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Uncertainty Before and After Faith: The Dynamics of Belief in Theology and Literature

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To my parents and sisters for their constant support, patience, and love.
I believe and interrupt my belief with doubt. I doubt and interrupt my doubt with belief. Be, belovéd, threatened world.

—Denise Levertov

“Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus”
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ABSTRACT

Although there has been much interdisciplinary scholarship on the influence of Catholicism upon various novelists’ work, there has been relatively little discussion about the nature of faith itself that emerges in this literature. Scholarly attention tends to focus on the content of faith. In contrast, this dissertation considers how Catholic novelists portray the affective dimension of faith at faith’s most fundamental level. To state simply, how is faith depicted by novelists who creatively engage with the Catholic tradition?

I argue that faith is portrayed by various Catholic authors primarily as a person’s imaginative orientation to trust and hope in the presence of God’s grace in creation and human life. Faith then is not first and foremost intellectual assent to conceptual propositions, however influential such propositions may be. I approach this issue through the category of uncertainty, specifically uncertainty’s relationship to faith, as this relationship plays out in novels by François Mauriac, Graham Greene, Flannery O’Connor, Muriel Spark, Mary Gordon, and Shusaku Endo. I will examine their novels through the lens of two paradigms: The experience of uncertainty as a catalyst for Christian faith and the experience of uncertainty as a challenge and possible critique of a prior Christian faith. My discussion will build upon the thought of Martha Nussbaum, David Tracy, Karl Rahner, and Charles Taylor to consider the kind of “thinking” about faith shaped by the genre of the novel.
This investigation demonstrates the necessity of uncertainty as a means to prompt conversion, both before and after the conscious acceptance of religious belief. Further, this experience of uncertainty is manifested in the novels through literature’s affective appeal which reveals both the ambiguity of emotions as well as the ambiguity of faith itself. That is, faith will be seen as existing in a dynamic, existential relationship to uncertainty such that faith is imaginatively presented as a surrender of the all-too human desire for certainty in the face of life’s struggles, tragedies, and fickleness, a surrender that orients the believer towards a vision of ultimate reality lived with hope and trust in Divine Mystery.
INTRODUCTION

UNCERTAINTY, FAITH, AND THE NOVEL

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is implored to cure a possessed child. The child’s father previously made the same request to the disciples, but their inability to cure his son is blamed by Jesus on their lack of faith, a lack of faith that also implicates the surrounding crowd: “You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you?” (Mark 9:19). When the father begs Jesus for help “if you are able to do anything,” Jesus retorts, “If you are able! – All things can be done for the one who believes.” The father then immediately cries, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (9:21-24).

This plea, among the most moving of the New Testament, “captures the mixed character of faith within the experience of most people.” Specifically, the father’s plea of “I believe; help my unbelief” reveals the dynamics of belief, the tension between faith and uncertainty. For, the father demonstrates a degree of faith through his approach to Jesus, but his faith is intertwined simultaneously with uncertainty.

1 All scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

Mark’s Gospel, as a narrative, interrogates the relationship between faith and uncertainty in a manner distinct from other forms of discourse in the New Testament. For instance, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews emphasizes the promise of faith: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible” (11:1-3). The emphasis is upon faith as “assurance,” while uncertainty is downplayed. The language “of things not seen” or “things that are not visible” indicates that whatever certainty faith provides, it does not operate like the certainty of the empirical senses. But the language of “conviction” indicates that faith does give some manner of certainty. The epistolary genre is aptly suited for a passage that serves as an exhortation to maintain faith. Of course, the Gospel of Mark is also an exhortation for faith, but the narrative structure means that the Gospel appeals to its audience differently from an epistle.³

If Scripture manifests a variety of discourses, surely believers may respond to Scripture with a similar plurality? Even the most superficial survey of religiously inspired cultural products—from theological treatises, to sermons, to the plurality of art forms—

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³ Scripture confronts the believer with a bewildering plurality of discourses. As Paul Ricoeur observes, revelation occurs through a form “that is pluralistic, polysemic, and at most analogical”; as such there is no single discourse of revelation, but a variety of discourses. But this variety occurs as a response to some experience of the divine in history, whether the experience is of Yahweh in ancient Israel or the event of Christ, which prompts the earliest Christians to reinterpret the history of Israel in a new light. The contemporary Christian encounters this history of Revelation through the history of Christianity after Christ. The believer appropriates a faith that is mediated by a particular Christian community or culture. See Paul Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” *Harvard Theological Review* 70, no. 1-2 (January-April 1977): 2-3.
would indicate an obvious affirmative to this question. Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes* acknowledges this diversity of religious expression when it upholds the value of the humanities along with the “secular sciences”:

In their own way literature and art are very important in the life of the church. They seek to penetrate our nature, our problems and experience as we endeavor to discover and perfect ourselves and the world in which we live; they try to discover our place in history and in the universe, to throw light on our suffering and joy, our needs and potentialities, and to outline a happier destiny in store for us. Hence they can elevate human life, which they express under many forms according to various times and places.

But, as discussed in the comparison between the Gospel of Mark and the Letter to the Hebrews, the particular medium influences how faith is explored. As *Gaudium et Spes* observes, art and literature express their vision of human experience “under many forms according to various times and places.” But additionally, the various forms shape the manner of theological thinking. How the “meaning” of the Emmaus story is expressed in Caravaggio’s famous painting is different than a Scripture scholar’s consideration. A Scripture exegete’s primary concern is often to discern as accurately as possible the authorial intention of the text or the reception and understanding by the original audience.

In contrast, when an artist depicts a scene, another kind of claim becomes emphasized:

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4 H. Richard Niebuhr points out that a Christian community, through its particular ecclesial history, tells the history of Christ’s life. The early Christians did not simply teach propositions or teachings about Christ; they taught the story of Christ. Believers stand in this history in so far as they live out faith under the influence of this story as mediated by a particular community. In other words, the believers’ internal history—their personal appropriation of Christ’s life that claims this story as relevant for their lives—is grounded in a communicated external history. As members of a community, Niebuhr argues, believers adopt the past for the present so as to make this historical narrative their own. See H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Story of Our Life,” in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock, 1997), 21-44.

how a particular passage remains relevant to the believer today. Authorial intention or concern of the original audience fade into the background, if considered at all. In addition, even if an artist and a theologian agree on the same interpretation of a biblical passage or doctrine, new insights of the source material may emerge in the artist’s depiction that a theologian cannot capture in a more conceptual treatment. The creative work’s unique medium conditions how one thinks about faith.

In the pages that follow, I explore one particular medium—the novel—through which modern and contemporary believers creatively reflect upon the relationship between faith and uncertainty. If a novel confronts the issue of faith and uncertainty, this is a response to two historical narratives of faith—the narrative of Christ’s life and how this narrative is mediated through the narrative of a particular Christian culture and tradition; further, the genre of the novel conditions that this response is itself a narrative. Narrative prompts other narratives.

Specifically, I will examine how this relationship plays out in works by twentieth-century authors who manifest a Catholic imagination in their novels. The variety of responses to a shared Catholic tradition within a shared medium opens up fascinating intertextual dialogues. The specific content of the term “Catholic imagination” will vary depending upon the individual literary work and author. But for now, “Catholic imagination” can be generally defined as a literary imagination that consciously creates under the influence of the Catholic tradition. This imagination is often “sacramental” in that it manifests a vision of the world in which God’s grace is discerned as active within a fallen world. For the sake of simplicity, I will discuss the novels under two paradigms,
defined by how uncertainty functions temporally to faith: uncertainty as a catalyst for faith; and uncertainty as a challenge to faith. Uncertainty in the former serves as preparation for faith, while in the latter, it challenges a previously held form of faith. Since a novel may demonstrate both paradigms, these paradigms must be understood as heuristic in nature and with porous boundaries.

This investigation rests on three arguments of increasingly specificity. The first is general: fictional literature has a unique form of theological thinking. The second regards the investigation’s specific theme: theology must attend to this form since it conveys the angst-ridden dynamic between faith and uncertainty that can too easily be downplayed in conceptual discourses. The first argument is concerned with how literature “thinks” or “performs” differently from conceptual discourses. The second is specifically concerned with how Catholic theology can dialogue with the insights of literary imaginations on a particular topic. Finally, building on the previous two premises, I argue that literature offers greater space for ambiguity and ambivalence—hence a greater space for uncertainty to remain despite the imaginative reflection and clarification offered by the stories. My investigation reveals that this ambiguity is grounded in literature’s engagement with the reader’s emotions, an engagement that portrays a dynamic relationship between uncertainty and faith. Faith thereby is imaginatively portrayed as a surrender of the all-too human desire for certainty, a surrender that orients the believer towards Divine Mystery.

The Task at Hand

My investigation begins in the first chapter with a consideration both of how
literature “thinks” differently from other, more conceptual forms of discourse and with how the theologian can enter into a fruitful dialogue with this unique form of thinking about faith. First, I explore philosopher Martha Nussbaum’s thought and her attention to the affective dimension of literature. She notes that literature provokes the reader’s emotions in a manner distinctive from conventional philosophical discourses, a provocation that reminds us that life often thwarts claims of absolute certainty. In regards to the task of the theologian, I then turn to David Tracy’s concept of the fragment to provide a framework for the theologian to approach the various theological imaginations manifested in literature. Finally, I conclude this initial chapter with a brief discussion of Karl Rahner’s theology of grace. As will be seen in Chapters Three and Four, the novels frequently reveal a sacramental vision of the world, one which sees grace intertwined with creation and human existence. Rahner’s theology provides a foundation for these subsequent discussions.

Chapter Two considers issues of genre, namely, the development of the novel. The novel is cast conventionally as a product of modernity and secularity. Its emergence occurs at the moment of European history in which the natural world and human culture are increasingly seen as the sum total of reality. Ironically then, Christian authors turn to the product of modernity to undercut certain central assumptions of secular thought so as to present an alternate imaginative vision of reality, one open to the possibility for transcendence beyond the material world. In addition, I discuss two paradigmatic theological responses to modernity—John Henry Newman and Søren Kierkegaard—to begin exploring a central issue of this investigation: If the topic is the relationship
between faith and uncertainty in various novels, how is faith portrayed in the novels? In other words, how do the novels imagine faith? For instance, is faith presented as conceptual assent to propositions? If so, the focus would be upon the content of faith. Or, is faith presented primarily as an existential orientation? If so, faith then would be cast more as an imaginative vision of the self and the world. At this point, these questions can only be posed tentatively, with a fuller answer possible only after investigations of the various novels.

To this end, Chapters Three and Four will present close readings of works by six Catholic authors: François Mauriac, Graham Greene, Flannery O’Connor, Muriel Spark, Mary Gordon, and Shusaku Endo. As mentioned above, I divide the novels into two paradigms for considering the relationship between faith and uncertainty: First, the experience of uncertainty prompts a conversion to Christian faith (Chapter Three); second, the experience of uncertainty leads to a reconsideration of a prior Christian faith (Chapter Four). Most of the authors present a sacramental imagination which views divine grace as active amidst human uncertainty. This sacramental imagination is disrupted by Mary Gordon’s early novels; however, I argue that this disruption is not necessarily a complete rejection of the sacramentality, and offers an important critique of a religious imagination that denies space for uncertainty.

Finally, Chapter Five offers some concluding observations on the project as a whole. I begin with a discussion of Endo’s Deep River to revisit both paradigms (uncertainty before faith/uncertainty after faith) before considering how a theologian can incorporate the novels’ imaginative portrayals of faith into a theologian’s understanding
of faith. I then return to a matter left unresolved in Chapter Two, and argue that the novels portray faith as an existential orientation of a believer towards God. For, the novels’ present faith such that faith frames the believer’s imagination of the self, others, and creation. Hence, the focus is less on faith’s propositional content (however important this may be) than on faith’s imaginative orientation of the believer towards God prior to any explicit conceptual articulation.

What emerges in this investigation is the necessity of uncertainty as a means to prompt conversion, both before and after the conscious acceptance of religious belief. Further, this experience of uncertainty is manifested in the novels through literature’s affective appeal, which reveals both the ambiguity of emotions as well as the ambiguity of faith itself. Faith exists in a dynamic, existential relationship with uncertainty such that faith should not be understood primarily as intellectual assent, but as a surrender of the all-too human desire for certainty in the face of life’s struggles, tragedies, and fickleness. Such a surrender opens the believer towards an imaginative vision of ultimate reality, lived with hope and trust in Divine Mystery.
CHAPTER ONE

A METHODOLOGICAL FRAME FOR THE DIALOGUE
BETWEEN LITERATURE AND THEOLOGY

This chapter establishes a frame for my subsequent dialogue between theology and literature around the theme of uncertainty’s relationship to faith. After some introductory remarks, I discuss the thought of philosopher Martha Nussbaum and the theologians David Tracy and Karl Rahner. Nussbaum devotes much attention to the affective dimension of literature, which she argues lends literature a form of epistemology distinct from conceptual discourses. Further, her focus upon the novel foreshadows my discussion of the novel’s historical development within the context of modernity in Chapter Two. Meanwhile, Tracy’s investigations into theological hermeneutics and his more recent writings on the fragment provide the general theological foundation for my dialogue with literature. Finally, I turn to Rahner’s theology of grace to consider the issue of sacramentality, a consistent theme in Chapters Three and Four.

A note of clarification: I argue consistently, adapting Nussbaum’s thought, that literature offers an epistemology distinctive from more systematic, conceptual, or rational forms of theological rhetoric. “Form” here is more than simply the medium; it also refers to the structure of reflection made possible by the medium. In other words, the form of discourse determines one’s thinking and expression about a particular subject. Because of
the very nature of story, fictional narratives allow for the ambiguity and paradox found in the relationship between faith and uncertainty to remain, while still providing a structure for clarification. Clarification emerges through reflection upon the story, but the story often resists absolute certainty such that one’s reflection remains tentative. If the story cannot be reduced to a clear deductive reasoning (such as one finds in certain kinds of allegory, where X=Y, and the story is solved), then the narrative structure resists complete explication. It reminds the reader of the limitations of one’s interpretation, limitations that mark the reader’s relationship to the text as ambiguous. In this ambiguity, the affective experience of uncertainty remains; the reader recognizes that there is a surplus of meaning beyond one’s narrow interpretation.

It is true that a reader often encounters ambiguity in more conceptual discourses (as conventionally found in theology or philosophy), but this ambiguity is usually regarded as something to be solved, something to study so as to arrive in as complete an understanding of the text’s “meaning” as possible. One could always claim, and understandably so, that one’s interpretation of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* stands never more than tentative, but this is more likely to be attributed to either a lack of understanding on the part of the reader, or, as in Kierkegaard’s wry comment, that Hegel has not made himself clear. One’s affective reaction may be: frustration caused by a lack of understanding, displeasure characterized by rejection of Hegel’s thought, or some form of joy, either through enjoyment at the complexity of the text, agreement with Hegel, or even joy at having “solved” the confusion. “At last,” one may exclaim, “I understand

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Hegel.” For when one reacts with confusion to a theological or philosophical text, one may either humbly decide it is “over my head” or have a nagging sentiment similar to Kierkegaard—that the thinker did not understand their own thought, and that this points to a weakness in the argument. So, if one desires to be fair to the thinker, one strives to arrive at a kind of conceptual clarification that eliminates ambiguity as much as possible.²

By contrast, the ambiguity and ambivalence of literature is properly celebrated. To reduce _Hamlet_ simply to a psychological study in procrastination (even if one can prove this interpretation as correct!) would birth an impoverished reading. How one argues about the meaning of Kant’s “categorical imperative” requires a different engagement with the text than how one argues about the motivations of King Lear. First and foremost, literature’s form of thinking is affective, and because of the ambiguity inherent in emotions—their slipperiness so to speak—literature is aptly suited to convey

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² I am here speaking, admittedly, in broad generalizations. Certain philosophical texts revel in ambiguity and emotion provocation, and indeed, this may be part of the rhetorical strategy for a text’s argument. For example, Friedrich Nietzsche—as great a rhetorical master as anyone—certainly recognizes the influence of emotions on knowing. In _On the Genealogy of Morals_, Nietzsche declares “the more feelings about a matter which we allow to come to expression, the more eyes, different eyes through which we are able to view this same matter, the more complete our ‘conception’ of it, our ‘objectivity’, will be.” Nietzsche’s observation points to the subjective, perspectival nature of knowledge, as well as the connection between intellect and feelings. One cannot divorce feelings and the will from the intellect without producing a “castration of the intellect.” It is fascinating, as David Tracy observes, that Nietzsche found it necessary to turn to discourses unconventional for philosophy. In his _Thus Spoke Zarathustra_—a philosophical text structured around the literary elements of plot and characters—Zarathustra instructs his followers that there is no unchanging truth regarding good and evil, that the individual must dare to discover one’s own good and evil: “‘This – is now my way: where is yours?’ Thus I [Zarathustra] answered those who asked me ‘the way’. For the way – does not exist!’” If there is a single truth, it is the paradox that all claims to truth are subjective constructions. Nietzsche, in _Zarathustra_, interweaves this “truth” in a narrative structure that engages the emotions. See Friedrich Nietzsche, _On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic_, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 98, 99; italics in the original; and _Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One_, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 213; italics in the original. See also David Tracy, “Fragments: The Spiritual Situation of Our Times,” in _God, the Gift, and Postmodernism_, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 172; “Form and Fragment: The Recovery of the Hidden and Incomprehensible God,” in _The Concept of God in Global Dialogue_, ed. Werner G. Jeanrond and Aasulv Lande (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 104. Tracy dubs _Thus Spoke Zarathustra_ as belonging to a “quasi-gospel genre.”
uncertainty’s relationship to faith while still providing a structure for reflection and possible clarification.

In regards to the theme of this investigation, the reader thereby reflects on the relationship between faith and uncertainty in a manner distinct from more conceptual discourses. One can agree with Paul Tillich when he argues that “faith includes courage. Therefore, it can include the doubt about itself...doubt is not a permanent experience within the act of faith. But it is always present as an element in the structure of faith.”

One can even applaud Tillich for his insistence on the presence of doubt amidst faith. To say that doubt is always present in the structure of faith is to recognize that faith never eliminates the possibility of doubt completely. But to pursue Tillich’s understanding further, one would have to investigate what Tillich means by the “structure of faith” or how does he define doubt or courage, and one would once again be investigating conceptually in such a matter that ambiguity or uncertainty would be clarified as much as possible. Indeed, the interpreter would be in the odd-sounding position of trying to define what one means by doubt such there is no doubt about the definition of doubt. Perhaps this is conceptually possible, but it fails to convey the affective experience of uncertainty with literature’s concreteness and particularity.

Broadly speaking, the conceptual discourses of philosophical and theological texts aim for clarification through systematic argument, emphasized through some mode of rational discourse and/or appeal to authority such as Scripture, an ecclesial authority, or a particular theologian or philosopher. In contrast, a literary work’s “meaning” occurs

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through its rhetorical style, which imaginatively and affectively mediates to the reader the story’s plot(s) and characters. This difference in discourse is the difference in how the reader will or will not adopt the story’s particular vision of human experience. For a reader to care about a literary work, she or he must be engaged emotionally such that one will say that these characters or this plot mean something to one’s life. It is true, of course, that one could read a particular book based only on an intellectual interest in a particular subject; for example, perhaps one wishes to read an historical drama because of an interest in a specific historical event or era. But if the writing, the plot, or the characters fail to excite the imagination and affections of the reader, then the work will mean little in the long run. It is possible that one could appreciate the themes of a story conceptually without an emotional attachment; for instance, the reader may regard the novel as possessing pedagogical worth. But if the story does not engage the reader emotionally—whether this is caused by the reader’s subjectivity, the story’s failure, or both—then it has not fulfilled its full potential to prompt the reader towards deeper reflection. Conversion to the story’s vision of human life becomes much more difficult. One may decide the work is not worth additional time because one is bored, or one has “understood” it all, and it is not worth further bother. In short, the story holds no deeper mystery.

If the story deals with uncertainty’s relationship to faith, one may consider a variety of possibilities for why the story “failed” for the reader. Perhaps the emotional experience of uncertainty did not sufficiently become manifest in the reader’s response. Or perhaps the reader suspects that uncertainty was not treated with appropriate
seriousness and became just one more problem to be solved conceptually. Regardless, the reader’s response occurs affectively as much, if not more so, as conceptually. Even boredom may have a role. In such a reaction, the possibility for a deeper, emotional engagement has been obstructed, and along with it, the possibility for personal appropriation of the story’s vision. “It’s a nice story,” the reader may say without a second thought.

In contrast, the reader may be bored with, dislike, or even despise the writing of a theological treatise, but still decide that it conveys some truth about the religious experience because of the logical tightness of its argument, its careful reading of Scripture, or its grounding in the authority of a theologian, philosopher, or ecclesial office. One would probably hold this text in high esteem because of its theological agreement regardless of the writing style, indeed in higher esteem than a novel that one may agree with theologically but consider an uninteresting story. It is not that one suppresses one’s emotions when engaged with, say, an encyclical; instead, the difference lies both in the way these emotions are provoked or not, and in the reader’s subsequent response to this provocation. One may be excited by Kant’s “Transcendental Aesthetic,” but this positive emotional reaction will be grounded in one’s conceptual agreement of Kant’s conceptual argument, or at least an intellectual appreciation over the great nuances of his thought. I suppose it is possible for one to have an affective enthusiasm for Kant’s writing style, but it is not necessary to agree with him. But it would be strange for a reader to pledge great affection for Shakespeare and not to be moved by the beauty of his language.
In fact, a reader could love Shakespeare’s language and yet reject the psychological portrayals of his characters. One could be moved to tears by Ophelia’s relationship to Hamlet or feel sympathy for Gertrude, and yet reject these as unrealistic portraits of women. But if one enjoys the prose of the *Summa Theologica*, but rejects Thomas’ conclusions, one is likely to say simply, “Thomas wrote wonderful Latin,” before arguing against his conclusions on conceptual grounds. But to reject Shakespeare’s portrayal of a particular character while affirming the beauty of his rhetoric is to confront the challenges of affective language. A new kind of complexity emerges for the interpreter: The beauty of the language collides with the reader’s values and beliefs. In this conflict lies the ambivalence that gives literature its power as well as its danger.

**Martha Nussbaum: Literature as a Form of Knowing**

With these general remarks on the some differences between conceptual and literary discourses, I will now turn to the thought of philosopher Martha Nussbaum to delve more deeply into literature’s engagement with the reader’s emotions.

Nussbaum provocatively argues that her field of philosophical ethics must make space for literary works. She agrees with William James and Marcel Proust that some experiences are better captured in the form of a narrative, that some claims on how one should live are not sufficiently articulated in conventional philosophical language, but in a language more complex and engaged with concreteness. But what is communicated is more than simply the conveyance of factual knowledge. A philosophical text of an

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“abstract theoretical style” may convey the same knowledge as literature, but Nussbaum argues that style makes its own claim about what is important. If this is true and if moral philosophy has the task to seek out the truth in all of its forms, then it needs to attend to literary texts to succeed in its appointed task. Literature is not a substitution for philosophical texts, but an expansion for what is commonly included in the field.\(^5\) This also demands that philosophy reflect on its own methodology. Historically, philosophy has modeled itself on the style and methodology of the natural sciences, but one cannot haphazardly transplant the preferred methodology and rhetoric from one field to another, for “a very different sphere of human life…may have a different geography and demand a different sort of precision, a different norm of rationality.”\(^6\) But, as she clarifies, to speak of a different rationality or precision is not to claim that novels fulfill the same epistemological goals or articulate the identical psychological truths better than philosophical texts. Her claim is that novels provide some knowledge courtesy of their narrative structure that leads the reader into experiences, such as love or suffering, that even in principle cannot be provided in another, more abstract way.\(^7\)

Nussbaum grounds her approach in an Aristotelian framework for ethics that begins with the question: “How should a human being live?”\(^8\) Literature addresses this


\(^8\) Nussbaum, “Introduction,” 25. Regarding this question, some scholars have argued that she needs to have a more robust defense of why this particular question is the starting point for philosophical ethics; on the side of theology, others have wondered why she does not make a greater retrieval of Thomas Aquinas, considering their shared Aristotelian heritage; finally, some critics may agree with her insistence on the
question in a twofold manner: the unique form of cognition conveyed through narrative, and the affective dimension of this knowledge. Both of these claims are grounded in her belief that the Aristotelian tradition gives greater space than the Platonic tradition to the emotions.

Nussbaum’s comparison between literature and philosophy hearkens back to the ancient quarrel between Plato and Aristotle over the significance of poetry and drama.9 In Book X of The Republic, Plato (through Socrates) famously regards poetry as dangerous for philosophy. First, imitative poetry should be banned from the ideal city, and poetry, by its nature, was predominantly imitative. Any reproduction is ultimately a copy of a form; a craftsperson reproduces the form in their work, but not the form itself. Since poetry, unlike a craft, does not create directly from a form, but from other reproductions, it is lower than other works since it is an imitation of an imitation. Further, in the theater, the poet traffics in emotions, imitating the worst dimensions of the soul so as to move the

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greatest multitude and win the most applause. Emotions, in other words, become our governors. Plato does grant that a certain kind of poetry may be allowed into the city, such as hymns to the gods or descriptions of the virtuous. This quarrel, acknowledged as ancient even in his day, is left open since Plato grants that poetry should be allowed to make its case and, if successful, be allowed to return to the city.  

Meanwhile, in the Poetics, Aristotle argues that the worth of poetry in its dramatic forms of comedy, tragedy, and epic lies in its narrative structure and affective manner. For example, tragedy—his favorite form—is “presented in embellished language, in distinct forms in different parts, performed by actors rather than told by a narrator, effecting, through pity and fear, the purification of such emotions.” To Nussbaum, this “purification,” or katharsis, is not an act of eliminating one’s emotions; instead, it is a “clarification,” but not an exclusively “intellectual clarification.” Instead, katharsis involves reactions of pity and fear to the tragedy. The clarification then involves both the intellect as well as one’s emotions, for in this clarification, there “is a recognition of practical values, and therefore of ourselves, that is no less important than the recognitions and perceptions of intellect.” In this sense, Nussbaum’s understanding of katharsis is as much about disclosure as an intellectual resolution, that is, a manifestation of an alternate way of imagining the world that provokes self-reflection about one’s values and possible appropriation of this alternate mode of living in the world presented in the text.

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Both Plato and Aristotle then recognize the relationship between poetry and how one lives. For Nussbaum, Aristotle correctly recognizes that the value of literature lies in the reality that we will never live enough. Our experience will always be too confined, too limited to discover the great range of possibilities for human living. There is an epistemological claim at the heart of her preference for Aristotle’s position contra Plato’s, a claim that knowledge comes through concrete experiences, a knowledge that literature at least has the potential to provide when the reader engages with a narrative.\textsuperscript{13}

But this is not “factual” knowledge; it is more akin to Aristotle’s argument that the poet is not concerned with what actually happened, but with what “would happen”: “For this reason poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history; poetry utters universal truths, history particular statements. The universal truths concern what befits a person of a certain kind to say or do in accordance with probability and necessity—and that is the aim of poetry, even if it makes use of proper names.”\textsuperscript{14} At first glance, this would seem to contradict what has been said thus far about novels as a more concrete avenue to knowledge. In fact, it indicates the way narrative provides knowledge according to its own form of rationality, as Nussbaum argues.

If literature provides a form of knowledge regarding how one should live, this kind of knowledge is communicated analogically. Such knowledge is flexible in that it allows itself to be applied to the life of the reader who, most likely, exists in a wholly other context from the narrative. In other words, the reader performs an analogical

\textsuperscript{13} Nussbaum, “Introduction,” 16-17, 43-48.

\textsuperscript{14} Aristotle, \textit{Poetics}, 28.
movement through adopting (or not) the vision of human experience laid out in the text. I will discuss the concept of “analogy” further below in regard to David Tracy, but for now, I wish to observe that this analogical movement occurs in a different manner than, say, applying Kant’s categorical imperative to a different cultural context since this appropriation must confront literature’s affirmation of emotions.

“Literature is in league with the emotions,” observes Nussbaum, and while, as we saw with Nietzsche, other forms of discourse provoke strong emotions, literature depends upon emotions since they are the means by which a work elicits attention. Nussbaum’s stance is part of a larger debate over how philosophy should consider emotions. She argues that philosophy in general, in its preference to model itself on the methodology of the sciences, favors rational forms of discourse that attempt to downplay the role of the emotions in rational cognition. This does not mean, as she recognizes, that emotions should not be subject to criticism, or that they cannot lead to false judgment. She insists, however, that emotions demand the philosopher’s attention since they possess a cognitive dimension.

To Nussbaum, emotions are forms of evaluative judgments that deem certain objects as possessing great importance for the individual’s own flourishing, even though they are often outside the person’s self-control. To speak of emotions as related to judgment indicates their cognitive value, for emotions involve thought of an object combined with thought of the object’s importance. They thus involve appraisal or

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evaluation. Cognitive here does not mean a complex calculation, but rather how one receives or holds information. Emotions often compel us to acknowledge our neediness and lack of self-sufficiency. To speak of emotions as related to one’s flourishing is to say that emotions are eudaimonistic, which relates back to her starting question of how a person should live. One’s conception of eudaimonia impacts one’s answer to this question, for her conception of eudaimonia is inclusive of all which an agent considers to have intrinsic value.¹⁷

Emotions for Nussbaum are distinct from appetites, although she recognizes that in reality, there is not often a clear distinction. In general, appetites are oriented towards a specific object in the sense that one is pushed towards this object. In contrast, emotions are experienced more as a pull towards the object. In other words, emotions are provoked by the object, whereas appetites prompt one to search out the object. Further, emotions can fluctuate if one’s beliefs about the object change; for instance, love or hope may shift from one object to another. Emotions in other words possess more flexibility, as is seen in the fact that appetites remain fixed and are only satisfied by one particular kind of object—thirst is only satisfied by drink.¹⁸

More importantly, emotions indicate what one believes about the world, and, by


¹⁸ Of course, movement can occur in both directions, such as in the case of sexual desire. Nussbaum admits that these contrasts are too simple, since appetites can be modified by habit or teaching and thus allow some room for intentionality. Appetites signal bodily needs, but of course it is likely that we have emotions about objects that satisfy those needs. Nonetheless, the basic contrast remains. More difficult to discern is the distinction between emotions and moods, but one difference is that emotions always have an object, even a vague object, but a mood may lack this concreteness. One could be in a “bad mood” or filled with anxiety, but not able to pinpoint the exact cause. Finally, an emotion may contradict conscious belief, for one’s reaction may be ingrained from habit. See Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 129-37.
extension, how one observes the world. Emotions both insist on the importance of the object as well as manifest the person’s commitment to the object as part of one’s “scheme of ends”: “emotions look at the world from the subject’s own viewpoint, mapping events onto the subject’s own sense of personal importance or value.”¹⁹ A lack of emotion about a particular object or event may indicate the opposite of one’s articulated belief. For example, if one is not disturbed at the death of a beloved, it is possible either that the person has not yet accepted the tragedy, or that the beloved is not of as great an importance as one believes. Further, emotions are influenced by the freedom of the agent such that what objects are considered as important may change throughout the individual’s life. This helps to explain how grief (or any emotional fervor) may wax or wan. As one shifts what one deems as the most important objects in one’s life, one’s emotional relationships to other objects change. To an extent, one becomes a different person.²⁰

This indicates that emotions play out like a narrative in that they change and develop over time, an insight she explores in her consideration of the role of emotions in childhood:

Emotions...have a narrative structure. The understanding of any single emotion is incomplete unless its narrative history is grasped and studied for the light it sheds on the present response. This already suggests a central role for the arts in human self-understanding: for narrative artworks of various kinds (whether musical or visual or literary) give us information about these emotion-histories that we could not easily get otherwise. This is what Proust meant when he claimed that certain truths about the human emotions can be best conveyed, in verbal and textual form, only by a narrative work of art: only such a work will accurately and fully show the interrelated temporal structure of emotional ‘thoughts,’ prominently

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including the heart’s intermittences between recognition and denial of neediness.

Narrative artworks are important for what they show the person who is eager to understand the emotions; they are also important because of what they do in the emotional life. They do not simply represent that history, they enter into it. Storytelling and narrative play are essential in cultivating the child’s sense of her own aloneness, her inner world.\textsuperscript{21}

Instead of reacting suspiciously to literature’s affective structure, Nussbaum argues, philosophy should embrace literature precisely because it brings the historical character and cognitive dimension of emotions to the fore. Further, the narrative arts create a “potential space,” as Aristotle recognizes, a protected emotional area created by the “aesthetic activity” that allows one to investigate the possibilities of life. In the case of childhood, narratives allow the child to explore the full spectrum of life—from wonder to joy to suffering—in a protected fashion. But also for adults, this investigation, even when it involves painful content, allows us to explore our limitations in a protected space.\textsuperscript{22}

Emotions are often volatile and ambivalent, qualities that lead to the experience of uncertainty. Emotions, Nussbaum argues, reminds us that there are objects beyond our control. She approves of Freud’s argument that in birth, the human emerges “from the womb of secure narcissism” into a world of objects beyond one’s control: “When we wake up, we have to figure out how to live in that world of objects. Without the intelligence of the emotions, we have little hope of confronting that problem well.”\textsuperscript{23}

Emotions expose our vulnerabilities to the world and to the uncertainty of life. To

\textsuperscript{21} Nussbaum, \textit{Upheavals of Thought}, 236; also cf. 2-3.

\textsuperscript{22} Nussbaum, \textit{Upheavals of Thought}, 237-44.

\textsuperscript{23} Nussbaum, \textit{Upheavals of Thought}, 16.
confront one’s emotions is to confront the reality that one stands in a world always beyond one’s control. And if Nussbaum is correct that literature provides a means through which to explore emotions in a safe, aesthetic space, then literature possesses the potential to provide a unique kind of theological thinking regarding faith that more conceptual, systematic discourses fail to create. Reflection provides the opportunity for the clarification of faith through this aesthetic space, but this reflection can be marked by ambivalence and ambiguity since one can react to a text with conflicting emotions.

In exploring the relationship between uncertainty and faith, literature’s power to provoke emotions then renders it an invaluable avenue for theological reflection. The reader may react to a character’s experience of uncertainty regarding faith in various ways that defy a simple conceptual rejection or acceptance of the character’s actions. In this internal conflict, the reader experiences one’s own form of uncertainty, an experienced rendered emotionally as well as intellectually.

To speak of a reader’s reaction to a story is to speak of the relationship between text and reader. But this text does not spring from nowhere. Literature is, as Nussbaum points out, an interpretation of life by the author. Thus the reader confronts a vision of life made manifest in the text. The reader, as interpreter, discerns what kind of feeling and imagination is embodied in the course of the story. In other words, what is “the sense of life that animates the text as a whole?” Nussbaum does not believe in the authorless

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24 Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 16-22, 87-88. This is not just an abstract argument for Nussbaum. She writes movingly that her explorations of the cognitive dimension of emotions is based in part on her reaction to her mother’s death.

text. The text’s interpretation of life indeed comes from an author. Literary texts are works whose representational and expressive content emerges from human conceptions and intentions. In other words, the authorial consciousness is heard in the text. But she defines the author in three ways. First is the narrator or the character of the author; second is the authorial presence that animates the text as a whole; third is the life of the real author who for the most part is irrelevant to one’s reading. The first two are her primary concerns since they pertain to the manner in which the story conveys its interpretation of human experience; regarding the third, she takes a stance that no critical statements made by the writer automatically carry a particular authority over an interpretation of the text. These statements may very well be separate from the intentions fulfilled in the text itself. On the other hand, an author does not necessarily misjudge their work.  

Besides the issue of the author, however, there is also the issue of the reader, particularly in the matter of how she or he appropriates a literary work’s interpretation of life. For Nussbaum, this interaction between reader and text occurs in a fundamentally different mode from forms of conceptual discourse:

Before a literary work...we are humble, open, active yet porous. Before a philosophical work, in its working through, we are active, controlling, aiming to leave no flank undefended and no mystery undispelled. This is too simple and schematic, clearly; but it says something. It’s not just emotion that’s lacking, although that’s part of it. It’s also passivity; it’s trust, the acceptance of incompleteness.  

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There is less impulse to “solve” the story, and more allowance for ambiguity. Before a story, we are more trusting, more willing to accept the invitation to wonder and engage in the play of the imagination, to exercise the “ability to see one thing as another, to see one thing in another. We might therefore also call it the metaphorical imagination.”

In this project I will call it, after the theologian William Lynch, the “analogical imagination.”

Nussbaum describes the reader’s relationship to a literary work as akin to a seductive friendship: “Our actual relation to the books we love is already messy, complex, erotic.” With Nussbaum, I would argue that part of the complexity, messiness, as well as seduction of literature lies in the uncertainty one experiences in the encounter with the story. A novel, for example, is more open-ended than a systematic work, but it also provides clarification in that its structure guides the reader’s response, a structure through which it demonstrates why the “search matters…By showing the mystery and indeterminacy of ‘our actual adventure,’ they [i.e. literature] characterize life more richly and truly—indeed, more precisely—than an example lacking those features ever could…”

In other words, a journey through a story provides a clarification distinct from a conceptual clarification which can too often destroy mystery. A literary work potentially demonstrates that the human experience “is a series of happenings, some more, some less, mysterious. But to dispel their mystery altogether would be to control them; and this we can never, to this extent, do. Moreover, even the aim to explain the

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28 Nussbaum, Poetic Justice, 36.


30 Nussbaum, “Introduction,” 47. Nussbaum is specifically talking about the novel here, but I would extend this to include the short-story.
whole world, to put it all into a systematic order, may be...an inappropriate relation for a human being to have to this world...” But, as she acknowledges, this raises the question of how to speak of mystery without destroying it.\textsuperscript{31}

If Nussbaum is correct, if literature allows uncertainty to remain amidst its clarification, this gives literature a power to disrupt conceptual or systematic certainty. In Nussbaum’s context, this means literature can disturb reductive theories of morality, a capacity that makes literature potentially “subversive.”\textsuperscript{32} In the case of theology, literature’s disruptive power grants it the ability to interrogate and problematize systematic conceptualizations of faith. For instance, if one attempts to articulate in a propositional manner “what faith is,” literature may throw a wrench in the attempt. But again, this is not simply to add knowledge, as if literature supplies a missing piece that a theologian would have achieved through rational reflection eventually. Instead, it is to say that literature offers a unique form of knowledge, one imaginatively grounded in the cognitive dimension of the emotions.

Even if Nussbaum’s argument regarding the cognitive value of literature is correct, there still remains the question of theology’s dialogue with it. Specifically, how can theology attend to the form of thinking found in literature?

**David Tracy: A Theology of Fragment**

Alan Jacobs argues that Western philosophy and theology have historically treated literature as “leafy ornamentation” to demonstrate conclusions already worked-

\textsuperscript{31} Nussbaum, “Fictions of the Soul,” 258-259. Nussbaum makes this comment in her reading of Proust’s *Sodome et Gomorrhe*.

\textsuperscript{32} Nussbaum, “Introduction,” 22; *Poetic Justice*, 2.
out in the various philosophical and theological discourses; that literature itself might be
a source for this discourse, an equal partner so to speak, has traditionally not been
recognized. Jacobs’ comment, of course, is true only as a general, historical
observation. Nussbaum does not stand alone as a recent philosopher who approaches
literature as a valuable dialogue partner; for instance, the Irish philosopher Richard
Kearney also shares Nussbaum’s passion for literature. Closer to theology, the field of
religion and literature has flourished over the past few decades with the work of thinkers
such as Nathan A. Scott, Charles Gunn, and Wesley Kort amongst others. For example,
in The Wild Prayer of Longing, Scott develops his “sacramental principle,” a vision of the
world in which even human objects and activities may reveal the presence of the divine;
Scott then offers the poetry of Theodore Roethke as an example of a “sacramental vision”
of human experience. A more recent example can be found in Amy Hungerford’s
Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion Since 1960, in which she explores
the possibility of believing in belief through authors who “seek…to make literature a
secular religion and critics its priestly caste.”

But again, as a general observation, Jacob’s argument brings to light a tendency in

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34 This can be seen in many of Kearney’s works in which Kearney treats literature as a valuable dialogue
partner; see, for example, Anatheism: Returning to God After God (New York: Columbia University Press,
2010), 101-30.

35 Nathan A. Scott, Jr. The Wild Prayer of Longing: Poetry and the Sacred (New Haven: Yale University

36 Amy Hungerford, Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion Since 1960 (Princeton:
approaches to literature on the part of theology. Often, literature is treated as an example of a theological position worked out on its own divorced from the input of literature (Jacobs’ “leafy ornamentation”). Literature is valued for its performative dimension; in other words, it “performs” a philosophy or theology, but does not add additional value beyond this. This approach is most explicit whenever literature is treated primarily as a vehicle for apologetics. The work is judged according to how well it serves the need to communicate theology to the public at large. I share T.S. Eliot’s concern in his famous article “Religion and Literature” that such literature may too easily “come under the heading of Propaganda,” although my concern takes on a different hue from Eliot; rather, my concern lies on the side of theology. A strict apologetic standard for literature narrows the space for dialogue between the two fields.

If, as this project argues, literature is to be treated as an equal partner with theology, this entails that it must be granted the power to disrupt theological thinking so as to speak in its own voice, even a critical voice. What is needed then is a theological imagination that allows this disruption to occur while still remaining committed to the larger theological tradition.

In several essays over the past decades, David Tracy has explored how contemporary theology can retrieve the best of what pre-modern, modern, and postmodern theology has to offer. Tracy’s concept of fragment offers a theological

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37 T.S. Eliot, “Religion and Literature,” in *The New Orpheus: Essays toward a Christian Poetic*, ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 226. That said, Eliot’s strict polarity between the Christian reader and the secular world does not correspond with many of the authors of this project. It must therefore be rejected as a starting point for a project, such as this, that desires to let stories explore the relationship between the sacred and the secular with much greater fluidity.
imagination that allows literature to speak on its own terms. In his critique of modernity’s
certainty, in his search for new forms to express the experience of God, and the profound
uncertainty faced by the theologian in this search, Tracy’s work offers a theological
imagination that guides the theologian to approach literature without constructing a too
rigid system and standard by which to judge it.

As Scott Holland notes, Tracy’s theological framework shapes the theologian’s
approach to narrative differently from what is commonly called “narrative theology,” a
field that in this country is most associated with the “Yale School” of George Lindbeck
and Hans Frei, amongst others. The “Yale School” primarily attends to narrative as
biblical narrative since the theologian functions as a “guardian” of the community’s
canon and interpretation of this canon.38 Frei’s *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, for
example, charts the historical shift from pre-modern readings of Scripture—in which the
biblical narrative was treated as a self-contained world—to the readings of modernity, in
which the story of Scripture was evaluated from the outside. In other words, the meaning
of Scripture became determined by external historical events, or as an independent
spiritual truth exemplified in the texts. Biblical interpretation developed into positioning
the biblical narrative into another narrative.39 As Mark I. Wallace observes, the “Yale
School” considers the theologian’s task as descriptive; one attempts to uncover the
Christian church’s grammar. This task focuses on the biblical world while non-canonical

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sources are downplayed.⁴⁰

In contrast, Tracy’s framework encourages the theologian to attend to stories outside the established academic canon. The concept of fragment provides a check on the temptation for the theologian to construct a hegemonic, rigid theological system. By attending to voices and interpreters outside the canon, the theologian encounters other experiences and forms of thinking about faith.

Tracy’s development of fragment stems from his long-running interest in issues of hermeneutics for postmodern theology. But the term “postmodern theology” is perhaps a misleading phrase in the context of Tracy’s thought. As he clarifies, the phenomenon of a single postmodernity does not exist; instead, there are “postmodernities.”⁴¹ Postmodernity—to resort to the singular of the sake of convention—must not relapse to the great temptation of modernity: the desire to construct a totality system. Modernity—which sought to move beyond the burdens of pre-modern history—turned into yet another hegemonic tradition.⁴² Tracy thereby accepts many of the critiques leveled at modernity by postmodernity, in particular what he considers modernity’s “three fatal separations”: the divorce of thought from feeling, form from content, and theory from


practice. But this reaction to modernity does not mean an uncritical return to pre-modern forms of theology. Pre-modern retrievals need careful appropriation, so as to prevent an uncritical attitude towards the past that results in a kind of “retrospective utopia” that “is merely evolution-in-reverse.” At the same time, this does not mean that postmodernity is unproblematic. Tracy often finds that postmodern thought lacks a secure ground for hope and action in the ethical-political sphere. Still, at their best, the various forms of postmodernity allow the marginalized voices of history to be heard again, and likewise for theology: “...at its best, postmodern theology is an honest if sometimes desperate attempt to let God as God be heard again; disrupting modern historical consciousness, unmasking the pretensions of modern rationality, demanding that attention be paid to all those others forgotten and marginalized by the modern project.”

For Tracy, the theologian, as an interpreter of texts, must always work conscious of ambiguity. This opacity is grounded in the ambiguity revealed in history. Modernity attempted to achieve certainty through totality, but this was interrupted by the evil revealed in history. History demonstrates itself not as continuous, but as disruptive and profoundly ambiguous in its mixture of good and evil. This ambiguity is also present in

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44 Tracy, On Naming the Present, 20.


46 Tracy, On Naming the Present, 37.

the texts and the traditions in which the theologian moves. She or he need not abandon one’s particular tradition, but must be aware that every major religious tradition and their classic texts possess ambiguity. The text must be recognized as instable in that a definitive interpretation remains elusive; a classic text in particular must always be recognized as possessing an ambiguous history regarding its production and reception. Additionally, in one’s interpretations of the various texts of one’s religious tradition, the theologian can never claim absolute certainty, because one’s own interpretation will always remain ambiguous: “There is no innocent interpretation, no innocent interpreter, no innocent text.”

In Tracy’s thought, the language of the “classic” is most associated with his 1981 book, *The Analogical Imagination*. This book was intended to be the second of a projected three part trilogy, with 1975’s *Blessed Rage for Order* serving as a fundamental theology, *The Analogical Imagination* as a systematic theology, and finally, an as yet unwritten third book on practical theology. In *The Analogical Imagination*, Tracy discusses the theologian’s three “publics”: the academy, the church, or society in general. As a work intended primarily for systematic theology, the public of *The Analogical Imagination* is the church.

For Tracy, every theologian must dare to formulate “some personal theological

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48 Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 79. Cf also 11-14, 84-85.


response” to the event of Jesus in light of the traditions that mediate that event.\textsuperscript{51} This response comes through their interpretation of a “religious classic.” As a general definition, a classic is any text, event, image, ritual, symbol, or person that discloses truth and meaning and over time achieves a normative status in a culture.\textsuperscript{52} A specifically religious classic is characterized as disclosing truth and meaning through “some realized experience of the whole by the power of the whole,” as well as engaged with those “fundamental existential questions” that are a characteristic of all religions. These texts exert some kind of normative influence upon a religious community (such as the New Testament texts for Christianity).\textsuperscript{53} The language of the “fundamental existential questions” should be seen against the backdrop of Tracy’s fundamental theology in \textit{Blessed Rage for Order}. Here, Tracy argues for his concept of “limit”: “My contention will be that all significant explicitly religious language and experience (the ‘religions’) and all significant implicitly religious characteristics of our common experience (the ‘religious dimension’) will bear at least the ‘family resemblance’ of articulating or implying a limit-experience, a limit-language, or a limit-dimension.”\textsuperscript{54} Not only is Tracy arguing for explicitly religious discourse to be understood through the concept of “limit,” but he also insists that common experiences contain a “religious dimension.” There are “limit-situations” that “provide the surest clues to a disclosure of the properly religious

\textsuperscript{51} Tracy, \textit{Analogical Imagination}, 406.

\textsuperscript{52} Tracy, \textit{Analogical Imagination}, 108-09.

\textsuperscript{53} Tracy, \textit{Analogical Imagination}, 157-58, 249.

horizon to our everyday, our scientific, aesthetic, and moral experience.” These limit situations are “those human situations wherein a human being ineluctably finds manifest a certain ultimate limit or horizon to his or her existence.” Tracy divides these “limit-to” situations into two categories, “boundary” situations—death, sickness, guilt, etc.—and “ecstatic experiences,” such as “intense joy, love, reassurance, creation”: “When in the grasp of such [ecstatic] experiences, we all find, however momentarily, that we can and do transcend our usual lackluster selves and our usual everyday worlds to touch upon a dimension of experience which cannot be stated adequately in the language of ordinary, everyday experience.”55 Any classic then, not just an explicitly religious classic, could have the power to manifest these fundamental human experiences, these fundamental “limit” situations of our finite existence.

To interpret these classics—religious and otherwise—requires an “analogical imagination.” Such an imagination is grounded in analogical language, “a language of ordered relationships articulating similarity-in-difference.”56 Every theologian has the obligation to offer a personal interpretation of the various symbols and texts, i.e. the various religious classics, of their tradition so that these can remain relevant. The theologian engages with the multifaceted symbols that emerge from the various classics in order to find some “rough coherence” between these symbols that hold similarities and differences in tension without allowing one to collapse into the other. Further, a theologian—if one remains committed to a particular tradition—will attempt to clarify

55 Tracy, Blessed Rage, 105.

56 Tracy, Analogical Imagination, 408.
these relationships to “the primary analogue,” which for the Christian theologian is Christ.\textsuperscript{57}

Although Tracy may be the contemporary theologian most associated with the “analogical imagination,” his predecessor William Lynch argued for the necessity of an “analogical imagination” if theology is to discern the religious dimensions of literature. “Only when theology and literature come to have mutual respect for each other, not as sets of standards or morals versus orders and guardians of sensibility, but as vision aiding vision and creativity aiding creativity will the next step in collaboration become possible.”\textsuperscript{58} For Lynch, this mutual respect occurs through a focus on the finite, the concrete, which literature provides to the imagination. Imagination for Lynch is not fantasy, but “refers to the total resources in us which go into the making of our images of the world. It is, therefore, all the faculties of man, all his resources, not only his seeing and hearing and touching but also his history, his education, his feelings, his wishes, his love, hate, faith and unfaith, insofar as they all go into the making of his images of the world.”\textsuperscript{59} Images for Lynch, as Gerald Bednar points out, possess a cognitive value capable of influencing a person’s perception of reality—a remark that echoes Nussbaum’s insistence that emotions, including those provoked by literature, are

\textsuperscript{57} Tracy, \textit{Analogical Imagination}, 405-10. In contrast to the analogical imagination is the dialectical imagination. This imagination, and its corresponding dialectical language, stresses differences between symbols, particularly the great difference between God and the symbols one uses to speak of God. If ideally, the analogical imagination holds similarities and differences in tension, in practice, the temptation is to stress similarities. To Tracy, the dialectical imagination serves as a corrective to the analogical imagination. At its best, theology recognizes the need for both. Cf. \textit{Analogical Imagination}, 408-15.


\textsuperscript{59} Lynch, \textit{Images of Faith}, 18.
interwined with cognition and not simply knee-jerk reactions. When engaged in literature, Lynch, like Nussbaum, argues that the imagination focuses on the finite image; this focus on the concrete opens up the possibility to penetrate the surface and gain insight through the use of the analogical imagination. As in Tracy, this analogical imagination looks for patterns and relationships, yet is always careful not to force unity, or in other words, to let true difference remain between images. As a Christian philosopher as well as a literary critic, Lynch’s model of the analogical imagination is Christocentric: “Christ moved down into all the realities of man to get to His father.” Likewise, our own ascent occurs through a descent into our finiteness through the imagination, a descent that follows a parabolic trajectory such that our imagination follows a direct path through the finite and then “shoots up into insight.” “It is no small wonder,” Lynch insists, “that it is in Christ we come to the fullest possible understanding of what analogy means in the fullest concrete, the facing relentlessly into the two poles of the same and the different and the interpenetrating reconciliation of the two contraries. He who is the Lord of all things is the lord of the imagination.” Thus, Lynch’s parabolic trajectory adds a Christocentric narrative dimension to Tracy’s language of the analogical imagination.

In recent years, however, Tracy has moved away from the language of the

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63 Lynch, *Christ and Apollo*, 211.
analogical and dialectical imagination to the language of the prophetic-mystical, but he has not left behind the insight at the heart of the analogical imagination. In addition, he has also dropped the language of the classic in favor of the concept of fragment. But even when Tracy articulates his notion of classic in *The Analogical Imagination*, his description of the experience of art coheres to his later concept of fragment:

...when I experience any classic work of art, I do not experience myself as an autonomous subject aesthetically appreciating the good qualities of an aesthetic object set over against me...I find that my subjectivity is never in control of the experience...Rather the work of art encounters me with the surprise, impact, even shock of reality itself. In experiencing art, I recognize a truth I somehow know but know I did not really know except through the experience of recognition of the essential compelled by the work of art. I am transformed by its truth when I return to the everyday, to the whole of what I ordinarily call reality, and discover new affinities, new sensibilities for the everyday.64

Although Tracy is here speaking of art in general, his argument nonetheless converges with Nussbaum’s thought twofold. First, like Nussbaum, he insists that the classic work of art, like the classic work of religion, “is highly particular in both origin and expression, yet can be universal in effect.”65 Second, his comments on art recall Nussbaum’s insistence that literature, through its affective dimension, remains elusive and outside our control. Literature, like all art, can fragment theology’s temptation to construct a rigid system to explain the experience of the divine. But Tracy’s understanding of “fragment” occurs against the backdrop of his retrieval of form in his interrogation of how to “name” God in postmodernity.

64 Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 111, 112.

As discussed above, Tracy faults the separation of form from content in the thought of modernity. He argues for a retrieval of form despite postmodern suspicion. This suspicion is rooted in a distrust both of the claims of pre-modern thought to know the real through form as well as the Romantic retrieval of form. Tracy accepts the argument, such as found in Jacque Derrida’s work, that the Romantics never quite escaped “modern totality.” By this, Tracy means that the Romantic fragment still depends on a modern system of totality for its meaning—a Romantic form is a fragment, or piece, of the whole, as opposed to a disruption of totality. But he still applauds the Romantics for their attempt to break away from the temptations towards totality found in Enlightenment forms. The Romantics held “a belief that modernity is overdependent on a single form—the form of decontextualized abstract propositions articulated in accordance with the demands of modern rational argument. The kind of conceptual form produced by that kind of argument is the only form of reasoning approved by modernity.” The Romantics deserve credit with both retrieving a focus upon form (and hence an attempt within modernity to heal the separation between form and content) as well as articulating a particular kind of form, that is, the fragment in an attempt to articulate glimpses of the divine. Form in Tracy’s thought, then, is a general category, a structure for knowledge and thought, but “any form that attempts totality or closure…needs fragmentation.” Thus he speaks of the “peculiar form of fragments” that shatter totality systems.

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68 Tracy, “Literary Theory,” 308-309.

69 Tracy, “Form and Fragment,” 99.
In Catholic theology, the concept of form is most associated with the monumental work of the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. Tracy praises Balthasar for reminding Western theology both of the importance of form in general, as well as the particular importance of form for Christianity; Christianity, grounded in the specific form of the Incarnation, can never be formless. But Balthasar defines form classically. The concept of form must always be seen with the concept of splendor. Form refers to the actual shape or appearance whereas splendor is that radiance from within an object. In other words, between form and splendor one sees both the object itself and the internal radiance of the object. Tracy appreciates that Balthasar, along with his Protestant contemporary Karl Barth, views form as the means through which content is communicated to the beholder, and not as an aesthetical, and therefore unnecessary, supplement to content. But he finds these two great thinkers of the twentieth-century unhelpful regarding the fragment. For instance, Balthasar understands form through classical notions of beauty, harmony, and order, and, Tracy argues, “consistently made a basically negative judgment on the form of the fragmentary.”

Although I would agree with Tracy’s general assessment of Balthasar, I would still insist that Balthasar should be part of the discussion between literature and theology. In particular, Balthasar’s critique of modernity and his Christocentric understanding of

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72 Tracy, “Form and Fragment,” 100-01.
form provide rich intertextual dialogues with certain novels (such as some of Greene’s earlier works, for example). Where he is less helpful is in those texts that confront the ambiguity of faith, such as in Shusaku Endo’s works. Additionally, since my goal is to allow these texts to speak with as much autonomy as possible, it would be counterproductive to establish a rigid theological standard by which to judge these works. One would then run the risk of not moving the dialogue with literature much beyond the methodology of apologetics; there too a strict standard (how well does the work communicate orthodoxy to a general audience?) is applied so as to determine the “worth” of a particular work. Stories often engage with secularity and pluralism in an ambiguous, complex interaction that blends critique and appropriation. One cannot simply check one’s biases at the door, of course, and neither should a theologian abandon the tradition when donning the task of a literary critic. But to render justice to the voices of the text, one should at least strive to adopt an orientation that allows the story to speak its own themes and concerns. As Tracy observes, the theologian remains committed to their respective Christian tradition, but for authentic dialogue to occur, the theologian acknowledges that “everything is at risk: the interpreter’s present understanding and expectations, the text’s former receptions and its central claim to meaning and truth, and the very questioning that is the conversation itself.”73 The theologian enters into the dialogue formed by the tradition, but also aware that one may unconsciously harbor systematic distortions. The theologian therefore should abandon any pretensions to possess certainty; at best, a theologian can only claim a “highly tentative relative

73 Tracy, Plurality and Ambiguity, 99; cf. Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1990), 95-96.
adequacy” in their interpretations.74 If, as Nussbaum would argue, there is often uncertainty inherent in our response to great stories, the theologian works in awareness of the ambiguity inherent in one’s interpretation.

Amidst the ambiguity of postmodernity, the theologian attempts a “gathering of fragments.”75 Tracy credits African-American thought, particularly James Cone, Cornell West, and Toni Morrison, with demonstrating the importance of “fragmentary religious forms.” The great African-American thinkers’ have left something more valuable than a system with their attention to fragments.76 Amongst contemporary thinkers in general, Tracy sees three approaches to fragments: radical conservatives, who view fragments with nostalgia at what has been lost; postmodern, who view fragments as possibilities for liberation; and those who see fragments as bearers of hope and glimpses of the divine.77 Tracy situates many African-American thinkers, as well as himself, in this last group. As Nathan Crawford observes, “Through the interruption of the system, the fragment opens a way into the impossible and the infinite…the fragment is that form that shows the impossibility of any theological discourse to systematize God, while also revealing God as infinite within the world through the breaking of the whole.”78

But how does the theologian execute the task to gather fragments? Tracy insists

74 Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 84-85, 97.
75 Tracy, “Form and Fragment,” 107-108.
77 Tracy, “African American Thought,” 32-36; cf. also “This Side of God,” 56; and “Fragments: The Spiritual Situation of Our Times,” 173.
that this gathering occurs around Christ as the primary analogue, or the “form-of-forms,” for the theologian. But what does it actually mean to say that the theologian gathers fragments? What is the specific methodology or framework for this gathering? More pointedly, how does the theologian gather fragments without this gathering becoming a collection of fragments that share nothing more in common than the theologian’s personal taste? Can one gather fragments such that there is some point of unity, some point from which dialogue can spring, or is one always condemned to disunity? Perhaps these concerns will be answered upon publication of Tracy’s massive, long-delayed multivolume book on God. But until then, I would argue that if a theologian is a gatherer of fragments, then they need to specify how this will take place.

For this project, my theme defines this gathering. The various stories will be brought into a constellation around the incarnational principle of Sacramentality (to be discussed further below), which serves as an analogue of Christ for the gathering of these fragments; meanwhile, the theme of the relationship between uncertainty and faith establishes the limit of the investigation. Additionally, the common Catholic tradition of these chosen authors provides an additional boundary, in that it designates a specific tradition in which these authors move and work. Of course, each author provides their own unique reaction and appropriation of this tradition. But the shared heritage creates a space in which diverse experiences of faith are both allowed their unique voice and share enough in common to be brought into dialogue with each other.

Further, Tracy’s approach to hermeneutics will guide this endeavor. The

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79 Tracy, “Forms of Divine Disclosure,” 54.
The interpreter enters a dialogue with a particular text so as to engage with the truth manifested in the text and to which the interpreter responds: “truth is here understood, on the side of the object, as the power of disclosure and concealment in the object itself; and that disclosure is related to truth as an experience of recognition on the side of the subject.”\textsuperscript{80} That an object conveys truth with both disclosure and concealment indicates that the subject’s “experience of recognition” in the encounter eludes complete control and understanding. The results of the interpreter’s dialogue with the object then enter a larger dialogue with a community of interpreters. When interpreters offer their personal understanding of truth manifested in the text, they also make an implicit claim of “relative adequacy” for their interpretation. In the ensuing dialogue (including argument), some kind of communal consensus may emerge, as well as coherence. This coherence can mean what is considered valid in “purely formal arguments.” But Tracy is more interested in the “rough coherence implied in all manifestations and appropriate to all symbol systems, culture, languages, history, and life itself. Recall, for example, Aristotle in the \textit{Poetics} on the role of plots, or modern appeals to how narrative or story provides the rough coherence proper to experience itself.” Further, this rough coherence in the postmodern setting will always be aware of the ambiguities of language, history, and tradition.\textsuperscript{81}

Thus, if this gathering of fragments prompts the interpreter to strive for a rough coherence, this task still demands an analogical imagination. Tracy insists that:

\begin{quote}
\ldots as the question takes over, we noticed that to attend to the other as other, the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{80} Tracy, \textit{Plurality and Ambiguity}, 28.

\textsuperscript{81} Tracy, \textit{Plurality and Ambiguity}, 29, 83; and \textit{Analogical Imagination}, 426.
different as different, is also to understand the different as possible. To recognize possibility is to sense some similarity to what we have already experienced or understood. But similarity here must be described as similarity-in-difference, that is, analogy. An imagination trained to that kind of encounter is an analogical imagination.\textsuperscript{82}

Tracy observes that there is an experience of both difference and similarity in the reader’s encounter with the text, a stance that echoes Nussbaum’s insistence that literature speaks through common human concerns despite the very real differences in context between the story and the reader. But a gathering of fragments through an analogical imagination still requires careful discernment. Some fragments may remain irreconcilable to a particular Christian tradition. Likewise, a novel’s vision or critique of Christianity, for instance, may need to be rejected, or at the least qualified, in some fashion as a fragment unable to be gathered. There still needs to be a ground of some kind. If the hope is to create as a wide a space as possible for conversation, this does not mean this is an infinite, unmoored space. Nonetheless, an analogical imagination, in the spirit of dialogue, remains open to possibilities in the midst of gathering the fragments.

Of course for Tracy, like Lynch, Balthasar, or any Christian theologian, the event of Christ provides the primary analogue which must inform all Christian inquiry. His description of Christ as the “form-of-forms” echoes Balthasar’s description of the Christ form as the “super-form,” since it is the highest expression of God to the creature and the unique image and archetype of the hypostatic union.\textsuperscript{83} Reading Balthasar in light of Tracy, one can view the former as the twentieth-century theologian par excellence who

\textsuperscript{82} Tracy, \textit{Plurality and Ambiguity}, 20; italics in original.

\textsuperscript{83} Balthasar, \textit{Seeing the Form}, 419-22.
gathered the pre-modern fragments into a staggering synthesis of the Western Christian tradition around his Christocentric retrieval of theological aesthetics.

Tracy’s approach, however, opens the interpreter to a greater variety of religious forms. We need not choose between the pre-modern, the modern, or the postmodern. Tracy may not adopt the attitude of nostalgia towards fragments possessed by many thinkers who yearn to retrieve the pre-modern, but, as evidenced in his retrieval of the hiddenness of God found in Luther and Pseudo-Dionysius, he still believes the pre-modern speaks to us today.\footnote{Tracy, “Form and Fragment,” 108-14.} The postmodern therefore does not have the only or final word—tradition still has a necessary place.

But what does the postmodern theologian do with modernity? Thus far, modernity has been given a rough critique, a common opponent shared by those inclined towards either the pre-modern retrieval or the postmodern fragment. But Tracy does not believe one simply bypasses modernity. This former student of Lonergan still holds that theological modernity made a “permanent contribution...by forging various and increasingly sophisticated relational concepts to understand God’s radically relational nature better than premodern theologies,” yet this achievement cannot be left uninterrogated. To Tracy, there is too often a tendency for the “frightening, interruptive reality of God” to become lost amidst the relational concepts. Nonetheless, what is true in modernity still deserves a defense.\footnote{Tracy, \textit{On Naming the Present}, 36-37; and “Literary Theory,” 304.}

Modern theology cannot be ignored, but should be retrieved through the lens of
fragment. One sees this maneuver in Tracy’s thought when he argues that Kant recognizes evil as the “fragment” that disrupts his thought, or in his observation that Hegel till the end of his life struggles to rethink Judaism and Buddhism.\(^ {86} \) The theologian attends to the concerns and insights of modernity without constructing one more totality system. Tracy approves of Karl Rahner’s insistence on the ultimate mystery and incomprehensibility of God: “Such an understanding of the incomprehensible God, moreover, frees the Christian to become, as Rahner insisted, the most radical skeptic in modernity—skeptical, above all, about modernity’s pretensions to certainty...”\(^ {87} \) Modern theology continues to have a place with the proper recognition of the limits of all human thought.

Tracy’s attention to premodern, modern, and postmodern thinking on God clears a space in the theologian’s dialogue with literature, in which elements from each of these three “heuristic categories”\(^ {88} \) may inform an exploration of the relationship between uncertainty and faith. One need not approach a story with a theology more modern than pre-modern, more postmodern than modern, and then critique those elements of the story that cohere to the form of thinking deemed of lesser worth. Rather, my theme of the relationship between faith and uncertainty guides the journey, but hopefully allows enough flexibility that the concerns, images, and themes of each story have a place in the dialogue. A literary work enters into this theological discussion as a fragment. It makes

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\(^ {87} \) Tracy, On Naming the Present, 56-57.

\(^ {88} \) Tracy, “Fragments: The Spiritual Situation of Our Times,” 182.
no claim to totality and no claim to possess the final word. Instead, it offers an experience of uncertainty rooted in a specific context of faith and articulated in a concrete, limited narrative. Its very finitude characterizes its form of theological thinking. In short, it takes no stance other than as a fragment.

**Karl Rahner’s Theology of Grace: Towards a Sacramental Imagination**

Thus far, I have discussed Nussbaum’s claim that literature presents its own form of thinking through its positive engagement with emotions. To her, literature provokes the reader (ideally) to reflect upon one’s values and vision of the world, yet this is a reflection that is often no more than tentatively certain due to the ambiguity of emotions. Then, I turned to Tracy’s concept of the fragment in order to clarify my own theological methodology to the novels discussed in Chapters Three and Four, which I will approach as fragments of religious experiences regarding uncertainty’s relationship to faith. Now I will offer a preliminary discussion of sacramentality, a central theme that emerges in my examination of these novels, in order to offer an incarnational principle that serves as an analogue of Christ around which these fragments may be gathered.

By sacramentality, I refer to the sacramental imagination of the novels, that is, the text unfolds a vision of the world in which God’s grace is intertwined with the created world. The characters come to discern this grace through experiences of uncertainty, experiences consistently intertwined with sin and evil. In Chapter Three, I begin to discuss this sacramental imagination as it relates to the novels, but for now, I would like to turn briefly to theologian Karl Rahner’s theology of grace in order to provide a theological frame for these subsequent literary investigations. My reason for turning to
Rahner’s theology lies in his rejection of a reified understanding of grace that considers grace rare and as almost exclusively confined to explicit events of revelation (such as the Incarnation) or to ecclesial practices (such as the sacraments); instead, as in the novels, grace for Rahner may occur anywhere in the world where God communicates God’s self to humanity, that is, whenever the human person experiences one’s transcendence and orientation towards Divine Mystery, even though this transcendence may not be recognized immediately (if ever) as grounded in the Divine Mystery of the God of Christ. Despite the caricature of Rahner’s theology of grace as an “anything goes” mysticism—a caricature that paints this experience of grace as rooted in the hazy category of personal, and very subjective, experience—Rahner grounds his understanding of grace in the Incarnation.

“Christology is the end and beginning of anthropology. And this anthropology, when most thoroughly realized in Christology, is eternally theology,” argues Rahner.89 The human person’s created end, or telos to borrow the Thomistic language, can only be understood fully in the light of Christ. Christ is God’s self-communication to humanity about what it means to be human, specifically, that humans are created to be in an unique relationship to God: humanity is “that which ensues when God’s self-utterance, his [sic] Word, is given out lovingly into the void of god-less nothing. . .If God wills to become non-God, man [sic] comes to be, that and nothing else.”90 One detects the traditional doctrines of the imago Dei as well as the Chalcedon, Christological formula behind


Rahner’s thought. Christ, as both fully human and divine, reveals both who God most fundamentally is, and who we are as created in this image of God. The human person is understood in the light of Christ as a mystery who is created in the image of the ultimate Divine Mystery: “Our whole existence is the acceptance or rejection of the mystery which we are, as we find our poverty referred to the mystery of the fullness...And this mystery is our nature, because the transcendence which we are and which we accomplish brings our existence and God’s existence together: and both as mystery.”\textsuperscript{91} In other words, to have been created in the image of God means that we are a mystery grounded in and oriented towards Divine Mystery.

How does grace relate to this and to my claim above that grace can be active anywhere where God’s self-communication occurs? If the gospel of Christ is to be received, if, that is, human beings possess the capacity to accept the revelation of Christ and the call to live in relationship to God, this means that the human person is fundamentally a receptive agent, that is, one oriented to hear God’s word as revealed in the life of Christ, or a “hearer of the word” to refer to Rahner’s famous phrase from an early work.\textsuperscript{92} In Peter Fritz’s recent book, \textit{Karl Rahner’s Theological Aesthetics}, he notes that Rahner’s turn to the subject is not to be understood as one who controls, such as the caricature of the modern subject, but one who receives.\textsuperscript{93} In other words, grace should not

\textsuperscript{91} Rahner, “Incarnation,” 108.


be understood as a hazy, personal experience conjured by the autonomous individual.\textsuperscript{94} Instead, human beings are created so as to receive the word of God, a reception grounded in God’s self-communication, which is grace. “Grace,” Rahner argues, “is God himself, the communication in which he gives himself to man as the divinizing favour which he is himself…This grace is not thought of as a ‘thing’. It is something that is only ‘put at man’s disposal’ in that act of ‘letting oneself be disposed of’ which is the proper gift of the freest grace, the miracle of love.”\textsuperscript{95}

Because the human person is grounded in the mystery of God with an ultimate end towards this Divine Mystery, Rahner speculates that grace is involved in the entire spiritual life of a human person, and is not simply something added on top of a “pure” nature, as if it was supplemental to a closed, finite system, complete in itself; humanity is created to be “Christocentric” such that God’s free self-communication encompasses the span of human life.\textsuperscript{96} Grace, in other words, determines the created world and is the possibility for the human person to experience the mystery of God in the concrete world of lived existence, but, while grace and nature are distinct, they are nonetheless so tightly intertwined that finite human knowing can never split them apart with certainty in one’s actual existence.\textsuperscript{97}

\textsuperscript{94} For a summary as well as a subsequent rejection of this depiction of Rahner’s theology of grace, see Shannon Craigo-Snell, \textit{Silence, Love, and Death: Saying “Yes” to God in the Theology of Karl Rahner} (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2008).


Since human beings are by their nature oriented by grace *a priori* to receive and accept the word of God, one need not think of experiences of grace then as merely confined to explicit events of institutional Christianity. One notes Rahner’s reworking of Thomas Aquinas’s theology, in which grace prepares the person for any explicit recognition of Christian faith. But Rahner argues further that “acts inspired supernaturally by grace are not confined to the justified. There are stirrings of grace which precede the act of accepting justification in a free act of faith and love. There is also grace outside the Church and its sacraments.”98 One finds a similarity between Tracy’s “limit-experiences” and Rahner’s observations about certain pinnacle moments of a human life, except that Rahner more explicitly claims that these experiences demonstrate human beings’ desire for some kind of fulfillment and transcendence beyond finite existence:

The initial elements of such fulfilment are already present: the experience of infinite longings, of radical optimism, of unquenchable discontent, of the torment of the insufficiency of everything attainable, of the radical protest against death, the experience of being confronted with an absolute love precisely where it is lethally incomprehensible and seems to be silent and aloof, the experience of a radical guilt and of a still abiding hope etc. These elements are in fact tributary to that divine force which impels the created spirit – by grace – to an absolute fulfilment. Hence in them grace is experienced *and* the natural being of man.99

Or to return to the theme that started this discussion of Rahner: the human person experiences mystery, the sense that the created world and the life of one’s own fashioning


lies beyond one’s control and cannot be the ultimate goal of one’s desires. In a small essay entitled “Theology and the Arts,” Rahner notes that the modern ideal is of a human person who strives to comprehend and master human existence and the created world. But to Rahner, such a stance not only diminishes the fullness of the human person, it also misconceives the role of the intellect: “The human reason or intellect must be understood more fundamentally precisely as the capacity for the incomprehensible, as the capacity to be grasped by something which ever eludes our grasp. It must not be understood in the first instance as the capacity for the kind of comprehension which masters the object and subjects it to us.”100 Because the human person has been created as a mystery grounded in and oriented towards Divine Mystery, the essential hallmark of humanity, then, is its potential to receive the word of God communicated via the Gospel, and surrender through grace to the ultimate reality communicated in this word.

Tracy’s observation about Rahner noted above is correct: Despite the common understanding of Rahner as the modern theologian par excellence, his anthropological turn is not about the human subject mastering knowledge, or the subject being the exclusive ground for knowledge; it is instead the opposite of the modern self. As Fritz argues, “God’s incomprehensibility breaks all human attempts at mastery, whether of God or of the creation that comes from God. Rahner’s deployment of God’s incomprehensibility throughout his thinking works against modern subjectivism’s pretensions to all-encompassing mastery.”101 Rahner’s anthropology makes the claim that

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101 Fritz, Karl Rahner’s Theological Aesthetics, 15.
the human person cannot know one’s true end without the reception of God’s revelation, and it is this receptive nature that orients Rahner’s anthropology away from the modern subject. Rahner’s thought recognizes how little the human person can know, or, in other words, how uncertain the self must be in the light of grace.

Essentially, this is the same critique that many Catholic novelists make in their rebellion against modernism. I discuss the issue of modernity and its relationship to the genre of the novel in Chapter Two. For now, I will merely state that Catholic novelists frequently fault the modern self for being too confident, too certain of its vision of the created world. Ironically, they turn to the genre of the novel, a genre that develops during the age of Western modernity, which is increasingly stamped with confidence in the human capacity to order both the self and the natural world apart from the supernatural. Thus the sacramental imaginations of both Rahner and the Catholic novelists make a similar claim about how one should properly understand the self and the created world.

Further, grace is active in both Rahner’s theology and the novels in experiences outside explicit Christian institutions and symbols, experiences conditioned by tragedy and evil. As Stephen J. Duffy notes, Rahner’s critique of the modern autonomous individual’s capacity to master the self is related to his recognition that the individual’s freedom is restricted by the reality of evil. The individual’s propensity towards evil is formed by the actions and histories of others as well as one’s own inability to overcome temptations to sin.102 In other words, evil reveals our limitations. The Christian thereby

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cannot be naïve in the human capacity to overcome sin apart from grace—a similar critique plays out in many of the novels discussed in Chapters Three and Four.

But I wish to avoid the implication that the novels simply perform Rahner’s theology. Instead, the novels often present a sacramental vision of creation, but because of their affective dimension, they also preserve concrete ambiguities that elude conceptual reflections upon the experience of grace. That said, Rahner’s argument that grace is inevitably involved in various areas of human life, whether or not it is consciously recognized, coheres with the sacramental world unfolded in the stories, for characters often experience moments of grace without an immediate or necessarily explicit recognition of supernatural reality. In addition, Rahner’s understanding of grace reveals a narrative conception of faith, since he considers grace as involved throughout the whole of human life. As Richard Lennan observes, faith for Rahner is a “journey into Mystery,” a journey that, like many of our novelists, does not eliminate doubt even for conscious believers; in fact, doubt may serve as a catalyst for further spiritual development. Rahner, Lennan points out, considers “that coming to faith was a lifelong process, even for those within the church. Rahner did not accept that even certainty of faith ensured immunity from doubt, questions, or the possibility, and challenge, of growth.”

In the next chapter, in addition to the historical development of the novel, I also begin to consider the issue of how the novels depict the nature of faith itself. Specifically, I contend that the novels’ depiction of the ebb and flow of faith over the course of life’s

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turbulence does not lend itself to framing faith in terms of intellectual-assent. In other words, faith is not imagined primarily as the assent to a particular conceptual statement of belief(s); rather, faith is primarily existential before it is intellectual in that it presents faith as a journey that involves one’s fundamental orientation towards transcendence. In this sense, Rahner’s theology dialogues well with the novels.

Rahner approved of Balthasar’s famous plea that theology should be a “kniende Theologie (a theology on its knees),” and he added that theology must somehow be “‘mystagogical,’ that is, it should not merely speak about objects in abstract concepts, but it must encourage people really to experience that which is expressed in such concepts.”\(^\text{104}\) Poets, of all varieties, can assist theology in speaking this language of human experience of the divine, and Rahner’s argument returns this discussion to the concept of analogy:

We say generally that a poet speaks in images and metaphors. The possibility of such religious language is ultimately based on the analogy of being, meaning that all realities have an inner connection, refer to each other, are in some way related, and can in the final analysis be understood only when we transcend them, as individual things, in the direction of the whole of reality. This analogia entis enables poets to understand a certain human experience as mysteriously pointing to God. They can present human love in its mysteriousness as an analogous reference to God’s love. Faithfulness, responsibility, resignation to the mystery of life, et cetera are, even when they are mentioned in a context that is not explicitly religious, references to that of which theology expressly speaks.\(^\text{105}\)

Or to put it more succinctly, poets, crafting with an analogical imagination, may portray experiences of God’s grace even in contexts that are not explicitly Christian, experiences


\(^{105}\) Rahner, “Art Against the Horizon of Theology and Piety,” 164, 165.
that portray the human life’s orientation towards Divine Mystery.

**Nussbaum, Tracy, and Rahner: Framing the Dialogue**

The thought of Nussbaum, Tracy, and Rahner methodologically and theologically frame the remainder of my investigation. With Nussbaum, I argue that literature’s affective dimension allows it to engage in an alternate form of reflection from conceptual discourses. This form allows clarification of the reader’s own values, while also granting space to “play” such that the reader may become open to the adoption of the text’s imaginative vision of human life and the world. Nonetheless, this affective hallmark of literature means that ambiguity remains even if the reader attempts a conceptual response. With Tracy, I approach the novels discussed in Chapters Three and Four as fragments of theological thinking. I do not attempt to construct a rigid system; however, as will be clarified in Chapter Three, I argue that stories can be “gathered” (to use Tracy’s term) around the Christocentric pole of sacramentality. This then requires an analogical imagination as well as a theology of grace. Here, Rahner’s thought provides the theological underpinnings for my understanding of grace, even if his name is not on the page.

But since this investigation focuses on a specific literary genre—the novel—and claims that a particular understanding of faith will emerge during my discussions of various Catholic novelists, I would like to turn in the next chapter to two topics: the novel’s historical development and the question of how one understands what faith is.
CHAPTER TWO
THE NOVEL AND FAITH AMIDST MODERNITY

The novel’s historical lineage raises the question of modernity since much of its development occurred concurrently with the 18th century Enlightenment and its nineteenth-century consequences. This lineage is a contested one, for even its origin—whether or not its nascence lies with Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, for example—remains debatable. But one can say with reasonable confidence that the novel has conventionally been regarded as a product of the modern age. It is the progeny of the age most associated with the rise of secularity, yet it becomes, in the hands of many Catholic authors, the medium through which to explore faith. In other words, Catholic novelists use the very artifact of modernity to critique certain fundamental assumptions of modernity: namely modern assumptions that the human self has the innate capacity to order both the self and the world to its own desires apart from supernatural grace.

To see this irony is a bit of an historical journey through the dominant trajectory of modernity, or, as Charles Taylor would say, the conventional understanding of modernity as told by those who subscribe to what Taylor dubs the “subtraction” theory of modernity. As discussed further below, modernity, under this view, develops as religion was subtracted more and more from the dominant intellectual, political, and cultural fields often due to the triumph of the natural sciences and/or human reason. As a result,

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the self becomes the source of meaning instead of divine revelation. This anthropology is criticized in various theological reactions against modernity as problematic since it places human reason above revealed faith. To illustrate this, I turn to Søren Kierkegaard and John Henry Newman as two influential theological critics of modernity. Additionally, my discussions of Kierkegaard and Newman begin an exploration of different ways to think about faith, how, for example, Kierkegaard frames faith differently than Newman despite their shared rejection of nineteenth-century modernity. Finally, I return to Taylor’s thought to present his theory of Western secularity’s “immanent frame” as a way for conceiving the general trend in Western culture towards a closed, disenchanted world, a worldview that is interrogated, if not outright rejected, by most of the Catholic novelists discussed in Chapters Three and Four.

This chapter then provides the foundation for two arguments that emerge in the subsequent discussions of the novels: first, Catholic authors frequently overturn modernity’s belief in the disenchanted world in order to present a sacramental imagination of an enchanted world, one in which grace is intertwined with creation and human life; second, this sacramental imagination frames faith existentially. Uncertainty co-exists with faith such that faith emerges not as absolute, intellectual certainty, but as an imaginative orientation of hope and trust in Divine Mystery.

A fuller explanation of these two claims must wait until I turn specifically to the novels, but for now, I commence with the question: What is the novel?

**The Novel and Modernity**

One immediately encounters difficulties in any historical survey of the novel’s
development, for even the very definition of the novel is contested. Terry Eagleton begins his historical survey, *The English Novel*, with the definition: “A novel is a piece of prose fiction of a reasonable length.” But Eagleton dismisses his own description as “toothless.” As he notes, some novels are not prose, but verse, and a standard for a “reasonable length” remains debatable. The novel instead is an “anti—genre” in that it undermines the concept of genre, while also appropriating elements from other literary forms: “The truth is that the novel is a genre which resists exact definition.2

But even so, Eagleton insists that “the novel from Defoe to Woolf is a product of modernity, and modernity is the period in which we cannot agree even on fundamentals. Our values and beliefs are fragmented and discordant, and the novel reflects this condition.”3 But although we may not be able to agree on “fundamentals,” we can nonetheless claim the novel as the fruit of modernity, a genre that moves and shapes itself predominantly within a “disenchanted” world, regardless of whether it borrows elements from other genres: The novel “portrays a secular, empirical world rather than a mythical or metaphysical one. Its focus is on culture, not Nature or the supernatural.”4 Entailed in this, according to Eagleton, is the novel’s new sense of the human subject, one that is historical and creates in freedom. “Modern subjects, like the heroes of modern novels, make themselves up as they go along.”5 We are not confined to reiterate the values passed down through supposed revelation, family lineage, or cultural tradition. Instead,

“the novel is a sign of our freedom.” We are no longer acting out “the grammar of God.” Indeed, the novel places the human subject front and center as the creator of meaning.\(^6\)

Thus, in Eagleton’s view, the novel develops within a context in which human agency is being reoriented away from premodern conceptions, and towards new conceptions of time, history, nature, and, most particularly, the self. Above all, the self is the one who is free to create meaning without adherence to the past.

Even from this brief description, one observes how the novel represents an historical era that counters many of the assumptions of traditional, Judeo-Christian faith, such as the belief in humanity’s reliance upon supernatural grace for salvation, the necessity to order society according to God’s revelation, the limits of human knowledge, and so forth. In short, Judeo-Christianity insists upon an enchanted world; the narrative of modern secularity counters with a disenchanted one. These different worldviews shape different anthropologies.

Eagleton is hardly alone in his association between the development of the novel and modern conceptions of the secular self who lives in a disenchanted world. As far back as 1920, Georg Lukác claimed, in his *The Theory of the Novel*, that “the novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God.”\(^7\) Characters in a novel predominantly move in a world focused on human activities and cultural forms of meaning. Elizabeth Bennett in Jane Austin’s *Pride and Prejudice* may attend church as all proper young ladies of her social rank do circa 1800, but her struggles play out in a tightly inscribed

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domestic sphere in which grace, the supernatural, or the enchanted play little to no
dominant role. In a sense, Lukác’s claim may be a bit of an exaggeration, for certainly the
characters of the eighteenth and nineteenth century novels move in a Christian culture
and may confront religious concerns—one thinks of the title character of Charlotte
Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* or Dorothea Brooke in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*. But Lukác’s
observation stands in that the development of the novel coincides with the rise of
secularity.

The very term “novel,” argues Patrick Parrinder, suggests modernity in that what
is modern is deemed as what is new, and this new literary form emerges against a
backdrop of social-economic change. A rising middle class economically impacts the
development of literature, for they now have the leisure and the financial means to enjoy
this new genre. Part of this influence is seen in the novel’s focus on the domestic sphere.8
Women writers, who traditionally had little outlet for creative fiction, could work within
this new medium. Authors who often had little access to a traditional classical education
now could create their narratives inside a flexible form that allowed the ordinary, the
everyday to be showcased. “Thanks to this vernacular vein,” observes Robert L. Caserio
and Clement Hawes, “by the later eighteenth century there are more women than men
writing novels…The rise of women writers goes hand in hand with the unfolding of the
novel.”9 From the beginning, the novel potentially provides a space for the subversion of

8 Patrick Parrinder, *Nation & Novel: The English Novel from its Origins to the Present Day* (New York:

Eagleton makes a similar observation, i.e. that one of the innovations of the novel is that the world became
open to those, such as women, to work in a literary medium even though they did not have the conventional
traditional cultural norms.

I say “potentially,” for one has to tread carefully here. If, as Eagleton claims, the novel is indeed an “anti-genre” in its capacity to synthesize elements from other genres while still reflecting a subject-centered, modern ethos, then one can only speak in broad strokes. The danger, as the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin recognized, is to define the novel based on a single kind of novel, thus establishing a too-limiting definition. Instead, the novel’s form is protean, a “genre in the making.” For Bakhtin, the novel is above all what is new; thereby, the novel as a genre may be a product of modernity, but elements can be traced as far back as the ancient Greeks. Still, Bakhtin asserts, a paradigm shift occurred in the Renaissance that altered how Western culture perceived time and the self’s relationship to time; this in turn alters conceptions of human agency.10

Bakhtin’s discussion of the novel occurs intertwined with his theory of language,11 but it is not so much his overall linguistic theory that concerns us here, but classical education. See Eagleton, The English Novel, 20. Concerning the rise of the middle-class as a consumer of novels, Ian Watt, in his class study, argues that the reading public of eighteenth-century was still relatively small compared to the general population, but the increase “even if it was of comparatively minor proportions, may have altered the centre of gravity of the reading public sufficiently to place the middle class as a whole in a dominating position for the first time.” See Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), 48.


11 A novel, for Bakhtin, demonstrates “polyglossia” and “heteroglossia” in language. “Polyglossia” is the way in which various languages can influence and animate each other, a linguistic cross-breeding so to speak. This is distinct from “monoglossia,” in which language operates in a more closed framework that limits or blocks the influence of other languages. Meanwhile, “heteroglossia” describes how language is in one sense fixed—requiring some system in order to function—while also possessing plasticity in that its various contexts allow fluidity and the potential for additional dimensions of meaning. See Bakhtin’s
rather the way in which the novel manifests common characteristic features of modernity. Bakhtin often articulates his theory of the novel in a comparison with other genres, particularly the epic. He finds three common features of the epic: the subject may be a past national epic; the source may be a national tradition, i.e. not something of personal experience; and there is “an absolute epic distance” between contemporary reality and the world of the epic. These three features involve the epic’s relationship to the past, a relationship that is communal in its conception. “The world of the epic,” believes Bakhtin, “is a national heroic past: it is a world of ‘beginnings’ and ‘peak times’ in the national history, a world of fathers and of founders of families, a world of ‘firsts’ and ‘bests.’” That the content of the epic occurs in the past is not the salient point; rather, “the formally constitutive feature of the epic as a genre is rather the transferral of a represented world into the past, and the degree to which this world participates in the past.” The epic is the medium through which one may speak about a past which would be otherwise inaccessible.¹²

The epic therefore portrays the source of the good as the past, an orientation that renders memory as the source for creativity. The very structure of an epic hinges on this emphasis that the past grounds meaning, for an epic is a fixed genre, an “absolutely completed and finished generic form” passed on by tradition that defines how an author is to work. Further, this epic past is the “absolute past.” It creates a wall between the contemporary and its own times, or more precisely, a wall between when this epic age

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occurs and everything that follows. The epic itself establishes a boundary, and “to destroy this boundary is to destroy the form of the epic as a genre. But precisely because it is walled off from all subsequent times, the epic past is absolute and complete. It is as closed as a circle; inside it everything is finished, already over.” Because of this wall between the self’s experience and this communal past, there is an “absolute epic distance”: “The epic world is constructed in the zone of an absolute distanced image, beyond the sphere of possible contact with the developing, incomplete and therefore re-thinking and re-evaluating present.” Although Bakhtin focuses on the epic, he claims that many other premodern genres share a similar evaluation of time, a respect for tradition, and “hierarchical distance.” The contemporary age in these premodern genres cannot compare to this idealized, revered past.

In contrast, the novel presents a new relationship to the past, regardless of whether the content occurs in the author’s own age or not. “The novel, from the very beginning, developed as a genre that had at its core a new way of conceptualizing time. The absolute past, tradition, hierarchical distance played no role in the formation of the novel as a genre.” The novel is the world of one’s self and of one’s contemporaries. If memory serves as the fount of creativity in the epic, the novel allows present-day experience to shape its discourse. But since the present is open-ended, one that may be oriented towards the future as much as the past, this gives the novel a unique plasticity: “The novel comes into contact with the spontaneity of the inconclusive present; this is what keeps the genre from congealing. The novelist is drawn toward everything that is

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not yet completed.” In this new relationship to time one does not necessarily see the ancient past as idealized and unable to be surpassed. Instead, the past is now viewed and judged from the perspective of the present: “The present, in its all [sic] openendedness, taken as a starting point and center for artistic and ideological orientation, is an enormous revolution in the creative consciousness of man.”

This new conception of time grants a new form of human agency in the novel. “The individual in the high distanced genres is an individual of the absolute past and of the distanced image. As such he is a fully finished and completed being…There is not the slightest gap between his authentic essence and its external manifestation.” For instance, in epics, characters are defined and limited by their contexts and destinies. There is no gap between the character’s external behavior and the implied internal psychology. In contrast, a novel allows space for an author to create tension between a character’s external actions and internal beliefs: “One of the basic internal themes of the novel is precisely the theme of the inadequacy of a hero’s fate and situation to the hero himself. The individual is either greater than his fate, or less than his condition as a man.”

Because the world of the novel is more open-ended, and the characters more ambiguous, the novel grants greater space for uncertainty than the epic. As Bakhtin acknowledges, the reality constructed by a novel is just one possible reality amongst others. The past is no longer the standard by which to judge the present. Instead, a

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protagonist of a novel finds the self open to various possibilities. In other words, human agency moves with a greater degree of freedom, which in turn may grant greater ambiguity and uncertainty.

Many of Bakhtin’s thoughts on the novel—its focus on the self-ordering individual and its emphasis on the present more than the past—dovetail with insights offered by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*. Yet, Taylor takes us further with this question of modernity, for he gives us a contemporary perspective of modernity on a much grander scale. As a result, one can situate the novel within a greater historical context, for he demonstrates that various features of the novel—such as its focus on the individual who moves in a natural, disenchanted world—are hallmarks of modernity.

**Taylor and the Modern, Buffered Self**

Taylor traces the rise of secularity and modernity from a new conception of human agency that emerges in Western culture beginning in the medieval period. He argues that this development is often too narrowly framed as “subtraction stories.” In these historical narratives, science, human reason, or both develop sufficiently during the modern period such that religion becomes increasingly subtracted from society, at least amongst intellectual elites. For example, religion becomes unnecessary since science reveals religion as the great illusion that creates a false image of both ourselves and the surrounding world.

Taylor finds the subtraction narratives insufficient for at least two reasons. First, it assumes, without a prior justification, that a naturalistic account of the world would necessarily lead to the diminishment of religion. Second, it does not accurately represent
history. For instance, far from evolutionary theory creating a new order of nature that thereby supplants the religious view, evolutionary theory enters into a culture that has already begun to view nature as self-sufficient, and can be explained (at least once the moment of creation is left behind) without a need for God or the supernatural. This attitude towards the natural world begins not with modern science, but dates at least as far back as the Aristotelian revival of the Middle Ages, paradigmatically found in the thought of Thomas Aquinas, in which creation begins to be seen as ordered towards its own perfection. Later thinkers, such as William of Ockham, acerbate this trend even while rebelling against Thomistic scholasticism. Ockham’s nominalism rejects the notion that a conception of the good can be grounded in the supposed ends of nature since this limits God’s sovereignty, but nominalism’s emphasis on God’s transcendence over the world further divides the natural from the supernatural. In other words, key developments of modernity begin in earlier Christian forms of thinking that were not necessarily seen as a threat to a belief in God. Instead, Taylor argues, modern secularity and all its hallmarks—including modern science—emerge because of new understandings of the self.\textsuperscript{17}

In this new framework, there is a shift from the self as “porous” to one that is “buffered.” The “porous” self, the premodern self, occurs when there is no clear boundary between the self and the enchanted world. In an enchanted world, there is a “whole gamut of forces” which impose meaning on us, from demons to “charged” objects (such as sacramentals) to the cosmos. Time is experienced as both horizontal—the

\textsuperscript{17} Taylor, \textit{A Secular Age}, 4, 14, 15, 22, 26, 91, 284, 378, 773.
normal sequence of everyday experience—and vertical, in the sense of being oriented
towards God. In other words, there is both secular and sacred time. Additionally, the
porous self believes that the entire cosmos is enchanted and as such points in some
fashion to God. Thus the porous self seeks meaning from what is external to its own
mind.\textsuperscript{18}

In contrast, the modern self is a “buffered” self, which reconfigures one’s
conception of time, relationship to the world, and, above all, one’s source for meaning.
First, in regards to time, Taylor sees a fundamental shift in the conception of time with
the arrival of modernity similar to Bakhtin; modernity increasingly emphasizes
horizontal, secular time over a vertical, sacred time. This new conception of time is
closely related to a new conception of the cosmos. Here, again, one finds Taylor’s
annoyance with the standard, subtraction theory, that is, that science discovers that the
world is ordered according to natural laws and this discovery thereby reduces and
eventually replaces the need for religion. He notes that long before the rise of modern
atheism, specifically the nineteenth-century version of unbelief, the renaissance thinkers
have already become distrustful of the enchanted world view, and begin to view nature as
self-sustaining. One need not study nature only because it points to God, but also because
one finds it interesting for its own sake: “The great invention of the West,” argues Taylor,
“was that of an immanent order in Nature, whose working could be systematically
understood and explained on its own terms…” The Reformation—with its rebellion
against certain late medieval pieties—accelerates this disenchantment of the world. But

\textsuperscript{18} Taylor, A Secular Age, 25-26, 32-35, 55-60.
again, this is not seen in its time as necessarily leading to unbelief; this early form of humanism is, after all, a Christian humanism. But these Christian forms of thinking eventually take a secular turn.¹⁹

Taylor argues that the definitive, secular turn occurs with the development of an exclusive humanism, one that postulates the “buffered self” as the source of meaning capable of ordering the world around it. It is this exclusive humanism— with the buffered self at the center—that gives the greatest impetus to the rise of modern unbelief. Again, this rejects the standard subtraction theory in favor of an insistence that a new anthropology, focused upon a new conception of human agency, produces contemporary, secular society. We move from a more communal conception of society, based on a religious heritage, to one centered on the individual. The buffered self does not live in fear of demons or magic, but sees itself as sufficient to achieve human flourishing. This includes a new moral ordering in which “civilization” is ordered around a paradigm of the mutual benefit of individuals. This moral ordering includes the interactions of one buffered self with another, as well as the discipline of the self’s own instinctual, physical desires. This new ordering of civilization emphasizes discipline and reason built within an epistemology in which societies’ purposes are fulfilled according to the materials of nature (i.e. technology), and made possible due to a rational, instrumental knowledge of nature. Further, the individual lives aware that this ordering, and indeed meaning in general, originates and resides in the human mind. Unlike the porous self who seeks meaning externally, the buffered self creates the criteria by which one is to live aware

¹⁹ Taylor, A Secular Age, 15, 28, 71, 77, 90, 124.
that meaning resides in the human mind. The buffered self now believes that order is defined solely as a subject of human flourishing, not necessarily to lead us to God, and that the power for this ordering comes from our own capacity and not from any divine origins.\footnote{Taylor, \textit{A Secular Age}, 21, 27, 32, 38-39, 84, 135, 142, 157, 294-295.}

In other words, a new “social imaginary” develops, a term that suggests the various ways in which people imagine social existence, how they relate to each other, their expectations, and the underlying norms of those expectations: it is “the way that we collectively imagine, even pretheoretically, our social life in the contemporary Western world.” For us today, our social imaginary is a complicated secularity, one defined by a plurality in which various forms of belief and unbelief reside uneasily side by side. Taylor argues that secularity is a condition, and it is not “coterminous with exclusive humanism.” In other words, secularity is not defined solely on the basis of an exclusive humanism. However, “a secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable; or better, it falls within the range of an imaginable life for masses of people. This is the crucial link between secularity and a self-sufficing humanism.” To live in a secular age is one in which unbelief and the buffered self is recognized as a possible good. Thus, secularity in this sense arises when a purely self-sufficient form of human living becomes a viable option.\footnote{Taylor, \textit{A Secular Age}, 18-20, 146, 171, 295.}

But like Bakhtin’s observation regarding this new self in the novel, Taylor’s modern, buffered self, who lives amidst a plurality of possible worldviews, may
experience uncertainty and what Taylor calls “the Malaises of Modernity.” Various factors can render the buffered self uncertain, such as the flatness of the disenchanted world, the threat that the world lacks inherent meaning, or that any meaning we may bestow is fragile at best. Plurality means any form of belief—from religious belief to atheism—remains at best tentative: “We cannot help looking over our shoulder from time to time, looking sideways, living our faith also in a condition of doubt and uncertainty.”

This echoes what is implicit in Bakhtin’s conception of the modern self. Taylor observes that various responses to this new buffered self swing between optimism and pessimism. Eagleton notes a similar trajectory in literature. Earlier realistic novels of the nineteenth century exhibit greater confidence in the self’s ability to discern reality, to distinguish between objectivity and subjectivity. But towards the end of the nineteenth century through the First World War, the novel shifts from the comic to the tragic predominantly, and the subjective self is increasingly unreliable: “What the modernist novel tends to give us instead is a kind of empty signifier of a totality which is no longer possible,” he observes. In short, the modernist novel portrays the fragmentation of the world.

The advantage of Taylor’s account of modernity and secularity is that it is polyphonic. It eschews a simple account that sees unbelief as inevitably replacing belief with the advance of human knowledge. This view tends to present one optimistic version of unbelief, perhaps based either on human reason or the triumph of science. What is lost is the plurality of ways in which unbelief can be lived out. On the other side, Taylor’s

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22 Taylor, A Secular Age, 10, 11, 302-309.

account also recognizes that not all reactions against secularity occur through an entrenched religious dogmatism. Both belief and unbelief can exist side by side, perhaps even in the same person. But with this plurality, uncertainty has fertile ground to grow, and becomes nearly impossible to eradicate.

This polyphonic modernity should be kept in mind in the following discussion of Newman and Kierkegaard, for both thinkers battle against a confidence in human reason that renders nineteenth-century rationalism superior to revelation. But this is only one strand of modernity as Taylor traces it. At the heart of Newman’s and Kierkegaard’s rebellion against modernity lies an insistence that modernity conceives the self incorrectly and hence conceives faith incorrectly. In other words, their critiques—although very different from one another—reveal a similar attack on modernity’s conception of human agency.

**Faith and Modernity in Newman and Kierkegaard**

“In the nineteenth century,” Taylor observes, “one might say, unbelief comes of age.” In other words, unbelief acquires a depth and complexity such that it leads to a fundamental shift in the social imaginary. People in western societies begin to accept unbelief without much questioning. There is an “anthropocentric turn” in that “God’s ordering presence begins to fade. The sense begins to arise that we can sustain the order on our own.” Again, it becomes common in certain segments of Western society, to assume that humanity establishes all meaning.²⁴

On at least one point, Newman and Kierkegaard stand together—neither accepts

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²⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 374-76.
either the individual self or the larger social ordering as the primary ground for meaning. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries, much thinking about God occurs under various strands of the Enlightenment heritage. Kant represents one strand of this influence in which reason (at least reason as conceived under Enlightenment paradigms) becomes the framework to evaluate religion. In his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* as well as *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant assumes a universal reason such that even God is reasonable, and this reason grounds morality as well as guides one’s understanding of the Christian tradition. Schleiermacher, who frames religion as the feeling of absolute dependence, and other theologians of the various forms of Romanticism may have sought to bridge the gap between reason and the affections, but they still stand under Enlightenment paradigms of subjectivity. Meanwhile, Feuerbach famously rendered Christian truth-claims as mere projections of human self-consciousness. In contrast, Kierkegaard and Newman offer a different anthropology, one that recognizes the limits of human reason and the necessity of revelation. Both thereby argue that human reason is incomplete on its own and unable to be the ultimate ground for meaning or the evaluation of revelation. For them, faith is superior to reason.

Yet Newman and Kierkegaard offer more to this project than simply a critique of modernity’s anthropology; they demonstrate two different conceptions of faith that will be valuable in subsequent discussions of how the various Catholic novelists present faith. For now, let me present the issue interrogatively: How is faith handled in the novels’ narratives? In other words, how is it understood to be and what does it involve? My turn to Newman and Kierkegaard thus lays the foundation for Chapters Three and Four.
Both thinkers work out of particular ecclesial traditions. For Kierkegaard, this tradition is, of course, Lutheranism, despite his scathing critique of Danish cultural Christianity. Meanwhile, Newman eventually comes to Catholicism, but only after journeys through early nineteenth-century English Evangelical Christianity and high Anglicanism. In other words, although each may have been atypical for their day, there is an historical lineage to their thought.

In his book, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For*, Avery Dulles observes that, broadly speaking, the Catholic tradition has tended to define faith in a framework of intellectual assent. One finds this paradigmatically in Thomas Aquinas, who articulated faith as a habit of the intellect through which eternal life begins so that the intellect can assent to truths impossible to reason alone. Thomas’ conception influenced the first Vatican Council’s formulation of faith in which the cognitive dimension of faith was emphasized, but not so as to exclude other characteristics of faith such as trust. However, faith as a form of trust in God’s word, Dulles claims, is more frequently emphasized in Protestant theologies. Here, a paradigmatic exemplar would be Luther’s theology. Faith for Luther is “fiducial,” that is, “an act of trust or confidence” in God’s grace that God will fulfill God’s promise revealed in Christ. Dulles considers this model to be more existential than the intellectual-assent model. But he also clarifies that there are additional models of faith, and that various characteristics of one model may be blended into another. Vatican II, according to Dulles, articulates dimensions of faith that align to both the existential and intellectual-assent models. My concern is not to address all of these issues here other than to note Dulles’ claim that traditionally Protestant theologies tend
towards existential models of faith, whereas Catholic theologies tend towards intellectual-assent models.\textsuperscript{25}

That said, one needs to reiterate that these categories and labels are not hermetically sealed from one another. After all, Protestant communities may claim that an intellectual assent to certain doctrines (such as Jesus’ atonement on the cross for humanity’s sinfulness) is necessary for proper faith. Likewise, much Catholic theology can be cast as existential. For instance, long before he became pope, Joseph Ratzinger argues that “faith in the Christian sense is not primarily a mysterious system of knowledge, but an existential attitude, a fundamental decision about the direction of life,” a fundamental decision that can be understood as “trust.”\textsuperscript{26}

Thus my discussion of Newman and Kierkegaard is merely to provide a general reflection upon two contrasting approaches to faith. In other words, despite some similarities, Newman and Kierkegaard cast faith in fundamentally different frames. Newman demonstrates the intellectual-assent model of faith whereas Kierkegaard’s model is firmly existential. This is not to reduce these two thinkers to caricatures. Newman certainly attends to the affective and imaginative dimensions of faith—a concern he shares with existential models; likewise, Kierkegaard acknowledges that Christianity involves doctrine—characteristics more aligned with the intellectual-assent model. My discussion then merely intends to observe how different typologies of faith


\textsuperscript{26} Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), \textit{Faith and the Future} (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 35.
influence how the believer understands the nature of faith itself.

Newman recalls in his *Apologia pro Vita Sua* that, prior to his conversion to Catholicism, his participation in the Oxford Movement was to combat the “liberalism” of the day. By “liberalism,” Newman describes a tendency in early nineteenth-century philosophy to posit human reason as the judge over revelation and religious tradition; as he bluntly states, “Rationalism is the great evil of the day.”27 Newman makes clear in his writings that he is not antagonistic to the appropriate use of reason. In his *Oxford University Sermons*, Newman describes reason as a tool for analysis, but it cannot be the motive for action itself. In contrast, faith can be a principle for action. Reason, of course, is often necessary for faith, such as to articulate proper doctrine in order to combat heresies, but it does not form the basis of faith. In his age, however, reason has usurped the primacy of faith such that faith becomes subject to reason’s judgment in religious and moral matters. This attitude forgets the necessity of revelation as well as the necessity that humility is needed to accept revelation. In short, one does not doubt the good of the intellect, but one should be aware of its limitations.28

Newman’s call for a more limited role of reason reveals a different anthropology than is often found in nineteenth-century modernity. The confidence in humanity’s self-

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ordering of the world and civilization as described by Taylor, a self-ordering
acknowledged in Bakhtin’s conception of the novel, is greeted with great skepticism by
Newman. Part of Newman’s complaint is that this strand of modernity—and one needs to
keep in mind that this is only one strand—creates a split between the reasoning mind and
the deeper imaginative and affective dimensions of a human life. Faith, in order to be
received properly, requires a proper heart. “For is not this the error, the common and fatal
error, of the world, to think itself a judge of Religious Truth without preparation of
heart?” he asks as an Anglican in the Oxford University Sermons.29 Further, as Daniel
Patrick L. Huang notes, Newman is rebelling against the prevalence in much nineteenth-
century English thought that upheld the right of “private judgment,” a belief grounded by
confidence in reason.30 An anthropology that stresses private judgment fails to recognize
the humility necessary to receive revelation.

This attitude of humility involves obedience; here, Newman’s thought harmonizes
with an intellectual-assent model of faith. In his never completed, An Essay on the
Development of Christian Doctrine, written just prior to his conversion to Catholicism,
Newman states that “the essence of all religion is authority and obedience.”31 Newman
justifies this sweeping argument in part because he considers obedience to one’s


30 Huang observes that Newman’s rejection of “private judgment” as the basis for religious faith is involved in his transition from Evangelical Christianity to a high orthodox Anglicanism. Daniel Patrick L. Huang, S.J. “‘Private Judgment’ in the Anglican Writings of John Henry Newman (1824-45)” (PhD diss., Catholic University of America, 1996), 6, 78.

conscience as the essence of natural religion.\textsuperscript{32} That said, Newman is not unaware that there may be a conflict between one’s sincere conscience and ecclesial authority,\textsuperscript{33} nonetheless, Newman’s thought emphasizes the role of obedience and authority in the Christian’s life. Certain passages of Newman’s work highlight the importance of obedience in religious affairs, such as his insistence in the Apologia that in matters of discipline, the believer must submit to ecclesial authority.\textsuperscript{34} But Newman’s attitude towards ecclesial tradition did not begin with his conversion to Catholicism. He recalls that “From the age of fifteen, dogma has been the fundamental principle of my religion: I know no other religion; I cannot enter into the idea of any other sort of religion; religion, as a mere sentiment, is to me a dream and a mockery.”\textsuperscript{35} One hears a rebuke of Schleiermacher’s conception of religion as a feeling of absolute dependence. Again, Newman rejects the assumption that humans possess a right to private judgment in religious matters. Revealed religion to Newman is primarily the assent to dogma passed on through an ecclesial tradition—a belief Newman held as an Evangelical Christian, a high Anglican, and throughout his life as a Catholic.

But this assent, although it occurs with an attitude of obedience, is not blind

\textsuperscript{32} Newman held to this belief throughout his life. As a late example, see his discussion of natural religion in An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent, with an introduction by Nicholas Lash (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 303-17.

\textsuperscript{33} See, for example, his famous claim to the Duke of Norfolk: “Certainly, if I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts, (which indeed does not seem quite the thing) I shall drink—to the Pope, if you please,—still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards.” See John Henry Newman, “A Letter Addressed to the Duke of Norfolk on Occasion of Mr. Gladstone’s Recent Expostulation” (section 5), Newman Reader, accessed January 9, 2015, http://www.newmanreader.org/works/anglicans/volume2/gladstone/section5.html.

\textsuperscript{34} Newman, Apologia, 230.

\textsuperscript{35} Newman, Apologia, 61.
assent. In his famous later work, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, Newman argues that faith is “reasonable” even if it does not rely purely on Enlightenment reason. One can make a “real assent” to a proposition and believe with reasonable certitude that this proposition is true. Newman distinguishes “real assent” from “notional assent,” which he considers to be similar to an inference in that both acts are notional mental acts; that is, notional thinking relates to conceptual abstractions. In this, notional assent and inference are similar, but the former depends on the unconditional assent to a proposition, whereas the latter is conditional in that it logically deduces with the conditional acceptance of its starting premises. Theology, since it engages in speculation based on premises unconditionally accepted, is notional assent.\(^\text{36}\)

In contrast, a true act of religion is real assent. Such an assent is not an abstraction, but one that engages the whole person. Dulles notes that for faith “to be a real assent, involving conviction and commitment, its objects must be such as to ‘kindle devotion, rouse the passions, and attach the affections.’ Even though the believer does not directly experience the contents of faith, those contents must be presented in a concrete way accessible to the imagination.”\(^\text{37}\) In other words, this real assent must come from concrete, lived experience, for the concrete exerts a stronger influence upon a person’s life than a mental abstraction.

Newman argues that a concrete experience which impresses upon a person that a proposition is real, often occurs, for instance, under the authority of another. A person


often does not place one’s trust in logic or the raw data, but in that of others. Through the imagination, real assent may spur a person to act, although this is not necessarily the case. In contrast, notional assent and inference usually do not turn to action. Formal logical sequence is not sufficient to become certain of something concrete, and thereby grounds for a real assent. Instead it is the “cumulation of probabilities, independent of each other, arising out of the nature and circumstances of the particular case which is under review.” These antecedent reasons or probabilities are highly contextual, and they prompt a real assent through a person’s “Illative Sense”: “the sole and final judgment on the validity of an inference in concrete matter is committed to the personal action of the ratiocinative faculty, the perfection or virtue of which I have called the Illative Sense, a use of the word ‘sense’ parallel to our use of it in ‘good sense,’ ‘common sense,’ a ‘sense of beauty’…” In other words, it is a person’s practical judgment honed through experience that considers whether or not a proposition should be considered unconditionally true:

Theological conclusions, it is true, have often been made on antecedent reasonings; but then it must be recollected that theological reasoning professes to be sustained by a more than human power, and to be guaranteed by a more than human authority…a number of antecedent probabilities, confirming each other, may make it a duty in the judgment of a prudent man, not only to act as if a statement were true, but actually to accept and believe it. This is not unfrequently instanced in our dealings with others, when we feel it right, in spite of our misgivings, to oblige ourselves to believe their honesty. And in all these delicate questions there is constant call for the exercise of the Illative Sense.  

As John R. Connolly observes, “As in human certitude, informal reason and the illative sense demonstrate that it is rational for a person, in the act of faith, to accept things that one cannot fully understand and that go beyond the logical force of the available

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evidence.”

The illative sense, due to antecedent probabilities and reasons and under the influence of the moral authority of others, may prompt a movement from a notional assent to a real assent. In terms of Christianity, even if one cannot understand a particular authority, one can at least assent to the authority of the Church, an assent, Newman claims, that is real. Newman himself demonstrates this act of obedience. He notes in his *Apologia* that he did not believe in transubstantiation until he became Catholic. But once he became Catholic, he could make his assent out of obedience due to his belief that God speaks through the Church. Newman of course believes that submission to the Church is first and foremost the means to submit to God. But this submission to God occurs, as Mark McIntosh notes, because of “the believer’s sense that Someone is there, trying to communicate.” In other words, this assent is experiential, and thereby affective and imaginative. Nonetheless, the practical result of this, as Newman’s own example of transubstantiation demonstrates, is that one assents completely to the Church’s doctrines since one assents to the Church as the infallible authority in matters of faith.

Thus, this assent to the Church’s authority eliminates doubt and uncertainty. A


42 Dulles, “From Images to Truth,” 260.

believer, argues Newman, “cannot be both inside and outside of the Church at once. It is merely common sense to tell him that, if he is seeking, he has not found. If seeking includes doubting, and doubting excludes believing, then the Catholic who sets about inquiring, thereby declares that he is not a Catholic. He has already lost faith.” Newman qualifies this strong statement with conceding that individuals certainly display inconsistencies in their behavior, and that some may act as if they have doubts, although they do not truly doubt. This would appear to many contemporary believers as a remarkably uncritical lens to consider the relationship between faith and uncertainty. Newman’s stance is perhaps best summed up in his famous line, “Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt…” One should keep in mind, though, that doubt carries such a negative connotation for Newman, who lived in an age in which doubt often meant skepticism towards religious truth-claims oriented in the direction of unbelief. In unpublished papers from 1853, Newman claims that doubt is not a natural condition of the mind but is an act of the will, and thereby doubt in regards to revelation must be a sin. Further, when Newman speaks of certitude regarding faith, grace is always involved. Nonetheless, Connolly observes that “Newman primarily wrote the Grammar of Assent to demonstrate that the certitude of divine faith of ordinary Catholics, Catholic Divine Faith, was rational, even though it was not based on strictly scientific

44 Newman, Grammar of Assent, 159.
45 Newman, Apologia, 214.
demonstration”; indeed, this certitude is “analogous to the process by which the mind arrives at certitude in matters of concrete human truths.” For Newman, to have certitude is to be aware that one unconditionally regards something as true: “Certitude, as I have said, is the perception of a truth with the perception that it is a truth, or the consciousness of knowing...” Although a disposition of the mind, certitude is not an abstract, intellectual maneuver, but is a “felt” condition. Personal circumstances determine when assents develop into certitudes. Once attained, certitudes endure, whereas assents may change. Certitudes, believes Newman, are “the highest quality of religious faith.”

To bring Newman’s version of the intellectual-assent model of faith into dialogue with literature is not to compare points of doctrine, but to consider contrasting typologies for faith. Certain features of Newman’s thought would appear to coincide with Nussbaum’s observations with how the novel “thinks.” Newman focuses on the importance of the concrete, the moral authority of others on how humans shape their lives, the importance of the affections and the imagination, and so forth. But very few of the novels discussed in Chapters Three and Four present characters in which assents to doctrinal propositions resolve uncertainty. For some characters, certain doctrines may be influential, but the experience of uncertainty may prompt them to reevaluate their previous understandings of faith. Even in cases where characters are unbelievers, and uncertainty prompts one towards faith, this uncertainty rarely leads one to make a specific

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assent which could be framed primarily under the intellectual-assent model. Instead, as will be demonstrated, conversion is fundamentally imaginative in nature.

Perhaps because Newman was such a careful thinker, he felt confident to declare that one could arrive eventually at a stance that could be accurately described as certitude. Nicholas Lash notes that “Newman never ‘leapt’ anywhere in his life;” instead, “we grow, rather than leap, into conviction.”49 In terms of literature, a novel could mirror Lash’s take on Newman if it depicts the slow growth of faith rather than a sudden leap. On the other hand, novels often feature dramatic events that jar characters out of complacency.

In either case, if Lash is correct that Newman does not leap into faith, this certainly contrasts him with his Danish contemporary Kierkegaard. Sylvia Walsh points out that Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous Johannes Climacus would argue that Christian truth “can only be believed through a leap of faith requiring the highest pitch of passion or subjectivity on the part of the believer.” For Climacus, the greatest challenge for the individual Christian is to acquire and maintain the necessary passion to live as a Christian.50 This passion is a feature of Kierkegaard’s existential model of faith. “In Kierkegaard’s thought,” notes Walsh, “the term ‘existential’ always connotes the concrete or historical actualization of those factors that are essential to the formation of


human personality or the qualitative life of the individual.” Kierkegaard’s conception of faith focuses upon the individual who manifests this faith in their life; consequently, Kierkegaard shares little of Newman’s ecclesial and dogmatic concerns.

Before proceeding further, however, I should note the issue of the pseudonymous authors in Kierkegaard’s work. Kierkegaard himself requests that quotations from the pseudonymous works be attributed to the pseudonymous author, not to Kierkegaard directly. I will tend to follow this request, although my concern here is not so much to determine Kierkegaard’s specific opinions on faith, but rather to consider the kind of thinking about faith that his work manifests, more specifically, the manner in which Kierkegaard casts faith in a more existential framework than Newman; this difference alters the relationship between faith and uncertainty.

First, though, let me note two areas of convergence between Newman and Kierkegaard. Like Newman, Kierkegaard criticizes the tendency of philosophy in his day to place rational understanding above faith and rejects the idea that reason apart from faith can evaluate the truth-claims of Christianity. As C. Stephen Evans observes, Kierkegaard rejects the idea that human reason is essentially all-knowing in that there is theoretically no ultimate mystery. The incarnation cannot be considered as knowledge in the Enlightenment sense of a truth grasped based on objective evidence. Our sinful nature often blinds us to the limitations of reason; in contrast, faith prompts reason to recognize

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52 See the supplement to Søren Kierkegaard, The Point of View: On My Work as an Author; The Point of View for my Work as an Author; Armed Neutrality, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard’s Writings, vol. 22 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 288.
its own limits. In the signed work, Upbuilding Discourses, Kierkegaard describes faith as “the highest good,” one all are capable of possessing. Meanwhile, in Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments, Climacus notes that the understanding wants to dispose of faith as the thing of highest importance. But speculative thought cannot know what Christianity is, for it turns it into an abstraction, and claims that one can understand Christianity without truly being Christian. It may roam too freely such that it even begins to speculate on Christianity’s presuppositions. In other words, it ceases to speculate within Christianity—that is from the foundation of faith—but places itself above faith and sees itself empowered to critique faith. One sees a similar dynamic in Fear and Trembling, perhaps Kierkegaard’s most famous work, in which Johannes de Silentio considers Abraham’s act of faith—his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac—transcending the universal-ethical; that is, it transcends what conceptual thought can determine as universal morality. Otherwise, Abraham is indeed a murderer and not the Father of Faith. Thus Kierkegaard, along with Newman, casts faith as higher than reason.

Related to their shared belief on the primacy of faith over reason is their shared

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insistence on the importance of the imagination. However, the topic of the imagination immediately illustrates their difference. For Newman, the imagination can stimulate a person to turn a real assent into concrete action. But again, Newman’s dogmatic concerns must be remembered, for, to Newman, religion is when a real assent is given to a dogma which the imagination apprehends as real. So imagination can be a catalyst for action, but it is also involved in moving the believer to give a real assent. Although Kierkegaard would agree that imagination is bound up with the movement towards faith and with manifesting this faith in action, imagination is always oriented towards an existential framework for faith. Further, Kierkegaard’s understanding of the imagination is connected to his critique of Romantic poetry and aesthetics. The aesthetic stage is the first of his famous three stages: the aesthetic, ethical, and ultimately the religious.

As Walsh clarifies, in his movement between the three stages, Kierkegaard is not so much abandoning aesthetics as reframing it: “In the writings of Kierkegaard ‘the aesthetic’ is a major term signifying that condition and stage in human life where every human being begins and in which some remain, living in an immediate or reflective manner on the basis of natural inclinations and capacities in an effort to gain satisfaction and enjoyment through the senses.” Since he considers the aesthetic as the stage in which the individual focuses on sensual desires and inclinations, Kierkegaard recasts aesthetics to give subjectivity primacy over a detached objectivity. In Either/Or, for example, the

58 Connolly, John Henry Newman, 84.
59 Dulles, “From Images to Truth,” 261.
emphasis is upon what would be beautiful in life rather than in an artwork. Kierkegaard intends to move the individual out of the sensual stage into one oriented towards faith. Walsh notes that Kierkegaard’s movement from the aesthetics to the ethical to the religious is often regarded as showing his rejection of poetry. But this is only one strand of the poetic in his imagination. Another strand regards faith itself as a “work of art” when faith is understood poetically, which therefore involves elements of the aesthetic-poetic in the ethical-religious life. Kierkegaard believes that to live poetically in a religious sense is to regard the basic worth of the individual that is affirmed by Christianity. There is an ultimate purpose, unlike the random wanderings of the Romantic poets, that defines how one realizes the self. One’s existence is not simply to become whatever one wishes—a clear rejection of modernity’s emphasis on the human as self-determining—but to become a particular thing, specifically, ourselves as we were originally intended to become by God. The Christian life is “to be poetically composed”:

“For Kierkegaard, then,” observes Walsh, “living poetically is a matter not of self-creation but of self-development in accordance with one’s given nature.”

Thus, our two thinkers possess divergent concerns surrounding the imagination, and this in turn involves sharply contrasting frameworks for faith. Newman’s intellectual assent model, at least ideally, involves the imaginative and affective dimensions of a person; nonetheless, this assent is ultimately oriented towards assent of dogma based on trust in ecclesial authority. In sharp contrast, in Kierkegaard’s work, whether one can

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60 Walsh, Living Poetically, 6, 19, 100-01.

61 Walsh, Living Poetically, 2-3, 56-57.
assent or not to a doctrine is not the decisive factor in whether or not one is properly a Christian.

Under Climacus, Kierkegaard writes that while it is true that a Christian accepts Christian doctrine, one risks missing the inwardness necessary to be a true Christian if one fixates on the outward acceptance of doctrine. This inwardness comes from an appropriation of faith such that one holds Christian doctrine differently from anything else in one’s life: “it is a matter of defining the pathos of appropriation itself within the believer in such a way that it cannot be confused with any other pathos.” But this pathos does not occur “if one defines the appropriation as faith but promptly gives faith momentum and orientation toward understanding, so that faith becomes a temporary function whereby one temporarily adheres to something that is to become an object for understanding…” Again, faith is not a substitute for insufficient understanding or a step along the way to understanding, but is the ultimate goal of the Christian, a goal oriented towards the existential, that is, how one lives as a Christian: “Being a Christian is defined not by the ‘what’ of Christianity but by the ‘how’ of the Christian.” Ultimately, faith is whether or not one has appropriated the absolute paradox that is the event of Christ inwardly into one’s life. This paradox—that Christ can be both human and divine—is absurd according to natural reason: “Faith is the objective uncertainty with the repulsion of the absurd, held fast in the passion of inwardness, which is the relation of inwardness intensified to its highest.”62 Again, this faith is objectively uncertain, for it is determined by the subjective inward passion of the believer.

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62 Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, 607-611.
Under two different pseudonyms, Kierkegaard highlights how faith only comes through self-knowledge of one’s sinful nature. Similar to Newman, Kierkegaard also considers a modern anthropology overly optimistic. In the earlier work, *The Concept of Anxiety*, the pseudonymous Vigilius Haufniensis presents the argument that sin is intertwined with existential anxiety: “In the strictest sense, subjective anxiety is the anxiety that is posited in the individual and is the consequence of his sin.” But at the same time, “anxiety is freedom’s possibility”; in other words, anxiety opens up the possibility that faith may educate the self to see all ends limited to finitude as deceptive. Such an education hopefully opens up the self to recognize its infinitude: “Whoever is educated by anxiety is educated by possibility, and only he who is educated by possibility is educated according to his infinitude.”

In this way, anxiety can prompt the individual to eventually turn towards faith.

This anthropology—that a human is both finite and infinite—appears in the later *The Sickness unto Death*, written under Anti-Climacus: “A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis.” Additionally, all humans suffer to some extent from anxiety, whether consciously or not, an anxiety of either the self or some other unknown, and this bestows a despair upon the human condition that leads to an existential unrest. However, recognition of despair may allow faith to become a possibility. The human thus faces a choice. But this choice only presents itself when the person realizes in the light of

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revelation that one is a sinner. In other words, sin always depends on knowledge of God; without knowledge of God, recognition of sin is impossible. Thus, sin is a kind of intensification of despair that creates the possibility of faith. Consequently faith, and not virtue, is the opposite of sin. “Faith is: that the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God.”64 That the consciousness of faith depends on consciousness of sin forms the “central dialectical relationship in Christian existence,” argues Walsh, but this faith also involves believing in the possibility of forgiveness of sin, even “against the understanding.”65 The action of faith, thereby, is a surrender of the understanding, and a surrender of logical probability; such conceptual thinking would render faith as a decision based on human capacity. Instead, at some point, a person may face a pivotal decision, a decision in which the self recognizes that no possibility exists to resolve despair, at least in human terms. Then the person must decide whether they believe that for God all things are possible, and whether then the self will likewise choose faith: “to believe is indeed to lose the understanding in order to gain God.”66

In the signed work, Judge for Yourself!, Kierkegaard agrees with his pseudonymous authors that faith is only possible through the self-knowledge of one’s limitation before, and dependence upon, God. The self must become “sober,” and to become sober is a movement towards self-knowledge that leads to action. “To become


66 Kierkegaard, The Sickness unto Death, 38.
sober is: *to come to oneself in self-knowledge and before God as nothing before him, yet infinitely, unconditionally engaged...*[and] *to come so close to oneself in one’s understanding, in one’s knowing, that all one’s understanding becomes action.*”\(^{67}\) Again, we return to the importance of one’s inward appropriation of faith; to be a Christian requires a manifestation of this appropriation. Faith then can never be considered merely conceptual knowledge to which one assents; this conception of faith depends too much on external criteria. Rather, the criteria lies in subjective inwardness.

In other signed works, Kierkegaard remarks that his strategy attempts to grab ahold of “the single individual,” in order that the individual may at least recognize what Christianity truly is. Intertwined with this strategy lies his recognition that most people live in the aesthetic, that is, the world of the immediate. A direct assault upon their cultural Christianity would bear no fruit. Instead, the religious author, such as himself, must establish a “rapport” with them indirectly (such as using pseudonyms) through aesthetics works—works that attempt to meet the reader within the concerns of the aesthetic; the more explicitly religious works must be introduced at the right time after the ethical works. In other words, the religious author through indirect communication—that is, through works that are not directly religious—must convince the readers that the world of the aesthetic, the world of the immediate, the finite, and sensual, keeps the self in despair, paints a false image of human self-reliance, and can never properly be called

Christian. In this sense, Kierkegaard prepares his reader for the movement towards faith. Thus, John Macquarrie, in his comparison between Newman and Kierkegaard, does not give full justice to Kierkegaard when he argues that Newman more carefully prepares the reader for the movement towards faith, whereas Kierkegaard’s leap is a more isolated, unprepared action. However, I would agree with Macquarrie that whereas Newman strives for certainty, Kierkegaard sees faith as always precarious.

This is not to say that Kierkegaard does not see faith as granting any kind of certainty. As Kyle A. Roberts notes, faith can grant a subjective certainty when driven by inward passion. But this certainty can only be achieved by the subjective appropriation of a faith given in grace, not by any external, objective criteria. If human conceptual thinking could arrive at knowledge or understanding of God with certainty, then faith would be unnecessary. So, when Kierkegaard argues that “truth is subjectivity,” this “means that a person must inwardly appropriate Christianity for it to be truth–ful. Subjectivity is both a way of knowing and a way of being—and the being and the knowing are interconnected as a task that one undertakes.” Faith always occurs in the contradiction between a Christian’s passionate inwardness and the reality of objective uncertainty.

Of course, Kierkegaard’s inward appropriation of Christianity bears resemblance in details to Newman’s assent, since in both, one notes an affective dimension.

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68 Kierkegaard, Point of View, 9-11, 43-44, 50.


Nonetheless, one still observes that faith is framed under contrasting typologies. If for Newman, faith ultimately depends on one’s trust in ecclesial authorities and acceptance of doctrine, Kierkegaard frames faith primarily as the individual standing existentially before God aware of one’s sinfulness. So, if Newman’s faith gives a certain repose—as captured in his famous line “Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt”—Kierkegaard’s faith is much more restless and fragile:

…I have said that to say about oneself that one is a Christian means to speak with God, and that therefore a human being must speak with fear and trembling…yet it is still perhaps possible, by continuous diligence over a number of years, to pursue this to the point of knowing definitely what it means to be a Christian; whether one oneself is that cannot be known, and not with definiteness either—it must be believed, and in faith there is always fear and trembling.  

The famous “fear and trembling” of Kierkegaard’s faith is a faith aware of the individual’s uncertainty about the self.

But how can we connect Newman’s and Kierkegaard’s rebellion against modernity with modernity’s literary offspring, the novel, and the Catholic novelists in the subsequent chapters? Let me return to Taylor, for what the novelists, theologians, and even Bakhtin are working within is a fundamental shift in the “social imaginary” of Western societies, a social imaginary that is often culturally assumed and unchallenged. This secularized social imaginary is dubbed by Taylor as an “immanent frame.”

**The Immanent Frame: Closed or Open?**

Taylor writes that “the buffered identity of the disciplined individual moves in a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular. All of this makes up what I want to call ‘the immanent frame’.”

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71 Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 140-141; emphasis in the original.
Again, the irony is that the distinction between the natural and the supernatural was not the achievement of modern secularity but of the late Christian medieval nominalists and their influence on the early modern period.\textsuperscript{72}

The rise of the immanent frame pivots the buffered self towards a new emphasis on individualism which challenges a traditionally more collective religious culture. Beginning in the eighteenth century, a strong form of Christianity comes to be viewed as a threat to the modern age’s focus on the individual. In contrast, a strong religious faith would demand loyalty to either ecclesial structures or specific doctrines in the face of instrumental reason. “Religion in all these menacing forms is what the men of the Enlightenment called ‘fanaticism’.” This reaction is one of the sources for why the immanent order becomes closed; indeed, as Western civilization progresses, the narrative develops that modernity necessarily leads to a closed immanent frame.\textsuperscript{73}

The closed immanent frame, which Taylor considers to be the default assumption of contemporary Western societies, is supported by “closed world structures” (or CWSs). These structures assume a clear divide between the natural and the supernatural, or, more pointedly, a divide between the real and the unreal. The most powerful of these closed world structures today is the view that modern science inevitably justifies materialism as the only viable, rational belief-system. Further, the epistemology of these closed world structures is frequently assumed. The modern person would eventually understand their

\textsuperscript{72} Taylor, \textit{A Secular Age}, 542.

\textsuperscript{73} Taylor, \textit{A Secular Age}, 541, 546, 548.
life as occurring within a self-sufficient and impersonal immanent order.\textsuperscript{74}

These closed-world structures falsely assume that a neutral view of the natural world is possible, but in fact, we cannot simply step out of an earlier identity into one based on pure nature. Instead, the assumption of a closed immanent frame hides the complex reality in which the development of this modern buffered self creates a context for this new science to make a lasting impact. Again, this reiterates Taylor’s rejection of the “subtraction theory” of secularization theory: “The subtraction story gives too little space to the cultural changes wrought by Western modernity…It fails to see how innovative we have been; its tendency is to see modernity as the liberating of a continuing core of belief and desire from an overlay of metaphysical/religious illusion which distorted and inhibited it.” These developments only make sense if we also recognize the new understandings of self and society in Western modernity.\textsuperscript{75}

More importantly, Taylor argues that it is also an illusion that the immanent frame—a worldview that posits a self-sustaining, ordered natural world—need necessarily be closed. In other words, this new immanent order allows closure but does not mandate the rejection of a transcendent order; properly understood, it allows both open and closed readings without forcing us in a particular direction. If one understands this, then one understands that either direction requires in its own way a “leap of faith”.\textsuperscript{76}

Why a “leap of faith”? According to Taylor, this is because arguments for atheism

\textsuperscript{74} Taylor, A Secular Age, 543, 551, 558, 561.

\textsuperscript{75} Taylor, A Secular Age, 543, 558-60, 573.

\textsuperscript{76} Taylor, A Secular Age, 543-44, 550.
based on natural science are ultimately not convincing. Although in regards to scientific discoveries, one must assume their validity based on professional authority, this does not mean that this automatically leads one to deny God. The person has other resources beyond science to make this decision, such as the self’s own religious life, or a sense that God is active in one’s existence. Further, a closed immanent frame would leave one to be concerned only with human (instead of divine) concerns, but this does not thereby instruct the self to be concerned about the universal welfare of all humans, nor does it explain why a desire for fulfillment, equality, or freedom are important. In other words, there are certain assumptions that cannot be proved in a closed immanent frame. Taylor’s argument, as he clarifies, is ultimately over epistemology. “It is because the paradigm examples of valid knowledge in the modern world (supposedly) take the realities they study as made exclusively of matter, that we are supposed to conclude that everything is matter.”

So, whether one chooses belief or not, one still makes a choice that cannot be grounded with the same certainty as the discoveries of the empirical sciences.

Ultimately, this authority of materialism in contemporary science comes not so much from science, or facts, but from a new narrative of history and anthropology that emerges in modernity. This grand narrative is composed of multiple other narratives that support a closed immanent frame, but fundamentally they are variations on the “coming of age” narrative in which we move from a childish, supernatural, superstitious pre-modern world to a more adult, mature, natural conception of the world. Such narratives consider religion, thanks to science, obsolete and irrelevant. But again, Taylor insists that

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the subtraction story possesses its own illusions, such as that certain values, say, justice or equality, are universal once religion is left behind. Again, history is understood through the narrative of developing maturity. The modern, secular person often assumes humanity’s discovery that previous conceptions are false, but this assumption leaves out that Western modernity occurs because it has its own conception of the good, one conception amongst others. Human beings, after all, dictate their own values; it is not just that we became liberated from illusions. In other words, this narrative of discovery leaves out or ignores the new constructions of identity. In the end, the impact of these closed world structures has less to do with the details of the argument, but more from the fact that they are a narrative.\textsuperscript{78}

\textbf{Is the Literary Imagination Oriented Towards an Existential Faith?}

Through fictional narratives, the Catholic authors subsequently discussed reject the modern, historical narrative of a closed immanent frame, either, to use Gregory Wolfe’s metaphor, through a “shout” or a “whisper.” By this, Wolfe observes that Catholic writers of O’Connor’s generation were more likely to “shout” to their contemporaries by casting “Catholic faith in bold relief to secularism”; in contrast, many later Catholic authors, such as of Gordon’s generation, “are less sure they can, or should, create those big silhouettes.”\textsuperscript{79} I would further add that a novel’s narrative may critique secularity with either a hard, strong rebuttal or take a softer position that allows faith and the secular world to merge in fascinating and creative ways. In either case, Catholic

\textsuperscript{78} Taylor, \textit{A Secular Age}, 569, 571, 575-77, 580, 589-90.

authors resort to a literary genre associated with the closed immanent frame of secular modernity to offer instead an open immanent frame. In other words, Catholic novelists frequently reject a disenchanted world, and instead imagine an enchanted one. Similar to Bakhtin, Taylor considers the novel as evidence for a new exploration of the modern, buffered self, one who discovers its own internal depth, a depth that can be explored and shared through the novel. In contrast, Catholic authors consistently offer a sacramental vision of reality, one that sees human lives as sites for God’s grace, even amidst evil and suffering. This sacramental vision implies an anthropology and epistemology open to, and often reliant upon, the supernatural.

Further, the Catholic novelists portray characters who move in a fictional world that fits Taylor’s description of those who are “cross-pressured.” He sees this description as apt for the majority of people in Western societies who fall somewhere between pure materialism and religious fundamentalism. Such people live within a frame that pushes one towards the closed worldview, but this closed frame still provokes protests and a desire for an open frame. However, people often move within the immanent frame without recognizing the consequences of their social imaginary: Such people “have not necessarily stood in that open space where you can feel the winds pulling you, now to belief, now to unbelief.” The central characters of the novels, however, often awaken to these winds by the experience of uncertainty.

Indeed, some degree of uncertainty is inherent in all forms of belief, according to

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80 Taylor, A Secular Age, 539-540.
81 Taylor, A Secular Age, 548-49, 555.
Taylor, no matter where on the spectrum one falls between belief and unbelief. Modernity’s axiom of self-authorization tells an exhilarating story, exhilarating in that we are inspired to be courageous in the light of emancipation from pre-modern superstition. But, Taylor argues, we will never possess absolute certainty such as often is assumed or enjoyed in daily life or natural science, whether we adopt an open or a closed version of the immanent frame. Further, most people are not completely embedded in either pure belief or unbelief. Contemporary persons often experience “fragilization,” that is, they live “cross-pressured,” aware of the fragility of their beliefs. In the contemporary social imaginary, belief itself is inevitably haunted by uncertainty.82

Further, in their narrative depiction of restless anxiety and uncertainty, Catholic novelists present a form of faith that more often echoes Kierkegaard’s existential model than Newman’s intellectual-assent model. In this, I do not mean to imply that Catholic authors doctrinally are more similar to Kierkegaard than Newman, or that there are no points of convergence between the novels and Newman’s thought. But the characteristics of the existential model—its focus on subjective experience, its greater allowance for uncertainty, and its awareness of the fragility of faith—are more akin to the vision of faith unfolded in the narratives. Indeed, as a preliminary observation, the narrative dimension of the novel seems to lend itself more easily to an existential model than an intellectual-assent model. But why this would be can only be answered after further discussion of the stories themselves.

82 Taylor, A Secular Age, 551, 556, 588, 593.
CHAPTER THREE

FIRST PARADIGM: UNCERTAINTY AS A CATALYST FOR FAITH

Newman’s and Kierkegaard’s models of faith present two different trajectories for the relationship between uncertainty and faith. For Newman, uncertainty leads him to reconsider previous beliefs regarding faith; eventually, these experiences of uncertainty prompt his conversion to Catholicism. Kierkegaard, meanwhile, emphasizes that uncertainty about the self—an experience that occurs because of one’s recognition of anxiety, despair, and sin—forms the basis for true faith to occur. Faith does not come with one’s baptism in a culturally Christian society. Faith only comes because uncertainty clears a space for its reception by the individual. There is an overlap here admittedly, for Kierkegaard, like Newman, is embedded in, and speaking to, a cultural Christianity. Thus, to say that Kierkegaard argues that uncertainty leads to faith is not to say that the person is unaware of faith or Christianity prior to this experience of uncertainty. Nonetheless, these two paradigms—Kierkegaard’s uncertainty as prior to faith; Newman’s uncertainty as a challenge to a previous faith—serve as heuristic categories for the discussions of the novels in Chapters Three and Four.

Similar to Kierkegaard’s context, the paradigm for this chapter—uncertainty as a catalyst to faith—plays out in the various novels with a character aware of a traditionally Christian culture, although the character’s attitude towards this context varies. This character usually moves from unbelief to some form of faith because experiences
undermine previous certainties. Of course, this is not to deny a character’s previous history, such as an infant baptism or childhood instruction, but nonetheless the dramatic arc of the story carries her or him from unbelief to belief.

In the following, I examine in chronological order novels by François Mauriac, Graham Greene, Flannery O’Connor, and Muriel Spark through the paradigm of uncertainty prior to faith. These novels portray the characters’ experience of uncertainty as an experience of evil, often times unrecognized as such until the characters undergo a conversion in the way they imagine the world, others, and the self. This imaginative shift is prompted primarily through the emotions. A character’s recognition of evil and sin, either in themselves or in others, is thereby provoked affectively more than conceptually. Just as both Kierkegaard and Newman argue that a recognition of personal sin frequently serves as a prolegomenon to faith, so it is with many of the novels’ protagonists.

As discussed in the last chapter, the novel historically has been associated with the rise of the secular world, a world that increasing saw God as distant or non-existent. In other words, it is Taylor’s closed immanent frame, one that regards God’s grace as either absent from the created order, or that believes God does not exist and the natural world is the sum total of all reality. This chapter’s Catholic novelists use a genre forged in secularity to interrogate an underlying assumption of secularity. Their work subverts a closed immanent frame, in other words, and presents an open immanent frame in which natural reality is intertwined with supernatural grace.

The characters’ movement then is from a dialectical worldview—one that sees the supernatural as separate from the natural—to an analogical worldview, one that is sacramental and considers the world as a location for grace. In this affective movement,
the characters frequently experience transcendence in that their imagination of reality expands from a closed, finite natural world to a supernatural one. To borrow Taylor’s language, they move from a “buffered” self to a porous one, and discover that reality is infinitely larger than previously imagined.

I discussed the analogical imagination in Chapter One, and I would like to return briefly to the thought of David Tracy and William Lynch. David Tracy argues in his seminal work, *The Analogical Imagination*, that the dialectical and the analogical are the two primary “language traditions” of Western Christianity. Analogical language “is a language of ordered relationships articulating similarity-in-difference.” One creates order by discovering “analogous relationships among various realities (self, other, world, God), by clarifying the relationship of each to the primary analogue,” that is, to the Christ event. This is the language tradition that stresses sacramentality. Meanwhile, dialectical language strives to preserve God’s transcendence, and is suspicious of convenient similarities between the disparate realities of the divine and the created. “The negations” found in dialectical language help to prevent “any slackening of the sense of radical mystery, any grasp at control of the event and the similarities-in-difference of the realities (God, self, world) focused upon and interpreted by that event.”¹ The theologian should attend to both language traditions, for the dialectical serves as a corrective to the analogical; nonetheless, analogical language remains primary for Tracy, since a theologian seeks “to find some ordered relationships for understanding the similarities-in-

difference in the whole: the realities globally named God-self-world.”

However, Tracy’s framework is not a dramatic one, and so, when speaking of the analogical imagination in the context of narrative, it is helpful to retrieve William Lynch’s application of the analogical imagination to literature. For Lynch, the analogical imagination allows the reader to see literature’s concreteness as capable of possessing theological dimensions: “...literary insight comes from the penetration of the finite and the definite concrete in all its interior dimensions and according to all its real lines...” Lynch believes that a literary, analogical imagination can be a theological imagination if, like Tracy, Christ becomes the hermeneutical focal point, for “Christ moved down into all the realities of man to get to His father.” The Incarnation indicates that our own ascent to the infinite occurs through a descent into the finite. In literature, this descent is a focus on literature’s particularities. The imagination follows a parabolic trajectory, down through the concreteness of a story and then “shoots up into insight.”

Neither Lynch nor Tracy consider the analogical imagination as a tool to destroy differences; instead similarities and differences remain in tension. A detail of a novel (a character, a symbol, an event, etc.) should not be seen as a simple allegory of Christ, for example. The concrete remains the concrete, and yet, may reveal convergences with

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Christ’s life. Although Lynch does not use the language of the “sacramental imagination,” he is essentially arguing for it, as can be seen when one compares his rhetoric to O’Connor’s contemporaneous essays. In a review of Lynch’s *Christ and Apollo*, O’Connor praises Lynch for his exploration of the finite: “In genuine tragedy and comedy, the definite is explored to its extremity and man is shown to be the limited creature he is, and it is at this point of greatest penetration of the limited that the artist finds insight.”6 O’Connor makes a similar point in an essay on Catholic novelists, but with more explicit sacramental overtones: if the novelist “is going to show the supernatural taking place, he has nowhere to do it except on the literal level of natural events…”7 In other words, O’Connor also believes that literature can cohere to sacramental logic: the infinite is revealed through a focus on the finite.

The novels in this chapter follow a similar parabolic trajectory, a dialectical movement, in which the characters experience the great gulf between themselves and God in the face of some tragedy, but this trajectory then reveals by the end, an analogical, sacramental vision of creation, in which tragedy now reveals the finite world as the potential site of grace. The degree of this gap between human and divine varies depending on the novel. Let me also add that the following discussions are not intended to argue that this trajectory can be found in an author’s entire oeuvre, (although I would speculate that it can be found in almost all of O’Connor’s work); instead, the novels are chosen as representatives of this first paradigm.

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Mauriac and the Sinner Pursued by the Hound of Heaven

The tension between the analogical and the dialectical is illustrated in François Mauriac’s *Viper’s Tangle* (1932). This novel, as David Lodge observes, contains themes that have come to be identified as common characteristics of the “Catholic Novel”: “mystical substitution,” a portrayal of Charles Péguy’s claim of the sinner as “the heart of Christianity,” and God depicted as “the Hound of Heaven,” as captured in Francis Thompson’s famous poem. The “Catholic Novel” as a genre is much disputed. Bernard Bergonzi argues that the term “Catholic novel” may be useful as a “loose” description, but it is also misleading; he notes that Spark, for example, believes that a novel cannot be described as Catholic unless it serves as propaganda. Cecil Jenkins likewise considers the term unhelpful, since a novel speaks from individual experience and “can never adequately be viewed as the expression of a collective orthodoxy.” Many critics regard the term as outmoded at best and irrelevant to literature written in recent decades. Certainly the term depends on how one defines its characteristics, since after all, the description usually refers to more than simply the influence of the Catholic tradition upon a work; otherwise, James Joyce’s novels would be deemed “Catholic novels” like

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8 David Lodge, introduction to *Viper’s Tangle*, by François Mauriac (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1987), 7.


10 Quoted in Malcolm Scott, *The Struggle for the Soul of the French Novel: French Catholic and Realist Novelists, 1850-1970* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 5. Scott disagrees and sees the French Catholic novel as sharing a different side of the same coin with Realism in that both share “the struggle between two opposed visions of the real, expressed in and through the novel form” (ibid).

Mauriac’s work. I tend to use “Catholic novel” more as a heuristic tool to note common themes across several, roughly contemporaneous works rather than as a rigid genre. The term draws the reader’s attention to certain ontological assumptions about the relationship between the natural and the supernatural shared by the authors of this investigation. Fundamentally, these assumptions are grounded in the belief that the natural is not closed, but open to the supernatural, and that the imagination is an avenue for the perception of grace in the world.

In *Viper’s Tangle*, the first person narrator, Louis, recounts in his diary his plan to swindle his family out of their inheritance. Louis, an upper-class lawyer, landowner, and investor, is the sinner at the center of the novel. Yet for much of the story Louis would not consider himself a sinner, since this implies a theological framework initially absent from his convictions. As Patrick Sherry observes, “Many novelists of redemption paint a very bleak picture, often depicting extreme wickedness and suffering, and some of them have been accused of having a fascination with evil. Mauriac in particular was attacked for his seeming preoccupation with the abnormal, the diseased, and the monstrous.” In a journal entry, Mauriac notes that “the sinner about whom the theologian gives us an abstract idea, I make incarnate.” Yet, Mauriac’s portrayal of wickedness is ultimately a

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12 Related to this issue, of course, is the question of whether an author should be considered a “Catholic novelist.” Greene declared the label a “detestable term”: “Many times since *Brighton Rock* I have been forced to declare myself not a Catholic writer but a writer who happens to be a Catholic.” Quoted in Bernard C. Swift, “‘The Dangerous Edge of Things’: Mauriac, Greene and the Idea of the Catholic Novel,” *Journal of European Studies* 22, no. 2 (June 1992): 111. In contrast, Endo, to be discussed in the next chapter, seems to have embraced or at least tolerated the description.


14 Quoted in Sherry, “Novels of Redemption,” 252.
movement from some sort of egotism to a portrayal of grace intervening in Louis’ life. The novel thereby portrays a dialectical trajectory to arrive at a sacramental imagination.

Thus, at first Louis addresses his journal to his long-suffering wife, Isa, retelling the slights he believes he has suffered during their marriage. Amongst other things, Louis blames their mutual antagonism upon the contrast between her upper-class bourgeois family lineage and his working-class background (51, 52), her confession of a past lover (48, 49), her indifference to her husband due to her constant attention to her children (57), and, perhaps most devastatingly, her blame of him for the death of their daughter, Marie (97, 98). His relationship to his adult children and grandchildren, meanwhile, is even worse. A letter written by Hubert towards the novel’s end confirms the reader’s prior impression that Louis’ children regard him as a monster who needs to be treated with distrust and constant vigilance. Louis’ regard towards Catholicism is related to his constant fights with Isa, whom he describes as an exemplar of upper-class bourgeois, religious hypocrisy; her class attend church but fail to manifest their religious precepts otherwise (80). At first, during his courtship of Isa, he casually regards religion as an affair for the wife of the family (46), but considers himself an unbeliever who has never practiced since receiving first communion as a child (28). But religion soon becomes a battleground for his marital troubles; for instance, he purposively eats meat on Good Friday in front of his family, including his great-grandchildren, in order to flaunt his atheism (43). The novel’s title, at various points, refers to either the “knot of vipers” in his heart or the knot created by his family’s scheming against him (114, 137).

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Yet this act of memory, his recording of his grudges and hatreds, turns Louis slowly towards grace. In Part II, he no longer addresses his journal to his wife. Eventually, he writes, “I know now for whom it [i.e. the journal] is intended” (145). In hindsight, the reader realizes that ultimately the journal becomes an account of a conversion to faith. This conversion is not completely unprepared for in the narrative’s earlier chapters, but again, it is memory that most prompts this search. At the end of part one, he notes, “It is, on the contrary, when I study myself…with a closeness of attention which is stronger than my feeling of disgust, and when I feel my mind to be at its clearest, that the temptations of Christianity most torment me. It is then that I feel it impossible to deny that a way does exist in me which might lead me to your [i.e. Isa’s] God” (113, 114). God is this Hound of Heaven who pursues him regardless of his villainy in the past or his present treacherous plan to cheat his family by giving his inheritance to an illegitimate son. Sin prepares the sinner for grace.

The memory of his sins also provokes the memory of his love for his long-deceased daughter, Marie. Marie is not the only memory of a good relationship; Louis frequently recalls his love for his nephew Luc and acknowledges that the Abbé Ardouin, a young tutor, appeared genuine in his faith (86). Nonetheless, Marie’s memory casts the longest shadow, for she embodies the Christian trope of mystical substitution. Upon her deathbed due to illness, the young Marie, seemingly delirious, exclaims “for Papa!” (98). Years later, towards the end of his journal, Louise writes, “I had shut my ears so as not to hear Marie’s words as she lay dying. Nevertheless, at her bedside the secret of death and of life had been revealed to me….A little girl had been dying for me…that was something that I had tried to forget” (198). Marie’s death is akin to a sacramental seed
buried in Louis’ imagination, only to bear fruit years later after being provoked by memory. Her mystical substitution, her death for Louis’ eventual redemption, relates to Mauriac’s belief that, as Sherry observes, “Christians who share in Christ’s agony cooperate in the redemption of the world.”16 Marie’s death does follow a kind of Incarnational logic, in the sense that the innocent suffer and die for the sinful. But this is a troubling path for redemption to occur since a child, like Marie, does not possesses the same freedom of choice as Christ.

That said, Louis arrives at this insight about Marie only after he has suffered the death of his wife, Isa. Shortly after her death, Louis abandons his plans to rob his children of their inheritance: “…my hatred was dead, and dead, too, my desire for reprisals” (171). Unlike some of the works discussed below, Viper’s Tangle presents the Hound of Heaven’s chase of the sinner less through dramatic, pivotal moments and more through an untiring pressure that finally wearies Louis into conversion. Shortly later, Louis discovers the charred remains of Isa’s letters, and is surprised to find that “I had not been an object of indifference to her,” a discovery that prompts self-realization: “…I had refused to look beyond the tangle of vile snakes. I had treasured their knotted hideousness as though it had been the central reality of my being—as though the beating of the life-blood in my veins had been the pulse of all those swarming reptiles” (181). Memories of accumulated petty hates, grudges, and greed are too tiring for Louis, and finally he succumbs: “At last I had cut through the knot of vipers” (183). Yet this relinquishment of past grievances is not the end of his spiritual journey, but a transition to an awareness of

16 Sherry, “Novels of Redemption,” 255.
grace. His journal ends, “Something, as I sit to-night writing these lines, is stifling me, something is making my heart feel as though it would burst—it is the Love whose name at last I know, whose ador...” (199). One notes that the narrative portrays God’s love as slowly “stifling” him into recognition. In other words, his conversion is driven more by an affective journey than a conceptual one.

Mauriac allows some slippage to exist between the end of the journal and the end of the story, for the novel concludes with two letters after Louis’ death. Hubert, Louis’ son, describes the journal to his sister, Geneviève, and makes clear that he distrusts his father’s expressions of conversion or contrition. But the text privileges Janine, Louis’ granddaughter, since she has the final word. Hubert prepares the reader for Janine by noting her new found religious zeal since living with her grandfather during his final days (205). This contrasts with the portrait of Janine found in Louis’ journal. In her letter, Janine declares that she alone spent sufficient time to judge her grandfather’s feelings and she insists that Louis had met with a local Curé three times, but that death came upon him shortly before he was to declare his faith (206).

If Viper’s Tangle portrays God as the Hound of Heaven, the hunt is less one of a dramatic chase, but more of a deliberate, unrelenting pressure brought to bear upon the sinner until the sinner submits. As Mauriac writes at the end of Woman of the Pharisees (1941), “God is very often the good temptation to which many human beings in the long run yield.”17 In the act of memory, Louis’ imagination of himself and of others becomes reoriented such that God’s presence is not only possible but experienced as a burden upon

him. Indeed, this reorientation gives Louis a new perspective on himself. Janine mentions in her letter that Louis felt unworthy, and planned to delay his public return to the Church until Christmas (206, 207). In other words, his former swagger and arrogance dissolves with the recognition of his own sinfulness. Through self-reflection, Louis makes a dialectical descent into his depravity, a trajectory that ultimately turns his insight away from his ego and towards grace.

**The Hound of Heaven in Greene’s *The End of the Affair***

The three prominent refrains of *Viper’s Tangle*—mystical substitution, God as the Hound of Heaven, and the sinner as the heart of Christianity—are intensified in Greene’s *The End of the Affair* (1951). In Greene’s novel, two characters, engaged in an adulterous affair, are chased by God, but the reader is left with even more ambiguity than in Mauriac’s novel. If Louis’ journal and his granddaughter’s letter indicate Louis’ eventual repentance of his former life in light of his new-found faith, Maurice Bendrix in *The End of the Affair* experiences an intensification of hate as a result of his nascent belief. Uncertainty here is prompted by his love affair with Sarah Miles. Her movement towards faith eventually clears a space for Maurice’s reluctant acceptance for the possibility of belief. Both Louis’ journal and Maurice’s narrative are a “record of hate” (in Maurice’s description) (7). But if the former tale begins his story with a hate that is subsequently relinquished, the latter story records hatred’s intensification with the recognition that faith is possible. *The End of the Affair* demonstrates “Greene’s via negativa toward religious faith,” as Mark Bosco describes, “a belief in evil that opened up space for belief in

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goodness.” Like Mauriac, Kierkegaard, and Newman (who influenced Greene’s religious imagination), Greene presents the recognition of sin as a prelude to faith. But the dialectical movement found in Viper’s Tangle is heightened in The End of the Affair.

In the biographical literature of Greene, The End of the Affair is frequently discussed in light of its inspiration: his adulterous affair with Catherine Walston in the 1940s and 1950s. Like his real-life creator, Maurice Bendrix is a novelist, living in London, during World War II. His relationship with Sarah Miles begins in 1939 when he wishes to interrogate her about her husband, Henry, who, as a mid-level government bureaucrat may serve as possible comic fodder for his next novel: “Henry was important, but important rather as an elephant is important, from the size of his department” (10). Their affair lasts throughout most of the war, but in June 1944, while they are together at Maurice’s flat, an air raid strikes, and Sarah initially believes he is dead. Unbeknownst to Maurice at the time, this air raid becomes literally the end of their physical affair.

The novel is set in 1946, but in fact, Maurice narrates his tale three years after their affair abruptly ends (19). Like The Viper’s Tangle, The End of the Affair confronts the theme of memory. As Bergonzi observes, the novel contrasts with Greene’s earlier work by the “the fluidity of the time-scheme, which moves back and forth between 1939 and 1946, following the uncertain course of memory.” But unlike Louis’ journal in

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Viper’s Tangle, Maurice’s perspective is interrupted by another perspective, Sarah’s memories. About midway through the novel, Maurice discovers Sarah’s diary and a new perspective on the affair is introduced. True, The Viper’s Tangle ends with differing perspectives of Louis in the form of brief letters by his son and granddaughter. But in The End of the Affair, Sarah’s journal both calls into question everything that has preceded it as well as haunts the remainder of Maurice’s tale; Sarah’s memories become a counterpoint to Maurice’s narrative. Further, the narrative hints at how one’s perception of the past can be altered by subsequent incidents. Reflecting on events prior to his discovery of the diary, Maurice admits that Sarah could have been in a way “a born Catholic, although she believed in God as little as I did. Or so I thought then and wonder now” (50). In his memory, Sarah at that time had not yet arrived at belief in God, nor any desire to practice faith. But in hindsight, he questions his memory’s accuracy. In other words, the experience of uncertainty created by his affair have rendered his memory of those events uncertain. Sarah now gives her own account of her conversion, a conversion that begins, she initially believes, in a moment of “hysteria” (94). Her own struggle with belief then is between reducing her impulse towards faith either empirically—as the result of the emotions of the moment—or as a genuine insight of some other non-empirical reality. A frequent complaint among many of Greene’s critics is that his female characters tend to be viewed through the lens of masculine desire. But Sarah speaks on her own terms through her diary and it is a reason why she, along with Aunt Augusta in Travels with My Aunt (1969), is frequently considered by critics to be among Greene’s
most complex, and fully-realized female characters.\textsuperscript{22} If Maurice’s story is a memory of how uncertainty opens the path to belief, it is a memory framed by his memory of Sarah.

Greene’s focus on this memory of uncertainty and the consequent movement towards belief turns the conventional conversion story upon its head. In \textit{Viper’s Tangle}, Louis abandons hate and recognizes the love of God. But in \textit{The End of the Affair}, uncertainty spawns hate, and it is hate that indicates belief, and not, as would be expected in a typical conversion story, the love of God. “So this is a record of hate far more than of love,” writes Maurice at the beginning of his tale (7). And yet this act of memory is already tinged with belief. Here, I disagree with Stephen K. Land’s reading, when he writes, Maurice “cannot be converted to a genuine belief in God before the end” of the novel since Maurice would then “have told the whole story in a very different way from the beginning.”\textsuperscript{23} But this reading misses the subtle indications on the first page of the novel that Maurice tells his tale with belief. For instance, reflecting on his chance encounter in 1946 with Henry, the action that serves as the catalyst for the book, Maurice writes that Henry must surely have come to hate both him and his wife upon learning of their affair as well as “that other, in whom in those days we were lucky enough not to believe.” The “we” implies that both he and Henry had come to some form of belief since then, but Maurice casts this belief in a negative light—previously, they did not have the


misfortune to believe in God. Indeed, the first paragraph signals this tension between God and the narrator. “A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead,” claims Maurice; yet he then asks, “but do I in fact of my own will choose that black wet January night on the Common…?” (italics in original). Indeed, he realizes that “if I had believed then in a God” perhaps he would have recognized that God may have prompted him to speak to Henry (7). The “then” again implies that Maurice looks back upon his story with current belief, yet the desire to affirm his own capacity to choose how he tells his narrative indicates that he still is uneasy at the thought of divine influence.

Maurice’s movement towards belief through uncertainty, hatred, and jealousy, parallel Sarah’s movement as described in her diary. After his meeting with Henry in 1946, Maurice suspects that Sarah has a new lover, and he hires a private investigator to track her movements. Thus, Sarah is doubly hunted: one hunt of divine origin, the other a spawn of all too human jealousy. Mr. Parkis, the bumbling detective, eventually steals Sarah’s diary and gives it to Bendrix. In its pages, Maurice ironically discovers Sarah’s new beloved, a discovery that prompts his hatred of God, and which mirrors Sarah’s own awakening of belief through hatred.

Sarah’s diary—or more specifically, Maurice’s excerpts from the diary—documents a woman who does not believe in God prior to Maurice’s near-death experience in 1944. At one point, Sarah meets Smythe, a member of the Rationalist Society who spends his time preaching his empiricist beliefs upon the Common. Sarah wonders if Smythe wastes his time since Christianity is already dead (92). But when Maurice nearly dies from an air raid, Sarah, in her panic, vows to God, to whom she had
never prayed, that she will believe if Maurice survives, and do anything in recompense, even ending the affair. She then records, “he came in at the door, and he was alive, and I thought now the agony of being without him starts, and I wished he was safely back dead again under the door” (95). Pages before, Maurice first records this event from his perspective, and recalls that upon his arrival, Sarah looked at him with fear (72).

Despite this event, Sarah does not jump blindly to faith. She wonders, as would be expected, if one is required to keep a vow made while hysterical in grief. She visits Smythe so that she can become convinced that God does not exist, but his atheistic fervor drives her in the opposite direction (115). Shortly after one of her meetings with Smythe, Sarah visits a Catholic church, and is disgusted by the emphasis on the body and the belief in the bodily resurrection, for she wishes to escape her own body, the source of her adulterous desire for Maurice (109-12). Yet this scene proves pivotal in her movement towards faith. If the bomb blast and Maurice’s subsequent survival prompts uncertainty regarding her atheism (a culturally-assumed atheism, to be sure, that contrasts with Smythe’s passionate, educated version), her meditations on the body and God in the church produce a movement towards a sacramental imagination. As Bosco explains, “it is Sarah’s meditations in which God is identified with the finite world of bodies that is central to the theological vision Greene constructs. God first becomes real for her as another suffering, naked body having every human attribute.”

Sarah moves away from a dialectical conception of God—God as detached spirit separated from bodily creation—and towards an analogical, incarnational understanding of God.

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Sarah’s new sacramental insight now prompts her to conform to the drama of mystical substitution in the novel, akin to Marie in *The Viper’s Tangle*. Hans Urs von Balthasar remarks that it is the saint who is the paradigmatic believer who most manifests the Christ-form, that is, who transparently reveals Christ’s sacrifice in one’s own sacrificial love.²⁵ Sarah makes an odd saint, but her acceptance of faith echoes Balthasar’s theology of sainthood. She prays:

I believe the legend. I believe you were born. I believe you died for us. I believe you are God. Teach me to love. I don’t mind my pain. It’s their pain I can’t stand. Let my pain go on and on, but stop theirs. Dear God, if only you could come down from your Cross for a while and let me get up there instead. If I could suffer like you, I could heal like you. (120)

Sarah desires to heal the suffering of Henry and Maurice by making their suffering her own.

Thematically, Sarah’s movement towards an incarnational imagination involves the novel’s paradox that love and hate depend upon one another. She wonders why she reacts with hatred to the crucifixion, but she also comes to believe that any kind of love requires a body. Eventually, she makes the same insight in reverse: one cannot speak of loving something deeply unless one cannot also hate. Thus, a person can only love and hate someone with a body. Indeed, it is only after she hates the idea of a crucified body that she begins to believe that she could possibly love God. (109-13)

This tension between love and hate in the relationship between God and Sarah is mirrored in her relationship with Maurice. In her diary, she observes, “I thought,

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sometimes I’ve hated Maurice, but would I have hated him if I hadn’t loved him too? O God, if I could really hate you…” (182). Real love, Sarah concludes, occurs when hatred is possible. Maurice also recognizes the relationship between love and hate, and wonders if his hatred is as inadequate as his love (56).

Like Sarah, Maurice’s movement towards belief involves hatred. Even after reading Sarah’s diary, Maurice feels no hatred towards God, for the simple reason that it is illogical to hate what does not exist (132). His atheism remains certain. Only upon Sarah’s death does uncertainty shatter his assumptions, but this uncertainty occurs over the course of several signs. For example, he discovers from Sarah’s mother that Sarah was baptized when she was two. Of course, Sarah did not remember it, but her mother claims she had always wished the baptism “would ‘take’. Like vaccination” (164), an ironic comment considering Sarah’s self-description in her last letter to Maurice that “I’ve caught belief like a disease” (147). Sarah’s baptism is a play on the principle of *ex opere operato* (“by the work worked”) in traditional, Catholic sacramental theology, a principle that holds that grace is objectively effective in a legitimate sacrament regardless of the state of either the minister or the recipient. Sarah was marked from the moment of her baptism with God’s grace. At first, Maurice tries to downplay the connection between Sarah’s childhood baptism and her desire to become Catholic near the end of her life. But other signs occur. Mr. Parkis’ son is healed of a stomach illness after praying to both God and Sarah (178). Finally, Smythe’s facial disfigurement is miraculously healed after taking a locket of her hair, an act that mimics the traditional piety of preserving the

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relics of saints (144, 188). Perhaps the most frequent criticism of The End of the Affair is the implausibility of these miracles. For example, Michael Gorra argues that the miracles happen too quickly so that certainty replaces a leap into faith; in contrast, Sarah is “wiser than the novel” in that she understands that faith occurs despite doubt and without absolute certainty.²⁷ Greene himself admitted years later that his original intention was for the miracles to occur over the space of several years, “battering the mind of [Maurice] Bendrix, forcing on him a reluctant doubt of his own atheism… but I had spurred myself too quickly to the end.”²⁸

I harbor a similar reaction to the miracles, but in regards to the subject of the present investigation, the miracles are the catalyst for Maurice’s uncertainty about his atheism and his progression towards belief. Towards the end, Maurice rants that he hates Father Crompton (who wanted to give Sarah a Catholic burial), Henry, Sarah, as well as Sarah’s “imaginary God” (181). But uncertainty has crept into Maurice’s hatred despite his self-description as “a man of hate”:

What I chiefly felt was less hate than fear. For if this God exists, I thought, and if even you [i.e. Sarah] – with your lusts and your adulteries and the timid lies you used to tell – can change like this, we could all be saints by leaping as you leapt, by shutting the eyes and leaping once and for all: if you are a saint, it’s not so difficult to be a saint. It’s something He can demand of any of us, leap. But I won’t leap. (190; italics in the original)

His affair with Sarah and her subsequent death has rendered Maurice uncertain about God, himself, as well as Sarah, for if even Sarah can count as one of the blessed, than God’s mercy extends greater than Maurice wishes to accept, since it implies that he too

falls under this mercy. Fear lies at the heart of Maurice’s imaginative conversion—fear of God’s mercy and what it subsequently entails. God’s mercy is a frequent theme in Greene’s Catholic novels. As a priest tells Rose in Bright Rock (1938), “You can’t conceive, my child, nor can I or anyone the...appalling...strangeness of the mercy of God.”29 In The End of the Affair, Sarah tells Maurice that God’s mercy is “such an odd sort of mercy, it sometimes looks like punishment” (146). But Maurice does not desire mercy. In the end, he concedes that God exists, but he nevertheless refuses to submit to God and wishes to remain in hatred towards the divine (191). If God is the Hound of Heaven, Maurice is the quarry who wishes the hunter would abandon the chase. As he prays at the end of his record of hate, “O God, You’ve done enough, You’ve robbed me of enough, I’m too tired and old to learn to love, leave me alone for ever” (192).

Greene turns the standard conversion narrative upside down in The End of the Affair. If conversion to faith is generally portrayed as catalysts for joy and love, here, conversion instead leads to loveless, joyless belief. Nonetheless, Maurice undergoes an imaginative conversion; his reluctant faith mirrors Sarah’s journey, thus opening up the possibility that he too may follow her movement towards the joy and love of faith. Yet, the reader can only speculate upon this hope. In Viper’s Tangle, Louis’ record of hate eventually prompts him to discern “the Love whose name at last I know.” Maurice may know this “name” too by the end, but he does not desire to be in a relationship with this “Love.” If Janine is to be believed, Louis desires the outcome of a conventional tale of pious conversion—membership with the Church. But Maurice ends his narrative with no

indication that he shares a similar inclination, and instead makes a desperate plea to be left alone.

Hazel’s Blindness to a Graced World in O’Connor’s Wise Blood

The theme of a protagonist who desires to flee from God, and yet is hounded nonetheless, is heightened dialectically even further in O’Connor’s Wise Blood (1952), her first novel. In O’Connor’s work, the issue of cultural Christianity looms more explicitly than in the previous two novels. Louis in The Viper’s Tangle claims to have fashioned his life distinct from the surrounding cultural Christianity, and Maurice initially regards cultural Christianity with indifference. In contrast, in O’Connor’s “Christ-haunted”30 American south, Christianity still exerts a significant influence. O’Connor would say, however, that this Christianity has become a perversion of authentic faith, one that has splintered the spiritual from the sensible world. Her characters possess a dialectical imagination with its separation of grace from matter, which thereby allows them to ignore God’s presence. The result is an arrogant confidence in the human self.31 O’Connor’s work is populated with characters who consider themselves Christian, yet their cultural Christianity serves more as justification for self-righteousness. One thinks, for instance, of the Grandmother in “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” or Mrs. Turpin in “Revelation,” or Sarah Ruth in “Parker’s Back.” The list could easily be expanded. In sharp contrast to such characters is Hazel Motes in Wise Blood, who detests even the cultural residue of Christianity with an intense fidelity to his nihilistic philosophy.


31 For a discussion of this issue, see Christina Bieber Lake, The Incarnational Art of Flannery O’Connor (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 3-5.
Perhaps more than any of the other novelists discussed in this investigation, O’Connor considers her vocation as a fiction writer to be a prophetic vocation. Her work critiques both secularity’s modern confidence in the human self and cultural Christianity’s laziness in regards to faith. O’Connor explains in an essay on Catholic novelists, that “the fiction writer should be characterized by his kind of vision. His kind of vision is prophetic vision. . . The prophet is a realist of distances. . . it is the realism which does not hesitate to distort appearances in order to show a hidden truth.” This distortion, often discussed as the “grotesque” in O’Connor criticism, is part of her technique to rouse an audience she sees as having become unmoored from the central Christian story:

The universe of the Catholic fiction writer is one that is founded on the theological truths of the Faith, but particularly on three of them which are basic—the Fall, the Redemption, and the Judgment. These are doctrines that the modern secular world does not believe in. It does not believe in sin, or in the value that suffering can have, or in eternal responsibility, and since we live in a world that since the sixteenth century has been increasingly dominated by secular thought, the Catholic writer often finds himself writing in and for a world that is unprepared and unwilling to see the meaning of life as he sees it. This means frequently that he may resort to violent literary means to get his vision across to a hostile audience…

Perhaps, O’Connor muses, if one’s audience shares the basic beliefs and sense of the importance of these beliefs as the author, then one’s fiction does not have to take drastic means to gain attention; otherwise, “to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.” In his recent survey of post-World War II


33 O’Connor, “Catholic Novelists and Their Readers,” 185.

Christian novelists, Thomas F. Haddox remarks that O’Connor is more explicit than other American authors “about her avowed purpose and her intended audience.” O’Connor wishes to provoke her audience about the consequences of a modern anthropology that disregards sin and either rejects Christianity as a relic of the past or considers it worthwhile only as a lazy, self-satisfied cultural practice.

Hazel provides consideration of how cultural Christianity relates to the two paradigms explored in this project. Hazel was raised as a Christian, and in his atheistic preaching of the “Church without Christ,” he adopts many of the mannerisms of his grandfather, who was himself a preacher. (For example, both men proselytize atop a car.) Should uncertainty then be seen as prior to or after faith? I consider it to belong more to the first paradigm since the primary story is Hazel’s movement from unbelief to belief, whereas in the second paradigm, the trajectory is for some belief (however problematic) in a Christian God to be challenged by uncertainty. That said, I would again stress that these paradigms are heuristic categories for theological reflection, and I do not intend to deny the possibility of overlap between them.

Like Louis in Viper’s Tangle and Maurice in The End of the Affair, Hazel undergoes a dialectical movement through evil that ultimately leads to some form of belief, but the story’s violence and Hazel’s extreme behavior heightens the dialectical trajectory even further. Louis is more concerned about managing and expanding his fortune than the consequences of his rejection of Christianity. Bendrix, meanwhile, gives little thought to Christianity until compelled by Sarah; he believes he would be content

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with the happiness produced by their sexual relationship. In sharp contrast, Hazel sees the consequences of his rejection of faith and attempts to live them out. Even for O’Connor’s fiction, *Wise Blood* offers a particularly bleak dialectical worldview. Critics often note that the novel lacks the Christian symbols that are found in her other works—one thinks of the baptismal imagery in “The River,” the peacock in “Displaced Person,” or the Eucharistic symbols in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost.” Although I agree with such readings as a general observation, I will suggest below that this observation needs to be further qualified.

Hazel believes that to reject Christ (and by extension God) is to reject the foundation for a belief in sin; the consequence of Hazel’s unbelief is that truth itself is suspect. “There’s only one truth and that is that there’s no truth,” he proclaims (93). Hazel aspires to be a representative of Taylor’s self-ordering modern person, a cross between a caricature of a Nietzschean nihilist and a hillbilly preacher, who believes history can be left behind. As Christina Bieber Lake remarks, “When he [Hazel] preaches his new church, he preaches modernity’s church: we are all free from our primitive pasts.” Without sin, there is no need for a redeemer; without a redeemer, there is no firm foundation for objective truth.

Even as a youth, Hazel realizes that “the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin”

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38 Lake, *Incarnational Art*, 69, 70.
Later, when he arrives in the city of Taulkinham to begin his atheistic preaching, Hazel declares his disbelief in sin, and consequently, the implication that everyone is already clean without the need of Jesus’ atonement (29, 30). Atop his pitiful Essex, he declares, “I’m going to preach there was no Fall because there was nothing to fall from and no Redemption because there was no Fall and no Judgment because there wasn’t the first two. Nothing matters but that Jesus was a liar” (59). Hazel is not content with merely proclaiming his disbelief in sin; he also seeks to live it out. He visits Mrs. Watts, a prostitute, upon his first night in Taulkinham, and wishes to demonstrate to the fraudulent Asa Hawks, whom Hazel believes to be a blind preacher, that he practices what he preaches by sleeping with his daughter, Sabbath Lily Hawks.

Yet if Hazel insists on his unbelief, he still needs faith in something, and this can be seen in his faith in his car, an Essex. “Nobody with a good car needs to be justified,” he insists to Asa and Sabbath (64). The car to Hazel represents his freedom, his ability to travel and order his life as he pleases. But the narrative humorously suggests that Hazel’s ideals are a fantasy. The Essex, as John F. Desmond points out, is his escape from history, but it is an escape frequently thwarted by reality.39 Indeed, the narrative from the beginning humorously hints that Hazel is not in control as much as he desires. During the train journey to Taulkinham, he is frequently ignored or jostled by others—the train even leaves without him at one point (3-9). Nonetheless, he continues to place his faith in himself, and by extension in his car, and believes he can achieve autonomy. Only after the car is destroyed does he relinquish his fantasy.

This moment is prepared by various events. One is his unintentional influence upon a fellow newcomer, Enoch Emery, who desperately wants Hazel as a friend, and who introduces the title theme of “wise blood,” a marker for Enoch which indicates that a person operates by instinct. As Lake points out, Enoch’s instincts may be flawed, but they are, in comparison to Hazel, at least unsuppressed in that he seeks out mystery according to his desires. Enoch shares with Hazel his discovery of a mummified man, an object of mystery to Enoch, at a local museum (45). But Hazel’s response is to reject it violently and he throws a rock at Enoch’s head (57). Later, Enoch steals the mummy, and treats it as a sacred object, housing it in his now-cleansed room inside a washstand that the narrative describes as a “tabernacle.” Enoch considers the mummy a “new jesus,” at least until it explodes. Enoch then decides that “one Jesus was as bad as another” and he decides to plant it on Hazel (97-99). Thus he gives it to Sabbath, who now lives with Hazel, much to Hazel’s chagrin. In a particularly macabre moment, Sabbath begins to treat the mummy like a baby, but Hazel throws out the corpse. A furious Sabbath exclaims, “I seen you wouldn’t never have no fun or let anybody else because you didn’t want nothing but Jesus!” (106-07). Hazel has, George A. Kilcourse notes, a “ruthless honesty” that will eventually lead him back to Christianity. To replace one myth with another is intolerable. To discard one mystery only to accept another is contradictory to his nihilism. But there is something even deeper in his animosity. Lake observes that Hazel’s rejection of the “new jesus” is symbolic of the consequences of his own

40 Lake, Incarnational Art, 73-75.

preaching, a realization that if Christ is denied, then human instinctual desire for religious mystery in some form channels itself in other ways, for “Enoch’s worship of the new Jesus is a powerfully grotesque entrance of the primitive into a modern context.”

Enoch’s theft manifests the dire consequences when one splinters the natural from the supernatural. But Hazel’s response to the “new Jesus” is also the beginning of his own “redemption,” as Lake argues, although this conversion occurs only after the introduction of another fraudulent preacher.

Onnie Jay Holy (whose real name is Hoover Shoats) hears Hazel’s preaching and realizes that money can be made. When Hazel’s integrity to the truth leads him to refuse Holy as a partner, Holy hires Solace Layfield to imitate Hazel while he feigns as Layfield’s disciple. Hazel’s brutal response is to run over Layfield outside the city: “Two things I can’t stand...a man that ain’t true and one that mocks what is,” declares Hazel (115). Just as he rejected the “new Jesus,” Hazel rejects anyone who parodies his conviction that Jesus’s death did not grant redemption since no one needs to be redeemed. His rigid dedication to his principles collides with two consequences of his preaching—Enoch’s sincere but misguided attempts to channel his desire for mystery and Shoats’ cynical appropriation of Hazel’s convictions for personal gain under the ironic name “Holy.” With consistent violence, Hazel renounces both consequences. As he explains shortly after his act of murder, “it was not right to believe anything you couldn’t see or hold in your hands or test with your teeth” (116). In essence, Hazel believes in

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42 Lake, *Incarnational Art*, 82.

Taylor’s closed immanent frame—there is no reality other than the empirical world. Yet, Hazel’s desire to live out the consequences of his philosophy catch up with him when a policeman pulls him over. The reader initially expects the event to have something to do with the recent murder. But instead, the policeman stops him because “I just don’t like your face,” and shortly thereafter, pushes Hazel’s car over an embankment, citing Hazel’s lack of a license as justification (117, 118). Hazel experiences the outcome of his own belief that everyone can create their own truth. He stands defenseless before a police officer who sees no need to justify his illegal devastation of Hazel’s car other than a personal belief.

Hazel may have experienced prior moments of uncertainty, but the destruction of his car becomes the sharp pivot of the plot which altars Hazel’s perception of the world and himself. Hazel’s face reflects “the entire distance” of the surrounding landscape (118). Vision is a frequent motif in *Wise Blood*, from his childhood imaginings that “he saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind” (11) to the impaired sight caused by his mother’s glasses (106). But Hazel lacks a sacramental vision of the world. His desire for autonomy means that he insists on living within a closed immanent frame of his own making. “Motes wants to create an alternative order of reality and become his own measure for truth,” points out Susan Srigley.44 He is a character of extremes. As a childhood believer, he walked on stones in his shoes to atone for the guilt of seeing a naked woman (36). As a non-believing adult, Hazel consciously lives out the consequences of his non-sacramental worldview as dogmatically as possible. There is

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44 Susan Srigley, *Flannery O’Connor’s Sacramental Art* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 62, 63.
little wonder then that when uncertainty ruptures his faith in himself and his own self-ordering world that he would again respond in extremes. Hazel does what Hawks only pretends to do: He blinds himself with quicklime (119).

I would argue that although Hazel does not recognize a sacramental world, O’Connor nonetheless points to its existence through its apparent absence. The crux of my argument lies in Hazel’s self-blindness. Hazel’s act is an event of great critical controversy. Ralph Wood considers Hazel justified in his extremism, arguing that Hazel manifests the biblical instruction (found particularly in the letters of Paul) to mortify the flesh so as to discipline the self for the Lord; further, Wood contends Hazel becomes a witness of faith to his landlady, Mrs. Flood. However, Brian Ingraffia points out that mortification for Paul was usually not self-imposed, like Hazel’s blindness, but the result of persecutions brought upon him by others. Further, Hazel may be a witness to Mrs. Flood of some kind of a conversion, but he is a reluctant witness at best. He is frequently taciturn, surly, and at one point runs away from her house. He is only brought back because she calls the police, and he is additionally brought back dead (accidentally killed when a police officer knocks him over the head). Wood believes that Hazel’s witness to Mrs. Flood prompts her conversion in the end, but the text leaves the reader with ambiguity: “She sat staring with her eyes shut, into his eyes, and felt as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn’t begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther away, farther and farther into the darkness until he was the pin point of light”


(131). Is this journey that she cannot begin by herself because it requires God’s grace? Or
is it a journey that she cannot begin because she is unwilling to take it, which would call
into question the efficacy of Hazel’s self-blindness as a witness to faith? At the most, as
Debra L. Cumberland notes, Mrs. Flood receives only “a niggling awareness of divine
mystery” as she stares into Hazel’s dead eyes.47 Further, even if Hazel is a witness to
Mrs. Flood, his blindness prevents him from witnessing to anyone else; it is a closure to
possibilities, and a closure to the world. Hazel, even after his abandonment of atheistic
nihilism, cannot adopt a sacramental vision of the world. But again, this is true to the
character. As O’Connor writes in a letter, “Haze is saved by virtue of having wise blood;
it’s too wise for him ultimately to deny Christ. Wise blood has to be these people’s [i.e.
Southern, Protestant Christians] means of grace—they have no sacraments…They have
nothing to correct their practical heresies and so they work them out dramatically.”48 In
light of this, one could conclude that O’Connor would agree with J. Ramsey Michaels’
argument that Hazel has made his body “the visible sacrament of his redemption.”49 Yet,
O’Connor’s comment also implies that she sees this kind of active religious faith as less
than ideal.

Thus, I find myself asking Srigley’s question: “Why do we assume that when
O’Connor describes Hazel Motes as a Christian despite himself it means that he

48 Flannery O’Connor, The Habit of Being, ed. by Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux,
1979), 350.
49 J. Ramsey Michaels, Passing by the Dragon: The Biblical Tales of Flannery O’Connor (Eugene, OR:
understands Christianity well?” Indeed, Hazel’s behavior gives no clear indication that he grasps or accepts God’s forgiveness. Similarly, Hazel’s actions lack charity, a component that the Christian tradition would consider essential to the Christian life. O’Connor admitted that Hazel is “in no state to practice charity” in the end. But then what has this experience of uncertainty produced in Hazel? What kind of faith does Hazel then turn to? Is it even faith conventionally understood?

Here, the reader should recall that Hazel has been obsessed with the theme of sin, an obsession expressed in his language of cleanliness. If you avoid sin, you have no need of Jesus and no need of a redeemer—so goes Hazel’s logic. Hazel’s conversion is thus an imaginative conversion to an awareness of sin, an awareness that in fact he is not clean. When Mrs. Flood asks him why he has begun to walk on rocks in his shoes, a reiteration of his childhood penalty, he responds, “to pay” (125), an acknowledgment that he is in fact not clean and in need of atonement. I agree with Srigley when she notes that Hazel’s response indicates that he still prides himself on his independence—that he will pay, as opposed to letting Jesus atone for his sins—but she goes a little too far when she argues that Hazel’s blindness “does not bring about a conversion or any reassessment of his spiritual condition, and he continues to understand God as disconnected from his own intellect and imagination.” In contrast, Hazel’s belief that he needs to pay only makes


51 Ingraffia, “‘If Jesus Existed I Wouldn’t Be Clean,’ ” 82; Srigley, “Penance and Love in Wise Blood,” 96.

52 O’Connor, Habit of Being, 335.

53 Srigley, Flannery O’Connor’s Sacramental Art, 64.
sense if he has begun to believe in the existence of sin and has abandoned his prior belief in his own inherent moral purity. Sin is not the same as evil, since the former is a theological category and not simply an ethical one. In other words, a belief in sin depends, in fact, upon some kind of belief in God, some kind of moral foundation independent of human construction. If Hazel’s penance was simply a matter of legal restitution, one would assume he would turn himself into the police for his murder. But in fact, Hazel never remarks that this is the root of his guilt, and his own moment of conversion occurs not with the evil of his murder, but with an evil done to him—the police officer pushing his car over the cliff. When Mrs. Flood asks him what he is paying for, Hazel responds “It don’t make any difference for what...I’m paying,” he then a moment later retorts to her, “You can’t see” (125). Hazel’s internal vision looks upon his guilt with eyes different from the world, different indeed from both a purely legal, secular vision, as well as a sacramental vision.

To a degree, Hazel’s journey, like the journeys of Louis and Maurice, coheres with Kierkegaard’s and Newman’s argument that an awareness of sinfulness is the first step towards true religious faith. But O’Connor intensifies the dialectical trajectory even more than the earlier novels. If Louis’ granddaughter is to be trusted, he had some nascent interest in returning to the practice of the sacraments, and in his own mind at least, he made some attempt to improve his behavior towards his family. Maurice meanwhile is more truculent, and ends his story with a negative prayer, a prayer for God to leave him alone, yet he at least acknowledges that belief in God entails learning to love in a new way. Whatever faith held by Hazel is even more truncated. As Cumberland notes, “Even at the end of the novel, there is not a single moment of human connection,
genuine kindness, or an expression of love.” Hazel may be redeemed, as O’Connor insists, but Hazel expresses no joy in this redemption, and the reader is left in doubt whether he is even aware of it.

Nonetheless, regardless of Hazel’s personal awareness of God’s grace, the narrative does imply a sacramental vision. Hazel’s story occurs, as Desmond notes, via negativa such that O’Connor’s belief in redemption through history is manifested in Wise Blood indirectly. Hazel begins the novel with epistemological convictions that the natural world forms the totality of reality and that he can order his life apart from the supernatural; even at the end, he cannot accept a sacramental view of creation. Yet, O’Connor implies that Hazel cannot see reality as it truly is. Christ dogs his path despite his intentions, from the frequent Jesus-laden curses of the car dealer’s son to the signs he sees on the roadside reminding him that Jesus died for his sins. Just as when he was a child, the adult Hazel still sees Jesus moving “from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing…” (11). Indeed, there is a similarity between Hazel’s childhood vision and his insistence to pay with his adult self-blinding—Hazel refuses to live with uncertainty. He refuses to follow Jesus “off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing” as a child and he refuses to accept that Christ has atoned for humanity’s sins as an adult. His desire to pay is an extension of his fear of uncertainty. So focused is his attention upon restitution that he fails to consider how grace may operate in the world


55 Desmond, Risen Sons, 55.
either in others or in himself, a grace that would open him to transcendence and the gift of forgiveness. Again, his blindness and flight from Mrs. Flood indicates his desire for isolation and his inability to see his own body as a means to grace for others. If Hazel does succeed in some meager way as a witness to Mrs. Flood, it is not through Hazel’s conscious intentions but through God’s grace that creates and sustains a sacramental world despite human beings’ best efforts to the contrary. Uncertainty ruptures Hazel’s faith in his own moral purity and capacity as a truth-maker, but uncertainty does not prompt him to embrace the sacramental vision of creation and history implied by the narrative.

**Spark’s Hidden Sacramental Imagination**

Spark’s work fascinatingly converges and diverges with the novels of Mauriac, Greene, and O’Connor. She is perhaps the least explicitly Catholic author of the four novelists, and yet, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) and *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963) both feature central characters who join Catholic religious communities after their conversions. In contrast, although Sarah desires to become a Catholic and Louis desires to return to the Church, death thwarts their intentions. Meanwhile, Maurice and Hazel demonstrate no inclination to join any kind of religious community.

That said, Haddox notes some similarities between O’Connor and Spark: both novelists “avow a religious dimension in their work; both have a marked hatred for sentimentality; and both are known for violence and shock,” and yet there are differences beyond the obvious issues of tone and setting. Haddox observes that while Spark always acknowledges the influence of Catholicism upon her work, she is more circumspect about how this influence should guide readings of her work. Although her novels contain more
explicit references to Catholicism than O’Connor, they are also presented with greater obscurity. The stories do not provide “the portentous intrusions of the divine into everyday life that characterize O’Connor’s fiction.” Finally, Haddox points out that while “O’Connor assumes the hostility of this audience…Spark dramatizes her complicity with it.” Thus despite Spark’s dark humor, incisive wit, and scathing critique of modern secularity, she paradoxically presents a much more flexible attitude than O’Connor regarding the issue of faith. Her work thereby exhibits greater sympathy for a non-religious reader. Her characters move to faith, but an ambiguity remains as if Spark is acknowledging the rough edges of faith. Thus, while both *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *The Girls of Slender Means*, like the previous novels, depict evil and human sin as a prompt for conversion, the sacramental vision is implied more than depicted. Nonetheless, the characters undergo an imaginative conversion in which they perceive reality as possessing a previously unseen depth.

The issue of Catholicism in Spark’s work is often contested. Like Greene, Spark was a convert to Catholicism, and she sees a connection between her conversion and her writing, claiming that it provides “a norm from which one can depart,” but she claims that “I never think of myself as a Catholic when I’m writing because it’s so difficult to think of myself as anything else. It’s all instinctive.” In an interview Spark argues that she does not consider her novels religious (with the possible exception of *Memento*.

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Mori), although she acknowledges that her beliefs inevitably influence her work.\textsuperscript{58}

Many critics, however, would prefer to downplay the issue of her personal religion. Martin McQuillan, for example, argues that “writing is not a theological activity, it purposely undermines essential and stable meanings, which presuppose and seek a single and authoritative centre. Meaning is always plural, writing is always cut adrift from its source and origin.” To McQuillan, Spark should only properly be considered a Catholic writer in the sense that she is concerned with universal themes within a contemporary context.\textsuperscript{59} McQuillan incorrectly implies that theological writing essentially would be an effort to achieve stability and eliminate plurality. No doubt some theological writing does make that attempt, but there is no reason to assume all of it does. Further, does the existence of plurality necessarily mean that there is no ground, no “authoritative centre”? McQuillan pushes his claim too far when he argues that “writing is always cut adrift from its source and origin,” a curious claim indeed in that he makes it in the context of a book which ends with his interview of Spark herself. I am not here advocating authorial intention as the final criteria of a text’s meaning, for, as discussed earlier, Nussbaum (amongst others) points out that a text may have meaning beyond the author’s conscious intentions. Rather, my suspicion is that a novel, as a historical, cultural product inevitably references various sources of meaning, and if a narrative engages with a specific tradition or traditions, religious or otherwise, it would be

\textsuperscript{58} Muriel Spark, “‘The Same Informed Air’: An Interview with Muriel Spark,” Martin McQuillan, in \textit{Theorizing Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction}, ed. Martin McQuillan (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002), 217, 222.

incorrect to regard the text as “cut adrift from its source and origin.” This is not to deny plurality; it is to recognize the complicated manner in which plurality emerges. As Gerard Carruthers argues, one can certainly appropriate Spark in a variety of ways—the influence of her Scottish or Jewish background, for instance—but this need not render the Catholic influence as irrelevant.60

The critic should keep in mind Spark’s “nevertheless principle.” As Joseph Hynes explains, although the critic cannot regard any interpretation of a text as possible, one’s reading must nonetheless accommodate multiple “subreadings.” “The ‘nevertheless principle’ underlies Spark’s imaginative scope as well as her consistent efforts to express paradox, oxymoron. Spark is decidedly a ‘both/and’ writer, rather than an ‘either/or’ writer.”61 In an essay, Spark remarks, “I find that much of my literary composition is based on the nevertheless idea. I act upon it. It was on the nevertheless principle that I turned Catholic.”62 As Martin Stannard explains, Spark distinguishes between “literal truth” and “anagogical or mystical / symbolic / artistic truth.”63 Indeed, Spark revels in the paradox that truth could come from fiction. In an interview, she dubs her work as “a pack of lies,” but lies “out of which a kind of truth emerges.”64


63 Martin Stannard, Muriel Spark: The Biography (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 146.

Spark describes her aesthetic of “lies” in her call for the “desegregation of art.” By this, she means “the liberation of our minds from the comfortable cells of lofty sentiment in which they are confined and never really satisfied.” Spark argues that while literature has enjoyed a rich heritage of socially-conscious literature and art, the problem is that the audience thinks the provoked emotions sufficiently fulfill their “moral obligations.” Instead, “I advocate the arts of satire and of ridicule…Ridicule is the only honorable weapon we have left.”

Spark’s biting satire echoes similar critiques of modernity we have already seen in a style uniquely her own. She frequently satirizes the human illusion that a person can consciously fashion one’s life according to one’s desires. Often, this satire takes a horrific turn. In *The Driver’s Seat* (1970)—which Spark describes as her favorite book—the reader quickly perceives that the main character, Lise, plots her own death. One of her instructions to her chosen murderer is that he is not to have sex with her until after he has killed her. The murderer rapes her nonetheless. In other words, she fails to achieve complete control despite her meticulous planning. Indeed, her actual death is chillingly described: “As the knife descends to her throat she screams, evidently perceiving how final is finality” (117). The language provokes the possibility that Lise in her last moments realizes her own illusion, “how final is finality,” although the narrator limits its

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67 Carruthers, “Muriel Spark as Catholic Novelist,” 83.

omniscience with “evidently,” thereby allowing a tinge of ambiguity to remain.

*The Driver’s Seat* is a particularly bleak novel in Spark’s oeuvre; yet her critique of human arrogance in other works is likewise scathing. Often in this critique, a sacramental vision is implied, but a vision often blurred, buried under satire and ridicule. As Alan Bold observes, “Like Gerard Manley Hopkins, Sparks subscribes privately to the notion that the world is charged with the grandeur of God. Still, she prefers to manipulate characters indifferent to this grandeur.”69 Hélène Cixous likewise notes that “Spark underscores the irreparable duplicity of the universe, where ordinary things coexist with supernatural ones in hideous harmony.” But Spark is never didactic, for often “dubious motives induce spectacular conversions. Religion is smeared with hypocrisy because nothing is sacred that is not also bound for sacrilege.”70 Her characters may experience uncertainty, and may even come to some kind of religious faith, but conversion does not eliminate ambiguity. Carruthers argues that “Spark, operating from within the most orthodox Catholic epistemological traditions, nonetheless suggests that good and evil are constantly in collision and that humans never have an entirely absolute sense of these things. All that is certain is that both conditions pertain.”71 Through a dialectical maneuver, Spark’s fiction undermines the closed immanent frame and ridicules the arrogance of her characters, who believe they control their fate apart from God; yet, the

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71 Carruthers, “Muriel Spark as Catholic Novelist,” 80.
satire often only hints at a sacramental world.

In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *The Girls of Slender Means*, as Robert Hosmer observes, the reader finds Spark’s “preoccupation with manipulation and the themes of good and evil, particularly with the presence of evil as a paradoxical moment of grace for conversion.” Both novels feature sharp temporal shifts into the future before returning to the central narrative, a technique Spark also employs in *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965), her longest and most personal work since the main character, like Spark, is half-Jewish and a convert to Catholicism. These temporal leaps shift the reader’s interest from “what” will happen to “why.” In the case of *Miss Brodie*, this “why” involves the betrayal by Sandy Stranger of her charismatic teacher, a betrayal intertwined with Sandy’s eventual conversion.

In the 1930s, Miss Brodie is a teacher at the Marcia Blaine School for Girls in Edinburgh. Her experimental methods irritate the headmistress, but so loyal are Miss Brodie’s students to her that the headmistress can never find any justification for firing Miss Brodie, until after Sandy’s betrayal several years later. Spark has acknowledged that Miss Brodie is inspired by one of her own teachers as a girl in Edinburgh, a Miss Kay. However, Spark cautions that this similarity must not be pushed too far since if the real Miss Kay “could have met ’Miss Brodie’ Miss Kay would have put the fictional character firmly in her place. And yet no pupil of Miss Kay’s has failed to recognize her, with joy.

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and great nostalgia, in the shape of Miss Jean Brodie in her prime.” The similarity between Miss Kay and Miss Brodie, according to Spark’s recollections, appear to have less to do with specific details and more to do with Miss Kay’s alternate way of living as a female within the provincial, Calvinistic world of 1930s Edinburgh. But Spark’s depiction of Brodie is unconcerned with nostalgia; instead, the satire creates a biting critique not just of the time period, but of a kind of modern anthropology, one in which the self creates its own moral order. This is most clearly seen in the connection between Brodie and the theme of fascism, but the narrative is subtle, one that exposes both Brodie’s flaws and manifests her charisma.

The story opens with Miss Brodie meeting her “set,” a small group of girls whom she deems to be the fruits of her “prime,” that is, she devotes particular time and attention upon these girls even after they have advanced beyond her classroom in the Junior school into the Senior school. The narrative quickly informs the reader of Brodie’s unique influence upon her pupils, for these are students who know about the Italian Renaissance painters, Mussolini, Einstein, and the possibility that the Bible is not true (2). Part of Brodie’s charisma lies in her romantic tales of her travels and former lovers. Six years previously, Miss Brodie beguiles her charges with tales of her recent summer trip to Egypt (7, 8). But even here, the alert reader notes something is wrong. As Lodge notes, Miss Brodie lives within the world of her own fantasies and will rework the story of a

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75 All references to the novel are to: Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009).
past love to suit her wishes. More troubling for Spark’s post-war audience, however, is Miss Brodie’s obsession with fascism.

Unlike the real-life Miss Kay, Miss Brodie’s alternate way of living as a woman is morally problematic. As Judy Suh notes, the novel captures how some women of Miss Brodie’s generation adopted fascism in reaction against the patriarchal status-quo in order “to exercise iconoclastic forms of individualism.” As Miss Brodie remarks to her students: “Mussolini has performed feats of magnitude and unemployment is even farther abolished under him than it was last year” (46, 47). And it is Miss Brodie’s fascism that eventually prompts Sandy, after many years, to betray Miss Brodie when she informs the headmistress that Miss Brodie has encouraged another student, Joyce Emily, to travel to Spain to fight for Franco, an action that results in her death (133, 134).

But the narrative allows a great degree of ambivalence. As Lodge observes, with Miss Brodie, “the good and the bad are inextricably entwined.” For example, Miss Brodie’s interest in Mussolini’s economic priorities also leads her to encourage her students to pray for the unemployed (39), and, under Miss Brodie’s supervision, Sandy encounters poverty for the first time, akin to a “first experience of a foreign country,” when Miss Brodie takes her set to a poor section of Edinburgh (32, 33). Further, Miss Brodie’s instructions upon art, history, and literature expand the girls’ education and imagination far beyond what would be possible under the other teachers. As Jennifer

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76 Lodge, “Uses and Abuses of Omniscience,” 163.


Lynn Randisi observes, “The quality Sandy most admires is Miss Brodie’s ability to transfigure the commonplace. But she sees that this power is also Miss Brodie’s most dangerous gift. For unlike Sandy, Miss Brodie places the idea above the individual, and in transfiguring the commonplace she replaces the world at hand with one of her own imagining.”

Miss Brodie’s actions, in other words, are akin to sacramental actions in that they deepen the world for the girls and expand their awareness of the possible. As an adult, Sandy becomes famous for a psychological book, “The Transfiguration of the Commonplace,” and the title is certainly apropos of Miss Brodie. Sandy’s text makes her famous and even as a cloistered nun, she must endure a steady stream of visitors who wish to interview her about “her strange book.” The novel closes with a visitor asking if Calvinism was the primary influence upon her childhood, to which Sandy, now “Sister Helena of the Transfiguration,” replies, “There was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime” (137).

Yet, Calvinism is not uninvolved in Sandy’s conversion to Catholicism, although its influence is channeled through Miss Brodie. Throughout the novel, Miss Brodie reminds her students that she is devoting the best years of her lives to fashioning her students to their fullest potential, but this formation occurs according to Brodie’s own fantasies. Sandy, whose family is “believing though not church-going” (36), comes in her

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later teenage years to discern the connection between Edinburgh and Calvinism: “In fact, it was the religion of Calvin which Sandy felt deprived, or rather a specified recognition of it. She desired this birthright; something definite to reject. It pervaded the place in proportion as it was unacknowledged” (115). Thus, Sandy may be culturally Christian, but she essentially lives in unbelief since Christian faith does not influence her behavior until she falls under the spell of Miss Brodie. But it is not specifically Calvinism that motivates Sandy’s conversion. Instead, Sandy rejects Calvinism by rejecting Miss Brodie’s version of it: “She thinks she is Providence, thought Sandy, she thinks she is the God of Calvin, she sees the beginning and the end” (129). A particular form of Calvinist elitism—that some are elected and not others—inficts Miss Brodie’s attitude about herself. Sandy “began to sense what went to the makings of Miss Brodie who had elected herself to grace in so particular a way and with more exotic suicidal enchantment than if she had simply taken to drink like other spinsters who couldn’t stand it any more” (116).

But Miss Brodie’s form of Calvinism, of course, is a perversion of its source, for, after all, in Calvin’s theology, only God can deem a person one of the elect—one cannot elect the self. Miss Brodie lives in secularized distortion of Calvin’s doctrine of predestination. Miss Brodie, god-like, orders her set, designating certain roles for her girls: for instance, Mary is deemed stupid and serves as the group’s scapegoat; Rose is to be “famous for sex” and have an adulterous affair with Mr. Lloyd, the art teacher, as a surrogate for Miss Brodie herself. But this self-ordering is ultimately delusional. She

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82 For a discussion of Mary as scapegoat, see Peter Robert Brown, “‘There’s Something about Mary:’ Narrative and Ethics in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie,” Journal of Narrative Theory 36, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 228-253.
never pauses to consider whether Rose wants to have an affair, nor does she display much self-reflection. In 1938, she believes that Germany and Austria “were now magnificently organized,” but even after the war, she can only say, “Hitler was rather naughty” (131; italics in the original).

Meanwhile, Sandy has the capacity for the self-reflection that is sorely lacking in her charismatic teacher. Sandy is not wholly innocent, as many critics point out. For instance, she can also be manipulative and, instead of Rose, she has the adulterous affair with Mr. Lloyd, thereby upsetting Miss Brodie’s scheme. However, I find such criticism often fails to appreciate Sandy’s position. Mr. Lloyd—a married teacher—takes the initiative (109, 131), but more importantly, Sandy comes under the spell of Miss Brodie during her impressionable adolescent years, and the burden of moral responsibility thereby falls more upon the teacher. Indeed, Miss Brodie’s entrenched narcissism reveals that she remains an adolescent emotionally and spiritually. She scapegoats Mary, manipulates others, and lives in her own fantasies. No wonder one of her captivated students exhibits similar behavior. Yet as far as the reader can know based on narrative perspective, Sandy alone amongst the set perceives the danger of Miss Brodie’s obsession with fascism.

Spark, in an interview, remarks about her characters, “I don’t put Sandy as the wise woman of the novel, I put Miss Brodie as the wiser - the thing about Miss Brodie is

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that she has no restraining influence whatsoever, whereas Sandy did." The narrative suggests that Catholicism would have given Miss Brodie this restraint, since she “was by temperament suited only to the Roman Catholic Church; possibly it could have embraced, even while it disciplined, her soaring and diving spirit, it might even have normalised her” (90). As Dorothea Walker observes, “The church, for Spark, is the refiner of excess.” Miss Brodie, the teacher who insists that “art is greater than science” (24), would have been suited to the aesthetic dimensions of Catholicism.

But this is the world of a Spark novel, and good never exists with purity; evil always abounds. After Sandy’s conversion to the Catholic Church, she discovers “quite a number of [Catholic] Fascists much less agreeable than Miss Brodie” (134). Spark’s novel makes no claim for a tidy, conversion story. It is not literature as apologetics. Paradox and ambivalence remain. The reader affectively experiences the allure of Miss Brodie upon her pupils, and recognizes that Sandy’s conversion is less than perfect, for it occurs not out of the modeling of a saint, but out of reaction to moral failure. Thus this conversion occurs dialectically. Miss Brodie’s deleterious influence leads to Sandy’s affair with Mr. Lloyd, a Roman Catholic, from whom “she extracted, among other things, his religion as a pith from a husk. Her mind was as full of his religion as a night sky is full of things visible and invisible. She left the man and took his religion and became a nun in the course of time” (132). Faith occurs because of a sin, but the sin relates to Sandy’s uncertainty over her relationship with Miss Brodie.

84 “An Interview with Dame Muriel Spark,” 151.

85 Walker, Muriel Spark, 44.
Conventional dialectical characteristics—hubris over the self, the absence of God from a disenchanted world—occur, but the narrative only hints at potential sacramentality obliquely and paradoxically. Miss Brodie unwittingly manifests both the dialectical and the sacramental. She believes in her capacity to order her set as she sees fit, but she cannot restrain herself from excessive exercise of this capacity (such as in sending poor Joyce Emily to her death)—these are dialectical traits of a human arrogantly moving in a disenchanted world. But Miss Brodie also prompts a “transfiguration” in her pupil Sandy, expanding her vision of what is possible that ultimately leads to Sandy’s acceptance that grace may exist in a fallen world.

*The Girls of Slender Means* is likewise a story about a conversion prompted by evil with only an oblique hint at sacramentality as an alternative, but the novel depicts evil more dramatically than *Miss Brodie*, and in this regard, is more akin to O’Connor’s stories. In *Slender Means*, the story centers on the conversion of Nicholas Farringdon, one that will eventually lead to his martyrdom in Haiti, an event that is mentioned by the third page of the story.

Even more explicitly than the character of Sandy in *Miss Brodie*, Nicholas fulfills our paradigm of uncertainty prompting a movement towards faith. The novel begins with a parody of a fairy tale (“Long ago in 1945…”) that signals a generational contrast between the novel’s publication (1963) and the central story, which occurs between V-E day and V-J day during the summer of 1945 The title refers to a group of young women

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86 Haddox, *Hard Sayings*, 64.

and adolescents who, due to their lack of financial resources, live together in the May of Teck Club in London. One of the young women, Jane Wright, works for a publisher, and through her, Nicholas, an unpublished author, becomes acquainted with these women of slender means. Nicholas lives in uncertainty. He is described by one character, Rudi Bittesch, as a failed anarchist, who disturbs other anarchists when he discusses original sin (45): “He will finish up as a reactionary Catholic, to obey the Pope,” declares Rudi (37). Rudi likewise informs Jane that Nicholas changes his preference for women or men, wonders whether to live in France or England, and alternates between the temptation to commit suicide or to convert under the influence of the famous Catholic priest, Father D’Arcy (42). In regards to his publishing career, Jane describes him as “still feeling his way” (27), but this could just as appropriately describe his life in general.

Nicholas’ uncertainty is rooted in his idealism. He projects onto the May of Teck Club the ideal of a nurturing community free of materialistic corruption. Jane feeds his vision of her home:

She told him things, in her clever way of intuition, which fitted his ideal of the place. In fact, it was not an unjust notion, that it was a miniature expression of a free society, that it was a community held together by the graceful attributes of a common poverty. He observed that at no point did poverty arrest the vitality of its members but rather nourished it. Poverty differs vastly from want, he thought. (70)

Among the women of slender means is an elocution teacher named Joanna Childe, who intrigues Nicholas with her recitation of Hopkin’s famous poem, “The Wreck of the Deutschland.” Joanna is described by Jane as having little regard for her own talent, and by Nicholas as “the slightest bit melancholy on the religious side” (94). Joanna is an idealist herself when it comes to love. At a younger age, she had fallen in love with a
young curate: “It had come to nothing. Joanna had decided that this was to be the only
love of her life.” Thus, upon subsequent encounter with an even more attractive curate,
Joanna suppresses her feelings; otherwise, she would dishonor her earlier love: “Once
you admit that you can change the object of a strongly felt affection, you undermine the
whole structure of love and marriage, the whole philosophy of Shakespeare’s sonnet”
(14). Nicholas becomes so charmed by Joanna’s poetic demeanor that he records her
recitation of “The Wreck of the Deutschland” (89).

But Nicholas saves his greatest idealism for his sexual relationship with Selina.
Selina enhances her attractiveness by her comportment, as she describes in her daily
recital of a formula learned in a “Poise Course”: “Poise is perfect balance, an equanimity
of body and mind, complete composure whatever the social scene. Elegant dress,
immaculate grooming, and perfect deportment all contribute to the attainment of self-
confidence” (39; italics in original). Nicholas is not content with Selina’s physical beauty;
he also desires to form her according to his dreams.

He loved her as he loved his native country. He wanted Selina to be an ideal
society personified amongst her bones, he wanted her beautiful limbs to obey her
mind and heart like intelligent men and women, and for these to possess the same
grace and beauty as her body. Whereas Selina’s desires were comparatively
humble, she only wanted, at that particular moment, a packet of hair-grips which
had just then disappeared from the shops for a few weeks.

Nicholas is not clueless about the gap between Selina and himself; he recognizes that
Selina does not share his principles: “It was incredible to him that she should not share
with him an understanding of the lovely attributes of dispossession and poverty, her body
was so austere and economically furnished” (77). He is baffled at the dissonance between
Selina’s physical appearance—which conforms to his idealism of a certain kind of
poverty—and Selina’s behavior. Nicholas thus finds himself moved by two different aesthetic experiences: Joanna’s poetic deportment and Selina’s physical attractiveness.

This contrast further widens in the novel’s climax. A buried, unexploded bomb, left over from an air raid and missed by the bomb removal squad, detonates behind the house, and spawns a fire due to a subsequent gas-main explosion. As a result, many of the girls find themselves trapped in a bathroom, but the single window is too narrow for most of them to climb through to the adjacent roof. Meanwhile, firemen try desperately to pry open a bricked-up skylight so as to lower a ladder down to the trapped girls.

Nicholas, atop the adjacent roof, assists Selina through the window, one of the few women thin enough to escape, while Joanna is trapped along with the others. However, Selina climbs back into the house only to emerge once more onto the roof clutching her prized possession: a beautiful Schiaparelli dress. “Poise is perfect balance,” wryly comments the narrator about Selina’s display of indifference regarding her still trapped friends. But her actions impact Nicholas: “Later, reflecting on this lightning scene, he could not trust his memory as to whether he then involuntarily signed himself with the cross. It seemed to him, in recollection, that he did” (105). Selina’s selfish actions contrast with Joanna, who sings to her fellow women from the Anglican evening psalter. She remains behind and continues to sing as others scramble up the ladder in the now opened skylight, and her final words before the house collapses references Psalm 130, a prayer of hope for reconciliation with God: “Out of the deep have I called…” (109; italics in original).

The sight of Selina’s selfishness and the tragedy of Joanna’s death become catalysts for Nicholas’s conversion. Again, one notes the dialectical movement, but as in
Miss Brodie the narrative only hints at a subsequent sacramental imagination. Amongst his writings, Jane finds the comment that “a vision of evil may be as effective to conversion as a vision of good” (118). Grace is only possible if one first recognizes evil and sin. Selina, meanwhile, seems unable to face the consequences of her actions; she screams at the sight of Nicholas in horror, embarrassing her new husband (116, 117). In the world of Spark, good and evil are always intertwined. In the jubilant, mass celebration of V-J Day before the royal family, a fight breaks out between American and British military personal, but the narrator ironically comments, “It was a glorious victory” (120). Meanwhile, Nicholas’ vision has already been altered by the sight of evil; he alone notices a seaman stabbing a woman (118, 119). The narrative ends before the reader learns the details of Nicholas’ conversion to Catholicism and vocation to the priesthood. Spark thus leaves the reader to recall from prior pages his subsequent movement to faith, and to recognize that an event of evil can paradoxically lead to a sacramental imagination.

Uncertainty and the Conversion of the Imagination

In the works discussed above, faith emerges out of experiences of tragedy and evil, experiences that undermine previous certainties about the self, others, and the world. The Catholic novelists reverse the traditional conundrum of theodicy—how can a good God allow evil in the world—and interrogate whether one can speak of evil apart from some form of belief in the divine. Further, the stories consistently deconstruct a closed immanent frame and critique the confidence of the modern, self-ordering person. But the stories offer this critique affectively, jarring the reader to recognize the consequences of the characters’ various experiences of uncertainty. Characters undergo imaginative
transformations in which uncertainty interrogates their previously assumed disenchanted world, and now discern an enchanted world intertwined with grace. Imagination then emerges as the convergence between the intellect and the emotions, an epistemological avenue for how one perceives, understands, and relates to creation and human actions.

The characters’ imaginative conversion opens them to transcendence and the possibility of faith, yet it would be a mistake to categorize this faith univocally, for they adopt faith in a variety of forms. In Chapter Two, I tentatively began my argument that these novels present faith that more closely follows an existentialist model than an intellectual-assent model, and indeed, the characters’ journeys towards belief do not rely upon their acceptance of ecclesial authority or explicit doctrines. Piety appears occasionally, but often it serves as a source of rebellion for the protagonists. Instead, the novelists appeal to their secular audiences through a dialectical movement in which the absence of God is depicted and often pushed to some extreme. The logic of a purely materialistic worldview is thereby demonstrated as inadequate. Character’s struggles play out through dramatizations of evil and tragedy. Saints are conspicuously rare and sinners abound. The portrayals of greed, misdirected sexual passion, and the grotesque, often through dark humor, critique various types of modern anthropologies to offer instead a sacramental vision.

The novels present the theologian with various “fragments” (in Tracy’s sense) of thinking about faith. This “thinking” is not primarily conceptual but imaginative, and engages the reader’s affections as much as the intellect. Since the stories concern conversion, they intersect with a question often associated with fundamental theology: what are the conditions that make faith possible for an individual? The novels indicate
that a conversion to faith occurs through a shift in a person’s imagination. This is not to say, of course, that various conceptual arguments for faith cannot assist this shift. Nonetheless, the novels depict experiences of sin and tragedy that reorient the imagination towards faith, and compel the reader to reconsider how one envisions the world.
CHAPTER FOUR
SECOND PARADIGM: UNCERTAINTY AND THE INTERROGATION OF FAITH

In the previous chapter, I discussed the first paradigm for uncertainty’s relationship to faith by examining the protagonists of four Catholic novelists. The general progression was a movement from unbelief to belief, from a disenchanted world to an enchanted, sacramental world. This progression, though, is fundamentally imaginative in nature, in which the characters’ emotional reactions to various experiences undermine previous beliefs about the world, human relationships, and the self. The movement to faith has epistemological consequences, then, but these consequences are affective as much as conceptual in nature. Nonetheless, faith becomes a new medium via which the characters discern the world imaginatively. Faith then resolves uncertainty.

In contrast, in the second paradigm, protagonists experience uncertainty with a prior background as a Christian believer. This background is more than simply cultural Christianity since it includes the explicit practice of Christianity and confidence, to various degrees, in their faith. Uncertainty then causes protagonists to interrogate their prior beliefs and compels them to face a choice: the believer can either return to their faith informed by experience, abandon faith, or stay in a dialectical struggle between uncertainty and faith. But even the first option is fraught with complications, for this return is rarely a simple reiteration. Instead, the return may take the form of a faith corrected and deepened in light of uncertainty; or it only partially resembles the initial
faith. In the latter case, this faith is often reconfigured imaginatively so as to resemble the previous faith in certain essentials, but also dares to diverge from it in some fashion. Regardless of the protagonists’ personal response, their experiences of uncertainty interrogate their faith.

The novels thereby provoke the theologian to reflect upon how uncertainty plays out in relationship to an earlier understanding of faith. Does a return to faith resolve uncertainty in some fashion? If so, such a conclusion converges with the first paradigm. Flannery O’Connor’s *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960) exemplifies this treatment of uncertainty’s relationship to faith; the narrative presents uncertainty as a corrective to a previously flawed conception of faith, a corrective that prompts the protagonist to return to an orthodox faith with a deeper commitment. Yet, in novels by Graham Greene, Mary Gordon, and Shusaku Endo, uncertainty is not resolved by a character’s continual commitment to faith.

Regardless, faith again emerges as more existential in nature than propositional. Faith is not, first and foremost, a conscious assent to a conceptually articulated belief. Instead, faith continues to be depicted primarily as an imaginative orientation in trust and hope that grace is indeed active in the world. Further, in the novels where uncertainty is left unresolved, characters (as is often the case in Greene’s, Gordon’s, and Endo’s works) recognize that faith exists in a tensile relationship with uncertainty. In other words, faith does not grant the believer absolute certainty in one’s religious beliefs. What emerges under this paradigm is greater space for ambiguity to remain at the end of the novels. Unlike in the first paradigm, faith does not eliminate uncertainty.
O’Connor’s Uncertainty as a Corrective to Faith in *The Violent Bear It Away*

O’Connor’s second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, presents the second paradigm as a return to a previous faith, only a faith now fully accepted and purified of its earlier flaws. As with the novels discussed in the last chapter, this novel also manifests a dialectical movement through an experience with evil, which ultimately reveals a sacramental vision of the world. Indeed, the novel’s protagonist, Francis Tarwater, struggles with the relationship between faith and uncertainty even more explicitly than Hazel in *Wise Blood*. Hazel considers himself certain of his atheistic beliefs, but Francis’s uncertainty concerns his prophetic vocation, as taught to him from his infancy by his great-uncle, Mason Tarwater. By the novel’s end, young Tarwater submits to his vocation and accepts his role as a modern day Old Testament prophet.

To paraphrase the subtitle of Tolkein’s *The Hobbit*, there is a “there and back again” structure to *The Violent Bear It Away*. The story begins with the fourteen year old Francis upon the farm of Powderhead, where he has lived for most of his life with Mason. After Mason’s death, Francis travels to the nearby city only to return to Powderhead after a tragic attempt to resist his vocation. Powderhead, the beginning and the ending of Francis’s journey, signifies the beginning and resolution of Francis’s faith. He ends where he begins, but only after a dialectical descent into tragedy and evil that parallels Lynch’s dramatic parabola of spiritual insight. This return is not to say that Francis’s faith is unaltered from its previous state; instead, uncertainty causes a former faith to be accepted as well as transfigured into a fuller, richer incarnational faith. Like Hazel in *Wise Blood*, Francis undergoes a journey that follows a Lynchian trajectory, but Francis’s
story charts a journey from a dialectical faith—one that splinters grace from matter—to a sacramental, analogical faith.

Richard Giannone argues that young Tarwater, Hazel, and the Misfit (from “A Good Man is Hard to Find”) “are ardent, even principled, exponents of nihilism.”¹ But this observation needs to be qualified; it applies to Tarwater most specifically after his murder of his cousin, Bishop, the developmentally disabled son of his uncle, Rayber. Tarwater, unlike Hazel and the Misfit, begins his story with some semblance of faith, for Mason teaches his great-nephew that he raised young Tarwater to be a prophet (338),² but young Tarwater treats his vocation in service of his own ego. His birth in a car wreck fills him with pride, as if he had been specially marked by God from the beginning (355). He approves of his great-uncle’s appearance after Mason “thrashed out his peace with the Lord” in the woods and returned “as if he had been wrestling a wildcat,” but the boy has little interest whenever Mason comes back, eager to accept God’s will, hungering for the “bread of life” (334). In other words, the boy’s interest in prophecy lies in its violent, dramatic actions, as oppose to its spiritual dimension. Although unlike Hazel and the Misfit, he has faith, it is a dialectical faith that desires to avoid the Incarnation. Francis prefers to dispense with Jesus and contend with God directly, without a mediator. Indeed, young Tarwater is disturbed at his great-uncle’s hunger to spend eternity eating the bread of life—“the loaves and fishes” of the Lord—afraid that such madness might have passed


on to him (342). As J. Ramsey Michaels notes, “Tarwater fears the materiality of such a [i.e. Mason’s] vision, the sheer physical hunger it summons within him.”\(^3\) Instead, he hopes his call from God is akin to the Old Testament prophets, one, in other words that does not depend upon a belief in Jesus, and desires that the call will be “a voice from out of a clear and empty sky…untouched by any fleshly hand or breath” (343).\(^4\)

Francis avoids an incarnational faith because to follow Jesus means to curb one’s own autonomous freedom. In this regard, Francis is akin to Hazel, and continues a critique discussed in the last chapter—O’Connor’s frequent criticism of a modern, self-ordering anthropology. Francis’ non-sacramental faith is exacerbated through the relationship between the “voice” of a stranger, “strange and disagreeable,” whom he hears almost immediately after the death of his great-uncle (337). Soon, while grudgingly digging a grave for Mason, young Tarwater comes to view the voice as a sign of liberation: “He began to feel that he was only just now meeting himself, as if as long as his uncle had lived, he had been deprived of his own acquaintance” (352). The strange voice soon aggravates Francis’ dialectical faith, and encourages him to assert his own independence by rejecting Jesus: “It ain’t Jesus or the devil. It’s Jesus or you” (354; italics in the original). The voice will change identifiers as the novel progresses, from stranger, to friend, to adversary, and even becomes incarnate at key points in the novel. Under the voice’s influence, Tarwater attempts to deny his vocation as a prophet through


\(^4\) Susan Srigley, *Flannery O’Connor’s Sacramental Art* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 120.
the murder of Bishop.

Bishop is the linchpin of the novel. As Jason Ambrosiano notes, Bishop is the locus upon whom converges “the violent irrationality shared by his relatives into their prophetic realization manifested in Tarwater.” Rayber, Bishops’ father, had once been baptized by Mason as a child, but now has become an ardent atheist, claiming a twisted form of rationalism in which not just human endeavors but even human beings must serve a practical use. “Rayber,” notes John F. Desmond, “is O’Connor’s version of that type of secular rationalist which emerged in...the Enlightenment”; for Rayber, to be a mature adult is to be that autonomous self who creates one’s own identity under a rational paradigm. He describes Bishop as “useless forever” (351), although he realizes that he “had not conquered the problem of Bishop. He had only learned to live with it and had learned too that he could not live without it” (400). Bishop’s presence provokes attacks of a “hated love” which Rayber attempts to suppress through sheer willpower; indeed, he too attempted to drown Bishop, only to abandon the act at the thought of a life without him (418, 419).

Meanwhile, for young Tarwater, Bishop symbolizes his struggle over his prophetic vocation. Despite the voice’s manipulation, the great-uncle still exerts a powerful influence on the youth, Francis has not forgotten Mason’s command that Francis’ first act as a prophet is to baptize Bishop (335), but young Tarwater desires to

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assert his own independence. Under the voice’s encouragement, Francis attempts to burn the farmhouse and his uncle’s corpse within it before hitchhiking to the city (352, 361). During his ride, he admits his indecisiveness to the driver, Meeks, claiming he will wait to see if something happens once he arrives in the city. And if nothing happens, “Then I’ll make it happen. . .I can act” (381). Tarwater insists repeatedly on his ability to act. Once he arrives at Rayber’s house, Tarwater’s vocation is confirmed at the sight of Bishop: “. . .the revelation came, silent, implacable, direct as a bullet. . .He only knew, with a certainty sunk in despair, that he was expected to baptize the child he saw and begin the life his great-uncle had prepared him for. He knew that he was called to be a prophet and that the ways of his prophecy would not be remarkable” (388, 389).

As Christina Bieber Lake observes, “[young] Tarwater wants a glamorous calling,” and if he baptizes Bishop, his life would lack distinction, and he would become like his uncle, following Jesus as the bread of life. When Tarwater nearly baptizes Bishop at a park in a fountain, only to be stopped by Rayber, the voice retorts, “If you baptize once, you’ll be doing it the rest of your life.” Shortly thereafter, the voice becomes incarnate as a stranger on a park bench. The stranger, whose voice sounds familiar and whose eyes “held a malevolent promise of unwanted friendship” tells Francis, “‘don’t let no jackasses tell you what to do’…An interesting coincident, his friend observed, that he should say the same thing as I’ve been saying” (433). Again, the voice plays upon Francis’ desire to live according to his own desires and freedom.

But Tarwater’s rejection of Bishop mirrors his rejection of a sacramental faith.

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7 Christina Bieber Lake, The Incarnational Art of Flannery O’Connor (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 158.
Indeed, Bishop is the Christ figure in the story, the figure of unconditional love, marginalized from society, and misunderstood and rejected by both Rayber and Tarwater.\textsuperscript{8} He is O’Connor’s “grotesque” element of the novel, through whom “divine mystery” is manifested.\textsuperscript{9} It is through violence upon Bishop, the innocent who suffers Christ-like for the sins of other, that the voice eventually claims Tarwater. The voice, “his friend—no longer a stranger,” deters Tarwater from baptizing Bishop (429, 430). After his near baptism of Bishop, Tarwater insists to his invisible friend, “I wasn’t going to baptize him, he [Tarwater] said, flinging the silent words at the silent face. I’d drown him first. Drown him then, the face appeared to say” (432). The voice gives Tarwater an action to replace the sacramental action of baptism. At the nearby Cherokee Lodge, where Rayber has taken Francis and Bishop with the plan of taking the boy back to Powderhead, Tarwater looks directly at Bishop and claims defiantly to the receptionist, “You can’t just say NO. . .You got to do NO” (427). Tarwater’s action upon this “no” comes explicitly at the prompting of the voice. For, in a boat upon Cherokee Lodge’s lake, Francis sits with Bishop in the dark, yet he can see his friend’s “violet-colored” eyes watching him (461): “No finaler act than this, his friend said. In dealing with the dead you have to act. There’s no mere word sufficient to say NO” (462).

Tarwater’s defiant “no” is a “no” to his vocation. As he explains to a truck driver after he drowns Bishop, “. . .I had to prove I wasn’t no prophet and I’ve proved it. . .I proved it by drowning him. Even if I did baptize him that was only an accident” (458).

\textsuperscript{8} Gary M. Ciuba, \textit{Desire, Violence, and Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 149-51.

\textsuperscript{9} Lake, \textit{The Incarnational Art}, 147.
This “accident” of baptism does not produce an immediate conversion; he still insists he is not hungry for the bread of life (459). But his murder challenges his self-certainty. His attempts to avoid baptizing Bishop in fact produces the baptism. Thus, “he now confronts an interior world of mystery which reason is powerless to control or comprehend fully.”

Despite the exertion of his will, Francis discovers that complete autonomy is elusive.

Nonetheless, Francis remains enthralled to the voice. As Francis travels back to Powderhead after Bishop’s murder, the voice becomes incarnate as a strange driver who picks up the hitchhiking boy; here, the reader should recall O’Connor’s explicit identification of the voice as the devil. Indeed, Francis’s relationship with the voice fulfills Mason’s prophecy: “‘You are the kind of boy,’ the old man once said, ‘that the devil is always going to be offering to assist, to give you a smoke or a drink or a ride, and to ask you your bidnis’” (367). The driver’s appearance looks familiar to Tarwater, and indeed, his lavender shirt recalls the violet eyes of the voice during Tarwater’s murder of Bishop (469).

After drinking the devil’s drugged whiskey, the youth proclaims, “It’s better than the Bread of Life!” and completes his attempted rejection of his great-uncle’s teaching (471). Shortly thereafter, he passes out. After the disturbing rape scene, the devil reappears out of the woods carrying two articles of Tarwater, a corkscrew—a gift from Rayber—and his hat, which the youth has jealously guarded throughout the story. Meanwhile, Tarwater’s “hands were loosely tied with a lavender handkerchief which his friend had thought of as an exchange for the hat” (472). The devil completes his

10 Desmond, Risen Sons, 115.

possession of Tarwater, both by stealing Tarwater’s possessions and by metaphorically binding him with the devil’s own color.

Viewed through Lynch’s parabolic trajectory, Francis has bottomed out. The rape, however is not the ultimate revelation; in other words, it is certainly not the moment of grace, but it does clear his vision. Near the novel’s beginning, Tarwater sets fire to Powderhead—an act of willful violence—and now, upon his return, he once again begins a fire near Powderhead, but this time to cleanse the violence done upon him, that is, he burns the woods where the incarnate devil has raped him. This duality of O’Connor’s imagery matches the multiplicity of fire’s symbolic meanings. It creatively holds together both the flames of hell and spiritual purification. Mason once predicts to Rayber, “THE PROPHET I RAISE UP OUT OF THIS BOY WILL BURN YOUR EYES CLEAN” (379; capitalization in original). But in fact it is young Tarwater’s eyes, after being raped, that look as if “they had been lifted out, scorched, and dropped back into his head” (472). If young Tarwater’s eyes have been scorched by the devil’s sexual violence, it is also through fire that he purges every spot in the woods touched by his rapist.

Francis then slowly begins his trek home: “He knew that his destiny forced him on to a final revelation. His scorched eyes no longer looked hollow or as if they were meant only to guide him forward. They looked as if, touched with a coal like the lips of the prophet, they would never be used for ordinary sights again.” (473). His “friend,” however, is still with him, urging Tarwater to claim the house for them both: “Ever since you first begun to dig the grave, I’ve stood by you, never left your side, and now we can

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12 Srigley, Flannery O’Connor’s Sacramental Art, 131.
take it over together, just you and me.” But now, Tarwater reacts in horror, and feels his friend’s “presence” like “a violet shadow hanging around his shoulders.” Only with fire is his companion, now named “his adversary” (a traditional name for the devil), “consumed.” (475) As Gary M. Ciuba notes, “Having felt in his own flesh the agony of victimization, the victimizer of Bishop turns his heart instead to the God of nonviolence.” Like Hazel, the agent of violence experiences violence in return.

As he moves towards the house, Tarwater’s hunger increases, indicating that Tarwater’s faith is transforming into a sacramental faith. Earlier, throughout his time with Rayber, Tarwater has trouble eating. As Lake notes, Tarwater’s hunger is a sacramental hunger, for it craves the union between matter and grace: “Tarwater’s hunger for the bread must be literal here as well as spiritual—and it is. He cannot hold food down through most of the novel, and yet he feels himself strangely drawn to a loaf of bread he sees in a town bakery.” Only at the end of his journey does he acquiesce to this sacramental craving. Struck by the fact that his uncle’s body, which the boy believed he burned, still exists, Tarwater has a vision in which he sees his uncle, along with countless dead, being feed from “a single basket.” Francis becomes “aware at last of the object of his hunger, aware that it was the same as the old man’s. . .His hunger was so great that he could have eaten all the loaves and fishes after they were multiplied” (477, 478).

Tarwater now sees himself in a line of prophets that stretch as far back as Abel. And like any prophet, he hears a commandment of God, “silent as seeds opening one at a time in

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13 Ciuba, *Desire, Violence, and Divinity*, 159.
14 Lake, *The Incarnational Art*, 171.
his blood”: “GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY” (478; capitalization in original). If Mason prophesized to Francis’ mother, “Go warn the children of God. . .of the terrible speed of justice” (368), Young Tarwater achieves an even greater insight, an insight into God’s mercy. Stooping on his great-uncle’s grave, the boy smears dirt on his forehead in a sacramental gesture. He then moves off “toward the dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping” to fulfill his vocation as a prophet (479).

In The Violent Bear It Away, uncertainty after faith affirms a faith that was initially taught to Francis, but one that he held perversely, more out of his own desire to justify his self-righteousness and belief in his unique entitlement to the vocation of a prophet. Such a conception of faith, O’Connor demonstrates, focuses upon the self such that the self sees its freedom as separate from the God revealed in Christ. It is a dialectical faith that has splintered grace from matter. Francis initially would prefer a closed immanent world, for he rejects Christ’s incarnational interference with the natural world. Prior to his uncle’s death, Francis hopes that if God is to interfere in the world, it is so Francis can demonstrate miracles to the sinful city for the aggrandizement of his own ego; he has no desire to minister to the marginalized such as Bishop. Uncertainty then becomes a corrective to a stunted faith, one that reveals and navigates the tension between God’s justice and mercy, and violently wrenches Francis towards an incarnational vision of creation.

Further, Francis’s emphasis that one must act—and not simply believe conceptually—points out the holistic nature of all faith, whether belief or unbelief.
Rayber tries to live out his unbelief primarily through his intellect. In contrast, Francis discerns that to have faith to the fullest degree requires the intellect and the emotions to converge and produce action in the world. Rayber’s failure to drown Bishop, and his frequent bursts of love for his son, implies that his faith in his unbelief is not complete, at least affectively. Negatively, O’Connor thereby implies that any faith, religious or otherwise, requires not just the intellect, but one’s complete imagination of the world, the intellect and the affections. Goaded by the voice, Francis attempts to enact his unbelief upon Bishop, but, even after the murder, his unbelief remains thwarted, as is indicated by his own emotional uncertainty about himself despite his conceptual justifications. Further, if through violence he believes he can obstruct his vocation to prophecy, so it is through violence that his imagination is traumatized as he realizes the repercussions of his actions. His emotions thereby provoke an imaginative conversion, a conversion in which his emotions open his eyes to his own sins and prepare for the experience of grace and transcendence. Only after this reorientation of his vision can he again return to belief, a belief now purified and holistic.

**Faith and Unresolved Uncertainty**

Tarwater’s experience of uncertainty prompts a return to a previous faith, a return that also resolves uncertainty. But what about novels that allow uncertainty to remain unresolved by faith? In my discussions below, I argue that the novels warn against a faith that insists upon certainty about one’s religious beliefs and/or confidence in one’s personal righteousness. The protagonists in these stories often begin content with their faith, or they have not reflected greatly upon it. It is, for the most part, an untroubled
faith. The protagonists’ uncertainties then linger in a tensile dialogue with faith. Even when faith is ultimately affirmed, it is nonetheless fragile.

In his book, *Anatheism*, Richard Kearney argues that a believer’s experience of the “other” frequently involves an encounter with atheism as an essential “moment” of otherness; this experience is often productive so as to facilitate “a necessary purging of the perversions of religious power.” Anatheism is a return to faith, a second naïveté (to use Paul Ricouer’s famous phrase), in which faith is reconfigured anew after critical reflection. In this reconfiguration, Kearney recognizes the significance of uncertainty, for “the anatheist moment is one available to anyone who experiences instants of deep disorientation, doubt, or dread, when we are no longer sure exactly who we are or where we are going.” Faith always remains a wager and moves between uncertainty and (re)affirmation: “The bracing oscillation between doubt and faith, withdrawal and consent is the aperture that precedes and follows each wager. It is the guarantee of human freedom before the summons of the stranger. The choice to believe or not believe is indispensable to the anatheist wager. And it is a choice made over and over, never once and for all.” The believer makes this wager repeatedly, always in freedom, since a true wager can only occur in freedom. The believer then must respect the freedom of others to wager as they choose, from theism, to atheism, to a critical agnosticism, in order to

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15 But Kearney also deems a “hermeneutics of suspicion” as necessary, but not sufficient to account for a “surplus of meaning” found in the positive experiences of belief. Cf. Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 152, 153, 167; italics in original.


prevent religion from sliding into tyranny.\textsuperscript{18}

Indeed, in their encounter with the “other,” an other who frequently manifests a vision of life outside of Christianity, the protagonists discussed below likewise face a wager akin to Kearney’s anatheism: they may walk away from faith, struggle to preserve their previous faith, or engage in some kind of creative appropriation of faith that entails a reconfiguration of both self and belief. In such cases, this reconfigured faith is not a carbon-copy of the initial faith since it often involves re-imagining belief in light of experiences of uncertainty. Tarwater demonstrates this latter choice in that his return to faith has diminished the ego-centric nature of his previous faith. However, the following protagonists differ from young Tarwater since their uncertainties often remain unresolved.

\textbf{Greene’s Uncertainty in the Tales of Two Priests}

More than forty years separate \textit{The Power and the Glory} (1940) from \textit{Monsignor Quixote} (1982), a time-span that bookends significant changes in Western culture and Catholic theology and piety. Nonetheless, the novels produce a rich dialogue, a dialogue framed by convergences which thereby heighten their differences. Besides the obvious observation that they both feature priests as protagonists, the novels demonstrate elements of both paradigms. I am discussing the works here since the second paradigm best describes the struggles of the two protagonists, both of whom question their faith under the challenge of communism. But if the earlier novel presents communism as a sharp adversary, the latter engages communism more dialogically.

\textsuperscript{18}Kearney, \textit{Anatheism}, 16, 40.
The Power and the Glory, Greene’s most famous novel, is based on Greene’s travels to the Mexican states of Tabasco and Chiapas in 1938 when Catholic worship was severely restricted.\(^{19}\) As in The End of the Affair, many of the characteristics of the “Catholic novel” can be found: the sinner as the heart of Christianity, mystical substitution, and God as the Hound of Heaven.\(^{20}\) The sinner here is a whiskey priest who finds himself hunted by a communist lieutenant, and is the last practicing priest in the state. The moniker “whiskey priest” designates the unnamed priest as an alcoholic.\(^{21}\) Although his impact upon others falls more under the first paradigm, such as his influence upon the son of a pious family, the whiskey priest also demonstrates a tragic form of certainty about himself that uncertainty cannot shake—his belief in his own damnation while blind to any potential good he may do beyond his sacramental duties. Greene famously writes in an essay that, with the exception of the Incarnation, “Human nature is not black and white but black and grey.”\(^{22}\) By this remark, Greene observes that human goodness is often inexorably wrapped with evil and sin. The infamous  

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\(^{21}\) As Cedric Watts notes, the whiskey priest is never actually shown drinking whiskey (although he certainly drinks a variety of other forms of alcohol). Watts argues this discrepancy is an example of the many paradoxes in the novel that disclose a gap between appearance and reality. See “Janiform Greene: The Paradoxes and Pleasures of The Power and the Glory,” in Dangerous Edges of Graham Greene: Journeys with Saints and Sinners, ed. Dermot Gilvary and Darren J. N. Middleton (London: Continuum, 2011), 98.

“Greeneland” in *The Power and the Glory* presents uncertainty in various shades of grey such that it remains unresolved in the whiskey priest.

Greene once remarked that “the priest, for all his recollection of periods in his life when he was different, never changed.” But Greene sells his own creation short. It is true that the reader catches glimpses of the whiskey priest’s former life before the persecutions. For instance, the dogmatically atheist lieutenant—described in terms akin to a religious ascetic—sees a photo of the priest from his pre-persecution days and views him as someone who has been pampered by his priestly ministry (22-24). This image sharply contrasts with the priest in his present state. The lieutenant twice meets the priest—once even with the photograph in his hand—and fails to recognize him (75, 139). The priest himself recalls his younger days when he had plotted about how to leave behind the proper debt worthy of his ambition (92-94). And a priest who now appears like a village peasant once joined the priesthood to ensure material comfort, for he “had hated poverty like a crime; he had believed that when he was a priest he would be rich and proud – that was called having a vocation” (67). Greene’s remark leaves the reader to believe that there is no development in the whiskey priest during the main storyline. Yet, at the beginning of the story, the whiskey priest reluctantly attends to a sick call and thereby misses a boat ride to freedom; towards the end, he willingly walks into the Lieutenant’s trap to hear the last confession of a dying fugitive, despite the opportunity to

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stay safely in a neighboring province (16-19, 177-82). The priest indeed develops in his vocation in part because he reevaluates his theological aesthetics. The priest who once hated poverty like a crime now sees the ugliness of the oppressed and marginalized as a site for God’s grace. As Mark Bosco notes, “What he first thinks ugly—the poor, the prison hostages, the mestizo companion who betrays him—is seen to be a manifestation of God’s presence.”

For example, in perhaps the theological heart of the novel, the priest is forced to spend a night in prison for illegally possessing brandy in the capital city. There, in a crowded, smelly cell, convinced his identity will soon be discovered, he finds a surprising kinship with his fellow prisoners: “He had a sense of companionship which he had never experienced in the old days when pious people came kissing his black cotton glove” (128). Amidst the ugliness, he can relate to those around him as a fellow criminal in a way that was impossible when most people treated him with priestly deference. Indeed, it is a fellowship impossible in an earlier scene in which he visits the village of his illegitimate daughter, Brigitta, not only because the villagers desire him to perform his office sacramentally, but also because he poses a threat to them—the lieutenant has begun executing villagers wherever the whiskey priest has been sheltered. Amongst the prisoners, the priest lacks a sense of companionship only for a pious woman. He realizes he feels more sympathy for the mestizo—the story’s Judas figure who wishes to betray the whiskey priest for a reward—than for the pious woman, even though she never identifies him to the police (131, 132). He recognizes that he shares with his fellow

prisoners a mutual state as a sinner, and he tells the horrified woman that “we discover that our sins have so much beauty” and that “saints talk about the beauty of suffering. Well, we are not saints, you and I…It needs a lot of learning to see things with a saint’s eye: a saint gets a subtle taste for beauty and can look down on poor ignorant palates like theirs. But we can’t afford to.” When the woman protests that two other prisoners are committing mortal sin by having sex, the priest replies, “We don’t know. It may be. But I’m a bad priest, you see” (130). The priest’s own sins have rendered him uncertain about condemning the apparent sins of others, a caution he would never have made in the days of his more conventional piety.

Here, Greene plays out the theological implications of felix culpa (“happy fault”). Traditionally, felix culpa refers to the happy fault of Adam that caused the necessity for humanity to be redeemed through Christ’s sacrifice. Greene imaginatively depicts the close relationship between sin and grace—the greater the sin, the greater the sinner recognizes the glory of God: “it sometimes seemed to him that venial sins – impatience, an unimportant lie, pride, a neglected opportunity – cut you off from grace more completely than the worst sins of all. Then, in his innocence, he had felt no love for anyone; now in his corruption he had learnt…” (139).

But the priest remains uncertain about this relationship between sin and grace concerning his own soul. His theological training informs him that he should feel repentant about his mortal sin from his affair with Maria. Instead, he feels conflicted, and admits in the prison that he remains unrepentant: “He couldn’t say to himself that he

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26 Bosco, Graham Greene’s Catholic Imagination, 52.
wished his sin had never existed, because the sin seemed to him now so unimportant and he loved the fruit of it [i.e. his daughter Brigitta]. He needed a confessor to draw his mind slowly down the drab passages which led to grief and repentance” (128). Indeed, the certainty of his belief that he remains in mortal sin renders him incapable of reconciling his sinfulness with his equal certainty that as a priest, his sacramental duties remain valid, ex opere operato: “after a time the mystery became too great, a damned man putting God into the mouths of men” (60). Michael Torre observes that “in anguish, divided within and a scandal without, he nevertheless is the one priest who is there, the one conduit of the Lord’s grace available through the Eucharist and confession, poor vessel that he is.”

Yet, this does not console him, for his conception of grace and sacramental theology remains too rigid for him to allow the possibility that forgiveness may be extended to him even without confession. Upon his visit to Brigitta’s and Maria’s village, he reflects that he would be justified in abandoning his priestly duties by fleeing the province, for every person had a primary responsibility to their own soul. In another province, he would be able to confess his mortal sin and once again salvation would be given to him (65).

Andrei Gotia argues that “Greene exaggerates the dejection of his nameless character. As a priest, he should know that God died for all sins—past, present, and future, and that no sin can be greater than God’s mercy, that there is greater joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over one righteous person who doesn’t sin, as the

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Gospel clearly puts it.” Although Gotia’s observation is true, the whiskey priest possesses a strict, catechetical sacramental theology that, either due to cultural circumstances or a lack of education or both, convinces him that he remains in mortal sin even unto his execution. When Padre Jose—the apostatized priest who still lives in the capital—refuses to hear his last confession, the lieutenant asks him if he believes in the forgiveness of sin, to which the whiskey priest replies, “Oh yes, I believe,” but “I can’t absolve myself” (206). Even the curious dream later that night gives him only a fleeting hope which instantly evaporates upon waking. In the dream, Coral Fellows—a young girl who had once helped him flee the Lieutenant—serves him wine in front of a Eucharistic service, but he believes the service does not concern him, (209, 210).

There is then an unresolved conflict between his uncertainty over the beauty caused by sin, and his own certainty that he is a condemned sinner. “I don’t know a thing about the mercy of God,” he tells the lieutenant shortly after his capture, “But I do know this – that if there’s ever been a single man in this state damned, then I’ll be damned too” (200). Earlier, the whiskey priest speculates that “hate was just a failure of imagination” (131); similarly, the whiskey priest’s most severe failure is a failure to imagine God’s grace and mercy as extended to him.

Greene’s narrative subverts the whiskey priest’s own, narrow sacramental theology in order to suggest a more expansive conception of grace in which the priest is depicted as being a sacrament, not merely in his official, liturgical functions, but in his very presence, a presence which causes uncertainty in others. Mr. Tench, the indecisive,

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indifferent, and cynical dentist at the story’s beginning, becomes so distraught over the whiskey priest’s death that he finally decides to return to England (217). Coral’s parents, meanwhile, struggle to deal with consequences of their daughter’s death (a death left undescribed), and desire to avoid the topic; yet, Greene implies in their conversation that the whiskey priest may have opened her to the possibility of faith (214). Even the lieutenant falls under the priest’s influence, and is less certain of himself after the priest’s capture: “The spring of action seemed to be broken. He looked back on the weeks of hunting as a happy time which was over now for ever” (207).

The whiskey priest’s most explicit impact occurs upon a son of a pious family, who had previously shown disdain regarding religion, particularly in rejection of his mother’s sentimental stories of martyrdom. But the family also harbors the whiskey priest, and the priest’s presence subsequently inflames his imagination. It is the boy who welcomes into the house a newly arrived priest, without bothering to find out his name (222), for the function of the priest—the form of the priest as the kenotic form of Christ, as von Balthasar would say—is more important than the individual. Thus, the novel on one hand affirms a traditional theology of ordination—a theology that claims that a priest, by the ontological change caused by their ordination, is a conduit of grace in his performance of the sacraments; and on the other hand, the novel expands this sacramental theology such that the priest himself is a sacrament, albeit often times unknowingly so.29

Like Sarah in *The End of the Affair*, the whiskey priest takes on Balthasar’s form

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of a saint. But unlike the whiskey priest, Sarah seems more willing to discern God’s mercy and forgiveness amidst her suffering. The experience of uncertainty over his mortal sin, over the strange beauty of sin, has a more limited impact upon the whiskey priest. True, his increasing identification with fellow sinners means that by the end, he is able to forgive the mestizo and return with him to a dying, American fugitive, knowing that the lieutenant will be waiting to capture him. He leaves the safety and security of the Lehrs, and “the oddest thing of all was that he felt quite cheerful; he had never really believed in this peace. He had dreamed of it so often on the other side that now it meant no more to him than a dream” (180). But he never extends the mercy he shows to others upon himself. The whiskey priest, according to Christopher A. Link, “shows himself utterly incapable of separating the good of the child he loves from the ill of his broken vow. Nevertheless, his own failure to loosen this ethical knot permits (and perhaps obliges) the reader to work his or her own way through the bind.” Indeed, the reader, after the priest’s execution, encounters the uncertainty caused by the whiskey priest upon the Fellows, Dr. Tench, and the boy of the pious family, which thereby undermines the certainty the priest held concerning his own condemnation. Thus, the novel holds certainty and uncertainty in regards to faith in tension, and additionally manifests elements common to the paradigm of Chapter Three: uncertainty as a catalyst to faith.

Greene’s last major novel, Monsignor Quixote (1982), reflects a very different

30 Bosco, Graham Greene’s Catholic Imagination, 51.

Catholic context from the earlier work. Set in post-Franco Spain, *Monsignor Quixote* alludes to various developments that have occurred in light of the political and religious discourses since the Second Vatican Council, in particular the liturgical changes that give its title character a sense of nostalgia for the Tridentine liturgy, a preference that matches Greene’s own. But the relationship between Catholicism and Communism also plays out much differently than in *The Power and the Glory* in which Greene establishes a sharp contrast between the worldview of the lieutenant and the whiskey priest. Here, influenced by his travels to South America and his sympathies with Liberation Theology, Greene presents an amicable dialogue between the two ideologies, one that analogically displays their similarities and differences. This more sympathetic portrayal of communism, observes Murray Roston, occurs frequently in Greene’s later work: “The condemnation of communism in *The Power and the Glory*…was gradually replaced in later novels by a recognition that, whatever cruelties communism may have perpetrated under such dictators as Stalin, its aim of improving the lot of the poor was in itself not only noble but in some respects close to that of Christianity.” Catholicism and Communism converge in the novel around the theme of doubt, and through his struggles with doubt, Monsignor Quixote becomes a sacramental encounter with the divine to his atheist, communist friend, Enrique Zancas, more affectionately known to Quixote, in the spirit of his ancestor, as Sancho. In other words, Sancho’s previous certainty dissolves through Quixote’s sacramental actions.

32 Bosco, *Graham Greene’s Catholic Imagination*, 93, 94, 144, 145.

More explicitly than any of the other novels discussed thus far, *Monsignor Quixote* explores the relationship between faith and uncertainty. The novel has not received nearly as much critical praise and attention as *The Power and the Glory*, possibly because its lighthearted and simple prose easily mislead the reader to underestimate it.\(^{34}\) This is unfortunate, however, for beneath the comic tone, the novel insightfully engages not just in a dialogue between Catholicism and Communism, but also in a reflection upon the nature of epistemology. As the monk, Father Leopoldo, says towards the end of the book, “Fact or fiction—in the end you can’t distinguish between them—you just have to choose” (207).\(^{35}\) Indeed, Greene plays upon the relationship between fact and fiction throughout the novel, most importantly by depicting a central character who insists his ancestor is the title character of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, a work frequently (if problematically) described as the first modern novel. “How can he be descended from a fictional character?” demands Monsignor Quixote’s bishop (16). Uncertainty then also serves as the convergence for Greene’s epistemological play upon the relationship between fact and fiction.\(^{36}\)

By casting doubt as a meeting point between ideological differences

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\(^{35}\) All references are to the following edition: Graham Greene, *Monsignor Quixote* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

(Christianity/Catholicism versus Communism) and epistemological differences (fact versus fiction), Greene creates an avenue for two philosophical opposites to deepen their friendship. “It’s odd, he [Quixote] thought...how sharing a sense of doubt can bring men together perhaps even more than sharing a faith. The believer will fight another believer over a shade of difference; the doubter fights only with himself” (55). Quixote himself however is a reluctant pupil of doubt, for he must be prompted to leave his rural parish community of El Toboso under the influence of others. When he gives hospitality and mechanical help to the stranded Bishop of Motopo, the Bishop encourages Quixote to travel out into the world like his literary ancestor. When Quixote objects that his own bishop derides his heritage as fiction, the Bishop of Motopo responds, “Perhaps we are all fictions, father, in the mind of God.” In either case, Father Quixote should tilt at windmills like Don Quixote for “It was only by tilting at windmills that Don Quixote found the truth on his deathbed” (25). As if to press his case, the jovial Bishop of Motopo has the Vatican elevate Quixote to the position of Monsignor, much to his surprise, and his own bishop’s chagrin (28, 29). Shortly thereafter, the carless Sancho, who has recently lost his position as the mayor of El Toboso, suggests that a contemporary Quixote and Sancho should once more ride forth with trusty Rocinante, Quixote’s pet name for his antiquated car, so-called after the Don’s horse.

What follows is a plot characteristic of a picaresque, a genre that features characters often engaged in a series of comical episodes.\(^ {37} \) During his travels with Sancho, Monsignor Quixote innocently blows up condoms like balloons, unwittingly

\(^ {37} \) Roston, *Graham Greene’s Narrative Strategies*, 143, 144.
views an erotic film (caused by a misunderstanding of its title, A Maiden’s Prayer), and assists a robber with escaping from the Guardia. But these shared experiences augment the already existing bond of friendship between Quixote and Sancho, which allows them to confess to each other their doubts about their respective beliefs. As Bosco observes, “doubt is not an end in itself but a beginning point of engagement, revealing a common claim for the necessity of negotiating and constructing meaning.” Doubt’s relationship to faith then becomes an epistemological avenue for insight.

At one point, Sancho admits that originally he considered Quixote a person without doubts, an attribute Sancho finds appealing. Quixote corrects him however: “I am riddled by doubts. I am sure of nothing, not even of the existence of God, but doubt is not treachery as you Communists seem to think. Doubt is human” (180). Sancho desires to believe with certainty, but even he questions whether he holds “complete belief.” Sancho once attended the seminary at Salamanca, and studied under the famed philosopher, Miguel de Unamuno:\footnote{39} “The ghost of my professor haunts me…I hear him saying, ‘There is a muffled voice, a voice of uncertainty which whispers in the ears of the believer…Without this uncertainty how could we live?’” (99) Sancho credits Unamuno with his “half belief” for keeping him in the Church during his youth (98), and he convinces Quixote, who is unfamiliar with Unamuno’s work, to visit Unamuno’s grave, a small humble site in contrast to their earlier visit to the cavernous burial chamber of

\footnote{38} Bosco, Graham Greene’s Catholic Imagination, 140, 141.

\footnote{39} For a discussion of Unamuno’s influence upon Greene’s theological imagination, see Bosco, Graham Greene’s Catholic Imagination, 141; Brennan, “Graham Greene’s Monsignor Quixote, 169, 170; and Roston, Graham Greene’s Narrative Strategies, 150, 151.
Franco. But Sancho desires ideological certainty. When Quixote remarks that he hopes his friend also doubts on occasion, since this is only human, Sancho replies, “I try not to doubt” (55). Quixote then agrees that he also has no desire to doubt, but Quixote’s own reflections interrogate this claim.

In fact, Quixote recognizes the necessity of doubt, for only with doubt can one have a faith worth living. In a dream, the priest sees Christ come down from the cross on Golgotha and emerge victorious such that both his disciples and his crucifiers know who he is: “There was no ambiguity, no room for doubt and no room for faith at all. The whole world knew with certainty that Christ was the Son of God.” Quixote wakes up in despair and prays that both he and Sancho are saved from belief that allows no room for uncertainty or mystery (69, 70). In another scene, Sancho and Quixote discuss what would happen if one did not need belief, but knew with certainty, for example, if Communism in the future triumphed and faith in Marxist philosophy was no longer required. Sancho claims he would be happy that his ideology would be vindicated, but Quixote takes a different view, arguing that to live without faith and doubt would be to live in a desert with nothing for which to hope: “...it’s an awful thing not to have doubts” (73, 74). As Quixote and Sancho agree pages earlier, to have faith is to hope.

One should note that Quixote’s doubt is not doubt as understood by Newman, that is, doubt oriented towards absolute skepticism regarding religious belief. Quixote insists he believes in the “historic fact” of Christ’s death and resurrection (77); instead, Quixote’s doubt is akin to Kierkegaard’s doubt—doubt about one’s own Christian faith.40

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40 Bosco, *Graham Greene’s Catholic Imagination*, 141, 142.
For example, Quixote faults himself for an unintentional heretical metaphor for the Trinity, and for his inability to find the right words to advise a penitent during an odd confession performed in a lavatory (49-51, 115-19). And when he bids a final goodbye to his housekeeper, Teresa, he tells her that “for a Christian there’s no such thing as goodbye forever”; yet shortly thereafter, Quixote remarks to himself, “I believe it of course, but how is it that when I speak of belief, I become aware always of a shadow, the shadow of disbelief haunting my belief?” (173).

Quixote thus is able to navigate between his faith and his doubts, such that his doubts deepen his faith but do not obstruct his ability to act in faith. He remarks to his exasperated bishop (after the bishop attempts to quarantine him in El Toboso) that his journeys with Sancho have given him a new freedom (167), and he wonders to Sancho whether previously he hid behind the faith of his favorite saints (such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross) instead of developing his own faith: “In your company, Sancho, I think more freely than when I am alone” (180).

Yet, despite a faith plagued by doubt, Monsignor Quixote still acts upon faith. When he discovers a procession that raises money for local priests, and disrespects the Virgin Mary in the process, he halts the procession with as much certainty and chivalry, but with a greater grasp on reality, as Don Quixote’s charge at windmills. Such an affront to Mary’s dignity enrages Monsignor Quixote who is injured in the resulting chaos. Sancho rescues him, and the two are shortly thereafter pursued by the Guardia, a pursuit that leads to a car accident in front of a nearby Trappist monastery. A delirious Quixote is taken into the monastery, during which, under the influence of sedatives, he sleepwalks to
the monastery’s chapel and begins to perform an invisible mass, intoning key passages from his beloved Tridentine liturgy. In the end, he walks up to Sancho, and instructs his friend, “*Compañero*…you must kneel, *compañero*’…The Mayor opened his mouth and felt the fingers, like a Host, on his tongue” (217; italics in original). Quixote then collapses and dies.

Afterwards, Sancho, the Trappist monk Father Leopoldo, and Professor Pilbeam, a visiting American scholar, debate whether Quixote’s final mass was indeed a Eucharist. Professor Pilbeam, who prefers historical facts, insists it was impossible since there was no physical host, but Father Leopoldo takes a stance of uncertainty. At the very least, Quixote considered it a true Eucharist: “Do you think it’s more difficult to turn empty air into wine than wine into blood? Can our limited senses decide a thing like that? We are faced by an infinite mystery” (219, 220).

The narrative in these final pages shifts away from Quixote’s perspective to Father Leopoldo briefly and then ultimately to Sancho. The reader thereby encounters Quixote’s final mass through the perspective of others, whereas before the reader encountered Quixote’s actions along with his self-reflections. In one sense, the reader is left like Sancho, and must puzzle out one’s own opinion on the reality or illusion of Quixote’s mass. But on the other hand, the reader is more equipped to render judgment than Sancho, for the reader has been privileged to Quixote’s thoughts for much of the story, and is aware of his struggles between faith and uncertainty, an uncertainty that in part concerns whether he can properly love God if, since he has felt no sexual desire, he may not have properly loved another human; Quixote, in other words, recognizes an
analogical relationship between human and divine love (123, 124).

Quixote’s final words to Sancho are “by this hopping” (217). “Hopping” refers back to Quixote’s comment as he begins walking deliriously to the chapel: “By this hopping you can recognize love” (214). “Hopping” serves as a metaphor that relates to an earlier conversation between Professor Pilbeam and Father Leopoldo about the former’s reluctance and the latter’s willingness to make the leap, or “jump,” into faith, a metaphor literalized when Professor Pilbeam jumps at the sound of the car accident (207). When Quixote gives Sancho his invisible communion, “by this hopping you can recognize love,” Quixote himself is the sacrament. By Quixote’s actions, by his “hopping,” his willingness to jump into faith and perform his faith, Sancho will recognize Quixote’s love for him and, hopefully, the love of God. Again, Quixote’s earlier doubt leads him to become a sacrament for others. “Hopping” linguistically plays on “hoping,” which both Quixote and Sancho agree is the essence of belief. Without hope, there is no belief.41

Further, Quixote communicates this hope through matter, but such that the metaphysical meaning behind his liturgical gestures must be grasped with the imagination. As Brannon Hancock argues, “The ‘infinite mystery’ of this imaginative (which is perhaps not to say imaginary after all) eucharist becomes for the unbeliever a true sacrament in his communion with and remembrance of his friend the priest, and in the possibility of salvation extended not in spite of but by virtue of imagination.”42

41 For a discussion of the “hopping” metaphor, see Bosco, Graham Greene’s Catholic Imagination, 148, 149; Brennan, “Graham Greene’s Monsignor Quixote,” 170; and Brannon Hancock, “Pluralism and Sacrament: Eucharistic Possibility in a Post-Ecclesial World,” Literature & Theology: An International Journal of Religion, Theory, and Culture 19, no.3 (September 2005): 266.

42 Hancock, “Pluralism and Sacrament,” 266; italics in the original.
Sancho, meanwhile, prefers to believe that there was no real Eucharist, for to do so would compel him to confront uncertainty. To Sancho, doubt causes a loss of freedom, and consequently a loss of action (220). As just discussed, this is the opposite conclusion the reader can draw from Quixote’s life. But Sancho finds himself plagued by uncertainty despite himself. And in the final lines, he thinks to himself, “Why is it that the hate of a man—even of a man like Franco—dies with his death, and yet love, the love which he had begun to feel for Father Quixote, seemed now to live and grow in spite of the final separation and the final silence—for how long, he wondered with a kind of fear, was it possible for that love of his to continue? And to what end?” (221) Sancho’s love of Quixote, and conversely Quixote’s love for him, have prompted fear and uncertainty, and the reader is left to wonder whether he will adopt Quixote’s stance in regards to uncertainty.

With gentle humor and a lighthearted tone, Monsignor Quixote plays upon the fragility of human knowledge and the ambiguity between fact and fiction. Is Quixote really a descendent of a fictional character? Logically, the answer would be no, but Quixote acts upon this belief, a belief that cannot be known with certainty. Indeed, in the world of Monsignor Quixote, uncertainty is necessary for belief to be worthwhile. The blurriness between fact and fiction, for Greene, points to the nature of belief itself, and reflects upon the operation of belief within a story, whether it is Quixote’s faith in his lineage from Cervantes’ character, or his belief in the story of Christ as historical fact. As Bosco argues, Greene’s “leap of faith is more a negotiated trust in a story, a trust that such a story takes the individual somewhere adequate to the full range of human
experience.” In an encounter with a story, one suspends one’s disbelief and trusts that some kind of truth emerges imaginatively in the fiction. This trust in the story, like Quixote’s faith, navigates the tension between belief and doubt such that only a faith that lives with uncertainty is a faith worth living.

**Gordon and the Dangers of a Too Certain Faith**

If *The Power and the Glory* and *Monsignor Quixote* bookend great upheavals in Western Catholic culture, Mary Gordon’s first two novels, *Final Payments* (1978) and *The Company of Women* (1980), chart this historical turmoil in an American Catholic context. Unlike Greene’s mostly sympathetic portrayal of the Catholic tradition, Gordon’s novels exhibit a more critical attitude.

Above, I noted that Kearney’s concept of *anatheism* grants the space for the individual to choose belief, unbelief, or some form of agnosticism, and that this choice must be made continuously. Thus far my discussions have focused upon characters who have returned to faith after an experience of uncertainty or who never completely abandoned faith. Their faith may be altered from its initial form, but nonetheless faith is affirmed in the end. In contrast, *Final Payments* (1978) and *The Company of Women* (1980) present protagonists who choose not to return to faith; yet, their previous faith continues to exert an influence upon their beliefs.

Gordon’s work captures the cultural shift of American Catholicism that occurred in the 1960s, during which the tightly-knit, ethnic Catholic communities weakened as Catholics became more integrated into the American mainstream. Several strands

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converged. On the part of politics, John F. Kennedy’s election is frequently cited as the pivotal moment in which Catholics stepped out of their urban, immigrant enclaves in order to participate on the national and international stages. On an economic level, Catholics found an increased prosperity amidst the postwar boom that would have been impossible for their immigrant ancestors. On the theological level, the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) encouraged a new openness to the world, captured most famously by Pope John XXIII’s phrase aggiornamento, and gave theological underpinnings that allowed Catholics to participate in a pluralistic, democratic society (such as the Council’s declaration on religious freedom in “Dignitatis Humanae”). Yet this moment of relative optimism and newfound prominence soon became jarred both by significant cultural controversies, such as the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, and the fury surrounding the Vietnam War, as well as internal ones, for instance the difficulties in adopting new liturgical forms and the strife prompted by Pope Paul VI’s 1968 encyclical on artificial contraception, “Humanae Vitae.”

Gordon frequently charts these generational conflicts and developments, not only in her early work, such as Final Payments and The Company of Women, but even later stories, such as 2005’s Pearl, a novel that depicts the title character’s attempt to go on a hunger strike in Dublin in the late 1990’s and her mother’s attempts to rescue her. In

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45 For a discussion of some of these cultural changes, and how they relate to Gordon’s work, see Marian Ronan, Tracing the Sign of the Cross: Sexuality, Mourning, and the Future of American Catholicism (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). For a general overview of American Catholicism, see Charles R. Morris, American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners who built America’s most powerful Church (New York: Random House, 1997).
interviews, Gordon frequently describes her own ambivalence regarding the tension between her Catholic childhood and contemporary secular society. On one hand, she affirms herself as a Catholic and welcomes the openness of Vatican II and the figure of Pope John XXIII, yet she finds fault with the liturgical changes, describing the new mass as lacking the beauty of the pre-Vatican II mass. At the same time, she dissents from official teaching on issues such as sexuality and women’s ordination, and thereby does not share the politics of many believers who advocate for a return to the Tridentine Rite. In short, she mourns a lost aesthetical tradition, yet yearns for a more progressive Church doctrinally. This tension between old and new plays out in both Final Payments and The Company of Women.

In both novels, the refusal to return to belief after uncertainty comes in part from earlier impressions that faith provides certainty in one’s Catholic beliefs. In other words, the protagonists judge religious belief based on the assumption that faith eliminates doubt. Neither protagonist seems open to the possibility that faith may deepen through a struggle with uncertainty. As a result, both protagonists fail to consider the possibility of a sacramental imagination, although The Company of Women implies an openness to sacramentality in its concluding pages.

In Final Payments, the first-person narrative opens with Isabel Moore describing her father’s funeral. The novel is a tale of delayed grief. On the day of the funeral, Isabel reflects, “I had not begun to miss him, or if I missed him, it was the habit of him that I

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46 As an example of Gordon’s remarks on these issues, see a 1987 interview by Annie Lally Milhaven in Conversations with Mary Gordon, ed. Alma Bennett (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 42-57.
missed” (39). Several weeks pass before Isabel can admit, “My father was dead. I knew what that meant now. I was entirely unsafe, entirely alone” (198). This delayed grief entails Isabel grappling with the realization that she can no longer live with the same certainty about herself.

Isabel’s previous self-certainty stems from her relationship to her father, a figure of religious certainty: “My father’s life was as clear as that of a child who dies before the age of reason…His mind had the brutality of a child’s or an angel’s: the finger of the angel points in the direction of hell, sure of the justice of the destination of the souls he transports” (10). Her father, a college professor, lives without any doubt that Catholic doctrine is true and infallible: “For my father was sure: he had faith, he had truth; they had wired his muscles and made his bones like steel” (39). Isabel’s father passes this attitude of certitude onto her. When Isabel is an adolescence, she takes the initiative and orders Margaret, their housekeeper, to leave. Appalled at the older woman’s hopes to marry her father, the young Isabel never questions her own judgment. Margaret functions as Isabel’s “doppelgänger,” a woman repulsive in every way, and yet the woman via whom she constructs her own sense of self in opposition (28, 29). Yet, despite her hatred of Margaret, she wonders about her teenage self after her father’s death: “How did I become, at thirteen, such a monster of certainty?” (33).

Unlike her father, however, Isabel does not maintain certainty in regards to her faith. Long before her father’s death, Isabel abandons her Catholic beliefs as a consequence of her father’s discovery of a sexual affair with David, her father’s favorite

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47 All parenthetical references are to: Mary Gordon, Final Payments (New York: Random House, 1978).
pupil (21-24). Yet she still desires certainty; shortly thereafter, her father has a heart attack and Isabel abandons her education plans and devotes herself to caring for her father for eleven years. But she welcomes the clarity her father’s new condition brings: “Certainty was mine, and purity; I was encased in meaning like crystal” (12). Her father’s condition grants her an avenue for an unblemished moral life, an opportunity to perform an unadulterated good, in contrast to the messy complications of her affair with David.

After her father’s death, Isabel experiences a “new unsureness” and misses the certainty her father provided (61); the story tracks Isabel’s coming-to-terms with living in uncertainty, a journey plagued by a desire for new certainty. Upon reflection of her future, she observes, “What I wanted was what [her friend] Eleanor had said she wanted: something I was sure of. But I wanted something outside myself, and larger” (58). Part of this “new unsureness” is her awareness that she lacks knowledge of social protocol outside her Irish-Catholic enclave. She finds her awareness of contemporary American culture inadequate, and relies on her friends Eleanor and Liz for advice ranging from fashion to job searches. At the same time, she also seeks certainty about herself, most specifically that her body remains sexually desirable.

Isabel’s need for some kind of male affirmation after her father’s death prompts her problematic decisions to have adulterous affairs, first with Liz’s husband, John Ryan, an ambitious, chauvinistic playboy, and then later with the veterinarian Hugh Slade. She quickly regrets her affair with John Ryan, but falls deeply in love with Hugh. Yet when his wife confronts her, she finds herself consumed with guilt (197). In fact, the confrontation with Hugh’s wife forces Isabel to realize the truth of her father’s death: that
she is alone and that she mourns for the moral certainty her relationship with her father provided. Her rash solution is to seek out the same certainty as before, to denounce selfish impulses (such as sexually craving Hugh), and to devote herself to caring for someone, mirroring her care for her father (200, 201). Hence, she decides to live with Margaret, since to care for the one whom she hates the most means the least likelihood of causing harm: “I would take care of Margaret; I would devote myself to the person I was least capable of loving. I would absorb myself in the suffering of someone I found unattractive. It would be a pure act, like the choice of a martyr’s death which, we had been told in school, is the only inviolable guarantee of salvation” (204). Pleasure, especially physical pleasure, she believes, is dangerous; the antidote then is to avoid it as much as possible.

Even though Isabel lacks religious belief, her Catholic background also provides the resources to jar her from her unhealthy life with Margaret, a life in which she attempts to repress any form of independence at a great cost both to her physical and emotional health. For instance, she resigns herself to gaining weight, and allows Margaret to dictate her appearance, even to the point of cutting her hair to please the older woman (222-29). Yet Margaret’s churlish behavior towards Father Mulcahy, a long-time friend of Isabel and her father, infuriates Isabel when he visits during Holy Week. Further, Father Mulcahy reinterprets the fifth commandment to indicate that Isabel is slowly killing herself (242). Shortly thereafter, Isabel finally explodes at Margaret, “The poor you have always with you,” and then reflects: “It is one of the marvels of a Catholic education that the impulse of a few words can bring whole narratives to light with an
immediacy and a clarity that are utterly absorbing.” Christ’s remark (John 12:1-8) is in response to Judas’ criticism of Mary’s anointing of Christ’s feet, and she realizes that Christ indicates that the pleasure of the moment must be recognized. “We must not deprive ourselves, our loved ones, of the luxury of our extravagant affections. We must not try to second-guess death by refusing to love the ones we love in favor of the anonymous poor” (243). Shortly thereafter, she gives Margaret the money from the sale of her father’s house, and is picked up by Liz and Eleanor to begin again her life.

Yet Isabel’s struggle with living with the uncertainty after her father’s death does not lead back to faith as in the previous novels. Isabel at one point admits that she misses the Church in some ways because “I miss that sureness. But I don’t miss the people, and what it does to them” (53). In other words, she yearns for the certainty the Church provides, but she rejects the impact of the Church’s doctrines, particularly in regards to gender. Further, she rejects her earlier decision to renounce pleasure in order to gain the moral certainty provided by charity towards Margaret (244). Shortly before she leaves Margaret, she reads through the prayers of Holy Week and attends Good Friday liturgy with Margaret. Upon walking home she realizes that “Christ had suffered in the body, and I too had a body. I knew it false but capable of astonishing pleasures…Christ had died, but it was not death I wanted. It was life, and the body, which had been given to me for my pleasure, and the love of those whom loving was a pleasure” (247). Thus, even in her continual rejection of faith, faith continues to inform Isabel’s construction of her new self, even if this construction is in reaction against her Catholic upbringing.

*The Company of Women* likewise presents a protagonist who is raised with the
certainty of faith, and who does not return to faith after experiences of uncertainty. However, the novel presents even richer and more complicated hues regarding the second paradigm, for it depicts in greater detail both the abandonment of faith by the protagonist, Felicitas Maria Taylor, as well as her subsequent reflections upon the possibility to return to faith. Here, the father-figure is Father Cyprian Leonard, a charismatic, orthodox priest who decries the changes both to the liturgy and the wider Catholic culture in the wake of Vatican II and the turbulence of the sixties. His once adoring crowds have dwindled to five women, the “company” of the title, one of whom is Charlotte, Felicitas’s mother. These women for various personal reasons remain devoted to Father Cyprian despite his increasing pessimism. Father Cyprian is no longer allowed to function in a normal ministry; an outcast from his original community of the Paracletists, he now lives in rural New York, virtually alone except for the constant care of Muriel, the most bitter yet devoted of the company, and the less frequent ministrations of the other women whenever they visit. Yet he considers Felicitas “our only hope,” a gifted child whom he intends to school as a bulwark of Catholic truth against the corruption of contemporary America (7).

As a child, Felicitas basks in the attention given to her by Cyprian, who functions as her surrogate father in the aftermath of her biological father’s early death. Felicitas becomes confident of her own abilities under his tutelage. She delights in the fact that she alone rides with Cyprian in his truck (14), and, after Cyprian’s brief inattention causes an accident, she feels jealousy whenever Cyprian also gives attention to Gidget, a young girl.

48 All parenthetical references are to: Mary Gordon, The Company of Women (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982).
who shares the hospital room with Felicitas. Felicitas assuages her jealousy with a sense of entitlement: “They [i.e. Cyprian and the company of women] required her. It was her life they needed. How could they fail to love her best? She was the only one” (70). The novel’s first part ends with Felicitas certain of her fidelity to Cyprian: “She was perfectly happy. She would never leave him” (85).

How does this relate to faith? Felicitas’ childhood faith depends upon her relationship to Cyprian—thus her certainty of faith depends upon her certainty that Cyprian is correct. But the novel’s central second part continues Gordon’s theme of generational conflict and charts the collapse of Felicitas’ fidelity to Cyprian, provoked by Felicitas’ opposition to the Vietnam War and increasing interest in progressive politics. Consequently, Felicitas abandons her faith, and she begins a sexual relationship with one of her Columbia University professors, Robert Cavendish, who, like John Ryan in Final Payments cares little for the gap between their stated progressive political views and their self-indulgent, sexist behavior towards women. Felicitas’s return to the company in rural New York occurs only after she becomes pregnant by either Robert or her neighbor Richard, and wavers at the last minute from having an illegal abortion.

Although this is a return to her earlier community, her return is to a large degree on terms in which she maintains independence from Cyprian; at the same time, it is not a return to faith. The novel’s third part switches from a third-person narrative to varying first-person perspectives, in which Father Cyprian and many of the women describe their perceptions of the community. Like her mother before her, Felicitas’ daughter, Linda, is the child who bonds the community. Meanwhile, neither Cyprian nor Felicitas is content
with the other, and yet, there is an eventual reconciliation.

Felicitas, for example, sees the limitations of Father Cyprian’s theology, and yet loves him nonetheless: “I like to think that I am undeceived about him; I am over my childish adoration and my adolescent rage. I know his mind is not first-rate. He had three ideas: the authority of the Church, the corruption induced by Original Sin and the wickedness of large-scale government. All the rest is instinct and effusion. Yet there is no one I revere more” (266). This development, Felicitas observes, took time: “After perhaps five years, we were free to love each other again. And we began to talk and to argue as we worked.” Further, she does not immediately accept Linda as a gift of grace; she struggles to make the transition from a self-centered young adult to a responsible parent, “What a mystery the heart is,” she later reflects, “The mind is simple by comparison. How can I describe the process of love that overcame me, the gravitational pull of the baby I hadn’t wanted to touch? By her first birthday, she interested me passionately; by the end of the following spring, it was a grief for me to leave her in the afternoon” (256).

Yet despite the fact that uncertainty has caused her to renew her relationship to Cyprian, and also has prompted her to love a daughter she initially did not want, uncertainty has not prompted a return to faith. Felicitas cannot conceive of faith apart from the terms established in her childhood by Cyprian:

And I cannot talk about God. Of all of them [i.e. the company of women], I alone have no spiritual life. It is Cyprian’s fault; he trained me too well, trained me against the sentimental, the susceptibility of the heart. So I will not accept the blandishments of the religious life; I will not look to God for comfort, or for succor, or for sweetness. God will have to meet me on the high ground of reason, and there He’s a poor contender…I will not open my heart to God…I will wait.
But I will wait for light, not love. (267)

Felicitas cannot conceive of God through any other framework than one of the intellect. She disallows the possibility that faith should be considered also through affective categories. She wants God to speak through “light,” that is, the light of reason, not “love,” that “mystery” which she acknowledges moves her in regards to her own daughter.

Cyprian meanwhile remains pessimistic, believing he will die a failure in his vocation (277), yet the uncertainty caused by his relationship to Felicitas and the arrival of Linda nonetheless prompts him to reflection. If before, he had little regard for basic human pleasure, fearing it as a trap of worldliness and sin, a nighttime walk expands his sacramentality beyond the mere liturgical acts:

One night, I did leave the house and walked for hours, wishing to disencumber myself. But my bones failed me and the lights of an all-night diner were irresistible. I entered the steamy, greasy warmth, felt the meat smell cling to my clothing. I sat down at the counter and picked up a matchbox. On it was printed ACE 24-HOUR CAFE—WHERE NICE PEOPLE MEET. And tears came to my eyes for the hopefulness, the sweetness, the enduring promise of plain human love. And I understood the incarnation for, I believe, the first time: Christ took on flesh for love, because the flesh is lovable. (285)

Cyprian then glimpses that the Incarnation perhaps indicates that materiality is not wholly corrupt, and that there remains even after the Fall an inherent goodness to creation. In essence, it is an imaginative shift, in Tracy’s categories, from a dialectical worldview to an analogical one, from an imagination that emphasizes God’s separation from creation to one that recognizes God’s grace active in creation. Cyprian’s conversion occurs not rationally—as Felicitas’ would insist—but affectively, a seemingly simple moment that provokes Cyprian’s emotions and shifts his imagination of the world. To a much smaller
degree than with the novelists discussed above, Gordon hints at creation’s sacramentality.

Cyprian’s new openness is reflected in his relationship to Linda, which lacks the certainty and inflexible dogmatism found in his previous attitude towards Felicitas. When the nearly seven-year old Linda asks Cyprian to pray that one day the Church will ordain women, the orthodox priest startlingly agrees: “I said I would, but it must be a secret between us. And so each morning, at my mass, I pray for the ordination of women” (289). Thus, the novel illustrates two possibilities for the second paradigm: a former believer who does not return to faith; and a believer who reconfigures one’s faith, abandons previous certainties, and opens the self to possible new avenues to experience the transcendence of God’s grace in the world. Curiously then, in light of the novels discussed earlier, Gordon hints at a sacramental imagination not through the central protagonist, but through the character who, during the heart of the story, serves more as the antagonist. The contrast then between Felicitas and Cyprian at the novel’s end, one character who denies sacramentality, the other whose sacramental imagination expands, leads the novel to portray the sacramental imagination alongside a materialist imagination.

_The Company of Women_, like _Final Payments_, remains open-ended. Linda is allowed the final word, and her voice implies hope that she may be able to mediate the generational conflicts between her mother and Cyprian. She recognizes that each person in their community loves her, and in fact, she wishes to tell them, “Don’t love me so much,” for she fears she may fail them by not loving them enough in return (290). Linda still possesses an openness to faith, and her faith does not depend upon the certainty of
her fidelity to Cyprian, for it does not consist of the same sense of entitlement and surety as her mother’s childhood faith. It remains open. Linda’s concluding words, “We are not dying” (292), simply affirm hope for the future.

Appraisals of Gordon’s work often depend upon a reader’s reaction to her handling of the Catholic faith. Marian Ronan, who, like Gordon, mourns that something has been lost from the pre-Vatican II Church, and yet also questions certain official teachings, appreciates that Gordon refuses to accept the false choice presented to her in her traditional, ethnic childhood, a choice between Catholicism and the rest of the world.49 Meanwhile, Haddox, reading from a stance of orthodoxy, finds Gordon’s work both “intelligent” but also “narcissistic,” narcissistic in that the self-serving sensual often appears as “Gordon’s supreme value,” whether in terms of art or sexuality.50

Indeed, one does find narcissistic behavior in Gordon’s protagonists, more so with Isabel than with Felicitas; however, this judgment must be balanced against the recognition that both protagonists have been profoundly broken, or at least, handicapped by their unusual backgrounds, a background in which a male figure has demanded their obedience and fidelity. Further, their seemingly self-serving behavior occurs often in the aftermath of experiences that upturn their previous certainties, certainties grounded in the instruction given to them by their father-figures. Thus, their desires for pleasure, for self-indulgence, seems less an intentional ego-centric narcissism than a muddled, problematic rebellion against one extreme via another extreme. That each woman still turns to some


kind of community in the end—Isabel to Liz and Eleanor, and Felicitas to her mother’s company of friends and even to Cyprian—would indicate the recognition that this balance requires community. Further, if the protagonists fail to return to faith, the novels imply that a certain kind of rigid, simplistic childhood faith is mostly to blame, a faith that upholds certainty as a supreme value, and a faith that tolerates no ambiguity. In this reading, then, the warning would be against the instruction of a faith framed overwhelmingly in an attitude of intellectual certainty. Such faith will often not stand amidst the ambiguities of the postmodern world.

**Endo’s Uncertainty amidst God’s Silence**

Although the highly-acclaimed Japanese author Shusaku Endo chronologically predates Mary Gordon, I have placed him as the last author of this chapter since his 1966 masterpiece *Silence* perhaps best exemplifies my discussion of a faith reconfigured by the experience of uncertainty. *Silence* thereby serves as a fitting conclusion to the present exploration of the second paradigm. I will return to Endo in my next chapter for a discussion of his last novel *Deep River* (1994) for some final reflections on both paradigms.

A significant portion of the scholarly criticism surrounding Endo’s work, both in general and in regards to *Silence* in particular, concerns his so-called “mudswamp” thesis. This thesis claims that Christianity is too often beholden to Western philosophical concepts and concerns such that it is difficult for it to take root and flourish in Japan. *Silence* manifests this thesis explicitly and will be discussed further below, but one should note that Endo’s proposal has been criticized for a certain amount of historical
inaccuracy, considering the initial flowering of Japanese Christianity until its prohibition in the early seventeenth century. But it would be better to see the thesis as a personal metaphor for Endo’s struggle to remain true to his Japanese culture while a member of a predominantly Western religion. In an interview, Endo describes his youthful conversion under his mother’s influence as akin to putting on an “ill-fitting suit.” He speculates that if he could successfully find God through “typical Japanese scenes” in his work, then “my ‘Western suit’ will no longer be Western, but will have become my own suit.”

Despite his different cultural background, Endo belongs in conversation with the literary lineage traced in this investigation since he has acknowledged the influence of European Catholic novelists such as Mauriac and Greene. In fact, critics have frequently noted the similarities between Silence and The Power and the Glory. Both novels feature a flawed, but well-intentioned priest who attempts to live out his vocation during a time when Christianity is illegal, and who is subsequently hunted and persecuted by government officials. Additionally, both priests must face the harsh choice of either

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52 Quoted in Mark Williams, Endô Shûsaku: A Literature of Reconciliation (London: Routledge, 1999), 33.


martyrdom or apostasy. The whiskey priest, as discussed above, faces his martyrdom with near despair at his seeming failure in his vocation; the priest in Silence, Sebastian Rodrigues, makes the opposite choice of apostasy. But, unlike Greene and other authors of traditional Christian countries, Endo willingly describes himself as a Catholic Christian writer despite living and working in a cultural context traditionally non-Christian. 55

Some critics read Silence through a traditional theological framework of martyrdom and the inherent sinfulness of apostasy; such critics frequently fault Rodrigues for his decision to trample on a fumie, 56 an object engraved with an image of Christ or of the Madonna and Child upon which a suspected Christian steps in order to apostatize or to prove that one is not a Christian. While reflection on Rodrigues’s apostasy is certainly important, a critic risks downplaying the theological richness of Endo’s narrative with an exclusive focus upon whether or not Rodrigues should have upheld Christian orthodoxy. As Lanta Davis observes, to fixate upon this issue may lead the critic to overlook the complexity of Rodrigues’s situation; Endo himself argues that the hermeneutical emphasis should not be on Rodrigues’s act of trampling as much as on

55 Endo, “For These the Least of My Brethren,” 86.

his belief that he hears the voice of Christ encouraging him to do so. Indeed, the novel imaginatively provokes the question of how Christian theology should consider the issue of the apostate, the one who cannot uphold fidelity to the Gospel in the face of unjust suffering. Endo speculates that “If [the Christians of this era] were to be divided into the weak and the strong, I would be among the former. . . . History knows their sufferings: I believed it was the task of the novelist to listen to their sufferings.” Indeed, Endo claims that he sees himself as the character Kichijiro, a Christian who frequently apostatizes out of personal weakness and betrays Rodrigues to the government authorities. In its emphasis upon an apostate, Silence converges with Mauriac’s and Greene’s theme of the sinner at the heart of Christianity, although it also provokes the question of whether Rodrigues is indeed a sinner despite external appearances. Thus to evaluate Silence theologically based solely upon whether the novel’s perspective upholds orthodoxy is to risk avoiding the story’s complexity; in essence, such an approach would not allow literature to serve as more than apologetics.

But to read the novel through an exploration of the relationship between faith and uncertainty allows the theological richness of the novel to emerge. More specifically, Rodrigues’s experience of uncertainty serves as a catalyst by which he must reconfigure his understanding both of his faith and of himself. Rodrigues realizes that his own theology—one that assumes faith eliminates uncertainty so as to give certainty with one’s


59 Endo, “For These the Least of My Brethren,” 88.
religious beliefs—is inadequate in light of unjust suffering, a suffering that first and foremost occurs because of himself. This in turn forces him to recognize himself as a sinner in need of mercy. Thus, his reconfiguration of his beliefs and himself allows him to deepen his faith because he gains a greater insight into the incomprehensible gift of God’s love and forgiveness.

Prior to his initial first-hand experience of martyrdom, Rodrigues views martyrdom through a theology that assumes faith grants certainty, a theological stance that Endo hints is paradigmatic of Western Christianity. The news in Portugal that Christovao Ferreira has apostatized is deemed a failure for both the faith and for Europe. For Rodrigues, the issue is personal, for Ferreira was Rodrigues’s beloved teacher, and he and his friend Francisco Garrpe consider it “impossible” that the news is accurate (7, 8).60 One whom they believed to be firm and strong in his faith could not possibly waver under torture. Faith, for Rodrigues and Garrpe, would give certainty and strength. Rodrigues’s black-and-white attitude is further revealed when he first encounters the repulsive, cunning, and frequently drunk Kichijiro, whose help Rodrigues and Garrpe are forced to enlist in order to guide their stealthy entrance into Japan. As Rodrigues states in a letter, “it was impossible” for the obviously weak Kichijiro to be a Christian since “faith could not turn a man into such a coward” (24). When Rodrigues latter discovers that Kichijiro is an apostatized Christian, Rodrigues reminds him that Christ commanded his followers to confess his name for their salvation (Matthew 10:32-33) and warns him that only a “strong faith” will help him overcome his nature as a coward (40-43). As for his own

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faith, Rodrigues demonstrates a certainty that his religious convictions will not waver, for he travels to Japan aware that he will probably be captured and tortured eventually (9).

The transformation of Rodrigues’s initial conception of faith can be tracked by examining two reoccurring and interrelated motifs: his reflections on the relationship between Judas and Christ, and his imaginings of Christ’s face. Like the mestizo in *The Power and the Glory*, Kichijiro serves as the Judas-figure with the yellow teeth of his literary forefather (75). Rodrigues himself connects Judas with Kichijiro, a connection that prompts him to wonder why Christ had not saved Judas from his own sin (75). At the same time, Rodrigues’s imagination is kindled by the fact that no image or description of Christ’s face exists: “From childhood I have clasped that face to my breast just like the person who romantically idealizes the countenance of one he loves. While I was still a student, studying in the seminary, if ever I had a sleepless night, his beautiful face would rise up in my heart” (44). Even after he is captured and assumes torture and martyrdom to be imminent, Rodrigues still desires to idealize the face of Christ: “Even in its moments of terrible torture this face had never lost its beauty” (103).

Rodrigues’s certainty about his mission and his theology fractures with his first witness of martyrdom, in which two peasants from the village sheltering him are tortuously executed by being tied to posts and stranded in the sea (57-59). His previous dream of a “splendid martyrdom” imagined the executed as welcomed into heaven “filled with glory” (60). Yet instead, he witnesses only the peasants’ sufferings; meanwhile, the sea’s steady rhythms, seemingly unconcerned with human suffering, symbolizes God’s seeming indifference: “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 begins to question his prior idealistic concept of martyrdom as well as the wisdom of his mission. After the peasants’ deaths, he and Garrpe flee the village so as to prevent further executions; at the same time, they travel separately to increase the odds that their mission can endure as long as possible. Besieged with loneliness, Rodrigues catches a reflection of himself, worn and hunted: “I don’t know why, but at that moment I thought of the face of yet another man. This was the face of a crucified man…the most pure, the most beautiful that has claimed the prayers of man and has corresponded with his highest aspirations…Yet the face reflected in this 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’s does not realize that his reflections foreshadow a transformation in his image of Christ—one that moves from an emphasis upon Christ’s physical beauty to one that imagines Christ as the worn, suffering companion of humanity. Early in his mission (in a reflection that echoes Greene’s whiskey-priest), Rodrigues recognizes that Christ came for humanity’s ugliness: “But Christ did not die for the good and beautiful. It is easy enough to die for the good and beautiful; the hard thing is to die for the miserable and corrupt…” (38). However, at this stage, Rodrigues does not yet connect this suffering Christ to the ugliness around him.

Before this insight can occur, Rodrigues must struggle with the silence of God, a struggle also articulated by Kichijiro, whom Rodrigues begins to wonder if he resembles (54, 55, 75). Further, if God is silent, then perhaps this implies that God does not exist,
which would render their missionary actions and the peasants’ suffering “absurd” (68). Yet, Rodrigues refuses to cave to this thought, or to give into despair, what he deems the “greatest sin,” despite the incomprehensibility of God’s silence (69). However, God is not as silent as Rodrigues believes, for, when Rodrigues dwells on the similarities between his suffering and Christ’s Passion, he receives some degree of solace which reinforces his vow never to apostatize (99). He recognizes that both are betrayed, for example, and he enters Nagasaki upon a horse that resembles a donkey, an entrance that parodies Christ’s entrance into Jerusalem (156, 157). Such events often give consolation: “Yes, his fate and that of Christ were quite alike; and at this thought on that rainy night a tingling sensation of joy welled up within his breast. This was the joy of the Christian who relishes the truth that he is united to the Son of God” (125).

Despite this comfort, Rodrigues soon becomes uncertain about his mission in Japan. When he finally meets the now-apostate Ferreira, his former teacher remarks, “The one thing I know is that our religion does not take root in this country...This country is a more terrible swamp than you can imagine. Whenever you plant a sapling in this swamp the roots begin to rot; the leaves grow yellow and wither. And we have planted the sapling of Christianity in this swamp” (147). Later, just before Ferreira convinces Rodrigues to apostatize, the former priest recalls that he resisted the temptation to apostatize until he was told that Christian peasants would continue to be tortured—despite their own apostasy—until he stepped on the *fumie* (169). Rodrigues assumes he is in a similar situation; he hears the suffering of nearby peasants and believes their suffering cannot be relieved unless he apostatizes. Ferreira’s point is clear: Rodrigues’s
faith causes others to suffer for the glory of his own martyrdom. “You make yourself more important than them. You are preoccupied with your own salvation. If you say that you will apostatize, those people will be taken out of the pit,” argues Ferreira before insisting: “Certainly Christ would have apostatized for them” (169). In other words, Christ would not let his pride, like Rodrigues, cause unjust suffering

A reader at this point should understandably ask whether Ferreira’s arguments are reliable. After all, he could be justifying his own apostasy, and the reader cannot verify his veracity. But Ferreira’s claims affirm suspicions that have occurred to Rodrigues, suspicions both over the orthodoxy of Japanese Christianity as well as suspicions of himself. For instance, he harbors concerns about the peasants’ reverence of holy objects (45), worries that they honor Mary more than Christ (56), and is well aware of the linguistic confusions during the early missions in which many Japanese understood “Deus” simply as a synonym for the Japanese, Buddhist concept of “Dainichi,” a misunderstanding recalled by Ferreira when he insists that Japan has never embraced a true orthodox Christianity (70, 148). Further, Rodrigues has witnessed the execution of peasants as a result of Garrpe’s refusal to apostatize (134), and thereby has good cause to believe he is jeopardizing peasants’ lives. Finally, because Rodrigues begins to doubt his prior religious convictions as inadequate in the face of injustice, he questions his motivations: “…am I looking for the true, hidden martyrdom or just for a glorious death? Is it that I want to be honored, to be prayed to, to be called a saint?” (119). Thus, he questions whether he is committing a sin of pride in his refusal to apostatize.

As Rodrigues sits alone in his cell, he once again sees the face of Christ, but this
time, the face is sorrowful, and speaks to him, “When you suffer, I suffer with you. To
the end I am close to you” (161). Here, the reader glimpses what is sometimes called
“Endo’s Christology,” which often paints an image of Christ as one who is rejected and
suffers with humanity. In the preface to the U.S. edition of his A Life of Christ—his
interpretation of the Gospels—Endo remarks that in his depiction of Christ for a general
Japanese reading public, he portrays Christ with characteristics that would be most
appealing to his culture. He argues that “the religious mentality of the Japanese is. . .
responsive to one who ‘suffers with us’ and who ‘allows for our weakness,’ but their
mentality has little tolerance for any kind of transcendent being who judges humans
harshly, then punishes them.”

I will return to this issue in the next chapter with my discussion of Deep River,
but for now, I will merely observe that Endo’s image of a suffering Christ frames
Rodrigues’s decision to step on the fumie. When Rodrigues looks down at the fumie, he
believes he hears Christ’s voice: “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). The discourse of the
novel allows an ambiguity here, one that determines one’s reaction to Rodrigues’s
decision. Either Rodrigues is fooling himself into believing he is hearing the voice of
Christ, in which case, it is merely an illusion, or in fact, Christ does speak to him. If the

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former, the reader then must decide whether it is the result of the emotional toil of the moment, a weakness of his faith, an intentional or unintentional delusion, or some combination thereof. None of these positions can be proven persuasively based on the text. But if it is the latter, and Christ does indeed speak to Rodrigues, a reading endorsed by Endo, then this disrupts speculation, such as by William Cavanaugh, that Rodrigues fails to trust in God. Cavanaugh argues that due to his pride Rodrigues “is unable to accept that salvation is in God’s hands, not his own. If this is true, then Rodrigues’s damnation is a self-damnation; what damns him may not be simply his apostasy, but his subsequent failure to repent and seek God’s forgiveness.” But if Rodrigues does indeed hear Christ’s voice, then the situation is the opposite of Cavanaugh’s reading, for in fact Rodrigues, whose foot “aches” at the moment of his apostasy (171) abandons his theological certainties and assumptions, in order to fall upon the mercy of Christ. In this case, Rodrigues trusts that his salvation is indeed in God’s hands in a way that would previously be incomprehensible within his traditional theology of martyrdom.

Cavanaugh correctly notes Endo’s “art of ambiguity,” but I would suggest that the character of Rodrigues is even more ambiguous than Cavanaugh acknowledges when he argues that Rodrigues’s greatest sin is his lack of repentance. He further speculates that Rodrigues’s action denies God’s command of history, and fails to realize that his and the peasants’ martyrdom would be a victory since it would defy the government

63 Yancey, “Japan’s Faithful Judas,” 6, 7.

64 Cavanaugh, “Absolute Moral Norms and Human Suffering,” 110; italics in the original.

authorities’ wishes. Again, such a reading assumes that Rodrigues does not hear Christ’s voice, but more importantly it ignores the significance of the ending, which Cavanaugh dismisses as “thirty uneventful pages” and reads as “the sad dismantling of a human soul due to a sin that is mortal.” 66 But as Hitoshi Sano points out, the appendix is crucial for an understanding of Rodrigues’s character, for it documents his continual struggle over his actions, as well as the authorities’ suspicion that Rodrigues still believes, for he is again interrogated. Further, the appendix shows that Rodrigues continues his relationship with Kichijiro through whom Christianity ironically continues to spread. 67 The authorities once again must post the reward for turning in Christians (199), thereby indicating their continual failure to eradicate the faith. Thus, the novel ambiguously provokes the possibility that God’s command of history speaks even through what appears objectively to be sin and human weakness.

Admittedly, although Rodrigues struggles with his apostasy, he nevertheless reaffirms that Christ did indeed speak to him. He recognizes that his weakness is no different from Kichijiro, and this crisis of self has allowed him to discern that “I know that my Lord is different from the God that is preached in the churches” (175). When Kichijiro visits him after his apostasy in order to receive absolution, Rodrigues once again believes he hears Christ’s voice, affirming that Christ came to be trampled so as to share in humanity’s suffering. Further, Christ’s voice compels him to reconfigure his understanding of Judas, for now Rodrigues believes that Christ’s words of dismissal to

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Judas at the Last Supper occurred out of mercy (190). Yet interestingly, Rodrigues never explicitly recognizes what is implied by the text: that he is more akin to Peter than Judas, for, when he steps on the fumie, “Dawn broke. And far in the distance the cock crew” (171). Just as Peter continued to serve Christ even after his denial, so now Rodrigues accepts the paradox that God’s grace works through him despite his failings, for he alone is the last priest who can give Kichijiro sacramental absolution.

Rodrigues now recognizes that his experiences of uncertainty and a recognition of his weakness have brought him into greater insight of God’s love and mercy. “Everything that had taken place until now had been necessary to bring him to this love. ‘Even now I am the last priest in this land. But Our Lord was not silent. Even if he had been silent, my life until this day would have spoken of him’” (191). As John McCarthy observes, Rodrigues’s initial certainty of his stable self dissolves in the face of a new cultural context, a dissolution that prompts his former image of the triumphant, beautiful Christ to be replaced by the fumie’s image of the “battered” Christ: “The kenosis of the divine form and the central character in this extreme situation of cultural clash issue in a kenosis of language, cultural pattern, and traditional formulations. These usual indices of the Christian self give way to an unexpected orthodoxy—loving compassionate action, reflectively appropriated.”

Rodrigues recognizes, as Jacqueline A. Bussie argues, the insufficiency of his previous dualistic thinking—one that sees faith and doubt as stark opposites—and by the end he believes paradoxically in his experiences of both faith and

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doubt, for “faith and doubt constitute a dialect, not a dualism.”

Far from being silent, God reveals God’s incomprehensible mercy through Rodrigues’ weakness. Once again, the reader finds a shift from a dialectical theological imagination to an analogical one, from an imagination that views God as silent and thereby detached from the world, to an imagination that views God’s grace as active through Rodrigues’ life. Initially, Rodrigues experiences God in a dialectical frame, for God is absent and indifferent to the world, but by the end Rodrigues realizes that he himself is a conduit of grace, a conduit through whom God speaks. In this sense, Endo pushes the dialectical-analogical trajectory to a further extreme, in which the gravest of sins—apostasy—becomes Rodrigues’s personal “felix culpa.”

**Uncertainty’s Imaginative Challenge to Faith**

The novels discussed under this paradigm fall broadly into three categories concerning their treatment of uncertainty after faith: faith is corrected by experiences of uncertainty; faith is abandoned, although it continues to exert an influence; or faith is creatively developed due to the character’s recognition that God’s grace is active in the world in ways differently than previously imagined. At the same time, the novels often involve the first paradigm, in that uncertainty may prepare faith for some characters; for example, the whiskey priest’s personal struggles fall under the second paradigm, but his presence causes a movement towards faith for others akin to the first paradigm.

Like the novels in Chapter Three, the novels in this chapter depict faith existentially. This is, of course, not to ignore the content of faith in the stories; indeed,

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considering that the protagonists begin with some prior form of faith, it is only logical that their struggles often involve specific matters of belief. Yet, faith is often interrogated as insufficient if cast primarily in propositional categories. For instance, in Gordon’s work, Isabel and Felicitas abandon faith in part because they cannot conceive of belief in God beyond the mostly conceptual and rational forms of faith taught to them as children. Or again, in Silence, Rodrigues discovers that his previous idealistic theology of martyrdom fragments in the face of actual martyrdom. Further, protagonists, such as Francis Tarwater, Quixote, or Rodrigues, manifest a common feature of the existential model—that faith is primarily an imaginative orientation of trust and hope in God, and not in themselves. But, of course, the affective dimension of faith is a double-edged sword, for the whiskey priest’s self-despair hinders his ability to trust that God will forgive his mortal sin without sacramental absolution. In his case, his imagination fails to discern the forgiveness offered by the presence of grace in his final dream. Finally, the second paradigm introduces a new dimension in the relationship between faith and doubt: faith does not grant certainty, and uncertainty often co-exists with faith dialogically within the believer. As a result, a greater range of ambiguity remains at these novels’ conclusions than the novels of Chapter Three, an ambiguity that undermines attempts to portray certainty as a characteristic of faith. Instead, faith is imagined as a fragile wager that the believer must ever renew.
CHAPTER FIVE

FICTIONAL UNCERTAINTY REVEALS IMAGINATIVE FAITH

The novels discussed in the last two chapters offer rich opportunities for theological reflection. They are fragments of theological discourse with uncertainty’s relationship to faith acting as the boundary of the investigation. In Tracy’s methodology of the fragment, the theologian assembles the fragments around the primary analogue of Christ. The novels provide this analogue in that they often suggest an incarnational principle, or what I have frequently called a sacramental imagination. This imagination portrays grace as manifested in a fallen world, a divine action that undermines a character’s previous certainties about the world, others, and the self.

In this chapter, I return to some central questions that began the investigation. First, how can a theologian critically appropriate the insights of literature into theology? Further, what form of faith is portrayed by the novels? In other words, what is faith, as imagined by the Catholic novelists? To this end, I turn to Endo’s last novel Deep River since it summarizes the two paradigms—uncertainty as prior to faith and uncertainty after faith. Provocatively, Deep River expands the sacramentality of the earlier books by pushing the possibility of grace beyond an explicitly Christian context, but does so without rejecting the early investigations.

My discussion of Deep River, then, serves as a conclusion to the investigation as a whole since it both coheres with and enriches many of the insights gleaned from the
previous novels. First and foremost, *Deep River* affirms, along with the works of Mauriac, Greene, O'Connor, and Spark, that faith is fundamentally an imaginative orientation towards Divine Mystery and a sacramental vision of creation and human actions. Although Gordon’s *Final Payment* and *The Company of Women* complicate this sacramentality because of the protagonists’ rebellion against faith, her novels converge nonetheless with the other stories, including *Deep River*, upon a central insight: one’s faith must allow room for uncertainty to co-exist if faith is to survive the tragedies of life and the moments of doubt. Otherwise, one’s conception of faith becomes petrified and disallows new possibilities, new avenues of growth and development. Such a flawed imaginative frame for faith would not only be problematic in regards to human relationships, but more deeply troubling for one’s relationship to God; one’s personal faith could then be used to justify arrogance and self-righteousness. A faith that allows uncertainty is also a faith that allows one’s image of God to be jolted by grace, and opened to a new vision of the sacramental world. Or, as C.S. Lewis famously articulated, God “is the great iconoclast” who shatters human conceptions of God.¹

Considered together, both paradigms then indicate that faith coexists with uncertainty such that faith is not primarily, or fundamentally, assent to propositional doctrines (however much this may or may not subsequently follow) but an imaginative orientation to seeing grace active amidst suffering and evil, an affective vision that relegates all subsequent conceptual understanding as second-ordered reflection. In other words, fictional uncertainty reveals imaginative faith.

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Thus, to speak of faith at all, one must frame faith in terms reflective of this primal imaginative act. In this sense, my investigation intersects with what traditionally would be considered fundamental theology. Further, it indicates that the theologian must take into account literature’s affective dimension as essential to its kind of faith-thinking, and not as something to be dismissed as window dressing or conceptualized away. Consequently, a theology of faith informed by a dialogue with literature would recognize and reflect upon the affective nature of faith itself.

The theologian demonstrates a serious engagement with literature’s theological significance by allowing the world of the text to converge with one’s own world as a critical reader. *Deep River* provides a provocative opportunity for such a dialogue, for its open-ended conclusion compels the reader to respond to the text’s imaginative portrayal of faith. Like the other novels, *Deep River* once again manifests the dynamics of belief through uncertainty’s relationship with faith.

**Uncertainty and Faith in Endo’s *Deep River***

In the previous chapter, I briefly discussed Endo’s so-called “mudswamp” thesis in regards to his most famous novel, *Silence*, in which traditional Christianity is portrayed as too culturally defined by Western history to take root and flourish in Japan. However, Endo reconfigures this “mudswamp” thesis in his last novel before his death, 1993’s *Deep River*. Now the interaction between European Christianity and Japan is expanded such that both Christian and Japanese assumptions are challenged by religious and cultural pluralism. In the novel’s central plot, a group of Japanese tourists journey to various religious sites in India. Most of the major characters undertake this trip out of a
desire to find some form of resolution from a personal tragedy. For example, the elderly, agnostic Isobe journeys to India wondering if his recently deceased wife has been reincarnated in the country. The tension at the core of Endo’s “mudswamp” thesis—that Christianity often strikes Japanese culture as foreign and too Western—remains, but Endo now complicates his thesis by introducing the additional cultural context of India.

The theme of religious pluralism has prompted much critical discussion about Endo’s search for a “third religion,”\(^2\) that is, a form of religious practice that transcends sectarianism; in addition, attention has been given to the influence of British philosopher John Hick upon Endo in the 1980s, especially Hick’s claim that the major world religions manifest different responses to “the same ultimate transcendent reality.”\(^3\) As critic Mark Williams discusses, Hick’s influence upon Endo concerns Hick’s argument that these religions often depict conversion as a person’s movement from a self-centered conception of human life to a recognition and acceptance of some kind of ultimate reality that offers a form of salvation.\(^4\)

In the following discussion, I focus on two interrelated characters, Mitsuko and her former college companion Ōtsu, a pariah who simultaneously disgusts and intrigues.


Mitsuko. Ōtsu and Mitsuko demonstrate the two paradigms regarding uncertainty and faith. Ōtsu is raised as a Catholic, a trait that makes him an object of Mitsuko’s and her friends’ derision during their college years. Ōtsu continues Endo’s “mudswamp” thesis in that his journey is increasingly to find the God of Christ outside European forms of Christianity. His search eventually leads him to India where he is ostracized from the local Catholic community due to his apparent heterodoxy, and spends his days among dying Hindus along the Ganges. In this sense, he aligns with the second paradigm, that is, he seeks to develop his understanding of faith in light of challenges and uncertainties.

Mitsuko’s journey, meanwhile, ends on an open note, as will be discussed further below. She does not harmonize perfectly with the first paradigm since, unlike the protagonists discussed in Chapter Three, she does not come to an explicit acceptance of the Christian faith. But, uncertainty jars her into recognizing the possibility for religious transcendence. As in the novels of Chapter Three, uncertainty then continues to be a prolegomenon to the potential for faith. Mitsuko’s uncertainty about herself is paired with Ōtsu’s uncertainty about his faith. Indeed, Mitsuko’s witness of Ōtsu’s struggles with his faith exacerbates her uncertainty, and proves the primary catalyst for her newfound openness to faith by the end of the novel. Thus the two paradigms complement each other in *Deep River*. Since Ōtsu, with occasional exceptions, is mostly encountered through Mitsuko’s perspective, my focus is upon her development.

Over the course of the narrative, Mitsuko’s imagination shifts from a dialectical form of symbolic thinking to an adoption of a more ambivalent, complicated, analogical approach to symbols. (My language of dialectical and analogical is an adaption of
Tracy’s language discussed in Chapter One.) Initially, her journey is a journey to understand her own desires, but this journey lacks direction. As Williams observes, Mitsuko is “desperate in her search for something, yet unable to identify the object of her pursuit.” Additionally, the ambiguous ending leaves the reader wondering if, indeed, Mitsuko changes at all. But Mitsuko’s imagination becomes more fluid, more complex, and ultimately more open to life’s hidden depths through her adoption of an analogical imagination. At first, Mitsuko frames symbols, such as religious and artistic symbols, through a dialectical imagination that indicates her detachment and distance from others. She initially possesses a “me versus them” mentality in her relationships. For example, her instant rejection of Christian symbols reveals a rigid, dichotomous imagination; such symbols, she believes firmly, have no meaning or relevance in her life. As a result, she refuses to engage with Ōtsu’s religious struggles or, more broadly, with Ōtsu himself beyond the superficial. By the end, however, she now sees Ōtsu’s life and religious symbols analogously in the light of a larger horizon of human experience—the brokenness of all humanity, including herself.

Karl Rahner argues that “all beings are by their nature symbolic, because they necessarily ‘express’ themselves in order to attain their own nature.” A true symbol (in the fullest sense) is distinguished from mere “signs,” “signals,” or “codes,” for it is “the highest and most primordial manner in which one reality can represent another. . . And we call this supreme and primal representation, in which one reality renders another present

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(primarily ‘for itself’ and only secondarily for others), a symbol: the representation which allows the other ‘to be there’.”

Symbols, in Rahner’s understanding, are multifaceted and allow room for ambiguity and mystery, and as such cannot be reduced to clear, univocal concepts. Most importantly they make present what is symbolized to another, and this recipient then symbolically responds, either by appropriating the symbol—and the reality it symbolizes—or by rejecting it. Rahner’s thought provides a way to understand the dramatic sweep of symbolic movement in Endo’s novel.

Throughout most of the novel, Mitsuko understands herself through negative symbols, such as in her association of the darkness of the French and Indian forests with the darkness of her own heart, or in her attraction to art and stories that correspond to her destructive impulses (52), yet these negative symbols provoke ambiguity since Mitsuko still has trouble understanding herself through them. For example, after her marriage, she self-identifies with the title character of Mauriac’s famous novel, *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, in which Thérèse attempts to poison her husband for reasons that remain unclear to both the reader and Thérèse herself (54-58). In one sense, Mitsuko possess an analogical imagination in that she analogically relates to problematic, negative symbols such as Thérèse. But on the other hand, Mitsuko’s attraction to these destructive symbols indicates her dialectical imagination, for they indicate her detachment from human community. Indeed, Mitsuko consistently isolates herself psychologically from others, even in a context such as marriage that would generally imply emotional intimacy. Her

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external symbolic actions are deceptive since her behavior frequently belies her authentic interior emotions. Mitsuko’s adoption of more positive symbols, particularly religious symbols, subsequently transforms her imagination and leaves open the possibility of a deeper, reconfigured relationship to both self and world. This transformation is seen through two events in Mitsuko’s journey: her relationship with the character Ōtsu, and her encounter with a depiction of the Hindu goddess Chāmundā.

When the reader first encounters Mitsuko, she is a volunteer nurse at a hospital. This gives the initial impression that she is a person of compassion, charitably caring for the terminally ill. Eventually the reader realizes that Mitsuko cannot enter into any deeper relationship with her patients beyond the superficial external action. In a Rahnerian framework, then, one observes that her symbolic actions are inauthentic and fail to be a symbol in the fullest sense, for they falsely communicate compassion to her patients. Indeed, when she does act authentically, she stuns others, for such negative actions contradict her frequent behavior as a volunteer. For instance, her blunt denial of the possibility of reincarnation or any form of an afterlife causes pain to Isobe’s terminally-ill wife (21, 114). There is a deep fracture in Mitsuko’s psyche that she is unable to reconcile within herself: her external actions often do not correspond to her internal motivations, and when they do, these actions frequently pain others.

Mitsuko, however, recognizes the morally problematic nature of her own selfish desires to inflict suffering; her actions likewise often affirm her belief in a basic moral standard. However, her attempts to correct her self-centered desires on her own only cause further problems. For example, she consciously marries a “plain and proper” man
as a desperate attempt to “overcome” her selfishness (51, 52; italics in the original). She picks a husband, via arranged interviews, who lacks any interest in those works of art or stories that spark her destructive impulses; for example, her husband has no inclination towards art beyond a facile wish, for instance, to see the Mona Lisa during their honeymoon in Paris simply because it is famous (54). Indeed, Mitsuko believes her husband’s interests are incompatible with her own, and makes little effort to bridge the gulf between them. Mitsuko imagines the world dialectically. She only thinks in sharp contradictories between herself and others. She does not seek to alter her behavior through a gradual transformation of her interior imagination, rather she attempts to bury herself in a role, hoping that her malicious impulses will become like a “corpse” if she acts out what she perceives as the “commonplace” norms of her society (52). Additionally, at this stage, she does not reflect that others may have silent sufferings and brokenness of their own. Mitsuko’s dialectical—black or white—thinking frames her relationships with others and with herself.

Further, Mitsuko is unable to understand her own depravity. “Just what the hell is it I want?” she asks during her honeymoon (68; italics in the original). On one level, her desires are clear: she wishes to repress her selfish impulses and experience authentic love. But she cannot discern how to address these desires other than to engage in actions that reveal even more the split in her personhood. She begins to volunteer as a nurse after her divorce, but “from her own hunger for love, she cultivated the masochistic desire to engage in a make-believe charade of love. . . Mitsuko knew that what she performed were not acts of love from her heart, but mere play-acting” (124). By seeing herself as different
from others, Mitsuko isolates herself from entering into meaningful relationships. Unable to reconcile herself with her own brokenness, she cannot encounter the brokenness of others beyond an “imitation of love” (150), but, as the narrative will suggest, only through brokenness, a brokenness provoked symbolically, can Mitsuko undergo conversion. Mitsuko, in other words, must perform the symbols of love externally so as to experience internal transformation. Her actions thereby mirror the hope of the Catholic, ecclesial sacraments—internal conversion intertwined with external symbolic expression.

Mitsuko’s slow, gradual development begins with her college-age acquaintance to Ōtsu, although at first, this relationship plays out akin to her other relationships. Ōtsu is a social outcast at their school, both because of his awkwardness but also because of his strangeness as a practicing Catholic. He holds no interest or attraction for Mitsuko, but, on a dare by her friends and out of boredom, she feigns interest and even allows Ōtsu to be physically intimate with her. In some ways, Mitsuko’s relationship to Ōtsu is the same as the other men in her life, including her eventual husband. She play-acts the motions of physical attraction, but they do not correspond to an emotional attachment. As she reflects at one point, “she was a woman in whom the spark of love had never been kindled. Many times over she had made a show of passion with a man, but never once had honest flames flickered inside her” (120). Physical intimacy belies emotional distance. But although she has no physical desire for Ōtsu, she does desire to manipulate him. She fakes interest so as to play with his emotions, exert control, and thereby inflict pain.
To this end, she promises to let Ōtsu be one of her boyfriends if he abandons Christianity (44). Mitsuko has a knee-jerk aversion to Christianity, disdaining the very idea of any Japanese following the religion of Western colonialism (38, 43, 64). That Ōtsu might abandon his religion under her spell thrills Mitsuko. After Ōtsu keeps his promise and avoids going to the college’s chapel, she reflects: “A man who listens to anything I tell him, a man who will abandon even God for me - a man like that I want to torture even more” (45). She has no desire for Ōtsu himself, only a desire for him as an object to manipulate and torment.

When Mitsuko checks if Ōtsu is in the chapel, she flips through a Bible in the pew and finds Isaiah 53: “he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men. . .” (44, 45). Neither these words, nor anything else in the chapel, move Mitsuko. She eyes a priest as “some bizarre extraterrestrial,” and taunts the crucifix with the remark, “He’s [i.e. Ōtsu] not going to come, you know. He’s dumped you” (45). Mitsuko’s categorical rejection of Ōtsu’s religious symbols mirrors her own rejection of Ōtsu as a person worthy of respect.

In an interview, Endo remarks that he “tried to juxtapose the life of Otsu [sic] on to that of Christ, the failure.” As mentioned in the previous chapter, the notion of Christ as “failure” is a dimension of what is sometimes called “Endo’s Christology,” which often paints an image of Christ as “weak and despised.”

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9 Quoted in Williams, *A Literature of Reconciliation*, 205. A word on the transliteration of the Japanese: I tend to follow the spellings in Gessel’s translation of *Deep River*, but my quotations and citations from the secondary literature reflect the spellings of the source.

10 In regards to the issue of Endo’s Christology and this novel, see Mase-Hasegawa, *Christ in Japanese Culture*, 147-49.
edition of *A Life of Christ*—his imaginative retelling of the Gospels—Endo remarks that he portrays Christ for his Japanese readers with characteristics that would be most appealing to his culture. He argues that “the religious mentality of the Japanese is... responsive to one who ‘suffers with us’ and who ‘allows for our weakness,’ but their mentality has little tolerance for any kind of transcendent being who judges humans harshly, then punishes them.” In *Deep River*, Endo associates Ōtsu with Christ through the passage from Isaiah; Ōtsu is now the figure who is rejected, and yet, as will be seen later, remains with, and ministers to, the suffering outcasts of society. Unlike Mitsuko, Ōtsu performs actions that express his authentic self.

When Mitsuko is on her honeymoon to France, she tracks down Ōtsu, who is studying at a French seminary. During their conversation, Ōtsu disavows belief in “European Christianity,” and claims that his instructors and fellow seminarians’ “ways of thinking” are “ponderous to an Asian like me”: “I can’t make the clear distinction that these people make between good and evil. I think that evil lurks within good, and that good things can lie hidden within evil as well” (65). In his rejection of a strong separation between good and evil, Ōtsu implicitly criticizes the same kind of black and white dialectical thinking found in Mitsuko. During their conversation in France, Ōtsu offers a symbol for an alternative way of thinking about the divine. When Mitsuko objects that the word “God” bears no meaning for her, Ōtsu suggests they speak of God—and by extension Christ—as the “Onion” (63, 64). The image suggests a symbol for the divine that is conceived as possessing many layers to be peeled back and discovered. To Ōtsu,

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this Onion is imagined not so much as an existence, but as a force that performs works of love.

Although Ōtsu recalls Endo’s Japanese-centric “mudswamp” thesis from Silence, Ōtsu also reflects the development of Endo’s spiritual concerns in the context of contemporary globalism. Years later, a divorced Mitsuko travels to the Hindu holy city of Varanasi; once again, she searches for Ōtsu. Now, Ōtsu follows his God by performing his own labors of love: he carries the dead and dying poor to the “Ghāts” that line the Ganges river—the “deep river” referenced in the book’s appellation—where, after death, one’s cremated ashes are poured into the river. Although now a priest, Ōtsu continues his critique of a dialectical, religious imagination—one that excludes the possibility of the divine in other religions or in those with no religion. According to Emi Mase-Hasegawa, Deep River, and in particular the character of Ōtsu, illustrate not only Endo’s Christology but also the influence of koshinto (“Basic Shinto”) of Japanese culture upon Endo’s religious imagination, a conception of divinity as a force throughout nature and human experience across cultures and religions.12 Ōtsu, both in his beliefs and in his actions, departs from traditional, Western norms of Christianity—at least as these norms are understood by him. For example, Ōtsu regards Christ’s resurrection as an event that occurred inside the disciples’ hearts and that continues in Jesus’ contemporary followers, such as Ōtsu (185).13 As a result of his beliefs and practices, Ōtsu is ostracized from the local Catholic community. Although Mitsuko remains mystified by Ōtsu, she is

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13 This understanding of the resurrection echoes Endo’s own understanding as described in his A Life of Christ (156-79).
nonetheless on the verge of shifting away from the sharp dialectical thinking that has thus far dominated her understanding of herself and others.

The catalyst for this transformation is Mitsuko’s encounter with the goddess Chāmundā in a nearby Hindu temple. This particular representation is of a goddess who is old, worn, afflicted with the illnesses and sufferings of humanity, and yet continues to offer milk from her breasts (139, 140). She is thus analogous to Endo’s conception of a divine presence who suffers with humanity. In addition, Chāmundā also exemplifies Mitsuko’s fascination with India. Unlike in Japan or Europe, Mitsuko finds that she relates to the chaos both in the religious symbolism as well as in the city around her: “I’m much more at home with the confusion here in India, with the way that so many different elements are combined in one scene, with the statues of the Hindu goddesses who mingle good with evil” (159). The Hindu goddesses provide a symbol that appeals to Mitsuko—a symbol that combines good and evil with chaos and suffering.

Gradually this religious symbol alters her thinking on other religious symbols and, consequently, on her understanding of self and others. Eventually, she now sees Isaiah 53, the cross, and Ōtsu through the symbol of Chāmundā. In his actions of carrying the poverty-stricken dead and dying to the Ganges, Ōtsu is analogous to both Chāmundā and his beloved Onion (162, 175). He imitates the compassion found in Chāmundā and the Onion such that it begins to provoke Mitsuko’s recognition of the “individual dramas of the soul” that she witnesses along the banks of the Ganges (200). Nonetheless, she

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14 One should note that this depiction of a compassionate Chāmundā should be understood as Mitsuko’s reaction, along with other Japanese tourists, to the symbol as opposed to an accurate depiction from the perspective of Hinduism.
remains resistant, and denigrates Ōtsu’s actions as futile amidst the violence of the world—an argument underscored in that the trip coincides with the religious violence provoked by the 1984 assassination of prime minister Indira Gandhi. In the face of such strife, Ōtsu’s actions and those like him seem impotent (208, 209).

The decisive shift in Mitsuko’s imagination occurs not through rationalization but through participation in symbolic action. Dressed in a sari, she approaches the Ganges amidst a large crowd of Hindus praying and bathing at the sacred site. At the prompting of an anonymous Indian, she enters the river. Around her, various symbolic actions interact ambivalently with each other so that Mitsuko simultaneously experiences good and evil, life and death. Nearby, the blessings of a wedding couple occur near cremation grounds, while ashes mingle with flower petals on the water’s surface (210). When Mitsuko starts to pray, she initially attempts to rationalize her prayer as another imitation. But there is a clear shift towards authenticity in that she no longer separates herself from others. Further, unlike before, an external symbolic action now corresponds to her internal desires. She has not converted to any one religious belief, nor has she resolved her questions about herself, but she has at least achieved a new openness—an openness that occurs through participation in religious symbolic actions:

I have learned, though, that there is a river of humanity. Though I still don’t know what lies at the end of that flowing river. But I feel as though I’ve started to understand what I was yearning for through all the many mistakes of my past. . . What I can believe in now is the sight of all these people, each carrying his or her own individual burdens, praying at this deep river. . . The sorrows of this deep river of humanity. And I am a part of it. (210, 211; italics in the original)

From the standpoint of a Rahnerian theology of grace, Mitsuko makes her first act of surrendering herself to mystery, that is, a movement towards transcendence in which one
abandons one’s desire for control and certainty. As Rahner argues:

The act in which a person can face and accept the mystery of God (and therein the comprehensive meaning of his own existence) without being shattered by it and without fleeing from it into all the banality of his clear and distinct ideas, the banality of looking for meaning that is based only on such knowledge and what it can master and control, this act…is the act of love in which a person surrenders and entrusts himself to this very mystery.¹⁵

This acceptance of mystery is an acceptance that one’s desires have a goal beyond the self-enclosed world of “pure,” empirical nature (which for Rahner does not exist in reality); such an experience is an experience of grace. Certain primal experiences manifest the human person’s innate transcendence, such as intense longing or persistent hope in the face of death; such “elements are in fact tributary to that divine force which impels the created spirit – by grace – to an absolute fulfilment. Hence in them grace is experienced and the natural being of man.”¹⁶ Mitsuko experiences grace in her prayer, since her imagination opens itself to a new potential for transcendence, a transformation symbolically prompted and manifested. Again, however, this does not mean that she has become a Christian. But, as Rahner notes, the presence of grace does not depend upon the conscious awareness of grace, since grace is everywhere active in human existence.¹⁷ Grace always depends upon God’s free initiative, not human action, as Martin Luther would no doubt remind us. Rahner’s theology of symbol and grace and Endo’s understanding of divinity as a force converge in Mitsuko in that symbolic religious


¹⁷ Rahner’s argument on this point can be most clearly seen in his (controversial) concept of the “anonymous Christians.” As an example, see Karl Rahner, “Anonymous and Explicit Faith,” in Theological Investigations, trans. David Morland, O.S.B., vol. 16 (New York: Seabury, 1979), 52-59.
actions manifest an innate longing for a transcendent reality, a reality Endo makes concrete through his characters’ unique and various forms of suffering.

However, Endo resists the tidy conclusion. What Mitsuko ultimately does with this vision is left ambiguous by the few pages that follow. The novel leaves Mitsuko with an open-ended choice of whether to continue to see Ōtsu’s life as futile, or whether his compassionate acts manifest meaningfulness in the face of suffering and violence. Shortly after her prayer, Ōtsu is savagely beaten by a furious crowd as he tries to protect the selfish Sanjō, who has insensitively attempted to photograph the ghāts. As the severely wounded Ōtsu is carried away, Mitsuko yells at him that his actions, and indeed his life, are foolish and impotent, as “she pounded her fists futilely on the stone steps” (212).

Ōtsu’s sacrifice for the unworthy Sanjō recalls the discussion in Chapter Three of Balthasar’s theology of the saint; it is the saint who through self-sacrificial love most manifests the form of Christ. Ōtsu’s life throughout the narrative is a Christ-form that provokes Mitsuko’s self-reflection. Despite her distaste with Ōtsu’s vocation, Mitsuko by the end is now open to the possibility that his life is not as worthless as she previously believed. Williams points out that Mitsuko and her fellow tourists “may be leaving India as empty-handed and as alone as when they had arrived; but their eyes have been opened by Ōtsu’s altruism—and it is here, in the potential for regeneration attributed to each of these individuals in these concluding portraits that the force of the narrative impact lies.”

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transformed by their encounters in India.

Mitsuko’s potential for regeneration is most explicitly implied when, as she waits for the final bus to the airport, she witnesses Mother Teresa’s nuns picking up the sick and carrying them away on a litter. Unlike Sanjō, who immediately dismisses their actions as “futile” and “stupid,” Mitsuko asks the nuns why they care for the hopelessly sick. When the nuns reply that “except for this…there is nothing in this world we can believe in,” Mitsuko does not catch whether they said “for this” or “for him,” a confusion that symbolically links Christ and the divine with the weak and the helpless, a Christology that Ōtsu’s life manifests (215). The novel ends when Mitsuko is informed about Ōtsu’s grave injuries, but again, the novel leaves unanswered—and provokes the reader consequently—whether Mitsuko will come to understand Ōtsu’s actions as grounded in, and revealing, a transcendent reality.

But at the very least, after her plunge into the dramatic movement of religious symbolism, Mitsuko may now be willing to reconfigure her desires via a deeper dialogue with others through the shared brokenness of all humanity. The shift from a simplistic, black and white thinking about symbolic actions, and correspondingly about herself and her relationships, has given way to a more ambiguous and ambivalent imagination, one open to a larger frame of reference, or to use Rahner’s nomenclature, a broader, richer horizon. As Williams observes, she is able to accept “conflicting voices” about herself as an indication of a “greater complexity to her being,” and only at the end, when she recognizes herself as in fellowship with humanity, can she in turn begin to empathize
with others. Thus one hopes that she will now continue to embrace a greater vision of humanity’s ultimate ground and end.

**Uncertainty, Faith, and the Literary Imagination**

Although my focus in these last few pages remains upon Endo’s *Deep River*, my comments are also relevant to the novels discussed in Chapters Three and Four; for, each novel challenges the reader to reflect upon the story’s portrayal of faith. In other words, *Deep River* serves as an exemplar of the larger discussion, not as an exception.

Endo’s novel provokes readers to consider their own response to Ōtsu’s life by leaving the reader with the same choice as Mitsuko. The thoughtful reader will then engage in a dialogue between the world of the text and one’s own world, that is, between the story’s sacramental vision and the reader’s own willingness to adopt imaginatively this vision. By “thoughtful reader,” I assume a reader who is willing to reflect critically upon the novel, open to the possibility for a personal appropriation of the novel’s world (as opposed to a reader whose only interest in the story is in entertainment).

As a reader, the theologian faces the challenge, then, of how to respond to the novel’s portrayal of faith. Paul Ricoeur notes that in the act of reading, the reader grasps the sense of the text and the world projected by the work, but also experiences the openness of the text beyond itself in a manifold of references: “…the world is the whole set of references opened by every sort of descriptive or poetic text I have read, interpreted, and loved.”

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19 Mark Williams, “Crossing the Deep River,” 127.

unfolds, the “world in front of itself”; this vision is not limited to (nor can it be exclusively established by) authorial intention, although Ricoeur acknowledges an implied author.\textsuperscript{21} The implied author communicates an interpretation of the world through the text, but ultimately, the reader considers this text within the horizon of one’s own life. The text thereby is both closed and open to the world. It is structurally closed, but open in the sense that it presents itself for the reader’s interpretation.\textsuperscript{22}

In an interpretation, the reader oscillates between what is the same, different, and analogous between the text’s world and the reader’s world.\textsuperscript{23} In the case of the novel, the act of reading may become the catalyst of action in the reader’s historical context. Reading then has a “twofold status”; it may on the one hand be an opportunity for reflection, but on the other hand this reflection may also serve as the spark for conversion to some degree to the text’s vision of the world:

Reading appears by turns as an interruption in the course of action and as a new impetus to action. These two perspectives on reading result directly from its functions of confrontation and connection between the imaginary world of the text and the actual world of readers. To the extent that readers subordinate their expectations to those developed by the text, they themselves become unreal to a degree comparable to the unreality of the fictive world toward which they emigrate. Reading then becomes a place, itself unreal, where reflection takes a pause. On the other hand, inasmuch as readers incorporate—little matter whether consciously or unconsciously—into their vision of the world the lessons of the readings, in order to increase the prior readability of this vision, then reading is for them something other than a place where they come to rest; it is a medium


\textsuperscript{23} Ricoeur, \textit{Time and Narrative}, vol. 3, 178.
If Ricoeur is right, then *Deep River* provokes the theologian to reflect upon Endo’s expansive depiction of sacramentality, in which God’s presence is experienced often in those areas of human society that are the weakest, most despised, most rejected, and frequently not Christian.

In addition, this reflection is not only conceptual, but also involves the reader’s imaginative and affective response to the story, one which occurs in part, as Ricoeur notes, through a trust between the reader and the text. In chapter one, I discussed Nussbaum’s argument that literature’s unique form of thinking—as opposed to more theoretical forms of discourse—is because of its appeal to the reader’s emotions, emotions provoked by a context that emphasizes the specific and the concrete over the theoretical and the abstract. Nussbaum’s claim relates to fundamental questions of epistemology. As Julien Deonna and Fabrice Teroni point out, “Beyond its effects on our body, the principal feature of an emotion is to inform the subject of the significance objects and events have for her. Emotions reveal to us a world imbued with value.”

In part, literature allows for a great degree of uncertainty because it deals with the uncertainty of emotions. “Emotions shape the landscape of our mental and social lives,” observes Nussbaum, and thereby mark human lives as uncertain, uneven, and open to reversal; consequently, emotions also possess a narrative structure since they are

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24 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, 179.

temporal and fickle.\textsuperscript{26}

Novels, in turn, may help a reader to understand one’s self through reflection upon the narratives. For Nussbaum, the act of reading does not eliminate the reader’s emotions, but instead achieves, hopefully, a clarification with both one’s intellect and emotions. This clarification involves “a recognition of practical values, and therefore of ourselves, that is no less important than the recognitions and perceptions of intellect.”\textsuperscript{27} In this sense, a certain degree of personal enlightenment occurs concerning what one values, or, given the ambiguity that fictional literature often allows, to what degree one attaches value to various goods; for, literature may provoke the experience of conflicting emotions caused by conflicting values. As Nussbaum argues, “emotions look at the world from the subject’s own viewpoint, mapping events onto the subject’s own sense of personal importance or value.”\textsuperscript{28}

How might this help understand the power of Endo’s \textit{Deep River}? Here, let me take a personal turn by way of demonstration. As a theological reader, I encounter the story with a certain imaginative worldview—either consciously or unconsciously—that involves not only my religious values and beliefs as I conceptually articulate them, but also with an attached emotional importance to those beliefs. In engaging affectively with the text’s vision, I follow the characters through their experiences of uncertainty about themselves and about their understandings of the world. I then face a choice whether to

\textsuperscript{26} Martha C. Nussbaum, \textit{Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1-3.


\textsuperscript{28} Nussbaum, \textit{Upheavals of Thought}, 33.
engage analogically with the characters. But if I choose to engage analogically, I then face the challenges posed by the text. For example, if I am emotionally moved by Ōtsu’s uncertainty about his faith-life, or if to some degree I can relate to, or at least sympathize with Mitsuko’s skepticism regarding religion, I may begin questioning my own beliefs and values, often in a complicated and ambiguous manner. At the same time, I may also find myself reacting negatively; I must then articulate my emotional reaction against certain aspects of the story. Specifically, as an American, Catholic theologian, I find myself questioning Endo’s interpretation of Christ’s resurrection (which seems to downplay the importance of the bodily resurrection) or his presentation of “Western” Christian theology (which in the novel seems to be presented exclusively through the framework of scholasticism) as articulated in the voice of Ōtsu. To give another possibility, I may (although I do not) question the sincerity of Mitsuko’s prayer as she stands in the Ganges River, or even wonder how I can relate to her, considering that her and Ōtsu’s cultural context are very different from my own. And yet, I find that I do analogously relate to Mitsuko and Ōtsu despite these differences, for I too have experienced uncertainty, periods of questioning life’s meaningfulness, or wondering if (like Mitsuko) there is a deeper engagement to life beyond the cultural norms of a prosperous, materialistic society. In this sense, then, my emotions are conflicted regarding these characters. To push the matter further, if I choose to accept Ōtsu’s insistence—and the vision of the text by implication—of the divine presence in human life, especially in contexts that are not Christian, then I must decide whether to accept Endo’s own culturally-embedded understanding of this divine presence, or whether to
articulate an appropriation more suited to my own cultural context and theological understanding (as I have tried to do above through Rahner’s theology). In either case, through my emotional engagement with the text, I experience uncertainty since I realize that my values and desires conflict with one another in response to the novel’s ambiguity.

Because of the story’s provocation of ambiguous, ambivalent emotions, the reader must recognize the limited nature of one’s interpretation. For, as Ricouer reminds us, an interpreter may become so seduced by a text, so close to it in other words, that one may forget that a well-written narrative always contains a surplus of meaning. 29 This recalls Nussbaum’s belief that “before a literary work…we are humble, open, active yet porous” in a way readers often are not when engaged in more conventional, abstract discourses. 30 Of course, one often desires to “understand” everything about a novel, to claim to have the superior theological insight so as to judge the novel’s theological vision with certainty, but such an attitude may in fact limit the possibility for conversion. Interpretation then should be a spiritual exercise, practiced with an attitude of humility before the story and an attempt to consider reflectively, but still critically, the theological vision of faith articulated in the novel.

Although I have emphasized the affective dimension of literature, I do not mean to deny the importance of the intellect. Rather, to speak of faith as an imaginative orientation is to observe that the imagination is the convergence between the intellect and the emotions. As William Lynch reminds us, the imagination “refers to the total resources

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in us which go into the making of our images of the world” and include all of the person’s faculties, both intellectual and emotional, as well as personal history, cultural context, and so forth.\textsuperscript{31}

In Chapter Two, I discussed Kierkegaard’s existential understanding of faith, one that requires the passion of faith to be manifested in the concrete circumstances of one’s life, but a movement of faith that only occurs when one experiences an imaginative conversion. For Kierkegaard, this conversion, prompted by anxiety over the self, is an imaginative recognition that one is a sinner. In this experience of anxiety and self-doubt, one arrives at the realization of new, previously unrecognized possibilities. To recognize one’s self as a sinner only occurs if one also recognizes God. Otherwise, sin has no meaning. The believer then relates differently to God, the self, and the world. This imaginative conversion to faith is more existential than simply a movement of an intellectual frame of reference, for “being a Christian is defined not by the ‘what’ of Christianity but by the ‘how’ of the Christian.”\textsuperscript{32} As Dulles notes, existential faith is a faith marked by trust and hope in God’s saving grace.\textsuperscript{33} It is not that Kierkegaard ignores the “what” of faith (i.e. the content of faith); rather, it is that faith itself primarily requires a transformation of one’s vision of the world, a transformation shaped by hope in God’s saving grace.


The role of the imagination in faith then is a point of convergence between Kierkegaard and the novels, for the novels portray faith fundamentally more as an existential orientation than as an intellectual assent to conceptual propositions of belief. Regardless of whether their uncertainty occurs before or after faith, the protagonists undergo an imaginative transformation of one’s vision of God, the world, and the self. Their experiences of uncertainty provoke an emotional conversion; only then does their intellectual conversion follow.

Literature invites us to imagine faith as more existential than intellectual, and thereby reminds us that faith is inseparable from emotions. Edward Vacek observes that without emotions Christian faith is “dead,” because “it is through our emotions that we are formed into communities and are related to God, ourselves, others, and our world.”34 Theology then also needs to consider the relationship between faith articulated conceptually, and faith provoked affectively, such as found in literature. As Vacek perceives, existential faith recognizes that whenever one’s emotions are channeled towards the ultimate Mystery that is God, one experiences the realization that one is not in complete control but is completely dependent upon this Mystery. Revelation for existential faith, thereby, is not simply assent to information, but, more importantly, “revelation provides ‘objects’ to be loved or feared or otherwise emotionally appreciated. Above all, revelation is a personal and affective encounter with God, of being loved and of loving in return.”35


Further, the novels’ emphasis on mystery over mastery points to a convergence between their various portrayals of grace and a traditional theme of theology—an event of revelation involves both disclosure as well as hiddenness. The novels then make a distinctive epistemological claim that coheres with traditional Christian theology: Revelation discloses God yet, since it also points to the limitations of human knowing before Divine Mystery, it thereby implies the hiddenness of God.36

As seen in the novels of the six Catholic authors discussed above, uncertainty’s relationship to faith plays out often in the context of sin and evil. Repeatedly, this relationship between uncertainty and faith follows Kierkegaard’s path. Characters often first recognize their own sins before they undergo either a conversion to faith or a re-configuration of a previously flawed faith. Examples of this trajectory are seen in the protagonists of O’Connor’s novels, or with Maurice and Sarah in Greene’s The End of the Affair, or Louis in Mauriac’s The Viper’s Tangle. Perhaps this recognition of sin and evil occurs in the recognition of evil in the actions of others, such as Nicholas in Spark’s The Girls of Slender Means or Sandy in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie. Meanwhile, Endo’s Silence and Deep River, despite their different cultural contexts, provoke uncertainty’s challenge to faith in the face of unjust suffering. Regardless of the differences between these novels, they align with Nicholas’ insight that “a vision of evil may be as effective to conversion as a vision of good.”37


through reasoned, abstract argumentation for the good, the novels seek to seduce their readers into a vision of faith through affective provocation via concrete depictions of evil. Although Gordon’s novels complicate the sacramental vision unfolded in the other novels, it is a disruption greatly valued, for it critiques a form of faith that is too rigid, too certain, too small to allow insights emerge from the struggles with doubt. In this sense, despite their more skeptical attitudes to faith—although *The Company of Women* ends more open to faith than *Final Payments*—her two novels nonetheless present a vision of human experience that aligns with the other works: uncertainty, however painful, is necessary for a human life worth living.

Literature then reminds us that both life and faith are structurally narratives. It is human faith after all and humans are story-bound creatures. Literature compels the theologian to confront the power of the emotions; for, human beings interact with the world with diverse values emotionally projected upon this world to various, and often times contradictory degrees. The ambiguity of emotions regarding faith means that the theologian must not regard faith as the elimination of uncertainty. Uncertainty is not an enemy of faith, but is natural, even at times essential to a healthy faith. Literature grounds theological thinking in the imaginative nature of faith itself, since faith is not primarily the content of faith as much as the believer’s vision that the world is intertwined with grace, a vision that grants hope and trust amidst uncertainty.
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