of spiritual uncertainty due consideration. "[A] narrow understanding of faith very readily turns to bitterness and coerciveness," she writes, and, therefore, "There is something about certainty that makes Christianity un-Christian. Instances of this are only too numerous and familiar. Therefore, because I would be a good Christian, I have cultivated uncertainty, which I consider a form of reverence" ("Credo" 23). Ames is clearly of the same mind, stating in his confrontation with Jack over the question of predestination, "I'm just trying to find a slightly useful way of saying there are things I don't understand. I'm not going to force some theory on a mystery and make foolishness of it" (*Gilead* 152). Ames's willingness to acknowledge his own uncertainty—his own intellectual and spiritual limitations—increases his credibility, inviting readers to view his struggle with difficult questions and, by extension, his conclusions about their continuing mystery as honest and authoritative. Given what he has to say about the potential foolishness of certainty, it seems reasonable to view Ames's refusal to issue definitive pronouncements on complicated ideas like predestination as far more than evasion. Rather than attempting to duck his pastoral responsibilities, Ames is trying to avoid platitude or (worse) conjecture when describing the nature of God or God's relationship to human existence. Like Robinson herself, he is unwilling to risk blasphemy or mislead the afflicted by shoehorning important theological concepts into concise but inadequate statements.

Lila, toward the end of her own novel, returns us to Earth, applying this same understanding of uncertainty's theological value to the wonder demanded by the physical world. She thinks, "The old man always said we should attend to the things we have some hope of understanding, and eternity isn't one of them. Well, this world isn't one either" (259). By placing

physical existence beyond the possibility of comprehension, Lila reveals that she has made a kind of peace with wilderness and is cultivating the same kind of uncertainty that Robinson views as a spiritual imperative. In doing so she moves us, in her own subtle way, toward reverence for the visible world.

### Loneliness and the “Fact of Feeling”

Neil Browne asserts that, by invoking William James, “Robinson explicitly places herself within the pragmatist tradition,” and I want to suggest that Robinson’s treatment of loneliness in her Gilead trilogy is the extension of a pragmatist consideration of the problem of human inwardness and our efforts to explain the realities of private experience to ourselves and to each other (239). In her *Natural History of Pragmatism* (2007), Joan Richardson, describing what she, after Wallace Stevens, calls “the fact of feeling,” states, “we feel things before we think them,” that, for each of us, “being without words” precedes “the complicated harmony we make of what we think” (231). Richardson traces American historical efforts to find images for or put language to felt life—the wordless experience of being—back to Jonathan Edwards, who understood the human mind as “one more, if not the greatest, of divine things” and who came to rely on John Locke’s “concept of sensation” and on Newton’s *Opticks* “and the impact of what he learned there about the nature and behavior of light” for help in conceptualizing and articulating his sense of spiritual reality<sup>75</sup> (24). Edwards’s hope, as Richardson observes, was “to *affect* his

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<sup>75</sup> Richardson links her own analysis of Edwards to Perry Miller’s essay “Jonathan Edwards on ‘The Sense of the Heart’” (1948), which she describes as centered “around the text of one of Edwards’s ‘Miscellanies,’ no. 782, which bears the multiple title, ‘Ideas. Sense of the Heart. Spiritual Knowledge or Conviction. Faith,’” a title that, for Richardson, seems to suggest the progression Edwards hoped to initiate in the minds of his congregations (24). A prime example of Edwards’s attempts to convey “A true sense of the divine and superlative excellency of the things of religion; a real sense of the excellency of God and Jesus Christ, and of the work of redemption” through language and metaphor can be seen in his sermon “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” in which Edwards illustrates the “difference between having an opinion, that God is holy and gracious, and having a sense of the loveliness of that

congregations with the realizations by which he had been affected,” sharing with them “his majestic perception into the ways of God’s creation,” a task which “demanded that...Edwards...overcome their resistance in phrasings that would themselves repeatedly illustrate, perform as signs, as formulae or the steps of an experiment, the act of converting matter into spirit, pure being, since, as he had understood, the relation of matter to spirit was in the constant activity of God as pure being” (37-8).

Browne offers a brief but insightful analysis of Edwards’s and Robinson’s shared interest in light and of the “images of light [that] permeate *Gilead*,” but for the purposes of this discussion, I am more interested in how Robinson views subjective experience and in how she connects her view to Edwards’s own interest in what Richardson terms “the interactivity of individual beings with Being” (Browne 233; Richardson 59). In her essay “Givenness” (2015), Robinson writes:

Jonathan Edwards knew that emotions have a physical component, and he knew it could be argued this is all they amount to. He said, “The motion of the blood and animal spirits is not the *essence* of these affections...but the *effect* of them...There is a sensation in the *mind* which loves and rejoices, *antecedent* to any effects on the fluids in the body.”<sup>76</sup> He is arguing here for the capacity for emotion in spirits, disembodied souls. He is speaking within a set of religious and cultural assumptions, just as our neuroscientists do when they tell us that fear is the firing of certain synapses in the brain. Their culture and moment allow them to say, in effect, it is not you who are afraid—a little patch of gray matter is

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holiness and grace” by pointing to the “difference between having a rational judgement that honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness” (201).

<sup>76</sup> Robinson is quoting here from Edwards’s *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746).

responding to stimuli in the environment. Then is there a self at all? The point is now actively disputed. (77)

Robinson's goal in this passage is not to rehabilitate Cartesian dualism—her own work, fiction and essays alike, is far from dualistic in its depictions of embodied life and its discussion of souls—but to express discomfort at the readiness of some to dismiss the idea of selfhood wholesale. She understands Edwards's depiction of emotional reality in Cartesian terms—as “antecedent to any effects on the fluids in the body”—as a result of his moment in history and, consequently, of the science available to him in that moment. In other words, Robinson feels that the notion of selfhood remains useful for thinking about the reality of subjective experience, even if our understanding departs somewhat from the meaning that term would have had in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Adapting Edwards's insistence on the self as part of lived experience to the present historical moment, Robinson relies on the notion of inwardness (a term she employs in numerous essays) as vital to our participation in embodied existence: “For Edwards our nature is a reflex of the expectations God has of us. We are told to hope. To fear. To feel compassion and gratitude. All these things we can do, can scarcely refrain from doing...The whole traffic among human beings, and between human beings and the divine, is essentially a matter of inward experience—often it is dread, loneliness, homesickness, and regret, interpreted as alienation from God, or as the fear of alienation” (80). Robinson acknowledges that we exist among and in relation to each other and that our experiences acquire meaning as a result of those relations, but this is not all they mean because, concurrent with any external realities of human interaction, there are also internal impulses and responses, a series or network or assortment of emotional realities with a vast and complicated range. These emotional realities form a (if not the) significant mechanism



by which we interpret the behavior of others or construe our relationships to God and/or Being. Robinson adds, “If we approach the question of the affections or emotions or the inward life as Jamesian pragmatists, allowing always for the fact that they often mystify us, we will take our feelings as we know them, not only as physical states rooted in all the processes of our brains that reflect and condition our motives, but more especially as the continuously variable inward weather in which we live from birth to death” (81). This inward weather is lonely by definition in that it can be communicated in part but never fully shared, and when it stirs in us the feeling that we are isolated from, in opposition to, forgotten by, or otherwise at odds with or apart from the world and people that surround us, then we are in the throes of loneliness.

Whether Robinson’s vocation as novel writer precipitated her interest in subjective experience or whether an interest in subjective experience led her to the novel is impossible to know (perhaps even for Robinson herself), but her decision to anchor each book’s narration within the perspective of a single character has allowed her to explore the inward experiences of embodied life in powerful ways. As much as anything else, these different narrative perspectives call our attention to the fact that, in addition to the potential dangers and vulnerabilities physical existence entails, the individual nature of embodiment makes life incredibly lonely. Ruth in *Housekeeping* asks, “When did I become so unlike other people?,” and Ames says toward the beginning of his own narrative, “There’s a lot under the surface of life, everyone knows that. A lot of malice and dread and guilt, and so much loneliness, where you wouldn’t really expect to find it either” (*Housekeeping* 241; *Gilead* 6). The particular misery loneliness entails in Robinson’s fiction owes to the feeling of our own individuality—its uniqueness, certainly, but also its smallness in relation to the expansive wilderness we inhabit—and to our concurrent failure or inability to convey that inward reality in ways that would allow other people to know

the depth or truth of our experiences, much of which we cannot articulate even to ourselves. Robinson's Gilead novels can, to some extent, be understood in terms of their central characters' gradual movement from loneliness toward belonging, a transformation that depends largely on characters' recognition, by degrees, of another person's inward life and on their inwardness being recognized in turn, a process Salley Vickers describes as "the delicate growth of tentative trust." Ames's words, while partially describing his own "dark time," a season of loneliness that lasted for most of his adult life, also anticipate his discovery of Jack's family and, consequently, his discovery that a man he took for unregenerate and dishonorable has struggled secretly and mightily to discern the right course through socially (and legally) hostile terrain (44).

For Ames, overjoyed by the grace of family in his old age, loneliness is predominantly a matter of memory, providing an empathetic lens through which he views (or comes to view) the experiences of his fellow characters, but in both Glory's and Lila's narratives, loneliness is a present-tense concern, the precise nature of which each woman tries her best to communicate. Both women think about the felt reality of their loneliness in physical terms. Glory's midnight reflections on the gendered expectations of "Presbyterian Gilead" and their influence over the trajectory of her early life and education have become "part of the loneliness she felt, as if the sense that everything could have been otherwise were a palpable darkness. Darkness visible" (*Home* 20). The isolation Glory feels is so intense that it seems to her material, tactile, and given her background as an English teacher, it seems fitting that she would borrow from Milton<sup>77</sup> to

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<sup>77</sup> The image of "darkness visible" comes from the first book of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), when Satan first observes "the fiery gulf" into which he and the other demons have been thrown as a result of their rebellion and perceives "The dismal situation waste and wild, / A dungeon horrible, on all sides round / As one great furnace flamed, but from those flames / No light, but rather darkness visible /... / Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace / And rest can never dwell, hope never comes" (52, 60-6).

express her grief, invoking the image of physical expulsion from the presence of God to analogize her visceral sense of exile.

While Lila finds biblical metaphors useful for addressing the wildness of existence, she tends to consider the fact of her own deeply felt loneliness in terms that correspond much more literally to her body. Remembering how she and Doll weathered their first night together, she says, “the child just lay against her [Doll], hoping to stay where she was, hoping the rain wouldn’t end. Doll may have been the loneliest woman in the world, and she was the loneliest child, and there they were, keeping each other warm in the rain” (*Lila* 5). While this image suggests interdependence and community it also reveals a superlative loneliness made more apparent by a young Lila’s desperation for Doll’s physical presence and by her wish that the rain, however detrimental to their long-term health or safety, would continue unabated. After she becomes pregnant, Lila grows concerned that her prior life of loneliness will become her physical legacy to her child, and she wavers inwardly between a desire to protect him from that feeling and a desire to prepare him for life’s potential severity:

She’d heard people say that a sad woman will have a sad child. A bitter woman will have an angry child. She used to think that if she could decide what it was she felt, as far back as she remembered, she would know that much, at least, about the woman who bore her. Loneliness. She pitied the woman for her loneliness. She didn’t want this child of hers to be afraid with no real reason...Existence can be fierce, she did know that. A storm can blow up out of a quiet day, wind that takes your life out of your hands, your soul out of your body...In that quiet house she was afraid she might forget. (105-6)

Having come from such terrible loneliness, Lila is shocked to discover that she loves her husband, that the affection he shows her, his touch, is “a need she only discovered when it was satisfied” (253). Thinking about how the surprise of that need initially led her to say “something mean to him,” she observes, speaking again in physical terms, “That was loneliness. When you’re scalded, touch hurts, it makes no difference if it’s kindly meant” (253). Ultimately, however, she is glad to have married Ames and dreads only the loneliness she knows she will feel when he is gone.

As with spiritual uncertainty—which itself heightens the sense of alienation some characters feel—loneliness is not without value in Robinson’s world. Responding to Rebecca M. Painter’s suggestion that Glory is a character “for whom religious conviction does little to assuage...loneliness,” Robinson says, “I am not sure religion is meant to assuage loneliness. Who was ever lonelier than Jesus? ‘Can you not watch with me one hour?’ I think loneliness is an encounter with oneself—who can be great or terrible company, but who does ask all the essential questions. There is a tendency to think of loneliness as a symptom, a sign that life has gone wrong. But it is never only that. I sometimes think it is the one great prerequisite for depth, and for truthfulness” (“Further Thoughts” 492). As much as loneliness constitutes a kind of pain, it is also the result of consciousness, that property of embodied existence which allows us to formulate a (relatively) stable sense of our own values, desires, history, and identity—what Edwards might have called our sense of self. For Robinson, acquaintance with our own subjectivities is necessary and prefigures any meaningful conceptualization, however imperfect, of our relationship to the given world.

*Particularity, Civilization, and Interpersonal Grace*

When young John Ames and his father finally locate his grandfather's grave, they are stuck by the stark lifelessness of the prairie that surrounds it. Ames describes that site as "the loneliest place you could imagine," adding, "If I were to say it was going back to nature, you might get the idea that there was some sort of vitality about the place" (*Gilead* 13). After, "putting things to rights," however, as they stand praying over his grandfather's final resting place, Ames looks up to see a full moon rising "just as the sun was going down," a scene he describes as follows:

Each of them was standing on its edge with the most wonderful light between them. It seemed as if you could touch it, as if there were palpable currents of light passing back and forth, or as if there were great taut skeins of light suspended between them. I wanted my father to see it, but I knew I'd have to startle him out of his prayer, and I wanted to do it the best way, so I took his hand and kissed it. And then I said, "Look at the moon." And he did. We just stood there until the sun was down and the moon was up. They seemed to float on the horizon for quite a long time, I suppose because they were both so bright you couldn't get a clear look at them. And that grave, and my father and I, were exactly between them, which seemed amazing to me at the time, since I hadn't given much thought to the horizon.

My father said, "I would never have thought this place could be beautiful. I'm glad to know that." (13-15)

Ames and his father go on to disagree about the grander significance of this event, but the image itself—of beauty in the midst of apparent desolation—is useful for thinking about how Robinson

conceives of the human potential for civilization, for building and sustaining community in the midst of life's myriad hostilities.

For Robinson, there is a sense in which fallen wilderness is reflected in the fragmentation of human experience, the tendency of our inwardness to separate us from each other, but while she writes that "It may have been perverse for destiny to array perception across billions of subjectivities," she also asserts that "[this] fact is central to human life and language and culture" (*AM* 7-8). These diverse subjectivities, which render full identification with or understanding of another person impossible, are evidence, for Robinson, of the splendor and sacredness of "human particularity," a concept present in both her essays and her fiction and which she describes as "the odd privilege of existence as a coherent self, the ability to speak the word 'I' and mean by it a richly individual history of experience, perception, and thought" (*GT* 225; *AM* 110). Such rich individuality is unnecessary in the sense that it is a gift bestowed by a loving Creator far in excess of what is required to sustain embodied life. Robinson suggests that to honor or disrespect this particularity is, therefore, to honor or disrespect the human soul, which she describes in her essay "On 'Beauty'" as our "solitary and singular participation in the mystery of being" (31). In Robinson's fictional world, honoring another person's particularity requires a Calvinist recognition of God's image in every person, a process that depends, as Andrew Bower Latz observes, on "an exercise of the moral imagination," which begins with "Being awake to...the mystery of other people: awareness of the other person as brought into being by God simply out of God's love and good pleasure" (285, 288). Over and over in the Gilead novels, this awareness leads to wonder at the sacred in another person. Respect then turns wonder into reverence, and love turns reverence into forgiveness, understanding, and interpersonal grace.

Awareness begins, for Ames, with wonder at the mere fact of particularity itself, at the way in which our bodies conceal the complexity and utter difference of human beings from each other. In a moment of insight which may owe as much to Robinson's appreciation for America's transcendentalists<sup>78</sup> as to her affection for Calvin, Ames observes:

In every important way we are such secrets from each other, and I do believe there is a separate language in each of us, also a separate aesthetics and a separate jurisprudence. Every single one of us is a little civilization built on the ruins of any number of preceding civilizations, but with our own variant notions of what is beautiful and what is acceptable—which, I hasten to add, we generally do not satisfy and by which we struggle to live. We take fortuitous resemblances among us to be actual likeness, because those around us have fallen heir to the same customs, trade in the same coin, acknowledge, more or less, the same notions of decency and sanity. But all that really just allows us to coexist with the inviolable, untraversable, and utterly vast spaces between us. (*Gilead* 197)

In many ways, this observation is merely a fuller articulation of ideas Ames has introduced earlier in the text, but it comes at a crucial moment when the reverend is just beginning to see Jack Boughton as “the angel of himself, brooding over the mysteries his mortal life describes” and, therefore, marks the dawning of Ames's receptivity to the notion that Jack may be more

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<sup>78</sup> Ames's observation suggests kinship with Whitman and Thoreau, the former of whom describes himself as “a kosmos, of Manhattan the son” and the latter of whom urges, in the conclusion to *Walden* (1854), “[B]e a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought,” explaining that “Every man is the lord of a realm beside which the earthly empire of the Czar is but a petty state...there are continents and seas in the moral world to which every man is an isthmus or an inlet, yet unexplored by him, but...it is easier to sail many thousand miles through cold and storm...than it is to explore the private sea, the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one's being alone” (Whitman 1040; Thoreau 578). Ames, however, ultimately rejects other metaphors—“Maybe I should have said we are like planets”—in favor of the image of human beings as civilizations, explaining that “we all...live in the ruins of the lives of other generations,” a fact which situates us within a particular historical moment even while our “seeming continuity” with the past “deceives us” (197-8).

complicated, honest, and redeemable than Ames is initially willing to grant (197). That is not to say that this passage marks their moment of reconciliation, but the wonder reflected in it is a change in posture for Ames (toward Jack) that paves the way for eventual forgiveness and understanding. The acceptance of human individuals as metaphoric civilizations whose autonomy, relative to other people, must be recognized, respected, and even imagined by another person is, for Ames and Robinson alike, vital to any meaningful attempt to traverse the “vast spaces between us” and create larger, communal civilizations in the flesh-and-blood world.

This eventual wonder at Jack’s deeper complexity finally allows Ames to see Jack in reference to Christ’s parable of the Prodigal Son,<sup>79</sup> an image central to Robinson’s Gilead trilogy, and this act of “moral imagination” culminates in the physical act of blessing. Earlier in the novel, Ames thinks about how forgiveness operates within the parable. Citing one of his past sermons, he says, “It interprets ‘Forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors’ in light of the Law of Moses on that subject. That is, the forgiveness of literal debt...And it makes the point that, in Scripture, the one sufficient reason for forgiveness is simply the existence of debt...it goes on to compare this to divine grace, and to the Prodigal Son and his restoration to his place in his father’s house, though he neither asks to be restored as son nor even repents of the grief he has caused his father” (161). After Jack has told Ames all about his wife and child, the difficulties they have faced as a family, and his hope that Gilead might be a place where they could settle, the two men share a moment of unprecedented tenderness, of which Ames says, “he actually let his head rest on my shoulder...I could just feel the loneliness in him. Here I was supposed to be a second father to him” (231). Of Jack’s own father, Ames observes, “if he could stand up out of his chair, out of his decrepitude and crankiness and sorrow and limitation, [he] would abandon

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<sup>79</sup> This parable appears in Luke 15:11-32.



all those handsome children of his...and follow after than one son whom he has never known, whom he has favored as one does a wound, and he would protect him as a father cannot, defend him with a strength he does not have, sustain him with a bounty beyond any resource he could ever dream of having...That is a thing I would love to see” (238). Ames casts himself in the role of the “good son” the brother “who never left his father’s house” and “for whom the rejoicing in heaven will be comparatively restrained,” but his new acquaintance with the particularity of Jack’s experience has moved Ames beyond any feelings of resentment or judgement, and he marvels instead that “There is no justice in love, no proportion in it, and there need not be, because in any specific instance it is only a glimpse or parable of an embracing, incomprehensible reality,” one that “makes no sense at all because it is the eternal breaking in on the temporal” (238).

This intervention of eternal love in the temporal world—the world of bodies in time—requires expression through touch, and as Ames lays his hand on Jack’s head and prays, “Lord, bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father,” the gesture recalls Ames’s earlier description of baptism as a blessing which “doesn’t enhance sacredness, but...acknowledges it,” allowing the person performing the act to experience the unique pleasure of “feeling” (and honoring) another person’s “mysterious life” (241, 23). Thinking about the other protestant sacrament—the Lord’s Supper—Ames recalls a more recent sermon, saying, “I have been thinking a great deal about the body these last weeks. Blessed and broken. I used Genesis 32:23-32 as the Old Testament text, Jacob wrestling with the Angel. I wanted to talk about the gift of physical particularity and how blessing and sacrament are mediated through it” (69). Ames’s musings on the relationship of embodied particularity to blessing and sacrament

suggests that love and forgiveness are inseparable from physical actions of caring and generosity toward other people, the way Doll cares for Lila, the way Glory cares for Jack.

When Glory finds Jack drunk in the barn with his shirt jammed up the tailpipe of their family's convertible (he had previously given her the keys and, therefore could not get the car started), the shock of realizing that her brother has nearly committed suicide introduces Glory to the particularity of Jack's circumstances in an especially jarring way and overwhelms her physically, to the point that she "wept, so hard that she could only give herself over to it, though it kept her from thinking even what to do next" (243-4). Once she has cleaned Jack up and sent him to bed, however, her handling of the catastrophe's aftermath demonstrates remarkable grace (in the sense of poise) as well as a growing understanding of her own capacity to bless the lives of those she loves through physical action. Anticipating the suffering her brother will experience on waking, she phones Lila who colludes with her briefly in a different kind of grace: "Lila would send Robby over with whatever she lacked, knowing better than to ask why Glory or Jack didn't go to the store themselves. Good Lila. She might know some simple, commonplace treatment for hangover, some cool hand on the brow that would wake Jack from his sweaty sleep, as if penance were swept aside by absolution" (254). Glory suspects that Jack "had meant to recruit his whole body to the work of misery," and falling back on her mother's time-honored domestic policy, she decides "to announce the return of comfort and well-being...by cooking something fragrant," recalling that, "After every calamity of any significance," her mother "would fill the atmosphere of the house with the smell of cinnamon rolls or brownies, or with chicken and dumplings" and that "it would mean, This house has a soul that loves us all, no matter what. It would mean peace if they had fought and amnesty if they had been in trouble. It

had meant, You can come down to dinner now, and no one will say a thing to bother you, unless you have forgotten to wash your hands” (252).

This incident also leads Glory to think about the intimacy that she and Jack have fostered since his arrival, and she begins to understand her place in Gilead and within the Boughton family in providential terms. Thinking about “the talking and the joking and the moments of near-candor, the times [she and Jack] were almost at ease with each other,” Glory begins to feel that her homecoming is not entirely sad or purposeless after all:

She had been so proud of all that, pleased to believe it was providential that she should be there, having herself just tasted the dregs of experience, having been introduced to something bleaker than ordinary failure—it was a sweet providence that sent her home to that scene of utter and endless probity, where earnest striving so predictably yielded success, and Boughton success at that, the kind amenable to being half-concealed by the rigors of yet more earnest striving. Not that she could forget the bitterness of her chagrin, not that she preferred the course her life had taken to the one she had imagined for it. But she did feel she had been rescued from the shame of mere defeat by the good she was able to do her brother. (254)

Glory understands in this moment that her opportunity to be Jack’s saving grace has been saving grace to her as well, that it has, in a rough-hewn and unexpected way, redeemed her suffering by giving her a sense of purpose in the midst of her shame.

After she meets Jack’s wife and son at the end of the novel, even the place itself—the Boughton family home—assumes dimensions of grace she would not have previously anticipated. They have missed Jack by a couple of days and have to return to Missouri before

nightfall, but Glory can see in the way they regard the house and its surroundings that Jack has described it to them in detail and with fondness. “Dear Lord in Heaven,” Glory thinks to herself, realizing, “she could never change anything. How could she know what [Jack] had sanctified to that child’s mind with his stories, sad stories that had made them laugh...As if all that saving their father had done was providence indeed, and new love would transform all the old love and make its relics wonderful” (323). Glory imagines a future in which Jack’s son will return home to that house to pay her a visit and to see where his father lived, a fantasy that puts Glory, according to Jennifer L. Holberg, in the role of “the Prodigal’s father,” waiting to “stretch out her arms” in welcome to the child whose life, up to the novel’s present, has been one of itinerant uncertainty (297). Holberg notes that, “though this conclusion might be sad, even disappointing in another novel,” the ending of *Home*—with its unironic acknowledgement “The Lord is wonderful”—is affirming of Glory’s new understanding of grace and providence, noting that “Glory’s sacrifice (and it is undoubtedly a sacrifice) is built upon a vision of restoration, of justice” and that “she begins to understand how she is an essential part of the divine work of restoration, to a remedying of the world’s brokenness” (*Home* 325; Holberg 296).

By accepting ownership of her family’s house and deciding to preserve it as a future refuge for Jack’s son, Glory shares some of the same maternal qualities Doll exhibits in her care of Lila. While there is a sense in which Lila too could be described in terms of the Prodigal Son narrative, the biblical metaphor she chooses for herself is that of the baby in Ezekiel, the child “cast out and weltering in her blood,” whom God rescues and instructs to live (*Lila* 225). She sees in God’s relationship with Israel a similarity to Doll’s relationship with her, and in remembering the care Doll took with her, she attributes her own life and the particularity of its trajectory to repeated, physical expressions of interpersonal grace. “Ugly old Doll,” she

remembers affectionately, “Who had said to her, Live. Not once, but every time she washed and mended for her, mothered her as if she were a child someone could want” (47). It is plain that Doll was the one source of love Lila knew in her life before Gilead, and it is equally plain that, without Doll’s nurturing presence, she would likely never have developed the emotional resources required to trust another human being long enough to form the meaningful relationships that define her character by the novel’s end. In this way, Lila’s life with Doll—like Ames’s vision of Jack as “the angel of himself” or Glory’s realization in the wake of Jack’s suicide attempt—constitutes an example of what Ames might term “prevenient grace,” grace that prepares us for the fuller experience of “grace itself” (*Gilead* 246).

The most important instance of interpersonal grace in Lila’s life is her relationship with John Ames because it is through her relationship with the reverend that her understanding of existence begins to change. Ames is amused by Lila’s unique approach to learning the Bible and deeply interested in the secret former life at which her choices of text occasionally hint, and Lila marvels at the general kindness her “big old preacher” displays toward the world, but while mutual wonder at and respect for each other are important aspects of their relationship, sexual attraction and touch are equally significant (*Lila* 168). In the early days of their marriage, when they are still learning how to trust each other, Lila recalls that Ames was “not even sure how to talk to her” and that “It was to comfort him, and herself, that she slipped into his bed that first dark night” (96). This physical intimacy allows them to experience their growing, mutual love without having to depend on language to convey their investment in each other, and it deepens their trust beyond what words can achieve at that moment in their lives together. Lila sees their sexual interaction as a continuation of the early days of their courtship, when “She’d put her head on his shoulder that one time when he hardly knew her name,” and this intimacy is

gradually perfected over time, with the help of numerous mundane and minor touches, until she comes to enjoy “lying against the warmth of him” in the bed they share (236, 102). Lila makes a habit of meeting Ames at the church in the evenings to walk home with him and recalls how, on the first night, “he put his arms around her, just the way she knew he would, just the way she meant for him to do,” and later thinks of her husband, “for now he is mine to touch if I want to... Might as well take pleasure where you can” (139, 169). Lila enjoys her husband so much, values the grace of his touch so highly, that she cherishes his coat above almost any other object. “The old coat he had put over her shoulders when they were walking in the evening was as good to remember as the time Doll took her up in her arms,” Robinson writes, “She thought it was nothing she had known to hope for and something she had wanted too much all the same” (258). That coat is both metaphor and memento of his love for her, and by equating it to Doll’s intervention in her life, Lila reveals the extent to which the intimacy she and Ames share has been a paradigm-altering grace.

Lila’s emphasis on the mutual understanding promoted by bodily intimacy reinforces the physical world as the venue for interpersonal grace. “With all respect to heaven,” Robinson writes in her essay “Psalm 8,” “the scene of miracle is here, among us,” and Christopher Leise observes that Ames reflects this assertion in that he “privileges the incandescent” over the transcendent, “[leaving] the heavenly for its (non-)time and (non-)place” (*DA* 243; Leise 362). Ames marvels at “a kind of incandescence” he sees in those who discuss their lives with him, “the ‘I’ whose predicate can be ‘love’ or ‘fear’ or ‘want,’ and whose object can be ‘someone’ or ‘nothing’ and it won’t really matter, because the loveliness is just in that presence, shaped around ‘I’ like a flame on a wick, emanating itself in grief and guilt and joy and whatever else. But quick, and avid, and resourceful” (*Gilead* 45). Lila approaches this same reverence for human

particularity as she ponders the mysteries of pregnancy and childbirth, thinking instead in terms of “you” and addressing the unborn son she loves already without having met:

You. What a strange word that is. She thought, I have never laid eyes on you. The old man prays for you. He almost can't believe he has you to pray for. Both of us think about you the whole day long. If I die bearing you, or if you die when you are born, I will still be thinking, Who are you? and there will be only one answer out of all the people in the world, all the people there have ever been or will ever be. If we find each other in heaven, we'll say, So there you are!...no one else could say “you” and mean the same thing by it. (244)

Lila's maternal perspective leads her to conclude that we are particular not only in how we know ourselves but in how we are known by other people so that we are distinct not only inwardly but in our relationships to a potentially infinite network of other human beings, and only “in eternity,” where “people's lives could be altogether what they were and had been” can total unity between these disparate selves be achieved (259). The nearest we can come to unity in the world is community, the civilizations we construct out of respect for particularity and the grace we offer each other through physical care and mutual understanding.

Robinson writes, “it is possible to imagine that time was created in order that there might be narrative,” and I would suggest that, in her Gilead novels, wilderness is created that her characters might achieve civilization (*DA* 243). This they do by learning to notice, revere, cherish, and forgive the particular human beings who surround them in the physical world, by coming to understand that embodied acts of interpersonal grace, in all their myriad forms, are parallel to Christ's own ministry and sacrifice. Ruth observes in *Housekeeping* that, if the world's “first event is known to have been an expulsion,” then “the last is hoped to be a

reconciliation and a return,” noting that, while the Fall afflicted humanity with selfishness and a tendency toward separation, “God himself was pulled after us into the vortex we made when we fell...And while he was on earth He mended families. He gave Lazarus back to his mother, and to the centurion he gave his daughter again. He even restored the severed ear of the soldier who came to arrest Him—a fact that allows us to hope the resurrection will reflect a considerable attention to detail” (192, 194). That we too can participate in this process is the main thrust of Ames’s discussion of the Prodigal Son, in which he reminds his own son and, by extension, Robinson’s readers that each person can be father or brother to any other, appearing as an angel and offering water in the midst of a wilderness thick with jackals. “[G]race is the great gift,” he says, “So to be forgiven is only half the gift. The other half is that *we* also can forgive, restore, and liberate, and therefore we can feel the will of God enacted through us, which is the great restoration of ourselves to ourselves” (*Gilead* 161). It is worth noting that Christ himself is the physical intervention of an eternal, incomprehensible God in a temporal, embodied world so that the forgiveness Ames talks about is most powerful when expressed in physical human action, when it addresses the material needs of the afflicted. Lila imagines that even the most wretched person might be “pulled into heaven” by the love of her fellow human beings, and Robinson’s novels repeatedly make the case that, here in the flesh-and-blood world, tangible love and the grace it yields transform subject and object alike (*Lila* 259).



## Conclusion: Forms of Grace and Narrative

Flannery O'Connor, John Updike, Andre Dubus, and Marilynne Robinson, whatever their differences in personal theology or aesthetic vision,<sup>80</sup> share the conviction that bodies are necessary both to spiritual experience and to story. When viewed in the light of each other's efforts toward an ethically and artistically rigorous narrative praxis, these four authors display interesting sympathies and points of departure in their thinking about the behavior of grace in the material world. For O'Connor and Dubus, a Catholic imagination seems to understand the intervention of grace in human life as largely action-dependent, while grace in Updike's and Robinson's narratives generally seems gentler and more passively received. I want to be careful not to overgeneralize along denominational lines, and I would be interested to see if the distinctions that seem to emerge in this dissertation between Catholic and Protestant approaches to grace play out similarly in the work of other authors, perhaps that of Walker Percy, Mary Gordon, or Frederick Buechener. Among the authors I do discuss, however, the Catholic perspective seems to reflect the *Catechism's* assertion that "the human intellect and will cooperate with divine grace," while the observational moments that abound in Updike's and Robinson's fiction appear to reflect a Protestant insistence on grace as freely given (48).

If actions are not, in and of themselves, the vehicles for grace in O'Connor's world, her characters' actions drive them, with ever-increasing velocity toward divine mystery, which, though obscured, proves unyielding, turning the momentum—spiritual or physical—of characters' actions into the mechanisms of violence and shock by which they are made to realize

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<sup>80</sup> Flannery O'Connor, for example, was not especially fond of Updike's narratives, referring to one of his early collections as "a disappointment" and saying of his novels, "I just don't like people that are all that sensitive. I just never know if the thing they're being sensitive about is there or not" (*HB* 339, 540). Robinson, in turn, has been critical of O'Connor's approach to fiction, saying in a 2005 interview for *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought*, that "For some reason it is not conventional for serious fiction to treat religious thought respectfully—the influence of Flannery O'Connor has been particularly destructive, I think, though she is considered a religious writer and she considered herself one" ("World").

the errors of their initial thinking. In Dubus's fiction, some form of suffering is often the inciting incident rather than the climax, but his very emphasis on ritual—on actions performed with intention and spiritual awareness—illustrates the importance of action to grace in his world. Even when Jack Linhart of "We Don't Live Here Anymore" looks at his children as a form of grace, we cannot help remembering that the earlier pages of that narrative attest to his and Terry's decision to keep their first child rather than terminate her pregnancy, a fact which frames their children's existence as a product of Jack's and Terry's actions in the past. Compare this moment to Jim Werley's mid-morning epiphany in "My Father's Tears." Though Jim admits to having changed seats—a physical action—on a flight from Boston to New York, the narrative emphasizes that he could not have anticipated what he would see, presenting the fact that he "was rewarded...by the sun's reflection on the waters of Connecticut" as a beautiful accident, grace bestowed regardless of action or intention (206). Robinson's characters have similar relationships to grace—Ames's numerous, slightly startled observations regarding beauty and incandescence among ordinary people, objects, and events, Glory's discovery of Jack's son, or Lila's realization that she enjoys Ames's company and touch—and are often surprised to discover un-looked-for possibilities for redemption, liberation, and communion so that the physical care and interpersonal grace her novels urge are not prerequisites for grace but expressions of its truest form and boundless potential.

There is one sense, however, in which Robinson stands alone among my chapters: of the four authors I discuss, she is the only one who has not published a short story. The other three authors, by contrast, favor (and have done their best work in) the shorter medium for its power to deliver moments of epiphany that, over the longer text of a novel, lose some of their punch. All but Updike's best novels (and even a few of them) can seem overlong, while his shorter

narratives seem pleasantly insightful for their tendency to turn or end on a moment of realization, a fragment of human truth discovered unexpectedly amid the physical habits of daily living. Dubus, whose characters sometimes collapse under the weight of suffering or surrender to unrelenting banality but, more often than not, discover ritual, redemption and important new insight into the nature of lived experience, chose to work almost exclusively within the short story form, and O'Connor, even in her novels *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear it Away*, builds toward characters' run-ins with merciless and incontrovertible realities—Hazel Motes surveying the wreck of his rat colored Essex or Tarwater's rape. While these novels, largely through vivid description and black humor, remain engaging from start to finish, they lack the narrative sharpness of a "Revelation" or a "Parker's Back," in which the character's moment of discovery is the center of narrative focus.

There seem to be a few important reasons for Robinson's choice of the novel over the short story. On one hand, the kind of experience Robinson is most interested in dramatizing is not epiphany but the slow development of understanding among individuals who have been thrown together by accidents of birth or history, who must find some way to respect and then love each other's sacredness. On the other hand, Robinson's novels and their narrators are aware of how past events have shaped their present circumstances, and we, as readers, are especially aware of the historical moment her characters inhabit and its influence on their attempts to work out the dilemmas of embodied existence. For these relationships and this history to achieve their full narrative weight requires an amount of time and space intrinsic to the novel and unavailable, by the very nature of the form, in the short story. We might also read this choice of narrative form as tied to Robinson's understanding of grace, which, I would argue, she sees not as a

momentary intervention in physical life but as a condition of existence with which we become increasingly involved as we employ our bodies in the material service of other people.

That the notion of religion as a means of being in the world could (and did) evolve, in the work of four separate authors, into such distinctive aesthetics of embodied experience continues to astonish and interest me. The intersections between belief and narrative praxis examined in this dissertation warrant further exploration, and in future projects, I would like to return to these ideas, engaging more fully with such areas of critical discourse as phenomenology, pragmatism, and rhetorical narratology, all of which I touch on in the preceding chapters and all of which promise to disclose further ways of discussing and understanding the complicated relationships between what artists believe about the nature of existence and the narrative decisions they make in their effort to embody those ideas artistically.

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