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Introduction

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This special issue of *Intégrité: A Faith and Learning Journal*, features six essays that explore the intersection of Christianity with the world of contemporary fiction. In doing so, it contributes to two growing fields of interest, the first of which is the relationship between the Christian faith and contemporary culture. Recent studies along these lines include *Reel Spirituality*, by Robert K. Johnston, and *Catching Light*, by Roy Anker, both of which examine cinema in explicitly Christian terms. Douglas Cowan offers a more genre specific treatment of film in *Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen*. *Resounding Truth*, by Jeremie S. Begbie, and *Gods and Guitars*, by Michael J. Gilmore, offer a similar approach to popular music. There are *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports*, by Shirl James Hoffman, and a collection of essays titled *Small Screen, Big Picture: Television and Lived Religion*. Some of these titles have been published by Baker Academic, which features an entire series called *Engaging Culture*, “designed to help Christians respond with theological discernment to our contemporary culture,” and covering such varied topics as music, theater, film, leadership, art, and pop culture. Others are published in the “Religion and Popular Culture” series of Baylor University Press.

This issue also contributes to the growing interest in religion, sometimes referred to as the “Religious Turn,” in virtually every field of literary studies over the last several years. The March 2006 issue of *English Language Notes*, for example, focused on the “so-called Religious Turn in the study of literary history over the last decade, from the preoccupation among medievalists with ‘vernacular theology’ to the fascination with the topoi of conversion in postcolonial studies.”¹ Greg Kneidel’s *Rethinking the Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Literature*, an exploration of religious aspects of the works of Milton, Spenser, and Donne, is one of many books that reflects such an interest. And in an op-ed piece for *The New York Times*, Stanley Fish noted the abundance of sessions on religion (over twenty) on the 2011 MLA program, while also observing somewhat ruefully the scarcity of sessions devoted to “colonialism, racism, racialism, feminism, queer theory, [and] theory in general.”²

Yet, despite Christian scholars’ interest in contemporary culture, and despite the steady and growing interest in religion among scholars of literature generally, the Christian dimension of contemporary fiction is one area of study that remains largely unexplored. Two books published by Paraclete Press—*The Emmaus Readers: Listening for God in Contemporary Fiction* and *The Emmaus Readers: More Listening for God in Contemporary Fiction*—represent some of

the limited offerings on the subject. And there has been work on individual writers whose fiction explores and explicitly validates Christian religious experience: *Christianity and Literature*, for instance, devoted the entire Winter 2010 issue to Marilynne Robinson, and a volume entitled *Scandalous Truths: Essays by and about Susan Howatch* was published by Susquehanna University Press. But for such a plentiful harvest, those who labor in the specific field of Christianity and contemporary fiction are surprisingly few.

This lacuna in scholarship is particularly unfortunate in that contemporary fiction addresses the role of religious faith and experience in ways that other media cannot, namely, by offering sustained and varied narratives of individual experience that emerge from the contemporary world. In doing so, it offers insight into the nature and value of religious belief and experience, even when the theme is entirely absent, since that absence in itself says something about the place of such belief. But what may be surprising is that the theme is seldom absent in the world of contemporary fiction. One reason for this may be that there is a religious dimension to the medium, and to the novel in particular, that distinguishes it from other artistic forms as innately theistic. In discussing his *Man in the Woods*, a novel which he calls “passionately agnostic,” author Scott Spencer asserts that “novelists think a lot about God ... [because] we create whole worlds and we people them and then we tell the people what to do: We make them fall in love or fall out of windows. So there is that curiosity about God that I think all novelists have.”³ If, as Spencer says, the process of writing a novel involves thinking about God, then the novel itself will say something about God and our relationship to him, even if the author denies his existence or even avoids the subject. Such an author, in effect, emulates the God he doesn’t believe in.

Given the connection between the creative process that produces fiction and these matters of faith, contemporary literary fiction yields itself to certain questions that are of particular interest to the Christian. In this “post-Christian” age, what is the role of religion? Does it still provide consolation in suffering? Does it assuage the fear of death? Does it direct our raw fear and wonder and need for a truth beyond ourselves toward some meaningful end? And if not, what fills the void created by the death of religion? Such questions, and others, serve as the basis for much of the discussion in the pages that follow. And the answers that emerge point towards the sometimes overt, sometimes sublimated part religion still plays, not only in the writing of fiction and in the lives of its characters but in the experiences of the reader who encounters them.

These essays all address works of fiction that have found an audience outside Christian circles. And five of the six essays are devoted to works by authors who, though widely read, are not typically thought of as “Christian writers,” in the sense of a Flannery O’Connor or a Graham Greene or a Marilynne Robinson. For instance, Anita Helmbold argues persuasively that Tobias Wolff’s Catholicism plays a crucial yet largely overlooked role in his work, informing it with a theological sensibility. Wolff, Helmbold demonstrates, “blends realism with transcendence to craft a literary language which sometimes subtly reveals, and yet at other times loudly peals, a message of Christian faith.” Similarly, Roberta Kwan argues that Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet*, considered by many to be

the “Great Australian Novel,” is a work deeply rooted in biblical wisdom literature, particularly the book of Ecclesiastes. These ties, Kwan points out, make it an exception to the rule, stated by David Lyle Jeffrey, that “the deeper questions and counsel of biblical wisdom have for the most part disappeared from all [English literature]....”⁴

It may, in fact, be argued that all of the essays in this volume, one way or another, challenge this rule. Of these, two explore religious and biblical themes and issues in the works of National Book Award winner Cormac McCarthy. James E. Barcus, for one, considers the clash of competing theological visions—the comedic Protestant North and the tragic Catholic South—in *Cities of the Plain*, the third book of McCarthy’s Border Trilogy, while Patty Kirk considers the role of the Christian reader in McCarthy’s earlier work, the bleak, horrifying, yet strangely beautiful *Child of God*. And in his essay on Lewis Nordan’s *Sharpshooter Blues*, Gary Guinn observes and examines a “recurring pattern of transformation that appears in most of his [Nordan’s] stories and all of his novels, a pattern that has its roots in the Judeo-Christian language of redemption.”

The only essay to consider a work by an avowedly Christian writer is Lanta Davis’s “Embracing Paradox: A Dialogue of Suffering between John Paul II and Shusaku Endo,” which takes an intertextual approach to Endo’s *Silence* and Pope John Paul II’s writing on human suffering. However, both of the book reviews offered here critique work by Christian scholars who take significantly different theoretical approaches to the study of literature. On the one hand, Chris Baker considers the “theological aesthetics” of David Lyle Jeffrey and Gregory Maillet, drawing the conclusion that they build a strong but critically narrow set of criteria for the valuation of literary texts. While Jeffrey and Maillet are critical of much of the theory to emerge in the latter part of the twentieth century and urge a return to “moral criticism,” Deborah Bowen’s *Stories of the Middle Space* engages with theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Terry Eagleton, and Mikhail Bakhtin. The result is a reading of contemporary writers that, according to Samuel Martin, brings “us face to face with the lives of others and the Other who gives life in its fullness; this Other and the others made in his image call us to respond, and, through Christ’s Spirit already at work in the world, we are *enabled* to do just that in new and creative ways.”

Whatever the differences in approach, these essays and reviews all demonstrate the possibility of responding to the world of contemporary literature with spiritual and theological discernment. And such discernment is of greater importance than ever before, since even authors approaching the task of writing novels from a Christian worldview seem to heed the warning of Walker Percy: “If you get caught writing a *religious novel* about God, you are dead. You’ll be read by a few people. As one of my characters says, Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer*, ‘Whenever anyone says God to me, a curtain goes down in my head. I have to be damn careful when I talk about grace. I have to be extremely allusive.’”⁵ It is worth noting that two of the writers in this collection are presented in contrast, rather than comparison, to that perennially favorite subject of Christian literary scholars, Flannery O’Connor. As Guinn and Helmbold point out, the presentation of grace in the works of both Lewis Nordan and Tobias

Wolff is far different, and more subtle, than it is in O'Connor's, and thus more likely to be missed.

Demonstrating such discernment and perceptiveness, these essays finally point toward the possibility of reading contemporary literature as not only a deeply pleasurable activity but also a spiritual activity, even when the works they examine present us with the world at its most fallen and corrupt. It is, as Patty Kirk writes, the same “wrecked and wonderful world ...we ourselves have inherited and are ruining in our various ways.... [T]o affirm a human alternative to this reality—a better one than the one God gave us, or one less derelict than we have made it—would be a lie....” In addition to presenting us with this wrecked and wonderful world, contemporary fiction helps us to explore the divine life and to consider our own involvement in it. It may make us mindful that we ourselves are both readers of and characters in what The Belgic Confession calls a “most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to see clearly the invisible things of God, *even* his everlasting power and divinity.”⁶ It is my hope that the essays in this special issue will help their readers see those things more clearly as well.

Notes

¹ Call for Papers. <<http://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/node/22289>>

² Stanley Fish, “The Old Order Changeth,” *The New York Times*, December 26, 2011 <<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/26/the-old-order-changeth/>>

³ Interview by Terri Gross, *Fresh Air*, September 15, 2010. <<http://www.npr.org/2011/10/28/141755987/scott-spencer-plot-twists-where-everything-changes>>

⁴ “Wisdom.” *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992.

⁵ Interview by Brent Short, Washington DC, May, 1989. <<http://www.ibiblio.org/wpercy/short/interview.html>>

⁶ Belgic Confession, Article Two.

The Sacred in the Context of the Everyday: Finding Faith in the Fiction of Tobias Wolff

Anita Helmbold

Tobias Wolff has made a name for himself as a writer in the realist tradition of Raymond Carver, with whose works Wolff's stories are often compared. He is best known for his work in the areas of short story and memoir and probably most famous for his boyhood memoir *This Boy's Life*, which was made into a 1993 feature film starring Robert De Niro, Ellen Barkin, and Leonardo DiCaprio. A number of his short stories have now appeared in anthologies of literature designed for academic use, and his beautifully literary 2003 novel, *Old School*, is frequently taught in university courses. A multiple-award-winning author, he has been honored with the PEN/Malamud Award and the Rea Award for excellence in the short story, the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, and the PEN/Faulkner Award. Reviewers and fellow writers accord his works high praise. For example, Annie Dillard proclaims him "a brilliant, captivating writer—one of the best we've got" (endorsement, Wolff's *Back in the World*, n.p.), and *The Boston Globe* echoes the common opinion about him by proclaiming him "one of America's short-story masters" (Eder n.p.). For all of these reasons, it seems increasingly clear that Wolff has established a reputation that is destined to last.

While Wolff is well known for his crisp, incisive prose and for the penetrating qualities of his insights into the everyday struggles of our lives, he has not been widely recognized as a writer working from a standpoint that is infused with theological sensibilities and spiritual overtones. Indeed, the failure of recognition for this aspect of his work is puzzling, given that there is much to point the sensitive reader toward an awareness of this dimension of his life and work. Wolff has spoken of his faith concerns in interviews, and he speaks candidly of the necessity for faith, tempered by the humility born of doubt, in his powerful and thought-provoking essay "Second Thoughts on Certainty: Saint Jean de Brébeuf among the Hurons."¹

But despite Wolff's open acknowledgement of his Catholicism as an aspect of his identity, few critics have made the connection between his faith and his work. His memoirs acknowledge both his Jewish and Catholic backgrounds, and while a number of his characters wrestle with the question of what it means to be Jewish, it is ironic that though Wolff identifies himself openly as Catholic, and he regularly inserts Catholic characters into his fiction, the rather pervasive presence of a clearly Christian theological impulse within his writing has most often gone unnoted. Brian Hanley, for example, is more outspoken than most, characterizing Wolff's short story collection *The Night in Question* as

“relentlessly secular” (147); most other discussions endorse this opinion through simple silence on the matter.

Even authors who have recognized the presence of a faith angle have often done so in a rather limited way. This is true of the sole book-length study of Wolff’s work to date, James Hannah’s *Tobias Wolff: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Twayne, 1996). In his preface, Hannah repeatedly uses words with theological overtones to characterize Wolff’s work, speaking of mystery and miracle, of the lost being found, of the use of jeremiad, and of an allusion to the Cain-and-Abel story from the book of Genesis.² Hannah goes on to concede that “some of [Wolff’s] most powerful stories are refashioned parables, and they seem to illustrate John F. Desmond’s definition of contemporary Catholic fiction as work that ‘continues to affirm the fundamental mystery and sacramental character of our existence and the reality of the supernatural. Likewise, it affirms our radical incompleteness and the genuine possibility of redemption’” (xi).

And yet despite Hannah’s acknowledgement of the influence of faith upon Wolff’s writing, Hannah is not fully successful in carrying this insight over into his own analyses of Wolff’s stories. In his discussion of Wolff’s story “The Rich Brother” (Hannah 83-86), Hannah repeatedly refers to the Cain-and-Abel parallel suggested by both the climax and the final words of the story, where Pete, the “Cain” character, imagines his wife confronting him and asking, “Where is he? Where is your brother?” (Wolff 212). While these observations unquestionably form a key pattern in helping the reader realize some of the story’s significance, Hannah never mentions the two other biblical parallels—both stories of brothers—that are equally, if not more, important to the story’s meaning: the sibling rivalry of Jacob and Esau, and, crucially, the parable to which the story’s title alludes, that of the prodigal son.³ In this deficit he is not alone; indeed, the standard approach treats the story simply as a character study illustrating the different natures of the two brothers whose lives the story chronicles.⁴ Similarly, although Farrell O’Gorman does an excellent job of exploring faith concerns in his study of Wolff’s short story collection *Back in the World*, he misses the bigger picture, claiming that this particular collection “seems to reflect Wolff’s Christian concerns more consistently than does his other fiction” (74).

Paul J. Contino, one of the few authors to address the connection between Wolff’s Catholicism and his writing, has produced a fine but regrettably brief survey of the topic in his essay “This Writer’s Life: Irony and Faith in the Work of Tobias Wolff.” In an article discussing five contemporary Catholic authors, “Catholicism in American Fiction,” John F. Desmond devotes merely half a page to Wolff, and the essay mostly leaves to the reader’s imagination the question of how faith concerns manifest themselves in the works that Desmond mentions. Perhaps most tellingly, Wolff’s name remains absent from important recent discussions of contemporary Catholic authors, including Anita Gandolfo’s *Testing the Faith: The New Catholic Fiction in America* (1992) and Mary Reichardt’s *Encyclopedia of Catholic Literature* (2004), nor is he mentioned in Reichardt’s more recent volume, *Between Human and Divine: The Catholic Vision in Contemporary Literature* (2010).⁵

So while there is some awareness that Wolff's work is shaped, in part, by his Catholic faith, an understanding of his work as being significantly indebted to Christian thought has simply not emerged, placing him in stark contrast to, for example, a writer such as Flannery O'Connor, whose work is largely understood through the lens of her Catholicism. The surprising lack of recognition for the spiritual dynamics of Wolff's work may be due in part to a general dearth of Wolff scholarship and to the tendency of existing scholarship to tread already established paths. Just as plausibly, however, this lack of recognition may provide tacit testimony to the subtlety of Wolff's artistry. Sacramentalism powerfully pervades the work of Tobias Wolff, but his style is less showy than the Southern Gothic of Flannery O'Connor.

That the two writers have not been more extensively linked is hardly surprising, given the differences that characterize their styles. Wolff himself has professed his own antipathy to approaching his work from an O'Connor-esque stance. While he confesses a debt to her work, he explains, "I have a different sense of what saves people than O'Connor's. It's grace, but mine takes different forms than hers"; eschewing O'Connor's "violent eruptions from heaven," Wolff crafts characters who find (or fail to respond to) grace as it appears in the ordinary, everyday moments of life (interview, 12-13). Stylistic differences notwithstanding, however, Wolff's oeuvre, in its own, more naturalistic way, reflects Catholic concerns just as deeply as does O'Connor's. In a variety of ways, Wolff blends realism with transcendence to craft a literary language which sometimes subtly reveals, and yet at other times loudly peals, a message of Christian faith.

Ample evidence attests to the importance of Christianity in Wolff's writing. Both Wolff's writings and his personal testimonies encourage the reader to see a connection between Wolff's Catholic faith and the questions that he takes up in his fiction. Given that Wolff is a memoirist, his own statements about his faith ought to be given some weight in any evaluation of his work, considering the acknowledged closeness of connection between the man and his writing, since his works often blur the line between fiction and personal history.⁶ Indeed, the central struggle of the unnamed protagonist of his novel *Old School*—a teen-aged boy in his final year of prep school who is seeking to realize his ambition of becoming a writer—chronicles his painful need to construct an idealized persona for himself versus his dawning awareness that good writing cannot spring from such a muddied fountain. In the process, he comes to re-evaluate the strengths of his most revered role model, Ernest Hemingway, a writer whose influence on Wolff cannot be underestimated.

Attracted initially to the reassuring images of macho manhood that he sees in Hemingway's stories, *Old School*'s protagonist-narrator comes to a deeper insight about what makes Hemingway's work so compelling. Initially, he says, he had "admired Hemingway above all other writers, but the truth was that I'd been drawn to him mostly by his life—and by a set of ideas about his work that spilled over from the legend. I'd gone in looking for images of toughness, self-sufficiency, freedom from the hobbles of family and class and conventional work, so that's what I'd found" (*Old School* 96). As he develops a more mature outlook,

the narrator reflects on his feelings about Hemingway's character Nick Adams and about Hemingway's work in general:

We had been taught not to confuse the writer with the work, but I couldn't separate my picture of Nick from my picture of Hemingway. And I had a sense that I wasn't really supposed to, that a certain confusion of author and character was intended. But the man who lived in these stories was not the steely warrior-genius whose image had so fogged my first impressions. He was in most respects an unremarkable, even banal man who got things wrong and suffered from nervousness and fear.... I judged him, but I also understood that he'd allowed me to. (*Old School* 97)

The novel climaxes when the narrator finally surrenders his pretense and allows himself to be seen, in his writing, as the person he actually is. Such a struggle seems to clearly reflect Wolff's own journey as a writer, since his memoirs portray him with an immediacy and an intimacy that is profoundly—and sometimes painfully—honest. Students of mine who have read his works cite a nearly universal experience of feeling as if they have come to know Wolff personally.

As regards faith, the picture of Wolff that emerges through his writing suggests that the issue plays a key role in his understanding of the world. Hannah introduces his study of Wolff's early short fiction with an important quote from Wolff, one taken from a *Life* magazine interview that was published in September, 1990. In it, Wolff describes his thoughts upon viewing a photograph of a friend with whom he had served in the Vietnam War: "this picture tells me a tale when I look at it, but not always the same tale. At different times it has been a comedy, a tragedy, and a miraculous narrative in which the lost are found, the dead brought back to life. And the story goes on. The Lord only knows where it will end" (Hannah xi). While Hannah acknowledges that the quotation embodies a faith angle, he does so with a telling "but," insisting instead that what really matters is that Wolff's short stories concern themselves with detailing conflicts which may or may not result in the characters' illumination.

While Hannah's statement is certainly valid, it is somewhat lacking in insight or even in particularity; it is more a comment about stories in general than about Wolff's work specifically, and it does tend to shoulder aside the insistently theological language of the quote, language that suggests that a theologically shaped vision of the world provides an important perspective to, on, and for Wolff. The particular phrasing that Wolff uses, describing his friend's story as "comedy," "tragedy," and sometimes, "a miraculous narrative," closely—and perhaps quite deliberately—parallels the title of a book by writer and theologian Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*.⁷ Wolff's phrasing suggests, at the very least, a vision of life in sacramental terms, and the particular allusions that pepper his speech—of the lost being found and of the dead being brought back to life—derive plainly from Scripture and point to a way of seeing life that is shaped by Christian sensibilities.

His closing comment, that “The Lord only knows where it will end,” might merely echo the empty and commonplace phrase “Lord knows,” but more likely, given the context of the entire quotation, it is meant as a serious statement that his friend’s life is ultimately in God’s loving hands. In fact, this trick of using bland, ordinary, everyday words to express a deeper or more profound truth is one of the distinguishing characteristics of Wolff’s writing.

The idea of there being a spiritual pattern to life—or at least a spiritual point to it—occurs in both of Wolff’s memoirs. The second chapter of *This Boy’s Life* relates Wolff’s “conversion” to Catholicism, his mother’s religion, and connects it to his dreams of transformation. His religious affiliation, at this point in his life, does not play a significant role in his identity formation, but here, as elsewhere, Wolff speaks kindly of the faith. The church is present for him largely through the character of Sister James, whom he clearly respects and whom he perceives as a kindly woman “who wanted to help me without knowing what kind of help I needed. Her good will worked strongly on me.... I would have surrendered to her if only I had known how” (20). When she makes an unannounced visit to his family’s apartment, he describes his feelings: “I didn’t want to let her in. At the same time, strangely, I did” (28). When the family moves from Utah to the Pacific Northwest, they seem to lose contact with the church. But the story ends on an ambiguous note, with Wolff and his friend Chuck driving along in the moonlight on a road trip that represents their journey through life. Filled with hopes for a glorious future, they share a bottle of Canadian Club and sing hymns together, first quietly, then increasingly robustly. As Wolff relates, “We sang them with respect and we sang them hard. . . . Our voices were strong. It was a good night to sing and we sang for all we were worth, as if we’d been saved” (288).⁸

Wolff offers up some of the ensuing chapters of his life’s story in his second memoir, *In Pharaoh’s Army*, which relates his experiences before, during, and after the Vietnam War. Again, faith here is not primary throughout, but its position is telling. Shortly after joining his battalion in Vietnam, Wolff is invited by his fellow officer, Sergeant Benet, to join him for mass. Although he had not attended often since childhood, he accepts the invitation, and he speaks of his comfort in the service: “The sound of [Latin], the smell of incense, the once-familiar rhythm of the liturgy gave me a sense of continuity with my own past.... I was pleased at how unhesitatingly I stood and knelt with the others, how quickly the responses came to my lips” (89). Just as Sister James had offered a source of sanity and compassion at a time when Wolff’s personal circumstances were bleak, so, too, Sergeant Benet embodies a wholesome decency, and he, too, is associated with faith. Though Wolff is a lieutenant and, as far as the military is concerned, out-ranks his fellow officer, he says of Benet, toward the end of the memoir, that “For eleven months we had lived together. Each of those mornings Sergeant Benet had appeared in fresh fatigues, with our day already mapped out. He called me sir. He found work for us to do when there didn’t seem to be any and somehow let me know what orders I should give him to preserve the fiction of my authority. I knew that he was my superior in every way that mattered” (162).

Wolff describes him as being always “a kind, dignified, forbearing man. He read the Bible every night before he went to bed” (29).

Just as in *This Boy's Life*, Wolff reserves his most important statement on the matter for the end of the story. After the war, having worked diligently to earn a place at Oxford, Wolff is astounded by the contrast it provides to the war-ravaged insanity of the preceding years. He describes his life at the time, saying, “It was the best the world had to give, and yet the very richness of the offering made me restless in the end. Comfort turned against itself. More and more I had the sense of avoiding some necessary difficulty, of growing in cleverness and facility without growing otherwise. Of once again being adrift” (216). The answer comes to him as he works through a translation of the gospels from Old English, and the words come upon him with a freshness and an insistence that is a revelation to him, telling him of “the wise man who built his house upon a rock and the foolish man who built his house upon the sand. ‘And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell, and great was the fall of it’” (Wolff 216; Matthew 7:24-27). He concludes with the conviction, humbly but sincerely stated, that “I would do well to build my house upon a rock, whatever that meant” (217). Since Christ implies that he, himself, provides that firm foundation, these lines reveal that Wolff’s true conversion to Catholicism caps his second memoir.

Despite the fact that they have largely failed to attract comment on the matter, a number of Wolff’s works engage directly and overtly with faith and its practitioners. His first collection of short stories, *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*, published in 1981, includes the story “An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke,” in which two English professors, both practicing Catholics, must determine how they will treat one another in light of their differing values and personal shortcomings. The volume’s eponymously titled concluding story alludes to, draws on, and finally specifically references the struggles of the North American Martyrs, a dedicated group of Jesuit missionaries who were slaughtered in the strife between the Iroquois and the Huron in the 1640s.

Wolff’s second published collection of short stories, *Back in the World* (1985), includes “The Missing Person,” a story concerning Father Leo, a priest adrift in a church that he does not quite know how to serve and a man in search of how he can best fulfill his vocation. Its closing story, “The Rich Brother,” tells the story of Pete and Donald, the latter of whom is most noteworthy for a life-long search for spiritual meaning, embodied, at the time the story takes place, in Donald’s membership and residence at a communal Pentecostal farm and clearly proclaimed through the lettering on his T-shirt, “Try God.” Although the collection’s title has most often been understood, and rightly so, as a reference to the way Vietnam veterans styled their return to the U. S. and to civilian life, it has deeper, more theological implications as well. As Wolff explains in an interview with Bonnie Lyons and Bill Oliver, “It wasn’t just Vietnam. ‘The world’ is what people in religious orders—nuns and priests—call secular life. That’s the way Jesus talks about it: The world’s yoke is heavy, my yoke is light. So ‘back in the world’ is an expression which has many connotations” (9). The title story of his third published collection, “The Night in Question,” features a sermon illustration

recounted at length by a once-troubled but now apparently contented man who has clearly found hope and transformation through the message of the church.

Drawing upon the rich resources of Christian history, Wolff most frequently imbues a spiritual significance into his works through the use of scriptural allusion. In a heartbreaking story detailing the “riches-to-riches” career trajectory of a young computer nerd, played off against the inexorable decline of a once-brilliant but now down-on-his-luck whiz kid of the preceding generation, Wolff calls attention to Christian values by alluding in the title of his story to one of the most painful and heart-wrenching utterances of Jesus’ earthly career, “The Poor are Always with Us.” The title holds sway over readers as they watch the moral choices of Russell, the story’s twenty-one-year-old protagonist, a man who genuinely believes that he wants to do the moral thing and who proclaims clearly, “I know the difference between right and wrong” (65), but whose moral choices lead him, by the end of the story, to embrace and live by the very values that the text has associated with corruption and decay. While Russell’s choices appear superficially to be correct, justifiable, and natural, the story’s Christ-haunted title calls into question the way in which the values by which most people lead their everyday lives reinforce the crushing cycles of poverty and abuse, and it forces the reader to examine whether the ongoing sufferings of the poor among us are not some rudimentary necessity of human existence but rather, a function of the fact that the “haves” will have it so.

Wolff again employs titular scriptural allusion as a way of pointing toward biblical values in “The Rich Brother.” Here, Wolff retells the story of the prodigal son,⁹ but to contextualize it for a secular and materialistic Western society, he must invert the values. Thus Pete, the rich, elder brother, has achieved all of the icons of worldly success: he “worked hard and made a lot of money, but not any more than he thought he deserved. He had two daughters, a sailboat, a house from which he could see a thin slice of the ocean, and friends doing well enough in their own lives not to wish bad luck on him” (191). Donald, the younger brother and therefore, via parallel, the prodigal, has made a failure of his life, not by wasteful and riotous living but by its opposite. Whereas Pete’s ambition is to follow in the footsteps of his parents, who had not “found it necessary to believe in anything” and who had “managed to be decent people without making fools of themselves” (192), Donald embarrasses Pete by his continual spiritual seeking, his anti-materialistic attitude, and his failure to pursue a lucrative line of work. In addition to invoking the parable of the prodigal son, and, by inverting it, calling into question the values which contemporary society upholds as “right” and “righteous,” Wolff completes a biblical tour de force by invoking two further biblical stories of brothers: the stories of Jacob and Esau, and the original story of sibling rivalry, the murder of Abel by Cain. These scriptural allusions provide a set of alternative possibilities, a rich fabric against which Wolff’s story is to be read, and, without being preachy, they point to a value system which transcends and corrects the secular philosophies embraced by his story’s protagonist.

But Wolff does not imbue his works with spiritual values only by depicting worldly characters and implicitly questioning their choices through

selected but telling scriptural allusions: he also portrays characters genuinely wrestling with how to live out a life of faith in the midst of the brokenness of the world that they live in. His Christians are not merely straw men, flawed hypocrites whom readers can smugly love to hate, but real people seeking to be faithful in the face of the pressures of real life. In his short story “The Liar,” a paean to the art of story-telling, he provides a tapestry of responses to the pain of life around us. There is that of the protagonist’s father, who reacts with wit and sneering cynicism—his way of rising above the muck that he sees about him. The protagonist’s brother, Michael, is involved in social action: he “had given up college to work with runaway children in Los Angeles” (165). The protagonist’s mother, Margaret, faithfully attends Mass at four o’clock every day. She “did volunteer work at Children’s Hospital and St. Anthony’s Dining Hall and collected things for the St. Vincent de Paul Society” (162). The text describes her as “a lighter of candles,” while his father had been a “curser of the dark” (162). James, her son, and the liar of the story’s title, tells morbid stories as a way of preparing himself for the worst that is sure to come. But he is transformed when he comes to see his mother’s activism in a new light, as an imaginative victory against the darkness: “I thought of Mother singing ‘O Magnum Mysterium,’ saying grace, praying with easy confidence, and it came to me that her imagination was superior to mine. She could imagine things as coming together, not falling apart” (172). The story ends as he comforts the passengers of a stranded bus by telling them uplifting stories, speaking to them the language of story and hope, addressing them “in what was surely an ancient and holy tongue” (175). Thus, the art of story-telling participates sacramentally in mediating hope and possibility to the reader. Similarly, in *Old School*, Wolff describes the author’s vocation as resembling that of “a monk in his cell praying for the world—something he performed alone, but for other people” (163).

In “The Night in Question,” Wolff again offers insight into the life of a believer, but Frank is nothing like the exemplary Margaret of “The Liar.” A victim of physical and emotional abuse as a child, Frank has lived a life of reckless destructiveness, always rescued from the consequences of his abysmal choices by his co-dependent older sister, Frances. But things have changed. Although Frances “had come to her brother’s apartment to hold his hand over a disappointment in love,...Frank ate his way through half the cherry pie she’d brought him and barely mentioned the woman. He was in an exalted state over a sermon he’d heard that afternoon” (174). The story does not say so outright, but it is manifestly clear: Frank has become like the demoniac whom Jesus healed, whose acquaintances are dumb-founded to find him clothed and in his right mind (Mark 5:1-15).

The sermon that has so captivated Frank features a story familiar in Christian circles: a switch operator working a drawbridge must choose between lowering the bridge and thus killing his son, who at the crucial moment is amongst the machinery, or allowing the train to derail and letting hundreds of passengers die. With compelling effect, Wolff deploys the emotional baggage freighting the relationship between Frank, Frances, and their abusive father as an explosive counterpoint to the loving father of the sermon illustration, an

illustration which Frank recounts in its entirety and which comprises the bulk of Wolff's story. Frank has come to understand the love and fatherhood of God, and he intones rapturously, reverently: "we are never alone, ever. We are in our Father's presence in the light of the day and in the dark of the night, even in that darkness when we run from Him, hiding our faces like fearful children" (181). But Frances responds to this truth not with gratitude but with rage, her need to play God apparent in her resolve to reinvest herself with importance and to retain her ascendancy in Frank's life, even if it meant "tak[ing] on the Father of All, that incomprehensible bully" (184). That Frank no longer needs her protection—that he has found some better way of managing and coping with the pain of his childhood—is as apparent to the reader as it is intolerable to Frances, and Wolff allows his readers to watch these two characters grapple with what the love of God might mean for their lives.

Another of the faithful whose struggles Wolff depicts is Professor Brooke in "An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke." The primary focus of the story is on the relationship between two professors, the upright and respectable Professor Brooke and his flashy and apparently rather loose-living colleague, Riley. Both are married men and practicing Catholics, and they often see one another when they attend Mass with their families. Brooke takes a grim pleasure in considering himself above Riley, whom he finds it very easy to pass judgment on, and in priding himself on having a very satisfactory marriage that leaves him with no felt need to pursue the temptations that appear to lead Riley astray. Wolff structures their story around the theological bases of confession, judgment, and absolution.

Brooke takes the lead, doling out an easy condemnation. Suspicious—and possibly rightfully so—of Riley's conduct toward a female student, Brooke eyes his colleague disapprovingly in church the following Sunday, watching Riley as he went "up to take communion [and] then return[ed] to his seat with downcast eyes and folded hands. Was he praying, or was he trying to remember whether he'd checked his collar for stains? Where did Riley find the time, considering his tireless production of superficial articles and books, for romancing girls who had not yet mastered the English sentence?... Did Mrs. Riley know?" (28). From the standpoint of his own righteousness, and across the personal distance that separates him from Riley, Brooke finds it easy to disdain and condemn.

But the two men find themselves sharing an unexpected intimacy when Riley, in need of transportation, phones Brooke on the eve of a conference they are both attending and they are thus thrown into more prolonged and closer-than-usual proximity. Their contact almost immediately takes on a confessional overtone. Instead of finding Riley performing to expectations—brash, mouthy, and over-bearing—Brooke finds his colleague unexpectedly taciturn and preoccupied. On the outskirts of town, Riley asks Brooke to pull over so that he can make a phone call from a public phone booth, and the call, to judge from Riley's expressions and gesticulations, is a stressful one. Although Riley claims he has been arguing with his publisher, Brooke suspects quite a different explanation, and he may well be right, for Riley, perhaps inspired by his own soul-searching and seemingly on the verge of confession himself, turns to Brooke

and asks, “What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?” (29). But when Brooke is stunned speechless, unable to come up with any truthful transgression of a morally serious nature, the topic of conversation is dropped.

Quite unexpectedly, Brooke’s life is changed when he finds himself, for a variety of rather complex reasons, spending the night with a woman whom he meets at the hotel where the conference is being held. Riley had joined Brooke and Ruth at the bar where they had gone together for a drink that night—in fact, he had tried to pick her up before Brooke decided to take her home to prevent another of Riley’s conquests—so Riley has little difficulty in interpreting the meaning behind the unrumpled state of Brooke’s hotel bed when Riley stops in, as they had previously agreed, the following morning so that they can make an early start. But the unslept-in bed is Brooke’s confession to Riley: “He had considered messing it up a little, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it” (41-42). On the drive home, it is Brooke’s turn to be taciturn.

As Brooke drops Riley off at the latter’s home, Riley, unprompted, simply offers absolution, perhaps as facilely as Brooke had earlier indulged in condemnation, saying, “Listen. I don’t know what happened last night and I don’t care. As far as I’m concerned I’ve never heard of anyone named Ruth” (42).¹⁰ Brooke protests—“It wasn’t like that”—and Riley responds—one imagines, knowingly, “It never is” (43). Brooke never confesses to his wife, unable to put her through the pain the knowledge would cause her, although his secret continues to pain him. But his confession before Riley becomes a lifelong profession, with salutary effects: “Never again, he decided, would he sit in the back of the church and watch Riley. From now on he would sit in the front of the church and let Riley, knowing what he knew, watch him. He would kneel before Riley as we must all, he thought, kneel before one another” (43).

Wolff takes this same theme of confession and wrings from it a strikingly different result in his short story “Hunters in the Snow,” a story set on a wintry day in the countryside outside of Spokane. In this story of shifting loyalties and sinful self-indulgence, the sacraments of confession and communion are misappropriated, misused, and disturbingly parodied, with the most dire results ensuing. At the outset of the story, Kenny is the most powerful character in the triad of friends. His power is fueled by a secret knowledge of the shortcomings of his two friends, Frank and Tub, and he deploys his power ruthlessly, needling, prodding, and insulting his hunting buddies while dropping broad hints about their moral weaknesses. Kenny takes a keen delight in baiting his friends, teasing them mercilessly about their eating habits, in Tub’s case, and about “a certain babysitter,” in Frank’s case, goading them toward unwilling confession as a way of humiliating them even further. At first, Frank sides with Kenny against Tub, as the latter’s struggles with weight management are no secret to anyone, despite Tub’s insistence that his problem is hormonal.

But the confessions that Kenny attempts to extract against the will of his friends flow freely enough when the need for survival dictates a change of strategy. Everything changes when Tub, with due provocation, shoots Kenny in what he believes to be an act of self-defense. They call the hospital, but no ambulances are available, so Tub and Frank must now put aside their differences

if they are to work together to get Kenny to the nearest hospital, fifty miles away across the countryside via unfamiliar roads. The woman from whose house they have called dictates a complicated set of directions that will get them to the hospital more quickly. But they have additional problems to contend with: while Kenny lies in the back of his own pick-up truck, a shotgun-sized hole in his side testimony to the effects of his callous victimization of his friends, his friends sit freezing in the cab of the truck, the heater out of order, cold air gushing in through a broken window, and with only two blankets between them to offset the effects of the cold.

As Frank and Tub weigh their own needs against Kenny's, they find it increasingly difficult to muster sympathy for the man who has brought them to this pass. While they sit in a tavern, trying to warm themselves up for the next leg of the journey, Frank volunteers an apology for his ribbing of Tub; then he goes on to admit to his decision to leave his wife for his fifteen-year-old babysitter. And Tub cements the collusion between them by offering not condemnation but support. When Frank humbly suggests, "I guess you think I'm a complete bastard," Tub sets him on the wrong road, morally speaking, by supplying encouragement and support instead: "No, Frank, I don't think that.... When you've got a friend it means you've always got someone on your side, no matter what" (23).

And Frank's confession opens the door to Tub's admissions. Some distance beyond the tavern, Tub admits that he accidentally left the directions behind. Frank, however, offers understanding and reassurance rather than condemnation, stating consolingly, "That's okay. I remember them pretty well" (24). This change of attitude heartens Tub, who, at a further stop along the way, voices his gratitude, telling Frank, "You know...what you told me back there, I appreciate it. Trusting me" (24).

Emboldened by Frank's acceptance, Tub now freely confesses to his overindulgence in food, supplying Frank with the particulars and all the juicy details: that he stashes food in the paper towel machine at work, and that after a frugal breakfast at home, he "scarf[s] all the way to work. Oreos, Mars Bars, Twinkies. Sugar Babies. Snickers" (25). Frank, with dawning delight, recognizes in Tub a kindred, self-indulgent spirit and insists on cementing their fellowship with an orgiastic parody of communion designed as an unabashed celebration of Tub's worst shortcomings. At Frank's insistence, four orders of pancakes are spread before Tub, taking the place of communion wafers, and an entire bottle of pancake syrup stands in for the communion wine. Frank pushes Tub to indulge, until the syrup drips down his chin while he digs in with his fork, calling to mind the familiar picture of a bearded devil with pitchfork.¹¹ Meanwhile, Kenny languishes in the bed of the truck, and the story ends with the wry observation, applicable on more than one level, that the three friends will not successfully navigate the roads they are travelling, having taken a wrong turn "a long way back" (26).

While the imagery of the two friends' meal as a fiendish communion is subtle enough to be missed, it clearly conjures up for the perceptive reader a scene with spiritual resonances, and Wolff delights in painting such scenes, imbuing the

ordinary and everyday with Christian overtones. Two stories provide evocative illustration of Wolff's use of the technique. In "Passengers," a routine business trip becomes an ordinary-extraordinary journey in which the physical matters of life and death push the stakes into metaphysical territory, demanding that the characters make this-world choices that clearly have far-reaching spiritual implications. Similarly, a road trip in the story "The Rich Brother" takes two siblings on a journey in which the stakes are much higher than might at first be imagined.

In "Passengers," Wolff follows his protagonist, Glen, a boating supplies contractor, on a road trip along the coast from Depoe Bay to Seattle. The story begins with an environmental description which doubles as a metaphor for the state of Glen's life. Wolff relates that "Glen left Depoe Bay a couple of hours before sunup to beat the traffic and found himself in a heavy fog; he had to lean forward and keep the windshield wipers going to see the road at all. Before long the constant effort and the lulling motion of the rhythm of the wipers made him drowsy, and he pulled into a gas station to throw some water in his face and buy coffee" (73).

Though the descriptions are physical, their significance is spiritual. Glen's journey begins "a couple of hours before sunup"—thus, literally in the dark; and as he travels he achieves not enlightenment via the sunrise but instead an increased state of stupor, as represented by the heavy fog and by his drowsiness. Indeed, although this is presumably a road Glen knows well, since it is a regular part of his route, what emerges from this opening portrait is a sense of his lostness and vulnerability: in order to be able to "see the road at all"—that is, to discern the path he should take—he must continually "lean forward," resisting his natural ennui and love of ease, and "keep the windshield wipers going"—that is, to continually refresh his own perspective of the world (73). But Wolff foreshadows the outcome of the story, pointing to the way in which the "constant effort" of vigilance, coupled with the "lulling motion of the wipers" (73), merely exhausts, rather than invigorates, Glen.

The points of moral and spiritual decision in the story center around Bonnie, an aging, would-be-former prostitute whom Glen reluctantly picks up as a hitchhiker at his gas station stop. He first encounters her when she steps in front of the vehicle and begins, unasked, to wash his windshield, an action indicative of her role in bringing some clarity to Glen's vision. He ends up acquiring her companionship and that of her symbolically named dog, Sunshine, whose behavior will function, at the first crisis of the story, to bring moral and spiritual clarity to both Glen and Bonnie. But Wolff offers the telling detail that, in his fog, Glen "cannot see [Bonnie's] face clearly" (73), thus foreshadowing his later inability to respond constructively to the crisis of conscience that Glen will face in regard to her.

The first crisis of the story is precipitated by Glen's careless inattention. His choices, as the vehicle's driver, represent the course of his life. In spite of the dangers represented by the fog, and in spite of the presence of distractions, in the form of the quirky Bonnie and her large and lively dog, Glen has been driving rather dangerously, yet clearly oblivious to the danger, rhythmically squeezing a

tennis ball, for the rather inconsequential purpose of improving his golf swing, while keeping only one hand on the wheel (76). When Bonnie's behavior startles him into (literally) dropping the ball, an act which surely serves as another metaphor for Glen's upcoming moral failure in regards to Bonnie, Glen's thoughtless action provides the catalyst for his moment of moral clarity, provided, aptly enough, by the initiative of Sunshine, who darts after the dropped ball with the sudden action of a ray of light breaking through the fog. Glen loses his tenuous grip on the wheel, the car slides and spins, and when they manage to right themselves, they have just narrowly missed being mowed down by a convoy of logging trucks that roars past them out of the fog.

This near-death experience is transformative for both Glen and Bonnie. After observing that they have just escaped physical annihilation—"I thought we were goners," Bonnie says, and Glen adds, "They wouldn't even have found us... Not even our shoes" (82)—both recognize that they have been given a rare gift, a second chance at life, and both avow renewal, a change on the moral plane of life. "I'm going to change my ways," Bonnie declares immediately, and she knows precisely what to do. She tells Glen, "I'm going to pay back the money I owe, and write my mother a letter, even if she is a complete bitch. I'll be nicer to Sunshine. No more shoplifting. No more..." (82) and the traffic drowns out the rest of the declaration, but the second crisis of the story makes it clear that she desires to turn her back on a life of prostitution.

In the face of this near-miraculous salvation, Glen, too, desires to change. He echoes Bonnie's declaration of resolve, but his usual foggy thinking obscures the possibilities for him. As the omniscient narrator points out, Glen's affirmation is sincere if fuzzy, since Glen, in the first place, "wasn't sure just what was wrong with his ways" (82). Fortunately, the second and decisive climax of the story is approaching, and it will provide Glen with an unambiguous, although not easy, answer to his uncertainty.

On the road again, Bonnie affirms a sense of a special link bonding her to Glen—not, as she puts it, "boy-girl feelings" (82) but, presumably, something more profound—whatever name one puts to the experience of having survived near-certain death with another person. But Glen, despite his acknowledgement of this inescapable intimacy, fails the moral test that arises from it. When they reach Seattle, Bonnie gives him the address of the girlfriend with whom she intends to stay. The friend lives in a transients' hotel, but she is not at home; as Bonnie explains, her friend "came and went at all hours" (83). When Glen asks where the woman works, Bonnie replies, "Around. You know. Here and there... I don't want to stay with her, not really. I don't want to get caught up in all this again" (83).

Glen listens, and he feels that he should help Bonnie; in fact, he recognizes that he wants to. But he easily talks himself out of trying, instead thinking of the complications that she would bring into his life and that of his roommate, Martin, who is also his boss at work and the owner of the car Glen is driving. Ultimately, he opts out with the easy lie, telling Bonnie "that he really wanted to help out but that it wasn't possible" (84), adding, for good measure, the supererogatory lie that his roommate is allergic to dogs. Adding insult to injury,

he slips her a \$20.00 bill as a “kindness”; bitterly, Bonnie interprets it as a payment for services not yet rendered. The depth of Glen’s failure is implicit in Bonnie’s parting words to him: “I owe you one. You know where to find me” (84).

When Glen returns home, in response to his vague resolution to live differently, he decides to smoke the joints that fell out of Bonnie’s purse in the car, having never gotten high before. He goes quietly downstairs to a small room in the basement where they store firewood, so that Martin will not catch him at it, but even so, “What the hell” Glen thinks (86), conjuring up the image of the scene that Wolff is about to paint. He sits in a darkened room, since the light would give him away. But while he is there, Martin comes downstairs to iron a massive pile of shirts, and Glen is trapped. Martin turns on the radio and parodies the music, bringing

his voice to a controlled scream, not singing the melody but cutting across the line of it, making fun of the blues. Glen had never heard a worse noise. It became part of the absolute darkness in which he sat, along with the bubbling sigh of the iron and the sulfurous odor of Martin’s aftershave and the pall of smoke that filled his little room. He tried to reckon how many shirts might be in that pile. Twenty. Thirty. Maybe more. It would take forever. (87)

By rendering this ordinary scene hellish in its particulars, the text passes judgment on Glen’s moral choices.

Perhaps Wolff’s most piquant use of symbolic detail is to be found in “The Rich Brother.” The plot of the story is remarkably simple: Pete picks up his brother Donald in Paso Robles, and en route to Pete’s home in Santa Cruz, they pick up a hitchhiking con man. But beneath this ordinary surface lurks hidden depths. Donald is not only Pete’s brother; he is also a God figure, as both his spirituality, a character trait well developed in the text, and his “Try God” T-shirt suggest. More subtly, there is his overall relationship to Pete: he is the part of Pete’s life which Pete tries repeatedly to distance himself from, to repudiate, and even to destroy. Pete’s reactions to Donald are his reactions to God and to faith: as Donald points out, “It’s all a big laugh to you, isn’t it?” and “You have this compulsion to make me look foolish” (199). When Donald reminds his brother that years before, Pete had tried to kill him, punching him repeatedly after he had undergone surgery, Pete disclaims ever having done so, dismissing Donald’s assertion with excuses often used to shoulder aside the claims of faith: “kid stuff,” Pete claims; “[a]ncient history” (201). Nor will Pete admit that Donald is correct in his uncanny claim that Pete dreams about him: Pete is not up to owning that in his dream, Pete is blind and he needs Donald to help him (201).

Pete is more at ease with the con man whom Donald invites to ride along than Pete is with his brother, apparently because he believes that he understands the con man and has nothing to fear from him. But this is not just a man selling shares in a gold mine in Peru; he is the devil incarnate, as Wolff’s choice phrasing so tellingly reveals. In response to Donald’s terse observation, “Dark night,” the

hitch-hiking Webster replies, significantly, “Stygian” (203). He tells the two brothers that “It was my own vaulting ambition that first led us to the tropics and kept us in the tropics all those many years, exposed to every evil. Truly I have much to answer for” (203-04). He states that he has come from “the lowlands,” and when asked what it is like there, he replies, in a “sepulchral” tone, “Another world. A world better imagined than described” (204). Between these two characters, Pete is trapped, confronted at every point with the reminder that that the fabric of his life is fraught, one way or another, with a theological significance that he can attempt to deny but which he cannot escape.

As the foregoing demonstrates, a theological impulse and questions of belief and practice resonate throughout a number of Wolff’s works. That this is, indeed, a significant aspect of his work may be gleaned from the importance that the topic has taken on in the first three of his four short-story collections. In his interview with Lyons and Oliver, Wolff explains, “When you use the title of one story for the title of a collection, that story really has to carry a lot of weight, because in some way it has to support the claims of all the other stories” (9-10). Since the eponymous stories in two of the collections are richly theological in their implications, they infuse their companion tales with a spiritual resonance.

“In the Garden of the North American Martyrs,” the titular story of the first collection, updates the genre of the medieval saint’s life to tell the story of a contemporary woman’s struggle to find a voice in the academy.¹² At its climax stands a prophetic denunciation of the wrongs of a self-interested and oppressive system of values, as the protagonist, Mary, quotes from the Old Testament prophets Obadiah and Micah, proclaiming, “Mend your lives. . . . You have deceived yourselves in the pride of your hearts and the strength of your arms. Though you soar aloft like the eagle, though your nest is set among the stars, thence will I bring you down, says the Lord. Turn from power to love. Be kind. Do justice. Walk humbly” (Obad. 1:4; Mic. 6:8; Wolff 135). Thus, spiritual values claim ascendancy. Likewise, the titular story of Wolff’s third collection, “The Night in Question,” is the story in the volume that carries the most spiritual heft. While Wolff’s second collection does not take its title from any of the stories contained therein, its most spiritually powerful story, “The Rich Brother,” occupies the closing position and leaves the reader with his or her final impression.

While it would be simplistic, reductive, and naïve to claim that spiritual considerations are Wolff’s sole or exclusive concern, the works discussed above demonstrate that they are pervasive enough to merit more attention and commentary than they have heretofore been given. The current and accepted understanding of Wolff’s fiction as work deeply concerned with questions of moral and ethical choice can only be augmented by a deeper understanding which recognizes and integrates Wolff’s theological vision with his moral one. Such an understanding would do much to rectify past omissions and to lead the way toward according Wolff due recognition and respect for his important contributions as a Catholic author.

Notes

¹ Wolff's interest in Jean de Brébeuf carries over into his fiction, for the Jesuit missionary features in a lecture given by the protagonist at the climax of Wolff's short story "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs."

² Among other noteworthy omissions is Wolff's failure to receive mention in *Some Catholic Writers* (2007), a volume which discusses "a number of writers who in their different ways were influenced by their Catholic faith," including even many who "would have been surprised by, even unhappy with, the designation Catholic" (www.staugustine.net). He likewise receives no coverage in Paul Giles's 1992 study, *American Catholic Arts and Fictions: Culture, Ideology and Aesthetics*, nor does he receive mention in *Literary Giants, Literary Catholics*, published by Ignatius Press in 2005. Indeed, I have been unable to locate any compilation or index which includes Wolff among its listing of Catholic authors.

³ The mention of Cain and Abel occurs in Hannah's brief but unfortunately mistaken characterization of Wolff's short story "The Rich Brother." According to Hannah, Wolff's story climaxes at the point at which "an Abel checks his reach for the deadly stone." But Hannah here confuses the details concerning the biblical original, for in it, it is Cain, not Abel, who slays his brother: Abel is the *victim* in the first biblically recorded homicide. Thus, it is Cain's parallel in Wolff's story—not Abel's—who is recalled in time to avoid committing a potentially murderous assault—a point that Hannah renders correctly in his more detailed discussion of the story on pages 83-86 of his book.

⁴ Pete, the "rich" brother in the story, gives rise to the Jacob-and-Esau allusion in his angry, worried rumination that he, the materially successful, hard-working brother, might not be the one to profit ultimately from his labors. He fumes, "What ...if there really was a blessing to be had, and the blessing didn't come to the one who deserved it, the one who did all the work, but to the other" (210). In doing so, he echoes the well-known Old Testament story in which the twins, Jacob and Esau, seek the blessing of their father, Isaac. Esau, the elder brother, loses out on the blessing that is his birthright when Jacob, the younger, tricks his father into providing it for him instead. Genesis 27 recounts the incident.

⁵ The Kennedy and Gioia anthology illustrates the customary approach. The editors place the story in their section on "Character," and they follow it up with a series of questions designed to elicit the differences between the two brothers' personalities. Their summary of the story, provided in their Table of Contents, states simply that "Blood may be thicker than water, but sometimes the tension between brothers is thicker than blood" (v). Nothing in their presentation of the story suggests that a deeper, more symbolic level is operative: they portray it simply as a study of contrasting characters, without any indication that the story

actually portrays an important moment in an ongoing struggle of character development for the story's title character.

⁶ Two examples will suffice to illustrate the point. Wolff's memoir *This Boy's Life* opens with an incident taken from a road trip with his mother, Rosemary. The opening paragraph of the story offers a quite ordinary and matter-of-fact account of radiator problems encountered en route; the text begins with the words, "Our car boiled over again just after my mother and I crossed the Continental Divide" (3). While the two of them wait for the car to cool down and the journey to proceed, they hear, "from somewhere above us," the sound of an airhorn, and then a semi careens wildly past them, its brakes having failed; the out-of-control truck hurtles around a corner and over a cliff. While the incident provides a dramatic and sober opening to the story, it also offers an interpretive conundrum—or perhaps a clue. For the story is logically inconsistent. Engines overheat when cars have *climbed* grades; brakes overheat when vehicles have *descended* grades. A truck with burned-out brakes would not overtake them from above; it would instead be a danger at the base of the grade. Thus, the anecdote provides the reader with an early warning that truth and fiction may be tightly interwoven and difficult to disentangle: the author as character, and the author as fiction writer, blend, merge, and diverge seamlessly.

A similarly instructive incident occurs in Wolff's Vietnam War memoir, *In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War*. In his chapter "Old China," Wolff recounts a harrowing experience in which a respected friend attempts to get him reassigned to a more dangerous and exciting post, much to Wolff's chagrin and horror. The chapter ends with Wolff's description of himself deliberately damaging a priceless piece of china that he must ship to his friend. Here, Wolff offers a metafictional intrusion, musing,

Really, now. Is that part about the bowl true? Did I do that?

No. Never. I would never deliberately take something precious from a man—the pride of his collection, say, or his own pride—and put it under my foot like that, and twist my foot on it, and break it.

No. Not even for his own good. (159)

Here, Wolff raises—but leaves unanswered—the question of the degree of fictionality of the narrative. The reader cannot answer with certainty where fact leaves off and fiction begins, but that is precisely the point with Wolff: the man is inextricably intertwined with his work, and his facts blend with his fictions.

⁷ Telling the truth is also a question that interests Wolff deeply as a writer. For example, in *In Pharaoh's Army*, Wolff grapples with the question of how to retell, in a manner that is truthful, honest, and real, the stories of his Vietnam days, any such recounting being necessarily fraught with "problems, problems of recollection, problems of tone, problems of ethics" (207). The problems of and need for truthfulness are central to *Old School*, which is very appropriately prefaced by an epigraph taken from poet Mark Strand's "Elegy for my Father":

“Why did you lie to me?”
“I always thought I told the truth.”
“Why did you lie to me?”
“Because the truth lies like nothing else and I love the truth.”
(emphasis in original; n. p.)

⁸ In an interview with Bonnie Lyons and Bill Oliver, Wolff explains that the memoir quite intentionally ends with a message of hope, notwithstanding that these particular hopes are destined to be disappointed. Wolff explains that “the fact that hope persisted is what I wanted to leave at the end of the story” (2), thus imbuing the conclusion of his memoir with a theological virtue.

⁹ The prodigal son is clearly one of Wolff’s favorite biblical stories. It serves to structure “The Rich Brother,” and it also provides an essential interpretive angle on another of his short stories, “The Other Miller.” It furthermore provides the conclusion to his novel *Old School*: as Dean Makepeace returns, after a self-imposed exile, to the novel’s prep school to resume his teaching duties, “he felt no more than a boy again—but a very well-versed boy who couldn’t help thinking of the scene described by these old words, surely the most beautiful words ever written or said: His father, when he saw him coming, ran to meet him” (195).

¹⁰ Her name provides a complex pun. At the bar, Riley enthuses, “Ruth! What a beautiful name. ‘Whither thou goest I will go; wherever thou lodgest,’ [and,] looking right into her face, ‘there also will I lodge’” (38). Riley’s appropriation of lines spoken by the biblical character Ruth (in Ruth 1:16) here provides him with a convenient pick-up line. But his later absolution of Brooke is richly ambiguous, for here the word must necessarily be understood with reference to its emotional register: as signifying pity or compassion; sorrow or grief; self-reproach, contrition, or remorse. Clearly, in his absolution of Brooke, Riley is demonstrating compassion; presumably, he has known sorrow (witness his on-the-road telephone conversation); but if he has ever felt self-reproach, contrition, or remorse, the text offers no evidence of it. It remains for Professor Brooke to become an exemplar of all of these qualities, and to his credit and benefit, he does so.

¹¹ I am grateful to the students of my Senior Seminar on Tobias Wolff, who first called to my attention some of the sacramental symbols in this story.

¹² For a fuller discussion of this story and its spiritual dimensions, see my essay “The Virgin Martyr Updated: ‘In the Garden of the North American Martyrs’ as a Secular Saint’s Life” in *The Year’s Work in Medievalism*, ed. Gwendolyn Morgan (Vol. 20 and 21: Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007: 54-68).

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Embracing Paradox: A Dialogue of Suffering between John Paul II and Shusaku Endo

Lanta Davis

Shusaku Endo and Pope John Paul II took very different approaches in their attempts to tackle one of the most pervasive and troubling of all theological problems: theodicy. Their arguments are strikingly different, yet undeniably similar, reflecting the paradoxical nature of the problem. Because of this polarity, these two works can illuminate one another in a way that enriches the overall discussion of theodicy, the attempt to explain how a good and just God can allow suffering and evil.

Though Endo and the former Pope may not immediately seem candidates for comparison, both men were Catholics writing on theodicy in the twentieth century, attempting to shed light on a topic thrown into confusion after the overwhelming suffering of the Holocaust. The two men take different approaches, with Endo creating a historical novel, and the Pope writing a brief encyclical (apostolic letter); however, their contrasting methods actually contribute to the necessity of dialogue between these two works. Pope John Paul II's *Salvifici Doloris* is a theoretical meditation on suffering that aims to explain the existence, nature, endurance, and possible purposes of suffering. Endo's *Silence*, in contrast, is a fictionalized, psychological exploration of how a person of faith grapples with real suffering. The two works speak to each other, with John Paul II providing the theory and Endo the practical example. John Paul II's orthodox and biblical response to theodicy both affirms and denies Endo's controversial ending, while Endo's novel both affirms and denies the ability to put John Paul II's theology into real life practice. Using one to critique the other will help identify the strengths and flaws of both and will also highlight the key move that unites both works: an understanding of suffering based on the paradox and love of the Incarnation.

Salvifici Doloris* as a Critique of *Silence

Jewel Brooker says that the theme of *Silence*, theodicy, “involves the struggle to reconcile our ideas about God with our experience as human beings” (510). Endo wants to justify how not just the saints but also the weak-willed and sinful can still live faithfully. For Endo, “the title is not just about God's silence but people's silence. History is written by the victor, but God loves the weak and sinners” (Fujita 106). Endo saw himself as the latter, rather than the former, and he conveys the story of the persecuted, of those “who trod the *fumi-e*” (a picture of Jesus the Japanese used as an instrument to declare apostasy), of those who “are

buried in silence as blots and traitors” (Endo, “Concerning” 101). “History knows their sufferings,” he declares, and it is “the task of a novelist to listen to their sufferings” (101). Thus, Endo writes a story about a man trying to reconcile his lowly, weak state with the glory of the Christian faith.

Endo’s portrayal of Father Rodrigues as he is challenged by the reality of what it means to suffer for his faith is a powerful insight into the psychology behind suffering. Rodrigues is trying to work out the question John Paul II considers in *Salvifici Doloris*: “What is the Christian meaning of suffering?” And Rodrigues, in many ways, is also an exemplum for the Pope’s answer about suffering. He becomes, through the course of the novel, a fictional example of the salvific transformation of suffering; he starts to share in the sufferings of Christ and to understand love—two developments which complicate his obvious sin of apostasy and thus pave the way for the end of the novel, a glimpse of Rodrigues as an apostate of great faith. Much of the debate on the novel revolves around whether or not Rodrigues was correct to stomp on the *fumie* and, thus, apostatize. However, forcing a decision of right or wrong may hinder the complex nature of Rodrigues’s decision. Thus, though a dialogue between John Paul II’s *Salvific Doloris* and Endo’s *Silence* will not provide the definitive answer to the debate over the novel’s ending, it will shed some light on the paradoxically orthodox and unorthodox capacities of Rodrigues’s decision.

Though Rodrigues formally apostatizes, Endo hints that the priest does not inwardly renounce his faith. Rodrigues questions and doubts, but he still offers his experiences and concerns to God. These actions are what John Paul II declares to be the general human reaction to sin, a reaction that includes “*a typically human protest [...] with the question “why”*” (26). Rodrigues, following the pattern of the Israelite laments and Christ himself on the cross, utters both a heart-wrenching protest and a sincere request for an answer to his question of “why?”:

Why have you abandoned us so completely?, he prayed in a weak voice. Even the village was constructed for you; and have you abandoned it in its ashes? Even when the people are cast out of their homes have you not given them courage? Have you just remained silent like the darkness that surrounds me? Why? At least tell me why. We are not strong men like Job who was afflicted with leprosy as a trial. There is a limit to our endurance. Give us no more suffering. So he prayed. (96).

In praying this way, Rodrigues joins himself with the Christian tradition of the lament. His prayer has all the components of most laments—address (to God), complaint (abandonment), petition (no more suffering), motivation (village constructed for you, reminder of Job), and a vow (limit to endurance) (Brueggemann 6). Rodrigues is not despairing by expressing his suffering in this manner; he is actually showing a commitment to the faith and to the Christian tradition of response to suffering. Christ, in fact, cried out in lament upon his death, echoing Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

John Paul II asserts that Christ answers his own question by suffering on the Cross (26). He “does not answer directly and he does not answer in the abstract this human questioning about the meaning of suffering. Man hears Christ’s saving answer as he himself gradually becomes a sharer in the sufferings of Christ” (26). Thus, when Rodrigues asks the same question in the same manner as Christ did, he receives the answer of Christ’s Cross and with it, the command to take up his own cross and share in Christ’s sufferings, “spiritually uniting himself to the Cross of Christ” (John Paul II 26). His sufferings become Christ’s, and Christ’s sufferings become his.

Rodrigues constantly parallels Christ’s suffering throughout the novel. His suffering makes him better understand Christ’s suffering, and it introduces him to a new depth of knowledge about his Savior. For instance, when he bends down to get a drink of water while in hiding, he sees “a tired, hollow face” and then automatically thinks “of the face of yet another man”:

This was the face of a crucified man, a face which for so many centuries had given inspiration to artists. [...] No doubt his real face was more beautiful than anything they have envisaged. Yet the face reflected in the pool of rainwater was heavy with mud and with stubble; it was thin and dirty; it was the face of a haunted man filled with uneasiness and exhaustion. (67)

Rodrigues is not having delusions about himself as Christ; he is meditating and reflecting on the sufferings of Christ. The man who was enchanted and “fascinated by the face of Christ just like a man fascinated by the face of his beloved” (22) has now seen the face of the Christ who suffers, the one who suffered on the Cross and suffers beside Rodrigues still. Without experiencing his own suffering and witnessing the suffering of others, Rodrigues would not have understood the depths of Christ’s sacrifice. Rodrigues, too, experiences betrayal, hunger, and temptation, as well as versions of the betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane and the triumphal entry.

However, in the controversial climax of the novel, Rodrigues, unlike Christ, fails in his final moment and chooses apostasy instead of faith. Yet in this defeat and humiliation, the padre finally really understands grace. Rodrigues has always pictured his martyrdom as a conquering of self-will, of withholding release from torture or pain; thus, when Inoue and Ferreira present him with a choice, not of personal torture or death but of the torture and death of several Christian peasants, his resolve breaks, and he reconsiders his absolute stance against apostasy in order to save them. After listening to Ferreira’s argument that “certainly Christ would have apostatized for them” (169), Rodrigues hesitantly raises his foot to trample on his beloved Christ’s face and then hears Christ break his silence: “Trample! Trample! I more than anyone know of the pain in your foot. Trample! It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world. It was to share men’s pain that I carried my cross” (171). Thereafter, the priest steps on the *fumie* and hears a cock crow; he has betrayed his Christ for the sake of Christ’s children. He makes a formal, public act, the substance of which is nonetheless deeply Christian.

Rodrigues understands the weighty significance of his trampling on the *fumie*, remarking that it “is no mere formality” to stomp on the face of his Savior (171). Yet, it is this moment when he truly understands grace; he knows he is already forgiven by the One who died and suffered in the name of all who have sinned. Rodrigues suffers the loss of all he held dear but, in doing so, better understands the suffering of the One he holds dear. He therefore fulfills John Paul II’s declaration that “it is suffering, more than anything else, which clears the way for the grace which transforms human souls” (27).

However, though Rodrigues may finally understand grace, is he still a faithful Christian? Admittedly, Endo’s resolution and his apparent approval of Rodrigues’s decision are extremely problematic, especially for Catholics. The novel was banned by many Japanese priests, and many (possibly most) Catholics cannot adhere to what they conceive as Endo’s apparent “message”: that apostasy can, in fact, be its own kind of salvation. Endo himself notes that he thinks “Protestant critics showed a better understanding” of his novel, because “the Catholics stressed the treading of the *fumi-e*” while his emphasis was really on Christ’s voice breaking the silence during that moment (“Concerning” 102). While Endo assumes Catholics’ problem with the novel occurs because they stop reading before the last chapter, he too quickly discards why Catholics (and all professing Christians) might take issue with this novel.

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which John Paul II commissioned and approved, both personal profession of faith and sacramental action of the Church are required for salvation. The Catechism says that a “disciple of Christ must not only keep the faith and live on it, but also profess it, confidently bear witness to it, and spread it [...]. Service of and witness to the faith are necessary for salvation” (1816). Salvation also “comes from Christ the Head through the Church which is his Body,” but those cannot be saved who, “knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it or to remain in it” (846). Rodrigues, in his moment of apostasy, cuts himself off from both of these tenets; he refuses to profess his faith and in doing so, he renounces and is subsequently expelled from the Church.

Endo tries to minimize Rodrigues’s apostasy by appealing to God’s mercy and questioning the value of martyrdom: “Why did the Christian padres [...] instruct their simple Japanese converts to endure the cruel persecution [...]? Why did they not renounce their faith and escape such cruel persecution? If God is truly the God of loving mercy, how could He criticize those who apostatized under such circumstances?” (qtd in Williams 108). Endo’s statement borders on the blasphemous here, as he belittles truthfulness and witnessing, two essential components of faith. Martyrs are not simply stubborn people who are unwilling to give in to pressure; instead, martyrdom is the “supreme witness given to the truth of the faith” (*Catechism* 2473), and, as Tertullian famously says, their blood “is the seed of new Christians.” Endo’s statement negates the importance of the martyrs’ witness and counters John Paul II’s acknowledgement of martyrs’ suffering as a mirror of the suffering of Christ. Martyrdom, the Pope writes, reveals “the glory that is hidden in the very suffering of Christ.” In the suffering of martyrs, “the great dignity of man is strikingly confirmed” (22). He claims that suffering contains a

call to perseverance, and if the person does persevere, that “individual unleashes hope, which maintains in him the conviction that suffering will not get the better of him, that it will not deprive him of his dignity as a human being” (23). Rodrigues, reduced to taking another man’s Japanese name and family and working for the government that encouraged his apostasy, is clearly not a martyr in the Pope’s understanding of it, as he is shamed and undignified at the end of the novel. Rodrigues admits, “I fell” (175).

In his fall, an act of apostasy, Rodrigues separates himself from the Church. Though he remarks that he still has inward faith in the Lord, that he “loved him now in a different way from before” (191), he no longer cares about what the Church thinks of him and now has a much more private vision of faith. When he administers the sacrament to Kichijiro, he reflects: “No doubt his fellow priests would condemn his act as sacrilege; but even if he was betraying them, he was not betraying his Lord” (191). This act sums up Rodrigues’s faith at the end: while the priest still holds on to some of the rituals of his Catholic faith, what Rodrigues really professes here is an individualistic faith rooted in his own experience rather than in the tradition of the Church. He sees his suffering as “necessary to bring him to this love” and knowledge of Christ, but this view contradicts John Paul II’s claim that the mystery of Christ began “*the union with man in the community of the Church*” (24). The Church is the Body of Christ, and only through the Church can Rodrigues truly understand the redemptive quality of his suffering: “It is precisely *the Church* [...] which is the dimension in which the redemptive suffering of Christ can be constantly completed by the suffering of man” (24). Though he joins himself to Christ’s sufferings, Rodrigues’s churchless suffering cannot fully participate in the redemptive completion Pope John Paul II proclaims.

Rodrigues attempts to justify his apostasy, but he, like the Church, doubts whether such an act can be justified. When Rodrigues reflects upon his apostasy, he says he fell because he “could not endure the moaning of those peasants suspended in the pit,” yet, he also “wonder[s] if all this talk about love is not, after all, just an excuse to justify [his] own weakness” (175). Rodrigues wants to assure himself of his intentions, his motivation behind his decision, but John Paul II might declare his act evil no matter what motivation was behind it. William Cavanaugh contemplates whether Rodrigues’s act of apostasy could fall under John Paul II’s definition of intrinsic evils in his encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*. The Pope notes that some actions are evil “*always and per se* [...] quite apart from the ulterior intentions of the one acting and the circumstances” (80). Some betrayals cannot be justified, no matter what the intentions. For instance, JD Charles, in his article contrasting the message of *Salvifici Doloris* and euthanasia, notes the difference between Christian compassion and secular compassion. He asserts that though both the Christian and the non-Christian may feel compassion, “they are worlds apart in *how they interpret and order it*. For the Christian, compassion is not self-justifying, i.e., it must be harnessed to and controlled by faith-oriented reason, *if*, that is, it is to be a virtue and not prostituted as a vice” (218). Thus, though Rodrigues may have committed his act of apostasy in the name of love, it still may not justify the decision. Because his apostasy separates him from the Church, his decision

essentially becomes one based on his *individual interpretation* of what it means to have compassion, to love, and to understand Christ's sacrifice.

However, though this conclusion may seem to condemn Father Rodrigues's decision, it serves instead to interrogate the Church and Pope John Paul II. For instance, how does allowing these peasants to die really fulfill the commandment to love one's neighbor? How is one to understand the idea of compassion if not to sacrifice all of one's self (including, potentially, one's salvation) to save another? Does the Church truly have a place for those who are "poor in spirit"? What happens to those who suffer but do not persevere? *Silence* presents challenging but essential questions about the nature of suffering that allow us to evaluate Pope John Paul II's theodicy as presented in *Salvifici Doloris*.

Silence as a Critique of Salvifici Doloris

John Paul II's encyclical on the meaning of human suffering, *Salvifici Doloris*, was written in the Holy Year of the Redemption, a Jubilee event in commemoration of what would traditionally be dated as the 1,950th anniversary of Christ's death. John Paul II says the event, though it is a year of celebration, also signifies the need for a discussion of suffering, because "the *Redemption* was accomplished *through the Cross of Christ*, that is, *through his suffering*" (3); due to this connection, the Holy Year of the Redemption provides motivation to explore a theme that "demands to be constantly reconsidered" (2). John Paul II understands suffering as a "universal theme" that seems to be "*essential to the nature of man*" (2) and "almost *inseparable from man's earthly existence*" (3). Since suffering is an inherent issue, it is one the Church must concern itself with, and the Pope notes that "the Church has *to try to meet man* in a special way on the path of his suffering," so that "man 'becomes the way for the Church'" (3). He writes *Salvifici Doloris* in order to foster and encourage this meeting, so that the Church may learn from those who suffer, and those who suffer from the Church. Since John Paul II represents, on this occasion, the Church, Endo's *Silence* will be the example of the suffering man with whom the Church meets and dialogues. *Silence* affirms John Paul II's careful and precise explanation of "The World of Human Suffering" and "The Quest for an Answer to the Question of the Meaning of Suffering," the chapters that set the stage and define the terms for the rest of his encyclical, though the novel will eventually ask questions left unanswered by the former Pope.

John Paul II first attempts to define aspects of suffering. The Pope delineates between moral and physical suffering, noting that there is a "double dimension of the human being" (5). Physical suffering, for John Paul II, is pain of the body while moral suffering is "pain of the soul," or a "pain of a spiritual nature" (5). Though the two may be interrelated, since physical suffering can lead to moral suffering and moral suffering can lead to physical suffering, John Paul II seems to be more concerned with moral suffering because it is less treatable by medicine and other forms of therapy (5). This latter type of pain always contains "*an experience of evil*, which causes the individual to suffer" (7), since a person suffers "*because of a good* in which he does not share" (7). Suffering, then, when connected to evil,

“always, in some way, refers to a good” (7). Consequently, a discussion on suffering always includes a discussion of the good and of its source: God. Suffering makes one aware of human failure and thus, it has the unique ability to point to God. Suffering “seems to belong to man’s transcendence” and is one of the points of human life where “man is in a certain sense ‘destined’ to go beyond himself” (2). In such an encounter with evil, there “inevitably arises *the question: why?*[,] a question about the cause, the reason, and equally, about the purpose of suffering, and, in brief, a question about its meaning” (9). These questions sometimes lead to a point of near despair, “of actually *denying God*,” because evil and suffering “obscure” the goodness of Creation, God’s “wisdom, power and greatness” found in the world (9). Any problem so prevalent that it challenges people’s confidence in God needs a response from the Church; it shows “the importance of *the question of the meaning of suffering*; it also shows how much care must be taken both in dealing with the question itself and with all possible answers to it” (9).

Because Pope John Paul II recognizes the complexities of the question and the answers to suffering, he does not, then, simply connect all human suffering to punishment. While he admits that suffering as punishment is a scripturally attested to possibility, the book of Job, especially, counters the notion that *all* suffering is punishment for specific sins. God is the “*Lawgiver and Judge* to a degree no temporal authority can see,” and since “the objective moral order demands punishment for transgression, sin and crime,” suffering can appear as a “justified evil” God makes (10). However, both Job and the Pope himself question this conclusion. Job is innocent, and his suffering “must be accepted as a mystery which the individual is unable to penetrate completely by his own intelligence” (11).

Such certainly is Father Rodrigues’s experience. His understanding of and reaction to suffering fits John Paul II’s. Father Rodrigues, while experiencing hunger and physical pain along the journey, struggles primarily with moral suffering. His encounter with persecution and death in the name of belief does not fit his understanding of a God who loves and takes care of His people. His suffering is an encounter with evil in the way that John Paul II addresses it: it is a lack of the good, a void where goodness is expected. Rodrigues struggles with the absence, or silence, of God in response to all the pain, death, and suffering he sees in Japan. He confronts the perceived absence of the ultimate goodness of God, and thus experiences extreme psychological suffering. He asks the question John Paul II says is the apt response to suffering, “Why?,” and he genuinely searches for God’s answer. By always looking for the divine answer to the difficult question of the meaning of suffering, Rodrigues transcends himself. He also demonstrates the crucial importance of the question—as John Paul II notes can happen—by nearly losing his faith. Rodrigues sees the beauty in the world and prays, “Lord, everything that You have created is good. How beautiful are your dwellings!” (71), yet when he contemplates God’s silence in the face of suffering and evil, he begins to doubt God’s existence: “If God does not exist, how can man endure the monotony of the sea and its cruel lack of emotion? (But supposing...of course, supposing, I mean.) From the deepest core of my being yet another voice made itself heard in a whisper. Supposing God does not exist....” (68). Rodrigues’s

journey is the journey of the suffering Christian that John Paul II presents so accurately. The priest's struggle is a fictional example for John Paul II's theory.

Father Rodrigues and the Japanese peasants to whom he ministers also provide an example, alongside Job, of John Paul II's assertion that not all suffering is punishment for sin. Though suffering is connected to the Fall and sin, it is not always indicative of punishment for specific sins. When Kichijiro cries out to Father Rodrigues, "Why has Deus Sama imposed this suffering upon us? [...] What evil have we done?" (55), he echoes the cry of Job, who also claims no wrongdoing that deserves the suffering he endures. The Japanese peasants and missionaries are there trying to do God's work, to spread the Gospel and bring souls to the Kingdom. If God were to punish someone for their sins, he would punish those who are trying to stop the spread of Christianity in Japan. Instead, even martyrdom, faith unto death, brings no word from God and just seems to contribute to the priest's anguish:

What do I want to say? I myself do not quite understand. Only that today, when for the glory of God Mokichi and Ichizo moaned, suffered and died, I cannot bear the monotonous sound of the dark sea gnawing at the shore. Behind the depressing silence of this sea, the silence of God...the feeling that while men raise their voices in anguish God remains with folded arms, silent. (61)

Rodrigues is bewildered and depressed that martyrdom, the ultimate sacrifice for God and seemingly the ultimate good one could perform in the name of faith, does not provoke God to speak or act; he does not see a response from God to stop the pain of His people. Martyrdom, for Rodrigues, does not stand as a witness to God's greatness but instead stands as a witness to God's absence. For example, Mokichi and Ichizo are strong men of the faith; they help Rodrigues settle into his mission, and they sacrifice themselves in order to save the priests from being found out. Their death and suffering are surely not a punishment from God, and neither is the suffering of the other peasants due to any specific sins they commit; the characters in this book come face to face with the very same conundrum as Job: "Why has God give us this trial? We have done nothing wrong" (54). Both Endo and John Paul II therefore conclude that suffering is not necessarily directly related to divine judgment.

Thus, Endo and John Paul II seem to agree upon the fundamentals of suffering: how it is expressed; that it is an absence of the good; that it therefore points to God even as it challenges God; the importance of both asking the question and finding an answer; and the conclusion that the answer to suffering is not always punishment. Endo, however, in his fictional example of a struggling and suffering man, posits a challenge to John Paul II by questioning his emphasis on the glory in suffering and by asking questions that simply are not answered by the Pope's encyclical or, frankly, by the Church.

Pope John Paul II asserts that, if one takes up one's cross with Christ to share in his suffering, then that person also shares in the Redemption (19). He writes, "*The eloquence of the Cross and death* is, however, completed by *the*

eloquence of the Resurrection. Man finds in the Resurrection a completely new light, which helps him to go forward through the thick darkness of humiliations, doubts, hopelessness and persecution” (20). While Endo does not deny the importance of the Resurrection, he feels that too much emphasis is placed on the triumphant Christ rather than the suffering servant (Brooker 519). Thus, Endo’s *Silence* is critical of what John Paul II presents as the glory hidden in suffering. Their presentations of martyrdom, in particular, greatly contrast. The Pope says the Resurrection reveals an unexpected side of suffering:

[...] *the glory that is hidden in the very suffering of Christ* and which has been and is often mirrored in human suffering, as an expression of man’s spiritual greatness. This glory must be acknowledged not only in the martyrs for the faith but in many others also who, at times, even without belief in Christ, suffer and give their lives for the truth and for a just cause. In the sufferings of all of these people the great dignity of man is strikingly confirmed. (22)

Pope John Paul II sees suffering and death for the truth as a revelation of dignity and greatness, of the glory behind the Cross and the ultimate expression of faith. Father Rodrigues starts with a similar image of martyrdom and suffering as glory-filled and as a testament to dignity. However, actually seeing martyrdom challenges this image:

They were martyred. But what a martyrdom! I had long read about martyrdom in the lives of the saints—how the souls of the martyrs had gone home to Heaven, how they had been filled with glory in Paradise, how the angels had blown trumpets. This was the splendid martyrdom I had often seen in my dreams. But the martyrdom of the Japanese Christians I now describe to you was no such glorious thing. What a miserable and painful business it was! The rain falls unceasingly on the sea. And the sea which killed them surges on uncannily—in silence. (60)

Endo, through *Silence*, warns of putting too much emphasis on the glory and triumphant nature of the faith. He subscribes to the idea that, while one should have faith that all, in the end, will turn out well, a theology of suffering focused on the “glory of suffering” will not always match up to one’s practical experience. He first looks at the suffering, without the silver lining, and presents that to God. He would agree with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who argues that we must learn to live without God. Bonhoeffer says God “is weak and powerless in the world, and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Not by omnipotence but by weakness and suffering” (360). Though John Paul II mainly does focus on Christ’s cross and suffering, Endo would still question his attempt to dignify it with the manifestation of glory. For Endo, suffering does not always reveal the great dignity of humankind, as seen in Rodrigues’s shame at the end of the novel. *Silence* asks,

as William Cavanaugh points out, “if there is only one kind of martyrdom” (12). Can Endo’s weak-willed apostate, Father Rodrigues, who gave up his entire life’s work and mission to step on the *fumie* and save the lives of peasants, be enacting an undignified, inglorious martyrdom that still lines up with an orthodox understanding of Christ?

This question reveals a gap in John Paul II’s and the Church’s understanding of suffering and faith. John Paul II encourages perseverance and strength in suffering, but he does not address what happens to those who fall, those who stumble and cannot handle the suffering. Kichijiro defends his apostasy to Father Rodrigues, reflecting the problem the novel poses to the Pope and the Church by echoing the words of Job: “But I have my cause to plead! One who has trod on the sacred image has his say too. Do you think I trampled on it willingly? My feet ached with the pain. God asks me to imitate the strong, even though he made me weak. Isn’t this unreasonable?” (113-14). Though he admits he is an apostate, he notes, “If I had died ten years ago I might have gone to paradise as a good Christian, not despised as an apostate. Merely because I live in a time of persecution... I am sorry” (115). Kichijiro, and eventually Father Rodrigues, suffer in a different way than the martyrs of the faith; they suffer as outcasts, as weaklings, who yet hold strong to their faith.

John Paul II’s *Salvifici Doloris*, together with the Catholic Church, seems to have no place for people like Rodrigues and Kichijiro. They are an anomaly. Both apostates still have faith, but both have been cast out from the Church due to their apostasy during persecution. Rodrigues simultaneously betrays and exemplifies Christ, just as Rodrigues’s action of stepping on the *fumie* both negates and fulfills John Paul II’s understanding of the Christian response to suffering. He does not persevere under trial but apostatizes; yet in doing so, he also completes John Paul II’s call to be a Good Samaritan, fulfilling the papal claim that “the Redemption, accomplished through satisfactory love, *remains always open to all love* expressed in *human suffering*” (24).

John Paul II asserts that the parable of the Good Samaritan “indicates what the relationship of each of us must be towards our suffering neighbour. We are not allowed to ‘pass by on the other side’ indifferently; we must ‘stop’ beside him. *Everyone who stops beside the suffering of another person, whatever form it may take, is a Good Samaritan*” (28). Christ’s example demonstrates that people must “cultivate this sensitivity of heart, which bears witness to *compassion* towards a suffering person” (28). However, the Pope says a Good Samaritan “does not stop at sympathy and compassion alone. [...] A Good Samaritan is *one who brings help in suffering*, whatever its nature may be” (28). Christ’s life and death in the Gospel of Suffering points to a Good Samaritan way of living, one that stresses taking action and alleviating suffering where one can.

Love and action toward a suffering neighbor, then, is a natural corollary to better understanding and sharing in Christ’s suffering: “Faith in sharing in the suffering of Christ brings with it the interior certainty that the suffering person ‘completes what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions’; the certainty that in the spiritual dimension of the work of Redemption *he is serving*, like Christ, *the salvation of his brothers and sisters*” (27). Rodrigues, as a missionary, constantly works toward the

salvation of his brothers and sisters in Christ, but it is not until the end of the novel, in his apostasy, that he actually *acts* to save them. He moves from someone who has compassion and pity for others' sufferings to one who takes action to stop the suffering of his brothers and sisters.

By the time his moment of trial and apostasy arrives, Rodrigues has seen several peasants die and has stood by without doing anything. He feels pity, compassion, and sincere pain for the persecuted peasants, but though he encourages others to apostatize when their lives are on the line, he never actually performs any action to help them. When he is faced with the option, then, of either apostatizing or allowing peasants who have already apostatized to continue hanging over the pits in torture, his choice to apostatize could be, in John Paul II's conception of it, the Good Samaritan choice. Rodrigues, in putting his foot down on the *fumie*, gives up the life he had known so far: he renounces his priesthood, his state within the Church, and his Christian purpose in life. He essentially gives, in the name of compassion and love for the peasants, John Paul II's Good Samaritan "gift of self" (28).

This moment of apostasy occupies a gap in theology, a problematic hole in John Paul II's and the Church's treatment of suffering. For if, as John Paul II notes, "the salvific meaning of suffering *is in no way identified with an attitude of passivity*," so that "the Gospel is the negation of passivity in the face of suffering" (30), then Father Rodrigues is condemned if he does apostatize and condemned if he does not. John Paul II asserts that suffering's purpose in the world is "to release love" (30), but if Father Rodrigues's choice of love leaves him an apostate and undignified, then the practicality of the Pope's assertion is called into question; his *Salvifici Doloris* counters itself.

Both *Salvifici Doloris* and *Silence* present paradoxical conclusions when used to critique each other. While some may declare both works, then, a failure in outcome, an incomplete analysis of suffering, this paradox represents the answer to suffering that both of them ultimately point to: the love of God as demonstrated in the paradox of the Incarnation.

Reconciliation in the Incarnation

William Cavanaugh calls *Silence* "a meditation on the Incarnation" (12), and a similar declaration can be made for *Salvifici Doloris*. Though neither Pope John Paul II nor Endo explicitly state the Incarnation as the answer to suffering, their conclusions all draw on the event of the Word becoming flesh, of the inherently paradoxical mystery of the Incarnation, of the realization of Immanuel, "God with us."

John Paul II says the "true answer to the 'why of suffering'" can only be found in "the revelation of divine love, the ultimate source of the meaning of everything that exists" (13). He refers to John 3:16 three times throughout his encyclical: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." He uses this verse as the essence of God's salvific work to end suffering. For God does not only wish to stop

particular suffering but to end the “definitive suffering: the loss of eternal life” (14). John 3:16, then, points to the event of the Incarnation as the result of God’s gift of His Son, and the Son’s acceptance of this responsibility, in order to “strike at the very roots of human evil and thus draw close in a salvific way to the whole world of suffering in which man shares” (15).

Though John Paul II emphasizes the Cross as instrumental to understanding human suffering, he admits that it is Christ’s “duality of nature” that makes Jesus’ death on the Cross such a significant act (17). Only a fully human and fully divine Savior could defeat sin and death:

He who by his Passion and death on the Cross brings about the Redemption is the only-begotten Son whom God “gave.” And at the same time this *Son who is consubstantial with the Father suffers as a man*. His suffering has human dimensions; it also has unique in the history of humanity—a depth and intensity which, while being human, can also be an incomparable depth and intensity of suffering, insofar as the man who suffers is in person the only-begotten Son himself: “God from God”. Therefore, only he—the only-begotten Son—is capable of embracing the measure of evil contained in the sin of man. (17)

By sacrificing himself on the Cross, Christ forever links suffering to love. Only someone who was fully human *and* fully divine could defeat sin and death. Only a God who has experienced suffering can be a real comfort, or provide a real answer, to the mystery of suffering. Only Immanuel, “God with us,” can illuminate the divine meaning of suffering. As the late pope writes in his *Catechesis on the Creed*, “Christ’s passion and death pervade, redeem and ennoble all human suffering, because through the Incarnation he desired to express his solidarity with humanity, which gradually opens to communion with him in faith and love” (439). The Pope believes that “Christ, the Incarnate Word, confirmed through his own life [...] that God is with every person in his suffering” (274). The Gospel then, for John Paul II, is a “Gospel of Suffering,” and it is “being written unceasingly, and it speaks unceasingly with the words of this strange paradox: the springs of divine power gush forth precisely in the midst of human weakness” (*Salvifici*, 27). Thus, this paradoxical understanding of suffering is necessary because of the paradoxical nature of the Christian faith.

John Paul II concludes with words that emphasize an Incarnational approach to the question of suffering. He says the meaning of suffering is “truly supernatural and at the same time human” (31). Suffering, for him, “is certainly part of the mystery of man,” and, as he quotes the Second Vatican Council, “...only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light” (31). Thus, John Paul II presents a chain of mysteries all interconnected: the mystery of suffering is part of the mystery of humanity, and the mystery of humanity can only be understood in the mystery of the Incarnation.

Endo’s *Silence* comes to the same conclusion. Father Rodrigues’s journey takes him from a faith that sees reality in absolutes to one that begins to notice the

paradoxes and complexities of faith. He develops a “growing understanding of reality as ‘both/and’ rather than either/or” (Bussie 95). When he first arrives, he understands apostasy as a “humiliating defeat for the faith itself and for the whole of Europe” (Endo 7), and he treats Kichijiro, an apostate, with disdain, not understanding how a man could be so cowardly. Rodrigues’s battle, then, is not necessarily the battle of whether or not to apostatize, of whether or not he will be “cowardly” or brave. Instead, as Rodrigues’s climactic struggle with the *fumie* shows, the priest’s primary battle is with his old understanding of a faith that deals in absolutes and his gradual development of a faith that better understands paradox. Only when he hears Christ speak out from the *fumie* can the priest understand the humble, self-sacrificing love of God becoming human and suffering for all. When Rodrigues tramples on the *fumie*, he completes, in a sense, his Christ-paralleled journey. He steps on the beloved face of his Christ to save peasants’ lives, a moment that synchronously declares him a Christ figure and an apostate; for though he renounces his faith, he echoes Christ who too was a “heretic” of the faith who died for the sake of others.

After this moment, Rodrigues lives in the “in-between” that echoes his new “and/both” concept of faith and reality. Though he is cast out from the Church, he claims his apostasy actually instigated a stronger love for his Savior. He can declare, “Even if [God] had been silent, my life until this day would have spoken of him” (191). In Rodrigues’s final declaration, he professes that he cannot regret his actions, for he now understands the depth and fullness of God’s love, as exemplified in the Incarnate Word who suffered on the Cross. Jesus as Immanuel incarnates the God who participates in daily trials and joys, the God who is present in the lives of the faithful, allowing their lives to speak of him even in the face of his presumed silence. Rodrigues’s claim that his life had “spoken” for God shows the priest understands the power of the Incarnation, of the God who lived not just once on this earth but lives on in all who profess faith in him.

A true understanding of faith, and thus of the Christian meaning of suffering, is one that must focus on the entirety of what it means for God to have become incarnate, lived, suffered, died, and risen. Understanding the Incarnation allows one to see the complexities and paradoxes of faith in a God who is three in one, who became fully divine and fully human, who has already but not yet redeemed the world. The question of suffering is a mystery wrapped in the paradox of the Incarnation, and only in understanding the loving gift and consequences of the Word becoming flesh can one begin to understand the purpose and meaning of suffering in a world created by a good and loving God.

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Sin and Grace: The Ethical Complexities of Colliding Theological Visions in McCarthy's *Cities of the Plain*

James E. Barcus

In the introduction to his book *Days of Obligation*, Richard Rodriguez observes that in writing a book about California and Mexico he was writing a book about comedy and tragedy. In Rodriguez's life, Mexico plays the tragic part; California plays the role of America's wild child. Rodriguez adds, "Or was I writing a book about competing theologies?" (Rodriguez xvi). Borrowing from Josiah Royce, a Californian turned Harvard professor, Rodriguez wonders if California missed the opportunity to reconcile the culture of the Catholic South and the Protestant North. "The Catholic—the Mexican—impulse was pushed back, vanquished by comedy: a Protestant conquest" (Rodriguez xvi). Rodriguez claims to be using comedy as the Greeks used it, suggesting "a world where youth is not a fruitless metaphor; where it is possible to start anew; where it is possible to escape the rivalries of the Capulets and the McCoys..." (Rodriguez xvi). (For disciples of Northrop Frye, Rodriguez may be conflating comedy and romance, but I will use the term as Rodriguez defines it.) Rodriguez observes that the comedy of California was constructed on a Protestant faith in individualism whereas Mexico knew tragedy. Rodriguez's Mexican father, like his father before him, "believed that old men know more than young men; that life will break your heart; that death finally is the vantage point from which a life must be seen" (Rodriguez xvi).

Cormac McCarthy's *Cities of the Plain*, set not on the California-Mexico, but on the Texas-Mexico border, chronicles the friendship of John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, the protagonists of McCarthy's earlier novels, who are now ranch hands in a post-World War II West. In the first novel in the trilogy, *All the Pretty Horses*, the young John Grady Cole crosses into Mexico with two companions and returns alone, perhaps a wiser and sadder person. In the second novel, *The Crossing*, set in the years just before World War II, Billy Parham crosses also into Mexico, chasing his dreams. Returning to find all has been transformed, if not transfigured, Billy and his brother Boyd return to Mexico, beginning a journey to find what is rightfully theirs and finding a world more alien and foreign than they had imagined. And Billy returns to the U. S. alone, changed and tortured by what he has done and not done. McCarthy brings John Grady and Billy together in this third novel. Both are haunted by a sense of loss: the loss of the Old West, the loss of a way of life, the loss of property, and the loss of important relationships. Loved ones have died; childhood memories haunt the living; family ties have been shattered or exist most tenuously.

In *Cities of the Plain*, the two hired cowhands round up cattle, exterminate wild dogs, attend horse auctions, and wait for the day when the ranch they work will be sold to the government or go bankrupt. While drinking in a Mexican whorehouse, John Grady sees and falls in love with an epileptic prostitute. Believing he can rescue her, perhaps even buy her freedom, he decides to marry her and set up housekeeping in an abandoned adobe house on the outskirts of the ranch. Billy advises against the project, but nevertheless helps John Grady repair the house. When the Mexican pimp refuses to sell the prostitute, John Grady arranges for her to escape and join him across the border. The pimp Eduardo, learning of the plan and unwilling to lose the girl, has her throat slit. Determined to right the wrong, John Grady challenges the pimp to a knife fight in which both men are killed. In the epilogue to the novel, Billy, now an old man, traverses the Southwest with no particular destination. In the final scenes, Billy engages in a long conversation with another peripatetic traveler who also questions the destiny and purposes of human existence. Then, near death, Billy finds shelter and refuge with a family who recognizes him for the human being he is.

The problem for both Billy and John Grady is how to live—and die—in a world in which loss and absence are real and present. Both characters know that the past was no paradise. Both men recognize that the center probably does not hold in the post-World War II world—or perhaps in any time. If the past is not paradise and the present is irreparably splintered, then what does the future hold and how ought a human to order daily life? What significance do daily events have and what function do personal relationships serve. In short, is the world a comedy or a tragedy? Or, to return to Rodriguez's formulation, does the Protestant north or the Catholic south offer a more viable paradigm?

Rodriguez's experience of the tragic Mexican vision as well as the comedic northern and Protestant-dominated California sheds light on the characters of John Grady and Billy. Rodriguez recounts the tension between these theological visions in his own life:

Something hopeful was created in California through the century of its Protestant settlement. People believed that in California they could begin new lives. New generations of immigrants continue to arrive in California, not a few of them from Mexico, hoping to cash in on comedy.

It is still possible in California to change your name, change your sex, get a divorce, become a movie star. My Mexican parents live in a California house, with four telephones, three televisions, and several empty bedrooms.

How could California ever reconcile comedy and tragedy? How could there not have been a divorce between Mexico and California in the nineteenth century?

The youth of my life was defined by Protestant optimism. Now that I am middle-aged, I incline more toward the Mexican point of view, though some part of me continues to resist the cynical conclusions of Mexico. (Rodriguez xvii)

Several critics of McCarthy's novel have noticed the conflicts generated by the characters of John Grady and Billy, but none has explored the tensions in the terms outlined by Rodriguez and as experienced by him. For example, Edwin Arnold argues that *Cities of the Plain* combines the romance of *All the Pretty Horses* and the fatalism of *The Crossing*. The problematic aspects of John Grady's character, his violence and stubbornness, are emphasized in the novel while Billy who appears to be a radically different character at first turns out to be the same broken-hearted boy just a bit older, louder, and more cynical.

Barclay Owens furthers the conversation by claiming that while Mac's ranch is close to paradise for Billy and John Grady, Billy has learned his lessons the hard way unlike John Grady who still clings to his idealism and rigid ethical code. Owens believes that John Grady's tragic flaw is that he is out of his depth by refusing to face the facts of life unlike Magdalena who is tragically aware of the actual facts of the world.

As the novel opens, the nineteen-year-old John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, now 28, work on a dusty Texas ranch near El Paso. Trucks are common, but horses are still central to the ranching activities. But the old methods are dying and both men recognize that the new world holds little for them. In a conversation with the aging Mr. Johnson, John Grady teases out memories of the Old West. Johnson admits he misses the old range life. "I went up the trail four times," he says. "Best times of my life. The best.... There's nothing like it in the world. There never will be. Settin around the fire of the evening with the herd bedded down good and no wind.... Listen to the old waddies tell their stories. Good stories, too. Roll you a smoke. Sleep. There's no sleep like it. None" (187). Johnson regrets that a way of life he loved is now over, but John Grady and Billy have more conflicted feelings.

Although they are close friends, John Grady and Billy do not share a common response to the dilemma of not being able to reclaim the past or stake out the future. Billy, the older, has few illusions and even fewer plans. Billy admits that once upon a time he thought that he would have a little spread up in the hills and run a few head of cattle on it, but now he doubts he ever will. He once wintered in a line camp in New Mexico, but he wouldn't do it again if he could help it. He says, "I like to froze in that damn shack. The wind would blow your hat off inside" (77). When John Grady asks him if he would have like to have lived back in the old days, he replies: "No. I did when I was a kid. I used to think rawhidin a bunch of bony cattle in some outland country would be just as close to heaven as a man was likely to get. I wouldn't give you much for it now" (17). John Grady says that he would like to live like that. Billy replies, "I'll tell you what I like.... When you throw a switch and the lights come on" (17). As this conversation reveals, life experiences have turned Billy into a realist. But John Grady clings to an optimistic view of life that Rodriguez attributes to the Protestantism that dominated life north of the Border.

Even though Billy refuses to idealize the past, the myth of the rugged West, he does like his present life on the range. Yet on some days he hates coming out. "Goddamn ground wont even hold a fence post" (10). He does have perspective on his own life and the changes he has experienced. He says, "If I

think about what I wanted as a kid and what I want now they aint the same thing. I guess what I wanted wasn't what I wanted" (78). When John Grady asks him what he wants now, Billy says, "Hell, ... I don't know what I want. Never did" (78). Ever the realist, Billy concludes that when you're a kid you think you know how things are going to be. "You get a little older and you pull back on some of that. I think you wind up just tryin to minimize the pain. Anyway this country aint the same. Nor anything in it. The war changed everything. I don't think people even know it yet" (78). In the face of change and instability, Billy refuses to wax nostalgic for the past or to hope and plan for a better future. The best one can do is to bundle up against the cold and minimize the pain. For Billy the world is to be endured, not embraced. He has sought the brass ring and it has eluded him. Despite his best efforts, the world has tripped him up, tamed him, trounced him. There is no escaping the pain of human existence. With effort and some luck, a man may perhaps ease his pain although the loss of his brother during their trip to Mexico haunts him and makes him question whether pain can ever be lifted. Billy's experiences in Mexico have taught him the remorseless agony of human life.

In contrast to Billy Parham, John Grady finds the world a much greener place where hopes and dreams are possible and where obstacles are not impossible hurdles, but mere impediments. Although Billy lightly mocks John Grady's youth and idealism, he makes no attempt to reconstruct John Grady's perspective. Calling John the "all-american cowboy" (3) whom no whore could shake off, Billy respects Cole's idealism even if he does not share it. While Billy and the other cowhands josh each other about the fat and aging whores, John Grady finds no pleasure in ogling the merchandise. He is drawn to the young teenage whore named Magdalena who looks like a school girl. At 19, he is, however, no predator. Rather, from the moment he sees her, he knows love.

John Grady views life essentially optimistically. He has faith in the rugged individualism which has characterized his life, a feature of his essentially Protestant worldview. He likes the mornings, and he rises before Billy and grows impatient with his late-sleeping friend and mentor. He comments, "I dont see how you can lay there like that." To which Billy replies, "Damn if you aint a cheerful son of a bitch in the mornin. Where's my by god coffee at?" (8).

Throughout his life John Grady has had unusual empathy for the elderly, the needy, and the helpless. The narrator reports that "all of John Grady's dreams were the same. Something was afraid and he had come to comfort it. He dreamed it yet" (204). John Grady's respect for the elderly clearly elevates him above the other hands. He rises and offers old Mr. Johnson his seat at the breakfast table (9). When Billy suggests that "the old man is gettin crazier and crazier," John Grady defends Johnson, saying, "There aint nothing wrong with him. He just old is all" (11). When the old man walks out in the yard wearing only his unionsuit, John Grady takes his arm, helps him into the house, and brings his pants to him, all the time sympathetic and careful to help the man maintain his dignity (105). And he sits with Johnson until breakfast so the old man will think he has just waked early (106).

And John Grady has a special affinity for animals, especially those that have been mistreated or mishandled. Questioned by Billy, John Grady admits that he would go to veterinary school, if he could (217). After hunting down a pack of feral dogs that have been killing calves, John Grady rescues one of the remaining pups for a pet (177). As a horse trainer, he has no peer. Thrown four times in an effort to break an especially untamable horse, he climbs back on four times (14). Against the advice of experienced hands, he is determined to tame the wild, perhaps outlaw, horse, and even wakes up the entire ranch with his late night efforts. He believes he can train the horse to follow him like a dog (20). And to the amazement of Mac, the owner of the ranch, he refuses to turn on the barn lights because they bother the horses.

When a shady horsedealer brings a horse for him to train, John Grady recognizes instantly that the hoof has been doctored and refuses to accept responsibility for the horse or to accept a bribe to overlook the defect. Told to go to hell, John Grady does not respond, maintaining his temper as well as his integrity (47). Impressed by John Grady's knowledge of horses, the horsetrader Wolfenbarger offers him extra work, but he refuses saying, "I guess I dont know how to work for but one man at a time" (51). He knows, of course, that the horse trader wants to use his skills in unethical ways. When Mac asks him why he won't work for Wolfenbarger, John Grady says that it would be a full-time job to keep the horsetrader out of trouble (60). John Grady believes that one individual can make a difference, that a personal ethic need not and ought not to be undermined by greed.

John Grady's respect for horses is essential to his success as a trainer. His personal ethical code carries over to his treatment of animals. A horse's qualities cannot be simply tallied up like a bank account. They are unlike other animals. They understand what a person means and they know the difference between right and wrong. If they did not, according to John Grady, you couldn't train a horse:

I think you can train a rooster to do what you want. But you wont have him.

There's a way to train a horse where when you get done you've got the horse. On his own ground. A good horse will figure things out on his own. You can see what's in his heart. He wont do one thing while you're watching him and another when you aint. He's all of a piece. When you've got a horse to that place you cant hardly get him to do somethin he knows is wrong. He'll fight you over it. And if you mistreat him it just about kills him. A good horse has justice in his heart. (53)

John Grady's concern for justice and fairness carries over into all of his life, even into his evening chess games with Mac. Expert at the game, he refuses to deliberately allow his boss to win even though another ranch hand jokingly reminds him that "you might could be replaced with something that cowboys better and plays chess worse" (39). However, when Mac finally beats Cole in a game, Billy wonders whether John Grady had slacked up on Mac—"just the

littlest bit.” Reaffirming his adherence to principles, John Grady rejects the insinuation, saying, “No. I dont believe in it” (93).

John Grady’s love for Magdalena is no casual emotional attachment. Love, not lust, motivates him. He is relentless in his quest for the girl. He goes from bar to bar, from whorehouse to whorehouse looking for her. He makes repeated visits to Mexico. He gives his last thirty-six dollars to get information about her whereabouts (58). When he learns that the prostitute has moved to the White Lake, an expensive whorehouse that Billy says, “Aint no place for a cowboy,” John Grady seeks a month's pay advance of one-hundred dollars in order to have enough money to spend the entire night with her.

His friends soon realize that his relationship with Magdalena is no fleeting affair. When John Grady no longer joins them in their dancing and drinking nights out on the town, Billy forces the issue into the open, noting that John Grady manifests all of the symptoms of a man in love: “Have you got a girl you're seein?” Grady admits it: “Tryin to.” Even the shoeshine boy says John Grady has the look of someone who's getting married (95). Recognizing that he will need to buy Magdalena’s freedom, he pawns his most prized possession, his grandfather's pistol, and he eventually sells his horse. And he sends the reluctant and wiser Billy to Mexico to negotiate the purchase of Magdalena. In Billy’s judgment, John Grady has left his senses:

“Tell me you aint gone completely crazy.”

“I aint gone completely crazy.”

“The hell you aint.”

“I’m in love with her, Billy.” (118)

But Billy, always the realist, sees how impossible the goal is. Having never recovered his innocence and haunted by the death of his brother, Billy tells John Grady that he is not making sense. “What the hell kind of people do you think it is you're talkin about? Do you really think you can go down there and dicker with some greaser pimp that buys and sells people outright like you was going down to the courthouse lawn to trade knives?” (118-9). John Grady’s response is, “I cant help it” (120). Billy knows the tragic Mexican mind as John Grady does not. He knows, in Rodriguez’s phrase, that “life will break your heart.”

Rather than submitting to a tragic view of life, John Grady believes optimistically that rescuing Magdalena is his destiny. When Billy asks him how the attachment developed this far, John Grady says, “I dont know. I feel some way like I didnt have nothing to do with it. Like it’s just the way it is. Like it was always this way” (121).

John Grady has no doubt that he will be able to make a home with Magdalena. He persuades Mac to allow him to repair the dilapidated adobe house out on the mesa. Even though Billy does not believe that John Grady's vision will ever be realized, he helps John Grady paint the house. Billy finds John Grady as stubborn as his brother Boyd was. Billy says, “Most people get smacked around enough after a while they start to pay attention. More and more you remind me of Boyd. Only way I could ever get him to do anything was to tell him not to” (146).

John Grady visits Magdalena regularly and makes plans for her escape since the pimp will not sell her. In one telling scene, he watches Magdalena wade in the river, and then he dries her feet worshipfully, in a reversal of the act of the biblical Mary Magdalene (158). However, Magdalena's pimp Eduardo sees that John Grady's worldview is a chimera, a vision without substance. He says, "Men have in their minds a picture of how the world will be. How they will be in the world. The world may be many different ways for them but there is one world that will never be and that is the world they dream of" (134). John Grady cannot grasp that the green world he envisions cannot be. In spite of the reservations of his best friend, the failure of his attempts to purchase Magdalena's freedom, and the practical difficulties of forming a union with an epileptic Mexican whore who speaks no English, John Grady perseveres. The blind whorehouse musician understands John Grady's dilemma and that he may, in fact, be living out his destiny. He says,

Each act in this world from which there can be no turning back has before it another, and it another yet. In a vast and endless net. Men imagine that the choices before them are theirs to make. But we are free to act only upon what is given. Choice is lost in the maze of generations and each act in that maze is itself an enslavement for it voids every alternative and binds one ever more tightly into the constraints that make a life" (195).

Nevertheless, the musician counsels John Grady that "those things we most desire to hold in our hearts are often taken from us while that which we would put away seems often by that very wish to become endowed with unsuspected powers of endurance" (192-3).

John Grady believes, in spite of evidence to the contrary, that fulfilling his quest, although risky, is not impossible. To his mind, grasping that which you really want is necessary, not an option. Until he finds Magdalena in the morgue he genuinely believes that his goals are attainable. Billy, more aware of the tragedy in the world, says, "My daddy once told me that some of the most miserable people he ever knew were the ones that finally got what they'd always wanted." John Grady responds, "I'm willing to risk it. I've damn sure tried it the other way" (219).

In John Grady's green and comic world, the Protestant North has nothing to fear from the Catholic South. In spite of his time in Mexico John Grady has no real concept of the mysteries of the southern world. Billy and Mac recognize the practical difficulties inherent in John Grady's quest, and they along with old man Johnson have some intuitions about the ambiguities of Mexico. For example, the violence inherent in Mexican history dominates some of their conversations. Mexico is a place where bodies disappear and shootouts are common (63-4). Archer, another ranch hand, says, "You don't need to go far to get in trouble.... You want trouble you can find all you can say grace over right across that river yonder" (89).

Billy, however, feels indebted to the Mexican people. Coming upon a truckload of Mexicans needing roadside assistance, he stops to help because some Mexican peasants saved his and Boyd's lives years ago. He says, "I liked the country and I liked the people in it.... Those people would take you in and put you up and feed you and feed your horse and cry when you left. You could of stayed forever" (90).

Still there is a mystery at the core of Mexico. As Eduardo the pimp says, "No one knows this country" (211). And Billy agrees with him, for Mexico deceives the American. "I damn sure dont know what Mexico is. I think it's in your head. Mexico.... The first ranchera you hear sung you understand the whole country. By the time you've heard a hundred you dont know nothing. You never will" (218). Among the mysteries is the Mexican devotion to the Virgin. Mac, reflecting on the death of his daughter on Candelmas Day, says, "Candlemas. Somthing to do with the Virgin. As what didnt. In Mexico there is no God. Just her" (116).

Although John Grady has visited Mexico often, speaks the language, and even knows elements of the culture (for instance, he knows Magdalena needs a padrino), he does not and will never understand the tragic vision that undergirds the Catholic Mexican worldview. The pimp Eduardo sums up the gulf between the Protestant North and the Catholic South this way: "Americans cannot bear that the world be ordinary. That it contains nothing save what stands before me. But the Mexican world is a world of adornment only and underneath it is very plain indeed. While your world...your world totters upon an unspoken labyrinth of questions" (253).

Do the deaths of Magdalena, John Grady and Eduardo suggest that the gulf between the tragic and comic worlds cannot be bridged? Certainly for John Grady, his world is never ordinary. It is filled with wonder and possibility and, it is true, many questions. But John Grady never doubts that a man's actions—even the decision to kill the man who murdered Magdalena—have significance. John Grady has his revenge, but at great price. Yet the deaths of Magdalena, John Grady, and Eduardo have no apparent effect on Mexico.

Rodriguez sums up the conflict between the Mexican tragic vision and the Protestant north (represented by California) this way:

I think now that Mexico has been the happier place for being a country of tragedy. Tragic cultures serve up better food than optimistic cultures; tragic cultures have sweeter children, more opulent funerals. In tragic cultures, one does not bear the solitary burden of optimism. California is such a sad place, really—a state where children run away from parents, a state of pale beer, and young old women, and divorced husbands living alone in condos. (Rodriguez xvi-xvii)

The last words are left to Billy who even in old age continues to suffer, but also to endure. Homeless, broke, mourning the loss of his brother and his best friend John Grady, he wanders the West, sleeping under thruway bridges and sharing

crackers in a faintly Eucharistic feast with an anonymous traveler. And the puzzle of his life sheds little light on the labyrinth of questions that infest his mind. Although he finds no bridge between Mexico and the United States, he does find shelter and some comfort with a family of four near Portales, New Mexico. There ordinary Americans support him in his old age as peasant Mexicans had in his youth. Perhaps in this common experience of humane treatment of people in need, we are to find the foundations for a bridge that spans the Mexican Catholic tragic vision and the American Protestant green and promising world.

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Roaming the Margins of Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*: An Examination of the Christian's Role as Reader

Patty Kirk

The forlorn image of Grendel in the dark outside the meadhall peering in with longing at a life foreign to him emerges again and again in the history of the canon. Caliban on his lonely island. Christian and Faithful in *Vanity Fair*. Oliver Twist, Pip, Scrooge. Frankenstein's monster. The comfortless Jane Eyre and her even more bereft fictional counterpart Lucy Snowe. Edna Pontellier of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, gazing in upon the Lebrun family's apparent filial bliss. The Misfit and Hazel Motes of Flannery O'Connor's fiction on their rage-spurred pilgrimages. Seekers all. Not all such characters find what they seek. Invariably, in fact, they are mistaken about what's really on the other side of the windows of they peer through. But it is never what these characters find or don't find that constitutes their enduring appeal. Rather, it is this looking in at what others have, this hunger for what one imagines one sees.

These figures have drawn me from the beginnings of my undergraduate career, when a spiritual crisis occasioned by family troubles left me at once Godless and crippled with longing, peering in ravenously at the certainties I supposed others had. Perhaps I recognized myself in these lonely pictures of misguided longing. Having lost sight of an author of all things seen and unseen, I believed instead that one's hurts determined one's desires, one's needs generated one's gods and one's world. In any case, as a nonbeliever throughout my undergraduate and graduate studies, I went from dream to dream and theory to theory and eventually country to country looking for something I thought contained in every lit and noisy window I encountered.

Much later, when I finally came back to the country of my birth to settle down, with a family and a newfound faith, and commenced to teach at a nearby Christian college, I was surprised to catch glimpses of Grendel in even my most devout students.

"Tell us about your life *before* you became a Christian," they often beg, peering past my bland life now—of daughters and husband, office hours, essays to grade—to the blinding noise and activity of a past most of which I would like to forget. Some of my students are missionary kids and intimate with worlds far more exotic than my faithless life in European and Asian cities, and yet my stories draw even these for their licentiousness and, as they see it, freedom.

"Don't you miss it? Aren't you glad you got to do that *before* you became a Christian?"

Even my mother-in-law, a teetotalling Baptist and retired schoolteacher in her eighties, has a bit of Grendel in her. Her favorite T.V. program of all time is

Cheers, the meadhall seen through the steam-blurred window of desire for what one does not have: mirth, companionship, belonging. Don't we all want to go, as the series' theme song claims, where everyone knows our name?

Cormac McCarthy's grisly novels often feature such a figure—an outsider looking in, seeking, haunting the outskirts of ordinary human activities in search of pleasures neither clearly seen nor understood, a lonely seeker who dashes in from time to time to snatch what he does not know cannot be got by theft or violence—what, ironically, cannot be got at all but must be received as a gift.

In McCarthy's early and perhaps most disturbing novel, *Child of God*, this figure is Lester Ballard, the now grown son of a mother who ran off on him and a father who committed suicide when he was just a child. In the opening scene, we discover him peering out of the dark barn from the rafters of which still dangles the rope on which his father hanged himself years before. He is watching the townspeople arriving, "like a caravan of carnival folk" (4), for the auction of his repossessed homeplace. In the remainder of the novel, after his house and land are sold to a stranger, he will move from place to place, seeking warmth and protection from the elements and his pursuers, first in the decrepit cabin he squats, then in the hilly woods and abandoned quarries of Sevier County, Tennessee, and finally a cave whose muddy entrance is "no more than a crawlway" (107). The merest substitutes for home. From these loveless retreats he will emerge to peer in one window after another—the steamed up car windows of copulating strangers parked along the Frog Mountain turnaround, the windows of his old homeplace where the new owner sits cozily sockfooted before "Ballard's very stove" (109) reading seed catalogues, the grimy windows of neighbors with wives and families—at the life so abundantly denied him.

Looking through these windows ourselves and looking at Ballard looking through the same windows fosters an interesting disconnect between what Ballard sees and what we see. The lives he watches and longs to be part of are hardly enviable. The poverty of Ballard's neighbors—spiritual as well as worldly—is only slightly less abject than his own. The families he watches are polluted by hatred and incest, and their houses are literal dumpheaps in varying states of decay. Fathers couple with daughters whose names they can't even remember. Profoundly disabled children are left to bite the legs off of birds and wallow in their own messes on the floor. The girls he lusts after are mean-mouthed "whore[s]," as he himself repeatedly refers to them (52-54, 63). Nevertheless, from these pools of misery Lester Ballard assembles a companionship of his own devising—beginning with the body of a girl he finds with her lover in the back of an idling car, both dead from carbon monoxide poisoning, and progressing through his neighbors' promiscuous daughters, other couples on the Frog Mountain turnabout, and finally the new owner of his house, who manages to shoot Ballard's arm off and survive. Ballard kills his other living victims, drags them off, and stacks them up in his cave, where he fondles, arranges, dresses, and sodomizes their dead bodies, then goes out on the frozen hillside and turnabout looking for more. Often on these forays he wears their clothes and makeup and scalps, obviously thinking by these macabre means to become, somehow, like

them—the brightly dressed and happy inhabitants of the meadhall he had seen through the windows.

In the end, it would be easy enough to dismiss Lester Ballard as a crazed criminal—as unnatural and inhuman as the similarly one-armed, cave-dwelling Grendel on which he is modeled—were it not for the novel’s title, taken from the opening scene, in which he is described, confidingly, as “A child of God much like yourself perhaps” (4). This equation of reader and protagonist, at once compassionate and accusatory, encapsulates the novel’s shifting point of view. *Child of God* is a montage of unidentified voices. There are few scenes in which Lester and other characters truly interact. Instead, the gossipy anecdotes of the people of the town, the dispassionate and detailed accounts of an obsessively curious camera eye observer, and Lester’s own fragmentary voice merge with the conspiratorial pronouncements of a narrator we can’t help but agree with, who comments judgmentally on Lester’s hideously sinful yet pitiable life. We are forced, time and again, to recognize this life as in many ways similar to the one we ourselves are living. Despite unnumbered chapter breaks and the novel’s three part structure representing Lester before and after his crime spree and then on the run, these voices weave in and out of one another, sometimes changing point of view within a single sentence, ultimately forming a composite voice that is utterly human and real and bereft of any true or good impulse—at once the voice of the sinner and the hardhearted judge of others’ sins—a voice that is unmistakably our own.

We are part of the story of Lester Ballard from the start, uncomfortable co-creators of the monster he is and the monsters we are. We look out with longing from the between the slats of his barn and with horror from the outside back in at Lester’s amazing crimes. We peer in curiously at the dead lovers in the car and gape terrified back out at the loveless stranger about to ravage us. We sit ostracized with Lester at the back of the church reading the notices on the bulletin board and glare at him through the backs of our bowed heads with precisely the same judgmental outrage.

The voices of the townspeople, choral in quality as in Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” record key events of Lester’s past life in the sketchy stories of their minimal experience with the outcast. These are de-emphasized by the ribald hillbilly tall-tales of other townspeople mixed in with Lester’s story. In one such tale, a man lights a fire under his recalcitrant oxen, which only move forward far enough to set afire the cart they are pulling; then, when the man climbs under the cart to quench the fire, they drive forward again, breaking both his legs. In another tale, the dumpkeeper whom Lester visits has named his daughters from a discarded medical dictionary—Urethra, Cerebella, Hernia Sue. Upon discovering one daughter in the act of intercourse, he runs off the unnamed man and “Next thing he knew his overalls were about his knees and he was mounting her” (27-28). Another man, we are told, sang “the chickenshit blues” (22) with his hat in his hands when asked if he wanted to say a few words at his wife’s burial.

The events of Lester’s early life are bland by comparison. He was locked up for fighting the sale of his house. He beat up a classmate for refusing to fetch a ball. He set more than seven fence-posts at eight cents a post to buy a rifle,

stopping in the middle of the day as soon as he had enough. He won three enormous stuffed animals at a shooting booth at a fair before he was made to leave. He attended church, but arrived late and “snuffled loudly through the service” (32) because of a cold. In recounting Lester’s past, the chorus of townspeople focuses on themselves, rather than on Lester: how he slighted this one or that, how mean and crazy he was to them. Even his father’s hanging victimized *them*—not the nine year old child Lester was when he summoned the townspeople to cut his daddy down—because the corpse was so ugly to look at: “The old man’s eyes was run out on stems like crawfish and his tongue blacker’n a chow dog’s. I wisht if a man wanted to hang hisself he’d do it with poison or somethin so folks wouldn’t have to see such a thing as that” (21). Their self-satisfied voices are familiar to those of us who read the newspaper or watch true crime accounts on T.V. They always knew he was crazy, mean, not like everyone else. There is no true exposition of Lester’s past, only rumor and the coarse selectivity of the storyteller. The Lester of his neighbors’ gossip is not a real person but a character they have invented and, as such, twice removed from the reader’s usual window frame of willing belief.

In stark contrast with the townspeople’s subjective account, a fastidious observer gives us hyper-realistic reports of Lester’s hand-to-mouth existence, thoughts, and dreams in details and images that, reminiscent of the Grimms’ fairy tales, are dark, violent, and sparse, but bejeweled in the telling. We see him alone, urinating and defecating, gathering food from newly harvested fields and stealing chickens, cleaning out his living quarters with an old newspaper for a broom, portaging his mattress and other belongings from place to place, defending himself from dogs, sneaking around parked cars and houses, cursing, fleeing his enemies, hoisting a corpse—now frozen, now thawed—in and out of an attic on a homemade ladder. Toward the end of the book, he dreams that he is “riding to his death” through leaves that “rode over his face like veils, already some yellow, their veins like slender bones where the sun shone through them” on a day in which “the world [...] was as lovely as any day that ever was” (170-171).

Lester’s most humble activities acquire importance and a kind of precious beauty through the descriptive powers of this objective narrative voice and its ironic blend of lofty vocabulary with rustic colloquialisms and archaic syntax. One chapter begins, “A winter dreadful cold it was” (136). At the hospital after he loses his arm, we are told,

Ballard woke in a room dark to blackness.
He woke in a room day bright. (174)

Even the scum on a flooding river is beautiful and significant in this voice: “It came on bobbing and bearing in its perimeter a meniscus of pale brown froth in which floated walnuts, twigs, a slender bottle neck erect and tilting like a metronome” (155-156).

Child of God resonates additionally with biblical diction and images. Like Ruth, Lester “glean[s]” his food (26). Like David in exile, he hides in caves. His perpetual curses are described in one passage as “echoes from the clefts of

bedlam” (157) and in another as “A vitriolic invocation for the receding of the waters” (155). Taken naked from his hospital room by a lynch mob, he is eventually “swaddled” in someone else’s “outsized overalls” (192). Roaming the woods, he passes a felled tree holding “in the grip of its roots two stones the size of fieldwagons, great tablets on which was writ only a tale of vanished seas” (128).

Unlike Faulkner’s prose, which is similarly lofty and often biblical in diction and style, McCarthy’s sentences are frequently short and spare and modern sounding, and their starkness seems to pull their subject matter out from under the medium itself—in a manner reminiscent of Diane Arbus’s black and white photographs of what she referred to as “freaks” (Arbus, Israel, and Arbus 3)—to underscore their realness and strange beauty as well as our own prurience in examining them. Reading *Child of God* amounts to spiritual voyeurism.

The reader’s role as eavesdropper is further heightened by pat, subjective pronouncements in which the objectivity of the observing narrator parts to expose the underlying judgmental nature of both storyteller and listener. “Were there darker provinces of night he would have found them” (23) begins one unnumbered chapter in which coon dogs “vault ghostly [...] through the open window” (23) of the cabin where Lester is sleeping. He is described as “some crazy winter gnome” (107) and a “crazed mountain troll” (152). “Given charge,” the narrator remarks with no small sarcasm, “Ballard would have made things more orderly in the woods and in men’s souls” (136). Not only the storyteller, in selecting what details and events are recorded, but we, the audience, in being most interested in those details which reinforce our sense of our superiority over others, influence the truth of a story. We know the sinner because we too are sinners, but we listen to the story—or read the paper or slow down the better to view the accident—to reassure ourselves that we aren’t the worst sinners or the most wretched or idiotic or messed up. This narrator-judge speaks directly to us—often using “you”—and also *through* us, predicting our own unstated thoughts and unsavory longings, knowing our own predilection for sin as well as our judgment of others’ sins.

The third person narrator frequently merges with what seems to be Lester Ballard’s own interior voice—in first person minus the *I*—a sensory catalogue of sentence fragments detailing the weather and scenery from the truncated perspective of a journal writer, recording information divorced of any personal reference. The disconnected precision of these observations, ironically, renders Lester’s point of view the more intimate: “The mud packed with tins trod flat, with broken glass. The bushes strewn with refuse. Yonder through the woods a roof and smoke from a chimney” (26). Lester sees everything but himself. In a post office, “The wanted stared back with surly eyes. Men of many names. Their tattoos. Legends of dead loves inscribed on perishable flesh. A prevalence of panthers” (55). McCarthy captures Lester Ballard’s view not in words his main character would have used or could even have articulated but nevertheless channeled so directly through his sensory organs and fears and hopes that it is as if we are suddenly seeing Ballard’s world through his own eyes and thinking his thoughts. Our vision in these passages is crystal clear, although shuttered by

Ballard's margin-roaming perspective, as in the horror movie *Halloween*, when the action suddenly cuts to outside the house in which the murders are committed and we see through the jostling mask of the escaping killer. Lester Ballard, too, is on the run and limited in what he sees by the window frames through which he views the world around him. We often see him silhouetted small against the larger background of Sevier County—the blue hills, a dark lake, the fire of a forge. In passage after passage we find Lester and his countrymen contrasted, as here:

He stood in the crossroads listening to other men's hounds on the mountain. A figure of wretched arrogance in the lights of the few cars passing. In their coiling dust he cursed or muttered or spat after them, the men tightly shouldered in the high old sedans with guns and jars of whiskey among them and lean treedogs curled in the turtledeck. (41)

In a climactic moment toward the end of the novel, when Lester is in flight and about to turn himself in, a churchbus appears:

It was all lit up and the faces within passed each in their pane of glass, each in profile. At the last seat in the rear a small boy was looking out the window, his nose putted against the glass. There was nothing there to see but he was looking anyway. As he went by he looked at Ballard and Ballard looked back.[...] Ballard climbed into the road and went on. He was trying to fix in his mind where he'd seen the boy when it came to him that the boy looked like himself. This gave him the fidgets and though he tried to shake the image of the face in the glass it would not go. (191)

This is the closest Lester Ballard comes to actually being in the meadhall. From within another's window, he looks out to see himself seeking.

At the Christian university where I teach, my students would ask me, if I were brave enough to assign McCarthy's dark novel in a course, *Is this enough, this seeking and our proposed similarity to Lester Ballard, to justify the novel's graphic depictions of sin and gore and its strangely sympathetic rendering of the worst sinner most of us could imagine?* One of them would invariably quote Philippians 4:8, "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (NIV), and they would be thinking, justifiably, about the novel's unsavory depiction of sin and its victims, graphically and often comically rendered. Upon these McCarthy often exercises his finest poesy—the uncooperative frozen corpse that Lester burns his cabin down trying to thaw, another he carries on his back that makes him look like "a man beset by some ghastr succubus, the dead girl riding him with legs bowed akimbo like a monstrous frog" (153), or the collection of bodies eventually discovered when a "span of mules" falls into the cave where they lie, "covered with adipocere, a pale gray cheesy mold common to corpses in damp places" (195-96).

That he's a sinner, and we're sinners, and we're all children of God—is that enough? my students would ask me, and they would be thinking, as many readers might, about their own discomfort at being identified with Lester Ballard, even as fellow children of God. Indeed, the mere thought of sharing the earth with one such as him—cohabiting with Satan, as it were—is disturbing. *Is this seeking and sinning enough, they would want to know, if in the end all we find out about is our own mortality—if, as for Lester, all the world has to offer in the end is loneliness, hatred, death, and being dissected by strangers? How can the novel be worth reading if it does not offer any result of the seeking more affirmative than the “whitebeans with fatback and boiled greens and baloney sandwiches on lightbread” (52-53) Lester is served in prison, or a fellow inmate who doesn't even respond to “Take it easy” when Lester leaves (54), or the cage at the state hospital in which Lester Ballard dies?*

And if I were brave enough to assign McCarthy's macabre commentary on the human condition to the earnest fellow Christians who are my students, I would argue that it *is* enough because it is true: Lester Ballard is our sibling, his wrecked and wonderful world the very same one we ourselves have inherited and are ruining in our various ways. I would argue that to affirm a human alternative to this reality—a better one than the one God gave us, or one less derelict than we have made it—would be a lie, and it would be a lie perpetrated by much of the contemporary literature that they find less objectionable. That's what I would tell them.

Near the center of *Child of God* is one of the novel's rare interactive scenes, a chapter in which Lester goes to the local blacksmith to have an axehead he's found sharpened. After convincing Lester that merely grinding the rusted blade would be a waste of money, the smith launches into the considerably more complicated process of reforging the axehead. While he works, evidently inspired by a genuine passion for his trade and the desire to share it with even a stranger like Lester, he narrates and explains each step in the process. He actively attempts to engage Lester, and the scene vibrates with a simple beauty and warmth shocking in the context of Lester's miserable aloneness. This is the novel's only scene in which a character seems motivated by anything but selfishness, mean-spirited humor, lust, or gossipry in his or her dealings with Lester, and as such it calls to mind a self-less compassion reminiscent of Jesus' dealings with the unloved and unlovable outcasts of his time. Lester doesn't deserve the blacksmith's attention—he doesn't even really seek it—and yet the blacksmith proffers it anyway. When he finishes the axeblade, he asks Lester, “Reckon you could do it now from watchin?” and Lester answers, “Do what?” (74). Ironically, through the one window that offers a glimpse of compassion, joy, and true companionship, Lester sees nothing at all.

This is, for me, one of the funniest and most beautiful scenes in the novel—one in which McCarthy, an amateur blacksmith himself, makes every word sparkle. It is also one of the saddest and truest. Like Lester, like Grendel, we spend our lives gazing through windows, but we see there what we want to see, not what really is there, with the result that, even as God's own children, we spend our lives seeking, clasping corpses, and longing for the pleasures of the

meadhall, when we could be enjoying abundant life, regardless of our circumstances, in “a world this day as lovely as any day that ever was” (170-71).

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Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* and the Wisdom of Qoheleth

Roberta Kwan

Noteworthy anniversaries invite celebration, as well as reflection. 2011 marked two decades since the publication of the novel *Cloudstreet* by one of Australia's foremost contemporary authors, Tim Winton. Indeed, *Cloudstreet* has already been much celebrated, as seen in its accumulation of literary prizes, including the prestigious Miles Franklin Literary Award, and enduring popular embrace in Australia and internationally.¹ In the 2009 fan poll conducted by the literary review journal, *Australian Book Review*, *Cloudstreet* was decisively voted the favourite Australian novel. According to Jason Steger, upon its release *Cloudstreet* "went straight into Australia's collective heart and has remained entrenched there ever since" (51). In his analysis of the conditions of its reception, Robert Dixon suggests that *Cloudstreet's* publication soon after the 1988 bicentenary of European settlement in Australia and its fulfilment of expectations generated within that historically-charged context established it as both a "Great Australian Novel" and "the ideal Bicentennial novel" as it "champion[ed] traditional Australian values and social consensus, and appeal[ed] to the varied historical, literary and even spiritual interests of mainstream, middlebrow, middleclass Australian readers" (258).

Given the seeming emphasis on reading and assessing *Cloudstreet* through a filter comprising discourses and narratives of Australianness, it may be surprising that in this essay I will turn to an ancient Hebraic discourse and a narrative that asserts its universality to reflect upon the novel's significance. The discourse is the Old Testament treatment of wisdom, the narrative the biblical salvation-historical narrative. It is the considerable literary consonance between *Cloudstreet* and the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, especially the book of Ecclesiastes, that links the two. This ensues in the contention that the illocutionary impetus of *Cloudstreet*, like Ecclesiastes, is underpinned by an exploration of what it means to live wisely "under the sun," in the terms proposed (and used twenty-seven times) by the biblical book's preacher or teacher, Qoheleth.

The biographical details of Winton's life affirm the possibility that the biblical text has been influential in shaping his authorial intentions. In the 1960s, when Winton was a young child, his father was in a long-term coma after being run off his motorbike by a drunk driver. Winton recalls the chain of events that ensued:

My Dad was a big bloke, and Mum couldn't get him into the bath, so this bloke used to show up and carry him into the bath and bathe

him.... [T]his guy was a member of the local church, and he'd heard that Dad was sick and he just showed up to help. I think that was part of what set my parents on a course to being converted. (Kohn 12)

Winton's parents became involved in the Protestant Church of Christ. He tells of growing up in a house replete with Bibles (Kohn 14). Consequently, in his words, "[t]he Scriptures were very influential in my upbringing" (Willis 20) and, from this foundation, Winton's own Christian faith developed. In his autobiographical chapter in Maria Zijlstra's *The Deep End*, published in 1989 when he was in the midst of writing *Cloudstreet*, Winton asserts: "I can't see how I can't be a Christian. And because of that, I suppose I'd have to say that I see Christianity as the one, true way" (18). Throughout his career, Winton has affirmed the nexus between his faith and his writing. In 1987, he stated, "I hope everything I write is imbued with the things I feel and believe and those things are Christian things" (Salter 10). Twenty-three years later he makes a similar, if more measured, statement: "most writers' work is imbued with their cultural background, their tradition and worldview. I'm a product of a Judeo-Christian tradition and within my own, probably eccentric, terms I've embraced that tradition" (Bird 15-16). The nature of the twice-mentioned "imbuement" of Christianity—especially its discourse on wisdom—in *Cloudstreet* will be investigated in this essay.

The three universally recognised canonical biblical wisdom books²—Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes—share epistemological and existential concerns about the "nature of reality" (Goldsworthy 11) and how these concerns inform wise living. Within the biblical worldview, such concerns are explored with *a priori* presuppositions: reality is shaped and given meaning by the transcendental God who created and ordered the universe, and anthropological and cosmological discourse occurs within the paradigm of the "creation-fall-redemption-consummation schema," as denoted by Kevin Vanhoozer (84-5), which encapsulates the biblical narrative. As such, (biblical) wisdom has been defined as "understanding the present confused order, and the future restored order, so that one can live according to what is real" (Patston, "The Place" 3).

Despite James L. Crenshaw's labelling of wisdom literature as "an alien body within the Hebrew Scriptures,"³ the book of Ecclesiastes does resonate with the general tenor of the biblical worldview. Ecclesiastes 3:11a—"He [God] hath made everything beautiful in his time" (*Authorized Version*)—succinctly exemplifies the wisdom book's use of Genesis' initial chapters as its allusive and theological source, and how it is, following Richard L. Schulz, best characterized as a work of creation theology. This aphoristic verse mirrors the narrative of Genesis 1 in its depiction of God as the omnipotent creator of all—"the heaven and the earth," (Gen. 1:1) and his creation as beautiful—"very good" in the terms proposed in Genesis 1:31. From an anthropological perspective, humanity in its prelapsarian state enjoyed joyful, harmonious relationships with God, one another, and the natural world. Before the Fall, human experience was characterised by abundance and the absence of anxiety. Ecclesiastes contends that this ordinary condition of the world continues as a persistent strain in its ontology. Humanity

can experience the world as good through God's gifts of food, drink, work, happiness, the opportunity to do good, wealth and possessions, a wife and love, and youth and vigor (Eccles. 2:24-25, 3:12-13, 3:22, 5:18-20, 9:7-10, 11:9-10). As Iain Provan argues, "Qohelet [*sic*] understands what the confession that *God* created the *world* and made it *good* (Gen 1) truly means. We cannot have God without embracing his world, and we cannot in the end have the world without embracing God" (italics in the original, 38). For Qoheleth, such understanding constitutes part of the foundation for wise living.

Creation theology is evident in the worldview enunciated by the narrative of *Cloudstreet*. The prologue contains a prelapsarian image: "Will you look at us by the river! The whole restless mob of us on spread blankets in the dreamy briny sunshine skylarking and chiacking about for one day, one clear, clean, sweet day in a good world in the midst of our living" (1). The language resounds with an originary, unspoiled goodness. The word "mob," used colloquially, connotes a common, perhaps family, bond, particularly when considering its usage by Indigenous Australians to refer to a tribe or language group. The skylarking and chiacking of this mob emphasize a harmony and ease in their relating. The imagery used to describe the sunshine—it is dreamy and briny—depicts a setting and atmosphere that is concomitantly and paradoxically ethereal and sensorially saturated, an intensified, enriched reality, again suggestive of an Edenic ideal. This allusion is reinforced by the tangible purity of the sublime day—evoked by "clear, clean, sweet," and the distinct echoes of the creation narrative in "good world"—a reminder of Genesis 1:31—and "by the river" that educes the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2. This creation account features a river which nourishes the abundant garden and extends four ways beyond Eden's boundaries, connecting it with the world beyond (Gen. 2:10-14). From the beginning of creation, rivers are critical to the flourishing of physical life and symbolic of a broader metaphysical conception of life.

Analogies can also be drawn between Ecclesiastes' insistence that there is a goodness—material, relational and existential—stemming from its origins, that still inheres and can be experienced in the world, and the worldview portrayed in *Cloudstreet*. There are regular times of feasting throughout the novel that revel in the creation. A particularly memorable feast bookends the narrative—the riverside feast that occurs on that "one day."⁴

Twenty years, they all say, sprawling and drinking. There's ginger beer, staggerjuice and hot flasks of tea. There's pasties, a ham, chickenlegs and a basket of oranges, potato salad and dried figs. There are things spilling from jars and bags.

The speech is silenced by a melodious belch which gets big applause. Someone blurts on a baby's belly and a song strikes up. Unless you knew, you'd think they were a whole group, an earthly vision. (1-2)

The naming of each constituent of the feast evokes in turn a lingering, familiar, multi-sensory image in readers' imaginations. The growing list conveys

abundance. This is accentuated by the image of the overflow of provisions that hints at the world in its primordial state. The goodness of and satiation provided by the physical creation is amplified through the oxymoronic “melodious belch” that draws applause, not censure, the way the mutual experience of it knits the characters together and the joyful tone that permeates the scene. A similarly joyful tone and existential contentment accompany the acquiring and performing of work in *Cloudstreet*, for instance when Sam Pickles gets a job at the mint (85-6), again echoing the biblical creation narrative in which work is intrinsic to the ontology of human beings (Gen. 2:5-7). Wise living, in the perspectives of *Cloudstreet* and Ecclesiastes, includes participating in and enjoying the gift of the created world that retains a significant trace of its essential, ordinary goodness. In Qoheleth’s words: “[it is] good and comely [for one] to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life, which God giveth him: for it [is] his portion” (Eccles. 5:18).

It would be necessary to characterize *Cloudstreet* as Utopian if its only intersection with the biblical narrative is a positive resonance with creation theology. However, in the narratives of both the Bible and *Cloudstreet*, there is an acute awareness that every dimension—material, relational, existential—of the original good creation has experienced significant corruption, distortion, and loss. Winton has constructed his novel such that the prologue is temporally situated twenty years after the chronological commencement of the main narrative. The prologue ends with an image of human existence antithetical to the one with which it opens: “those who go on down the close, foetid galleries of time and space without you,” (3) a depiction of the human condition in its current state. Time and space are figured as galleries. They delimit the human journey through life, emphasized by the description of them as “close” and “foetid.” Human beings are subservient to their physical occupation of a particular space—an inescapable situatedness—to time’s inexorability, and to the inevitable decay and decomposition it poignantly leaves in its wake. There is a feeling of claustrophobia and atrophy in this description of the existential conditions for the “those” in the narrative, a feeling that links the prologue to the narrative’s chronological commencement, which begins: “Rose Pickles knew something bad was going to happen. Something really bad, this time” (7).

The Genesis 3 Fall narrative accounts for “really bad” things occurring in a good world. This narrative is recognised in Ecclesiastes in which a deep consciousness of the Fall is juxtaposed alongside the wisdom book’s insistence on the goodness of the world. Qoheleth speaks against the background of Genesis 3 (Provan 39)—its discourse permeates the mood of Ecclesiastes’ well-known motto: “‘Vanity of vanities,’ saith the Preacher, ‘vanity of vanities; all is vanity’” (Eccles. 1:2, 12:8). The *Authorized Version*’s “vanity” translates *hebel*⁵—the key image in the motto that occurs in Ecclesiastes’ opening and closing verses, and thus frames the book.⁶ It is generally agreed that *hebel*’s literal meaning is akin to “breath,” “breeze,” “vapour,” or “mist” (Brown 130; Longman III 62; Provan 51; Fox, *A Time to Tear Down* 27)—the term conveys a sense of impermanence and transience (and calls to mind Winton’s 2008 novel, *Breath*). There is considerable disparity over *hebel*’s interpretation,⁷ a discussion of which is

beyond the scope of this essay, but, given the frequent, earlier-noted references to the goodness of the creation and human existence, and Qoheleth's urging of his audience to enjoy these, I follow Provan's argument that Qoheleth cannot mean that everything is meaningless (as per Longman III, Fox, Brown and the *New International Version* translation). When Qoheleth declares all is *hebel*, he is making the empirical observation that reality is both ephemeral "from the mortal point of view" and elusive; that is, "it resists our attempts to capture it and contain it, to grasp hold of it and control it...at the level of both understanding and of action" (Provan 52).

This description of reality is exemplified in humanity's relationship to time. Time is an aspect of reality that transcends human existence, yet its inescapable immanence is etched on every human face and gravestone. Each human being is a first-hand witness to this duality in our experience of the regular subjection of time on earth to what is in order at a particular time. This is expressed in the famous "Time" poem in Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. Qoheleth lists twenty-eight empirically-determined aspects of human existence and experience: fourteen pairs of polar opposites.⁸ He emphasizes that each is subservient to the rhythm of a transcendent, time-driven reality by first, prefacing each with the phrase "a time," the insistent repetition of which places the metrical stress in each line on every occurrence of "time," and second, through his use of merismus (Provan 87)⁹ to highlight that throughout life one may be engaged in diametrically opposite activities, the fittingness of which can only be understood through a consideration of their temporally-determined context.

Cloudstreet's narrative resonates with such a perspective, already seen in the dominant image of the human condition as limited by the "close, foetid galleries of time and space," and in its rhythm, which seems to follow that of Qoheleth's "Time" poem. Provan's analysis of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 as picturing "human experience as a tapestry woven of 'times'" (Provan 87) could be aptly applied to *Cloudstreet*. Structurally, the novel is composed of many short, chronologically-ordered sketches or vignettes of a moment or more in the lives of the Pickles and Lamb families. From 1944 to 1964, the two families cohabit—with considerable inter- and intra-familial tension and calamity reflective of humanity's fallenness—a large, ramshackle Perth house—"Cloudstreet"—willed to Sam Pickles by his cousin Joel. The essence of each vignette is encapsulated in its title. Many echo a phrase from Qoheleth's "Time" poem as the narrative moves from one to the next with pendulum-like regularity. Early on, the Lambs encounter tragedy when Fish, an engaging nine-year-old, is accidentally entangled under a prawning net, almost drowns, and suffers brain-damage as a result. That moment in time means that for the Lambs there will always be times when it is fitting to weep. In "Fish forgets," the narrative poignantly states of Fish that "[w]hen he's frightened or angry he falls down. He cries like a man. It makes the Lambs crazy with emotion to hear it" (70). But there are also times when laughter is appropriate, such as in "Cake," which occurs soon after "Fish Forgets" in both discourse and narrative time. In another concrete moment in time—Quick's twelfth birthday—Oriel, his mother, sells his birthday cake as he is on the verge of blowing out the candles.

Birthday, Quick, said Fish.

Yeah, said Quick.

Suddenly, they all laughed—even Quick. It started as a titter, and went to a giggle, then a wheeze, and then screaming and shrieking till they were daft with it, and when Oriel came back in they were pandemonius, gone for all money. (73)

This oscillation between polar emotional states and experiences is repeated throughout the narrative.

Cloudstreet also resonates with Ecclesiastes' consciousness of a transcendent, universal reality in which time and its insistent, orderly progress is intrinsic; a reality that shapes the lives of its characters. This resonance is emphasized by the chronological linearity of the novel's narrative, elucidated by the constant references to a season, a year/date, a character's age, and to time itself, which all contribute to the sense of the narrative being carried along by the unstoppable flow of time.

In "Ticking," time is personified in a single sentence: "A man stands in the street across the road [from Cloudstreet] with his great timepiece ricking and ticking" (265). This image conveys a sense of time's immanence—suggested by the onomatopoeic effect of the continuous ricking and ticking and the presence of the man and his timepiece within the confines of the world—and simultaneously its transcendence. There is a mythic, fabulous feel to the size and rhyming operation of the timepiece, and the man, whose appearance is mysterious. Although there is no explanation of his identity in the vignette, it is possible that the man is the enigmatic "blackfella," most probably an Indigenous Australian, who appears throughout the narrative and serves as a protector of Cloudstreet and guide for its inhabitants.

This suggestion is proposed on the basis of Fish's special affinity with him (for example, 178-9 and 326)—Fish being the subject of the preceding sentence—the "blackfella's" other appearances in the vicinity of Cloudstreet (for example, 61-62, 161, 367, 405-06), and his figuring with Christ-like, transcendental overtones. His role and type are most obvious in Quick's encounter with him after Quick flees the wheat fields (208-210). The "blackfella" "seems to fill the cab"—his presence transcends his physical limits. He offers Quick inexhaustible wine and bread; his family is all over; he is always on family business, and the petrol tank stays on quarter full—suggestive of supernatural provision. Finally, he directs Quick to Cloudstreet, in which "[t]here were so many rooms you could get lost and unnerved" (39). This description resonates with Christ's use of a multi-room house as a metaphor for heaven and his self-description as the one who will take his disciples there (John 14:2-3). Regardless of his identity, the enigma surrounding the time-personifying man underscores that both time and the greater reality of which it is a part exist outside the control, and for the most part, understanding, of *Cloudstreet's* other characters. They experience time and reality as ephemeral and elusive—as *hebel*.

The ultimate empirical evidence for declaring all *hebel* is death, the definitive imprint of the Fall and conclusive proof that humanity has no power over time and reality through the severing of one's engagement with both. This powerlessness is articulated by Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes 8:8: "There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power in the day of death"—and captured poignantly by Winton in "Quick Lamb's Sadness Radar."

The impoverished McBrides—eleven-year-old Wogga and younger brother Darren—are objects of fascination for twelve-year-old Quick, who has a multi-sensory apprehension of their poverty, a telling contrast with the evocation of a multi-sensory appreciation of the goodness of the world with which the novel begins. He can see their malnourished states verging on lifelessness: "their blue-mottled skin and legs like hinges, the way they fold inside the knee;" "[t]here is a kind of weariness to them. Their hair lies flat against their birdlike skulls" (90). As Quick follows them, the ghost-like McBrides are juxtaposed with the life-affirming redolence and pungency of "the food smells and the odour of newness seeping out of the open doors and shopfronts" (90). Further, Quick realises he has hardly ever heard them laugh. Through Quick's perspective, the reader experiences the pathos of the paradoxical embodiment, in the McBrides' youthful bodies, of the ephemerality of human existence, which culminates shockingly here:

Down there Wogga McBride is fooling with the dog, some carpetbacked stray that's got a hold of his school bag and he's laughing. Laughing! The two boys prance around the brown dog.... [Quick] wants to go down and run that dog ragged with them. Oh the laughter, even over the sound of the train.

And then Wogga McBride tears the bag free of the dog and sways back, shrieking with glee, and the sleeper catches his heel and he staggers and the engine smacks him with the sound of a watermelon falling off the back of a truck, and he's gone.

Everything is screaming.... Screaming, screaming. (91-92)

Despite its certainty, death does not cease to disturb. In the space of a single sentence, the light-hearted sound and movement of Wogga's laughter and prancing is extinguished—his transition from "shrieking with glee" to being "gone" occurs within a seemingly insignificant, exiguous fragment of both story and discourse time; yet it is profoundly irreversible. The increasing cadence of the sentence, effected through the repetition of "and," emphasises the uncontrollable pace with which death overtakes the scene, matched by the abrupt alteration in tone from joy to pervasive shock.

For Qoheleth, the realization that all is *hebel* and that the trajectory of every fleeting life is death provokes the "programmatically question" (Ogden 28) within Ecclesiastes, a question repeated throughout: "What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?"¹⁰ "Profit" translates "*yitron*," derived from the world of commerce and referring to gain or surplus. Provan (54)

and Graham Ogden (22) argue that Qoheleth infuses *yitron* with a metaphysical sense and is asking: “What reward [or gain] is there on the balance sheet of life for ... all the effort and hard work that human beings put into the business of living?” (Provan 54). Qoheleth answers his own question in 2:11: “Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour to do: and, behold, all was vanity [*hebel*] and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.” Within humanity’s terrestrial bounds there is no gain; human attempts to achieve it by controlling reality are futile. The hopelessness of attaining *yitron* evokes gain’s implied binary opposite—loss. Qoheleth imbues his discourse with a consciousness that life under the sun involves loss. Loss is one of the “times” in the “Time” poem (Eccles. 3:6), and is poignantly evoked in 12:1-7 where the end of life is likened to valuable objects rendered useless: a silver cord, a golden bowl, a pitcher at a fountain or a wheel at the cistern that have all been snapped, broken or crushed.

Loss is a key motif within *Cloudstreet*. At the novel’s chronological commencement, Rose is rapidly acquainted with the “really bad” thing she knew to be imminent—on that very day, her father Sam, the perennially-poor family’s sole breadwinner, loses the fingers on his right hand, his working hand. Sam attributes this loss to forces beyond his control, which, in his naming of them, can be seen as whimsically irreverent parodies of the biblical God. The idea of God “with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning” (Jas. 1:17) and under the shadow of whose wings one can find protection (for example, Ps. 17:8, 36:7, 63:7) has been reconstructed in the Australian vernacular into the dubious, unpredictable “shifty shadow of God” (9). Further, the biblical image of the providential hand of God (for example, Deut. 7:18-19; Josh. 4:24; 2 Chron. 30:12; Ezra 7:6, 9; Eccles. 2:24, 9:1) becomes the comically grotesque “Hairy Hand of God” (161). Sam equates the shifty shadow and hairy hand with luck and fate, and he usually finds himself on the wrong side of both. Sam “was on a lifelong losing streak” (12).

The language and image of the “loser,” often used in connection with Sam, can be inverted and idealized in the imagination of a nation that at times has mythologized loss, a prime example being the ANZAC¹¹ loss at Gallipoli in World War I, which forms part of the backdrop of *Cloudstreet*. Such mythologizing occurs towards the end of the novel:

A long time ago [Sam]’d decided this was to be a straight up and down life of bad luck.... If anything, he figured there was some strength in knowing the way things were—it gave a bloke security, something to believe in.... Everybody loved a loser, especially a loser of such romantic proportions. (342)

Here, Sam’s enduring “loser” status characterizes him as a happy-go-lucky, benignly fatalistic larrikin. But there is a darker side, which reveals the flimsiness of Sam’s God-parodying fatalism when it exposes him to despair. Upon being shamed by the adultery of his wife, Dolly, so that, from his perspective, his sons

“smelled a loser” (161) in him, Sam rails against his own conception of the cosmos:

Well the shadow was on him, the Hairy Hand of God, and he knew that being a man was the saddest, most useless thing that could happen to someone. To be alive, to be feeling, to be conscious. It was the cruellest bloody joke. In the dark, night after night, he raised his mangled fist to the sky and said things that frightened him. (161-62)

Sam’s fatalism cannot assuage his experiences of loss. The shadow and Hairy Hand appear both distant and malevolent; Sam questions the rationality of existence and is overcome by angst and despair. Continual, inexplicable loss, even for the archetypal fate-believing Australian “loser,” carries with it ontological and existential implications.

The narrative also frequently uses the language of loss to explicate the Lambs’ experiences. When Quick leaves home unexpectedly, Oriel feels she has lost another son (173), and she even views her daughter Hat’s marriage as “[a]nother loss. Oh, if she thinks about everything that’s been taken from her over the years—Lord it’s like the longest subtraction sum invented. She can’t help it, the feeling is on her and she’s furious” (251-52). The experiences of real loss in Oriel’s life—the deaths of her mother and siblings in a house fire, her beloved half-brother’s death in World War I—culminating in Fish’s accident, have left her with a perpetual sense of and bitter perspective on life’s experiences as loss, incurred at the behest of an unrelenting power who takes. The narrative suggests that the Lambs’ greatest loss, and possibly the foundation of their continuous sense of loss, occurs in the aftermath of Fish’s near-drowning. Previously, the Lambs had been fundamentalist Christians. However, after initially thinking a miracle had occurred when Oriel revives Fish, the realization that “not all of Fish Lamb had come back” (32) causes such turbulent disenchantment that they cannot reconcile a belief in God with their loss: “The Lambs of God. Except no one believes anymore: the disappointment has been too much” (47). Their experience of the fallenness of the world produces in them a Fall-like response—a questioning of the benevolence of God resulting in the fracturing and loss of relationship with him (and others).

Like Sam, Oriel and Lester construct an alternate “belief” system in order to make sense of their existence thenceforth—for them, it is an anti-theological, naturalistic schema consisting of the post-war Australian mini “deities” of nation, family and work. The ANZACS assume a mythic significance. The Lambs serve weekly at the ANZAC Club—it becomes an alternate church—and their allegiance is couched in religious terminology: “The ANZACS were what the Lambs believed in, the glorious memories of manhood and courage. The nation, that’s what kept the Lambs going” (144). Family also becomes an object of devotion. When Quick (rather heavy-handedly) asks Lester, “So what...what do you live for?” Lester’s reply is, “The family, Quick.... Take away the family and that’s it, there’s no point” (303-304). And work is a vehicle for the expression of their newly-adopted naturalism. They open a shop in their front room; soon after,

the narrative presents Sam's perspective: "You'd think they were carrying the nation on their backs with all that scrubbing and sweeping, tacking up shelves and blackboards, arguing over the situation of jars, tubs, scales and till" (76).

Significantly, the narrative signals the failure of this belief schema, especially for Oriel. Midway through the narrative, she and Lester engage in their longest conversation in its twenty-year span:

We don't belong anywhere. When I was a girl I had this strong feeling that I didn't belong anywhere, not in my body, not on the land. It was in my head, what I thought and dreamt, what I believed, Lester, that's where I belonged, that was my country. That was the final line of defence in the war.

...What're you sayin, love?

Since Fish...I've been losin the war. I've lost me bearins....

You believe in the Nation, though. You're the flaming backbone of the ANZAC club.

Ah, it's helpin the boys, I know, but I read the newspaper Lester. They're tellin us lies....

But, but the good of the country.

Oriel put a blunt finger to her temple: This is the country, and it's confused. It doesn't know what to believe in either. You can't replace your mind country with a nation, Lest. I tried.

Lester almost gasps.... It's terrifying.

You believe in hard work, love.

Not for its own sake, I don't. We weren't born to work....

There's always the family, says Lester.

Families aren't things you believe in, they're things you work with.

...So what do you want? says Lester.

I want my country back.

The tent?

I wish I could lace it up an never come out...

Why?

Then I could get on with the real war.

You want a miracle, don't you?

I want the miracle finished off. I demand it, and I'm gonna fight to get it.

So you do believe. (231-32)

The repetition of the language of "belief" suggests that the Lambs had not discarded a desire, even a need, to believe, just the former object of their belief, whom they replaced with nation, work and family. But Oriel realizes the impotence of this triumvirate (perhaps this "colonial trinity") in what she terms "the war," her earlier-stated trope for life: "It's all war, she said.... Everythin.... Life. War is our natural state" (229). Importantly, Oriel distinguishes between "country" and "nation." Country is the metaphorical conjunction of mind and

belonging. It represents the conciliation of subjectivity with reality and meaning, and consequently an absence of anxiety and solicitude. In contrast, nation, especially post-war and against the backdrop of the Cold War, is an idealized, rhetorical tool that feeds on dis-ease. Oriel recognizes the importance of belief for her figurative country but only experiences destabilizing disjunction when she grounds her belief in nation, as well as family and work. Concomitantly, she maintains an intransigent refusal to entertain the thought of believing in a God who did not give her the miracle she wanted. She is left not without belief but worse, without a grounding for her inability not to believe, and experiences what may be the most significant of losses—she loses her “bearings.” To lose one’s bearings is to live in a state of existential angst. Oriel’s desire to remove herself from the world in order to “get on with the real war” implies she holds God responsible. She cannot completely detach herself from God, but her unwillingness to believe in him only eventuates in her futilely trying to make up for the loss.

If *Cloudstreet* echoes Ecclesiastes’ empirically-derived assertion that loss is an inevitable part of one’s “times” under the sun, it also reflects the wisdom book’s circumspection towards loss’s implied binary opposite—gain, another assumed mainstay of Australian orthodoxy. Indeed, *Cloudstreet* suggests, with some irony, that loss and gain are more similar than one would presume. When Quick leaves home, Oriel responds by expending herself to cripple Gerry Clay, the owner of a rival mixed business store, after she is slighted by Clay. And she succeeds, but it is a hollow victory, an empty gain. Oriel discovers that Clay has left his wife and children, who are destitute. Oriel is remorseful and tries to make amends, but to no avail:

I’m... I’m sorry, said Oriel Lamb who had not said those words since 1911.

Go to Hell! Mrs Clay slammed the doors to.

Oriel Lamb walked home the long way, taking it in....

This was a sin. It was her, because of Quick.... This was what happened when you lost a son, another son and now she knew how it must have felt for that Sam Pickles waking one morning to see the bandages, to feel the tingling but know that there was only a space.

...Oriel Lamb wept the sound of a slaughteryard and the grass bowed before her. (172-73)

Oriel’s insular attempt to compensate for her loss through materialistic gain and others’ loss leads only to an acute awareness of the ubiquity of loss. The damaging consequences of pushing for gain are embodied in Oriel’s weeping that sounds like a “slaughteryard”—a painful, resounding reminder of the terminus of loss.

In both Ecclesiastes and *Cloudstreet*, the true antithesis of both loss and gain is gift.¹² For Qoheleth, knowledge of the futility of striving for gain and the certainty of loss could lead to deep cynicism, absolute despair, or nihilism. However, a persistent vein of joy is evident throughout the book. Richard Schulz

considers joy to be Qoheleth's "dominant call" and R.N. Whybray argues that in Ecclesiastes joy is "a kind of Leitmotiv" (88). The possibility of joy in a world where all is *hebel* is founded on Qoheleth's theology, in which "giving" is "[t]he activity most frequently ascribed to God" (Schulz). The nexus between the possibility of joy, a God who gives, and all being *hebel* returns us to Ecclesiastes' grounding in creation theology. Because God created and gave a world that is good, joy can be had from accepting—without thought of gaining from—what he has given, while concomitantly accepting that one cannot control reality or prevent the inevitability and constancy of loss. Qoheleth discovers that the answer "None" to his programmatic question (see Eccles. 1:3) can be qualified: "but God does gift you with the possibility of joy through his creation."

Cloudstreet embodies a similar (but more expansive) perspective of gift that has at its core the character of the biblical, gift-giving God. Like Ecclesiastes, the already-noted influence of biblical creation theology underpins the novel's worldview such that at points it exudes a tone of joy in its assertion and depiction of a "good world." Unlike Ecclesiastes, *Cloudstreet's* conception of gift is also informed by biblical redemption and re-creation theology, focused on the New Testament's account of God's gift of Christ. In "Ticking," Oriel and Quick haul up a miraculously voluminous catch of prawns. Oriel rejects the suggestion to sell the prawns, and her explanation could be Qoheleth's: "They're a gift... And you don't go floggin off a gift" (273). Gifts and gain are antithetical; gifts should not be used to procure gain. The details of the event evoke the biblical portrayal of Christ in the accounts of Christ's disciples' miraculous catches of fish in Luke 5 and John 21.

This portrayal is also educed when, after Quick leaves home, Lester's mind turns somewhat unexpectedly to one of three parables in Luke 15 centered on the motif of loss: "Often, the only thing he could think of was that old Bible story of the prodigal son. Now he knew what it felt like to be abandoned and left hurt and confused" (151). The response of the parabolic father upon the return of the gain-seeking son who "was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:24, 32) is to gift him with his unconditional love. This is an allegory of God the Father, whose compassion and love for his fallen creation were ultimately demonstrated when he gave his Son who became first, the means that enabled God's gift to humanity of redemption from the Fall, and second, the gift itself.

The allusions to Christ signify the continuation of *Cloudstreet's* proximity to the dynamics of the biblical narrative. There is the explicit ontological and functional characterization of the "blackfella" as a type of Christ. Further, Winton's structuring of the novel also indicates that the biblical delineation of gift is cardinal to understanding its meaning. Barring a brief epilogue, two accounts of Fish's second, completed drowning frame *Cloudstreet's* narrative. These, in conjunction with Fish's first near-drowning, form what Veronica Brady terms the novel's "*cantus firmus*," its "base melody," (10) in which the "tonic note" is gift. Paradoxically, Fish obtains a lucid understanding of gift through loss. From his family's perspective, Fish's accident was a tragic loss. But the narrative contains another point of view, of which Fish is given an apprehension: "Fish's pain stops, and suddenly it's all just haste and the darkness melts into something warm.

Hurrying toward a big friendly wound in the gloom ...” (31). Surprisingly, as Fish rushes towards death, physical pain ceases as he is gifted with an expansive, magnetic, “longer perspective” (Brady 14) of reality in which he joyously anticipates his imminent participation.

Fish’s real loss occurs when he is abruptly snatched back into the human condition; upon being resuscitated, he lets out an “awful, ... sad, ... hurt moan.... Never, never, was there a sadder, more disappointed noise” (31). After his abrupt return to the “close, foetid galleries of time and space,” (3) the narrative frequently describes Fish as being “hungry” for the water and the river (for example, 146-47), hunger symbolizing a yearning for that of which he had been given a foretaste. The source of the satiation of Fish’s yearning is entwined with and informed by biblical imagery of Christ. There may be an allusion to Christ and his sacrificial death in the “friendly wound.” And there are explicit allusions in the re-telling of Fish’s near-drowning:

Sink and glide to where the light comes down like a vine. It’s all calling, softbottomed and the colour of food, the rich saucy look of a meal you’ll feast on forever, Samson Lamb, so down you fly, to the sky beneath, we are the firmament below and can’t you see the light coming up from the darkness, it seems to say. Cool goes to cold, but now there’s a heat to it, a joy here you didn’t expect, growing in you all the time.... (120-21)

Some of Christ’s figurative self-descriptions—his “I am” statements in John’s gospel—provide the imagery for and elucidate the meaning in this key paragraph. Christ describes himself as the “light of the world,” (John 8:12) the provider of the way out from entrapment in the metaphorical darkness of the fallen world. He is the “true vine” (John 15:1) the source and sustainer of eternal life that is the antithesis of Qoheleth’s *hebel* and death. And he is the “bread of life” (John 6:35) such that “[h]e that cometh to me shall never hunger.” He provides an eternal satiation of the human need—epitomized by darkness and the implications of all being *hebel*—wrought by the Fall. Elsewhere in the Bible this satiation is depicted as a feast (for example, Luke 14:15-24). Further, just as the biblical gift is not abstract but personal—Christ—there is possibly a hint that the essence of what Fish experiences is personal. This hint is contained in the switch in the perspective of the voice between the third-person neuter pronoun—“it”—and the first person—“we.” Like Christ, this (personal) presence reorders reality—the sky is beneath and the “we” are the firmament below. An understanding of the unexpected joy that permeates the mood of the underwater reality and seeps into Fish’s being is enlarged by a consideration of its biblical usage in which joy is deep contentment, born of receiving the gift of Christ and the resulting understanding (for example, 1 Pet. 1:8-9). The biblical Christ symbolises and informs the transcendental Other for whom Fish hungers, and serves as both Fish’s and the novel’s teleological destination.

The importance of the river, the entrance to this destination, to *Cloudstreet*’s narrative and meaning is foreshadowed in the novel’s epigraph:

“Shall we gather at the river / Where bright angel-feet have trod,” the opening lines of an 1864 hymn written by Pastor Dr. Robert Lowry as he reflected upon Revelation 22, the biblical eschatological vision in which the river is a key image. Proceeding from “the throne of God and of the Lamb” (Rev. 22:1) it feeds the tree of life (Rev. 22:2), which, in its monthly crop and healing leaves, represents the reversal of the Fall (“there shall be no more curse”—Rev. 22:3) and a re-creation characterised by restored relationships, “light,” and abundant, everlasting life (Rev. 22:5)—the consummation of the gift of Christ. This is the vision that frames *Cloudstreet*’s narrative, unambiguously indicated by its circularity. The river features in the prologue and penultimate vignette (“Moon, Sun, Stars”). Both also include the refrain, “the beautiful, the beautiful the [*sic*] river,” (2, 423) the sixth line of Lowry’s hymn, and several other allusions to the hymn.¹³ Further, the language of completeness and perfection is used in conjunction with Fish’s transformation via his return to the river. The prologue states: “for a few seconds he’ll truly be a man;” (2) in “Moon ...” Fish articulates the experience from his perspective: “a pause for a few moments. I’m a man for that long, I feel my manhood, I recognize myself whole and human ...” (424). It is as Fish reconnects with the river and the other, transcendent, abundant, re-creating reality it represents and contains, and as he gives himself to it to attain it—“he’ll have it, and it’ll have him” (2)—that paradoxically, he is enabled to momentarily experience the fullness of his humanity. This sense of fullness is reinforced in the echoes of the language of healing from Revelation 22: “he’ll savour that healing all the rest of his journey, having felt it” (2).

In these brief moments, Fish receives insight into his earthly existence—in “Moon ...” he states, “[I] know my story for just that long, long enough to see how we’ve come, how we’ve all battled in the same corridor that time makes for us” (424). Fish’s story is the twenty-year saga of *Cloudstreet*, its inhabitants, and their journey along life’s time-chiselled corridor: “I’m Fish Lamb for those seconds it takes to die, as long as it takes to drink the river, as long as it took to tell you all this” (424). Behind all the perspectives and “times” presented in the novel is Fish’s perspective and voice, a “believing” voice, infused with the perspicacity and wisdom gifted to him as he pauses in the liminal space and time between earth-bound finitude and eternity. This perspective and voice add a layer of meaning to the narrative hinted at from the novel’s commencement. In the prologue’s final paragraph, the point of view switches from the third person to the second person as the narration adopts the point of view of the eternal Fish who watches his mortal self: “From the broad vaults and spaces you can see it all again because it never ceases to be. You can see that figure teetering out over the water, looking into your face...” (3). The brief introduction of another point of view alerts readers to the presence of at least two layers of reality and aligns those layers with the perspective of the subject—the eternal “you.”

“Wherever the River Goes” contains another temporary shift in point of view, this time to the first person as the eternal Fish speaks of himself in relation to his earthly self: “I’m behind the water, Fish, I’m in the tree. I feel your pulse.... Your time will come, Fish ... you’ll be me, free to come and go, free to puzzle and long and love, free of the net of time” (178-9). The first-person point

of view is only ever assigned to the eternal Fish—the narratorial “I” indicates a subjective state that has transcended the shackles of time and space. Here there is still a disjunction between the “I” and the “you”—the layers of reality that compose Fish’s ontology and experience are discreet. But the narrative looks forward to their union, consummated in “Moon ...,” when Fish’s material self and subjectivity are enlarged into the eternal, perfect, fully-realised “I”: “my walls are tipping and I burst into the moon, sun and stars of who I really am. Being Fish Lamb. Perfectly. Always. Everyplace. Me” (424).

The framing of *Cloudstreet*’s narrative by the river and Fish’s eternal voice shapes that which is enacted within the frame. Brady suggests that Winton directs attention “to the frame, not for its own sake and not to the detriment of his characters and their word but to allow for their enlargement and enrichment” (11). Enlargement and enrichment occurs through the characters’ contact with the frame, symbolized by the river and embodied by the “blackfella” and Fish, such that it changes their living in the world by orienting them to and giving them an expansive sense of “home.” Stuart Murray comments, “Allowing individuals to achieve the state of ‘being’ that Fish attains, or even to recognise it as a possibility, Winton writes of a sense of place that possesses a resonance that goes beyond the simple geographies of family, house, street or river” (90). To elaborate, as Murray does not, this sense includes the noted resonance of Cloudstreet with Christ’s depiction of heaven in John 14; similarly, Fish associates home with “the Big Country” (192, 201)—the other reality accessed through the river, “[a]ll that country below” (423). Towards the end of the narrative, Dolly and Sam debate selling Cloudstreet:

Did you earn this place?
No. You know that. Joel gave it to me. Us.
You think it’s good luck to sell what someone gave you as
a present, a gift? (407)

Here, in order to persuade Sam against selling it, Dolly explicitly describes the house as a “gift.” By this late point in the narrative, the biblically literate reader cannot help but note the biblical connotations of the term.

It is this broad, transcendental understanding of home that the “blackfella” and Fish impart as a gift to the other characters as they urge them towards the physical manifestation of home as the site of belonging. Upon realising that “[w]e belong to it, Quick,” (418) Rose, who has married the boy from across the corridor, wants to remain at Cloudstreet to enact life amid what she terms “a new tribe”—“I want to live, I want to be with people, Quick. I want to battle it out” (419). Given the novel’s biblical framing, the new tribe calls to mind first, the Old Testament people of God—the tribes of Israel—and second, in the New Testament fulfillment of the Old, any who have received and believed in the gift of Christ (Rom. 9:6b-8) and consequently live in anticipation of the eternal reversal of the Fall and the relational wholeness it will usher in. Thus when the “blackfella” appears to Quick three times and urges him to go home (210, 362, 367-8), he is orienting Quick to the final, eternal belonging for which Fish

hungers. Quick and Rose make their decision to stay at Cloudstreet in temporal proximity to their dawning awareness of this other layer of reality, described by the eternal Fish to his earth-bound self in “Spaces” as “this moment they have seen us too, your gift to them” (419-20). Gifting his family with a sense of “us,” and its vast implications, is the catalyst that frees Fish to “finish what was begun only a moment ago” (420). As Brady asserts, “Read intertextually like this in relation to Christian scripture, Fish’s death opens the way to new life, not only for himself but for everyone else” (16). Consequently, the novel concludes with an epilogue that consolidates the formation of the “new tribe”—the fence that separates the families’ yards is removed, and Oriel and Dolly symbolically resolve their twenty-year-long antagonism. Further, belonging is intimated in the final sentence: “they went inside the big old house whose door stood open” (426).

The imbuelement of *Cloudstreet* with the narrative and wisdom of the Bible and its literary parallels with Ecclesiastes elicit suggestions concerning the novel’s endearment that supplement and transcend explanations focused on discourses and narratives of Australianness. The novel’s subtle critique of the constitution of Australian orthodoxy supports this assertion. Luck (or fate), the persona of the happy-go-lucky larrikin, nation, family, work and the pursuit of gain are all portrayed as inadequate to make restitution for loss and relieve existential angst. *Cloudstreet* may not be as uncritical a champion of “traditional Australian values and social consensus” (Dixon 258) as it appears at face value. Further, the juxtaposition of key tenets of national orthodoxy with the discarding of belief in God through either parody or wilful rejection suggests the impoverishment of a predominantly naturalistic and materialistic national worldview. This accords with Winton’s views. In an interview with Andrew Taylor, he argues—with distinct echoes of Qoheleth’s well-known aphorism: “[God] has ... set eternity in the hearts of men” (*New International Version*¹⁴ Eccles. 3:11)—for the existence of “a universal religious or spiritual yearning in people” (Taylor 375). Winton concludes that the anti-religiousness coupled with consumerism he perceives as characteristically Australian “has wounded our culture” (Taylor 374). Instead of shying away from the metaphysical in order to connect with this culture, Winton describes his undertaking to “find a language for spiritual yearning” (Taylor 374) in his writing, suggesting that, within his context, this language should be uniquely Australian, unashamed of the vernacular (Taylor 374) in its exploration of spiritual ideas. It should be “a new language that’s authentic and which doesn’t relax into clerical stereotypes,” (Willis 23) “a language that would work” (McGirr 27).

Cloudstreet’s locutions are couched in the Australian vernacular, and the characters, places, and history they portray are unmistakably Australian. But their illocutionary force is universal in nature, through the resounding within the novel’s narrative of the biblical narrative, of its discourse about wisdom—“understanding the present confused order, and the future restored order, so that one can live according to what is real” (Patston, “The Place” 3). *Cloudstreet* endows its readers, Australian and otherwise, with an extensive depiction of reality, and hence its illocutions concerning how to live according to what is real are multi-dimensional. The positive echoes of biblical creation theology serve as

a reminder of the goodness to be found in the created world—in food, work, family, the natural world, and the pendulous “times.” In Murray’s words, “*Cloudstreet* rejoices in the rhythms of work and the sights and sounds of the everyday,” (90) and calls readers to imitation, in a manner that distinguishes it from the scepticism and cynical irony of much contemporary literature. Concomitantly, the echoes of the Fall and its consequence—all is *hebel*—are acutely explored; readers are steered away from both idealism and the futile pursuit of gain. In another dimension, if followed, the trajectory of *Cloudstreet*’s believing voice leads to an epistemology of reality animated by its tonic note and dominant image—redemptive gift from an Other—that presents a glimmer of hope for humanity anchored in the future restored order. As such, *Cloudstreet* stands as an exception to David Lyle Jeffrey’s contention that since the Enlightenment “the deeper questions and counsel of biblical wisdom have for the most part disappeared from all [English literature] but fantasy literature.” Winton’s novel quickens in its readers first, a desire to enact one’s God-created humanity through engaging meaningfully in and with the gift of the creation amid the present confused order and second, their eternity-conscious hearts. That such outcomes are affected through its narrative, is, I argue, the ultimate explanation for *Cloudstreet*’s celebrated acclaim.

Notes

¹ For example, within two years of its release, there was interest in a Hollywood-produced adaptation of *Cloudstreet*, as seen in the following correspondence to Winton’s manager from Ellen Erwin of Twentieth Century Fox: “We have a lot of diverse interest in *Cloudstreet*, including producers and directors” (Winton, “Papers,” Series 11).

² As with most attempts at genre classification, there is no definite consensus about which books within the biblical corpus should be viewed as wisdom literature, aside from Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. There is disagreement concerning whether, in the Old Testament, Song of Songs, Lamentations, some or all of the Psalms, the Joseph narrative in Genesis, the narratives in Daniel and some sections of the prophets are wisdom literature. In the New Testament, the teachings of Jesus, some parts of the epistles of Paul that refer specifically to wisdom, and especially the epistle of James have all been labelled as wisdom literature in different contexts. Outside the canon, there are two well-known pieces of Apocryphal wisdom literature—Ecclesiastus and The Wisdom of Solomon (Jeffrey; Crenshaw; Patston, “Wisdom Literature” 1-2).

³ Crenshaw bases this assertion at least partially on Job’s, Proverbs’ and Ecclesiastes’ exclusion of major components of the Old Testament narrative such as the Patriarchs and the exodus from Egypt.

⁴ Other examples include Beryl Lee’s farewell dinner (264) and Rose, Quick, and Wax Harry’s send-off (408-9).

⁵ The *New American Standard Bible* and the *English Standard Version* also translate *hebel* as “vanity.” Other versions translate it as “meaningless,” (*New International Version*) “nonsense”/“nothing makes sense,” (*Contemporary English Version*) and “vapour, emptiness, falsity, and vainglory” (*Amplified Bible*).

⁶ *Hebel* also occurs thirty-seven or thirty-eight times throughout Ecclesiastes, mostly in the context of a summary or concluding statement (Ogden 28).

⁷ The crux of the disagreement concerns two opposing interpretations of Qoheleth’s empirical, phenomenological engagement with the world. The first reads it as eliciting the conclusion that the creation, and human experience and existence within it, is ontologically devoid of meaning. The second follows Ogden, in arguing that it is articulating humanity’s epistemological predicament—human beings are unable to completely understand life, but this does not render the creation or humanity essentially meaningless or futile (22, 28). Tremper Longman III, Michael V. Fox and William P. Brown hold the former view. Longman reads it as an absolute negative arguing that *hebel* means “meaningless,” and thus “all is vanity” emphasises the universality of the attribution of meaninglessness. According to Longman, Qoheleth “cannot find meaning in anybody or anything” in the world (65). Fox and Brown understand *hebel* to mean “absurd” in a Camusian sense. Brown follows Fox in connecting Qoheleth’s declarations of *hebel* with “[t]he notion of the absurd [which] reflects an understanding of the world that is in tension with the framework of human expectations and hopes” (131). Such existential contradictions lead to conclusions similar to Longman’s, although Fox goes further in exegeting “all is vanity” as “not merely the absence of meaning, but an active violation of meaningfulness” (*Qohelet and His Contradictions* 34).

⁸ Ecclesiastes 3:1-8:

“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;

A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.”

⁹ Provan (87) explains that “[m]erismus involves the statement of polar extremes as a way of embracing everything that lies between them...and is a frequent feature of Near Eastern literature.”

¹⁰ It occurs after Qoheleth’s initial declaration that all is *hebel* (1:3), immediately following the “Time” poem (3:9), as well as in 2:22, 5:10-11, 5:15-16, 6:8 and 6:11. 5:15-16 specifically draws out the connection between death and Qoheleth’s programmatic question.

¹¹ Australian and New Zealand Army Corps.

¹² This follows the insights of Kirk Patston from his 2009 Katoomba Easter Convention talks on Ecclesiastes.

¹³ Most notable among these allusions are, first, the novel’s description of the river as “silver-skinned” (2), and as making a “mirror” (423) that parallel the hymn’s description of its river as “Dashing up its silver spray” (line 10), “shining,” (lines 13, 17 and 21) and “Mirror of the Saviour’s face” (line 18). Second, the use of the phrase “quivering with happiness” (2) to describe Fish as he approaches the river reflects the second-last line of the hymn: “Soon our happy hearts will quiver.”

¹⁴ The *New International Version*’s translation of “`owlam” as “eternity” is more accurate than the *Authorized Version*’s “world.”

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**“The Kingdom of God is Like...”:
Lewis Nordan’s *Sharpshooter Blues* as Parable**

Gary Guinn

The writer Lewis Nordan has attracted what can only be called a cult following. The 2007 Association of Writers and Writing Programs conference in Atlanta included a session celebrating Nordan and his work, and following the four paper presentations, the hundred or so people in the room told story after story of personal experiences with Nordan, with his work, and with his characters. Those who know Nordan personally spoke of him with a note of awe in their voices—John Dufresne referred to it as adoration (8)— and those who know only his work spoke with passion about his character, Sugar Mecklin, and all the bizarre and beautiful “freaks” that surround him.

In 2003, the *Southern Quarterly* devoted an issue to Nordan, who, though he has been on the faculty of the University of Pittsburgh for twenty years, was born and raised in Mississippi and has set his fiction in the small imaginary Mississippi town of Arrow Catcher, loosely based on Nordan’s hometown of Itta Bena. Most of the scholars writing in the *Southern Quarterly* decry the lack of attention Nordan has received and associate him with the best-known writers of the Southern Gothic tradition—Faulkner, Welty, and O’Connor. The fit is a natural one. His characters create a pantheon of freaks and misfits of which that southern triumvirate would be proud. Nordan titled his book of selected short stories *Sugar Among the Freaks*. But Nordan’s attitude toward Faulkner, Welty, and O’Connor, whom he calls “the family,” is ambivalent. In particular, he has been blunt in his criticism of O’Connor’s treatment of her characters. Claiming that a generosity to his own characters is central to his work, Nordan asserts that O’Connor seems to him “judgmental and brittle and even bitter, so interested in the freakishness of her characters that she fails to see their humanity,” all of which Nordan attributes to a “spiritual failure in her” (Dupuy, Interview 100).

While it is true that Nordan, like O’Connor, offers an unrelenting ironic vision, viewing his characters through a thoroughly comic lens, it is also true that Nordan’s irony, unlike O’Connor’s, is softened by a tenderness and humaneness in his handling of the characters. John Dufresne claims that Nordan is “in love with all of his characters, even the mean sons-of-bitches” and that he “never fails to recognize the humanity in his characters” (8). The emotional result of this love of character in Nordan’s fiction is what Huey Guagliardo refers to as “essential optimism” and the “redemptive power of human connectedness” (65, 66). The formal result is a recurring pattern of transformation that appears in most of his stories and all of his novels, a pattern that has its roots in the Judeo-Christian language of redemption and opens his work to a reading from that perspective.

In the introductory chapter of his book *The Language of Grace: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and Iris Murdoch*, Peter S. Hawkins claims that the text of any writer who uses the language of grace may be “hermeneutically ‘open,’” that is, “susceptible to a sacred, as well as a secular, reading” (4). Hawkins uses the parables of Jesus as “a paradigm within the ancient legacy of Scripture” for literature that is not overtly religious yet explores the religious dimension in human experience. Jesus’ parables are “secular fictions,” which do not require a particular interpretation but compel the reader to confront the self (12-13). In the comic parables (using the Classical definition of comedy), “what interrupts the normal course of affairs, and thereby implies ‘something more,’ is the sudden impact of the extraordinary and marvelous, with its overflowing sense of extravagance” (16).

Along the same lines, though from a particularly Anglican slant, L. William Countryman identifies in the history of Anglican poetry a spiritual tradition, the “keystone” of which is “a dialectic of absence and presence, an experience of the Holy, of God...withheld at times and given at times,” the reappearance of which he refers to as “the discovery of grace” (62). It is incarnational and transformative (108). At its center is surprise, “the discovery and rediscovery of grace, the unpredictable, unfathomable and, indeed, humanly impossible moment” of recognition and acquiescence, “a somewhat embarrassed encounter with delight that casts all of life in a new light” (124).

The two perspectives offered by Hawkins and Countryman—parabolic and hermeneutically open literature that implies “something more” in the sudden, the extraordinary, the marvelous, and the extravagant, that implies the “discovery of grace” in the unpredictable, unfathomable, impossible, encounter with delight—offer a template through which Lewis Nordan’s fiction, in this case particularly *The Sharpshooter Blues*, may be seen as comic parables of grace. The extraordinary, extravagant, unpredictable, impossible encounters with grace in the novel are apparent in Nordan’s language, in his setting, and in the characters, who are transformed. In the end the reader is given a vision of the world inhabited by Hawkins’ “something more” and Countryman’s “impossible moment” of surprise and the “delight that casts all of life in a new light,” opened to the reader through the redemptive power of human connectedness.

Scholars frequently comment on the power of Nordan’s language. Mary Carney speaks of Nordan’s “eruption of Gothic imagery” (80). Robert W. Rudnicki believes that “In Nordan’s work the transformative powers of language underscore his transformative themes” (62). In his review of *The Sharpshooter Blues*, Blake Maher describes the “strange and stunning mix of lyric and offbeat language” that creates a “weird strain of magical realism” (quoted in Lavers, par 9). In *The Sharpshooter Blues*, Nordan establishes the magic potential of language immediately, in part by emphasizing its wonder and uncertainty. Three times on the first page of the novel this uncertainty presents itself. The narrator tells us that “Beavers had felled the trees, a few trees anyway...,” and they had “built dams and houses as big as igloos, or tepees....” Then “Somehow dolphins, porpoises, whatever they were, had made their way up here to the Delta...who

knows how or why..." (1, italics mine). The phrases indicating uncertainty are set off each time by commas, heightening the hesitation, the indecisiveness of the language itself. This pattern continues throughout the novel. For example, two pages later, the narrator foreshadows the novel's climax, when the main character, a young hydrocephalic man nicknamed Hydro, looks into the black water of Lake Roebuck, looking, the narrator tells us, "through the looking glass," an allusion to the Lewis Carroll novel, a novel that also explores the wonder of language and the fluid nature of reality. In this scene, Hydro imagines slipping down into the water and believes "he might find the boy and the girl there...the lovely children, alive again.... They might be happy there...his head might be a normal size...he might be smart, with no atrophy of the brain, they might not call him names" (3, italics mine). Every desire here is qualified by the uncertainty of "might," and the "lovely children" referred to are a pair of cold-blooded killers, shot by Hydro while they robbed the store at which Hydro worked, and after one of them had raped him. Throughout the novel, everyone, including the sheriff, the funeral director, and Hydro's daddy, calls the killers the "two lovely children," further eroding the certainty of language in the novel.

When Hydro attempts to confess to the shootings, nobody believes him, and his young friend Louis, who witnessed the killings, lies about who did the shooting—lies in an attempt to incriminate the young man who is having an affair with Louis's mother. The plot threads focusing on Hydro and Louis are dictated in large part through the rest of the novel by this truth that nobody believes and this lie believed by everyone. The truth is impotent, and the lie is powerful. In the forward to *Sugar Among the Freaks*, Nordan says that Sugar Mecklin, the narrator of the title story and of several of the other stories in the collection, "would seem to have an unreliable memory at best" and that the "third person narrator of the other stories makes as many mistakes as the unreliable Sugar" (xxiv). The unreliability of the narrative voice in *The Sharpshooter Blues*, reinforced by the continual uncertainty of the language used by the narrator, leaves the reader uncertain of what is real and what is not. Repeatedly, characters are unable to respond to what is said to them, and their reply is simply "Well—." The frequency of this response is so high that the reader cannot escape the feeling that words, language itself, is trying ineffectually to communicate "something more."

The Mississippi Delta, a powerful presence in all of Nordan's work, is a place of wonder, extravagance, and unpredictability in *The Sharpshooter Blues*. Mary Carney, in describing Nordan's Delta setting as an American Gothic landscape, says that "the swamp itself sometimes appears to be a living force and at the same time a place of supernatural events" (84). From the opening sentence of the novel, the setting is bigger than life, magical. Hydro's daddy, Mr. Raney, owns a fish camp on an island

far out in a strange bayou, the vast, unbounded backwaters of many lakes and rivers; from underground, somewhere, salt water, brackish at least, mineral salts, filled up the swamp and broadened

it far across the Delta. The water seemed limitless, everywhere, even to a boy who grew up on the island; it was a black mirror, colored by the tannic acid that seeped into it from the knees of cypress trees. (1)

The swamp contains magical creatures—rats as big as yellow dogs that yap like puppies and howl at the moon by night, and dolphins or porpoises or whatever they are, and swamp elves. In a review of Nordan's first collection of stories, *Welcome to the Arrow-Catcher Fair*, Edith Milton refers to "the juxtaposition of an unglamorous modern reality, comically reduced, against an equally comic but larger-than-life mythology about the past that surrounds it" (quoted in Lavers, par 4). The mythical history of the swamp is for Hydro and his father the present reality—the "olden days" when "there were many families of tree people" living in three-story tree houses, who could converse with the monkeys, and "a few wild Indians" and loose herds of wild horses and buffalo. Sometimes Hydro thinks "the stories might be true" (11).

In the end, the magical nature of the world contributes to the climactic transformations of the novel. The Little St. George by the Lake Episcopal Church, where Hydro's funeral is held, "had once been the old Colony Town depot" (255), and here young Louis McNaughton is given a vision, in which the church becomes the New Jerusalem. As the service nears its end and Preacher Roe reads about the "great river, the streams and pools whereof make glad the city of God," Louis hears "a great rushing, as of waters." All the waters of the novel—the lake in which people drowned, the storm rains, the water in Hydro's head, and the blood of those who were slain—all become "the multitudinous streams of the great river whereof the City of God is made glad, *no one knows how*" (259, italics mine). As the service draws to a close, Louis looks through the windows of the church and sees a ghost train pull up, board all of the dead, and leave for "the other side." The congregation of mourners travels to Hydro's wake in a procession of boats back through the swamp to the fish camp. Through the monkeys chattering overhead "and the wild birds, parrots and stranger beasts, with their bright wings and red tails like capes" (280). The dolphins or porpoises, whatever they are, swim alongside the lead boats, and Mr. Raney calls them by name. In words that seem to echo Jesus' description of the many mansions of his father's house, the narrator says that the "fishshack was not small, there were many rooms, and it was crowded on all its levels" (281).

In "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," Flannery O'Connor says that the characters of Southern grotesque fiction "have an inner coherence" that does not fit the popular definition of realism, and that "the look of this fiction is going to be wild, that it is almost of necessity going to be violent and comic, because of the discrepancies that it seeks to combine" (40-41). The characters in all Nordan's work, but especially those in *The Sharpshooter Blues*, are steeped in the Southern gun culture and the violence that accompanies it. They shoot guns to pass the time and to calm their nerves and relieve their boredom. Yet Nordan never relinquishes the comic vision with which he sees them. This tension between the

tragedy of violence and the comic irony of the narrative voice is, just as it is in O'Connor's fiction, a source of the unpredictable and marvelous. Mr. Raney keeps two refrigerators in the fish shack, one to keep food in and the other to shoot holes in—because a man just needs to shoot a gun now and then. When Mr. Raney arrives at the William Tell Grocery in the middle of the robbery by the “two lovely children” and hears shots from inside, the shots being fired by Hydro killing the two lovely children, he assumes Hydro and his new friends are just having some fun shooting at cans of pork and beans, and he gets his own big pistol out of the back of the truck to join in the fun. When he steps in the door in the dark, he and Hydro both fire their pistols at the same time, Hydro barely missing Mr. Raney's head, and Mr. Raney blowing open a large can of lard. The comic absurdity of the scene is juxtaposed with the commission of armed robbery and rape by the “two lovely children” and with the violent slaying of those two by the soft-spoken, innocent Hydro.

Mary Carney asserts that the “potential for healing metamorphosis inherent amid anger and revenge” is a central preoccupation of *The Sharpshooter Blues* (89), and it does seem that, in spite of the constant violence or threat of violence, almost every character in the novel, though trapped in the culture of violence, is finally transformed by an act of love. Yet even these transforming acts of love are couched in unpredictable moments by the ironic voice of the narrator. Louis's father, Dr. McNaughton, and his alcoholic wife, Ruthie, who is having an affair with a teenage boy, begin their journey to reconciliation while she is “lying on the tiles of the bathroom floor, hugging the cool porcelain of the toilet bowl” where “she almost felt at peace with herself, with the world.” She feels “almost hopeful about her marriage” (117). Dr. McNaughton finds himself “filled with the same cool, clean, clear fragrance and quiet music of forgiveness and hope for the future as his wife had felt with her head in the toilet.” As he approaches the bathroom, he feels “transformed...forgiving and forgiven. Love was the answer” (118). Though the reconciliation that occurs in this scene is real, Nordan never lets go of the ironic brush. The narrator tells us that Ruthie thinks that “Miraculous transformations were really most valuable when you didn't have to get up off the bathroom floor and talk to your husband.” And as Dr. McNaughton decides to ask and offer forgiveness, he is frustrated by the thought that “You didn't want to have to say all that through a locked bathroom door. You didn't want to beg forgiveness for moral failure through locks and keys” (121).

Meanwhile, the McNaughtons' son, Louis, is transformed when he and his little sister, Katy, rescue thirty wild canaries that have been washed out of a tree by a storm. In Louis's eyes their rescue is futile. He is convinced that the birds are all dead. But Katy has a simple, childish faith that the birds will revive if they are placed on her bedspread, which looks like a meadow. And the extraordinary happens when Louis finds the next morning that the birds have indeed revived and he watches them, bright gold again, fly out the window into the sun. In the surprise and impossible delight of the moment, “suddenly a great many things became clear” to him (187). He decides to go to the jail and confess his lie about the murder of the “two lovely children.” He decides to love his mother's lover,

Morgan, whom he has accused of the murder. When Louis arrives at the jail, Morgan, who has just lifted the revolver from the sheriff's holster with the intent of shooting the sheriff and getting away, decides not to do so and shoots the refrigerator instead of the sheriff. This act becomes a prelude to Louis's confession, while Morgan believes that his own "choice of life over death...had given Louis, and maybe the whole world, the rare gift of effective moral damage control" and that "by this choice of life, Louis had been set free" (196).

In both of these scenes, the canaries and the jail shooting, the protean nature of reality is the catalyst for transformation. Louis assumes that the canaries are dead, so that the apparent "resurrection" of the canaries leads directly to his change of heart, the undoing of his lie, and his forgiveness of Morgan. Then Morgan absurdly assumes that his decision not to shoot the sheriff, his choosing of life over death, has set Louis free and maybe changed the whole world. The novel will eventually close with Morgan and his adoptive mama, Aunt Lilly, a hoodoo woman with a crystal ball—which is always less than accurate—headed for Texas to start a new life.

The most dramatic character transformations come in two key chapters late in the book. Both are fully Nordanesque mixtures of comic irony and pathos. The first is the transformation of Hydro himself into the dashing and handsome Ramon Fernandez (Hydro's real name, though nobody has ever called him by it). The morning after Hydro drowns himself in the swamp, Mr. Raney has a vision of Hydro as a handsome, shimmery-looking stranger, who seems familiar and is "wearing clothes like Mr. Raney had never seen before—tight black pants and a white frilly shirt and a black vest and shiny leather boots.... His eyes were black as death, and his face, pale as marble, he was handsome as a movie star" (202). Mr. Raney finally recognizes Hydro, his head "no longer enlarged.... He was a man of mystery. He was Ramon Fernandez" (205). A few pages later, the narrator tells us that the first thing Ramon Fernandez does when he gets to the other side is look up his mama, who had died giving birth to Hydro. And in a scene that is a comic masterpiece, Ramon finds his mama "in a blues bar with a slender young man with pale hair and a British accent," who turns out to be Jesus. Ramon's mama says, "Ramon, me and Jesus here, we's just friends, that's all. Jesus owns this here bar. That's how come we can get Robert Johnson." Jesus closes the scene by telling Ramon, "It's always Happy Hour in Chez Jesus" (222).

The final transformations occur at Hydro's funeral. First, we see Louis and his father, Dr. McNaughton, sitting in the parking lot before going into the church, having their first honest conversation. They hold each other and sit and cry together. And then, most dramatically, a few minutes later in the funeral service the dead themselves are transformed. As Preacher Roe reads the beautiful promises about resurrection from the service for the Burial of the Dead, Louis McNaughton is given a vision. He sees all the dead of the novel sitting with Hydro's daddy, Mr. Raney, off to one side of the altar: Pap Mecklin, "wearing green aviator sunglasses...who had died at St. Louis", the two lovely children shot by Hydro, Louis's grandfather "who had died long ago," Mrs. Raney "dead for so long now," and even Hydro himself as the resplendent Ramon Fernandez (258). Preacher Roe reads, "Behold I show you a mystery. We shall not sleep,

but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall all be changed.” The dead board the train, headed to the other side, and they wave goodbye, while Preacher Roe reads the closing lines of *The Burial of the Dead*: “The Lord make his light to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.” And the congregation says, “Amen” (260-61).

Robert Rudnicki asserts that the provisional nature of reality in Nordan’s style, the high degree of qualification and uncertainty in the assertions about truth, lead the reader to adopt the narrator’s struggle to know the self and the world (59). Huey Guagliardo believes that, “By transforming grim reality to shapely art, Nordan achieves a...connection with his readers; and through the redemptive magic of his narratives we gain not only a better understanding of the afflictions of others, but a better understanding of our own afflictions as well” (67). Both Rudnicki and Guagliardo claim that the transformations in Nordan’s work may be as likely to happen to the reader as to the characters.

When Edward Dupuy, in an interview with Nordan, mentioned the lack of scholarly attention to religion and humor in Nordan’s work and asked whether he saw anything salvific in art, Nordan dismissed any relationship between his art and religious experience, saying that his own purpose in writing is to “come close to other human beings longing to hear a story.” But he added this caveat: “I place this condition on the stories I tell: at the very least, they should avoid adding wretchedness to the world’s considerable store of wretchedness. I don’t want to avoid any part of the truth of our lives, but I don’t want to exploit it for prurient reasons or merely shocking effects. To this extent I hold art responsible for a corner of the world’s salvation” (105).

This may be why O’Connor seems to Nordan judgmental, brittle, even bitter, failing to see the humanity in her characters. O’Connor, who claims to be writing from a deep Catholic Christian orthodoxy, defends her penchant for writing about freaks as part of a theological conception of humanity (44). As L. Lamar Nisly says, “O’Connor’s prophetic stance to her unbelieving audience leads her, at times, to create characters as acted parables, characters who perform disturbing actions so that O’Connor can confront her reader” (64). In this light it is hard to think of what happens to Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* or to the Grandmother in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” as the “good news” of O’Connor’s orthodox gospel. Perhaps her story “Revelation,” with its final and, one hopes, transforming vision, is closer to it.

John Dufresne may capture the fault line between O’Connor and Nordan when he says that Nordan “understands that every one of his people is a part of him” and that he “is generous to them because he is trying to understand them, because they are trying to survive their heartbreaking lives, because he sympathizes with the fruitlessness of much of their search” (8). If Nordan’s voice is “prophetic,” as O’Connor’s is so often said to be, its tone differs significantly from O’Connor’s.

The novel ends in one last vision, given this time to Mr. Raney, who sees the teenager Morgan and his mama, Aunt Lily, “barreling on down the road...singing every Texas song they knew.” Morgan says, “Are you happy,

Mama? Are you glad to be getting out?” and Aunt Lily, in the last line of the novel, says, “Get on down the damn road!” (291). By this time the reader is ready to get in line. To get on down the “damn” road. The humane and sympathetic voice of the novel, manipulating the tension between comedy and violence, between distance and tenderness, has pulled the reader into the celebration.

This is a mystery of transformation. Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poor potsherds become diamonds, the mundane reality of violence, deformity, betrayal, loneliness, and death become the Kingdom of Love. Nordan makes the uncertainty, the unknowability of existence, at times of love itself, the sorcerer’s stone by means of which the alchemy takes place. The language questions its own ability to be true. The place questions its own reality. The characters express the existential dilemma of being caught between meaninglessness and the reality of love as the only meaning. The novel becomes parable, a secular story using the language of grace to call the listener to confront the self—“The Kingdom of God is like a young hydrocephalic man who is robbed and raped, who shoots and kills his assailants, and then takes his own life. The young man’s father, grieving, is given a vision of the young man risen and made new, and the father finds peace. The young man’s friend, grieving, is given a vision of all the dead raised and made new, leaving together on a train bound for glory, and the friend finds peace. The young man’s friends, grieving, are all invited to a banquet in a fish camp in a world made new and wonderful. They come to the banquet and find peace.” Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.

In an interview with Thomas Bjerre, Nordan says, “Other people have said that I avoid, more than most Southerners, religion, fundamentalist religious practices, revivals, and that sort of thing. And although I went to church on Sunday, religion was never a strong talisman or a magical element for me as a writer” (372). Yet Nordan, through his humanity, his sympathy, his identification with the freaks and misfits of his fiction, breaks down the barriers between reader and character and eliminates the very distance created through the ironic narrative voice. The freaks, misfits, and broken people who fill the novel are redeemed, and readers are ready to get on the train with them, heading for the Promised Land.

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Book Reviews

**David Lyle Jeffrey and Gregory Maillet. *Christianity and Literature: Philosophical Foundations and Critical Practice*.
Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011. 336 pages, \$24.00**

David Lyle Jeffrey and Gregory Maillet intend this book to suggest “ways that a Christian worldview can provide a pertinent and fruitful approach to literary study as an academic discipline” (27). This statement appears inviting to both Christian and non-Christian readers, as well as holding out the promise of a methodology for reading works that may be either Christian or non-Christian in their themes and assumptions. However, the volume’s guiding premise is somewhat more tightly focused and is captured in a quote from Gerard Manley Hopkins that prefaces Part One: “The only just judge, the only just literary critic, is Christ” (33). What was certainly true for that Victorian Jesuit is extended here to all Christian readers, making this study quite useful for Christians seeking a theologically traditional approach to appreciating Christian authors but rather less helpful for those seeking to understand how Christian readers might establish modes of engagement with texts which do not explicitly advance familiar tenets of the faith.

Part One (“Christian Foundations”) lays the groundwork for a Christian critical stance firmly on the basis of truth as an objective, apprehensible reality and upon language as a symbol-system which can be relied upon to permit the accurate perception of that reality, not least through the medium of analogy and metaphor. Postmodern assumptions about the indeterminacy of language and the relative or subjective nature of truth, such as those advanced by deconstructionists, Marxists, feminists, or New Historicists, are firmly rejected as “fundamentally incompatible with a Christian worldview” (57). In place of such “fashionable” approaches, the authors propose a “theological aesthetics” in which the fundamental truth of any literary work is to be measured by the extent to which it gives evidence of its divine origin. Christians uneasy about the “transparent expression of the basis of their worldview,” say the authors, “should, in our view, get over it” (50). For Christian literary critics, a method capable of appreciating such an expression constitutes a “critical realism” blending faith and reason, an approach which the authors contend can alone lead to an awareness of the true, the good, and the beautiful.

Part One concludes with a lengthy chapter arguing for the Bible as the decisive formative influence upon English literature. Jeffrey and Maillet lament what they see as “the loss to active memory of biblical narrative in Christian churches on all sides” (109) which has had a deleterious effect on students and

academic curricula. Chapter three is one of the gems of the book, a succinct yet remarkably detailed summary of the literary features of biblical narrative. As is typical of the whole volume, the authors' assertions are consistently lucid and methodically laid out. The methods of moral criticism essential to grasping biblical truths form the core of their larger critical scheme, and there is no mistaking the homiletic vigor of their argument: "Given the philosophical confusion and lack of faith characteristic of the modern world, it is unsurprising that transcendent moral criticism of this kind is not on the theoretical map of much contemporary literary theory. It is part of the work of Christian intellectuals to put it back" (88).

After this strongly urged opening section, one might be forgiven for expecting Part Two ("Literary Interpretation") to apply these principles in a representative series of analytical readings or to demonstrate examples of "critical realism" in practice, but instead the next three chapters present a necessarily compressed and selective collection of examples of Christian authorship from the church fathers to the Romantics. The "Critical Practice" promised in the book's subtitle, the opportunity to see just how the application of the "theological aesthetics" so ably mapped out in the opening chapters might distinguish itself from other hermeneutic strategies as a means of critical discovery, is not fully realized. Instead, we are given a chronological survey in which medieval and Renaissance works, notably the Metaphysical poets, are given high praise, whereas eras after the Restoration are shown to display a gradual decline into skepticism, secularism, aestheticism, and agnosticism, with far fewer authors offering works which meet the criteria of the authors' standard of merit; "as a milieu for literary creativity," the Enlightenment, for example, "was not so fruitful as had been the previous era" (236).

That subsequent centuries display the erosion of traditional faith is clear; what is less clearly defended here is the claim that the literature written during these eras is, as literature, of lesser quality than before. The authors resolve the thorny issue of determining literary quality by valorizing the degree to which a text espouses traditional doctrine. Herbert's famous Eucharistic lyric "Love (III)" is thus given high praise: "Never has the reality of God as the fundamental need of our souls been more purely or profoundly expressed" (202). However, if the standard for assessing the quality of literary compositions is essentially their fidelity to orthodoxy or their agreement with a shaping biblical analogue, then inevitably a great number—probably most—post-Renaissance works must be found wanting. By this measure one might conclude that, for example, "The Dream of the Rood" is of greater literary worth than, say, *In Memoriam*, in which Tennyson famously announces that "There lives more faith in honest doubt, / Believe me, than in half the creeds" (xcvi, stanza 3), a statement recalling Augustine's own remark that "Doubt is but an element of faith." Readers might also pause at the authors' decision to devote four pages to C. S. Lewis but only one sentence to *Moby-Dick*. No one denies that Lewis was a formidable critic and apologist while Melville, certainly no Christian, admitted to Nathaniel Hawthorne that his novel was a "wicked book" that had been "broiled in hell-fire." Yet the seriousness with which Melville considers issues of faith and doubt in a novel

shot through with echoes of the Bible, and the sense we have of the narrator as a latter-day Jacob wrestling with a re-imagined angel of darkness, will seem to many as genuine a confrontation with spiritual concerns as the confident allegory of the Narnia tales.

The authors encourage us to “look for deeply religious purpose in poetry and fiction where one might not perhaps at first expect to find it” (255), a worthy goal that may have extended the reach of their critical model if they had followed more closely T.S. Eliot’s observation in *Murder in the Cathedral* that “glory is declared even in that which denies Thee; the darkness declares the glory of light” (284). This path is suggested in their discussion of James Hogg’s *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), which praises its “theological criticism and psychological brilliance” (235) and offers a perceptive but too brief analysis of a work which intelligently challenges the received principles of Calvinism in a way that students of faith would find enlightening. Examination of literary works and critical theories that seem at first beyond the pale of a Christian critic may reveal that even in such texts God has not left himself without a witness. As Luke Ferreter suggests in *Towards a Christian Literary Theory* (2003), even deconstruction itself cannot escape a kind of faith in the language which it is ostensibly dismantling because deconstructive readings share, along with negative theology, a recognition of the limitations of language: “Deconstruction does not prohibit or render meaningless the use of theological language in literary theory or criticism, therefore, since it remains within the circle of precisely such language itself” (184). While God may be the meaning Christians seek, many scriptural texts concur with Isaiah that God too can be a deferred meaning: “Thou art a God who hides himself” (45:15). There may be more of Christianity to be found in the literature of its cultured despisers than the authors’ critical stance discloses.

This study concludes with three chapters (“Contested Authority”) addressing late Victorian and contemporary literature, tracing the familiar themes of nihilism and despair but also finding hopeful exemplars in the work of such notables as Walker Percy and Flannery O’Connor, as well as in contemporary American authors Marilynne Robinson, Leif Enger, and Ron Hansen, and in Canadians David Adams Richards and Michael D. O’Brien. The book’s last chapter, drawn from several previously published essays by Jeffrey, laments the loss of Christian influence upon literary criticism and the academy, the fading of the conviction that “literature in English has acquired both its historic identity and its cultural authority from the mystery of divine transcendence” (323). Matthew Arnold and Northrop Frye (himself ordained in the United Church of Canada) emerge as primary agents of the secularizing drift away from traditional critical certitudes and of “the displacement of God and the Bible by modern literary criticism” (316). Despite their critiques of contemporary culture, critics George Steiner and Terry Eagleton are likewise taken to task for “remaining locked into the Arnoldian legacy” (322).

Student readers of this volume will find it clearly written and thoroughly documented, while specialists will find its arguments provocative and the bibliographies at the end of each chapter essential helps for further study. (Pico’s surname, however, was Mirandola, not Miranda [169] and Shakespeare’s *Henry*

VIII dates from 1613, not 1593 [156].) David Lyle Jeffrey and Gregory Maillet deserve praise for the broad scope of their essay, but even many Christian readers may find that their strong yet narrow critical bridge does not carry us to all texts, even some notable landmarks.

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Deborah C. Bowen. *Stories of the Middle Space: Reading the Ethics of Postmodern Realisms*. Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010. 304 pages, \$95.00

“To divorce word from world is to court death; to bring them together with care is to enter the ‘truhing’ of responsible relational life, and thus the contemporary metanarrative of grace.”

— Deborah C. Bowen, *Stories of the Middle Space*

In a recent article for the online magazine *Comment*, Deborah Bowen poses a pertinent question, one my English Literature students ask a lot, in one form or another: “Why bother with the humanities in a time of crisis?” What is the use of reading stories when there is war in Afghanistan, famine in Somalia, and rioting in London? Bowen, in that article, draws our attention back to C.S. Lewis’ 1939 sermon, “Learning in War-Time,” in which Lewis addresses Oxford students who have not gone off to war and who probably feel like many of my students feel, like they are “fiddling while Rome burns.” Bowen writes that in “a culture of instant gratification and instant communication, young people increasingly need help to contextualize: to recognize that the world beyond their own immediate lives is real, interesting, and ‘relevant,’ not only on their own doorstep but also in other parts of the world, and in the past of their own civilization and that of others.”

Bowen’s recent book *Stories of the Middle Space: Reading the Ethics of Postmodern Realisms* (2010), shows through richly detailed readings of contemporary philosophy, literary theory, and the works of several well-established British and Canadian novelists, just how *real* the world is in literature: so real, in fact, that “things” are not only spoken *of* in our human language but they *speak* in their own right. In contemporary critical theory this is actually a bit of an outrageous claim: the world, after all, according to Richard Rorty, does “not speak without human intervention” (6). Bowen, however, thinks Rorty’s “first premise” is far too “anthropocentric” and she chooses to argue from an openly

Christian perspective that the world, as creation, speaks, and that it speaks profoundly, though not exclusively, in literature—specifically novels.

She argues that narrative is essentially a site of ethical interaction with others and with this world we inhabit *because* there is something “beyond language” that “reverberates” in the stories we tell, calling us to respond. It is significant that Bowen favors *stories* as productive sites of ethical engagement rather than theoretical reasoning or philosophical argumentation. The importance of stories, for a Christian reader, should be clear, Bowen insists, since we are called to inhabit or *live within* the Christian story: “a story that affirms the material world as well as the transcendent, and that invites [us] to a place of response and responsibility within that world” (7). This story, Bowen explains, depicts us as dust, but “infinitely valuable dust” (7). And it asks us to recognize that we are created as well; that we, like “things” in the world, are unique beings with our own “this-ness,” our own “createdness” and inherent worth.

Derrida’s idea of one’s “irreplaceability,” put forward in *The Gift of Death*, is a secular inhabitation of the biblical story *up to this point*, but Bowen pushes its implications further than the idea that we are created in the image of God and are therefore of infinite and irreplaceable worth. She argues that this “story invites [us] to recognize that, seeing the trials and struggles of its creatures, the Creator of the story has gone so far in love as to seek out a way to bridge the transcendent and the earthly, a way of mediation that entails the Creator’s entering that story to participate in it, to identify with its suffering, and to empower its unfolding to a happy ending” (7). A Christian reader then, following this line of thought, is doubly called to responsibility. Not only are we called by the other, we are called to follow the example of the One who has already answered that call and continues to inhabit our world through Christ’s Spirit.

Bowen argues that inhabiting a metanarrative like the Christian story does not foreclose or necessarily *Christianize* meaning. Instead, she insists that it provides a “dynamic narrative rather than [a] static propositional statement” (14). In other words, the Christian story cannot be reduced to papal bulls or ninety-five theses, however well written or historically revered; such doctrinal statements, though part of the drama, do not make up the whole of the plot—they too require context. Drawing on one of Terry Eagleton’s notions, put forward in *Illusions*, Bowen demonstrates that a metanarrative does not necessarily explain *everything* but that it is the “grand” story that provides the context we need to understand our lives: a “matrix within which many, [though] not all, of our practices [can] take shape” (13-14). What can take shape in the lives of those who authentically indwell the biblical story is an understanding of what it means to love God and one’s neighbour as oneself *because* Christ has done this first. This for Bowen is not only the root of “relational ethics” but it is also the “grace” that makes such ethical response possible.

Bowen writes that “[in] this formulation [she hopes] to avoid the pitfalls of ontotheology since, rather than reading the Other onto the world, [her] desire is to recognize the prior and necessary activity of the transcendent Other in first reading [her]” (18). Bowen’s innovative aim in this book is not to impose God-centred interpretations on secular fictions but to recognize that since Christ’s

Spirit speaks in, with, and through creation, and since stories are part of an ongoing creation, that same Spirit reads her *before* and *as* she reads—that Christ’s Spirit not only calls her to read and respond but *enables* her to do so.

In order to flesh out this central idea, Bowen puts Emmanuel Levinas’ philosophy into dialogue with Mikhail Bakhtin’s literary criticism—showing how Levinas’ emphasis on the “call” of the other is answered by Bakhtin’s focus on the dialogic nature of responding to that call. For “Levinas, ethics is understood as an activity in relational responsibility, and it precedes ontology, understood as the attempt to comprehend the ‘being’ of what is; ethics is thus prior to the whole project of Western philosophy” (34). This idea that the ethical relationship between oneself and the world should take precedent over one’s own “being” is implicitly tied into Bowen’s idea that creation speaks in primal ways and that it calls us to attend to it.

But how are we, as readers, to respond?

Here Bowen shows the heaviness in Levinas’ thought: the weight of one’s responsibility to the other that, at times, seems crushing—self-eclipsing. She writes that where “Levinas undertheorizes the self in order to focus discussion on the other, and thus to redress what he perceives as the imbalance of Western philosophical history, Bakhtin as a literary critic is concerned to retheorize the self of author and critic, as well as of fictional characters, as dialogic constructions” (45). If Levinas’s focus is on one’s responsibility to the other, then Bakhtin’s focus is on one’s relationship with the other in narrative, through which one’s responsibility can be relationally enacted.

Bowen refers to this as “narrative-as-ethics,” following Bakhtin, because “narrative necessitates relationships of response and responsibility between teller, listener, witness, and reader” (66). For Levinas, and for Derrida, this ethical relationship is necessitated because of the gaze of the other who calls one to responsibility; for Bakhtin, and for Bowen, relational responsibility is not only necessitated but made possible because of “the gaze of a loving God”:

[This gaze] is primarily constitutive of our selfhood and thus necessarily prior to our ethical response to the other human creature, a response that is never *sui generis* but is itself a response to and empowered by the gift of God in Christ. Grace is a gesture that emerges from the apophatic, conveying the profundity of self-insufficiency, and it enables Bakhtin to say, “[W]hat God is for me, I must be for another” [...]. Levinas’s is a stern ethics of responsibility alone; Bakhtin’s is an ethics of *grace before responsibility* that transforms my response to narrative as it transforms my living. (47)

It is this abiding interest in the work of grace in both one’s reading and one’s living in the world that makes *Stories of the Middle Space* not only relevant to Christian literary scholars but to readers of literature in general—to anyone who has ever wondered if studying fiction is nothing more than “fiddling” while wars rage, famines spread, and riots erupt.

Just as Terry Eagleton has pointed out in *Illusions* that postmodernism, in contemporary theory, has the “ability to discern power in powerlessness,” so Bowen explores how postmodern realisms, in contemporary fiction, allow unique insights into the “precious spiritual tradition” behind postmodernism that “knows how to conjure force out of failure” (234). The fact the Bowen names this “the Christian tradition” in Western literature will likely offend some readers, but if these readers give this beautiful and difficult book the time it deserves—if they are as hospitable to it as Bowen is to the novelists she engages—then they will find a tradition that claims, prophetically, that “responsibility is implicit in response—that human words are secondary to the reference they evoke, but render us responsible to it, and the people between whom the words pass” (235).

All of the writers Bowen engages with—A.S. Byatt, Joy Kogawa, Penelope Lively, Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson, Jane Urquhart, Thomas King, Julian Barnes, Timothy Findley, Roland Barthes, Michael Ignatieff, Michael Ondaatje, and Carol Shields—refuse to “divorce word from world” (235). All of them—whether they affirm a Christian worldview or consciously oppose such a view; whether they are writing historiographic metafiction, magic realism, parodic myth, or using real photographs in fictional memoirs—affirm that “[narratives] are always relational and they *always* call for response” (25). Because narrative is a site of responsibility to the other—for many postmodern writers and for critics like Bakhtin, Eagleton, and Bowen—stories can become key means through which injustices in the world are addressed in very real ways in the lives of readers who are actively engaged in their world (25).

This is why, for Bowen, stories matter: because they offer, through a dialogic engagement with the world, *real* context: they allow us “to recognize that the world beyond [our] own immediate lives is real, interesting, and ‘relevant,’ not only on [our] own doorstep but also in other parts of the world, and in the past of [our] own civilization and that of others.” Contemporary literature, Bowen argues, is not only deeply concerned with the real world; it is in itself a means of ethically interacting with that God-given world because words always draw us back to their referents—stories, even the most fantastical or ironic, always ground us the flesh and blood “this-ness” of our daily lives. And, as Bowen reminds us, they also bring us face to face with the lives of others and the Other who gives life in its fullness; this Other and the others made in his image call us to respond, and, through Christ’s Spirit already at work in the world, we are enabled to do just that in new and creative ways.

Stories of the Middle Space presents this “good news” in theory and in practice, in insightful engagements with contemporary philosophy and in edgy conversation with postmodern literature. This is Christian scholarship at its best and most articulate. Bowen not only tells us that the fields of contemporary literature are ripe for harvest, she shows us how to work the ground without bruising the fruit, how to engage the world ethically and in a spirit of love. She shows us that studying literature is not “fiddling while Rome burns”: it is producing meaning in active engagements with stories and the world they depict, and it is offering truth to a world that is famished. Such study is both a serious calling and a real responsibility. As Bowen tells us, “[there] is no room in

postmodern realism for a passive reader; the reader is invited—nay, expected—to be not a consumer but a producer, to be involved and active and responsive” (237). The good news is that we can do this because of God’s grace and in so doing we can offer this grace in the contemporary narratives of our own lives.

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Call for Papers and Book Reviews

Intégrité: *A Faith and Learning Journal*

*Published Semiannually by the
Faith & Learning Committee and the
Humanities Division of
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Intégrité (pronounced *IN tay gri tay*) is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal on the integration of Christian faith and higher learning. Founded in the fall of 2002 with the Institutional Renewal Grant from the Rhodes Consultation on the Future of the Church-Related College, it is published both online and in print copy. Interested Christian scholars are encouraged to submit academic articles and book reviews for consideration. Manuscripts should be sent as e-mail attachments (Microsoft Word format) to the editor, John J. Han, at hanjn@mobap.edu.

Articles must be 15-25 pages, and book reviews must be 4-8 pages, both double-spaced. Articles should examine historical, theological, philosophical, cultural, and/or pedagogical issues related to faith-learning integration. Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- the current state and/or future of the church-related college
- history of Christian liberal arts education
- Christianity and contemporary culture
- a Christian perspective on multiculturalism and diversity
- service learning
- academic freedom in a Christian context
- implementation of Christian truths in academic disciplines
- Christian education in the non-Western world
- global Christianity.

Articles must engage in faith-learning issues or controversies in a scholarly, critical manner. We generally do not consider manuscripts that are merely factual, devotional, or sermonic. Due dates are March 1 for inclusion in the spring issue and September 1 for the fall issue.

Articles are expected to be research-based but must focus on the author's original thought. We typically do not consider articles that use more than twenty-five secondary sources; merely present other scholars' opinions without developing extended, thoughtful analysis; and/or use excessive endnotes. Direct quotations, especially lengthy ones, should be used sparingly.

Considering that most *Intégrité* readers are Christian scholars and educators not necessarily having expertise on multiple disciplines, articles and book reviews must be written in concise, precise, and easy-to-understand style. Writers are recommended to follow what William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White suggest in *The Elements of Style*: use definite, specific, concrete language; omit needless words; avoid a succession of loose sentences; write in a way that comes naturally; and avoid fancy words.

For citation style, refer to the current edition of *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. Articles should include in-text citations in parentheses, a list of endnotes (if applicable), and an alphabetical listing of works cited at the end of the article. Book reviews need only page numbers in parentheses after direct quotations.

