

TEACH ME YOUR WORD, O LORD: RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE, LITERARY
CONGREGATIONS, AND THE INEFFABLE IN AMERICAN FICTION

by

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Teach Me Your Word, O Lord: Religious Discourse, Literary Congregations, and the Ineffable in
American Fiction

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“Teach Me Your Word” examines Protestant discourse in twentieth- and twenty-first-century American novels, comics, and television. It argues that artists employ shifting representations of the ineffable not to establish a Protestant nation but to critique and reform injustice in America. Including texts from William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, Alice Walker, Ralph Ellison, David Simon, Garth Ennis & Steve Dillon, Scott Cheshire, and Marilynne Robinson, “Teach Me Your Word” analyzes the sermonic rhetoric of literary pastors and pastor figures to identify the mediated, negotiated, and transformative effect of religious discourse within American literary communities. Furthermore, the gospel message preached within these texts always redirects so that it speaks to the reading/viewing audiences as well as the fictional characters. Protestant discourses in American literature need to be considered as both religious and sociopolitical discourses that work to align America’s practices more closely with its stated ideals. To do so in a non-oppressive, non-discriminatory manner, these texts resist concretizing the ineffable source that powers religious discourse so as to generate evolving conceptions of both religious and American ways of living in the world.

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*It was the time of the preacher
In the year of '01
Now the preachin is over
And the lesson 's begun*
Willie Nelson, "Time of the Preacher"

INTRODUCTION

The figure of the Protestant pastor belongs beside the cowboy, the pioneer woman, the immigrant, the noir detective, and the rags to riches ingénue as an archetype in the American literary imaginary. Pastors embody America's ongoing and evolving relationship with religion as a force in American social, aesthetic, and political life. When fictionalized, pastors emphasize the rhetorical nature of religious life in American art and politics. The texts in this study render sermons that testify to the metamorphic power of religious discourse to remake listeners' inner and outer selves, and through those individuals, to transform communities. To analyze pastors in American fiction is to analyze how writers and artists blend religion and literature to fashion and to communicate a transformational message for their characters and for their reading audiences.

"The Time of the Preacher," from Willie Nelson's 1975 album *Red Headed Stranger*, provides a useful introduction to the ways that preachers operate in American fiction, both within and beyond the bounds of conventional expectation. The song adopts the deviant pastor narrative, embodied in literary pastors such as Theron Ware, Rev. Whitfield, and Elmer Gantry, before returning to the redemption story at the heart of Protestant sermonizing. *Red Headed Stranger* consists of a collection of original compositions and covers framed by the story of a pastor who abandons his pulpit to track down and murder his adulterous wife and her lover. After committing the crime, the preacher later kills a woman whom he believes is trying to steal his wife's horse before eventually meeting another woman and finding redemption in their love. The album's narrative is startling in its violence, and it highlights the way that an artist can

deviate from and reimagine the Protestant story of redemption. Nelson's stranger reveals a tension between devotion to and rebellion against a divine source, reminding us that rather than being a static experience, belief fluctuates according to the individual's devotion at any given time.

Notably, Nelson's preacher abandons his pulpit, and only then does the learning begin. As born out by the character of the American preacher since Arthur Dimmesdale, religious discourse in fiction becomes most critically appealing when it exits the church and comes into conflict with opposing belief systems. The result of such conflicts is most frequently the construction of a new religious discourse inflected with American civic ideals. In the case of *The Red Headed Stranger*, Nelson bends the Protestant gospel such that it locates redemption in human rather than divine love. Meanwhile, his preacher avoids punishment, emphasizing the stranger's privileged position as someone whose spiritual journey ultimately supersedes local jurisprudence. Nelson rewrites the redemption story so that it forgoes any implied individual weakness that may come with asking for God's forgiveness while it emphasizes the power of inhabiting a position seemingly above the law. *The Red Headed Stranger* preaches an idiosyncratic version of the gospel story through its lyrics and music, and it also becomes a vehicle to incarnate Nelson's own musical persona. Both outlaw preacher and country singer, Nelson's red headed stranger shows the malleability of the fictional American preacher while simultaneously asserting its authority to revise religious and civic discourses.

Religious discourse, like all discourse, depends on representation for its power.¹

Representation presents a host of interpretative challenges, as it forces us to consider how we

¹ In "Theology and Literature': What is it About?" Olivier-Thomas Venard sees the representational nature of language as the entry point of studying religion and literature because it is the point at which theology and literature coalesce: "Moreover, philosophers and literary

symbolize and substitute words, images, and actions for abstract concepts. Since representation carries with it idiosyncrasy, complex motives, and multivalent meanings, I find it necessary to define a few of the terms that are central to this study. To distinguish religious discourse from other discursive forms, I define it as reverential language about a sacred subject, such that speakers submit their will and shape significant aspects of their identity according to the dictates of the sacred context. The sacred itself is a contested term. It defies definition because it refers to the ineffable, but also because it depends on an individual's thoughts, feelings, and convictions, phenomena that are themselves fluid and open to revision. For the purposes of this study, I use the term to refer to ineffable sources of divine authority, but I do so following the lead of the preachers and congregations I analyze. As I argue in the following chapters, individuals and congregations work out religious convictions in a process that includes doubt, questioning, conversation, introspection and debate, and they do so in matters of both belief and faith. Matthew L. Potts argues that critics of Christianity and literature need to distinguish between belief as a "doctrinal embrace" and faith as a matter of "trust or fidelity" (490) so that we can attend more faithfully to the characteristics of religious experience in literature and life. I focus on both evangelical and mainline Protestantism, and my study often reveals the extent to which belief and faith vary in their alignment to the individual's convictions. Furthermore, since Protestant manifestations of religious discourse vary according to the individuals who speak it, it is useful to acknowledge certain norms. Protestantism emphasizes the individual's relationship to the divine, for instance, and privileges piety over sacrament. As evidenced in the texts in this study, Protestant individualism affords writers the ability to reshape the gospel message in light

scholars have discovered that metaphor is more than a literary device: it is the matrix of any signification. / In brief, theology and literature share a common interest in the advent of meaning in human *conscience/consciousness*" (90, emphasis in the original).

of their characters' identities. As such, fictional pastors inflect religious discourse according to their experience as an American, further emphasizing that religious discourse in American fiction is both sacred and civic.

Individualizing a generalized discourse begins with mediating it. Mark Knight suggests that religious dogma is often “mediated (rather than just illustrated) through literary forms” (1). Mediation modifies dogma as it is communicated in writing as opposed to illustration, which claims to convey without altering. I argue that mediation should also remind us of the physicality of speakers in that they stand between the sacred and an audience. Despite Protestant ideals of the Holy Spirit's unimpeded movement through the speaker, the Protestant pastors in this study foreground the influence of the speaker on the message. By connecting two parties, the mediator forces both parties to see a human at the center of the exchange. In other words, the mediator reminds the parties of the humanity in the process of communication. As mediators who seek to represent the sacred in words, the pastor figures that I examine emphasize the physicality inherent in the act of preaching by materializing the religious discourse that they preach.²

Religious discourse is necessarily human discourse, though it is specially tasked with describing the ineffable, that which transcends human thought and experience. As such, it yields itself to the same methods of critical analysis as other discursive forms. We come to terms with it not through specially ordained words but from repurposing words from everyday experience. Referencing Kenneth Burke's *The Rhetoric of Religion*, Denis Donoghue argues that words that are “applicable to religious experience...issue from natural or social experience, and then are

² Venard writes, “Yes, propositions about the origin, the essence or the functioning of language may only be manifested and explained—*not* demonstrated. But *no*, this does not mean that truth is inaccessible. It just means that truth is *mediated* (revealed and given) in language within a given culture in which codes and performances will prove essential to accessing truth” (91, emphasis in the original).

applied figuratively and rather desperately to one's religious occasion" (33). As ordinary language put to special purpose, religious discourse must be continually renovated so that its metaphors, symbols, and imagery avoid becoming stale, and thus denuded of their spiritual implications.³ Speakers frequently maintain religious discourse by engaging competing discourses, whether they are secular or originate in opposing belief systems⁴. If this demonstrates the limitations of sacred diction then it also reveals that it is a living discourse that can be adapted to specific contexts and audiences.

Language about the sacred has to talk about or around the ineffable while never quite capturing it. In *The Mind of the Novel*, Bruce Kavin writes, "This does not mean that humans are incapable of feelings that there is something beyond...but it does mean that, in language and thought, we cannot deal with that 'something' directly; we can only come to terms with its beyondness" (26). In his study, Kavin claims that "[the] ineffable is a metaphysical province" and "out of bounds" to language (26). He argues that writers confront the problem of representing that which is "out of bounds" by creating "closed-system narration," or stories that "call attention to the limits of" their narrative world. By restricting their narrative systems, the

³ In "Religion and Literature: Four Theses and More," Larry D. Bouchard identifies a reciprocal relationship between religious tradition and cultural matters: "Not only do religious traditions inhabit the arts, but cultural matters infiltrate traditions: matters of taste and forms of beauty, virtues and dispositions, instituted relations (e.g., types of marriage), ways of exchanging things and power, styles of speech and interaction (forms of address, etiquette, politics, gender or class strata, rules of friendship)" (15). For Bouchard, this is more an inevitable than it is a negative process; it is also, he notes, an entryway into exploring religion and literature in an academically satisfying way.

⁴ As Tracy Fessenden, Talal Asad, Michael Warner, and others have argued, binary distinctions between the religious and the secular break down upon close scrutiny. The religious and the secular need to be considered as fluid phenomena dependent on specific cultural and political contexts. When I use the terms religion and secular (and less frequently, the nonreligious) in distinction, I do so recognizing their complex relationship and to call attention to the ways that speakers of religious discourse often use these terms rhetorically. I return to a more detailed discussion of the secular in chapter two.

artist suggests there is something beyond the story, something that the artist wishes to point to even as s/he cannot name it. I see a common thread in Kawin's argument and my own, which is that the ineffable generates artistic endeavors. As Marilynne Robinson explains, "I continuously attempt to make inroads on the vast terrain of what cannot be said—or said by me, at least...the unnamed is overwhelmingly present and real for me" (*When I Was a Child* 19-20). Robinson's project remains necessarily incomplete though, for if she were to succeed, then she would bring about not just the end of the story but also the end of storytelling. Putting the ineffable into words ends Protestant narrative possibilities because it names that which is beyond human understanding and, thus, that which would reorient human thought to itself if revealed. The ineffable, then, is not only generative but also necessary to artistic invention. Further, texts that pursue the ineffable as their project tend to record its power to transform individuals. Protestant speakers make recourse to the ineffable as a source of authority capable of affecting the listener's convictions. Dilsey, Celie, Jesse Custer, Lila Dahl, and many other characters in this study experience transformational change, and they do so by encountering ineffable sources they assume have the power to effect change in their experiences. The ineffable thus drives art and produces transformational change such that characters internalize the quest to name "what cannot be said" and then become witnesses to the "beyondness."

Analyzing religious discourse in American fiction thus requires close attention to the ways that it develops in response to specific audiences, times and purposes. It is tempting to think that the speaker who most directly allows the purported word of God to speak through him or her wields the most control over the listening audience, but the mediated word of God is an entity that has the power both to control and to be controlled by communities with whom it interacts. Those who speak religious discourse must contend with those who hear it in order to

produce a communal consensus regarding its power in their lives. That this process plays out consistently over the past one hundred years of American fiction underscores a particularly American literary understanding of God as revealed in spiritual as well as political discourses. As evidenced in the texts that I analyze, congregations frequently choose their preachers and their messages, and they often require speakers to modify their messages to fit communal needs and beliefs. This does not undercut the authority of religious discourse to affect the listener; rather, it demonstrates that religious discourse depends on the community's authorization and that it has to be open to communal correction even as it tries to transcend the limitations of a given community's political situation. The fact that discourse remains open to negotiation also creates space for doubt and details that are revisable. Religious discourse in American literature is often more a process than a product.

The evangelistic aspect of American literature, embodied in pastors and narratives that perform sermonic functions, indicates the millennial desire of American authors to save their readership from an incomplete, only partially realized American experience. Indeed, there is no single American experience; rather, when we talk about American experiences we have to consider that they are constantly evolving. Likewise, its literatures and its religions resist strict definition. For the purposes of this study, I adopt Roger Lundin's assertion that "negotiating the tensions between the demands of the past and the possibilities of the future has been the task of America's religious traditions as well as of the authors who have played a vital role in its cultural history" (6). I find Lundin's dialectical argument appealing because it posits an active relationship between American literature and religion such that they work in tandem to critique American experiences in light of an inherited past and a hoped for future. Though as critics we resist the American exceptionalism often preached in literature and pulpits, it is important to

remember that much of our literature continues to avow an exceptional interpretation of America in history and in the world.⁵ No where is this more evident in the literary sermons I analyze in this study. Protestant sermons work to transform their congregations, and the sermons in the texts I analyze look to two audiences: their fictional audiences and their actual reader/viewership. Like the sermons within their pages, these texts are evangelistic when they preach the good news of how to find a spiritual experience in the face of materialistic temptation, the consequences of social inequality, and persecution from oppressive institutions.⁶ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines sermons as a “discourse, usually delivered from a pulpit and based upon a text of Scripture, for the purpose of giving religious instruction or exhortation.” As the texts I examine in this study reveal, literary sermons go further than religious instruction and exhortation and they more frequently speak both to the religious and the civic lives of the congregation in American literature.

When evangelical threads appear in American literature, we must read it as an art form with one eye on the current state of America and the other on the “always in the future” millennial reign, not of Christ, but of spiritual, civic, and aesthetic enlightenment. Albert Tricomi, in *Missionary Positions*, sees a resurgence in an American Christian mission in the popularity of the Left Behind novels at the turn of the century: “As a cultural phenomenon, the

⁵ I am working here out of Sarah Rivett’s argument on American exceptionalism in contemporary America, see “Religious Exceptionalism and American Literary History: The Puritan Origins of the American Self in 2012.” *Early American Literature*. 47.2 (2012): 391-410.

⁶ Robert Detweiler argues that the enterprise of religion and literature asks literary critics, as well as casual readers one supposes, to recognize what he calls the “existential responsibilities” of reading and interpreting: “I use the term ‘existential’ in the old mid-century sense of exercising one’s freedom to shape one’s stance toward life by constantly making critical choices. It seems to me that we have forgotten in the last three or four decades that these critical choices, especially for text interpreters, are really *critical* choices. A literary critic’s choices in reading a text this way rather than that always has results, always make a difference” (67).

Left Behind novels and the movement supporting them illustrate from a new direction a resurgence in the ideology of America as a [sic] evangelical nation with a Christian mission to the world” (9). I argue that the Left Behind novels do not tell the whole story of evangelical Protestantism in America, despite their popularity. A less oppressive American evangelical message in twentieth and twenty-first century fiction preaches an evangelism that in many, but not all, cases permits negotiation and modification of the gospel message. Moreover, the gospel message in these works is less the representation of a particular denominational interpretation of eschatology than it is a message that represents the search for an American experience rooted in equality, respect for individualized beliefs, and democratic institutions.

The matter of selecting specific texts over others is both a practical and theoretical decision. Critics put forth a multiplicity of analytical and theoretical tools to come to terms with the expansive field of religion and literature. “[It] appears appropriate to describe the discipline of ‘religion and literature’ / ‘theology and literature’ as heterogenous and acephalous,” observes the critic Daniel Middleton (152). Elisabeth Jay quotes Wesley Kort’s review of the *Oxford Handbook of English Literature* to identify a sentiment similar to Middleton’s: “the study of religion/theology and literature can scarcely be said to exist as a clearly delineated academic discipline. Rather...it [is] ‘a category of diverse interests’” (112). Both Middleton’s and Jay’s estimations of the field come from an issue of *Religion & Literature* that itself “is the result of individual and collective reflection by leading and emergent scholars on what sorts of intellectual projects, disciplinary configurations, and scholarly practices might be called into being by thinking about religion and literature together” (Monta 1). The thirty-four articles that follow Susannah Monta’s introduction point to the wide range of critical approaches, such that some argue for the field’s privileging of personal belief and a return to truth claims after

postmodernity, while others call for a more rigorous philosophical bent and an embrace of postmodernity's emphasis on play and difference. The way of religion and literature certainly seems to be broad, but managing it in a study of this size calls for a narrowing of focus.

The sheer number of Protestant pastors in the canon of American literature precludes comprehensive analysis; as such, I limit my focus to Protestant pastors who challenge implicit religious assumptions without abandoning religious belief—or in the case of *Preacher*, belief in the sacredness of pop culture. Due to the expansive nature of religion and literature, I also restrict my analysis to the roughly one-hundred-year period beginning with Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and ending with Marilynne Robinson's *The Givenness of Things*. One hundred years can seem like an arbitrary number, but I choose this timeframe in order to situate my work in context of the recent postsecular scholarship. Often aligned with the postmodern, postsecular studies focuses on “partial and open-ended” faiths and works to explain the “re-enchantment of the world” as documented in American literature.⁷ I too see a shifting, open-ended aspect of religion in American literature, but I locate it in the ineffable rather than in individual belief practices. Additionally, I suggest that the shifting representation of the ineffable in American literature predates the postmodern, suggesting that it is less a byproduct of time and more a general characteristic of religion in American literature.

Further, I choose to focus on Protestant pastors because of their ongoing relevance to the American political situation and because each of these texts, all of which feature Protestant discourse as a major aspect of the narrative, interrogates the American experience. Protestantism

⁷ “Partial and open-ended” faith is John McClure’s phrasing in his preface to *Partial Faiths: Postsecular fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*. In *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960*, Amy Hungerford explores the “belief in meaninglessness” she sees prevalent in postmodern literature, a phenomenon she correlates to what Zygmunt Bauman termed the “re-enchantment of the world” (7).

remains an important political force in American life, as evidenced by the posturing of Republicans for evangelical votes in the 2016 political primaries and by a recent article in *The New York Times* titled, “Hillary Clinton Gets Personal on Christ and Her Faith,” that prints Clinton’s response to a voter who asks her to explain how some politicians claim to be Democrats because of their “Christian values” while others “say they are Republicans because of their Christian values” (Chozick). Clinton’s answer performs many of the sermonic functions listed above: it is itself a declaration of a faith, a negotiation between competing religious discourses, and a call to action.

Though inhabiting different time periods, genres, and media, each text engaged in this study devotes a significant portion of its narrative to a transformational language rooted in Protestant preaching. As a way to grapple with this subject, I turn to Robert Detweiler’s sense of hermeneutics in religion and literature. In his response to Jonathon Culler’s “Political Criticism: Confronting Religion,” Detweiler proposes a means for narrowing the work of religion and literature in the academy by identifying three critical practices: the curatorial, the hermeneutic, and the existential (Wright 19). Although all three present compelling rationales for studying religion and literature, for the purposes of my project I find the hermeneutic practice most useful. As Detweiler defines it, the hermeneutic aspect of religion and literature demands that critics acknowledge their own personal beliefs and how those beliefs color their interpretive exercises. Explaining the relevance of the hermeneutic aspect of religion and literature, he references David Jasper’s work on “rhetoric and violence”: “our articulations of belief—in a god, a vision, a pattern of meaning, a society—are inevitably religious, insofar as we expect them to transform us and others, yet...these articulations are effective...only insofar as they are embodied in transformational language” (Detweiler 66). As such, I turn my gaze to the ways that the speakers

of religious discourse transform their listeners. Each of the speakers I analyze interprets a religious text and conveys it to a literary audience, and they adopt a particular hermeneutical stance in doing so. In speaking their religious discourse, they embody a transformational language that produces an effect on their listeners. To analyze transformational language and the process of embodying it, I approach the texts in three ways: first, by reading religious discourse in light of theoretical arguments; second, by considering examples of gospel messages across canonical literary genres and contemporary multimedia texts; and third, by highlighting theological components of the gospel message to demonstrate how the gospel in American fiction engages with, adapts, and alters the Protestant story for political purposes.

I combine close readings of pastors and sermons with theoretical arguments in order to examine how the sacred is mediated and negotiated through literary preaching. My close readings examine rhetorical methods, the interplay between religious and nonreligious discourses, and the means through which these texts imagine political and social reformation. Furthermore, I compare religious discourse across genre to highlight its pervasiveness in American fiction as well as the ways that religious discourse can be adapted to narrative techniques. Here I follow Emma Mason's assertion that "thinking of religion enables a compassionate reading of texts to access hopeful unknowns" (5). Reading the gospel message in American novels, comics, music, and television, I identify how these textual gospels create new scriptural interpretations rather than submitting to an authorized reading. Engaging texts across genres allows me to analyze the ways that these innovative interpretations of the gospel confront oppressive institutions and discriminatory practices in America.

Interrogating authorized readings is an essential aspect of both the texts I study and my critical approach to them. At the same time, I am interested less in what Paul Ricoeur called the

“hermeneutics of suspicion” than I am in his “hermeneutics of faith.”⁸ Whereas the former opens texts to the critic’s scalpel, the second recognizes the capacity of books to teach their audiences. I find Lundin’s take on the matter useful: “There is something badly truncated about any study of religious belief and practice and literary production and reception that fails to treat seriously the ‘willingness’ to listen and the ‘vow of obedience’ as well” (“Prospects and Retrospects” 295). The works I analyze in this study document transformation within the text and argue for sociopolitical change without. They use literary techniques such as structure and point of view rhetorically, so as to appeal to their readers to address real world conflicts. As such, I approach these novels from the hermeneutics of faith in order to illustrate how they preach their messages to their reading/viewing audiences.

Following the critic George Newlands, I arrange my chapters according to a theological scheme of Christian redemption that follows four phases of the Protestant gospel: incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. I link each chapter to one of these concepts both to show how readily the gospel story manifests itself in narratives about America and to create a mosaic of modern and contemporary American texts that reveals the ongoing tendency to combine the religious and political to imagine a more perfectly realized American experience. George Newlands divides the gospel story into constituent parts of incarnation, suffering, and transfiguration: “In the Christian tradition, salvation is through Christ alone: God comes into our world in the figure of Jesus Christ as a human being, in solidarity, in suffering, and in transfiguration” (830). I see transfiguration as embodying two components of the gospel message: resurrection and ascension, for transfiguration in the Christ story begins on earth but

⁸ Ricoeur’s explanation of the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of faith originated in his 1961 Terry Lectures, which were later published as *Freud and Philosophy: And Essay on Interpretation*.

carries over into the removal from earth to heaven. I analyze the texts in this study according to the components of the gospel message in order to answer the following question: What does it mean to say that a text incorporates and addresses elements of the gospel message? More specifically, what does it mean to say that *The Color Purple* rewrites the Incarnation, that *The Wire* refuses to carry the narrative past the point of the suffering figured in the crucifixion, that *Preacher* resurrects religious discourse even as it tries to discard it, or that *Lila* employs the absence associated with the ascension to recast redemption in religious humanist terms?

Although not all of the texts I consider may be considered protest fictions, all of them protest conditions that inhibit either the lives of the characters within the texts or the imagined citizens of America. In defining protest in this way, I borrow from Ralph Ellison's description of writing *Invisible Man*, "I would say simply that in the very act of trying to create something, there is implicit a protest against the way things are, a protest against man's vulnerability before the larger forces of society and the universe" (*On Initiation Rites and Power* 544). Generally speaking, the "larger forces of society" are those forces that have created and continue to maintain the discrepancy between America's practices and its founding documents. In protesting these forces, the texts I analyze work, borrowing again from Ellison, to "[force] the confrontation between the nation's conduct and its ideal" (Warren 339). The characters in the texts I analyze, and the imagined Americans they represent, have a right to self-expression, but they are restricted or obstructed from achieving that experience because of antagonistic forces that span cultural, political, and artistic spectrums: whether it is the failure of myths, racial discrimination, the deleterious effects of the war on drugs, the systematic control of institutionalized religion, or the dehumanizing forces of anti-humanist thought. The multiplicity of viewpoints and protest targets represented in these texts seem to preclude a unified analysis; however, situating them

under the umbrella of religious discourse allows us to see them working toward common ends even though their respective projects remain distinct.

The first chapter of *Teach Me Your Word, O Lord* examines the incarnation of religious discourse in three novels of the American South: William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Faulkner, O'Connor, and Walker construct their narrative conflicts by situating characters in a fallen world corrupted by impotent myths, materialism, and discrimination respectively. Within these spiritually threatening settings, characters preach a spirituality that elevates characters above their current problems. Shegog, Motes, Celie, and Shug achieve this because they incarnate the word of God as they mediate it, which allows them both to speak and to act such that it has a transformative effect for their audiences. Faulkner's Reverend Shegog confirms to Dilsey that she has seen the beginning and the end: temporally, she has seen the birth of the Compson children and the death of the family legacy; spiritually, she sees the possibility for redemption through Christ's suffering, which may or may not assign significance to the decline of the Compsons. O'Connor populates her novel with conmen preachers who preach theologically absurd sermons of self-help and self-worth. A reluctant preacher, Hazel must reject the false preachers and his own sermons as he recognizes that he needs to submit to a religious presence that supersedes verbal religious discourse. Redemption requires self-sacrifice in *Wise Blood*, and it leaves little hope for a redeemed South. Walker's novel stands out from the other two in that Celie must find God in order to escape unjust gender and racial systems, but she has to do so by sacrificing the God of Christianity to a more expansive pantheistic spirituality. Remarkably, her awakening seems to open up the possibility of redeeming the world in a way that Faulkner and O'Connor's novels do not permit.

The second chapter moves from the Deep South to the nation's capital and the nearby city of Baltimore, analyzing how discourses of religious suffering contrast and compliment nonreligious discourses to identify and counteract racial and class discrimination. Chapter two picks up the first chapter's concern with oppression and its fundamental contradiction to principles of the American Imaginary. Ralph Ellison's *Three Days Before the Shooting...* and David Simon's HBO television series, *The Wire*, emphasize the suffering of the crucifixion to highlight systemic racism and classism in major American cities. For both, these cities represent problems found throughout the nation. A. Z. Hickman, the protagonist of Ellison's unfinished second novel, uses religious, political, and historical discourses first to identify and then to mediate the conflicts that arise when individuals in a society assert their rights as equal and empowered citizens. In Simon's television show, Deacon Melvin uses the language of the streets, the political office, and the church to negotiate with characters whom he believes can confront the deleterious effects of a capitalist system that perpetuates institutionalized discrimination. Neither Hickman nor Deacon achieve the reformation they seek, and their failure to do so returns to the suffering aspect of the gospel story in that they cannot envision the redemption that comes with resurrection. Nevertheless, both texts should be read as evangelistic sermons that seek to inspire their readers/viewers into social action even as they underscore the struggle for change in place of the hoped for triumph.

Chapter three continues the thread of the process of negotiation between religious and nonreligious discourses, but it does so in order to emphasize the inevitability of resurrecting sacred discourses after characters reject them. Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon's 1990s comic book series *Preacher* and Scott Cheshire's 2014 novel *High as the Horses' Bridles* make use of the bildungsroman to tell the story of boys who are groomed to become preachers, but who

ultimately abandon their faiths. As with the texts in the second chapter, *Preacher* and *Horses' Bridles* are critical of systems of power, but they are less interested in specific issues of racism, classism, and sexism than they are focused on the abuses of power in religious institutions. As such, these novels depict religious discourses in competition with each other to show the ways that religious leaders seek to control their audiences. The main characters of each of these texts reject their religion—and all religions—but discover new discourses created out of elements from popular culture that are no less sacred than the systems of belief that they turn away from and that more readily permit the individual the freedom they advocate. Whereas the texts in the first two chapters earnestly engage elements of the gospel story, the texts in this chapter present an ironic take on the resurrection element of the gospel. Jessie and Josie work to discard the religious discourses of their youth, but their efforts produce an ironic resurrection in that their stories document the return of sacred discourses that continue to shape their experiences. Though *Preacher* and *Horses' Bridles* ostensibly preach freedom from religion, they both ultimately advocate for the power of sacred discourses to shape their readers' experiences.

The final chapter focuses solely on the works of Marilynne Robinson to analyze her thematization of absence and its implications for her intellectual and political visions. Analyzing her nonfiction and her novels provides an opportunity to develop themes across a spectrum of writing. Though all of her works achieve their own specific purposes, taken together they demonstrate a unity in Robinson's work that can best be described by its evangelistic bent: her nonfiction and fiction work together to preach the merits of religious humanism as an aesthetic and political discourse vital to the American experience. Her religious humanism is aesthetic in that she writes novels wherein the action takes place primarily in the protagonist's mind in order to illustrate the power of religious humanism to shape thought while still telling an evocative

story about the doubts, beliefs, and convictions of people of faith. Her work is political in that she advocates for religious humanism's message that every life is an image of God and, as such, needs to be afforded equal rights and individual respect. Her texts examine the negotiation of religious discourse between believers from different denominations, between lifelong believers and recent converts, and between preachers and apostates. Moreover, her texts call to mind the absence implied by the ascension. Whereas her nonfiction advocates for a return to religious humanism, which she argues was abandoned by the turn towards Social Darwinism and logical positivism, her fiction repeatedly returns to the theme of absence by focusing on the thoughts of those who have lost family and who work to honor their legacy in their everyday lives. Robinson's work uses absence as a call for transformation, such that it persuades her readers to reconsider and turn towards a religious humanism that advocates for racial equality, generational respect, and spiritual reverence.

Earlier, I discussed Detweiler's sense of hermeneutics in religion and literature, focusing on fictional characters' use of transformational language. After outlining the chapters and my rationale for the structure of those chapters, I find it necessary briefly to discuss the confessional component of hermeneutics. I am drawn to the way that Protestantism manifests itself in American literature because writers treat it as a serious literary subject that invites their readers to consider how the institutional and the personal qualities of Protestantism intertwine with American experience. What I see in the texts I analyze is a Protestantism that fluctuates without equivocating and that asks difficult questions and embraces doubt as a form of narrative resolution rather than falling back on dogma that seems right because it is either orthodox or venerated. I see in American literature a Protestantism that can be used to work towards the ideals of the founding American documents and that works to realize those ideals for all people. I

am particularly interested in literary Protestantism because it resists current iterations of Protestantism that openly embrace racist, exclusionary rhetoric while entrenching themselves in entitlement. This is the Protestantism currently magnified by the lens of our national politics, but it is not the only Protestantism available to American citizens and artists.

I end by turning to President Obama's eulogy for Reverend Clementa Pinckney to emphasize the political and cultural power of Protestant rhetoric in America. On June 17, 2015, Rev. Pinckney and eight members of his historically African-American church were murdered in a racially motivated mass shooting. That the President delivered the eulogy underscores the vital connection between religion and politics in this tragic moment in American history. Obama directed the eulogy towards social as well as spiritual change, which underscores the point that what often begins as an aesthetic shaping of religious discourse in American art ends as a call to political action. Obama celebrates Pinckney because "[he] embodied the idea that our Christian faith demands deeds and not just words; that the 'sweet hour of prayer' actually lasts the whole week long—that to put our faith in action is more than individual salvation, it's about our collective salvation." Obama moves between the pulpit and the street and between the pulpit and the presidential podium in his praise of Pinckney's positive example of faith and action. Religious discourse for Obama is both word and action, it is for the individual and for the community, and it is both given to and negotiated by the audience. After touching on a number of civil rights issues, such as the incarceration of black men, the lack of economic opportunities for minorities, and the symbolic removal of the Confederate Flag from the South Carolina State House, Obama makes another call for social action borne out of religious conviction: "But it would be a betrayal of everything Reverend Pinckney stood for, I believe, if we allowed ourselves to slip into a comfortable silence.... To settle for symbolic gestures without

following them up with the hard work of more lasting change—that's how we lose our way again." Obama's call to action begins with Pinckney's faith and ends with eschewing "symbolic gestures" for "hard work." Religious discourse becomes social action when preacher and congregation agree on the message and then choose to act on that message. Religious discourse in America is always a matter of mediation, of negotiation, and of transformation.

Each of the texts that I analyze either directly addresses or alludes to the political consequences of preaching. These fictional pastors call out racism in the South, they debate how the church can best lead the fight against the infringement of civil rights, they argue whether or not we should abandon institutionalized religion in order to realize a freer and more individualized American experience, and they wrestle with how religious discourse best supports democratic processes. The fictional pastor, like its archetypal literary counterparts, speaks both to what America is and to what American should become.

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CHAPTER 1

THROUGH WORD AND DEED: INCARNATING THE GOSPEL IN THREE NOVELS OF THE SOUTH

Literature provides an occasion for expressing and imagining the role of the spiritual in the material world. Further, it permits the reader to interact with spiritual phenomena as they are documented in the lives of fictional characters. When this interaction occurs among multiple parties, first with one character and then with another, the diversity of voices in the novel allows the reader to test and explore a multiplicity of spiritual points of view. In his article “From Novel to Bible: The Aestheticizing of Scripture,” Stephen Prickett argues that “the novel was [and is] essentially a pluralistic art-form” (14). As such, “the novel, as a genre, does not deploy a particular narrative technique; it has, rather, a whole armoury of them at its disposal... The wild, outlandish and miraculous can be found alongside the ordinary, the trivial, and mundane. Anything goes. It is, above all, the art of juxtaposition” (15). Ultimately, the novel’s ability to incorporate a variety of voices opens up the possibility of seriously engaging the irresolvable, which Prickett associates with “the mystery of the Incarnation,” an event that reveals a “necessary and truthful inconsistency, which [is] one of the foundations of human experience” (14). For Christianity, the gospel message begins with the Incarnation and its paradoxical fusion of the ineffable and the human. As Bishop N. T. Wright indicates, the Incarnation provides the means for achieving the gospel: “In 1 Corinthians 8:6...[Paul] adapts the Shema itself, placing Jesus within it: ‘For us there is one God—the Father, from whom are all things and we to him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and we through him’” (47). Paul’s revision of the Shema emphasizes Christ’s role as mediator, through whom God and humanity connect. In the three novels I analyze in this chapter, characters incarnate their religious discourse as they inflect their interpretation of the gospel according to their identities and

purposes. Mediating between God—represented as a personal, yet ultimately indescribable sacred entity in each of these books—and their congregants, these speakers provide the means by which these novels present a “necessary and truthful inconsistency,” namely the distillation of disparate voices into a gospel that preaches a mission to their life in America.

The Sound and the Fury, *Wise Blood*, and *The Color Purple* present, protest, and transform Southern experience. They offer readers multiple methods for confronting social injustice. William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, and Alice Walker shape the Protestant gospel message for their respective purposes: Faulkner’s novel preaches against the inability of a crumbling family to communicate meaningfully with each other and with their community; O’Connor’s novel protests the vacuous self-improvement narratives endemic to a society that values consumer capitalism over religious conviction; and Walker’s novel decries the injustice of discrimination, of blacks by whites and women by men. Though each novel protests its own particular vision of a fallen South, they all use religious discourse to address the problem at hand. For Faulkner, O’Connor, and Walker, change begins in the words of pastors and speakers who mediate the word of God to their audiences. These three novels, unlikely to be read as sacred texts in and of themselves, employ sermons and narratives to validate and to foment the religious beliefs of their characters. Though readers do not have to believe that Shegog’s message is divinely inspired, they should recognize the narrative consequences of Shegog’s formulation of the ineffable as “de ricklickshun en de blood of de Lamb” (295), which offers Dilsey an empowering sense of time, something that eludes the Compsons. For Mrs. Flood’s conversion to be satisfactory, readers have to believe that Hazel’s submission to the “wild ragged figure motioning to him to turn around and come off into the dark” is genuine enough to inspire Mrs. Flood’s burgeoning spiritual insight. Celie’s transformation, and her community’s

transformation, depends on her introduction to “That Which Is Beyond Understanding But Not Beyond Loving” (preface). Shegog, Hazel, and Shug represent their particular visions of the divinity to Dilsey, Mrs. Flood, and Celie respectively in such a way as to create a transformative effect, and they do so by mediating messages of personal and communal salvation.

The story of the Incarnation emphasizes the humanity in the gospel story, and focusing on how Shegog, Hazel, and Shug incarnate the source of their religious belief shows us how religious discourse connects individuals to communities and how listeners become speakers who then carry the message to others. Terence Fretheim argues that the word of God in the Bible is situational and relational; it is no less situational and relational in these three novels of the American South.¹ It is situational because speakers preach their gospel messages as Southerners whose experiences are shaped by the racial, economic, and social restrictions that structure the South; it is relational in that the speakers mediate between a divine source and, notably, Southern women who inhabit a place on the margins of society. Within the gospels preached in these novels, one hears echoes of the Protestant message of redemption made possible by the divinity’s sacrifice. Dilsey and Mrs. Flood respond to stories of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection; Celie accepts Shug’s narrative of a sacred source that loves what Celie loves, offering gifts to Celie—in the form of love, sex, and the beauty of nature—until she sees that it empowers her life and her individuality. Directing evangelistic messages to marginalized women indicates that these novels present something more than the story of divine sacrifice. Faulkner, O’Connor, and Walker’s narratives call our attention to their particular vision of the gospel story, but they also ask us to consider to whom the gospel is preached.

¹ Terence Fretheim, “Word of God.” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. 6: 963-4.

The gospel message as it is preached in these novels is ultimately less a story of salvation from sin than it is a story of redemption for people who have been deemed inferior or worthy of scorn. Dilsey is not saved from her sin so much as she is ushered into a transformative discursive experience. Connecting with Shegog comforts her, but more important, it also elevates her: she alone experiences authentic and restorative communication between two people who are, at least at the outset of their interaction, separated by educational and geographical backgrounds. It is remarkable that Faulkner directs Shegog's sermon to Dilsey because she is a black woman servant in the employ of the Compson household, a family as important as Yoknapatawpha's other aristocratic families, the Sartorises and the Sutpens. Dilsey commands little respect from the remaining Compsons: both Jason and Mrs. Compson see her as little more than a cook and servant who ought to tend to Benjy more carefully and who should be stricter with Caddie's daughter, Quentin. Yet she is the recipient of the gospel message; Faulkner chooses to give her the insight that the other characters fail to obtain. Shegog's message to her is that she has more dignity, enough to warrant the sacrifice of Christ, than society tells her she has; more important, she is given the power to see the beginning and the end. Dilsey receives a divine revelation that places the temporal story of the declining Compson family within a larger sacred history. Though she will not and cannot inherit the Compson legacy, she finds peace that many of Faulkner's characters never achieve. Her synthesis of the South, the Compsons and sacred time does produce a communal effect, though. Her revelation comes as she sits among a congregation of worshipers who seem to commune with Shegog in a similar manner. Nevertheless, it is her ability to synthesize multiple discourses—both the Compson's and Shegog's—that creates the possibility for meaningful significance that the novel's title dismisses as all but impossible to achieve.

That Mrs. Flood is the recipient of a gospel message ought to be just as startling as Dilsey's special dispensation. Like most of the characters that inhabit *Wise Blood*, Mrs. Flood cannot see past her own egotism. Unlike Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock, her narrative foil, Mrs. Flood is aware of and comfortable with her antisocial behavior, which manifests in her miserliness. Her fascination with Hazel stems from her desire to not be cheated, to make sure that the world does not play a joke on her: "She didn't like the thought that something was being put over her head" (222). She concocts a plan to marry him not because she loves him but because she wants his military pension. Like Enoch, Onnie Jay, and Sabbath Lily, Mrs. Flood wants life on her own terms, but unlike these characters, she finds herself—her awakening tends more to the passive than active—honestly being drawn to Hazel. She receives the gospel message because she gradually becomes aware that she pursues a perverted love. The narrative does not make it clear why she experiences the awakening that the others are incapable of, but it does suggest that she can see the light in Hazel's dead eyes beckoning to her because she, like Hazel, ultimately surrenders to the wild ragged figure. Called to be separate from the citizens of Taulkinham, she comes to see past the materialism and vapid self-improvement that others understand to be the key to a fulfilled life. By the end of the narrative, Hazel finds security in his salvation, but only Mrs. Flood hears his message; alone among the other characters, she continues the gospel story that begins with Hazel.

As opposed to Dilsey and Mrs. Flood, Celie as beneficiary of the gospel message seems much less surprising because of all the characters in *The Color Purple* she manifests the most obvious need to be rescued. Yet the fact that she receives Shug's empowering message is nevertheless remarkable to the characters in the novel. Moreover, her salvation stands apart from Dilsey's and Flood's because it is salvation from a patriarchal God and to a benevolent,

pantheistic spirit. Notably, Walker refers to this spirit as “the Ultimate Ancestor,” “the Divine,” “All That Is,” “the Great Mystery,” and “That Which Is Beyond Understanding But Not Beyond Loving” in the preface, indicating that she and Celie can write about or to the ineffable but never actually describe it. Despite moving away from black Protestant Christianity to a loving/lovable but unknowable divinity, Celie is still the recipient of a gospel message, but it is a gospel rooted in comprehending that the sacred recognizes one’s voice as authoritative and worthy of respect. From this point of view, Celie’s salvation is indeed striking because she begins writing in response to a domineering voice that aims to restrict her growth rather than foster it through the work of autobiography. Moreover, Celie’s conversion stands apart from Dilsey’s because she becomes the evangelist, speaking first to Nettie and then to Albert. Of the three novels in this chapter, *The Color Purple* demonstrates the greatest potential for communal and individual salvation. I see two reasons for this: first, Walker begins by setting Celie’s religious experience within the confines of the Southern black evangelical church, a church that has traditionally emphasized the community as much as it has the individual.² Second, *The Color Purple* illustrates Walker’s mission to encourage women to come together and write their own autobiographies in an act of self-authorization; her message of self-worth has as a goal the validation of entire communities of black women.³

² In *Judgment & Grace in Dixie*, Charles Regan Wilson writes, “Black folk religion has always had a pronounced communal aspect; the characteristic evangelical concern for individual salvation has been tempered by the need for collective expression of spirituality” (71).

³ In *Alice Walker: A Life*, Evelyn C. Wright indicates Walker’s strategy for “developing a black history curriculum for Head Start teachers”: “Faced with...obstacles, Alice determined that the best way to help her ‘earnest but educationally crippled’ students gain a sense of self-worth that they could, in turn, impart to the Head Start children was to ask the women to write their autobiographies” (162). Walker’s plan begins with the individual writer, but its goal is to reach a community of students.

The interplay between the gospel speakers and their audiences in *The Sound and the Fury*, *Wise Blood*, and *The Color Purple* suggests that although a single speaker often mediates the discourse between the divine source and the message's recipient, the final product of that message occurs through a negotiation between the speaker and the listening community. In order for Dilsey and the rest of the congregation to hear Shegog's message, he has to alter his speaking style and his appearance so that they meet the expectations of the black church in Jefferson. Dilsey and Shegog negotiate the right to speak and the right to be heard; speaker and audience work together in order to determine who has the authority to mediate the word of God. Negotiation in *Wise Blood* largely occurs for comedic effect because it is, at its heart, a novel about unmitigated submission. O'Connor emphasizes the merits of submitting to the divine in her author's note to the second edition, "Does one's integrity ever lie in what he is not able to do? I think that usually it does." Mrs. Flood's integrity arises, then, from her inability to ignore Hazel. At the same time, negotiation plays a part in Hazel and Mrs. Flood's relationship; they negotiate the cost of room and board, and they debate the merits of penance. Both dialogues are decidedly one-sided: she raises the rent, and he refuses to stop wearing barbed wire. In O'Connor's world, negotiation represents the final stand of the individual's will before consenting to the divine call. The negotiation between Celie and Shug is much subtler because it celebrates the individual's power as much as *Wise Blood* elevates God's sovereignty. Though Shug preaches a higher power, she frames its purpose as wanting "admiration": "People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back" (198). Shug and Celie's dialogue about God moves back and forth between each woman's understanding of the sacred, and while Celie ultimately accepts the Great Mystery who

offers her the flowers of the field, she modifies Shug's idea of the Divine so that it encompasses both Shug's and her sister Nettie's understanding of "All That Is."

Shagog, Hazel, Shug, and Celie develop their religious discourses through mediation shaped by negotiation; their listeners then begin to mediate the messages they hear. This results in the formation of communities of believers who speak a similar discourse but who also inflect it with their own personalities. The situational and relational aspect of religious discourse within these novels also extends to the novels' readerships. Though these novels do not present systematic interpretations of the gospel, they nevertheless evangelize their audiences. Whereas the fictionalized sermons reach out to characters in the text, the forms and narratives of these novels speak to the reading audience. *The Sound and the Fury*, *Wise Blood*, and *The Color Purple* present their audiences with a new view of life through their narrative discourses, and their evangelistic messages cannot be divorced from the structure of their novel-length sermons. The challenge of identifying the spiritual message within these texts provides an opportunity to examine how texts advocate for a new means of living in America. Through textual resolution, both in plot and form, these evangelistic novels incarnate religious dialogue within the pastor figures to preach a new vision of spiritual life in America.

The Sound and the Fury requires readers to unite the disparate experiences of a family atomized by an inability to communicate and in so doing to formulate a coherent unity of place and time within the novel. Faulkner wrote the book throughout 1928 and later explained that writing it was a wrestling with time and perspective. After finishing Benjy's section, he thought: "the story was complete, finished. There was Dilsey to be the future, to stand above the fallen ruins of the family like a ruined chimney, gaunt, patient and indomitable; and Benjy to be the past. He had to be an idiot so that, like Dilsey, he could be impervious to the future, though

unlike her by refusing to accept it at all” (quoted in *Faulkner: A Biography* 213). Faulkner was wrong, of course, and he would complete three more sections before the novel was actually finished.⁴ His insight into the book’s composition reveals two aspects of its evangelism: first, the novel not only describes the fading of a family history but also projects that history into the future both as a phenomenon that affects the direction of the characters’ lives in the novel and as a way to inspire readers to consider the role of history in determining future behavior. Second, the novel compels readers to bridge the gaps in time and perspective in order to assemble a story obfuscated by a complex narrative discourse. The act of constructing the story permits readers to share in the epiphany Dilsey experiences during Reverend Shegog’s sermon, thus partaking in her ability to transcend the decaying Compson family history. The hoped for future, redeemed from the mistakes of the past, awaits the work of readers who unify past and present by synthesizing isolated narrative elements into a whole and asserting significance to this family and to the reading process.

The Sound and the Fury presents a number of challenges to its readers, chief among them is learning to comprehend the brothers’ respective interior monologues in the novel’s first three sections, and though the fourth section’s third person narrative seemingly provides a respite to its readers, it actually complicates the book’s overall narrative and thematic structures. In addition to changing narrative perspective, the final section devotes considerable time to Dilsey, the Compson’s mammy, and her experience at church on Easter Sunday. As Giles Gunn explains in

⁴ Faulkner explained in an interview for *The Paris Review* that he never finished writing it: “It was still not complete, not until fifteen years after the book was published, when I wrote as an appendix to another book the final effort to get the story told and off my mind, so that I myself could have some peace from it. It’s the book I feel tenderest towards. I couldn’t leave it alone, and I never could tell it right, though I tried hard and would like to try again, though I’d probably fail again” (quoted in *The Faulkner-Cowley File* 39)

“Faulkner’s Heterodoxy: Faith and Family in *The Sound and the Fury*,” it is tempting but dangerous to read the final section as resolving the novel’s discordance by way of Dilsey’s intense spiritual experience:

Many critics have supposed that because clarity and resolution are achieved only in section four, where Dilsey’s faith is triumphant, Faulkner is making a religious statement not just *in* the novel but *with* the novel, that he is here taking up all the discordant and destructive views of the book and integrating them, indeed, reordering them, in a holistic vision of religious transcendence. (162, emphasis in the original)

Gunn argues that to accept a religious resolution to the novel is to be complicit in perpetuating “a social system predicated on racial inequality” (171) since much of Dilsey’s spiritual insight depends on her ability to “bear the burden of the white peoples’ suffering and silliness and savagery” (170). Gunn’s analysis questions the fourth section’s resolution, but it also complicates assigning a positive religious significance to Dilsey’s epiphany because to do so would mean celebrating an “insidious” ideology in an otherwise “theologically acute...literary text” (172).

Gunn’s analysis notwithstanding, *The Sound and the Fury* does lend itself to critical religious readings that affirm Dilsey’s experience without reinforcing the novel’s problematic depiction of Dilsey’s suffering and redemption. Reading Dilsey as the book’s deliverer perpetuates the stereotype of the black matron who suffers for and, thus, saves the white family she serves—a stereotype that Faulkner perpetuates in his description of Dilsey’s family: “they endured.” Reading Dilsey as a woman who experiences a genuine religious epiphany, though, allows us to see that the novel uses the Incarnation to solve the narrative problem of extreme

egotism it creates in the preceding three sections. Dilsey's section can tie the novel together, and in doing so it does not affirm a religious transcendence as much as it extolls the means by which Reverend Shegog and Dilsey create transformative communication. The book locates its transformational change in two processes: Shegog's mediation of the gospel and the negotiation that occurs between the pastor and the congregation. Dilsey experiences her epiphanic vision during an exchange between pastor and congregant, and engaging with her pastor's use of local dialect to embody the ineffable reveals the extent to which the religious discourse in the novel is situational and relational for the characters and the reading public.

A speaker keenly attentive to his listeners' dialect, Reverend Shegog illustrates both the necessity of adapting language to the specific congregation and the transformative power of sacred language in a work of fiction. Shegog's success as a preacher depends on his ability to adapt his language to the dialect of the church. Before seeing Shegog, the churchgoers expect him to fit into the specific mold of their local preachers. Frony describes him as "Dat big preacher" who can "put de fear of God into dese here triflin young niggers" (290), and a counterpart of Dilsey's explains that "[he'll] give her de comfort en de unburdenin" (292). Frony and the old lady base their expectations on Shegog's reputation, and their assumption presupposes his ability to communicate within their discourse. Thus, when he begins to speak, they are shocked to hear "he sounded like a white man. His voice was level and cold. It sounded too big to have come from him and they listened at first through curiosity, as they would have to a monkey talking" (293). Faulkner's language reflects the racist tropes of the community he creates, emphasizing the remarkable nature of Dilsey's role as recipient of the divine vision. Reduced to a type, Shegog nevertheless gives the most rhetorically appealing and effective speech in the book. Further, the racist language turns back on itself: Shegog is "like a white

man” because he is “level and cold;” figuratively, he parallels the coldness—the sterility—of the Compson family. His audience equates him to a monkey talking because he speaks like a Compson and not like a preacher; his sermon to this point is characterized by miscommunication between pastor and congregation. The “cold inflectionless wire of his voice” (293) stands as an obstacle to meaningful connection, and any interest on the part of the congregation focuses on Shegog’s unnerving spectacle.

Unless he conforms his speech to the dialect of the church, he will remain an outsider, which precludes him from ministering in an authentically spiritual manner. Only after his voice “[becomes] negroid” (295) does the congregation contribute to the spiritual experience of the sermon. Faulkner continues to traffic in types here. Shegog’s dialect becomes perversely exaggerated, and he develops into a caricature, as do the congregants. It is tempting to see Shegog’s speech as subversive: this marginalized community is the first in the novel to produce emotionally substantive dialogue. To do so reinforces the stereotypes that Gunn identifies because it suggests that this group achieves harmony because they are a subordinate class who speak a heavily embellished dialect. *The Sound and the Fury* fails to convey the nuance that Faulkner will eventually bring to his later novels, such as *Light in August* and *Go Down, Moses*, and their interrogation of racial stereotypes. It is important to note, then, that Shegog and the congregation connect not because they speak a racially-charged or demeaning dialect, which they certainly do, but because they make an effort to speak the same dialect, something that the Compson brothers cannot or will not do. As such, the progression of the responses from “Yes, Jesus!” to “Mmmmmmmmm! Jesus!” to “I sees, O Jesus!” (295-6) echoes the deepening significance of the pastor’s message as he connects to his audience. Exclamation and emotional fervor gradually transform into spiritual insight as Shegog employs the language of the

congregation. While his intent may have been the same from his opening lines to his final rhetorical inflection, the meaning of his message can only be understood if it conforms to the dialect of the listeners.

Since the discourse of the church extends beyond verbal dialect to include physical appearances, Reverend Shegog's connection with the congregation also depends on his capacity to look the part of a local preacher. The call and response between preacher and congregation achieved later in the sermon is nonexistent early in the sermon because of Shegog's appearance. Compared to their minister, the visitor is "undersized," "dwarfed," and "countrified" (293). While "countrified" should suggest a lack of sophistication, here it predominantly evokes a sense of insignificance about the man; his unremarkable physical appearance translates into a perceived lack of authority. The passionate physicality that characterizes the later part of the sermon is initially portrayed as "an indescribable sound...a sigh, a sound of astonishment and disappointment" (293). The audience prefers the "unction" of their minister because he fits their expectations of an authentic pastoral presence—a presence characterized by a deep voice, a large body, and palpable fervor. So the dialogic connection Shegog makes with the congregation depends on the mediation of the religious message through his speech and his physical bearing. As the voice takes over the body of the speaker, he becomes "a meagre figure, hunched over upon itself like that of one long immured in striving with the implacable earth" (294). Although this passage continues the use of diminutive adjectives, the tone now produces the opposite effect. If earlier in the sermon the pastor was insignificant because of his small stature, he is now elevated because of his beaten-down demeanor. "Meagre" in this passage implies honorable physical suffering rather than physical in consequence; similarly, the demeaning sense of "countrified" gives way to a noble ideal of enduring with the earth. Shegog manipulates his

speech and physical presence to create a connection between himself and the land, to which he is now “immured.” Confined to the land as his particular audience is, he wins acceptance from the people as an authoritative spiritual leader. This action of assigning real significance to a supposedly insignificant preacher parallels the novel’s search for meaning in the cacophony implied by the title.

Shegog adapts his discourse to that of his audience to become an insider of the community so that he can effectively communicate his message to the congregation. The content of his message, “the recollection and the blood of the Lamb,” teaches the congregation how spiritual and emotional significance can be achieved through the synthesis of memory and religion; his use of a localized dialect, “de ricklickshun en de blood of de Lamb” (295) allows his listeners to hear that message. He sees Mary “weepin en de lamentation of de po mammy widout de salvation en de word of God!” Worse yet, he explains, “I see de widowed God shet His do; I sees de whelmin flood roll between; I sees de darkness en de death everlastin upon de generations” (296). The despair evoked in these images parallels the isolation felt by each member of the Compson family, while the apocalyptic imagery is itself an antithesis to Shegog’s ultimate lesson, which is that agreeing on the significance of the Easter story can provide an opportunity for meaningful communication. If the congregation ignores the word of God as spoken by Shegog, God shuts His door, the flood overwhelms, and the darkness destroys. Salvation from this isolation and destruction comes from the words of Jesus, as seen and spoken by Shegog: “I sees de resurrection en de light; sees de meek Jesus sayin Dey kilt me dat ye shall live again” (297). According to the pastor, Jesus bridges the gap between memory and blood by speaking to His believers. Significantly, Shegog moves from the incarnation by referencing the figure of Mary to “de po mammy” and the “widowed God.” Shegog’s diction is oddly

idiosyncratic in that equates Mary with the mammy and labels God a widow, as if he has descended into the local argot to a point of incoherence. But this section of the novel focuses on Dilsey, a widowed mammy who is desperate for comfort. From her perspective, the “mystery of the Incarnation” that Shegog references incorporates her into the divine plan of redemption. Like Mary and like the widowed God, she waits for the words of Christ to attenuate her desperate situation.

The synthesis Shegog preaches is the paradox of the Incarnation: the birth of the fully-God and fully-human Jesus results in the redemption and triumph of the sinner. Shegog reverses the order of his phrasing when at the end of the sermon he preaches “de blood en de ricklickshun of de Lamb” (297). Blood and recollection represent Shegog’s attempt to describe the ineffable. Changing the pronunciation and phrasing of the words reflects the necessity to speak around the sacred rather than define it. Thus Shegog can argue that memory and blood synthesize in paradoxical ways because he recognizes that his words approach but do not explain the inherently unknowable aspects of his religious vision. While the salvation he preaches would most likely have little meaning for any Compson not named Benjy, Shegog’s sermon has palpable implications for Dilsey and the youngest Compson brother. Benjy is left “rapt in his sweet blue gaze” usually reserved for the spectacles of fire, flowers, and Caddy. Meanwhile, Dilsey is so “unburdened” she can see “de first en de last,” the beginning and the ending. Dilsey not only sees Jesus—the alpha and the omega—she also unites the disparate poles of experience in the novel. Restoration of the Compsons is too much to ask for in this novel, but the authentic significance Benjy and Dilsey experience is no less momentous. Their ability to correctly synthesize memory and blood trumps the bleakness implied by the novel’s title. In the end, more

than any of the other Compsons and Gibsons, they find that the sound and the fury can signify something.

The novel presents a model of communication that is significant to both Dilsey and the readers, and the novel asks its readers to consider the mediation and negotiation embodied in the sermon as an alternative to the isolated narratives of the three previous sections. Walter Slatoff reads the book as prohibiting any definite resolution and points out that Dilsey's section, while providing her solace, fails to extend beyond her experience. He emphasizes that Dilsey's section is superseded first by Jason's futile attempt to catch Quentin and then by Benjy's alternately bellicose and serene ride around the town square. He concludes: "This final scene does not negate the moderate affirmation of the Dilsey episode, nor does it really qualify it. Rather it stands in suspension with it as a commentary of equal force. We feel and are intended to feel, I think, that the events we have witnessed are at once tragic and futile, significant and meaningless" (157-8). Slatoff's overall argument in *Quest for Fiction*, that Faulkner's prose resists resolution generally because of his desire to faithfully capture life within narrative and stylistic tensions, is compelling because it encourages the reader to consider why the abundant oxymorons, paradoxes, and polarities resist closure. However, Slatoff's interpretation of the Dilsey section assumes the narrative and stylistic irresolution is the reader's as well. Readers know that each individual section does signify something for the respective speaker of that section. The Compson brothers are all intensely earnest in their narratives. To suggest that Benjy's hollering, Quentin's devolving sanity, and Jason's pessimism waver between significance and meaninglessness strips each of these segments of their narrative force.

The insignificance implied by the title emphasizes that the brothers cannot communicate their pain to others in a way that leads to resolution; as such, the novel presents the brothers'

individual experiences in self-contained chapters. Slatoff is correct to say that these characters do not achieve resolution, but that does not mean the novel fails to resolve for the reader. *The Sound and the Fury* is a novel about ineffective communication, and Dilsey's section offers a counterpoint to this problem. The novel presents the solution in the interaction between the preacher and his congregation. Shegog's manipulation of language opens up dialogue between guest pastor and church patrons to create meaningful conversation in the book. The pastor's message of "unburdenin'" offers an alternative to the Compson brothers' isolated, anxious discourse. Presented in the fourth section of the book, outside the individual Compson perspectives, Shegog's language of redemption creates a shared authentic dialogue for a community rather than just a single individual. David Minter argues, "Faulkner draws his readers into his own imaginative processes, making his art an art of conjecture and surmise, and his reader, his hidden double" (219). It is up to the reader to resolve the seemingly permanent lack of communication in *The Sound and the Fury*, and the reader's best opportunity to do so is to learn from Shegog and Dilsey. Through the act of reading the novel, readers must adopt Shegog's example: to understand the three preceding sections, they need to learn from Shegog's sermon by first anticipating each narrator's emotions, thoughts, obsessions, limitations, and frustrations and then recognizing how they communicate those aspects of their character through their particular discourses. Shegog's example mirrors the readers, and his rhetorical style and his sermon's content provide an interpretive key for the novel.⁵

⁵ Gunn suggests a similar approach to the novel: "What we become aware of as we move from section to section, only slowly realizing that similar events are being interpreted in strikingly different ways, is how different and confiding each of these perspectives seems to be, and how much of their meaning for us is a consequence of operations we must perform to compensate for what their narrators leave out or obscure" (160).

The fact that Dilsey and Shegog are part of a marginalized community in the novel suggests that whatever the minister has to teach his congregation about communication will not be heard by the more dominant Compson family, but because of the book's structure, the reading audience must consider Shegog's sermon. Walter Benn Michaels suggests that the ability for Shegog to speak to his congregation without words—"he was nothing and they were nothing and there was not even a voice but instead their hearts were speaking to one another in chanting measures beyond the need for words" (*TSATF* 294)—exemplifies the desire of the characters in the book to participate in a kind of linguistic or familial fantasy that keeps them from being defiled by those outside of the community: "The linguistic fantasy of meaning without conventions turns out to be emblematic of a more thoroughgoing effort to empty the world of all non-natural relations. Every chapter in *The Sound and the Fury* involves the effort to replace arbitrary or social relations with natural ones" (5). Michaels' larger project is to show how modernist literature of the 1920s posits arbitrary distinctions of identity as natural distinctions; thus, Shegog and the congregation communicate without the need for words, and Quentin can believe that he has committed incest simply by saying so. The important thing for Michaels is that characters in the book try to replace arbitrary relationships with something that seems naturally present; seeing through these linguistic fantasies, Michaels argues that identities are constructed rather than discovered. Michaels' argument reminds us to consider how identities are constructed through linguistic means, but I am less interested in the linguistic fantasy of the novel as I am in the extent to which language does affect characters in the novel. Thus, though Shegog makes a connection with his congregation without the need for words, he moves past this moment and returns to the "arbitrary" words to speak to the congregation. Indeed, he uses the audience's dialect in order to teach them how to use those words as they return into the world.

Furthermore, the narrative reminds readers to consider Dilsey as a black character in a novel primarily concerned with a white Southern family in order to ascertain the full impact of the novel's sermon. As Charles Regan Wilson explains, Dilsey's race plays a large role in how she achieves her peace: "Cleanth Brooks notes that of the characters in *The Sound and the Fury*, she is the survivor because she has gained a sense of eternity. Brooks and others have not noted often enough that this knowledge of her heritage came from southern black religious culture" (71). He continues, "Faulkner's black characters surely are [Christ haunted], but not his white characters. This seems to be the source of some of their problems...[southern Baptist] religion was very much a part of Faulkner's mythical Mississippi county. He converted the actual religion of the land into an apocryphal story in which Evangelicalism stood for a twisted striving toward salvation" (72). Although the Compsons never iron out the "twisted striving toward salvation," their seeming lack of religious belief counterpoints Dilsey's devotion to the sacred, which is not to say that her faith is simpler or inferior to that of the white southern Baptists. The evangelistic message is never simple in Faulkner, but it is discernible. Dilsey's transcendent moment in church demonstrates that characters can grasp the sacred in meaningful communication with others. Her experience in church is too genuine to be dismissed as Michaels dismisses it, and it is too dependent on sincere interpersonal relationships to be discounted as Gunn discounts it. It is a moment of intense emotional and spiritual fulfillment in a text characterized by frustration and displacement. The Compsons speak only to themselves; meanwhile, they locate the source of their frustrations outside their selves, whether it is in Benjy's indecipherable world, Quentin's convoluted Southern civil ideal, or Jason's unending annoyance with a family and social life that seemingly exists to frustrate his desires. Dilsey lives in the Compson world, but she transcends it by the book's end. Her experience is instructive for the reader even if it is not a clear formula: the

final chapter suggests that spiritual satisfaction begins when one learns to assemble the beginning, the middle, and the end of the story; this is a process that begins with incarnating the word of God so that it can be meaningfully shared within a community.

At the same time, navigating the narrative brings about more than spiritual insight; constructing the novel also reveals a new world created after the fall of the Compson family. *The Sound and the Fury* is a book concerned with navigation. Throughout the narrative it painstakingly depicts how Benjy gets from one place to another, it charts Quentin's movements through Harvard and the surrounding areas, and it satirizes Jason in his vain search for his niece through the countryside. Similarly, readers have to learn to navigate the novel's four sections. Faulkner included italics to indicate time changes and at one time even suggested that the book could use various colors for the font to signal temporal shifts.⁶ Navigating the places and times in the novel, readers find themselves in church. They, along with Dilsey—and to a limited degree, Benjy—see the first and the last of the Compson legend with Shegog's help.

In the final scene of the novel, Jason upbraids Luster for driving Benjy the wrong way through town. Luster corrects course, drives Benjy along the right path, and calms Benjy's bellowing. This final scene would be vacuous if readers were to accept Jason's assertion that everything needs to maintain its order because they already know it lacks an inherent order. The old South that nurtured the Compson story has either diminished or never existed. However, they know that for Benjy there is meaning in this drive. The book's audience knows that those who

⁶ Since before its publication, the novel has demanded multiple readings and conjectures as to what it is up to. The exchange between Faulkner's publisher and an early reader famously captures the inscrutability of the book: "One morning [Hal Smith's] editorial reader, Lenore Marshall, came running downstairs to say, breathlessly, 'I think I have found a work of genius.' / [...] 'What's it about?' / 'I don't know,' she confessed, 'I'm just starting it.' / 'Finish it.' / She did, that day, and thereupon reported that *The Sound and the Fury* was indeed a work of genius, though she still didn't know what it was about" (Cowley 4).

supposedly do not have a voice actually find the significance that those in the upper echelons of Jefferson seek. Mediating the gospel through a careful negotiation with Dilsey and her fellow congregants, Shegog incarnates a gospel message for all of Yoknapatawpha that could lead to a way through the miasma of miscommunication. Perhaps demonstrating that “the gate is narrow and the way is hard” (Matt. 7:14) or perhaps reminding readers of the gulf between black and white experiences in Faulkner’s novel, Shegog’s message is heard by none outside of Dilsey’s church. As such, the hoped for community that lies behind and beyond the striving of Yoknapatawpha’s white inhabitants fails to come to fruition. The redemption that Shegog and Dilsey manifest remains real for her while failing to effect change for the Compsons. Evangelizing the community meets a similar fate in O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*, but it does so to reinforce the tenor of her novel’s particular gospel message that redemption requires complete submission, something that the materialistic and self-satisfied citizens of Taulkinham are not ready to accept.

Whereas Rev. Shegog’s voice dominates the preacherly discourse in the final section of *The Sound and the Fury*, privileging his particular sacred message, Flannery O’Connor offers up no less than five preachers each peddling their distinct brand of spiritual succor. Two of these preachers, Asa Hawks and Solace Layfield, deliver sermons of a few lines or less; meanwhile Sabbath Lily directs her sermon to an audience of one. Their sermons provide a contrast to the sermons of Hazel Motes and Onnie Jay Holy, also known as Hoover Shoats. The novel privileges Hazel’s and Onnie Jay’s sermons in both length and occasion: they speak to the most people and have occasion to develop their respective ideas. Given time to improve his message, Onnie Jay preaches a more rhetorically effective pitch about self-improvement in order to increase donations for his “church.” Meanwhile, Hazel proceeds from an extemporaneous speech

against redemption to an anti-theological sermon that preaches the freedom of living a life free from metaphysical concern. All of the fraudulent sermons contradict the novel's gospel message that the sacred saves people from the vacuous nature of a materialistic, temporal-minded society. So while Hazel fails to convert anyone to his Church of Christ Without Christ, he does connect with Mrs. Flood as she watches him embody his belief that he is not clean. Their connection then fuels the narrative's final image of the sacred intruding on the material, which is both a call to Mrs. Flood and to the reading audience.

Shegog's sermon provides a method for interpreting *The Sound and the Fury* using the vocabulary of spiritual sight, redemption, and sacrifice, which then offers an interpretive scheme for uniting the novel's four sections, but the sermons in *Wise Blood* demonstrate the ways in which preachers falsify sacred subjects to assert meaning for their own lives rather than for the lives of their congregants. Ostensibly delivered to the people of Taulkinham, these sermons turn inward so that they speak only to the speaker. The self-proclaimed preachers Hawks, Layfield, and Onnie Jay preach for their own profit: each uses subterfuge to separate the crowd from its money. Sabbath Lily and Hazel preach so that they can build the community that the world of the novel denies them. Their sermons demonstrate the extent to which the novel satirizes and dismisses—or satirizes to dismiss—religious discourse used to serve the self rather than to submit to a divine absolute. That the novel spends so much time depicting self-serving spirituality indicates the degree to which it recognizes a spiritual power is beyond human control and that defies attempts to codify it in language.

Hawks, Layfield, and Onnie Jay exemplify fraudulent preaching in *Wise Blood*, but their sermons also reveal the extent to which the sacred permeates the novel's setting despite the characters' efforts to ignore it, which underscores its argument that the sacred will manifest in

the physical world despite characters' intentions. Asa Hawks delivers the first counterfeit sermon in the novel when he hijacks the potato peeler salesman's crowd. Holding out a tin cup, he appeals to their desire to be left alone: "Help a blind preacher. If you won't repent, give up a nickel. I can use it as good as you. Help a blind unemployed preacher. Wouldn't you rather have me beg than preach? Come on and give a nickel if you won't repent" (36). An itinerant preacher who lost his faith after a bungled publicity stunt, Hawks begs more than he preaches, but he draws on the old religious discourse to do so. He manipulates the crowd by playing on the discomfort and anxiety that street preachers create so that he can bypasses his sermon and skip to the donation. Threatening them with a full sermon, he absolves them of the need to repent and tells them to ignore what should be the stereotypical crux of the evangelical fire and brimstone sermon. Hawks' desperate plea, "I can use it as good as you," reveals his intentions: Hawks' "I" comes before the community's "you." Additionally, he, like Layfield and Onnie Jay, deceives the crowd by wearing a false identity. His dark glasses trick people into believing that he is blind, but they also serve to keep people at bay. Sparing them from an uncomfortable sermon, this con artist preacher fails the community by refusing to incarnate the word of God; by choosing not to mediate a religious discourse that challenges people to examine meaning in their lives, he perpetuates the self-serving interests of Taulkinham.

Layfield and Onnie Jay work together to achieve similar results. Their con plays on hope rather than pity, but their spiritually negative effect on the community parallels Hawks'. Onnie Jay preaches to his listeners' egos. For a dollar—\$10 if adjusted for inflation—he tells them they are all essentially innocent children looking to love and be loved. He then turns to his "True Prophet," Solace Layfield, to stoke their hopes: "The unredeemed are redeeming themselves and the new jesus is at hand! Watch for this miracle! Help yourself to salvation in the Holy Church of

Christ Without Christ!’ He called it over again in exactly the same tone of voice, but faster. Then he began to cough” (167). Layfield exhorts by appealing to the crowd’s sense of self-satisfaction. Redemption is as easy to find as a product on a shelf. Much like the potato-peeler salesman, Onnie Jay and Layfield sell convenience rather substance. Their cons lack meaning because they use fraudulent religious discourses. As religious discourses they should mediate between a divine source and the congregation; however, they mediate only between themselves and their marks. Their discourse fails to connect to a transcendent source, which gives their sermons the same spiritual depth as the potato-peeler product pitch. Layfield easily repeats his message faster the second time because it is devoid of meaning and because it requires no negotiation between speaker and audience: like the peelers, his product comes ready for use. Tellingly, his tuberculosis then forces him to stop speaking, underscoring the poison lurking in his message of self-satisfaction.

In tandem with Layfield, Onnie Jay’s message plays on happiness to complete the sales pitch: “I want ever’ one of you people to join the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ. It’ll cost you each a dollar but what is a dollar? A few dimes! Not too much to pay to unlock that little rose of sweetness inside you!” (153). Like a perverse version of Jesus, Onnie Jay multiplies the dollar into dimes; in the process, he divides his audience from their money. Here he employs a quick wit to speak to the audience’s complacency; later he uses his “guitarr” to entertain them. Onnie Jay and Layfield make “fifteen dollars and thirty-five cents clear” (203). The qualifier “clear” humorously underscores Onnie Jay’s obsession with money. Although they have few material expenses, the book suggests that they cost the audience more than just the price of church membership. Like Hawks, both Onnie Jay and Layfield disguise their identities to present a better product. Onnie Jay tells Hazel that his name is actually Hoover Shoats and that he can

“get my own new Jesus and I can get Prophets for peanuts, you hear? Do you hear me, friend?” (159). Meanwhile, Layfield “had consumption and a wife and six children and being a Prophet was as much work as he wanted to do” (203). Onnie Jay and Layfield put on and discard their preacher roles as easily as Enoch does his work uniform. Street preaching is just another job in the city. It represents a method for making money more than it does a means for connecting the temporal with the ineffable. Earlier in the novel, a young Hazel believes that a “preacher’s power is in his neck and tongue and arm” (15). Hawks, Onnie Jay, and Layfield use all three to con their “congregations.” These street artists emphasize the corrupt preaching practices of Taulkinham: they make money through the power of their false bodies and deceptive words rather than preaching substantive messages.

Sabbath Lily presents the first example of preaching that actually says something about the spiritual. Preaching to Hazel on the steps of the columnated building, she betrays her desire for familial love in a religious vision redolent of a horror story. Her sermon tells of lovers who murder the woman’s child and hang it in a chimney, only to find that “Jesus made it beautiful to haunt her. She couldn’t lie with that man without she saw it, staring through the chimney at her, shining through the brick in the middle of the night” (48). Sabbath’s sermon revels in grotesque images, but it also reveals her obsession with mothers, children, and a desire for the security of a family. Although it is tempting to read Sabbath Lily’s story solely according to O’Connor’s stated desire to startle people through violent stories into seeing spiritual truths, its content reveals much more about the way she mediates the sacred for her own needs. Patricia Smith Yaeger, in “The Woman Without Any Bones: Anti-Angel Aggression in *Wise Blood*,” alerts us to the dangers of reading it as simply spiritual allegory: “O’Connor suffuses this event with light; she makes the material world so transparent, so luminous, that the dead child begins to glow

through the chimney.... What seems most unconscionable and horrifying about this passage is its aestheticization: its making of child-murder into something luminous or spiritual” (92). Sabbath Lily’s story is brutal, even for a book that includes two murders and graphic self-flagellation. Its religious function needs to be weighed against its explicit images in order to appreciate its perversion of the sacred. Read in light of her other conversations with Hazel, her sermon speaks to her desire for a mother-daughter relationship that has been denied her.

Sabbath Lily looks to men like Hazel for security, but she ultimately desires to create a maternal structure that was denied to her. On their trip to the countryside, she explains that her mother died shortly after giving birth to her (116). She then tells Hazel about her letters to Mary Brittle and her belief that “a bastard shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (117) before she narrates another story about an abused child: its grandmother “would get all itching and swoll...and it was twicet as bad when this child was there so she kept the child locked up in a chicken crate. It seen its granny in hell-fire, swoll and burning, and it told her everything it seen and she got so swoll until finally she went to the well and wrapped the well rope around her neck and let down the bucket and broke her neck” (121). Sabbath Lily’s second parable-like story evokes images as violent as the first. It also repeats many of the first sermon’s themes: womanhood, offspring, and damnation. Sabbath Lily does not see that she looks for salvation in the mother-daughter relationship. Bereft of this experience, she believes herself damned, much like the grandmother in her second story. She uses the word “swoll” or “swell” four times in the story to describe the grandmother’s affliction, but the word also suggests pregnancy and the complicated relationship Sabbath Lily has with caregivers, lovers, and children.

As opposed to the other duplicitous preachers in the novel, Sabbath Lily wants something more emotionally significant than money: she wants family. Her desperation eventually leads her

to adopt the new Jesus as her child, and in a parody of the pieta, she furiously scolds Hazel after he smashes it against the wall and throws it into the refuse pile two stories below. The book denies Sabbath Lily her family because she honors it above Christ. The Christ that haunts the pages of *Wise Blood* is a stark figure. He is the Christ who tells a disciple who wants to bury his father to “leave the dead to bury their own dead” (Matt. 8:22) and who has “come to...set a daughter against her mother” (Matt. 10:35). Sabbath Lily’s sermons include images of families being torn apart by Christ, but she misuses them as a means to start her own family. She falls short of the book’s rigid vision of salvation because she does not fully appreciate what it means for Christ to erode the familial structure. For her, Christ functions as a means to serve her own interests, not a reason to forsake everything by going “off into the dark where [she] was not sure of [her] footing” (16). *Wise Blood*’s gospel intractably demands that characters submit to the sacred through self-sacrifice, an act that only Hazel has the courage to perform.

Of the five pastor figures in *Wise Blood*, Hazel speaks the fiercest and most frequently; until he embodies the message as he truly understands it, though—and not just as he wants it to be—he fails to connect anyone to the sacred. Like the other preachers, he works to separate people from the Christian faith. Unlike Hawks, Onnie Jay, Layfield, and Sabbath Lily, Hazel showcases an ability to understand these fraudulent sermons for what they are: attempts to escape the ragged figure in the back of his mind, the ragged figure that haunts all of these characters. Hazel’s sermons are most easily characterized by their furious rhetorical style, but within their passionate delivery, they speak about freedom from original sin, they advocate for a positivist conception of the world, and they exhort the audience to question inherited religion. In his first sermon, delivered extemporaneously to Hawks’ “congregation,” Hazel begins with an ironic invocation, “Sweet Jesus Christ Crucified” and then argues that people are clean apart

from Christ: “I want to tell you people something. Maybe you think you’re not clean because you don’t believe. Well you are clean, let me tell you that” (51). The message is freedom from Christ, and he structures the movement in it by moving from “me” to “you.” He recognizes the work of preachers to mediate sacred messages, and he takes advantage of it to connect himself to the audience. In each of his four sermons, he asserts his authority to preach based on his personal insight. He is a preacher that preaches the truth (51), he is “member and preacher (101), he is “a peaceful man!” (141), and he is a harbinger of a truth based on “no truth”: “No truth behind all truths is what I and this church preach! Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it” (165). Hazel flees from God, but he does so by preaching. He urges people to abandon the God they think they believe in. His pseudo-religious discourse is the biggest con in the book: rather than connecting his audience to the sacred, he speaks an anti-evangelistic message to turn them against the wild ragged figure. Highlighting the degree to which spirituality in the novel serves only the self, his sermons speak to only one person: the speaker is his only listener. Hazel can represent religious discourse as well as any of the other preachers in the book, and he earnestly believes that he is delivering a vitally important message, but his sermons fail because they fail to align with the actual religious discourse of the novel, which requires total submission to the divine, even if it means forsaking one’s safety. This is the discourse that Hazel knows to be true but refuses to embody, and this is the gospel story directed at both Hazel and the novel’s readers.

Like his dilapidated Essex, Hazel’s words cannot hold together for long, and he has to surrender himself to the one who “[motioned] him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing” (16). From the beginning of *Wise Blood*, characters try to create community, but they always fail because they pursue it for its own sake and as a

distraction from their spiritual vacuity. When Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock tells a stranger about her family, the stranger seemingly ignores Hitchcock's desire to connect and tells of "a cousin who had cancer of the throat" (9). Enoch attempts to establish friendship with Hazel by appealing to their shared past in Melsy (53), but he receives the same taciturn responses that Hazel received when he used the same tactic with the train porter (13). When Sabbath rants against Hazel's self-blinding, Mrs. Flood calls Welfare Services to have her taken to a home (220). Community is non-existent in the novel because people are focused on pleasing themselves, so it should not be surprising that the fraudulent sermons fail to establish community either. As is true for most of O'Connor's stories, characters can only break through their solipsism once they engage in the severe acts of grace that usually begin and end with violence. Once Hazel embodies his belief through extreme penance, he mostly abstains from speaking and gives up preaching—at least verbal preaching—altogether. Because of his physically violent actions, Mrs. Flood moves past her selfish desire to cheat others while not being cheated and genuinely looks to Hazel for companionship. Like Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock, she finds herself drawn to the depth in Hazel's eyes.

Mrs. Flood receives the gospel message because she, alone among Hazel's associates, eschews her selfish passions and submits to Hazel's gospel. As with many of the characters in the novel, she is primarily ruled by her instinct for self-preservation, which manifests itself in her distrust of others and her desire to live comfortably in this world. Upon hearing that Hazel plans to pour quicklime into his eyes, the narrator gives Mrs. Flood reaction: "He might put lime in his eyes and she wouldn't doubt it a bit, because [preachers] were all, if the truth was only known, a little bit off in their heads. What possible reason could a sane person have for wanting to not enjoy himself anymore?" (213). The joke here is that Mrs. Flood can so easily dismiss Hazel's

stated intentions by chalking them up to something that preachers do. More seriously though is her reason for believing they are “a little bit off in their heads.” Hazel’s first act of penance is insane because it contradicts the desire to “enjoy himself.” Privileging the desire for pleasure is not uncommon in the novel. Onnie Jay and Layfield essentially preach the same message. Nor is her thievery particularly reprehensible; she steals from Hazel after he has blinded himself (220), but her sin pales in comparison to Enoch’s murder of the man in the gorilla suit. What sets her apart from Enoch and the con artist preachers is her desire to see the “clear light of day. She liked to see things” (22). Seeing is a powerful trope in the novel; characters repeatedly look into Hazel’s eyes or gaze into the distance in an effort to escape, if only momentarily, the materialistic world they usually inhabit. Mrs. Flood’s desire to see is unique because it allows her to gradually come to love Hazel unselfishly. By staring at him, talking with him, and tending to his needs—even if she does so originally for her own intentions—Mrs. Flood begins to hone her seeing until she can see grace in Hazel’s empty eye sockets.

The gospel message in *Wise Blood*, directed at both Mrs. Flood and the novel’s reading audience, focuses on the Incarnation of Christ more so than his crucifixion, resurrection, or ascension. This gospel message announces a change has come into the fictional world of Taulkinham. Heeding the call of the wild ragged figure, Hazel guides Mrs. Flood to the moment of Incarnation. Staring into his empty eyes, Mrs. Flood “had to imagine the pin point of light; she couldn’t think of it all without that. She saw it as some kind of a star, like the star on Christmas cards. She saw him going backwards to Bethlehem and she had to laugh” (222-3). The reference to the star of Bethlehem is clear: Mrs. Flood sees the birth of Christ in Hazel’s eyes. Harder to understand though is the fact that Mrs. Flood sees Hazel moving backwards. With this image, O’Connor implies that Hazel has returned to the thing that has pursued him since he was twelve,

the moment when he heard his call to preach. His transfiguration comes about because he has gone back to the moment when Christ first became incarnate for Hazel, the moment when Hazel discovered the ineffable. The image causes Mrs. Flood to laugh because she does not yet understand its growing power over her life.

Seeing the star of Bethlehem in Hazel's eyes constitutes the beginning of Mrs. Flood's conversion; this matter cannot be overstated because it betrays the book's emphasis on individual salvation. In his article, "Jesus, Stab Me in the Heart!" Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr. explains that O'Connor delighted in her rigid focus on the individual's relationship with God. He quotes a letter from O'Connor to one of her most frequent correspondents to illustrate O'Connor's emphasis on the individual's relationship with God.⁷

In a letter (October 20, 1955) to A., O'Connor spoke with approval of another correspondent's observation that, as O'Connor put it, 'the best of my work sounded like the Old Testament would sound if it were being written today,' noting that 'the character's relation is directly with God rather than other people' (*HB* 111). The middle ground for O'Connor is finally worthless before matters of the individual and his or her spiritual life, a judgment that lies behind her striking observation that readers of 'A Good Man is Hard to Find' should pay no attention to the murder of the family but only to 'the action of grace in the Grandmother's soul' (*MM* 113). (84-5)

⁷ At the behest of the correspondent, Sally Fitzgerald, O'Connor's friend who collected and published O'Connor's letters in *The Habit of Being*, kept her identity secret, designating her "A." for anonymous in the collection. A.'s identity has since been revealed as Elizabeth "Betty" Hester, after her death by suicide. See "Emory to Unseal Flannery O'Connor Letters" in *Emory Report*.

O'Connor's work largely eschews communal redemption in place of the individual's personal reckoning; remarkably, Hazel's final sermon—the embodiment of his devotion to Christ—calls another person to Christ's redemptive narrative. Hazel's total submission to the sacred is itself a religious discourse that mediates between the divine and the human. Like the word of the Lord that "shall not return...empty, but shall accomplish [its] purpose," Hazel's incarnation of his belief is irresistible to Mrs. Flood. Against the long odds that the book establishes against community formation, Hazel's sermon calls to Mrs. Flood and to the reader as well. The pinpoint of light that Mrs. Flood sees in Hazel's eyes should be read as an image as violent and discomfiting as Sabbath Lily's sermons, Hazel's walking on glass, and his wearing barbed wire. Mrs. Flood sees the light in Hazel's "deep burned sockets," but only when she closes her eyes. Hazel has invaded her mind's eye; he has instilled the religious discourse in her. "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" (236). O'Connor turns the fiery Protestant preacher into a saint, and Mrs. Flood gazes on him as if he were an icon. In the same way icons remind their viewers to contemplate aspects of the spiritual life, so the image of Hazel appears in the minds of Mrs. Flood and readers to call them on towards the Incarnation, the narrative beginning of the gospel, which is also, for all intents and purposes, that which will usher in a new heaven and a new earth. *Wise Blood* only hints at the community's redemption; *The Color Purple* manifests it fully.

The Color Purple concludes with a scene of communal redemption that *The Sound and the Fury* and *Wise Blood* only make possible for individuals. By the novel's end, Celie, Shug, and Mr. _____ have established a home wherein the family members respect one another and

where each member speaks with a self-affirming voice. Nettie returns to this harmonious scene with her husband and Celie's grown children, all of whom were believed to have died on their return to America. Not only do Celie and her friends find salvation, but the book also figuratively resurrects Nettie and her family from their oceanic graves. The familial vision at the end of the novel is triumphant, constituting a community that the novel could not have imagined in its early scenes of abuse and rape. Walker's novel achieves its image of a transcendent reality with a particularly evangelistic fervor, but it subverts the evangelistic formula established in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Wise Blood* by moving from an ostensibly Protestant evangelism to a pantheistic spirituality that finds evangelistic impulses in a divine presence, human individuals, and the natural world. The book does not stop with the redemption of its characters, though. Celie and Nettie's analysis of religion indicates that Walker's novel works to liberate both the characters and their religion. Indeed, *The Color Purple* incorporates religion into its narrative to redeem it, just as it frees its characters from oppressive and discriminatory forces.

The presence of a gospel message in *The Color Purple* demonstrates that the evangelistic mission in American literature exists in novels that reject the Protestant redemption story. Walker's evangelism functions more generally as a means of instituting social change through the infusion of the sacred into the temporal. Whereas the story of Christ's redemptive work inspires Dilsey, Hazel, and Mrs. Flood's redemption narratives, a more broadly conceived sacred entity fuels Celie's conversion. Nevertheless, the evangelistic discourse must still be mediated through the evangelizers, and Shug, Celie, and Nettie all embody their speech and inflect it with their individual senses of identity. Shug infuses her preaching with a confident sexuality that characterizes her relationships with men and women. Celie modulates her spiritual discourse such that it emphasizes intrinsic self-worth. Meanwhile Nettie's religious discourse evolves in a

more studied and academic manner, reflecting her education and her experiences with a diversity of cultures in America, England, and West Africa. As a novel that first and foremost protests discrimination against women, mediation is less a linguistic act than an act of self-assertion. Whereas Shegog mediated his discourse to establish a connection to his audience and whereas Hazel mediated his discourse to demonstrate its distinction from materialist worldviews, the women who speak religious discourses in *The Color Purple* mediate their words as a way to assert their ability and authority to speak of eternal things. Shug, Celie, and Nettie essentially abandon the Protestant gospel and its focus on the incarnation of Jesus in order to rewrite incarnation as a self-empowering act. The manifestation of the divine in human affairs is as equally important in Walker's novel as it is in Faulkner's and O'Connor's, but for Walker Incarnation is now the incarnation of the self, so that even those—especially those who are “black,” “pore,” “ugly,” and “woman” (209)—deserve and participate in mutual admiration and the love of God.

Of the three novels I examine in this chapter, *The Color Purple* most explicitly achieves its redemptive vision. Perhaps not coincidentally, it is also the most evangelistic of the novels. As Erin Huskey argues in her article, “Witnessing and Testifying: Transformed Language and Selves in *The Color Purple*,” Celie's story invites readers to adopt the book's gospel message, showing them a new, more self-fulfilling way of living in the world. Walker achieves this through the narrative—most obviously seen in Shug's testimony, Celie's response, and Nettie's evolving faith—but she further emphasizes the novel's evangelistic impulse in its form. One of the novel's missions is to validate women's writing in order to validate their experiences in a world that does not give credence to their point of view. Subverting male control of female-to-female communication, the novel's formal structure demonstrates the tangible and positive

effects of women writing. According to the narrative, Celie writes letters to God because it is her only outlet; the disembodied voice of Pa begins the novel by telling Celie to only share her experiences with God, which then provides the catalyst for the letters that comprise the book. The disembodied voice is never explicitly named in the novel, but it is quite clear that they belong to Celie's Pa. Making the words anonymous allows Walker to restart the novel with Celie's words, thus giving her the privileged position of beginning the novel proper. Additionally, the italicized, anonymous words also allow readers to identify the censoring voice with their own personal oppressors, thus inviting readers to adopt the narrative as their own. Valerie Babb, in "Writing to Undo What Writing Has Done," explains that the novel demands that readers consider its form: "The epistolary form of this novel itself calls attention to the act of writing by using letters to construct a tale. Once aware of the conspicuous presence of writing, we cannot help but note that a transformation occurs in terms of both its function and form" (107). For Babb, the novel's letters chart Celie's growing ability to use oral and written forms of communication. She learns to speak and write with linguistic tools previously controlled by the dominant group: men, and more specifically, white men. Babb explains, "By mastering and modifying writing, Celie and Nettie change it into an implement that is no longer solely the property of men and whites, but one used by black women to gain a greater awareness of themselves and to preserve their oral history" (108). Celie learns to control her spoken and written words so that she can speak what she previously kept silent and write to audiences other than a silent God. As her writing develops, she learns to critically read her experiences and herself, which then allows her to "fix the events of her life." As artifacts, her letters provide a means by which she can return to her experiences and make sense of them by interpreting them through her thoughts and the advice of others (109).

Since *The Color Purple* continually emphasizes the spiritual state of its characters and their world, the evangelistic component of Celie's letter writing bears attention as well. The book's epistolary form constructs an intimate reading experience that allows readers to experience Celie's reactions to her thoughts, emotions, and spiritual inquiries. Indeed, the novel pushes the limits of the epistolary form in the way it presents Celie's letters as an honest recording of her life on the one hand and as a fictionalized exploration of belief and authenticity directed at the reader on the other. Thus, readers come to know Celie's self-authorization in a personal manner, as Babb and Huskey argue, but they also intimately experience her spiritual conversion. The novel gives its readers access to Celie's mind and her soul, revealing that Celie engages the world both intellectually and spiritually. By writing to others and to God, Celie undergoes spiritual transformation, writing first to an inherited version of God, then to her sister, and then finally to a new pantheistic incarnation of an ineffable sacred entity. The final letter is of supreme importance to the book's spiritual closure. Celie addresses the last letter to God after refusing to write to a white male God for most of the novel's second half, and it is no coincidence that Nettie returns from her supposed death in the same epistolary moment. Thus Celie's writing manifests the spiritual within its pages by suggesting that the God Celie ultimately writes to is as real as her sister, whom readers are supposed to believe is dead and just as impossible to communicate with. The final letter's form—its address to God—and its content—Nettie's return—combine to show that within the world Walker creates the spiritual is as real as the physical. The concluding letter suggests that communicating with a person or entity that is by all practical measures unreachable is nevertheless efficacious to bring about personal, spiritual change. Every letter Celie wrote to Nettie returns to her unopened, but though they never reach Nettie does not diminish their ability to transform Celie. Addressing her thoughts,

feelings, and spiritual reflections to an entity seemingly beyond the reach of human discourse nevertheless constitutes meaningful dialogue in the novel because the novel assumes a spiritual reality that transcends day-to-day human experience but that is “Not Beyond Loving.” In its form and content, the novel incarnates the spiritual into the physical. In order to bring about this change, Celie must first reconceive what constitutes the spiritual and what it wants for her life.

Inhabiting a marginalized position within the community of the novel, Celie must learn to consider anew her community’s discourse in order to overcome the oppression she experiences as a black woman in the South in the early twentieth century. The novel begins by establishing her character as oppressed by both the men in her life and by a religion dominated by a silent but authoritarian white, male God. First raped by her stepfather (whom she believes to be her father), Celie is then married to Mr. _____ in a scene reminiscent of a cattle sale: “She good with children, Pa say, rattling his paper open more. Never heard her say a hard word to nary one of them. Just give ‘em everything they ast for, is the only problem. / Mr. _____ say, That cow still coming? / He say, Her cow” (11). Pa’s syntax elides Celie and the cow, which diminishes the cow’s worth because it is her cow and not one of his more valuable cows. As the final word of the chapter, the emphasis falls on the cow, illustrating that it is the main focus of her “wedding” to Mr. _____. It is no surprise then that while married to Mr. _____ Celie experiences prolonged physical abuse: “Harpo ast his daddy why he beat me. Mr. _____ say, Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for—he don’t finish. He just tuck his chin over the paper like he do. Remind me of Pa” (23). Mr. _____ and Pa see Celie as an object to beat and use. They speak about her in terms of use value, rather than speaking to her as a human, which culminates in Mr. _____’s denunciation of her: “He laugh. Who you think you is? he say. You can’t curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all”

(209). Within a hierarchical power structure that privileges white over black and male over female, Celie seems to have little worth. From Mr. _____'s point of view, she even lacks the ability to use language with enough authority to curse another person.

Celie experiences explicit abuse from men like Pa and Mr. _____, but the abuse she receives because of her spiritual beliefs reveals a deeper threat to potential self-realization. Explaining to Sofia that she cannot get mad at injustice any more, she says, "Well, sometime Mr. _____ git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to Old Maker. But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways" (42). Celie sacrifices potential present happiness for what she perceives to be her reward in heaven, but that reward does not promise much for Celie. Huskey points out that Celie's syntax creates confusion with regards to the identity of "he" in the third sentence. Grammatically, "he" should refer to God, her Old Maker, but she intends it to mean Mr. _____. Problematically, she equates God and Mr. _____; they are both manifestations of the "he" in control of her life (Huskey 109). Furthermore, the institution of the church simply means more work for Celie: "I do a right smart for the preacher. Clean the floor and windows, make the wine, wash the altar linen. Make sure there's wood for the stove in wintertime. He call me Sister Celie. Sister Celie, he say, You faithful as the day is long. Then he talk to the other ladies and they mens" (43). Celie momentarily earns approval because she works and because she is faithful; soon thereafter, the pastor seemingly abandons her to her duties while he goes to speak to the other women—the women who "didn't speak to me while I was there struggling with my big belly and Mr. _____ children" (195). Though her work may be appreciated more so in the church than at home, she becomes an afterthought too quickly to actually gain any sense of self-worth from her exchange with the minister. For Celie, religious devotion constitutes an insidious form of oppression in that it convinces her to accept

her position as someone beneath others and as a person who has value only in proportion to her subservience.

With the help of Shug, a blues singer and self-proclaimed evangelist who went to church not to find God but to “to share God,” Celie transcends these oppressive exchanges by learning to speak about God and herself in a self-authorizing way. Shug begins by disabusing Celie of her concept of God as someone who the male preacher alone can speak about: “She say, Celie, tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God” (194). To overcome gender and racial discrimination, Celie must first learn that the figure of the male pastor is the not the mediator between God and the congregation; to help Celie create a new perception of God, Shug situates herself and the rest of the congregation as the authorized speakers. Shug then breaks down Celie’s notion of God as a white man—or woman, for that matter: “‘It? I ast’ / ‘Yeah, It. God ain’t a he or a she, but a It’” (196).

Dispossessed of her view of God as dominant white man, Celie begins to see her identity as something that can exist outside the oppressive structures that limit her. It is at this point in the novel that Celie stops writing to God and begins writing to Nettie. Her release from traditional black Southern Protestantism also means her release from speaking only to God, the object of her writing since the book’s opening line. Shug’s evangelism and Celie’s change in writing audience also coincides with the moment in the narrative when she learns that Pa, the presumed disembodied voice and man that raped her before he “sold” her to Mr. _____, is not her Pa.

Removing these two men from their privileged positions, she leaves Mr. _____ to live with Shug in Memphis. Celie finds the strength to leave because of her rebirth from an incestuous past and

her conversations about God and spirituality with Shug. She can take these steps towards freedom because she is “reborn” (Powers 79).

After speaking with Shug, Celie considers new ideas about God that Shug and Nettie present to her, which then allows her to speak her inherent self-worth aloud. She rebukes Mr. _____’s earlier dismissal of her: “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here” (210). Celie speaks throughout the book and shares her experiences through writing, first to God and then to her sister Nettie, but it is this moment in the book when she asserts her own identity in an independent oral and literary voice. She then develops this voice through further conversations with Shug, by forming her own business, and in reading and responding to Nettie’s letters. By the end of the book, she can synthesize her thoughts so that she can speak through her final letter, not only to God, but also to people and the rest of creation: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (291). Having learned to mediate spiritual discourse for herself, Celie’s manifests her dignity through her literary voice. She can now write in a manner that recognizes the equality of all things: the divine, the natural, and the human. Her comprehensive ability to write with a voice that will be listened to emphasizes the action of the final chapter: Celie, Shug, and Mr. _____ welcome Nettie’s family to the old family farm, which itself has transformed from a site of oppression to a renewed Eden, replete with blossoming flowers, profitable businesses, and time to enjoy the company of others. For her this is one community, and she expresses this by addressing a new entity, embodied in the word “Everything,” that harmonizes humans, nature, and the divinity while still recognizing its transcendence.

In telling Celie’s story, *The Color Purple* inspires readers to consider their lives in light of Celie’s; moreover, it asks its audience to adopt Celie’s story as a template for instituting

personal and communal change as a way to engage injustice in the world. In “Witnessing and Testifying,” Huskey coins the phrase *gospel ideology* to explain how the novel performs its double evangelism. Gospel ideology posits three entities—the testifier, the auditor, and the witness—that participate in mutually respectful dialogue, wherein the testifier speaks her testimony to an auditor, who can then become a witness by first believing and then sharing the testifier’s experience. She explains, “[*The Color Purple*] is a textual act of testifying and witnessing to inspire the reader to transform his/her life and the terms in which he/she thinks about the self” (95). *The Color Purple* acts as both testifier and auditor because it illustrates women speaking to other women (and, eventually, to men) with an expressed desire to institute new ways of living in the world. The novel is a witness in that it depicts Celie’s eventual transformation into a testifier by communicating her story to readers.

Huskey argues that the novel expects its audience to adopt a similar witnessing role: “Witnessing here is not merely a passive act of reading the text and reacting to it; rather, witnessing in the gospel ideology calls for the subsequent act of testimony in word and deed” (99). Ultimately, readers need to mimic Celie’s lifelong spiritual education, learning to see the sacred as an entity that empowers individuals—especially individuals who experience oppression—and finding the means to share their testimony, to be a voice that “[speaks] to everything listening.” Huskey adds, “by extension, when the reader frees the self from the terms by which oppression has defined and limited life, the reader then transforms the lives and selves of those other people to whom she is connected” (106). *The Color Purple* employs gospel ideology through its plot and narrative discourse to evangelize readers who will hear the message of hope and then communicate it to others. As such, Huskey emphasizes the novel’s focus on

linguistic exchange in the form of dialogue, letter writing, and conversations with the self to identify its ability to do work in the world.

Peter Powers locates the novel's ability to effect change not in its depictions of linguistic exchange, but by replacing an oppressive temporal history with a redemptive sacred history. Seeing the work of a divine personality in nature and in her own self, Celie interprets her life and the lives of others as participating in the divine scheme. As such, she and her family find a spiritual resolution to their social problems. While oppressive social structures continue to dominate the world around them, Celie's family can celebrate their family as participants in the divine plan. As Mary Agnes says, "Us can spend the day celebrating each other" (293). They achieve this by incorporating Shug's pan-spiritual beliefs. "By imagining religious practice as participating in historical dramas rather than simply being a matter of individual belief, these sacred histories seek to clear a space in which different forms of social life might be imagined and enacted" (70). According to Powers, the novel achieves its spiritual vision by elevating what is often private and pietistic to something historically significant. The result is that personal salvation influences historical processes.

Powers recognizes an evangelistic tendency in the novel, but he argues that the text actually suggests that a truly redeemed world will come in the future, locating the millennial promise beyond narrative's closing scene: "Rather, total liberation awaits a different system, a different time, a different manner of living, for which Celie's story has only just begun to create a space" (84). For Powers, the novel's limitations stem from what he sees as Celie's movement away from God after she accepts Shug's spiritual vision. He argues that Celie accepts Shug's spirituality and then improves her station in life by abandoning Mr. _____ and creating her pants-sewing business, Folkspants, Unlimited. Her new identity as liberated business owner then

overshadows the work of God in sacred history (84), and if there is a religious vision at the end of the book, it sticks closely to the private space of home. The ending of the novel, then, provides peace for a woman who has ultimately succeeded because of her inheritance from her mother and Alphonso. Real change for the rest of the community would come later. Celie's empowerment is just the hope of things to come:

This eschatological vision awaits the moment when God will be with human beings and they will see God in one another. The 'Amen' [that concludes the book] suggests that what Celie can see now only as a glimmer on the surface of the moving waters of history—a community of love and support and admiration—is what must be made real in the world, fashioned into a fit temple for humanity and, indeed, for God. (87-8)

Like Huskey, Powers sees the novel's ultimate evangelistic success in its appealing to readers to pick up where Celie leaves off by instituting communities of "love and support and admiration." Huskey and Powers illustrate how the novel thematically works for change: both its gospel ideology and its inauguration of sacred history show readers how to learn from Celie's struggle for individual autonomy and self-worth.

Celie's story serves as a powerful fictional testimony of self-empowerment, sisterhood, and community redemption through a spiritual as well as a physical healing brought about by Shug's incarnation of an admiring spiritual presence. As Powers explains though, its vision betrays a certain limitation regarding the power of sacred history in the novel. He argues that Celie succeeds because of her spiritual rebirth but also, and more so, because of her entrepreneurial success in Folkspants, Unlimited and her father's store. And his point needs to be considered: Celie, as a black woman in the pre-World War II South, still faces severe persecution

and limited freedom. Huskey echoes the point: “Despite redeemed selves, healed ruptures, and community building, if this narrative were to continue, it is clear that these characters are headed for personal and community struggle” (111). Although she sees Celie’s appointment of Sofia as a clerk in the story as an example of larger community action—Sofia can, in Huskey’s words, “serve her African American customers in her store and...serve up a little verbal sass to the white customers who try to put her, and all other African-American women by extension, in a role defined by race and gender” (111)—she argues that the ending foreshadows some pending problems, such as Tashi’s acceptance in America. *The Color Purple* refuses to pretend that Celie has solved her county’s, much less her nation’s, racial and gender problems.

Yet there is hope for further redemption. The market element of the plot—the market for which her father was lynched—symbolizes Celie’s ability to manage of her own affairs but also to produce jobs for others. Rather than demeaning herself as Alphonso did in his obsequiousness to the white business owners, she oversees a business that elevates Sofia, a natural leader in the novel who was always forced to serve others. By novel’s end, Celie owns her home, produces both goods and jobs, shares an equal voice with her family, and redeems the economic position her father and mother lost to racism. None of this is possible, though, without the spiritual transformation Celie experiences in the novel. Late in the novel, Celie writes to Nettie about her days with Mr. _____ now that they have reconciled and become friends. She tells Nettie that Shug may be returning after her latest fling with a young man, “Shug writes me she coming home. / Now. Is this life or not? / *I be so calm.* / If she come, I be happy. If she don’t, I be content. / And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn” (288-9, emphasis in the original). Until now, Celie has located her love of life in Shug because Shug fulfills her sexually as well as represents for her the admiration of God. Celie’s declaration that she “*be so calm*”

fulfills her earlier pronouncement of “I’m here” in that the latter asserts her intrinsic self-worth, while the former emphasizes that she can now be at peace with that self-worth. She has internalized the gospel that Shug preached to her and can accept God’s admiration such that the material comforts Celie comes to enjoy pale compared to the harmony she feels with God and herself. If God loves us, Shug explains, then we can do things that please God, like “Be happy” (194). By the novel’s end, Celie can feel that happiness apart from Shug. She can be calm because she loves and is loved by the Great Mystery that Walker speaks of in the preface.

Evangelism is both a formal and thematic component of *The Color Purple*, as it is in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Wise Blood*. Shegog, Hazel, Shug, and Celie preach a new world for characters within the texts and the readers without. These pastors and pastor figures initiate transformational change in characters’ lives after they incarnate religious discourses they believe originate in an ineffable and divine source. Incarnation looks differently in each text, but it achieves similar effects. Shegog modifies his delivery to fit his audiences’ expectations, and he achieves a spiritual connection with Dilsey that not only affirms her existence but gives her access to sacred history. Hazel radically surrenders to the “wild ragged figure” through severe acts of penance, thus enacting the kind of violent grace O’Connor believes her characters need to experience spiritual insight. Shug recasts the divine in natural and sexualized terms that authorize Celie’s subjectivity and instigate her own testifying in letters and conversation. Shegog, Hazel, and Shug incarnate gospel messages for their readers as well. They radically re-envision the present state of a fallen world, thus allowing readers to participate in stories of liberation and redemption. Furthermore, they remind their readers that as they experience stories on the page, they also carry those stories into the world. Like Dilsey and Mrs. Flood, readers see the allure of the ineffable as a force for social change and spiritual insight. Like Celie, they are asked to

become witnesses and to consider how they can address the social, cultural, and racial problems in their lives and in their communities. Walker's novel may be more optimistic than Faulkner's and O'Connor's, but all of them allow for an individual and communal redemption made possible by characters who incarnate aspects of the ineffable in their actions and words.

As we will see in the following chapter, other fictional pastors do not meet with the same success that Shegog, Hazel, Shug, and Celie encounter, which serves as a reminder that while the gospel story begins with Incarnation, it also encompasses the suffering of the crucifixion. Terry Eagleton posits "that the ultimate signifier of the human condition is the tortured and murdered body of a political criminal" (Eagleton 37). Eagleton argues that sorrow must always be a part of the evangelistic message because the suffering represented by the man of sorrows trope is an essential aspect of the gospel. It is also a literary device that protest literature can employ to explore the agony of the gospel story as it is preached to those who experience persecution. Incarnation begins the gospel, but as the work of Ralph Ellison and David Simon indicates, the theme of suffering develops that message into something that demands political action in the here and now.

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CHAPTER 2

“THE COST OF THAT HUMANITY”: PREACHING DIGNITY AND CIVIL RIGHTS IN AMERICA

“And clutching my recorder I rushed past the grandfather’s clock and into the dim, but most welcome, light of a new day’s dawning.” So ends the third computer manuscript of Ralph Ellison’s sprawling yet unfinished second novel. Collected in John F. Callahan and Adam Bradley’s *Three Days Before the Shooting...*, this section, telling the story of Welborn McIntyre’s disorienting experience at the mansion of Jesse Rockmore, constitutes a small portion of Ellison’s incomplete novel. Confounded by what he sees, McIntyre flees into the morning light, hoping that the new day will provide him the clarity he fails to find in the mansion. Read in context with the other manuscripts, it seems apparent that McIntyre’s need for resolution will almost certainly not be met. David Simon’s *The Wire* provides its viewers a similar lack of clarity and resolution in the series’ final moments. The television series concludes with former detective Jimmy McNulty pulling over to the side of a highway to take in Baltimore’s downtown skyline. The episode then cuts to a number of vignettes depicting both established characters carrying on their storylines and anonymous Baltimore citizens going about their daily business before eventually cutting back to McNulty, who gets back in his car and says, “Let’s go home.” *The Wire*’s final scene fails to provide closure in that it conveys to the reader that the story will continue despite the series’ end. The dysfunctional bureaucracy and self-promotion that dogged McNulty while a member of the police force will continue to frustrate those who hope to make a positive change. For both Ellison and Simon’s work, the final words on the page and the final images on the screen by no means convey the final word on their subject.

Though separated by time and medium, *Three Days* and *The Wire* follow characters’ journeys through urban landscapes, depicting pastors and church employees who help people

enact transformational change in their communities and in their own lives. Neither work concludes with the picture of harmony that Walker's novel optimistically envisions or the closure that Faulkner and O'Connor provide. Rather, *Three Days* and *The Wire* emphasize the need for ongoing devotion in place of a final spiritual redemption. Locating the gospel as a force for social action in Ellison and Simon's work, we see that irresolution suspends not only the narrative but also the religious discourse of salvation, such that the gospel story fails to achieve its denouement. This results in the texts forgoing millennial closure in favor of narratives that remain in progress and, as a result, forcing the audience to consider the ineffable as something that draws people on to the hoped for but never realized promised land. The religious discourses of *Three Days* and *The Wire* are intimately connected to the works' preoccupation with civil and basic human rights; as such, these religious discourses preach civil rights, resisting institutional racism, and advocating for the marginalized and vulnerable. To emphasize these ends, the pastor figures in *Three Days* and *The Wire* preach the suffering inherent to the gospel story, all the while emphasizing the power of the sacred to keep people working through that suffering. These religious leaders exist in settings that provide little to suggest the possibility for transcendence. Their societies remain captive to systemic racism and institutional oppression so they preach the "here and now" of religious belief and performance, assigning God's work of redemption to people who faithfully practice their religious beliefs in the midst of hardship. In short, narrative irresolution creates religious discourses that inspire characters to analyze, respond to, and then formulate further questions about their frequently unjust experiences.

The defining feature of Ellison's second novel is that it fails to end at all, a fact that tantalizingly suggests that the work to reform America is and forever will be never ending. In his West Point lecture, "On Initiation Rites and Power," Ellison indicates that resolving what the

American experience is or what it should be will always remain incomplete: “Because in these United States the crucial question is not one of having a perfect society, or even of having at any given moment a viable society. Rather, it is to keep struggling to keep trying to reduce to consciousness all of the complex experience which ceaselessly unfolds within this great nation” (538). Ellison employs infinitives three times in the final sentence. Beyond giving the sentence a forceful rhythm, the infinitives convey a sense of potential action always awaiting fulfillment. The three verbs make up the “crucial question” for Ellison, and as such, they fail to provide a conclusive answer to the challenge Ellison proposes. To underscore this point, the first two infinitives exemplify Ellison’s doubt that the project can ever be realized: writers like himself need “to keep struggling” and “to keep trying” to understand the intricacies of life in America knowing full well that they can only approximate and never fully offer a satisfactory description. He thus embodies the need for ongoing work in the second novel’s structure and in its main themes.

Structurally, the novel moves through time and place to underscore its three main characters’ wrestling with identity and racism throughout America and within their minds. The novel’s manuscripts tell the stories of Reverend Alonzo “A.Z.” Hickman, his adopted son Bliss—who later changes his name to Sunraider before becoming a race-baiting Senator—and the reporter Welborn McIntyre as they each get pulled in to the central action of the plot: the assassination of Sunraider on the floor of the Senate. Their individual journeys up to this point fail to give them resolution, and the text eventually reunites them in a hospital ward as they each contemplate the unfulfilled hopes of their past selves. The repetition of past sins suggests a tragic succession of personal and communal pain. Bliss’s story emphasizes the theme of estranged parents and children; he betrays and curses his adopted family, while his own son plots his

murder. Hickman and McIntyre similarly contend with the reality of a lost child that once held promise for them. Although the novel suggests that this cycle will continue, it does not do so cynically, and the narrative ultimately reaffirms the responsibility of black and white Americans to work towards a more ideal American experience. In his text, Ellison searches for ways to resist systemic oppression in order to show his audience a new way of living in a spiritually and socially corrupted world. Because of the unresolvable nature of the work, the best he can hope for is a more lucid understanding of the “ceaselessly [unfolding]” complexity of racial discrimination in America.

The narrative structure of *The Wire* demonstrates a similar lack of closure, and it does so to underscore that the problems it identifies will continue to inflict harm on people after the series concludes. Simon’s characters often speak of a “new day” in Baltimore, one in which the politicians and police force can work together against the institutional forces that cause the city’s poorest inhabitants to take up the drug trade. The new day theme is redolent of a millennial narrative, symbolizing the dream for a day when responsible leaders will rule justly by prosecuting corruption and working to ensure the safety of the city’s population. Over the course of the series, the new day never dawns. It remains the resolution towards which people work but never achieve. There are moments when those in charge encourage the police to pursue cases against corrupt leaders such as State Senator Clay Davis (Isiah Whitlock, Jr.), but he and drug traffickers like Marlo Stanfield (Jamie Hector) ultimately beat the system because they can manipulate institutional corruption for their own purposes, and in the process they ensure that the corruption will continue. The final image of Baltimore’s skyline is bittersweet, reminding the audience that it has seen the institutional components of the city and how they function, or more accurately fail to function. Because of the institutional problems, the cops, drug traffickers,

longshoremen, politicians, teachers, and media will continue to profit the powerful elite rather than serve their communities. Simply put, power and institutional oppression will continue to suppress individual freedom. *The Wire* withholds resolution so as more accurately to capture the oppressive experience many communities in America still suffer from today.

What little possibility for change *Three Days* and *The Wire* permit can be found in the sermons and actions of two pastors: A.Z. Hickman, also known as God's Trombone, and Deacon Melvin, commonly referred to as Deacon. Hickman and Deacon rarely adopt the sermonizing of Shegog and Motes; like Shug they locate the sacred in physical actions and with an eye to immediate social change. At the same time, their work emanates from the undercurrent of a religious discourse that inspires their words, actions, and identities. For Hickman, the power of the religious narrative lies in its ability to transcend human language. He reminisces about his conversion in a section titled "Bliss's Birth" and explains, "Then I drank until He sent me the child and I realized that I had to change. Then I drank again of the true water, I had to change so the sound of life, the life I felt in me and in the others could become words and it's still too complicated for definition" (481). Two things stand out in this passage: first, throughout *Three Days*' narrative episodes Hickman frequently alternates between his pre-Christian and Christian experiences in his thoughts. In this case, he parallels the effects of alcohol and the power of Christ's "living water." Hickman's thoughts exemplify what Ellison called Hickman's "'two minds'—one doubtful, the other hopeful, one blues-toned, the other sanctified" (Callahan and Bradley 493). Hickman's dual nature illustrates the manuscripts' pairing of "blues-tone" and "sanctified" discourses, wherein each informs and compliments the other. Second, Hickman defines his mission as the work to embody life in words. His remarks acknowledge both the necessity and impossibility of such a task: life is "too complicated" to be reduced to words but he

must always try because it is his sacred calling. Although this seems to indicate the insufficiency of religious discourse, in another episode Hickman notes the power of religious discourse to move beyond the limitations of words. In the “Hickman in Georgia” section, he explains that the church hired him because “what counted most was a minister’s ability to move them with the Word beyond the limitations of words” (664). God’s Trombone taps into the ineffable in order to move his audience. Though he recognizes his inability to verbalize the “sound of life,” he testifies that it is powerful enough to transform his experience. Recognizing that he cannot completely describe the “sound of life” in words, he preaches through synthesis in order to get his congregation past the “limitations of words”: he combines words and feelings; rhetorical flair and the trombone; and secular and religious language to comfort his congregation so that they can transcend the discrimination they experience.

Deacon Melvin employs a similar tactic of combining religious and secular discourses so that he can draw from both to confront the social problems perpetuated by institutions and the individuals who run them. In doing so, he uses a “street-sense”-inflected religious discourse to inaugurate a restorative means of living in Baltimore. Like Hickman, he preaches and acts in the midst of institutional forces that paralyze individuals. Deacon proves adept at moving between secular and religious positions. In one scene he loads food and supplies gathered at the church into vehicles waiting to distribute them to the poor. In another scene, he effortlessly moves through the halls of power, petitioning a civic leader to save an experimental school program. He preaches both to a police captain and an ex-gang enforcer. He speaks the language of social work and educational reform. Throughout the later seasons in the series, Deacon confronts corruption through his words and actions, and he does so effectively because he draws on his knowledge of religious and secular discourses.

I use the words *religious* and *sacred* understanding that both are equally fraught terms and neither is reducible to simple definitions. In “‘The Secular’ as Opposed to What?” Tracy Fessenden argues for the necessity of thinking of them as evolving terms: “The usefulness of speaking of secularism in the singular may come to seem limited, in the same way that speaking of religion in the singular only gets us so far” (634). For Fessenden, the secular as it is often conceived in America tends to be shaped and influenced by Protestantism, especially in the way American culture privileges private, pietistic religious devotion. To speak of it as something in binary opposition to religion is to ignore the way it sanctions some religions over others.¹ In “The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies,” Michael Kaufman further argues against the dangers of opposing religion to secularism, as if the two were mutually exclusive. Working from Talal Asad’s *Formations of the Secular*, he writes “Since the secular and the religious depend on *each other* for meaning, they must always be present at the same time; we can never therefore trace a simple trajectory from one to the other because each concept is meaningless in isolation” (610, emphasis in original). Since the religious and the secular coincide, blending into particular formations that are neither given nor unmodifiable, we need to be alert to the ways that religion and secularism manifest in a particular work. Lori Branch summarizes the issue thusly, “Like Fessenden, Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, and Leigh Schmidt (to name only a few), Michael Warner advocates seeing secularism ‘as a specific cultural formation in its own right, with its own sensibilities, rituals, constructions of knowledge and ethical projects’ (17). Rather than defining “the secular” and opposing it to “the religious,” Fessenden, Kaufman, and Branch

¹ See also Fessenden’s *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature*. Fessenden, like Kaufman and Branch, argues that we do not perform literary criticism from a secular, and thus, inherently neutral critical position; rather, we need to examine secularism as we do the history, practice, and repercussions of religious belief.

remind us to consider both the secular and the religious as constructed, evolving, and context-specific phenomena.

For the purposes of this chapter, I use the “secular” and the “religious” not as mutually exclusive binaries but instead according to the ways that Hickman and Deacon contrast them so that I can best examine how these characters frequently move across what ultimately prove to be flexible boundaries. Doing so allows me to analyze how these preacher figures employ and exist within their communities’ particular, constructed notions of the secular and religious. For example, Hickman frequently compartmentalizes the sacred and the profane by distinguishing between his secular life as a jazzman and his sacred life as a preacher. Yet these distinctions tend to break down under closer scrutiny. He reminds himself that preaching and playing trombone use the same techniques to capture the crowd: “Indeed the same technique [of moving them from the known to the unknown in a jazz club] prevailed when he preached before unlettered congregations” (596). Nevertheless, Hickman attests to a fundamental distinction between the religious and the secular, most notably in his conversion from one way of life to another. He needs to maintain a difference between the two in order to make sense of his conversion, which coincides with the major turning point in his life when he decides to help the woman whose false accusations led to his brother’s lynching. Thus, he can speak about the religious and the secular as separate but not necessarily antithetical entities.

Deacon Melvin and the characters with whom he interacts make similar distinctions between the religious and the secular. He is a church man to the characters he interacts with, but he is also a man who knows how to play “the game” with politicians, police, and those looking to escape the drug corners. Working with civil servants and community activists, he demonstrates a facility for navigating the complex rules that order both street corner and city hall. Although he

can adeptly play the game, he is a deacon first and foremost and symbolizes someone who is fundamentally set apart from the frequently violent and always self-preserving figures that run the streets and institutions.

Due to their particular subject matter, analyzing *Three Days* and *The Wire* forces us to consider issues of race when analyzing their characters' secular and religious discourses. Like *The Color Purple*, *Three Days* and *The Wire* focus much of their attention on injustice against African Americans to underscore problems that pervade American society. For Ellison, to tell the story of African Americans is to tell the story of America, and it is to tell it with a particular emphasis on overcoming the failures of the country to recognize individual and corporate human dignity. Simon's series similarly illustrates a concern with violence and discrimination against African Americans by featuring a predominately black cast and studiously depicting the lives of African Americans living in the Baltimore projects and townhomes. Although it expands its scope to include the diverse makeup of Baltimore's population—implying that Baltimore is a metonym for America—it never loses sight of the black corner boys who are emblematic of the show's concern with economic inequality and racial injustice. Therefore, an analysis of gospel narratives in *Three Days* and *The Wire* must also consider the racial aspects of those discourses. Katherine Clay Bassard provides an entry point into discussing racialized gospels by examining the presence (or absence) of a suffering Christ on the cross in her Protestant upbringing. In "The Race for Faith: Justice, Mercy, and the Sign of the Cross in African American Literature," Bassard speaks of the power of the cross—and more specifically, the suffering of Christ—as a symbol for "social justice" and equality in black Protestantism. In an anecdote that tells of a debate over whether or not to hang a crucifix in her Baptist church, she notes the problem for "dispossessed communities" of removing Christ from the cross: "The irony for me is that in

insisting on the empty Cross as a way of signaling ethnic and cultural inclusiveness...we also lose contact with the suffering...Body. In other words, while the absent body signifies presence for the faithful it opens a space for potential misreadings that actually undermine the entire redemptive process” (98). Bassard’s larger concern is to “show the outworkings of this dilemma”—the dilemma between removing the body in order to emphasize “mercy and atonement” and keeping the body on the cross so as to focus attention on “social justice and equality” (98). At the heart of this problem is the interpretation of Christ as the suffering servant, a transcendent symbol that focuses the viewer’s attention on the physical and spiritual pain of oppressed bodies across cultures and races.

For Bassard, and I would argue for Ellison and Simon as well, the move to represent a black Christ on the cross is a rhetorically powerful tool that challenges cultural and religious assumptions. Bassard writes, “The visual representation of Christ necessitates a racialized (and we could say as well gendered) body,” and so “African Americans that reembody the cross with a black messiah find themselves performing a counter-Reformation move that cuts across the cultural tenets of Protestantism” (98). Both *Three Days* and *The Wire* include representations of black Christ figures in order to make provocative statements about race, religion, and civil rights. In the third season of *The Wire*, Deacon Melvin (Melvin Williams) and Dennis “Cutty” Wise (Chad Coleman) meet beneath a mural depicting a large cross that frames several people composed of different colors and painted in an Africanized style. The topmost figure of Christ stands in front of the cross with arms raised in victory above it. The image preaches both suffering and victory. Christ is on the cross and has been transformed by it, symbolizing Cutty’s current suffering and foreshadowing his eventual escape from the street. In *Three Days*, Reverend A. Z. Hickman marvels at a mural of a black Christ in a storefront church in

Washington, D. C. Though initially startled by the presence of the image in a southern city, he recognizes the power inherent to the imagery of a black Christ: “Christ’s blackness, which he recognized as a traditional symbolism by which a people whose enemies had made their very skin tones a cross to bear asserted their most human yearnings and spiritual needs and allowed them to identify more intimately with the transcendent image of Christ” (563). For Hickman and Deacon, the image of a black Christ on the cross or “marching to Calvary” (Ellison 562) symbolizes the suffering of black Americans while also providing a means by which to identify with Christ’s eventual victory. Of vital importance to both characters is that the victory that cross imagery foreshadows needs to be worked for by believers—and unbelievers—so that it will come to pass on earth, and not in some future heavenly realm.

The figure of the black Christ in *Three Days* and *The Wire* performs a powerful rhetorical function in the respective narratives; at the same time, the association of suffering with discriminated groups needs to be qualified because the symbolism also carries potentially marginalizing effects. Bassard quotes from Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker to explain how privileged groups control the use of religious imagery:

[Green and Baker] point to the selectivity of images of Christ offered to conquered and colonized peoples: while the conquistadores resonated with images of the conquering, triumphant Messiah, the suffering Jesus on the cross was reserved for colonized others. Green and Baker write:

“Especially among those who are the bearers of power and privilege in particular social contexts, the cross is sometimes deployed as a model for others... ‘Your pain, your loss,’ this typology seems to urge, ‘is an opportunity for you to identify with the passion of Jesus.’ On the other hand, ‘our victories, our imperial

dominion is nothing less than a reflection of the divine conquest over the forces of evil.” (99)

In a work like this that analyzes particular components of the gospel message in American fiction, there exists the danger of associating a gospel element to one group of people, as Green and Baker caution against. Keeping Green and Baker’s caveat in mind, I intentionally focus on suffering in *Three Days* and *The Wire* because these texts provide insightful examples of discrimination and oppression and not to suggest that suffering belongs to marginalized groups, while victory remains accessible only to privileged groups. The other texts in this study certainly contain images and examples of discrimination—none more disturbing than those included in the early pages of *The Color Purple*, it could be argued—but those texts eventually provide their characters at least some semblance of relief. For *Three Days* and *The Wire*, relief may be hoped for, but it is never delivered. Moreover, both texts take a more extensive view of suffering than that suggested by Green and Baker by exploring its effect on white and black Americans. *The Wire* suggests that suffering in the city extends to its white inhabitants too in that it devotes an entire season to the economic hardships of longshoremen, who are composed of both white and black blue-collar workers, while other seasons demonstrate the futility of white, black, and Latina workers who hope to bring about palpable change in the city.² Furthermore, the show pairs Bubbles (Andre Royo), an African American male, with Johnny Weeks (Leo Fitzpatrick), a young white male, to depict a mentor-mentee relationship between two heroin addicts looking for their next score. These texts do not assume special insight because of race, nor do they assign

² *The Wire* builds much of its narrative around the experiences of the black and white inhabitants of Baltimore, but in the final season the show does introduce the character of Alma Gutierrez (Michelle Pares), a member of the *Baltimore Sun* who discovers, much like other characters who want to effect positive change, the dehumanizing effects of living in a city controlled by greed and self-promotion.

the suffering to one people group; rather, they fictionalize real and recorded discrimination and oppression in order to examine what those instances reveal about ongoing problems in America.

The narrative content and structures of *Three Days* and *The Wire* forces us to consider their difference in medium. This distinction is important since *Three Days* presents its religious discourse through the form of the novel whereas *The Wire* broadcasts its religious discourse through spoken dialogue, physical action, and evocative visual scenes. At first glance, *Three Days* and *The Wire* seem to resist comparison because of these material differences.

Furthermore, *Three Days* constitutes an amalgamation of handwritten, typecast, and computer manuscripts. Subtitled “The Unfinished Second Novel,” *Three Days* offers its readers a work in progress. The book presents Ellison’s efforts to finish his follow up to *Invisible Man*, showcasing his revisions, expansions, and notes by providing a selection from “a series of related narrative fragments, several of which extend to over three hundred manuscript pages in length, that appear to cohere without truly completing one another” (Callahan and Bradley xv-xvi). Meanwhile, *The Wire* is a five season cable television series comprised of sixty episodes over five seasons.

Relatively self-contained, each season presents an aspect of life in Baltimore, beginning with homicide and narcotic detectives in Season One and ending with *Baltimore Sun* reporters in Season Five. Although it resists resolution, *The Wire* does present Simon’s completed story of a dying American city.

Yet *Three Days* and *The Wire* converge along several relevant lines, and studying them in tandem offers us not just a more expansive view of race relations in America but also an opportunity to see that change occurs when people utilize multiple discourses to transcend social and civil limitations. Ellison and Simon’s texts go out of their way to provide comprehensive views of their subjects. The manuscripts, notes, and published pieces that make up *Three Days*

reveal the stylistic divergences that Ellison pursued, first building the novel around lively and active sequences, then composing lengthy sequences wherein the action takes place primarily through characters' thoughts, only to return in later years to a renewed interest in the "episodic style" that characterized *Invisible Man* (Callahan and Bradley xxv). "At times, Hickman becomes less a character than a mouthpiece for Ellison as he endeavors to get it all down, to achieve what he refers to...as that 'aura of summing up' by which he could describe America to itself and the world" (xxvi). In *Ralph Ellison in Progress*, Adam Bradley argues that Ellison's approach fundamentally precluded him from finishing the second novel: "Captivated by his quest of 'summing up' American experience in a single novel, he was routinely thwarted by the passage of time, which would render his best efforts to capture the historical moment insufficient once that moment had passed" (17). The project of "summing up" American experience eludes completion because of the dynamic nature of American life; as such, Ellison's second novel comes to us in a necessarily unfinished state. Simon's show demonstrates a similar desire to capture a comprehensive view of life in a dying American city, and it reveals a similar inability to "sum up" American life in an urban environment. Each season focuses on a new aspect of life in Baltimore, while continuing the storylines of past characters. Interweaving new characters and institutions into established plotlines, Simon steadily composes a complex and in-depth narrative of the American experience. Yet as he notes in a 2016 interview, he failed to capture the entirety of that experience, which then inspired him to create *Treme*, a cable drama that looks not at the dying of an American city—the figurative end of *The Wire*—but at its rebirth (Maron). Ellison and Simon's work reveal similarly ambitious projects, and in the process they reveal the impossibility of providing a comprehensive description of America. Though they are projects

that defy completion, both texts present characters that effect transformative change within these vast narrative landscapes, and they do so through their use of religious discourse.

Rather than locating resolution in Christ's return, moments of divine grace, or the healing power of an admiring and admirable deity, Hickman and Deacon preach the dignity of human life in the midst of a dehumanizing America. Their words and actions are polemical: they explicitly work to reconfigure how Americans live together in community and how they interact with their country. Hickman's thoughts in front of the Lincoln memorial emphasize the difficulty of achieving this task. Hickman first thinks about Lincoln's fallibility, that he is not the "perfect hero" his friend believes him to be, which is fine "since perfection is reserved for God the Father, [and] I'll take the man who did the best he could for us and came out the winner" (582). "Coming out the winner" in *Three Days* proves difficult: Hickman fails to raise a son who will bridge the gap between blacks and whites and he also fails to save his son from an assassin's bullet. Despite these failures, Hickman does not retreat to his faith as a substitution for "winning" in the here and now. As he says, "I was never one for preaching 'Take the World, Just Give me Jesus'—oh, no! This is His, our Father's world, and in our searching we have to find Him in it and through it" (583). Finding "Him in it" involves first preaching the empathy that Lincoln expressed and then instituting the forgiveness that Hickman showed to the woman responsible for his brother's murder. Finding "Him in it" also requires Hickman—and Deacon—to combine religious and secular discourses in order to successfully resist the institutional forces that inhibit their work for a more just America.

Hickman and Deacon both institute programs of change that forego divine resolution in favor of sustained work. Their religious work models an ethical response to suffering. The conversions that Hickman and Deacon preach open up the possibility of new interpretations

rather than closing down or submitting to a final word. Rather than seeking to control how others live, they provide a means for responding to civic crises by reading them in terms of a larger sacred narrative. They combine the sacred and the profane, permitting them more easily to identify sources of corruption, and they preach against those who corrupt an America that both promises and denies personal freedom and equality. As Ellison explains in “The Little Man at Chehaw Station,” “We stand, as we say, united in the name of these sacred principles [revealed in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights]. But indeed it is in the name of these same principles that we ceaselessly contend, affirming our ideals even as we do them violence.” Ellison notably describes these principles as “abstract, ideal, spiritual” (505). These principles are ideal in that they are embodied in the words of the founding documents; they are abstract in that they wait to be made concrete by those who translate them into physical experience. They are spiritual because they recognize human dignity as a sacred thing. Both Hickman and Deacon embody the “abstract, ideal, spiritual” principles that America preaches but as yet fails to enact.

For Ellison, the “function of literature...is to remind us of our common humanity and the cost of that humanity” (540). *Three Days* emphasizes the agony of human experience in its depictions of Hickman’s frustrated plans, Sunraider’s crises of identity, and McIntyre’s inability to synthesize experience. The novel focuses on these agonies in order to illustrate the difficulty and necessity of creating and maintaining a society that recognizes the inherent dignity of each of its citizens. Simon’s television show demonstrates a similar concern for people in its humanizing of misfits, criminals, and addicts. Throughout their sprawling narratives and varying levels of completion, both Ellison’s and Simon’s texts teach us that individuals and institutions will discriminate and oppress if left unchecked. To preserve “common humanity” in *Three Days*

and *The Wire*, characters must oppose the individuals and institutions that dehumanize, revealing in the process the “the cost of that humanity.” Of particular significance to my project, it is preacher figures like Deacon and Hickman who are the most attuned to the presence of suffering and the secular and religious succor needed to address that suffering. A closer examination of Hickman’s work in *Three Days* reveals the difficulty of spreading the good news of these principles to an unbelieving audience, while also revealing the power of Hickman’s message to push America towards its stated promises.

Invisible Man famously ends with the ominous question, “And it is this which frightens me: Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (581), but the novel refrains from explaining how Invisible Man specifically intends to mitigate the social realities that render him and, perhaps, “you” invisible. Of course writing his experience is an act of making himself visible; he admits, “there’s a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play” (581). Invisible Man recognizes that even though writing can be a socially responsible act, it is an action that is limited to authors and one that necessitates at least temporary isolation from society. Invisible Man admits his need to return to society now that he has completed the memoir, but what is the socially conscious individual to do next? Ellison’s unfinished second novel seeks to answer the question of how to live in a society that renders one invisible. The second novel is far from complete, and, as such, lacks a narrative unity, but this does not mean the novel lacks thematic unity. In its noncontiguous typescripts and computer sequences, the novel should be read as Ellison riffing on Reverend A. Z. Hickman’s attempt to reconnect with his estranged foster son, Bliss/Sunraider, rather than as a self-contained narrative. Throughout these riffs, Hickman responds to Invisible Man’s quandary by demonstrating how to make oneself visible in a society that refuses to acknowledge the intricate social connections

between its black and white individuals. Hickman achieves this action by preaching and embodying what James Albrecht calls a tragicomic individualist ethics that recognizes the social impact each individual has on the community and the chaos that results from not appreciating the complexity of social interdependency. Meanwhile, Hickman's role as a preacher suggests that the ethics he preaches also demands that we pay close attention to the way religious and secular discourses compliment each other.

"Understand me." The white newspaper reporter Welborn McIntyre's first words in Book I of *Three Days Before the Shooting*. . . foreground the problem of interpersonal communication between characters and between narrator and audience. McIntyre begins his section by pleading with his audience to understand his point of view, credentials, and experience. In addition to setting the urgency of the speaker's intentions, the request also suggests a gulf between speaker and audience. If McIntyre and his reader/listener were in sync with each other, or if the day's events were not so chaotic, the request would not be necessary. But the events that follow the attempt on Senator Sunraider's life foster an atmosphere of second-guessing, distrust, and confusion as McIntyre struggles to connect the dots between the various characters depicted in Book I.

In the novel's chaotic milieu, McIntyre begins to realize, if not understand, the complexity of a society he wishes was simple and ordered. As his experience in a Harlem nightclub a decade earlier demonstrates, the social code he inhabits is never far from unraveling: "[The music] was too inclusive, it hinted at too many unnamable, chaotic, and unpleasant things, of _____ that were beyond my capacity of confrontation, and I was relieved to put them behind me with the closing of the door. But even so, it wasn't ended, only muted. For I could still hear it behind me, buoyed now by searching minor chords" (125). McIntyre wants to be

secure in his idealized conception of a racially ordered society; meanwhile, the actual tragic reality of race relations lies just beyond his ability to codify in words. He explains that his problem is that the vague “things” are “unnamable, chaotic, and unpleasant.” He is unsettled by the fact that he cannot identify those aspects of Harlem life beyond his understanding. As a newspaper reporter, his uneasiness over not being able to describe his experience is understandable. According to the book’s editors, John F. Callahan and Adam Bradley, the manuscript is unreadable between “of” and “that.” Readers are thus presented with two levels of unknowing: the object of McIntyre’s frustration cannot be named and the manuscript cannot be fully understood. Text and content mirror each other. McIntyre and readers cannot complete the thought that reveals the confusing social order. McIntyre’s responds to this dilemma by leaving the chaos of the throbbing nightclub for the cold streets of New York. A decade later, about the time he witnesses the Senator’s assassination, he is again thoroughly flummoxed by the chaos that is now fully “un-muted.” Despite McIntyre’s efforts to flee, the chaos does not cease to exist, and neither does it cease for Ellison’s readers.

Ellison’s second novel unites its disparate books and sequences by modulating each of its sections in various levels of un-muted chaos. The prologue portrays the chaos of Hickman’s black congregation in the race-baiting Senator’s office. Book I, as discussed above, recounts McIntyre’s effort to solve the mystery of the shooting. Within its larger call and response structure, Book II hinges on the chaos unleashed in Bliss’ mind after a white woman claims him as her own during a Juneteenth celebration. “Bliss’s Birth” documents Hickman’s conversion as he struggles to piece together the implications of his brother’s lynching and his adopted son’s birth. “Hickman in Washington, D. C.” accents Hickman’s perambulations through the capitol with scenes of bewilderment: an argument in the senator’s office, Hickman’s confusion over a

tapestry of “Landscape and the Fall of Icarus,” Leroy’s mistaken notion that Hickman is Sam the Liberator, and the turmoil in the hallway of Rockmore’s building. Throughout these scenes of confusion, Hickman anchors the novel’s action, and as the novel weaves its way through race relations in America, Hickman functions as the focal point of this examination. Whether he is mediating the spiritual comfort of his congregation or confounding characters who cannot comprehend the complexity of race relations, Hickman alternates between religious and secular discourses to model a solution to the race problem in America as he acts out the two-part role of first understanding the complex connections between individuals in a society and then making others aware of their connection to their fellow citizens.

As opposed to McIntyre’s unknowable, unutterable angst, the chaos of the novel should be understood as Ellison’s literary representation of the intricacies and repercussions of individualist ethics in America. In his article, “Saying Yes and Saying No: Individualist Ethics in Ellison, Burke and Emerson,” James Albrecht argues that Ellison framed the complexity of American society in terms of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Kenneth Burke’s concepts of individual action in a social context. Albrecht explains that individuals must act within the natural and cultural context they are born into. As such, individual acts of self-expression cannot occur without affecting other members of society: “We must consider how our individual acts participate in larger social contexts, contexts that may imbue those efforts with unintended consequences” (52). When individuals perform self-expressive actions, they struggle against and, if successful, alter the limitations of the natural cultural order, but in doing so they also affect the lives of other individuals in that community. The problem of individualist ethics then is the unavoidable impact one’s actions have on other members of the community.

To reconcile the desirability of self-expression with the unintended consequences of individual action, Albrecht, using Burke's methods, argues for a tragicomic approach to individualist ethics (52). A tragicomic understanding of individual action affirms the need for individuals to engage in self-expression against social limitations, what Burke calls "tragic" actions, while also acknowledging the fact that individual actions have societal repercussions, or "comic" connections. As such, individual and community actions may not be "vicious" attacks against other individuals and communities but merely "necessarily mistaken" (53) acts of self-interest. Thus, the tragicomic view demands that individuals in a social context recognize the unintended consequences of their actions and the actions of other individuals who are struggling to achieve their own desires: "Our conflicts with others do not result only from overt ill will, since the diversity of occupation and lifestyle inherent in culture ensures that individuals will have different and conflicting needs. Accordingly, a comic ethics provides a mandate for rhetoric, for confronting our differences and communicating across them" (53). Without this rhetoric of mutual connection, a rhetoric that makes veiled relationships visible, the proliferation of individualist acts can create unrest and division in society.

Albrecht reads Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a literary representation of an individual's tragicomic engagement in and against Jim Crow America. He argues that *Invisible Man* "tragically" rebels against society in order to assert his individualism (or visibility), while "comically" understanding the complex connections between each member of society—as evidenced by his upbraiding of Mr. Norton in the subway (58). For Ellison, the proper tragicomic response in a racially divided America is to acknowledge every individual's connection to a racially pluralist society and to recognize the negative repercussions of an individual's actions for what they are: harmful, but not necessarily intentional, failures to recognize common

humanity. Therefore, it is necessary for subjects as individuals to recognize their tragicomic position and to help others recognize their tragicomic position as well: “A recurrent theme in Ellison's work is that if America is ever to fulfill its democratic promise, individuals must recognize more fully how they are connected to one another—both by the social relations of inequality that create conflict and by the shared democratic ideals that may inspire attempts to remedy those inequities” (54).

This willingness to identify “social relations of inequality” and expose the failure of “shared democratic ideals” does not excuse racist acts as benign mistakes or the unavoidable foibles of individuals in a society. On the contrary, recognizing tragicomic interactions demands that individuals expose the racial injustice prevalent in people and institutions while reaffirming each person’s humanity and their rights under the nation’s democratic principles: “The narrator’s final confrontation with Norton offers an alternative to [Invisible Man’s] strategies of duplicity, a way to say yes *and* no in a direct political act of communication—to assert the democratic connection of all American citizens and confront the systemic discrimination that separates them” (59). For Norton, the subway exchange is confounding because Invisible Man is forcing him to recognize connections he does not concede, and the interaction propels Norton into a state of chaotic confusion because Invisible Man disrupts his deficient understanding of social connections. The social effect of individualist ethics in *Invisible Man* is the chaotic disruption of entrenched but mistaken conceptions of social connection. If the final exchange between Invisible Man and Norton illustrates this principle in *Invisible Man*, the character and actions of Rev. A. Z. Hickman embody a similar purpose in *Three Days*. Viewing Hickman in this light, the chaotic milieu of *Three Days* should then be understood as the novel’s depiction of a society forced to acknowledge its tragicomic racism. Yet the novel goes further. Ellison chooses to focus

the majority of the book's action with Hickman, a jazzman turned preacher. Hickman will show society its tragicomic racism; he will also reveal a way of mitigating that chaos through engagement with the ineffable. Though his gospel preaches the potential of an ideal America, his actions and doubts underscore that his is an ongoing project. Instead of resolving the suffering experienced by the nation as a whole—a nation that by the manuscripts' end still struggles with the effects of dysfunctional race relations—Hickman's words and actions offer a kind of millennial promise that Americans must always work towards.

To understand fully Hickman's ability to make complex social connections visible, it is necessary to view his actions as both instigating and mediating the chaos that results from the characters' emerging awareness of tragicomic interactions. Hickman instigates the chaos of the novel because he forces characters like McIntyre to consider that blacks and whites may be connected in more socially complex ways than they wish to consider. Such acts of self-expression are tragicomic in that when Hickman rebels against the cultural norms of Washington, D. C., he opens people's eyes to a more nuanced reality of social responsibility. Hickman also mediates the chaos of the novel by proposing methods that promote dignity, hope, and empowerment for his congregation as they navigate discriminatory social connections. In his reading of Lincoln's eyes and Maud's dream, Hickman envisions the true nature of social interaction, and his religious and civic vision of common dignity and social humaneness promotes a shared appreciation of the black experience in America.

Hickman first encounters McIntyre in Book I and elicits a hysterical response from the reporter that illustrates McIntyre's subconscious reluctance to consider Hickman as an equal. The combination of Hickman's dialogue with McIntyre and his sheer presence sends McIntyre into a tailspin of uncertainty, which leaves him grasping at conspiracy theories to help him

understand the scene. After a brief encounter with Hickman, McIntyre marvels, “I had been allowed to hear the voice of a mysterious authority, the existence of which I was completely unaware; an authority that rested on no form of power that I understood or respected and which, in all probability, had been limited until now to such as his followers” (72). He then explains that Hickman “seemed to imply a disorder in...society that was far more extensive, and potentially more destructive, than was indicated even by the shooting of the Senator” (72). The problem McIntyre has with Hickman—other than that Hickman refers to him as “boy” (71)—resides in his assumption, based on his tacit belief in an entrenched racial hierarchy, that the minister’s relationship with the Senator must be fraudulent. McIntyre’s description of Hickman as an “authority” sounds neutral, and maybe even a little complimentary, but his overall tone is one of incredulity. After all, he admits that he does not respect the “power” that grants Hickman’s authority. Although he admits that the preacher may affect change in his African-American congregation, he only begrudgingly recognizes that Hickman’s “authority” extends to his experience as well.

McIntyre fails to see a possibility for social connection between the most famous of racist senators and a seemingly irrelevant black preacher; therefore, in the face of such evidence, his only response is that society is “disordered” in a “destructive” manner. The chaos McIntyre describes is the obverse of a social system that neatly categorizes blacks and whites in “separate but equal” social positions. However, from a tragicomic perspective, McIntyre is actually waking up to the reality of a society in which blacks and whites are intimately and vitally connected. Thus, McIntyre fears Hickman’s presence because it signals a social order that does not limit Hickman’s sphere of influence to his congregation. To preserve what his experience gradually exposes as a broken model, McIntyre goes so far as to offer an alternative explanation that tries

to link a French politician, an exasperated jazzman, a dead antique dealer, a drunk caretaker, and a scantily clad prostitute to a larger conspiracy aimed at assassinating the Senator. Rather than acknowledging a social system that allows for connections between Sunraider and Hickman, McIntyre chooses to retreat into labyrinthine conspiracy theories.

Hickman's act of self-expression forces McIntyre into psycho-trauma. Hickman's individualist act in McIntyre's section is relatively minor: Hickman expresses his identity in opposition to the demarcations of a segregated society by merely fulfilling the Senator's request to sit outside an empty hospital room waiting for him to come out of surgery. The effect of the action is severe enough to make McIntyre conflate mental confusion with physical trauma: "Indeed, I was so roiled and shaken that it was as though a younger, more uncertain, idealistic, and guilty self which I had discarded following the war was being painfully resuscitated. It was like having a long-knitted bone broken afresh at the old point of fracture—blood vessels, nerves, and memory were all a-scream" (74). McIntyre uses the fairly standard trope of an open wound to describe his discomfort, but his graphic details suggest a severity of pain that borders on hyperbole. Structurally, he explains his discomfort using two series of descriptions, both of which indicate the depth of his suffering: he is repulsed at the return of his "younger, more uncertain, idealistic, and guilty self" and he is pained in his "blood vessels, nerves, and memory." Again, the lists are fairly conventional ideas, but the final words of each series indicate that McIntyre experiences something other than standard anxiety. First, Hickman makes him "guilty." Second, Hickman stirs repressed memories that McIntyre thought he had left behind. The guilty memory is that of his failed relationship with Laura, a black girl from Harlem with whom he had a child. Although he tried "do the manly thing" (103) by marrying his girlfriend, McIntyre eventually abandons her at her mother's demand. In the presence of

Hickman, McIntyre clearly realizes that he has not “knitted” the old wound together. Moreover, the fact that McIntyre associates the entire memory with World War II, and by association its intrinsic suffering, solidifies the severity of McIntyre’s psychic shock.

McIntyre’s confusion begins with Hickman, but the degree to which it devolves into physical suffering suggests he has an intensely personal history with the social connections that bind blacks and whites together. Hickman has revealed to McIntyre his “fallen nature.” Although he believed himself to be an upright citizen—a citizen that supposedly acknowledges the rights of African Americans—he finds that he has a past from which he continues to suffer and from which he needs to find redemption. Further, McIntyre refuses to respect Hickman’s presence because doing so would force him to consider his own guilty past. Hickman forces him to reconsider his relationship with Laura and his confusion unhinges his mind to such a severe degree that his unconscious threatens to override his rationality: *“Here and now dark things and dark people lost in the dark places of my mind are with me, and no search for peace nor pining for the past released them here, but him, sitting there!”* And I looked at Hickman, feeling as though my chest, my throat, were splitting apart” (127).³ McIntyre qualifies his painful memories as “dark,” which puns on the skin tone of both Hickman and Laura, but the location of the “dark things and dark people” in the “dark places” of his mind also illustrates that his repressions are returning to haunt him.

Hickman’s act of self-expression, manifested in his reunion with his foster son, reveals the social connections that bind McIntyre to the African Americans in his life, namely Mrs. Johnson, Laura, and his child. For McIntyre, this is an experience that threatens his very identity

³ Ellison frequently employs italics to distinguish thoughts that stand in counterpoint to the character’s main line of thinking.

because it reminds him of the part of himself he has abandoned. He finally snaps and tries to assault Hickman: “Then completely without warning I was bounding down the corridor through a hot thickness of light and shadow, heading toward Hickman and shouting within myself, *How dare you force your way into my secret mind, intrude on my memories!*” (126). Of course, Hickman cannot intrude on anyone’s memories, but McIntyre internalizes the preacher because he feels he has lost control of his own mind. Therefore, he uses the passive voice, “I was bounding,” to explain his actions, which emphasizes his loss of personal agency. The lighting of the scene, “the light and shadow,” also suggests that he is struggling to separate white and black experiences even while the colors threaten to blend in a “hot thickness.” The figure of Hickman disturbs McIntyre, even to the point of uncontrollable violence, because it forces McIntyre to reconsider the social ties he once had to African Americans. McIntyre had repressed his experience with Laura as a way to anesthetize the pain of their separation, but the force with which these memories return illustrate that he is still connected to the black community in intimate and indissoluble ways.

Though Hickman’s effect on characters like McIntyre demonstrate his ability to instigate the chaos of the novel, his position as a minister exhibits his ability to mediate the chaos of a society that does not know how to appreciate its social complexity. Hickman’s spontaneous sermon/prayer at the Lincoln Memorial epitomizes his ability to mediate confusion by preaching an interpretation of history that appreciates the nuanced intricacy of historical facts and simultaneously posits a dignified view of African-American experience in religious language. Hickman arrives at this conclusion by reading the eyes of Lincoln’s statue. In those eyes, he sees a man who valued the principles of equality set forth in “the documents of state upon which this nation was founded” (LMCS 505): “*It was that expression and what those sorrowful eyes reveal*

about what it means to be a man who struggles to reconcile all of the contending forces of his country out of a belief in simple justice" (575). By "simple justice," Hickman means an absolute and unbending justice that recognizes the common rights of Americans, while his use of the phrase "contending forces" points to the complex self-interests of communities who demand that their rights be preserved and enforced. Hickman explains that Lincoln was able to work towards this goal because of his lack of racial pride: *"So yes, he's one of us. And not only because of his act of freeing the slaves to the extent that the times and circumstances would allow, but he freed himself and a good part of this nation of that awful inheritance of pride which denies us our humanity"* (576). It is important for Hickman to recognize Lincoln as "one of us" because, in addition to claiming Lincoln as a proponent of equality, this identification illustrates the commonalities between whites and blacks that Hickman asserts throughout the chaos of the novel's tenuous social milieu.

Hickman's vision of Lincoln's legacy as concatenate with his own project is political in its affirmation of Lincoln's vision with the African-American struggle for equality. At first glance, Hickman does not seem overly political. He does not formally protest segregation, he does not advocate civil rights legislation, and he does not overtly discuss political action. Instead, Hickman's acts of political self-expression are primarily acts of dignity. He stands forth as an individual who believes he has a rich history and dignified identity borne out of suffering. Hickman sees a similar dignity in the assassinated President. Hickman announces this idea to his congregation as they gather in the Memorial:

And that's because he knows in his heart, and accepts the burden, of having been designated and set aside to perform those hard tasks that ordinary men are too timid and weak of purpose to tackle. But though frail and flawed, and often blind

in his purpose, that kind of man will toil and struggle in the interest of what he conceives as truth and justice until the earth yawns and swallows him down. (578)

Hickman's speech resounds with the concept of Burkean acts of tragic self-expression: Lincoln, in an individual act that also incorporated the actions of a country, rebelled against the limitation set forth by the secession of the South. Although Hickman explains that this action is rooted in the belief that the North and South are connected to each other in vital ways, Hickman proclaims that Lincoln's action also strove to legitimize the slaves' rights to citizenship. For Hickman, Lincoln's act is heroic and ethical because, while struggling to keep the country unified, he forced the country to realize its moral obligation to extend the nation's principle of democratic equality to the slaves.

Hickman nuances his reading of Lincoln's eyes so as to account for the complexity of a historical reality that has failed to live up to the ideals pursued by Lincoln; in this way, Hickman mediates between historical fact and myth in order to affirm Lincoln without needing to apotheosize the President. After his extemporaneous sermon/prayer, Hickman doubts the wisdom of his decision to bring the congregation to the memorial because he is afraid that the gulf between the President's promise and the reality of life in Jim Crow America will transform his congregation's spiritual and civic convictions into paralyzing disillusionment. As such, Hickman and his second in command, Deacon Wilhite, discuss the impact of Lincoln beyond his ideals or contradictions: "so maybe he concluded that with white folks being unable to live together in peace, getting the black and the white to do so was just too big a problem for any one mortal man to solve. Maybe that's why he tried to cut things down to size by simply concentrating on keeping this fire-and-water, alcohol-and-gasoline, freedom-loving, nigger-hating Union together" (608). In his conversation with Wilhite, Hickman walks a fine line between absolving

less than ideal motives and denying the man's achievements. He does this by focusing on the complexity of not just Lincoln but the United States as well. Hickman recognizes the difficulty of keeping a society with conflicting interests together, so he describes America with such contradictory phrases as "fire-and-water" and "freedom-loving, nigger hating." These contradictory descriptions of America underscore the suffering that permeates the novel.

Hickman describes a society that lacks peace because it has not enacted a foundational premise of America: that all people are created equal. As such, the nation suffers from its hypocritical actions, while those who are discriminated against suffer the repercussions of disenfranchisement, segregation, and limited access to opportunity. The only way to understand a society that simultaneously preaches the inalienable rights of every individual and refuses to grant equal rights to blacks is through paradoxical language.

But in no way is Hickman justifying the social injustice that befell African Americans after the war. Instead, he is carefully providing a space for a man—a "mortal man," Hickman reminds his congregation—to at least take that first step in rebelling against the limitations of a divided society. Hickman's project parallels Ellison's effort to call attention to America's contradiction between its practices and its ideals. In an interview with Robert Penn Warren, he explains, "we [African Americans] are determined to bring America's conduct into line with its professed ideals. The obligation is dual, in fact mixed, to ourselves and to the nation. Negroes are forcing the confrontation between the nation's conduct and its ideal, and they are most American in that they are doing so" (339). Hickman's defense of Lincoln focuses on the man's ability to hone in on the professed ideal of America, and Hickman will pursue the same end. While he is overtly apolitical, the dignity, humility, and strength he demonstrates in his actions and his vision of Lincoln attest to the notion of equality set forth in America's founding documents.

In addition to his civic-minded dignity, Hickman also mediates the chaos of a society at odds with its individual ethics by providing spiritual comfort to characters in the novel. As a minister, Hickman understands the need for his congregation to experience spiritual peace in the midst of social inequality. He explains his duty while sitting at Sunraider's bedside, "What else is there, other than what a minister always tries to do to help? Comfort and consolation—no, not just that, because there's still the mystery to be understood" (412). Episodes such as the one in "Bliss's Birth" quoted above suggest that this mystery is life, which is "still too complicated for definition" because of its attendant disappointment. Taken as a whole, the novel's episodes and fragments explore the ways in which this mystery keeps people from understanding how and why African Americans are treated as second-class citizens. Hickman's response to the problem is to turn to religious discourse. Even though it cannot fully explain life, it offers an alternative to the violent death he intended for himself and others after his brother was lynched. Moreover, it inspires him to forgive his brother's accuser by helping her deliver a boy that he will raise as his own. Hickman will use God's promises to pursue life for himself, his son, and his congregation. His faith in God and in the promise of America provides a means for him to reach out to his congregation and help them transcend the limits of language so that they can find some peace despite incomprehensible suffering. In short, religious discourse supports Hickman's quest to preach the dignity of life in spite of the discrimination he experiences. Thus, Hickman primarily comforts, consoles, and reveals to his congregation the mystery of why they suffer in a country that hypocritically preaches equality.

The most compelling example of Hickman's exhortations transpires in his exchange with Maud, a woman in disarray because of a startling dream in which she first gives virgin birth to three children—one black, one white, and one red—and then loses those children. Surrounded by

a bewildered crowd, she relates her dream to Hickman in a rambling style that suggests she is unhinged. But Hickman sees something serious and seriously important in the dream: “*I believe that your dream contains the meaning of a powerful mystery in which many many aspects of our people’s experience have come into focus. And that mystery is so enduring that most of the time we’re too confused to recognize the role it plays in supporting the slavery-born hope that’s still working among us*” (640). Hickman repeatedly explains that he does not understand the content of Maud’s dream, but this excerpt exhibits exactly what he does understand throughout the novel: people are connected in mysterious ways that need to be acknowledged. Moreover, Hickman ties that mystery to the “slavery-born hope” of equality. As in his sermon/prayer at the Lincoln Memorial, Hickman adamantly identifies the hope for equality as the fundamental reason to reveal the social connections between blacks and whites. Furthermore, the content of the dream suggests the inseparable, familial ties between blacks, whites, and Native Americans. Maud’s children are equal siblings, each born from a mother who not so subtly recalls the role of black Mammies in raising both black and white children. Further, the figuring of Maud as a virgin mother emphasizes the sacred nature of these three children, which suggests Hickman’s—and Ellison’s—continual emphasis on the near holiness of the project of equal citizenship in American democracy.

Hickman shows compassion for Maud because she is willing to speak the truth of the intricate social connections between the various races in America. While alarmed by her manners, he certainly applauds her desire to speak: “*I believe that in your pain and suffering you’ve seen the Promise that keeps us striving. You’ve seen it in your own tortured terms and accepted the responsibility of announcing it to your friends and neighbors, regardless of what they might think*” (640). Hickman explains that she has come to her knowledge in “tortured

terms,” which emphasizes her connection to the sufferings of African Americans as second-class citizens. His last phrase emphasizes his appreciation of her commitment to speak her mind despite persecution—from blacks or whites. Hickman honors Maud because she preaches social relationships, but he is equally impressed with her connection to him: “And because it speaks to my faith and says something comforting to my own troubled mind. And therefore I truly believe that if other folks would only listen to you with their hearts it would comfort them too” (641). Hickman identifies with Maud because he has shared her experience. Maud’s dream represents Hickman’s joy in a child that came to him from incredibly tortured circumstances, and he sees in Bliss the same hope that Maud saw in her children. She earlier compares her lost children to the “little black *savior[s]*” aborted or killed by women who did not care for them (639). Her grief in losing her children is the same twofold pain Hickman suffers from, for both have lost children who were not their own but in whom they placed their hope for the future. In the face of this loss, Hickman’s final action is to preach the significance of suffering and, thereby, to affirm the dignity of the black experience in America.

Hickman’s mitigation of the chaos in the episodes examined above suggests that he is skilled in comforting and leading his people, so why then does Hickman fail to save his son? In Bliss/Sunraider, Hickman and his congregation “had hoped to raise ourselves that kind of man” (421). That kind of man is no less than Lincoln, a figure Hickman lauds for being able to see the need for dignity in social connections. Hickman fails because Ellison recognizes the ongoing problems in American racial politics. Moreover, if the book’s project parallels Hickman’s own, as I believe it does, then Ellison’s inability to finish it discouragingly suggests that the novel cannot envision a day when American citizens interact with equality and mutual dignity. What the novel does provide is a method for opening up dialogue and dealing with continual

disappointment. Hickman's words work on both religious and civic levels: his "faith" manifests as a belief in God's comfort and a faith in America's supposed civil liberties. The "Promise" refers to both God's promise of redemption and the promises proposed in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. Hickman elides the religious language of salvation and the humanist language of inherent equality and dignity. Throughout the novel's fragments, he shows both characters and readers how to intertwine religious and secular discourses so that they provide a means for responding to social injustice with dignity; furthermore, he encourages others to re-read their social positions so that they demand action in the presence of discrimination. Hickman fails to save Bliss, but he does compose a constructive dialogue between theological and civic promises. In doing so, he institutes a means of working through disappointments in the fight for civil rights; more importantly, he models a discourse that challenges those in power while uplifting those who have suffered. Although the hoped for closure fails to materialize, Hickman's discourse invites others to work towards that resolution by speaking a new language of sacred and social redemption.

To be clear, Hickman's religious discourse is not a salve that asks its audience to endure present suffering because they will receive future rewards. The episodes that constitute *Three Days* resolutely argue for equal rights in the present moment. Hickman does not ask his audience to forgo the dignity that should be their inherent right; neither does he suggest that those who suffer on earth will earn a reward in an afterlife. Instead, he preaches a message that infuses the national dialogue about race with a sense of inevitability: civil rights will eventually be a reality, and the nation will recognize the artistic, historical, and political contributions of its black citizens. Moreover, Hickman preaches that blacks have and will continue to strengthen the country's national character. Since Bliss/Sunraider rejects his legacy, Hickman turns to his

audience, both in the text and outside it, to speak a religious humanist discourse that challenges the dominant oppressive discourse. Ellison understood the project he was engaged in to be ongoing, and it continues in contemporary American fiction. As Deacon Melvin's character in *The Wire* demonstrates, individuals can use religious discourses to resist institutional forces that continue to oppress significant sectors of American society.

In a 2006 interview, David Simon, co-creator of *The Wire*, insisted that his show would not bring about effective social change: "Even when I was a journalist I never thought that good journalism would change social or political policy. Things are too [far gone] for that. So the idea that a television show is going to do it is even less probable" (Drumming). If we take Simon at his word, it would seem that *The Wire*'s legacy is to document the slow death of an American city and not to affect significant policy reform. The show's tendency to withhold satisfying resolutions to the problems it depicts certainly seems to reinforce a general resignation with inevitable and irreversible decline. Nevertheless, there are characters in *The Wire* that provide a positive model for negotiating and counteracting the seemingly unsolvable problems created by the endemic red tape, ineptitude, and self-promotion within the police, government, media, and educational institutions. Specifically, Deacon Melvin, a minor character who belongs to none of these institutions, demonstrates the ability of characters outside the system to effect positive social change and to subvert the downward spiral of social, political, and educational decay that plagues the city's efforts to revive itself. His interactions with characters such as Bunny Colvin (Robert Wisdom) and Cutty, characters fed up with the futility of the war on drugs and street life respectively, illustrate his willingness and ability to help those interested in substantial change achieve some measure of reform.

Although inhabiting a peripheral role in *The Wire*, Deacon combines moral purpose with his knowledge of the streets to help counteract the deteriorating effects of the city. The education system encourages teachers to teach to standardized tests, but Deacon convinces Bunny to facilitate progressive, individualized education. Politicians manipulate civic programs to boost their election campaigns, but Deacon urges State Delegate Odell Watkins (Frederick Strother) to help Cutty secure permits needed to start a youth boxing gym. Police institute an alternative drug zone to reduce crime statistics in the city, but Deacon transforms the experiment into an opportunity for health organizations to attend to the needs of drug addicts. And as corner boys and lieutenants resign themselves to a life on the streets, Deacon offers spiritual guidance and employment opportunities to those who want to get out of the game. Deacon achieves actual results because he is a hybrid character that exists between institutions: he lives in the streets but is not part of the game; he works among politicians but holds no civic office; he is a religious authority but not the leader of a church. In turn, he uses this hybrid status to communicate with characters isolated by destructive policies and to connect them to meaningful, constructive activities. Ultimately, his ability to pair a religious discourse keen to the suffering of others with a street sense that knows how to play *The Wire*'s "game" provides the audience with an example of social action that stimulates effective change within the world depicted by *The Wire*.

Thematically, each of *The Wire*'s five seasons analyzes the inability of institutions such as the police department, the stevedores, the government, the schools, and the media to resist the insidious effects of poverty, drug addiction, and racism. The show blames these shortcomings on various institutional corruptions: The police administration works for positive publicity rather than public safety. The longshoremen turn to smuggling in order to counter economic declines in the shifting import and export economy. Politicians concern themselves with self-promotion

instead of reforming broken civic organizations, even as they tell themselves that they can better help the city if they are elected to higher posts. Schoolteachers must teach standardized tests rather than provide individualized instruction in order to maintain funding for their schools. And the print media, struggling to adapt to the new economic realities of the digital revolution, values Pulitzers over journalistic integrity.

Meanwhile, the structure of the show, which jumps between politicians and drug traffickers, policemen and schoolteachers, rookie cops and corner boys, equalizes the characters by paralleling their frustrations with bureaucracy, their disappointment with venal authorities, and their doomed struggle to thrive in a decaying urban environment. Of course, the characters are not equals in society: the show regularly depicts cops from the Western district and the Major Case Unit harassing and injuring people from the projects, whether they are criminals or innocent citizens. The city administration's top brass avoids the kind of recrimination and discipline they inflict on their subordinates; corrupt police chiefs and government figures are given promotions to state institutions and civic versions of the golden parachute rather than demotion or prison sentences.

Though the characters of the show are not equal, and though they remain separated by authority, class, and race, the structure of the show equalizes the characters as victims of the deleterious effects of a society that rewards self-interest and random luck. As Kent Jones explains, "The urgency of the situation...demands that every character be listened to, respected, befriended.... No one gets their just desserts, no one is discarded. A few episodes into this colour blind show you'll understand that nothing but the moral luck of the draw separates us from the homeless addict Bubs, or Namond, the teenager with no heart for the game" (24). For Jones, the show structures urban experience according to random selection, thus eviscerating individual

ability. Although describing the show as color blind suggests that all people potentially suffer from institutional failings, it ignores the show's primary focus on the many ways African Americans bear the brunt of the injustice. Duquan "Dukie" Weems (Jermaine Crawford) is a clear example of the particularly harsh experiences of African Americans throughout the show's run. One of the four children the show follows in seasons four and five, he is the most academically gifted of his friends, but because his parents are junkies and because there are no educational safety nets in the mostly black schools he attends—not to mention meaningful job opportunities after he leaves school—he is virtually assured an abject life in the streets. His example is not isolated; black characters across the economic and racial spectrum are subjugated to similar controlling forces in the show.

The combination of the thematic elements of static, broken institutions with the structural leveling of the various characters in the show produces a narrative stalemate wherein characters that do want to change their institutions prove ineffective, while characters that pursue self-promotion keep the institutions from adopting meaningful policy reform. Helena Sheehan and Sheamus Sweeney, in "*The Wire* and the World: Narrative and Metastructure," indicate how the thematic and structural elements illustrate the major problem detailed by the show:

Throughout the series, some scenes parallel each other almost exactly. For example, in one episode a cop vents his frustration and remarks that he would like to experience what it would be like to work in "a real police department." Later in the same episode we hear a journalist lament that he would like someday to find out what it would be like to work in a "a real newspaper."...The problems these workers identify are not isolated and unconnected but part of a deeper systemic logic that pervades all such institutions and encumbers all of their efforts. (2)

This “deeper systemic logic” is the relentless appetite of an economic model that consumes its constituents. The show’s themes and structures equalize the characters, but they are equalized because they exist within institutions controlled by the same leveling force.

Simon claims that the show is structured like a Greek tragedy in that institutional forces determine the fates of individual characters (Tyree 36). According to Sheehan and Sweeney, this tragic structure alienates characters from meaningful action: “This larger theme recurs across numerous interviews: *The Wire* is not a drama about individuals rising above institutions to triumph and achieve redemption and catharsis. It is a drama where those institutions thwart the ambitions and aspirations of those they purportedly exist to serve” (1). Detectives Jimmy McNulty (Dominic West) and Lester Freamon (Clarke Peters) investigate drug lords and venal politicians in the Baltimore drug trade, but their superiors, under pressure from corrupt politicians such as Clay Davis, scuttle those investigations and threaten the men with demotion to meaningless units, such as the pawn shop division. Working in a junior high public school, Roland “Prez” Pryzbylewski (Jim True-Frost) is forced to replace his gambling-statistics lessons, a pedagogy that engages the students in experiences they can relate to, with a language arts curriculum designed to teach to standardized tests, thus alienating them from meaningful education. When he bristles at this imposed instruction, he is told that the school has to meet minimum test scores or face the prospect of state seizure.

At the heart of these frustrations lies an economic system that rewards ruthless competition rather than effective social policy. Nick Hornby argues that the real villain is unfettered capitalism: “*The Wire* is ‘about untethered capitalism run amok, about how power and money actually route themselves in a postmodern American city, and ultimately, about why we as an urban people are no longer able to solve our problems or heal our wounds’” (quoted in

Sheehan and Sweeney). Hornby notably personifies “power” and “money” as the instigators and perpetrators of a destructive society. Some characters may wield more power than others, but every character has to submit to the disembodied lords of an economic model that privileges self-promotion and survival of the fittest. Corrupt bosses seem to be the puppet masters of this system, but the show replaces one boss with another to show that the corruption continues regardless of which particular character runs which department. For example, as Police Commissioner, Ervin Burrell (Frankie Faison) is told to “juke the stats” in order to give the mayor a boost in crime reduction. When the new mayor, Tommy Carcetti (Aidan Gillen), replaces Burrell with a handpicked Commissioner—ostensibly instituting a more effective police force—he later betrays his promises and commands his guy to “juke the stats” for similar reasons.

Individual characters certainly perpetuate the flaws of the system, but the show is clear to point out that the real villain of the show is the corrupt system itself. Burrell and Carcetti’s tenures, like the examples of McNulty, Freamon and Prez above, emblemize the show’s seemingly nihilistic narrative, and their example makes it tempting to view *The Wire* as a Greek tragedy controlled by abstract gods of power and money. To see the world of *The Wire* as hopelessly doomed by the institutions is to see only half the picture, though. The show modifies this interpretation if we learn, as the veteran Detective Bunk Moreland (Wendell Pierce) tells the rookie Kima Greggs (Sonja Sohn), to see with “soft eyes” so that we can see “the whole thing” (Episode 2, Season 4). The redemption narrative preached in *The Wire* is subtle enough to appear to be no redemption at all, but that is because it locates redemption in the crucifixion element of the Passion. Whereas Faulkner, O’Connor, and Walker emphasize incarnation in the gospel story, Simon locates the possibility of transformational change in the suffering inherent to the

gospel message. Institutions running amok because of unfettered capitalism create a nearly insurmountable antagonist for the show's characters, and Simon reinforces this point by constructing his story on examples of characters that break themselves against the formidable institutions. Within and throughout this suffering, social change begins to happen slowly but effectively, and the show does not discredit the real change that characters create while they live in the ongoing suffering caused by drugs and ineffective government. Even though *The Wire* refuses to give its viewers the sweeping social change they desire, it does affirm tangible social change that can happen within suffering. To see this change at work within the show, we must turn to the character of Deacon Melvin.

Deacon effectively undermines unjust institutional power by preaching a new way of living in a corrupted city through his work and his words. He and those he influences achieve success not by bringing down the institutions but by refusing to accept the limitations these institutions impose on individuals. Their rejection of institutional power is efficacious because they empower individuals rather than directly combat abstract social forces. The traditional role of a deacon in congregational churches is to assist the minister in matters both spiritual and secular, such as helping with marriages, burials, baptisms and communion (Union Theological Seminary), “[administering] the charities of church, and [attending] to its secular affairs” (OED). Like pastors who mediate between the divine and the temporal, deacons mediate by connecting individuals to the church in matters of the spirit and the church to the community in secular affairs. The deacon in *The Wire* fulfills a similar mediating role: he bridges the gap between ideals and actions. He translates abstractions such as individual freedom, meaningful work, and human complexity into concrete possibilities. Most important, he disciplines others in a way that helps them combat seemingly unassailable institutions.

Personified systems of power and money are too abstract for individuals to overcome. Characters such as McNulty, Freamon, Lt. Cedric Daniels (Lance Reddick), and Asst. State's Attorney Rhonda Pearlman (Deirdre Lovejoy) can effectively run an investigative wiretap to bring down the Barksdale organization, but they are powerless to rebuff capitalist forces such as power and money that doom their investigation before it begins. Facing pressure from elected politicians, the Deputy Commissioner demands that Daniels' team prematurely raid the Barksdale stash houses rather than follow a money trail that implicates a state senator. The Deputy Commissioner convinces Daniels to sabotage the mission because he has information that implies Daniels embezzled money as he rose through the ranks of the Eastern Police District. Impersonal forces of power and money similarly control institutions other than the police force. Augustus "Gus" Haynes (Clark Johnson), editor of the *Baltimore Sun*'s city desk, can organize an investigation to confirm a reporter's plagiarism, but he cannot thwart editors who ignore the allegations in order to help the paper win a Pulitzer, an award that will help the economically struggling paper remain profitable. Striving against people, gifted characters such as those listed above are often successful, but they are ineffectual against disembodied, abstract forces of capitalism.

For the viewer, the effect of watching characters thwarted time and again by the powers of capitalism can lead to an exasperated or, worse, nihilistic response. After watching characters that are interested in fixing the system falter against institutional powers, viewers are given virtually no corrective action to take in their lives. From this perspective, Simon's earlier quotation sounds more like a judgment than a perspective on the show, and the urban environment depicted in *The Wire* seems irredeemably hopeless. And yet, the show's relentless portrayal of urban decay seems to demand a different reaction. Sheehan and Sweeney correctly, I

believe, identify this tendency as well: “While *The Wire* casts virtually every character in a stance of moral compromise and shows sympathy for criminals, it nevertheless has a strong moral compass.... *The Wire* constantly raises the question of a moral code, even if along unconventional lines, and challenges its audience to moral reflection” (1). I suggest that the show actually asks the viewer to move beyond moral reflection and to consider the actions of peripheral characters as models for positive change. Within the show’s postmodern, capitalist miasma, characters such as Deacon confront and successfully reverse the effects of a population alienated from its labor, its good intentions, and its right to pursue a dignified life.

Though multiple characters bring about short term change, Deacon institutes significant improvement in multiple characters’ lives, and he does this by working in the gaps left by the “untethered capitalism” against which Simon’s show protests: “raw, unencumbered capitalism, absent any social framework, absent any sense of community, without regard to the weakest and most vulnerable classes in society — it’s a recipe for needless pain, needless human waste, needless tragedy” (Simon quoted in Sheehan and Sweeney). Deacon, as a hybrid character who exists in multiple institutions, works in a religious-social framework that allows him to connect politicians to ex-cons and progressive police to University academics. He displays a strong sense of community in his duties as the deacon of a church, and he has a pronounced regard for the weakest and most vulnerable classes around which the show is built. Specifically, it is in his relationships with Cutty and Bunny that Deacon combats the “needless pain, needless human waste, and needless tragedy” the institutions create.

In Deacon and Cutty’s story arc, the show demonstrates that invested personal relationships can transform not only a single person’s violent inner-city experience but also have positive effects for the community. Introduced as he is about to be paroled after serving fourteen

years on a murder conviction, Cutty's character has strong ties to the Barksdale drug organization as a former enforcer, but he also demonstrates a diminishing desire to participate in the drug violence. Once he decides to leave Barksdale's group, Deacon provides him opportunities to start a new life. They first meet in a Westside church, and the quiet scene starkly contrasts with other scenes of Cutty in prison, on the street, and at a raucous party. The church is imposing but serene; Africanized Christian art adorns the wall behind the pulpit, and Deacon and Cutty's voices solemnly echo throughout the sanctuary. In this first meeting, Deacon literally ushers Cutty into a new space in the inner city; in this space there are no sirens, gunshots, or disembodied voices calling out the latest nickname for heroin. At this point in their relationship, Deacon represents an example of non-violent urban life and a counterpoint to Cutty's character.

The initial meeting between the two men threatens to pigeonhole Deacon as a one-dimensional character that is more symbol of safety than an actual person, but his approach to Cutty reveals a complex individual who anticipates Cutty's mixed motives. First, he recognizes that Cutty may not be as sincere as he professes. When Cutty asks if his ex-girlfriend, the person responsible for the meeting, will join them, Deacon replies, "She's a beautiful woman. A man might say things he didn't mean to stand closer to a woman like that." Deacon's words are paradoxically straightforward and roundabout. He speaks to Cutty in doubletalk, wherein he makes his point known while never directly accusing Cutty of coming to the meeting under false pretenses. The insight shown by Deacon is further enhanced by his response to Cutty's request to be put on a job list: "I should tell you up front we don't do like that here. You want a job you gonna have to work to get it. We'll help, but it's gonna be your sweat. With that said, then, the first thing is to get you enrolled in a GED program." Deacon's response contrasts with Avon Barksdale's (Wood Harris) overtures to Cutty to be the muscle in his organization. Whereas

Barksdale employs him as soon as Cutty asks for work and rewards him with a package of drugs to sell, Deacon offers Cutty no easy solutions. Although Avon gives Cutty a free package, he is essentially purchasing Cutty by trapping him in a debt of obligation. But Deacon's offer of hard work is potentially liberating. When he suggests that Cutty get a GED, he is setting him on a path to self-sufficiency. Although Cutty will eventually reject this advice, Deacon's words and attitude provide Cutty with an alternative way to live in the inner city without becoming beholden to the cycle of drugs and murder.

When Cutty finally has his road to Damascus moment, subsequently changing his name back to Dennis, Deacon is readily able and available to help him fulfill his desire to serve other people in the community. In a short scene that takes place as Dennis cleans out a warehouse space to use as community boxing gym, Deacon informs Dennis that he will need permits to legally run the operation. Dennis is not aware of the legal processes of opening a community center. Deacon's pronouncement underscores his knowledge of the bureaucratic process, and he shares this information with the street-wise ex-con. The significance of this scene is realized when Dennis and Deacon next meet in a powerful Reverend's office. On his own, Dennis is flummoxed by the paperwork, regulations, and nearly incomprehensible civic jargon, so Deacon connects Dennis to his inside contacts. He tells Reverend Reid (Felix Stevenson), "Reverend, our man Dennis spent all day down at the Benton Building trying for permits." The Reverend replies, "You use my name? You use anybody's name?" Significantly, Deacon names Dennis as "our man." While with the Barksdale crew, Dennis was continually isolated: mentally, he stands apart from his co-enforcers because of his superior street sense, and he emotionally sequesters himself from them because of his conscious. Once he has joined with Deacon though, he is part of a community and he is joined to the Reverend in a common purpose. Moreover, Reid's comment

highlights what Deacon already knows: one needs connections to get through the red tape. After Reid makes a phone call to a local delegate, Deacon gives Cutty a knowing look. Deacon knows the system, and he is willing to use that knowledge to exploit it for positive social change. It is telling that Deacon is not morally above using political names to bypass city regulations. Actions like this one demonstrate both his understanding of a corrupt system and his willingness to use it to help his community. To bring about transformational change within the system, Deacon knows to use the system's own rules. He works within the suffering and turns the bureaucracy that creates suffering against itself.

Deacon's ability to help Dennis in season three is striking in its parallels to Stringer Bell's (Idris Elba) attempts to transform the Barksdale drug empire into a real estate development firm, "B&B Enterprises." Until this point in the series, Stringer has proven to be the cleverest and most powerful manipulator of the system—he knows how to pull the strings. When he tries to become "legitimate," crooked politicians and corrupt developers con Stringer; meanwhile Deacon, the meek figure he is, helps Dennis open the gym with relative ease. Stringer comes to realize that he has been swindled because he does not understand the type of corruption that plagues "legitimate business." Meanwhile, Deacon, as shown in his dealings with Dennis and Reid, knows exactly how to manipulate bureaucracy for his purposes. He is able to maneuver through institutions ruled by power and money because he has intimate knowledge of both the institutions and individuals. As a religious leader, he traffics in people's souls, evidenced by his attempt to convert Dennis, and he uses his knowledge of the institutions to help people like Dennis find ways to positively affect the community. In season four, Dennis asks him, "Tell me something—how is it you got so much wisdom about who should be where?" Deacon explains, "A good church man is always up in everybody's shit. That's how we do."

Here, Deacon plays on the stereotype of the nosy churchman, but even more telling is his use of vulgarity. In knowing “everybody’s shit” Deacon crosses multiple boundaries between the saved and unsaved, the churchgoer and the corner boy. This hybrid position also allows Deacon to help Bunny—a character that exists on the other end of the social and legal spectrum from Cutty—effectively help forgotten drug addicts and middle school kids in danger of falling victim to the Baltimore drug trade.

Throughout Deacon’s involvement in Bunny’s Hamsterdam storyline, one theme runs through his actions and motivations: he notices people who are either forgotten or marginalized. James Tyree, in his article, “The Wire: The Complete Fourth Season,” argues that the show calls the audience’s attention to the importance of seeing: “The show’s implicit argument condemns a criminally negligent and culturally pervasive *failure to notice*” (38). Tyree advocates for the kind of “soft eyes” that Bunk lauds because “[if] you got hard eyes—you staring at the same tree missing the forest.” Deacon succeeds in his reform movements because he sees individuals and the reality of their life in Baltimore. He notices Dennis’ desire for reform, and he guides him through the process. Similarly, he notices the neglected drug addicts corralled into Bunny’s legalized drug zone, Hamsterdam. But his view of the situation contrasts with the attitudes of the officers and Bunny. While some of the police warily support Bunny’s legalization experiment, officers such as Anthony Colicchio (Benjamin Busch) are furious that they have to tolerate the sanctioned drug zone. For officers like Colicchio the dealers and addicts are criminals rather than individuals; as such, they are objects to be harassed and intimidated. Meanwhile, Bunny ignores the dealers and addicts altogether. He is more concerned with keeping the peace than he is with changing lives. In response to Deacon’s objections, he explains, “Look, I’m just trying to make my district livable. I write off a few blocks in a few places, but I save the rest.” Bunny’s words

are contradictory. In an effort to make the district “livable” he has created a place that kills life, and he speaks of the addicts in economic terms: they are tax “write offs” rather than human beings. Deacon sees through Bunny’s contradictions and will later call Hamsterdam “hell” and “a great village of pain.” Bunny claims to notice his community, but in effect he is stashing a large portion of it in one of the city’s hidden corners.

Moreover, Deacon’s willingness to notice those involved in drug trafficking counteracts “untethered capitalism’s” tendency to alienate and objectify addicts. While Bunny satisfies himself with decreasing felony rates, Deacon refuses to let him off the hook for not caring for the addicts: “Where’s you’re drinking water? Where’s your toilets, your heat, your electricity? Where’s the needle truck, the condom distribution, the drug treatment intake? Half these people are dying on their feet, and the other half’s gonna catch what’s killing them.” Deacon speaks these words with a caring and patient demeanor. While Bunny changes his tone of voice over the course of scene from pleading to frustration, Deacon talks steadily because he is resolved to help the addicts and dealers. He sees them as individuals suffering from an affliction, and he empathetically understands Hamsterdam to be an opportunity both to make the Western neighborhoods safe and to reach the addicts in need of help. Colicchio and Bunny represent two sides of the institutional response to drug culture: either endlessly prosecute and harass the lawbreakers or ignore the activity and let the users suffer the repercussions. Deacon stands against these ineffective institutional responses, and he demands that characters such as Bunny acknowledge their responsibility to individuals consumed by addiction. Once he convinces Bunny to act, he facilitates quick action in order to manifest the most change possible given the circumstances.

Deacon approaches the situation with urgency because he recognizes that institutional power will shutter efficacious solutions. Further, he knows that he must act within the suffering paradigm rather than relieve it altogether. After convincing Bunny to address the health crisis in Hamsterdam, Deacon arranges a meeting at a pool hall between Bunny, a community worker named Roman (Clarence Clemens), and an academic named Gene (William Zielinski):

Deacon: Gene, this spot I'm telling you about? We're talking TB, HIV, syphilis, herpes, lice. It's like a five-acre petri dish.

Roman: You get in there now, you can run every health program or social program you want.

Bunny: Hell, every kind of liberal-ass project never got off the page it was written on.

...

Gene: So, you're saying that this is a sanctioned open-air drug market.

Bunny: No, it's not officially sanctioned. It's more like it's tolerated. That's why we came to you and the Public Health School, not the City Health Department.

...

Gene: So if the city doesn't know about it then that makes it...

Bunny: Complicated.

Deacon: That means temporary. You move it or you lose it, boss.

Contrasted with Bunny's sarcasm, Deacon earnestly explains the situation to Gene. He is aware that the government institutions will not allow Hamsterdam to continue, so he moves with precision. In this scene, Deacon organizes his contacts from across the civic spectrum, and by the

end of the pool game the police, community workers, and academics are quickly working to reach the at-risk population congregating in Hamsterdam.

The editing of the pool hall scene emphasizes the seriousness of these characters' actions by bookending their barroom meeting with two scenes that depict Marlo Stanfield picking up a woman in another Baltimore club. Marlo, the character who by the end of the series will most forcefully embody the institutions of power and money, engages in a sexual act with the woman in his car, which is parked outside the club. When he finishes, he barely acknowledges her presence. The editing suggests that these encounters happen simultaneously. While Marlo is using a woman for his pleasure, Deacon is organizing community leaders to address the health crisis in Hamsterdam. Institutions of power and money consume people, but Deacon assembles and recruits people to help the vulnerable while the window of opportunity is open.

Meanwhile, Deacon's commitment to reform exemplifies a long-term approach to solving the problems *The Wire* identifies. In the final conversation between Bunny and Deacon in season three, Bunny explains that he is excited to retire and that he is proud of Hamsterdam. But he does not see the implications of his experiment. Deacon chides him:

Deacon: You started something. You ain't gonna finish it?

Bunny: What you mean?

Deacon: On a battlefield you can't do much to help anybody with anything. But you managed a truce, Bunny. And making the game street legal takes the heart out of it. Keep it going, we gonna reach some of those people chasing dope and coke, and maybe even some hoppers, too.

Bunny: You might at that.

Deacon: But what happens when you turn your district over to the next man? Or people get wind of this thing and there's no one to defend it? What then?

In this exchange, Deacon indicates that, at least momentarily, the “heart” was out of the game. The power and money that control the drug trade are temporarily neutralized, and social workers and police engage in effective civic work. Furthermore, Deacon explains to Bunny that long-term commitment is necessary for proper reform. He knows that the opportunity for change is limited, so he recruits Bunny to commit to the process because he understands that Bunny is an individual with the ability to affect change. The forces of power and authority in Baltimore will quickly shutter Hamsterdam through deft political maneuvering, so Deacon recruits Bunny for further work in social change, which comes to fruition in season four.

Season four focuses on Baltimore educational institutions, and the theme is repeated in various mentor-mentee relationships. In this context, Deacon again uses his hybrid position to lead a community of people against destructive institutions, whether they are educational, political, or economic. In the season four episode “Margin of Error,” the audience discovers that Deacon is involved with the fellowship committee at his church, and in previous episodes, he is seen loading food supplies for a co-op. Though we are never given his job description, it is clear that his purpose is to be in the community and serve the community's needs. His ability to connect people from diverse communities makes him stand apart from other reform-minded characters. For example, in season four, he approaches Bunny with a job offer: “Well, if you was a bit free, I heard something. [The camera cuts to Bunny, who looks less than excited to hear the proposal.] This thing over at University of Maryland School of Social Work—they got a grant. Big money.” Bunny replies, “Just stop.” But Deacon continues, “Half a million to look at repeat violent offenders, clinical intervention—all that mess.” In this exchange, Deacon demonstrates

his resolve and his intuition for effective social work. The characters' costumes suggest that Deacon comes to Bunny uninvited: Deacon is dressed for the day, but Bunny is in his bathrobe, reading the paper and eating his breakfast on his stoop. Deacon interrupts Bunny's morning routine; more important, he interrupts Bunny's complacency. Forced to retire and blacklisted from a lucrative post-police career, Bunny has settled into an insignificant job doing hotel security. When Bunny rebuffs Deacon's proposal, Deacon pushes further, "You sure? Cause I sold 'em on it, should you want it. Bunny, you're a big man down on the campus. You the police that legalized it. The college boys loved that mess." He recognizes Bunny's talents, and he knows which sectors will appreciate those talents. Connecting Bunny to the college, Deacon restores Bunny's civic and moral purpose.

An interchange between Deacon, Bunny, and the professor running the experiment, David Parenti (Dan DeLuca), illustrates Deacon's ability to guide characters to effective social action and subvert the institutional pressures that work against reform. Deacon pushes Bunny to stand by Hamsterdam, and after it shuts down, he pushes Bunny to take a different approach. Just as he patiently guided Dennis, Deacon quietly but forcefully directs Bunny towards a calling. In the following dialogue, he mentors Bunny by answering his questions and pushing him to see past his doubts:

Bunny: What happens when you ain't around to translate?

Deacon: Don't play ignorant on me, Bunny. You can back-and-forth with any of these guys. I've seen you work. Besides, it's clear you ain't cut out for the private sector.

Bunny: 18 to 21? By that age, they're deep in the game. He's fucked on that.

Deacon: So show him.

Bunny: \$50,000, 80-20 health plan and a take-home vehicle.

Deacon: I'd be amazed if they give you 30, an HMO, and a bus pass.

Bunny: [Bunny exhales audibly. He nods his head back to the door, and speaks under his breath.] All right, let's go.

In this exchange, Bunny doubts both his ability to work with academics and the efficacy of their plan, while also demanding unrealistic compensation. Deacon's response to these objections exemplifies his power to persuade. First, he calls Bunny's bluff. He knows his friend, and he recognizes insincere doubt for what it is. Second, he calmly replies to Bunny's misgivings about the experiment. Deacon does not scoff or discount either side; rather, he assures Bunny that this is the reason why he is needed. Finally, Deacon discounts Bunny's monetary demands. While his reply seems to be about salary negotiation, he is actually forcing Bunny to focus on the actual purpose behind this experiment: to help inner city kids avoid drug trade violence. Deacon does not mislead Bunny with promises of promotion or money. That is a management ploy used by the institutions. Instead, he works against these institutional tendencies by guiding Bunny towards effective, individual-focused school reform.

The final scene of the Deacon-Bunny school project arc epitomizes Deacon's manipulation of the hybrid space he inhabits and his lasting influence in the show. The school threatens to shutter the project because the kids are not taking the statewide assessment tests. In response, Deacon suggests that Bunny ask Delegate Watkins to advocate to the mayor on his behalf. When the Delegate asks Deacon how he got "by [his] people," Deacon replies, "You can't turn away church folk, ain't done in these parts." Deacon uses his religious standing to force this meeting with Watkins and Bunny. The fact that Watkins assents to the meeting testifies to Deacon's political power as a churchman. Although not one of the thematic targets of the

series, religion is another powerful institution in *The Wire*, and it is shown to be as corruptible as any other institution. For example, an unnamed pastor launders Marlo's money for ten percent on the dollar, and politicians like Carcetti, Royce, and Watkins carefully pander to the ministers and their congregations. But Deacon uses his role within the religious institution for non-institutional purposes: he uses his specialized standing in the community to help others rather than using it for self-promotion.

Deacon is successful because he uses his hybrid identity as member of an institution and an agent who empowers individuals to work against institutional decay. Most important, his work is shown to be lasting. The meeting with Watkins is bookend by scenes of Dennis helping Michael Lee (Tristan Wilds) and Namond Brice (Julito McCullum) resolve their problems, to varying degrees of effectiveness. The emphasis of this bookend editing is that Dennis is now a force in the community, working with kids as much as he is able. Significantly, the two Dennis scenes on either end of the Deacon-Watkins meeting set up Namond's final destination in the show. Bunny will ultimately adopt him, saving him from a life on the corner—a life at which he was certain to fail. Deacon's ability to help characters like Dennis and Bunny, and by extension, Namond, is both successful and lasting because he focuses his work on individuals who can change rather than trying to battle against abstract forces. His efforts to combat these disembodied forces of power and money are permanent because he reforms individuals, who then take up the same project of reform. *The Wire* cannot envision change to the system, but it does imagine change within that system. The world of *The Wire* is very much still a fallen world, but within this suffering, Deacon and his disciples effect significant progress.

Significantly, Deacon does very little preaching in the show; instead, he exhibits his religious discourse in his role as churchman, his work gathering church resources for the poor,

and in his brief suggestion to Cutty that he can help him with his soul. In fact, the character of the devout minister is an inside joke in the show. Melvin “Little Melvin” Williams, the actor who plays Deacon, was a notorious Baltimore drug kingpin who was investigated with a wiretap, arrested by former detective turned series writer Ed Burns, prosecuted, and sentenced to twenty-four years in prison. David Simon, then working for the *Baltimore Sun*, covered Williams’ story for the newspaper. Though his personal story does not say much about the character of Deacon, his perspective on his drug dealing days highlights both the power and weakness of the institutions: “When you’re at the top, you don’t see the carnage that comes as a result of what you do. You simply see it in terms of dollars and cents” (TV Review). Although Williams did not see the suffering, the character he plays does, and rather than ignoring it, he teaches characters and viewers how to respond to it so that it can be mitigated. Although his use of religious discourse is less through sermons than it is through symbols such as the minister’s collar and his scenes at the church, Deacon combines it with the nonreligious discourse of the street to subvert disastrous policies. He is a churchman who uses his privilege as a minister to bypass bureaucratic red tape, and he uses the religious and the nonreligious to instigate change on the individual level. He may not inaugurate Baltimore’s fabled “New Day” (Episode 11, Season 4), but he creates effective and lasting transformation.

Deacon and Hickman educate through their use of religious and secular discourses. They present a representational pedagogy for both their congregations in the text and their audiences outside of it. Religious discourse supplies Deacon and Hickman with a perspectival narrative that requires them to focus on individuals and their suffering. Theirs is a communal discourse that needs to be shared with people like Maude and Cutty who have suffered from oppressive institutions. Moreover, theirs is a narrative that gives them a degree of faith in eventual change.

Rather than locating change in supernatural resolutions, they use religious words and symbolic actions to preach dignity and human rights through social and spiritual work in their communities. Their discourse is ultimately effective because it charges their brand of humanism with a holy purpose and a promised, ineffable New Day—even if that New Day is something that must always be worked for rather than realized. Their combination of religious and secular discourse is nothing less than a language of social action that protests and instructs simultaneously. It is a language that uses Protestant narratives to “to reduce to consciousness all of the complex experience which ceaselessly unfolds” in America while also teaching others how to defend those who suffer from the dehumanizing effects of racism and oppressive institutions.

There is a sense of spectacle that accompanies Hickman and Deacon’s stories. In *Three Days*, Hickman wanders through Washington, D.C., gazes at an intricate tapestry, is confounded by a provocative mural, and is moved to preach and pray at the Lincoln Memorial, which itself calls to mind the Civil War, Lincoln’s assassination, and the failure of the country to secure for its black citizens their equal rights. Set against the backdrop of national monuments and striking works of art, Hickman assembles a gospel story that affirms people in their suffering while also calling them to remain steady in their dignity and their sacred purpose. Though many of Deacon’s scenes take place in quiet rooms and hinge on the power of his words, his most profound and direct action takes place in Hamsterdam in a scene from which he is conspicuously absent. In the scene, health care workers and volunteers pass out contraceptives, give blood tests, distribute clean towels, and feed those who have come to the free zone to buy drugs. Deacon has convinced Bunny that the addicts need help and has successfully organized health and volunteer services to meet their needs. Similar to the pool hall scene in which Deacon connects Bunny to

the social workers, this scene is framed by two scenes of Marlo's crew abusing others. In this case, his enforcers first stake out and then fire on the Barksdale crew. While the two major distributors of drugs fight for control, Deacon's people offer meaningful and needed help to the people who are seemingly forgotten by those who wield power.

As in *Three Days*, the suffering in *The Wire* most certainly continues after the final scene, but there are those within these narratives who preach and provide dignity and comfort against the backdrop of suffering in America. Ellison and Simon set as their goal the in-completable project of summing up American experience. These are projects that are destined to fail; nevertheless, despite failing they each produce a vision of America that demands a response from their readers/viewers. Hickman challenges readers to expose the deficit between the nation's stated ideals and its practices, but he also asks readers to consider their own complicity in tragicomic relations. Meanwhile, Deacon Melvin showcases successful methods for addressing institutionalized discrimination. His viewers may not have the inside connections he cultivates, but they can invest in individuals and direct their efforts to enabling people. Although Deacon engages in traditional acts of charity, such as distributing clothing and food, he also illustrates the efficacy of listening to what people need and connecting them to those who can support those needs. Deacon's example remains powerful because it represents a non-patronizing form of social aid, wherein he assists people to address their own challenges. At the heart of both Hickman and Deacon's work lies an ineffable source of hope. For Hickman, it is the promise of an America that fully manifests its ideals. For Deacon, it is the promise of a New Day. Neither assume that the ineffable will be fully realized, but both work towards it as their stated goal and invite others to do so as well. As the next chapter demonstrates, the allure of the ineffable lasts

long after a person comes to realize they will never achieve it, even suggesting that it persists when characters try to discard it.

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CHAPTER 3

“A DEEP AND LUCKY CUP OF GOD”: RESURRECTING THE WORD OF GOD IN AMERICAN DISCOURSE

Midway through Modest Mouse's 1997 album, *The Lonesome Crowded West*, the band's frontman Isaac Brock sings, "He drove to the desert, fired his rifle in the sky / And said, 'God, if I have to die, you will have to die.'" Like many of the album's songs, "Cowboy Dan" records gestures of fruitless spiritual defiance. Here, the eponymous subject assaults God with a rifle to purge his own frustration and, in the process, suggests the futility of meaningful interaction with the divine. Severe in its lyrics and instrumentation, the song moves between slow arpeggios and aggressive power chords interrupted with occasional bent harmonics, which add a dissonant spark to the song's rhythm. Unique to the album, "Cowboy Dan" hints at rebirth in its quiet middle section where its tempo slows, the drums momentarily cease, and Brock's guitar moves from power chords to measured picking. He quietly sings: "Standing in the tall grass / Thinking nothing / You know we need oxygen to breathe." The middle section, with its meditation on breathing, provides a respite from the rest of the song's frenetic tone, but the peace it offers quickly fades as the tempo increases and Brock's lyrics return to Cowboy Dan's frustration. Brock ends the song by repeatedly screaming: "Can't do it, not even if sober / Can't get that engine turned over." The song's close evokes circularity, repetition, death and rebirth without delivering them. As the subject of a Modest Mouse song, Cowboy Dan will not find meaningful redemption, something the band's music routinely rejects. Reflecting the album's tone of spiritual emptiness, the song gives voice to Brock's preoccupation with spiritual dissonance in the pre-millennial West.

Taking listeners to the edge of redemption while refusing to grant it, "Cowboy Dan" closes down the possibility of spiritual transformation even as it offers two ways to find

resolution: first, to reject a God who offers no meaningful experience for the believer, and in the process, to seek a more meaningful a/spiritual belief; and second, to find solace by returning to nature and recognizing one's connection to the land, which symbolizes rebirth in the song's emphasis on breathing the oxygen the grass produces while breathing out the carbon dioxide the grass needs. Both methods rely on reorienting one's relationship with the divine, either by rejecting it or by locating the spiritual insight it offers in the physical world.

The two texts I examine in this chapter reconstitute religious discourse by using similar methods. Josie Laudermilk and Jesse Custer, the protagonists of Scott Cheshire's *High as the Horses' Bridles* and Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon's *Preacher* respectively, experience spiritual alienation similar to Cowboy Dan's. They experience dissonance in both their religious and non-religious lives, and in both texts, disappointment in day-to-day life resonates in spiritual and social experiences. Jesse and Josie thus reject the sacred in an effort to align their worldviews with their temporal experience. To affect meaningful change, they believe they need to abandon the religion of their childhood. As the final moments of both narratives reveal, though, religious discourse is more easily reconstituted than discarded. Concluding with the resurrections of important characters, both texts purport to restore characters to their pre-conflict selves, but more than just bodies return as resurrection in *Preacher* and *Horses' Bridles* carries both physical and spiritual consequences.

Whereas *The Wire* and *Three Days Before the Shooting...* fail to resolve the suffering they depict, *Horses' Bridles* and *Preacher* depend on death and resurrection—the third component of the gospel message—to resolve their conflicts, and in so doing they resurrect the religious discourse they reject in their narratives. Resurrection needs to be read as both a physical and spiritual act in many Christian theologies. Alan Ackerman explains that resurrection is first a

physical phenomenon: “Conventionally, a resurrection is a rising again, from the dead, from sleep, from a state of decay to an ideal form, a returning to life” (904). Fernando Vidal similarly emphasizes the physicality of resurrection in his historical analysis of resurrection theologies: “bodies are essential to humanity and...a disembodied self does not rank as a human being.” Karmen MacKendrick titles her essay on resurrection “Eternal Flesh: The Resurrection of the Body” to emphasize the presence of the body in her theological analysis of resurrection and eternity. For Vidal and MacKendrick, bodily resurrection reminds believers that they are physical bodies and that their identities are inseparable from those bodies. This physical component of resurrection restores linearity to human life because it makes it possible for human narratives to continue past death: “Resurrection implies a linear temporality through recurrence, history if not historicism. Redemption, on the other hand, breaks or ends time” (Ackerman 904-5). Ackerman emphasizes the role of time in resurrection to set it apart from redemption, which significantly alters time by recasting the believer’s past, present, and future. Redemption is closely associated with resurrection, especially in Protestant theologies of the cross and the resurrection of the dead. Whereas Christ’s resurrection provides atonement, the resurrection of believers reunites them, in their physical bodies, with Christ: “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15.46). Redeemed throughout time, the resurrected body physically resumes its role in the body’s history.

Notably, resurrections conclude both *Horses’ Bridles* and *Preacher*. Cheshire’s novel ends with a vision of a resurrected mother. In the midst of a camp meeting, Josie’s ancestor Orr sees his recently deceased mother: “Reborn and refreshed, she looks just like her.” And later, “Rising from the dirt and tangle of sleeping wet limbs this beautiful woman stands up. Is it her? She stands and stretches toward the stage. / ‘Mamma, I’m here! I’m right here!’” (301). The

narrative does not tell us whether or not the woman is Orr's mother, but the imagery is suggestive: this woman emerges from the "dirt"—restarting the "from dust to dust" formula—and disentangles herself from "sleeping wet limbs." She is reborn and effectively triggers Orr's faith in God, a faith that will define the Laudermilks through several generations. For *Horses' Bridles* and *Preacher*, Christ's resurrection exists as a symbolic event in the past that parallels characters' journeys toward redemption but does not actually redeem them. Orr becomes a believer at the moment he sees his resurrected mother, but the text suggests that the event is more of a catalyst for the Laudermilks' obsession with religion—and Josie's difficulty with it—rather than an affirmation of Christ's salvific work.

Not content with one miracle, *Preacher* depicts three literal resurrections and several more metaphoric ones. At various points in the series, Jesse, Tulip, and Cassidy each die, only to be resurrected by God. Resurrection in *Preacher* acts as both plot device and symbol: God resurrects Tulip to convince Jesse that he is a compassionate God. He resurrects Jesse and Cassidy as a final demonstration of his benevolence, although as with Tulip, he does so out of codependence rather than a sincere love for his creation. Symbolically, their resurrections confirm their identities as heroes who conquer both life and death. It is Jesse, Tulip, and Cassidy who sustain the narrative action, not God. Taking the point to an even further extreme, *Preacher* resurrects Jesse and Cassidy at the same time that Jesse's partner, the Saint of Killers, literally kills God: their rebirth coincides with his death.

The physicality of resurrection provides a means for the story to continue, but the spiritual aspect of resurrection reorients narrative trajectories. In "The Passion Story in Literature," Paul Fiddes writes,

But no theory of atonement was ever declared to be definitive by the church, so

that hearers of the story were encouraged to find new meaning in their own responses. The story of the cross could always acquire meaning, and—when placed alongside stories of suffering elsewhere in human life—could enable meaning to be gained in new situations when it did not seem to be intrinsically present. (742-3)

To interpret the “mystery of ‘atonement,’” church writers cast it in terms of “sacrifice, victory, ransom, justification, and persuasive love” (742), but these metaphors cannot provide a comprehensive understanding of the “mystery” as they speak about and around resurrection, never actually defining it. According to Fiddes, rewriting the passion story in poetry and prose makes possible further metaphoric interpretations and offers new insights into theologies of the cross. Daniel Boscaljon goes further, arguing that writers riff on the resurrection story so that they can find atonement apart from God, in effect humanizing the theology of the Passion: “In many ways, literature can be read as testing the boundaries of what can be redeemed, who can be redeemed, or what can be understood as an agent of redemption. Literature, not limited to theological assumptions of another world or an all-powerful creator, is able to explore how life on earth may be redeemed and how humans can mediate their own redemption” (760). Such is the case with *Horses’ Bridles* and *Preacher*. Cheshire, Ennis, and Dillon rewrite the resurrection narrative in order to de-spiritualize it. Nevertheless, the final effect of both narratives suggests that the spiritual must be reconstituted.

Although Josie and Jesse ostensibly reject their spiritual beliefs, their stories ultimately demonstrate how they exchange one spiritually redemptive discourse for another. Jesse leaves the pulpit because of God’s past transgressions. Considering his own abusive upbringing and the hypocrisy of his congregation, Jesse believes that God cares more for himself than his creation.

After a heavenly creature gives Jesse the supernatural power of the Word of God, he begins a quest that will ultimately end with God's death. By series end, Jesse helps install the Saint of Killers, a cowboy demigod, to the heavenly throne, while he becomes a cowboy who will spread the good news of the Texan way of life. The return of religious discourse in *Preacher* is particularly ironic because Jesse believes he is free; though his transformation from preacher to cowboy provides him a certain autonomy, he has only traded one god for another. He continues to serve a belief system complete with sacred icons, the cowboys created by John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, Lee Marvin, and a strict morality based on how these fictional characters handle their business. Jesse's pop culture cowboys represent the power of the ineffable in his life. Tellingly, the comic refrains from depicting John Wayne's face (Casey & Petersen 197), even as it represents God in stark detail. The ineffable persists in *Preacher* not in the God who created the universe but in imagined pop culture heroes who provide Jesse the belief system he desires.

The return of religious discourse in *Horses' Bridles* is subtler. Josie's faith erodes because he begins to contemplate the blood that will flow as "high as the horses' bridles." Will it be the blood of his Hindu girlfriend Bhanu? Will his mother wade through that blood? Disturbed by the images these questions evoke, Josie distances himself from his church and from his own eschatological sermons. Years later, Josie has to return to his childhood home because his father's dementia demands immediate attention. Faced with reminders of his childhood religion, Josie begins to reconcile his religious past with his mostly-nonreligious present. Wrestling with disbelief, Josie finds redemption while walking the crowded streets of Brooklyn. Swept up in the collective movement of commuters, Josie has a transcendent experience that overpowers his senses. The smells of an abattoir, the taste of a knish, the sights of the temple he attended as a child, and the bumps and jostles from passersby restore Josie to the community, a community

from which he had isolated himself. He can reenter the community because he has found a way to satisfy both his doubt and his belief by rejecting organized religion for something he calls the “Time of In-Between,” which for him provides a way of living in the temporal world while simultaneously appreciating the visions, solace, and hope of a spiritual life. By novel’s end, Josie seems to be free from the religious insecurity that plagues him, but the story does not end with his newfound security. Rather, the novel’s final section transports its readers back two hundred years earlier to Orr’s camp revival experience. By ending the story with the beginning of the Laudermilks’ faith, Cheshire pulls a narrative sleight of hand and forces readers to consider how devotion to the sacred begins for Josie even as he finds closure from it. Josie’s anxiety resulted from an inability to resolve religious disbelief with a yearning for the sacred. He comes to accept the “Time of In-Between” because it preserves the ineffable without requiring submission to a particular denomination or belief system. Moreover, though the “Time of In-Between” resists strict definition, it provides Josie with the tangible spiritual succor he requires. Orr’s conversion thus serves to emphasize Josie’s re-initiation into a sacred worldview.

Besides the mutually informative resurrection motifs in both texts, I pair *Preacher* and *Horses’ Bridles* because taken together they demonstrate the power of imagery and images in words and art to critique the persistence of religious discourse despite characters’ best efforts to resist it. Thematically, both texts center on the American ideal of the West as a place for renewal. Jesse and Josie move through America and, in the process, expose its idealistic potential and its present reality. These men posit the American West, California and Texas specifically, as a place of renewal: Josie escapes to the sunny beaches of California from an oppressive Queens, running from an isolated adolescence and successfully establishing a chain of computer retail stores.

Conversely, his return to New York forces him to consider the losses he suffered during his adolescence: specifically the disappearance of his best friend Issy and the death of Bhanu.

Preacher locates the renewing power of America in Texas rather than California. Jesse, who constantly reminds people he is Texan, keeps to his word, stands up for those who suffer, and physically overpowers anyone who questions his character. Like the mythic cowboy figures in Western films and novels, Jesse carries past transgressions, but he is primarily and ultimately the ideal American for Ennis and Dillon. Travelling to New York with his best friend Cassidy, the two discuss the power of New York City as a place to begin again. An Irish immigrant, Cassidy tells Jesse, “I looked out that first night an’ all I could see was America, stretchin’ away in every direction. I got this mad idea—if I jumped off the Empire State Buildin’ I could land anywhere in America I wanted...An’ the great adventure could begin” (“To the Streets of Manhattan I Wandered Away” 23). Partaking in the standard trope, Jesse and Cassidy read New York as a metaphor for beginning again. Texas, for both characters, is the actualization of that metaphor. Beginning in fictional Annville, TX and ending at the Alamo, *Preacher* asserts the primacy of Jesse’s way of life in America, which is underscored by Cassidy’s eventual conversion to live “like a man” (“A Hell of a Vision” 25), or more precisely, to live like Jesse.

Structurally, these two texts provide an opportunity to examine how art and artistry affect religious discourse in contemporary American fiction. *Preacher* and *Horses’ Bridles* both include the representation of sacred language as an integral part of the narrative, but they do so in divergent and mutually informative ways: *Preacher* primarily illustrates the Word of God in comic illustrations and colored fonts, whereas *Horses’ Bridles* represents religious discourse in rhetorically inflected speeches and vibrant imagery. Both representations evoke the sacred, but they locate the power that comes from representing the sacred in different places. *Preacher*

imbues the word of God with an inherent power: the force exists in the character's utterance of the Word and readers' interaction with the Word's distinct visual style. *Horses' Bridles* locates the power of the religious language in the speaker's charisma. For Josie and his community of believers, religious authority derives less from education or individual identity than it does from the rapture speakers embody in their sermons. The texts' differences in representation depend largely on the artistic possibilities of their respective medium. As a comic book, *Preacher* has recourse to both words and images, whereas *Horses' Bridles* relies on readers' ability to manufacture mental images. Furthermore, *Preacher* uses long-form literary techniques, such as narrative digressions and cliffhangers, that are more readily available to serialized stories than to novels. As Nicolas Labarre explains in "Meat Fiction and Burning Western Light," *Preacher* shifts its focus from religious critique to an examination of the American south and west after it finds an audience: "As *Preacher* became a success, [Dillon and Ennis] shifted the emphasis of the series, downplaying its religious elements" (249). *Horses' Bridles* has no such recourse. As an ostensibly self-contained unit, Cheshire's novel does not have the freedom to significantly alter its narrative nor its themes.

Though the differences in medium demand distinct interpretative strategies, analyzing them together provides a fuller picture of how artists represent the ineffable. In order to depict the ineffable in print and images, writers and artists must work around it, never actually describing or defining it. Analyzing how Cheshire, Ennis, and Dillon approach the ineffable in multiple media demonstrates the ways that the ineffable resists both concrete and abstract representation. At the same time, it reveals the allure of the ineffable as a source of creativity and authority for artists, their narrative discourses, and their characters. I began this chapter with a song not just to locate *Preacher* and *Horses' Bridles'* cultural moment and the chapter's overall

thematic focus, but also to point to various methods available to artists when representing religious discourse. Comics and novels require unique critical approaches to elements such as comic grids and textual organization, but they also reward comparative analysis. Since artists can only approach the ineffable without fully representing it, a comparative analysis of representative techniques across artistic media provides us a better idea of how the ineffable—and, for my purposes, iterations of the ineffable in Protestant discourses—continues to enchant artists, even after those discourses are supposedly discarded. *Preacher* and *Horses' Bridles* critically examine the persistence of religious discourse in America even as they challenge the legitimacy of that discourse. Taken together, they reveal a longing for religion and its ability to provide a metanarrative. To take it one step further, they illustrate the degree to which the hoped for metanarrative continues to shape their artistic output. As such, I bring these two texts together to evoke the power of religious experiences to alter a person's perspective. In the forward to *Graven Images*, Douglas Rushkoff writes, "Religious experience, for human beings, consists of a shift in awareness from the particular to the universal—from the mundane to the mythic or, even more precisely, from the moment to the infinite" (xii). We gain a fuller picture of this perspectival decentering by analyzing its representation across media. Jesse and Josie contend with the "mythic" and "infinite" as it infiltrates their temporal experiences, and the collective result is an ironic affirmation of the power of religious discourse to shape one's actions even after it has been discarded.

As is the case with the other texts in this study, using gospel elements in a text does more than simply enrich the narrative with biblical allusions: it also promotes specific courses of action. *Preacher* and *Horses' Bridles* use religious discourse to examine how it controls both the speaker and the audience. Both Jesse and Josie speak the word of God to audiences who fall

under their spell. Jesse literally speaks with the power of God and is able to control others, overcoming them with a supernatural power. As he speaks the Word of God throughout the series, he quickly learns when his power is justified and when it turns him into a tyrant. Josie speaks the word extemporaneously to a congregation of four thousand, having received a vision as he begins a prepared sermon he quickly discards. His words carry immediate power and spark religious fervor in the congregation, but their influence gradually dies down in the congregation and in himself as the years go by. Josie and his family lose their church membership because of the waning resonance of Josie's sermon. *Horses' Bridles* and *Preacher* show us that religious discourse survives both unbelief and discrediting, and they ask us to consider whether or not those who revive religious discourse do so to assert their own power or to support communities that negotiate who has the power to speak. In *Preacher*, the conflict between controlling discourse and negotiating it begins and ends with the nature of religious discourse. As the heroic cowboy, Jesse will take it on himself to destroy the source of oppressive discourse and, in the process, establish an ideal American discourse in its place.

Running from the law and possessed by the illegitimate offspring of an angel and a demon, the Reverend Jesse Custer speaks "the Word of God." In the first issue of Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon's *Preacher*, Jesse manifests an ability to control others by invoking a supernatural voice. The rules for using the voice are simple: the voice must be spoken aloud and the hearer must understand the language of the voice. Most frequently, Jesse uses his divine power to escape impending physical harm and to stop antagonists from committing grossly immoral acts, which helps him in his hero's quest to find God and demand from him an accounting for what Jesse considers his crimes against humanity. Jesse's powerful voice sounds out as the dominant voice in a comic series teeming with competing discourses. A multiplicity of

groups in the novel champion why their organizations should maintain power over humanity: angels speak of the divine order of creation, ultra-fundamentalists speak about their pure bloodlines and racial supremacy, and libertines led by the perverse Jesus de Sade speak of their right to engage in all matters of profligacies. At its core, *Preacher* is a book about how individuals and groups use their words to assert power over communities.

Ennis and Dillon released sixty-six monthly issues and nine special issues of *Preacher* from April 1995 to October 2000. The series primarily tells the story of Jesse's search for God after he is possessed by Genesis, the force that gives him the power to speak with the authority of God. Characterized by a loose combination of stereotypes of the God of the Hebrew Scriptures and Christ in the New Testament, the God Jesse pursues exists primarily to serve himself. Jesse learns that he creates new entities—first angels, then humans, and finally Genesis—so that they will love him. Jesse's sense of injustice with a God who would rather be loved than tend to his creation fuels his obsession as he pursues him across America. Once he disposes of God, the preacher becomes the cowboy. Despite that transition, he will continue to preach a sacred message to his audience, but this time he preaches the holiness and power of the western American archetype.

Preacher is infamous for its offensive humor and graphic violence.¹ The series goes out of its way to make its readers uncomfortable, and it does so to reinforce the main character's cowboy morality. Jesse Custer stands as the moral center of *Preacher*, but his morality emanates more from his identification as a protégé of John Wayne than it does from his religious

¹ Nicolas Labarre describes the series as follows: "it is a deliberately blasphemous, violent, and profane epic" ("Meat Fiction" 242), while Niall Kitson explains that it "marked a step up for D.C.'s adult comic imprint Vertigo in terms of sex, violence, and blasphemy" ("Rebel Yells" n.p.).

ordination.² Jesse doles out justice throughout the series, dispatching tyrannical businessmen for taking advantage of small town people, defeating corrupt law enforcement officials, and slaying serial killers. Yet these episodes are narrative digressions; Jesse's main mission is to make God answer for his crimes against humanity. On the way to achieving that goal, he reinstitutes the morality that God has forsaken, and he does so with his own sense of cowboy justice he learns from his father. The night before John Custer is murdered, he tells his son: "An' you be a good guy, Jesse, You gotta be like John Wayne: you don't take no shit off fools, an' you judge a person by what's in 'em, not how they look. An' you do the right thing. You gotta be one of the good guys son: 'cause there's way too many of the bad" ("When the Story Began" 14). Jesse adopts the last sentence of John's charge as his mantra. The offensive jokes in *Preacher* serve, then, to reinforce Jesse's morality compared to God's recklessness with his creation. They also highlight the series' condemnation of Christianity. Throughout the series, Ennis and Dillon pair sexual and physical jokes with religious commentary. One of the antagonists in Issue #13, "Came a Pale Rider," is Jésus de Sade, the Lord of the Gomorrah People and a pedophile. The allusions to Christ and to the Marquis de Sade are obvious. Conflating the two figures, Ennis and Dillon seek to offend, and they do so to demonstrate God's hypocrisy. As the series' main antagonist, the Christian God is utterly corrupt and debased. Jesse, following John Wayne's lead, will take "no shit off" either Jésus de Sade or God.

The series takes place in a story world that assumes the reality of God, angels, demons, and various other spiritual entities. Humans in this story exist in a world literally created by God that manifests physical and supernatural characteristics. Not all spiritualities are equal in

² Jim Casey and Marc Petersen interpret Wayne's presence in the novel as a "spirit guide" to Jesse, who "provides a model of masculinity and responsible action fashioned out of a particularly Western ethos" ("Ghosts of Texas" 197).

Preacher, though. For example, Jesse participates in a voodoo ceremony and later receives a religious vision while under the influence of peyote. Neither experience is portrayed negatively; instead, both help him on his journey to dethrone God. Contrasted to these spiritual practices, Christianity in *Preacher* clearly stands as Ennis and Dillon's main target. In an interview for *Writers on Comics Scriptwriting*, Ennis explains that he was fascinated with "the Church, faith, the idea of the keepers of that faith and of the abuses of it." He adds, "Faith...is a fairly harmless thing. It's when people see ways to manipulate other people's faith that the trouble starts. Also, the Christian Church is absolutely stacked with iconography, particularly the Roman Catholic side of things, so you've got great special effects for your horror stories" (76-7). For Ennis, the Christian church provides him both his antagonist and his means of representing that antagonist in visually appealing ways, and the oppressive and visual materials that Christianity offers Ennis and Dillon influence the comic's artistic layout.

Preacher incorporates a panel structure that emphasizes the narrative's rebellious, iconoclastic attitude. The series' panel structure features thick black, jagged panel borders, giving the comic series a fragmented, staccato rhythm.³ The border edges appear torn and are arranged loosely on the page. Panels do not follow a strict pattern, and they jarringly contrast to the basic nine- and six-panel comic page format. They occasionally overlap unevenly on the page, leaving large swaths of white space unfilled. Frequently, characters appear outside of panels, either as free-floating images or as part of a splash page upon which the other panels are superimposed. Stylistically, *Preacher*'s panel structure parallels Modest Mouse's guitar parts in "Cowboy Dan": jagged panels pace the story like Brock's distorted power chords, while free-

³ Labarre argues that *Preacher*'s uses a fragmented, ragged panel structure to resist distinctions between the "real" and "fiction" in the story ("Meat Fiction" 248).

floating images pull the reader out of the flow like the dissonant sound of Brock's bent harmonics. Modest Mouse's song jolts the listener into feeling Cowboy Dan's frustration. *Preacher*'s structure shocks its readers into feeling the chaos of a world mistreated by God. Specifically, it does this through its manipulation of the gutter and through its page layout.

Preacher's manipulation of the gutter forces readers into an uncomfortable and disorienting reading experience. Since the panel borders are jagged, the gutters between those panels appear to be just as disorganized. The gutter on a comic page provides much of the narrative flow because it forces readers to create the sensory action between the static images. Scott McCloud explains this process in his book *Understanding Comics*: "And despite its unceremonious title, the gutter plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics! Here in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea."⁴ He continues, "Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure [observing the parts but perceiving the whole] allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" (66-67). Although its manipulation of the gutter does not halt the "continuous, unified reality" of its narrative, *Preacher* consistently disrupts its narrative flow. Ennis and Dillon frequently "squeeze" the gutter between panels, and they often choose to do away with it altogether. The claustrophobic gutters in *Preacher* calls attention to the action

⁴ I ground my analysis of *Preacher* in the now older formalism of Scott McCloud and Will Eisner intentionally. Recent scholarship in comics has taken a turn towards the semiotic, which is best represented in the 2007 English translation of Thierry Groentseen's 1999 *The System of Comics*. Semiotic approaches to comics scholarship produces insightful analysis, but I find it also carries with it an attempt to legitimize the study of comics in academia, a move I see neither necessary nor interesting. Furthermore, my intention with *Preacher*, as with the other texts this study analyzes, is to argue for a unified evangelistic message, which the dissection that frequently accompanies semiotics disallows.

between the images so that reading becomes a conspicuous and deliberate process on the part of readers, which forces them to remain aware of the narrative's artificial rhythm.

Thinking about the narrative rhythm, readers cannot help but be aware of their role in creating the narrative. McCloud emphasizes the extent to which readers and comics writers collaborate to create the story: "Every act committed to paper by the comics artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice. An equal partner in crime known as the reader" (68). Of course, readers of all texts collaborate with writers in order to give plots life. But *Preacher* consistently emphasizes this point to its readers. Its gutter manipulation asks readers to remember their role in Jesse's story. As Jesse assembles his case against God, readers of the series assemble the story in an act of solidarity with Jesse. They help create the narrative, but they also take charge of the narrative structure just as Jesse subverts God's narrative. For Rushkoff, the act of reading across the gutter is itself a metaphor for religious experiences that "make human beings who are trapped within panels aware of the gutter beyond—even for just a fleeing moment, in the obscure shadows of inference" ("Looking for God" xii). Rushkoff's metaphor has its limits, but it nicely evokes the kind of participation that *Preacher* invites. Constantly made aware of the narrative's stylized panels, readers see both individual elements and the larger picture at the same time, which makes possible the comic's critique of the Christian metanarrative.

In his seminal work on comics, *Comics and Sequential Art*, Will Eisner explains the tendency of comic book readers to see the whole page first: "On a print page where the reader first scans all the panels on the page, the concentration on each panel is more leisurely" (171). Eisner is interested here in the fact that single-panel digital comics encourage readers to move to the next panel as quickly as possible in order to maintain the narrative flow. Print comics usually present a full page of panels, and their readers slow down (compared to the pace used when

reading digital comics) to peruse the entire assembly of panels before commencing to read them in narrative order. *Preacher*'s layouts present the readers with a non-fluid structure. To be clear, the narrative flows relatively uninterrupted throughout the series; however, the page layouts, replete with thick borders, superimposed panels, and free-floating images, call attention to the chaos at the heart of the story. McCloud explains that "closure in comics is far from continuous and anything but involuntary," and he adds that "the reader's deliberate, voluntary closure is comics' primary means of simulating time and motion" (68-9). *Preacher*'s seemingly haphazard layouts further remove the reader from the narrative. Jesse Custer works to dethrone God and in the process dissolve the master narrative of Christianity. The series' page structure asks its readers to similarly consider that God's narrative is broken, jagged, and superimposed. At the same time, as *Preacher* goes out of its way to offend and tear down religious discourses it recognizes the centrality of religious discourse in American fiction. It does this through its representation of the Word of God, through its criticism of religious control, and through its making sacred the tropes of the cowboy and the American immigrant.

The visual representations of religious discourse in *Preacher* emphasize its critique of power structures in the series. As a comic, the narrative uses both images and words to portray Jesse's superpower. Near the end of the first issue, "The Time of the Preacher," Jesse uses the Word of God for the first time (see Figure 1). Ennis and Dillon set the scene at dusk. Although the layout of the page consists of a full-page image with seven panels superimposed on top of it, the first panel dominates the page. In it, Jesse looks straight ahead at the reader. His pupils glow two shades of red, and the whites of his eyes appear pink. His clothes are tattered, and his skin appears greenish-white in the dusky light. He speaks in two speech bubbles, both of which are outlined in red and consist of red words on a white background, to the sheriffs who have him



Figure 1. From *Preacher*: "The Time of the Preacher" (April 1995). Copyright ©1995 Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon.

surrounded. First, he commands them to “Drop the guns, all of you.” Then he adds, “And let us go” (37). Jesse’s sentence structure and word choice are simple. He issues direct commands and is immediately obeyed. Jesse’s power is undeniably authoritative. Even though he speaks to the sheriffs, he looks directly at the reader. The effect is clear: Ennis and Dillon use this panel to present the hero in his power.

The image of Jesse using the Word of God for the first time evokes the comic book trope of the superhero suiting up, but it does so to subvert that trope. Jesse does not have to put on a costume nor does he have to arm himself to use his power. He displays his super-powered persona instantly through his words. Since he manifests his power through verbal words, he only has to speak to overpower his enemies. The page is roughly split in half by five panels depicting the sheriff’s force dropping their weapons. The small, uniform, rectangular panels proceed in a hurried pace, simultaneously depicting the police force surrendering their arms in quick succession. All but one of the snapshots are close-ups of the guns falling from an officer’s hand. The fourth illustrates the helicopter gunman’s rifle falling on the head of a sheriff on the ground in slapstick fashion. Jesse has disarmed the police, but he has also made fools of them. Significantly, they disarm at the moment he demonstrates his power. So while Ennis and Dillon present Jesse as the super-powered hero, they effectively “unsuit” the enemies to demonstrate that Jesse reduces the authorities to figures of comic relief. Jesse rewrites the narrative of authority that has previously controlled the *Preacher* universe.

The panels’ dark borders and the page’s layout reinforce Jesse’s subversive act. They do so in order to show the complexity of Jesse’s own feelings towards power. The whole page displays the image with a symmetry based on Jesse’s face. His red eyes and verbal commands at the top of the page dominate the field of view, while his profile at the bottom of the page, an

image roughly the same size as the top image, brings closure to the page. The bottom image actually contains all of the page's panels, which emphasizes its importance and demands that readers contemplate the page's action in light of Jesse's concluding pose and words. In this image he looks at the reader again, this time over his shoulder. His pose, while not meek, certainly exhibits more vulnerability than the first panel. He asks Tulip and Cassidy, "I gotta tell you, I'd sure as hell appreciate a ride out of here." Over Jesse's shoulder sits a panel with a close-up shot of Tulip's eyes and Cassidy's sunglasses. Tulip remarks, "...like the Word of God," repeating the phrase Jesse used to describe the voice inside his head and, thus, giving his power a name. Tulip and Cassidy are as vulnerable to Jesse's power as the sheriffs, but their eye-line is roughly in line with Jesse's. Tulip and Cassidy, the first a hit-woman on the run and the second a vampire, see "eye to eye" with Jesse and are his equals, whereas the authorities are powerless in Jesse's presence. Because of the nature of his powers, Jesse is potentially all-powerful, but he regularly concedes that power to his friends, displaying a clear need for their companionship by honoring their autonomy. Throughout the series, Ennis and Dillon use eyes to develop both characterization and the narrative's critique of power. They do so on this page to show both Jesse's power and his understanding that the power Genesis gives him needs to be used with discretion. Jesse's quest is, among other things, a quest to limit the power of an omnipotent God by putting an end to God's discourse—a discourse that flows from the demand that people love him because he created them. Jesse is able to fulfill his mission because he places restrictions on his own all-powerful voice and because he uses it to institute a new religious discourse in the series.

Ennis and Dillon turn to narratives of the cowboy and the immigrant to celebrate a new source of admiration and worship. The trade paperback *Ancient History*, which collects the

background stories for some of *Preacher*'s secondary characters, presents two introductions Ennis composed to tell the story of the Saint of Killers, a Western vigilante turned Angel of Death. The first, a foreword to the trade paperback, describes Ennis's fascination with Western films, the genre that inspired him to create *Preacher* and the Saint of Killers, who Ennis based on a combination of various Clint Eastwood and Lee Marvin characters. For Ennis, the Western is myth, legend, whitewashing, and means of interrogating the past. It offers him a chance to tell an appealing narrative while also breaking down hallowed stories. He writes, "You don't have to read too much about the American West to realize that you're dealing with a myth. The legend of the frontier is a frayed tapestry at best." He continues the thread a few paragraphs later, "The American myth originally intended to disguise [the] rather feisty past is, of course, the Western...Its makers seek to understand what went before, to portray the men and women who made history, warts and all. What began as a whitewash of the past has become a tool to interrogate it." Like Jesse Custer, Ennis grew up watching John Wayne movies on television. He sees in the figure of the cowboy a hero who can simultaneously fortify and deconstruct the myth of the American West. Characters played by John Wayne, Lee Marvin, and Clint Eastwood poke holes in the idea of a noble hero who would "stand four-square for what was right and just," but they would also reinforce the heroic qualities of men who, if they did not actually tame the west, somehow were superior to it and the people who populated it.

For Ennis, the legends of cowboys and gunslingers are ineffable and can transcend the critique they offer and to perpetuate popular imaginations of American ideals. Ennis's defense of the western tellingly reveals his belief that the fictional stories overcome the inconsistencies and contradictions they portray: "And yet, for all that, the western remains a form of legend. The stories happen long ago and far away, in a land so wild and brutal we cannot imagine it. The

characters who ride its streets and canyons are giants, the words they speak echo forever, and when the tale is told the sun goes down on a country as big as the world” (Foreword, *Ancient History*). Ennis’s final phrase suggests the allure of the American Imaginary, while still acknowledging its inconsistencies. His phrase, “a country as big as the world” speaks to the mythical expansiveness documented in the 35mm VistaVision of John Ford’s *The Searchers*, but it also speaks to the exceptionalism of the American West and its ability to represent the world’s wildness and, possibly, its redemption. The American West in *Preacher* can live up to such a task because Ennis combines the historical, the mythic, and the sacred within it.

Ennis’s second introduction, composed of a two-page splash and five extradiegetic boxes, introduces the Saint of Killers’ story in a deliberate confusion of history and fiction (see Figure 2). Guest artist Steve Pugh illustrates the splash so that it compresses a jumble of standard Western images: a gunman about to draw his six-shooter, a gang of riders emerging from a desolate canyon, a dusty cattle drive, indigenous Americans unhorsing and killing a cavalryman, a rattler entwined around a cow’s skull, and blood-stained Aces and Eights, the dead man’s hand. The images bleed into each other, competing for the viewer’s attention with kinetic intensity. Ennis and Pugh superimpose the extradiegetic boxes to praise the myth of the West by alluding to the fictions of history and film. The third box begins and ends: “There was Bowie and Crockett and Travis and a hundred and eighty men, who took the Alamo with them into history...and William Munny; who one black night in 1880 was to scorn a hail of bullets and kill six men, and ride out unscathed from a town too terrified to face him.” The narrator concludes the page in two short boxes: “It’s been so long since then that I no longer know just which of them are truth...and which are only legends” (“Saint of Killers” 2). The story that follows disabuses its readers of any glory or heroism associated with the west as it documents one

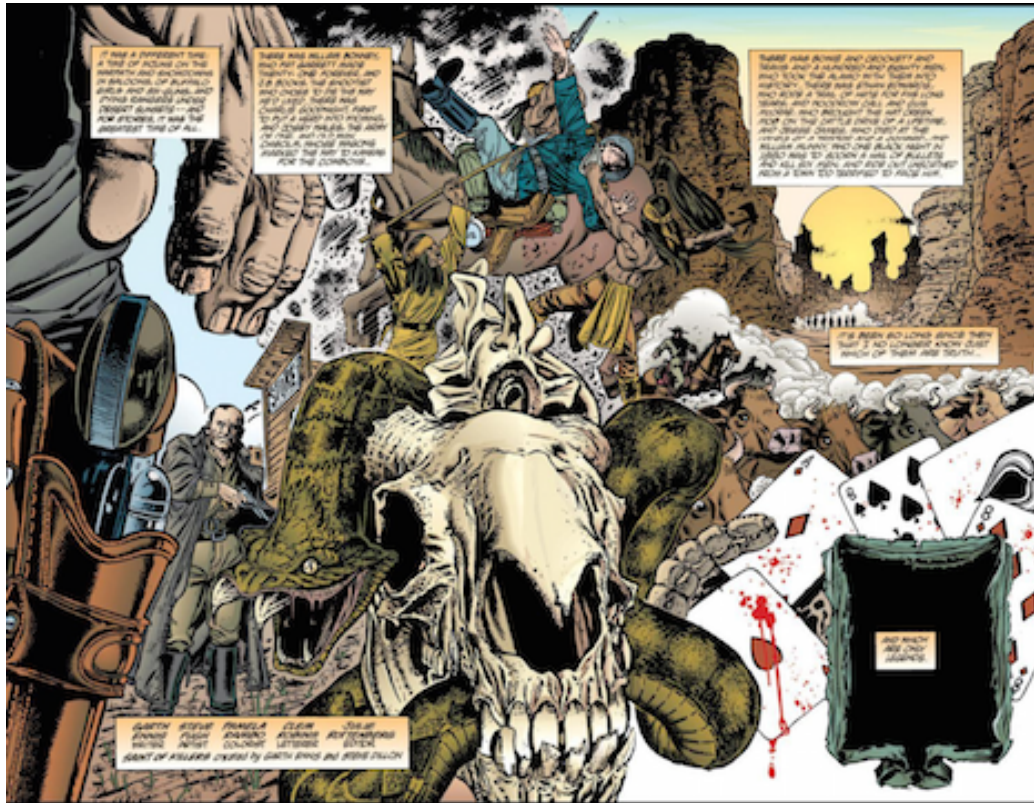


Figure 2. From *Preacher: Ancient History* (1998). Copyright ©1998 Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon.

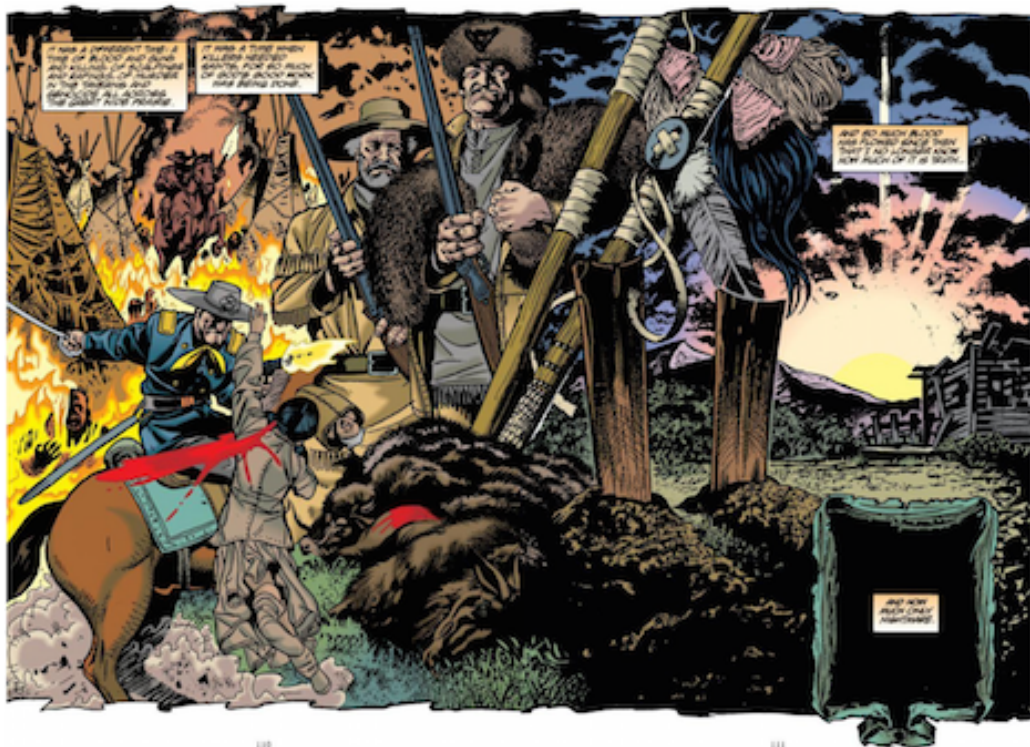


Figure 3. From *Preacher: Ancient History* (1998). Copyright ©1998 Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon.

slaughter after another. Hence, the story ends with another splash page, this time illustrating the white man's massacre of both the indigenous Americans and the buffalo (see Figure 3). The tentatively historical Bowie, Crockett, and Travis no longer stand apart from Eastwood's fictional Munny. In the introduction they are historical heroes who created a movement. However, the concluding splash suggests that these heroic men of history are no less imaginary than Munny. The American West and the characters that populate it can withstand the historical atrocities and fictional inaccuracies Ennis identifies because it has become for him a sacred source of inspiration.

As a *Preacher* story, the Saint of Killers's backstory is told in broad strokes and gory details. Despite the atrocities every one of its antagonists and protagonists perpetuates, the story returns to the idea of the Saint of Killers as a mythically great personality. Like Eastwood and Marvin's characters, he represents the idea of a powerful man, one who "takes no shit off fools." Although he has slaughtered an entire town, both the criminals who have taken it over and the innocent people who populated it, the Saint remains for Ennis and for *Preacher* an object of admiration.⁵ He is like the men at the Alamo simultaneous "cracked legend" and ideal hero. In Issue #59, "Texas, By God," Ennis deflates the legend of Jim Bowie and Davey Crockett: "Was Bowie a slaver, a drunk, a psychotic? Did Crockett beg for his life before Santa Anna, for mercy that could never come? Are heroes nothing more than desperate men? No. To dwell on such things is to miss the point" (2). The point that *Preacher* makes is that the American West, despite its contradictions and fictions, stands as something to be revered and admired because it

⁵ Rather than reading the Saint of Killers as a revision of Eastwood and Marvin characters, Jim Casey and Marc Petersen take him to be an embodiment of the harsh Western environment: "Unlike the other cowboys who venture into these arid demesnes, however, the Saint of Killers strides through the wilderness not as an adversary but as an embodiment of its desolating power. He is at home in the desert because he is the desert" ("Ghosts of Texas" 204).

provided an imaginary for later generations to adopt. Provocatively, Jesse cannot do this with God. Jesse does not worship God because of his hypocrisy. That he can worship John Wayne and the fictional heroes of Western history and legend even though they reveal similar contradictions reveals the narratives' willful discarding of one belief system for another based on the creators' passion rather than the discourses' moral consistency.

Preacher replaces God with the figure of the cowboy as the preeminent ideal because it allows Ennis and Dillon to exalt the free individual who roams the West over the person who serves a divine figure. Although the focus of the ideal changes from a religious figure to a non-religious one, the new discourse remains resolutely centered on the sacred. Tulip and Jesse complete their arc by riding off into the sunset. When Tulip asks Jesse where they will live, he casually remarks, "America." He then tells her, "I don't know if I told you, but I never really wanted to be a preacher...." She then asks what they will do, but he lets her figure it out: "Hell, girl...Can't you guess?" ("A Hell of a Vision" 21-22). The implication is clear: Jesse gives up the pulpit for the saddle. He and Tulip will live in America, spreading the cowboy ethic to those they meet. At the same time, the Saint of Killers, who has helped Jesse kill God, sits on the heavenly throne to find rest from his tumultuous past.⁶ The scene suggests that the Saint will let humans choose their own paths by closing his eyes to what they choose to do. Though it is tempting to see the Saint instituting anarchy, the overwhelming charisma of Jesse's ending suggests that he will spread the gospel of the cowboy. Jesse will institute the law and order of the West, something that he has done since the first issue. He assumes the identity of the cowboy

⁶ Christine Hoff Kraemer and A. David Lewis argue that exchanging one divine figure for another further validates religious discourse about the inability to fully represent God: "Comics...actually avoid idolatry by continually destroying and recreating images of the divine in a process that demonstrates God's ineffability" (*Graven Images* 7).

hero wandering America to help those who seek a new life. With its final images of a redeemed Cassidy, the series foreshadows Jesse's eventual success.

Cassidy's final words, which are also the final words in *Preacher*, illustrate the new sacred discourse the series promotes. Resurrected as a human and no longer a vampire, he says to the western landscape, which stands in for Jesse, "I think yeh were right, Jesse. I think I'll try actin' like a man" ("A Hell of a Vision" 25). Cassidy is reborn at the end of *Preacher*. God resurrects him as a human being in exchange for "betraying" Jesse, which is not actually an act of betrayal because the deal also mandates that Jesse will be reborn without the power of Genesis and the Word of God: Jesse Custer has to die so that Cassidy gets new life (Jesse Custer is an anagram for Secret Jesus).⁷ Cassidy's salvation reinforces another key component of the American Imaginary idealized in *Preacher*. Cassidy, the "sub-human" resurrected as a new man, is the prototypical immigrant of American myth. He flees Ireland and family because neither have a place for him. Politically, both the Irish rebels and the Imperialist British soldiers want him dead. Cassidy's outcast status extends to his family as well: now that he has transformed into a vampire, he feels ostracized as an abomination that would horrify them. He finds solace and salvation in America, first through the potential it offers and then through the blood sacrifice of a Western hero: the cowboy Jesse Custer.

The pages of *Preacher* read like a sermon in that they ask readers first to learn from and then to adopt Jesse's revision of Protestant discourses. Each page invokes the role of God in human affairs, and it does so to reveal God's duplicitous behavior. Jesse and his friends

⁷ Casey and Petersen argue that the resurrections of Jesse and Cassidy (and Tulip) symbolize the series' indulgence in the myth of recreating oneself in America: "All of the characters in *Preacher* become conflated into the symbol of the revenant, the one who returns from the grave, such that these polyvalent symbols of the undead offer intersecting fantasies of return and connection" ("Ghosts of Texas" 207).

constantly participate in Biblical stories and tropes, such as Sodom and Gomorrah, counting grains of sand, and the redemption of humans through substitutionary sacrifice, permitting Ennis and Dillon to recast the Biblical narrative. Furthermore, the pages explicate by way of illustration. They show readers how to act and live like Jesse as he preaches his particular morality. Moreover, his morality has a physical and a spiritual component. They are physical in their emphasis on tough talk and never “taking shit off fools,” providing revenge fantasies for the reader. They are also metaphysical in that they locate the justification for one’s behavior in the mythical and imaginary cowboy who becomes a sacred object of veneration. Cassidy’s final arc serves as the sermon’s application. He is the prodigal son, the man who built his house on the sand, the penitent who gives his life for his friend, and the redeemed soul who is resurrected so that he can emulate the divine figure of the cowboy. *Preacher* does not want to get rid of religious discourse as much as it wants to redefine the source of its inspiration. It uses its imagery and evocation of the American Imaginary to teach a new gospel to its readers.

Preacher visually represents the Word of God, whereas *High as the Horses’ Bridles* represents the disappointment of not seeing the word of God. Both texts focus on the imagery of religious discourse. Jesse pursues God with the help of spiritual visions and encounters various supernatural beings from the Bible and mythology along the way. Josie and his father, Gill Laudermilk, revel in supernatural visions of Christ’s conquering power at the Second Coming, while striving to worship God in the purest way they know. Despite its text-based format, *Horses’ Bridles* examines the images and imagery of the Protestant religion as earnestly as *Preacher*. Like *Preacher* it is a book about representing religious discourse in sermons, and more specifically, in religious imagery. Sermons begin and end the novel, and both of those sermons verbalize visions to large gatherings of people on celebration days. The novel opens with

Josiah's sermon to a congregation of millennialist Protestants during an end-times conference, and it ends with Josie's ancestor, Orr Laudermilk, internalizing a fevered apocalyptic sermon at a camp revival on the Kentucky frontier.⁸ Meanwhile, Gill strives with an ascetic fervor to manifest similar visions in the book's middle section. He desperately tries to access the visions his progenitor and son received. Throughout the novel, these apocalyptic visions control the Laudermilks, haunting their present problems and shaping their hoped for resolutions.

As with *Preacher*, *Horses' Bridles* examines how characters interact with religious discourse sensually. *Preacher* portrays a world saturated with manifestations of both supernatural and sacred entities, but *Horses' Bridles* reserves such manifestations for its opening and concluding scenes, thus giving them a resonance that shapes both the characters' and readers' experience with the book's large middle section. Visions—both the potential they promise and the disappointment they often create—consume characters as they deal with the grief of losing family members and the disappointed expectations of not living in a secure family structure. Visions of apocalypse, judgment, and redemption also empower Josie, Gill, and Orr. For Josiah and Orr, visions of a supernatural power conquering temporal realities come to them involuntarily. As both a cerebral and physical invasion, these visions dominate Josiah and Orr such that they surrender to them with ecstasy. Gill, on the other hand, seeks visions with a fervor driven by his conviction that he *should* receive special dispensation from God because of his earnest devotion. His visions have none of the poetic or rhetorical effect of Josiah's and Orr's.

⁸ Josiah changes his name to Josie a few years after giving this sermon. The change in name roughly corresponds with his loss of faith. In this study, "Josiah" refers to the child preacher; "Josie" refers to the person who gradually accepts but continually struggles with the fact that he cannot believe in religion. In the first part of his interview with *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*, Cheshire explains that he thinks of the main character as "Josie" ("Religious History and 'Distorted Takes on Genre'").

They provoke stark images nonetheless. Visions and the act of seeing dominate the narrative discourse such that seeing becomes the central metaphor of the book. Characters question how they see their role in the world: are they a prophet, visionary, or simply another person looking for meaning? Characters question how they should determine what is real: should they live according to the visions they have received or according to their experiences in the world? Characters question how they see America: is it God's nation, prepared by him to usher in the apocalypse? These are philosophical and religious questions, but in *Horses' Bridles* these questions arise out of the characters' contemplation of physical and spiritual images, and they highlight how religious discourse draws on the senses to speak about something that is the extra-sensual.

The text revels in sensory imagery. In addition to visions, voices and fevers accompany the Laudermilk's communion with the divine. Josie explains in the second section of the novel that he heard a voice first and then received his vision. "I definitely heard a voice. Not a 'voice-like sound,' and psychiatrists are careful to point out the difference, but a voice" (49). He later adds, "What was it I heard back then? I can't remember, not precisely, but it was something like 'Do it now.'" And then the vision comes: "Like it was yesterday, I can see the horse, right out there in front of me, coming through the back wall of the theater. By the lobby doors and under the balcony; the rider wore a golden crown" (50). Josie's words indicate the degree to which the voice inspired him. They also suggest that the voice needed a vision to lend it authority. Josiah does not start his prophetic sermon when he hears the voice; instead, he waits until the voice gives him a vision as well. Once the two work in Josiah, he cedes control of the sermon. He ends his description of his prophetic sermon not by sharing spiritual insight but by describing his thoughts as he speaks. Significantly, his thoughts wander from his spoken words and comment

on what he feels as he speaks: “I was standing at the edge of a high cliff, and I looked at my notes on the floor... Was I shouting just now? I think I was shouting” (51). Josiah succumbs to the voice speaking through him. Voice and vision take over Josiah such that he does not know that he is speaking. Religious discourse in *Horses’ Bridles* overpowers the Laudermilks by hijacking their senses, and the experience with the ineffable transforms their lives profoundly.

Like *Preacher*, *Horses’ Bridles* tells the story of a child preacher who loses his faith as he matures, and like Jesse, Josie embraces a religious discourse that he redefines rather than rejecting religion or faith altogether. The novel’s structure points to Josie’s ongoing negotiation with belief in God. Cheshire tells Josie’s story in three sections: “Woe to the Land Whose Child is King,” “The Ends,” and “No More Dominion.” The middle section, which dominates most of the novel’s length—taking up 228 of its 302 pages—presents the story of Josie’s return home from Seal Beach, California to Richmond Hill, Queens so that he can check in on his father, who has manifested symptoms of senility. Josie narrates this large section, which Cheshire divides into four sub-sections titled “East,” “West,” “East,” and “East and West.” Moving across America and through time, Josie narrates his life after his prophetic sermon and highlights the most significant moments of his life, such as his gradual loss of faith, the presumed abduction of his best friend Issy, the death of his girlfriend Bhanu, his move to the west coast, the formation of his retail computer business, his marriage to and divorce from Sarah, his mother’s death from cancer, and his father’s eventual death from old age and senility. Josie interprets his experiences as they relate to his and his father’s faiths in that he filters every memory through both his doubt and his father’s enduring religious passion. Although he never completely abandons belief, his non-religious experience on the west coast stands opposed to the religious turmoil he encounters on the east coast and his movement across America symbolizes his wavering belief. The first

“East” symbolizes his need to confront his old faith. “West” details his romantic involvement with Bhanu, his Hindu girlfriend, and Sarah, his Jewish ex-wife. He explains that his “fight and flight from the angels” began with Bhanu and continued with Sarah. The second “East” subsection tells of his eventual reconciliation with spiritual longing. “East and West” complete his synthesis of doubt and belief. Thus, by the end of the middle section he is able to understand that both his east and west coast experiences help him resolve his spirituality.

The structure of the novel highlights the importance of resurrection in Josie’s story. The middle section’s sub-headings reveal as much. For him, the east represents death, most notably the disappearance and presumed death of Issy, the freak accident that killed Bhanu, and his mother Ida’s succumbing to cancer. The middle section’s main title “The Ends” alludes to the ends that Josie has to confront. Some of these ends are unavoidable tragedies and others are indulgences. His friend and business partner Amad half-jokingly tells him, “You are what they call a necrophile. You love what is dead” (118). Indeed, Josie enjoys reminiscing about the dead, but he is equally obsessed with the unrecoverable past in general. As the middle section opens, he wallows in self-pity and doubt. His father’s mental condition concerns him, but Josie is predominately preoccupied with his own failure. The west should be a place of renewal, and although it was for a time, the money he made in computers has evaporated. Josie’s movement from the east to the west and back to the east comprises an act of repairing both the present and the past. By the end of the section, he can move forward with his life because he has recalibrated his present circumstances and overcome the demons from his past. At this point, he is able to join east and west by bringing his father west to provide the care he needs while also renewing efforts to resurrect his business. Josie literally recovers his father and his failing business, and these physical actions mirror his inner redemption. For Josie, the synthesis between past and

present, failure and success, is both spiritual and physical. By the end of the section, Josie still renounces his childhood faith, but he has achieved new life. He has resurrected his social and financial lives, and he has saved his relationship with his father.

The first and last sections of the book subvert the synthesis of the middle section. Cheshire sees these sections as bookends to the main narrative of the book (“Religious History”), and the shadow they cast over the novel’s middle section recasts Josie’s conclusions. The first section of the novel opens in Queens, with a twelve-year old Josiah giving a sermon for the 1980 convention of the New York chapter of Brothers and Sisters in the Lord.⁹ The third section of the book, “No More Dominion,” returns to 1801 to tell the story of Josie’s ancestor, Orr, a boy who believes he sees his mother resurrected at a camp revival in the frontier woods of Kentucky. Josie spends the middle section of the book reconciling his unbelief, but readers begin and end the novel with rhetorically powerful and seemingly real prophetic visions. Moreover, Josiah’s rapturous sermon parallels Orr’s febrile conversion. At the end of the first section, Josiah triumphantly proclaims the date of the Second Coming; at the end of the third section, Orr internalizes the charismatic rhetoric of a camp meeting revivalist. Structurally, the first and third sections are predominately told from the third-person point of view, but their final paragraphs shift from third- to first-person narration. Josie and Orr commandeer the narrative voice in their religious ecstasy. Stylistically, the concluding paragraphs of each section punctuate the sermons with an emphatic finale. Thematically, the appropriation of the narrative voice indicates the

⁹ In the second part of his interview with *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*, Cheshire explains that he invented this particular religious group so that he could explore religion in America in a more comprehensive way than focusing on one denomination would allow him to do: “At some point, I decided to invent a religion. One that was sort of a conflation of the Witnesses and your average millennialist American Protestant. Which there are a lot of” (“The Urge Towards Making Meaning”).

power of religious discourse to overpower listeners such that they adopt the religious voice as their own.

Before Josiah commandeers the narrative voice of *Horses' Bridles* first section, the narrative discourse relies primarily on imagery and ekphrasis for rhetorical effect. The novel's imagery attributes a kinetic energy to the setting of the opening scene, while depicting the people gathered in the movie theater turned church as a crowd paralyzed with hope. The narrative's first lines indicate the congregation's passive state:

They sit.

Below a painted ceiling looming high overhead, they sit and they wait.

The ceiling yawns, stretching like one vast wing warming oh so many eggs. (3)

Cheshire illustrates the congregation's passive expectation of a message that will dramatically reorient their lives. So while the first line, "they sit," could indicate the action of sitting, the opening's contrast between the inactive audience and dynamic architecture suggests that the idle crowd has already sat. Throughout the initial scene, the text juxtaposes the still crowd with the movement of the painted ceiling. Although it should be the static object in the room, it is the ceiling that "yawns, stretching" and "warming" the audience. Later, the narrator commands readers to

See the night clouds lolling, drifting above their heads across an expanse
of blue plaster sky. Like vapors released, dust climbs blue-gray and upward like
prayers.

Now see the ceiling stretch outward and above the seated people. (3)

In this section, painted objects—specifically, the ceiling of the Howard Theater, which is painted to depict the night sky—take on the lively action that should be ascribed to the members of the

audience. Painted clouds, inanimate but devout dust particles, and “affixed points of light,” impress upon readers the intensity with which the congregation attributes religious connotations to these artistic representations.

Just as the painted ceiling induces the congregation to read religious meaning into their surroundings, the narrator compels readers to read significance into the imagery of the book. Readers are told to “see the night clouds lolling,” a physically impossible task because they are given only words. The text conspicuously asks readers to stop and imagine the painted night sky, and it asks them to consciously consider the way artistic representation affects how they interpret the scene and how they interpret the community of believers gathered for the church convention. The narrative’s use of ekphrasis is telling. *Horses’ Bridles* examines inextinguishable faith in a man who has denied his faith, and it considers how a non-material thing like faith affects a man living in a physical world. Similarly, it asks its readers to remain aware of the process of imagining words on the page. *Horses’ Bridles* puts its readers and its characters in the same position by emphasizing the ways humans impregnate art with meaning and how they give static representations dynamic power. For example, the fictional congregation sits beneath the painted sky, attributing to it a lifelike quality of motion. To the front of the auditorium, they see a replica of Venice’s Rialto Bridge: “Not just any stage beneath any painted sky. Up there, you’ll find no less than the heavens of Venice. You want proof—the famed Rialto Bridge, one tenth of its original size, a reconstruction, spans the top width of the stage” (4). The text introduces the theater’s interior as it reminds readers of its artifice. Twice the narrator indicates that the bridge is a “reconstruction” and “one tenth its original size,” and twice the narrator addresses the reading audience, first telling them of the bridge and then, as if anticipating readers’ incredulity, proving to them the fantastical quality of the bridge. *Horses’ Bridles* reveals artifice as it

maintains it: like the congregation anticipating “a description of this world. And the next” (5), readers enter the world of the book through mediated artistic objects.

Horses' Bridles' ekphrasis teaches readers how to read the text while also interrogating the effect of faith on believers and non-believers. The opening pages achieve two purposes: first, they describe the fictional congregation's sense of expectation as they sit in a refurbished theater, which is an imitation of the world to come; second, they ask readers to consider the text's real-world influence as an abstraction that works on the life of the reader by affecting their “real life” experiences through their imagination. The painted ceiling, alive with glowing stars and wispy clouds, radiates and swirls around the seated congregation, demonstrating how the audience attaches beauty and authenticity to a representation of the night sky and the Venetian bridge. The congregation attributes to the bridge and sky layered significance in that they are both an imitation of the physical original and an indicator of the spiritual: “More than four thousand worshippers sitting, and anxiously waiting for the day's first prayer for His Kingdom Come on Earth as it Will Be in Heaven, and the long falling rain of salvation, falling stars, blackened sun, and fiery burning rain” (5). The worshippers already believe in the sacred apocalypse to come. As such, they amplify the theater's significance such that it reveals spiritual truths only hinted at by the interior design. Whereas they originally marveled at the way the painted stars shone realistically, here they see the stars as they believe they will be on the day of Christ's return. Beautiful reproductions metamorphose into dire descriptions of God's wrath. The narrative produces a similar abstraction. It describes a story about faith, it presents itself to readers to receive it, and it asks readers to consider physical manifestations of abstract concepts. Josie sees through the crowd's tendency to read the art as sacred signifiers, but he continues to appreciate the power of artistic representation to affect material life. His story's pathos hinges on how or if

readers attribute meaning to a literary representation. He navigates his own disbelief—his reluctance to attribute spiritual meaning to his everyday life—but he is continually tempted to read spiritual depths to his experiences. Ekphrasis in *Horses' Bridles* calls attention to the ways that art asks its audience to accept the object of representation and to assign significance to it. Josie sees this phenomenon as an act of faith, and he sees the accumulating technology of the twenty-first century as an increasingly effective distraction to faith.

Examples of technology in *Horses' Bridles* exemplify the ways in which technology replaces and diminishes religious discourse. Josie opens the book's middle section by describing his taxi ride from LaGuardia to Richmond Hill. The cab driver's phone conversation dominates the scene, signifying Josie's isolation from the driver and introducing a disembodied voice on the other end of the phone call: "He was laughing, fast-talking into his ear clip phone...[Abdullah] let loose another howling and happy laugh. He saw me in his mirror and threw me a smiling nod. Pointed at his phone and looked at me like, this guy's really killing me" (37). Incorporeal voices permeate *Horses' Bridles*. In the next subsection, Josie analyzes the vision he received in the Howard Theater and explains that it was preceded by a voice. The distinction between Abdullah's phone conversation and the divine command Josie hears are clear: Josie grew up in a world that allowed for direct communication from a disembodied, spiritual entity; fifteen years later, digital voices replace ethereal ones. From Josie's point of view, Abdullah's conversation is one-sided. He hears Abdullah's laughter, sees his reactions, and has to imagine the person on the other end of the line—or try to ignore it altogether. Josie once communed with a spiritual voice while others looked on and waited to hear him mediate that voice's message. A decade and a half after the convention, digital communication replicates the predominately significant event in Josie's life and it does so to suggest its insignificance. To hear a disembodied voice in the age of

cell phone earpieces is a commonplace occurrence, and Abdullah's Bluetooth earpiece illustrates the banality of disembodied voices in Josie's post-faith life. Throughout the novel's middle subsections, Cheshire repeatedly demonstrates the extent to which technology and commodities replace spiritual expectation and belief.

Technology and its detritus frequently compete with religious discourse to fill Josie's and his family's spiritual expectation, and it often invades religious discourse. On multiple occasions, Josie interprets religious doctrine in terms of *Star Wars*. The science fiction film's monomythic narrative makes it easy to apply to eschatological narratives, and the novel uses *Star Wars* to illustrate the interpretive methods Josiah, a twelve-year-old boy, has available to him. Before giving his sermon, he reads the sky differently than those who see in it the hope for heaven: "he stood there, looking up, the great sky opened above him. He imagined two suns, just like in *Star Wars*, and a butter-yellow moon between them" (6). For the faithful in the audience, the Howard ceiling presages future glory, but Josie, even though he "dropped his Dr. Seuss and picked up Genesis" (22) on his third birthday, sees the science fiction epic in the ceiling. In the midst of his vision, he compares the image of a triumphant Christ on a war horse to Luke Skywalker on a tauntaun. Seeing the image, he "touched the action figure in [his] pocket, and thought of the tauntauns in *The Empire Strikes Back*, the large horselike creatures that walk reared back on their hind legs, and [he] pretended the horse was real" (50). Josie reads the spiritual significance of his vision in terms of action figures and special effects. He can impart truth to the vision because it reminds him of his favorite story, which also happens to be a pop culture juggernaut. In "On *Preacher* (Or, the Death of God in Pictures)," Mike Grimshaw argues that "In its suspicion and rejection of singular meta-narratives, postmodern spirituality turns towards a salvific, redemptive use of pop culture—often against traditional religion and its claims and institutions" (153). Jesse

looks to Hollywood and Spaghetti Westerns to create a new religious discourse. Josiah interprets the established religious discourse with the cultural tools he has available to him so that *Star Wars* acts as a kind of gloss on his apocalyptic visions.

For Josie, the *Star Wars* trilogy allows him to make sense of his church experience. It has an opposite effect on his mother: “Mom used to say, *Star Wars* makes me so nauseous. I mean it’s exciting, Josiah, it is, but the world can never get that way because we won’t last that long. Armageddon’s right around the corner...Sausages simmerin in the Crock-Pot...It’s not easy! she’d say. But not much longer before our Heavenly Father comes home” (56). Josiah reads the apocalypse in light of *Star Wars*; his mother reads it in terms of household gadgets. Josie’s reminiscence indicates the degree to which technology and pop culture overcome spiritual experience. Ida preaches Armageddon, but sausages in the Crock-Pot interrupt her sermon. They underscore, for her, the chores of home life. Her day-to-day responsibilities intrude on her spiritual expectation, but they also show her how and why to anticipate Armageddon.

Horses’ Bridles contrasts physicality with spiritual yearning to examine religious discourse’s ability to influence Josie even after he has lost his faith. For Josie, physical manifestations, specifically technology and sensory experiences, provide him an alternative to the promises of salvation and spiritual victory offered by his church. Josiah first expresses doubts about his faith because of a particularly horrifying realization:

Come the final day, come Armageddon, the blood will flow and fill the streets, high as God’s holy horses, the elder brothers waving me over....

Wait a second now: *Whose* blood?...*Whose blood?* My good mother would one day slip and swim through whose wet blood? (53, emphasis in the original).

As his triumphant sermon winds down and the elders call him off the stage, Josiah begins to think about his prophecy in terms of logical conclusions. His questions are trenchant. The imagery of blood he conjured for the audience unsettles him. He replaces the vision he received with a vision of his own. Seeing his mother live the reality of his prophecy stuns him and allows him to see through the façade that had previously awed him: “Mother would wade through a river of whose dead blood exactly?...I looked up at the sky, at the cosmic ceiling, at the butter-yellow moon, and I don’t know how I’d missed it!...Across the moon was a jagged line like a lightning bolt, a crack in the painted plaster probably not even wide enough for a finger...the ceiling was just a ceiling” (53). The spiritual vision disintegrates for Josiah because he sees the signifier for the signified—he sees that the language he has used relies primarily on representation that breaks down under scrutiny. The thought of blood in the streets repulses him because it is messy, sticky, and because it means people he knows will suffer. The moon represented the Heavens, but it too shows its cracks. At first Cheshire’s pun seems clichéd—there is a literal crack in the artifice—but it reveals an important point in *Horses’ Bridles*: since mediation and representation never communicate the original message with absolute integrity, the best humans can do with religious discourse is to keep maintaining and repairing the representation. Had the cracked been repaired, Josie might not have realized that the “ceiling was just a ceiling.”

Josie sees in physical manifestations of technology and sensory experiences the meaning he has searched for since abandoning his Christian faith. Josie eschews strict religious discourse when he abandons his church. Like Jesse Custer, he replaces his family’s religious discourse with a new religious discourse. For Jesse, the new discourse emanates from the Western cowboy archetype; for Josie, the new discourse grows out of the physical experiences that take place in

what he calls the “Time of In-Between,” which is “outside of place, and inside of sex, of memory and dream, the time of saints, and of the dead we remember. It’s the time of two times at once, of invention...and supernatural knowledge. It’s the time of sticky nostalgic want, false memory, and cheap reminiscence, so be careful. It’s the time of the world, and the world that we want...it’s where my father lives, the time of visions” (263). The Time of In-Between comprises much of the novel’s narrative discourse. Readers live with Josie in the time of “memory and dream,” “the dead we remember,” and “the time of the world, and the world that we want.” Josie spends most of the novel’s middle looking for what the Time of In-Between gives him: namely, opportunities to search for spiritual significance, to be haunted by faith and doubt, and to reconcile the pain of past loss while still living productively in the world. Coming to terms with his father’s “[hunger] and cunning” (262), his mother’s death, the dissolution of his marriage, and Issy’s disappearance requires him to escape what Amad calls his necrophile tendencies. He does this by learning to identify and understand the Time of In-Between as an alternative to both the strict time of living in the world and the fanciful time of living for the next. He gradually learns to accept the Time of In-Between as he develops his faith in a sacred discourse of physical experience combined with, if not “supernatural knowledge,” then certainly supernatural wonder.

Josie can neither believe in the faith of his childhood nor abandon belief altogether, so he learns to read spiritual significance into the common experiences of day-to-day life instead. He is surprised by the transcendence he experiences at the newly renovated Howard Theater, which is now a movie theater. While on a tour, he leaves his group to explore the theater’s structure. He crosses the faux Rialto Bridge, and then he sees a movie screen descend from the ceiling and the projected numbers of a film reel’s opening sequence projected on it: “I didn’t look away. I extended my arm and stood on my toes. I slung a leg over the bridge. I reached out, trying to

touch the screen...I stretched myself and touched the colossal on-screen image of the 1” (225). Josie physically connects with the radiant, oversized image on the screen, feeling the “nylon fibers” and marveling at the projected image. The experience is tangible and luminous. After the house lights come on, he notices something else “beyond the reach of my hand, on the very outer edge of the ceiling, where the ceiling abutted the wall, and not so far from a small Saturn’s wobbly faux rings...the neatly scripted signature: *Harold Lowell, 1965*” (225-6). The name resonates with Josie not because he knows the artist but because he sees in it the mark of a person who “[drug] the heavens down to Earth, because [he] never once imagined in a million years we’d ever get to go up there alive” (264). Josie replaces faith in God with admiration for the human desire to represent transcendence in art. As such, he can now appreciate the defects and marks of humanity in the theater: “The lights came on, showing everything, the bridge beneath my feet, and the countersunk screws holding all of this together, the formed wooden joists above my head” (225). Earlier in his life, the cracked plaster moon pulled Josiah out of his reverie. Here he is able to maintain ecstatic wonder despite seeing the artifice. Moreover, this artifice—the obviousness that the theater was constructed—inspires his reverent awe such that he recognizes holiness in the theater. Whereas it was originally sacred because he believed it to be symbolic of God’s second coming, now it is sacred because it represents the work of people concretizing spiritual passion.

Josie’s transcendent experience in the theater transforms him so that he can unify his material and spiritual identities and then revel in the physical world. Immediately after leaving the theater, he catalogues a series of sensory impressions: “the trees tossed pale green and yellow flowers from their arms and the light breeze made my hair move,” “Across the street was an abattoir for chickens in an extra-wide two-car garage,” and “A tall, zaftig woman in peach velour

crossed the street while nibbling on a hot dog...this made me think of a knish. I wanted a knish” (228). In each of these instances, Josie synthesizes distinct objects: the wind rustles the leaves and his hair, the garage doubles as a slaughter house, the woman’s hot dog inspires Josie’s desire for a knish. Josie notices the generative relationships between objects and the people that maintain life in the city. He identifies wholeness in life, which allows him to grow out of his love of dead things and integrate into the city’s community:

I headed toward the main avenue a few blocks away, toward the subway stair that opened like a hell’s mouth down inside the sidewalk, and I saw the bobbing heads. The bobbing rise of people coming from the trains, and they just kept coming. They were shoulder close and moving fast, on cell phones sharing with their spouses, and they were coming fast my way. I used to look down on them, people like this. I said they were already dead. I said, Let them walk along their walls like rats in search of scraps. But now I saw not some marching millipede, khaki-legged and gruesome—no, I saw the quivering, the miscellaneous, the crowded and alive, busy soul of humanity...Then I turned and joined them, I walked, and I would go wherever they led me. (235)

Josie’s repetition of energetic adjectives and verbs like “bobbing,” “coming,” and “fast” compliment his recognition of the “alive, busy soul of humanity” that has escaped the figurative hell of his judgment. Seeing the community anew, Josie locates the sacred in humanity’s “quivering,” “miscellaneous” life in the Time of In-Between.

Josie’s narrative charts his growth through a crisis of faith. Rather than confronting and answering doubt though, his crisis revolves around his inability to discard faith completely. *Horses’ Bridles* is a story about the persistence of faith in those who do not want it or seek it. It

is, in essence, about the resiliency of faith in America, wherein faith manifests as a permanent aspect of the American condition instead of a conscious choice to believe in a higher power. There exists throughout the novel—woven through Josie’s spiritual conflict and his father’s fundamentalism—an assumption that apocalypse and spiritual redemption are part of the American Imaginary. Josie directly references the discourse of moving west that Jesse Custer’s story champions: “I left under the oldest American spell of all: I ventured west to begin...” (113). Josie calls himself “one of God’s Great American (Would-be) Men” (72), and Gill tells him, “You’re the last one, a long line of God’s men. American men” (240). Gill conceives of godliness as a fundamental aspect of being an American man. Josie denies this association, but part of him feels lost for doing so. The book does not resolve this conflict for Josie; rather, it amplifies it in the final section.

Horses’ Bridles emphasizes the enduring relationship between religious discourse and the American Imaginary, and in doing so, asks readers to contemplate the persistence of Protestant gospel narratives in American discourse. The book’s final section, “No More Dominion,” returns readers to 1801 Kentucky to tell the story of Orr Laudermilk’s moment of conversion at a tent revival. Orr has recently lost his mother, and he and his father burn the canebrake that concealed the men who murdered her. As they work on their farm, they see a gradual train of people headed into the woods for a “camp meeting” (273). Orr’s father sees an economic opportunity, so he leaves his feverish son to sell “luck jars” to the crowd of seekers. Orr, with the help of a free black man, eventually follows his father to the camp, where he sees him battling with a young preacher named Dowse for the attention of the gathered crowd—both men have something to sell. In the midst of the hot-tempered sermon, Orr’s father wagers Dowse that he cannot get God to make it rain, but Dowse prays and the rains come. Orr tries to make his way through the

worshipping crowd of people who have been “slain” in spiritual ecstasy. Almost crushed by the moving throng, Orr is pulled by Dowse onto the stage, despite his father’s protestations. From this vantage point, Orr sees a woman who looks like his mother rise from the fallen crowd, and he internalizes the preacher’s passionate preaching because of this miracle.

Orr’s section is remarkable for two reasons: first, it illustrates the sometimes complimentary, sometimes contentious relationship between American notions of liberty and Christian tenets of liberation; second, it ends with the same narrative style of the novel’s first section, paralleling Josie’s ecstatic submission to a divine voice. The preachers in the final section make constant reference to Christ as liberator. As the first pastor explains, Christ will “set His feet on American soil. He will walk these hills, returning giant of Jesus Christ, oh Great Man of Original Liberty” (289). For this unnamed preacher, the Second Coming of Christ is the ultimate expression of the American project for liberty. Dowse goes one step further. He exclaims, “It was Captain Christ who gave us revolution,” and then later adds, “A constitution...written by the heads of a Wild Beast! This is your land, yours! This place marked by His High Holy Spirit! Heal this place with me, and wait not for the others...make of this land the Lord’s backyard” (296). Dowse rhetorically moves from proclaiming Christ as the spiritual force of the American revolution to dichotomizing a corrupted land and a holy divinity. He institutes the rhetoric of the wayward people that need to be redeemed, even though he has just preached that Christ saved America from the British. Dowse’s leap seems contradictory, but it inaugurates the type of American jeremiad that Gill, his ancestors, and for a brief time, Josie have all preached. By ending the novel with this section, Cheshire forces readers to consider how Americans have inherited a similar spiritual tradition.

Orr's father had commanded his son to stay home, and when he sees him at the revival, he desperately tries to keep him from the preacher. Nevertheless, Orr gravitates toward the crowds and preacher. He sees his resurrected mother, calls out her, and then offers up a prayer: "Deep within his heart, the vessel of his soul, he thanks the preacher and wants to say a prayer, his first prayer...Dear Lord, let it be her...Think on the black sow, how you won't have to kill her after all because Death, I swear, is beaten today. Death be now and forever undone. Amen" (301-2). Cheshire uses the same point of view switch he used to end Josiah's section: "Lay focus on this boy, lay focus on me—O, look at me filling up with breath and divine voice" (33). Both final paragraphs begin with a third-person narrator and end with a passionate first-person prayer. Josiah and Orr internalize the preacherly discourse they have heard. They allow themselves to be overcome with religious passion to the degree that they take over the narrative voice. Josiah and Orr submit because of the visions they have received. The question remains whether or not Josie and Orr seek out the visions or if they come to them unbidden. Bookending the middle section of narrative with rhetorically evocative narrative voices though, Cheshire suggests that the spiritual version of American history is an unavoidable aspect of the American Imaginary.

In the midst of Josiah's prophetic sermon, the narrator comments on Josiah's complete surrender to God and the gifts he receives for that sacrifice: "He sees every dream he will ever have, every way he will become, what he certainly must become: a receptacle, an empty bowl, a deep and lucky cup of God" (32). Josiah believes that he will become God's vessel, the receptacle for God's words to his people. He sees himself as the mediator who has access to the ineffable source and who can faithfully represent it to those who will listen. Since the prophetic vision fails to materialize, Josie abandons his faith and eventually institutes a new sacred discourse built on the power of representation to connect people across time and in the present

moment. It is Orr who has the final word though, and he uses it to proclaim the hope of freedom from spiritual and physical death. The power of religious discourse lies in the ability of the sacred to be mediated, to evolve, and to be maintained. It is a flexible, malleable discourse that can withstand failed prophecy and, in the case of *Preacher*, the death of God. As Josiah, Orr, and Jesse Custer demonstrate, religious discourses transform speakers so that they embody the spirit they preach. Josiah, Orr, and Jesse are the deep and lucky cups of God. They are filled up with the sacred words so that they can pour them out to their audiences. But they are not merely passive receptacles; instead, they demonstrate the ways in which the speaker shapes the sermon and redirects the focus of spiritual truth. For Jesse, the ultimate sacred ideal is the American cowboy and the redeemed immigrant; for Josie, the sacred resides in the efforts of humans to create and represent the ineffable ideals they will never fully know or ever fully abandon.

Preacher and *Horses' Bridles* use resurrection motifs to conclude their characters' conflicts and to provide for them another chapter in their lives. Both Jesse and Josie reenter the world with deeper spiritual insight and a reformulated gospel to preach to their communities. Their narratives demonstrate the power of religious experience to, as Rushkoff argues, "shift...awareness from the particular to the universal...from the mundane to the mythic." If the texts only discarded religious discourse, they would move their characters from the mythic to the mundane. To provide their characters with spiritually transformative change, these texts resurrect religious discourses. It is no coincidence that the resurrected discourses have as their focal point an ever shifting ineffable source. The power of Jesse's resurrected discourse grows out of the ineffable figure of the cowboy in the American Imaginary. As depicted in the Duke and the Saint of Killers in *Preacher*, Jesse's sacred cowboy is a man who is above the law but who follows a deep and unwavering morality, a man who can embody contradictions because those paradoxes

reveal his larger than life potential rather than personal shortcomings. For Josie, the ineffable resides in the Time of In-Between and its attendant possibility of momentary but no less meaningful spiritual insight. That Josie's story ends with his ancestor's miracle reveals the persistence of the ineffable as it works on multiple generations of Laudermilks. As the ending of the novel suggests, whether or not Orr's mother was resurrected proves less important than that he believes he encountered the ineffable intruding on human affairs.

Resurrection is neither the end of Josie and Jesse's story nor is it the end of the gospel story. Though a promise of eventual transcendence, resurrection makes way for the final gospel component: ascension and the absence it implies. *Horses' Bridles* refrains from revealing the truth of Orr's vision. Meanwhile, *Preacher* ends with Cassidy's second chance at life. Though these two texts offer ostensible closure, they end their narratives with a number of potential possibilities, and readers are left to ponder how Orr and Cassidy respond to their transformative experiences. In effect, both texts continue the story past the last page by suggesting that new stories are just beginning. So it goes with the gospel and its turn towards Christ's ascension. Rather than ending the story, the ascension makes possible countless narratives of life after redemption. The ascension seems to suggest abandonment, but as Marilynne Robinson's writing underscores, Christ's ascension leads to the ongoing story of the church and its function in the world. As such, this study turns next to the final gospel element in Marilynne Robinson's fiction and nonfiction to examine how she promotes a robust Protestant humanism as a means of restoring communal and political discourse in America.

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CHAPTER 4

“STEWARDS OF ULTIMATE THINGS”: ABSENCE AND THE CHRISTIAN AGORA IN MARILYNNE ROBINSON’S RELIGIOUS HUMANISM

In a September 2015 conversation in the *New York Review of Books*, President Barack Obama asked Marilynne Robinson why she believed fear threatens American democracy. Robinson answered by claiming that fear restricts political dialogue because it creates false dangers that distract people from actual problems, while fear of the “sinister other” prohibits people from honestly considering opposing viewpoints, which in turn occludes constructive debate (“A Conversation in Iowa”). To have a functioning democracy, Robinson tells Obama that citizens need “to assume well about other people” and that fruitful political debate and cooperation must derive from an exchange of ideas grounded in mutual respect. Americans must pursue meaningful conversation and respect for opposing viewpoints if the country is to move past its “in-group mentality” that transmogrifies what should be a diverse community in pursuit of a common goal into recalcitrant factions unwilling to collaborate. The concern for democracy, individuals, and constructive communication that she champions in the conversation with Obama are common themes for Robinson, and her dialogue with the president displays a kind of summary of the political and intellectual concerns she explores extensively in her nonfiction and fiction. Though her specific focus changes from essay to essay, and novel to novel, a common thread unites her varied concerns.¹ Throughout her interviews, essays and novels, we can see a

¹ In her essay, “The Courage to See It,” Jennifer Holberg cautions against reducing Robinson’s work to a singular purpose, but does not let that stop her from offering her own unifying principle in Robinsons’ work: “If one generalization might be made about Marilynne Robinson’s body of work, both fiction and nonfiction (risky and presumptuous as I realize such a gesture to be), it is that her writing urges us again and again to pay attention to what she calls in her first novel, *Housekeeping*, the ‘resurrection of the ordinary’” (283). Rather than seeing Robinson’s work as primarily politically motivated, Holberg argues that a “rich Christian theology—one that considers ‘fragments of the quotidian’ integral to any conception of the holy” drives her oeuvre.

determination to recast what she sees as the narrative of modern Western thought by returning to a religious humanism that privileges complex subjectivity as it expresses itself and its place in the universe through creativity and contemplation.

In both Robinson's nonfiction and fiction, she articulates her desire to establish what she calls an "imaginative community of love" in twenty-first century America. In "Imagination and Community," Robinson explains that community "consists very largely of imaginative love for people who we do not know or whom we know very slightly" (*When I Was a Child* 21) and that "the more generous the scale at which imagination is exerted, the healthier and more humane the community will be" (30). Community in Robinson's writing depends on Americans' ability to extend dignity to others as fellow "images of God" ("A Conversation in Iowa").² Thus, imagining love for people they do not know, Americans can act with the "love, service, and equality" that the early twentieth-century theologian Walter Rauschenbusch preached (Rauschenbusch 57). Like Rauschenbusch, Robinson's imagined community rings with a certain idealism.³ Her nonfiction displays a fervent belief that religious humanism will, if pursued earnestly, resolve the country's political divides, whereas her fiction presents an image of a

² Holberg adds, "[For] Robinson, an understanding of the 'utterly real' quality of the God-given glory which human beings possess *must* radically change the way we think about ourselves and others" ("The Courage to See It" 285).

³ Todd Shy also identifies an idealist, utopic vision in Robinson's writing: "Her utopia is the biblical vision of a restored Jerusalem, in which 'old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand for every age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.'" According to Robinson, we have lost our ability to dream of utopia: "This fine, plain peace and human loveliness are the things we are learning not to hope for" ("Religion and Marilynne Robinson: 253). As Shy indicates, Robinson criticizes a contemporary unwillingness to work towards such a community of "peace and human loveliness." Rather than invalidating the possibility of realizing the utopic vision, Robinson's complaint underscores her desire to see it come to fruition.

community characterized by the “healthy and humane” social interactions born out of mutual respect.⁴

Taken as a whole, Robinson’s oeuvre demonstrates an evangelistic bent: she writes in order to bring about a transformation in her audience. She wants to change the culture of fear she identifies in her talk with the President, and she is keen to inspire her readers to take up the project of a salvific religious humanism.⁵ In the previous chapter, I argued that *Preacher* presents a sermon on every page and that *High as the Horses’ Bridles*’ narrative force derives from its prophetic discourse. These texts envision an America infused with a sacred discourse of American pop culture. Robinson’s writing is as didactic as Ennis, Dillon, and Cheshire’s, if not more so, but it has as its goal a return to the earnest belief in Christianity that O’Connor presents in *Wise Blood*. As such, she presents a revised understanding of Christian intellectuals in history, emphasizes the complexity of the human mind over what she sees as modern capitulation to determinism, and promotes the value of human life based on the idea that it is an inherently spiritual entity that reflects the image of God. Robinson’s project, in short, is to establish a Christian agora based on her liberal Christianity.

Working towards instituting a Christian agora begins by participating in the fourth element of the gospel: the absence created by the ascension of Christ. Among other things, the

⁴ Alex Engebretson agrees that Robinson’s work seeks to bridge divides, but he argues that Robinson, in *Gilead*, is concerned with addressing what she sees as a secular-religious division: “How can communities be formed which transcend the secular-religious divide? Robinson suggests the answer is aesthetic. The desire to form a community is sparked by the perception of the beauty of other people, whether they are religious or not” (“Midwestern Mysticism” 28).

⁵ Michael Vander Weele also sees a desire for social change in Robinson’s aesthetics: “In Marilynne Robinson’s work this means, in the first place, asking us to be part of a community that loves the elements of this world, that recognizes them as gifts, and that refuses to lose sight of their gift-character even amidst the keenly registered sorrows and flaws of our world” (“The Difficult Gift of Human Exchange” 237).

absence of Christ mandates that the church continues his mission on earth. Pope Francis elaborates on this point in his April 17, 2013 address at Saint Peter's Square: "St. Luke...recounts the event of the Ascension...to emphasize that this event is like the link of the chain that connects Jesus' earthly life to the life of the Church." According to the Pope, absence does not indicate abandonment; rather, it suggests a transfer or sharing of work between Christ and the church. In "Burial, Baseball, and Baptism: Typology and Memorialization in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*," June Hadden Hobbs suggests that John Ames' desire to memorialize his life stems from his participation in a religion that takes up "remembrance" as an inspiration to act in the world. She quotes Maurice Halbwachs to emphasize how memory and memorialization inspires characters to act in Robinson's work: "As [Halbwachs] puts it, 'the entire substance of Christianity, since Christ has not reappeared on earth, consists in the remembrance of his life and teachings'" (249). For Robinson, remembrance and contemplation inspire characters to live their faith in the world. Pope Francis' words echo this point: "This is the invitation to base our contemplation on Christ's lordship, to find in him the strength to spread the Gospel and to witness to it in everyday life: contemplation and action." The absence of Christ initiates the work of the church and the individual believer on earth. As such, Robinson's characters, and the persona she projects in her nonfiction, contemplate Christian writings and the life of Christ to make manifest a vision of society built on recognizing the image of God in others and creating a community based on respect for that image.

In addition to being the catalyst for social action, absence plays a significant aesthetic role in Robinson's work. Absence and loneliness haunt John Ames, Glory Boughton, and Lila Dahl, the main characters of her three *Gilead* novels. Ames devotes much of his story to his grandfather's disappearance, the deaths of his first wife and child, his brother's separation from

the family (both spiritually and physically), and his godson's decision to abandon his daughter. Glory speaks of her failed engagement and contemplates her visions of the children she will never have. Lila mourns the loss of her companion Doll, the parent figure who originally saved her from an abusive family and then later abandoned her to protect her from the vengeance of that family. In "Looking Back from the Grave," Laura Tanner argues that the specter of physical absence controls Ames' approach to recording his life. As he nears his death, he begins to see the world as it will be after he is gone, regardless of his belief in an afterlife. She writes, "Although Ames' belief in a spiritual existence after death mitigates, to some extent, the tragedy of mortality, it also contributes to his tendency to anticipate his embodied absence; the assurance of his sustained existence in another form lends form and credence to the imaginative work of 'looking back from the grave,' anticipating a world without him in it' (231-2). Tanner is interested in charting the ways that Ames' reconciliation with impending death distances himself from his own narrative, such that he often speaks as if already separated from his second wife and young child, but her point applies to the other Gilead novels as well. Contemplating those who are absent causes characters to remain in a state of transition, such that they always seem to be looking towards something—impending death, reuniting with those who have passed—or back towards past failures, which helps prepare them for their present challenges. Absence in the Gilead novels is responsible for a considerable amount of sorrow, but it also urges people to more fully embrace their religious selves, which in turn helps them solve their spiritual crises. Ames, Glory, and Lila find theological solutions to their immediate problems, such that they can resolve their situations spiritually without actually changing the present circumstances causing those problems.

Robinson's novels are deeply religious and her nonfiction grows out of her religious convictions. Taken together they act as a sermon that preaches her vision of religious humanism. Her project is certainly not solely humanist. Her writing needs to be read in light of her desire to spread her faith. As a nonfiction writer intent on emphasizing the contributions of theologians and Christian abolitionists to modern American life, Robinson extols the virtues of religious humanism and argues for its relevancy to the modern experience. As a writer of fiction, Robinson creates a mythical Middle Western American community that embodies her vision of the Christian agora. It is her emphasis on the value of religion in the humanities that sets her apart from philosophers such as Kwame Anthony Appiah who advocate for a cosmopolitanism that appreciates the role of religion in human life but who do not see it as integral to inspiring people to form community across cultural differences. Appiah writes in *Cosmopolitanism*, "[The] points of entry to cross-cultural conversations are things that are shared by those who are in the conversation. They do not need to be universal; all they need to be is what these particular people have in common. Once we have found enough we share, there is the possibility that we will be able to enjoy discovering things we do not yet share' (97). Appiah argues that people should bridge difference by identifying common interests, such as individual religious devotion, and he even frames this in language that Robinson uses: "So I'm using the word 'conversation' not only for literal talk but also as a metaphor for engagement with the experience and the ideas of others. And I stress the role of the imagination here because the encounters, properly conducted, are valuable in themselves" (85). Appiah suggests that reading about people from other cultures can prepare us to engage them in conversation—a point that Robinson argues as well. One of Robinson's characters, the prodigal figure Jack Boughton, bemoans an inability to find common conversation with his godfather, Ames, despite their having read the same

theologians. Later in her interview with the President, both Robinson and Obama agree that Americans need to engage in conversations over shared cultural moments. Like Appiah, Robinson believes that imagining relationships with others, especially those we disagree with, stimulates actual relationship building. At the same time, Robinson distances herself from Appiah by privileging the role of religion in her version of cosmopolitanism.

Robinson's religious humanism begins by recognizing the image of God in others. She writes, "I am a theist, so my habits of mind have a particular character. Such predispositions, long typical in Western civilization, have been carefully winnowed out of scientific thought over the last two centuries in favor of materialism" ("Humanism" 13). Robinson's religious humanism permeates her writing and provides a foundation for her Christian agora project. She argues that religious humanism is worth saving because she believes it offers the best defense of the rights of individuals in a community and because it demands that we appreciate the art, music, philosophy, and literature that human beings have contributed to human culture over time. Robinson and Appiah seem to agree on the value of art and culture to ultimately unite separate peoples—Appiah goes so far as to advocate for the display of plundered artifacts in foreign museums (133). Appiah sees in art and culture the expression of values that cross national, racial, and ethnic distinctions. Robinson goes further: by grounding her ethics in "image of God" language she can make recourse to the ineffable as the driving force of her cosmopolitanism.

An example from her second novel *Gilead* illustrates the power of using the ineffable as the source of finding common ground. John Ames and Jack Boughton disagree over matters of religion generally and predestination specifically, but Ames comes to recognize the image of God in Jack because he understands that the ineffable—in this case, the figure of the Christian

God—allows for more than one strict reading of Christian theology.⁶ Her turn towards the ineffable in *Gilead* allows her to preach the power of grace—or acknowledging the image of the ineffable God in others—to unite conflicting parties. Her belief in an ineffable God comes across in her nonfiction as well, but lacking the narrative illustrations of her novels, her nonfiction tends to describe the ineffable by describing qualities that emanate from it. As such she gives expression to her image of God discourse in her defense of the complexity of the human mind, her elevation of transient characters, the benefits of pursuing humanist disciplines, and the desire to put into words what has not been said before. Her purposes vary throughout her nonfiction and fiction, but these four aspects of her religious humanism frequently manifest in her articles and essay collections. Taken together, they reveal Robinson's desire to see a society redeemed by turning towards wonder, study, and creativity.

To be clear, establishing a Christian agora in America for Robinson is less a desire to see it become a "Christian nation" and more of a desire to see it respect and adopt the rigors of the kind of religious humanism practiced by Calvin (or her humanist reading of Calvin), Christian abolitionists, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.⁷ Though she speaks most frequently about religious

⁶ Critics such as Douglas, Engebretson, and Shy emphasize Robinson's nondoctrinal theology over doctrinal theologies. Engebretson's quote is representative of the tendency to see a more mystical theology in Robinson's work: "In *Gilead*, Robinson claims that the most compatible forms of religious identity with liberal democracy is one that exchanges orthodoxy for mystery and closed dogma for open speculation" ("Midwestern Mysticism" 34). Douglas sees her nondoctrinal theology as a politically motivated move: "Thus Robinson's 2004 liberal Christian protest against the political empowerment of conservative evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity is achieved by recommending a nondoctrinal Christian cultural identity in place of the doctrine-heavy Christianity that has characterized the emergence of this subculture since the novel's 1956 setting" ("Christian Multiculturalism in *Gilead*" 348-9).

⁷ Robinson's essays on Calvin, Darwin, and Christian abolitionists have garnered cutting criticism. In response to her essay "Consequence of Darwinism, Terence Diggory writes, "The problem with Robinson's rhetorical situation is that she is engaged with issues that she knows require logic, yet she expects her readers to supply it for her when her passion carries her away" (314). Christopher Douglas calls out her—seemingly—willful forgetting of Christian slavery and

humanism's potentially palliative effects for an America plagued with fear, she always suffuses her writing with a political bent that advocates for a return to a more functional democracy than she sees extant today. In her essays and novels about the wonders of the human mind, Robinson subtly but forcibly preaches a politics of shared humanity and civic action. She presents her defense of religious humanism most forcibly in her essays, and so it is to those that I now turn. Since her fiction frequently provides illustrations of the arguments she presents in her nonfiction, I occasionally refer to her fiction in order to provide a fuller picture of her arguments for religious humanism before I turn wholly to her fiction in the second half of this chapter.

Robinson preaches a recognition of every individual's complex subjectivity, from which she devises an ethics based on shared dignity. Her vision for a community of love, equality, and service also includes a dedication to pursuing humanist disciplines because they help foster further insight into the human experience without offering a totalizing narrative. To believe that we can resolve the universe and humanity's place within it is an act of hubris for Robinson. In her defense of religious humanism, she frequently reminds her readers of humanity's inability to provide ultimate answers. She understands the condition of humanity as seeking more—more answers, more insight, and more understanding—without ever finding a totalizing answer. Religious humanism works to provide insight and is a vehicle for wonder and doubt, rather than a final word. She asks in "The Strange History of Altruism" a question similar to the one she posited in "Humanism," "Why is the human brain the most complex object known to exist in the universe?" She refuses to believe that it is a side effect of the genetic imperative to survive and that it is an example of accident and adaptation "[overshooting] the mark" in human evolution.

its prominence during the time of the abolitionists. See "Christian Multiculturalism," p. 337. Todd Shy argues that her brand of Calvinism is much more humanist than Calvin's writing permits. See "Religion and Marilynne Robinson," pp. 243, 251, and 254.

Rather, for her “it is because it is intrinsic to our role in the universe as thinkers and perceivers, participants in a singular capacity for wonder as well as for comprehension” (*Absence of Mind* 72). Throughout this essay, she contends that various human characteristics, such as altruism, the drive to create art, and the complexity of human subjectivity, problematize theories that advocate for accident and chance. She sees these theories as too reductionist and too convenient, but even more problematic for her is that these theories fail to provide the kind of meaning that a model built on intention provides for humanity.

According to Robinson, if we are to understand the human experience then we must first appreciate the ways that the human mind contemplates what it means to be human, even if the mind cannot ultimately answer that question with satisfactory closure. She argues that people do this through their subjective, private reasoning as it draws on present experience and past achievement. Robinson’s nonfiction and fiction frequently align in their conviction that contemplation and study connect a person to their contemporary communities, both familial and civic, and to the broader community of humans who have explored questions about humanity in art, music, literature, philosophy, and theology. An example from her fiction illustrates how humans create community when they contemplate their own humanity. In *Home*, the main character Glory Boughton explains that she hides her Bible from Jack, her apostate brother, probably because if he found it she might have to admit to him that she does not know what a soul is: “She supposed it was not a mind or a self. Whatever they are. She supposed it was what the Lord saw when His regard fell upon any of us. But what can we know about that? Say we love and forgive, and enjoy the beauty of another life, however elusive it might be. Then, presumably, we have some idea of the soul we have encountered. That is what her father would say” (111). Glory contemplates what it means to have a soul, something she never actually

answers definitively, which is a mark of intellectual honesty for Robinson. But her contemplation is nonetheless personally enriching because it stimulates community: she has, in her mind, connected to her brother and her father, who are estranged from each other. This is no mere abstract or fanciful community, though. Her mental work here will help her mediate between the two over the course of the novel. Moreover, her contemplation enables her to appreciate her six other siblings and future visitors to the family home, which then prepares her for the revelation she discovers at the end of the narrative, a revelation that equips Glory to preserve her brother and her father's legacy long after they are gone.

Glory's complex experience of doubt and conjecture, like other human experiences of love and loneliness, reveals the inherent quality of subjectivity in human life. This is crucial to Robinson's thought: human beings are staggeringly complex creatures, so much so that generalizing theories of humanity, such as positivism, Darwinism, and other "certain disciplines [that] are still deeply invested in a model of reality that is as simple and narrow as ideological reductionism can make it" fail to see that each person's complex experience of the world makes generalizations invalid. In her essay "Humanism," she directs her critique at neuroscience in general and emphasizes to her readers that although neuroscience may identify which parts of the brain activate when a person feels fear, images of the brain at work do not actually tell us about the individual's subjective experience in the world.⁸ "The assumptions behind the notion that the nature of fear and the impulses it triggers could be made legible or generalizable for the purposes of imaging would have to exclude complexity—the factor that introduces individuality with all

⁸ Robinson's decision to critique "neuroscience" as a whole, rather than taking aim at specific neuroscientists or individuals who have popularized certain interpretations of neuroscience, demonstrates her own tendency to make broad generalizations, as noted by Diggory, Douglas, and Shy.

its attendant mysteries” (*The Givenness of Things* 7). The mysteries she alludes to here are the innumerable interactions between people, their communities, their environments, and especially their own thoughts. These interactions prove too complex to adequately record and thus evade our ability to provide a totalizing description of what it is to be a human. Rather, we need to “acknowledge the intrinsic complexity of human subjectivity, whatever its specific content. To acknowledge this is to open the archives of all that humankind has thought and done, to see how the mind describes itself” (“On Human Nature” in *Absence of Mind* 16). Robinson privileges human complexity—it is the base from which she launches most of her critiques—because it validates the work of the humanities throughout human history.

If we see the individual as intrinsically complex, we can then begin to see how the past record of art, literature, and philosophy can be read as a partial, but still instructive, inquiry into the purposes of human life. Moreover, we can excuse those who have erred and those who have manifested inconsistent attitudes and behaviors without dismissing their contributions to furthering human insight. Such is her defense of John Calvin in two of her long-form essays, “Marguerite de Navarre” and “Marguerite de Navarre, Part II.” In these essays, she acknowledges Calvin’s ignominious complicity in religious persecution, but she argues that his failures do not invalidate the contributions he made in theology, education, and women’s equality. Robinson titles essays about Calvin after a patron of his and not after the reformer because she believes readers will bring ill-informed preconceptions about persecution and repression to the reading experience that would preclude them from appreciating the reformer to the degree that Robinson believes he merits.⁹

⁹ Moreover, Robinson refers to Calvin by his French name, Jean Cauvin, in these essays so as to distinguish between her reading of Calvin and what she sees as biased modern readings.

Robinson's defense of Calvin coincides with her larger project to recognize the complex subjectivity of every person, a project she extends to her novels in her transient characters of Jack, Lila, and to a lesser degree, Glory. Each of these characters, like Calvin, carry with them both ignoble and noble actions and thoughts. Rather than simply being a vehicle to make these characters more well-rounded, their inconsistencies often serve to teach others that they deserve dignity in spite of their shortcomings. Moreover, their failures tend to grow out of their honest search for meaningful community and individual purpose. Lila's fantasy of stealing an unwanted baby derives from her desire to extend to someone else the love that was shown to her, and the persistent self-deceit with which Glory maintains a fraudulent engagement reflects her desire to create a family that will create the love and joy she felt as a child. The stories of Jack, Lila, and Glory parallel the sense of human mystery Robinson preaches in her nonfiction. To establish a community of love, service, and equality, we must be willing to see the dignity inherent in a person's search for self-understanding and acceptance in a community.

Complex subjectivity for Robinson is important because it elevates the individual's experience as an object worthy of study in fiction and because it enriches the relationship between individuals and their environment. She extends this to the relationship between the individual and his/her objects of worship. In "On Human Nature," she highlights William James's definition of religion because it emphasizes individuality in religious devotion. Critiquing what she sees as Daniel Dennett's tendency to generalize religious experience based on observable anthropological patterns of groups of believers and of "social systems," Robinson argues that we need to consider the subjective when critiquing religion. As such, she highlights James' definition of religion: "James defined religion as the 'feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to

whatever they may consider the divine.” For Robinson, James’ definition from *Varieties of Religious Experience* appeals to her because it suggests that totalizing approaches to studying religion unvaryingly miss the mark of personal devotion, which is key to understanding personal piety and the ways that human beings alter and adapt systematic religious practice. “The words ‘solitude’ and ‘individual’ are crucial [in James’ definition], since this is the unvarying condition of the mind, no matter the web of culture and language by which it is enabled, sustained, and limited” (“On Human Nature” 7). Rather than seeing limitation in individuality, Robinson argues that it justifies the role of the humanities in intellectual life. Science cannot adequately describe individuals in their religious devotion, but the arts and humanities are particularly suited to just such a thing because they allow for subjectivity, idiosyncrasy, and irresolution.

Robinson’s concern for individuals extends to her championing of the human soul, a concept whose disappearance from modern critical thought she laments. If the mind, she writes, contains more neurons than the Milky Way has stars, if the brain is currently understood to be “the most complex object known to exist in the universe,” and if there is an observable difference between the intangible mind and the physical brain, then this entity deserves a name. Robinson is not satisfied to use the word “mind” here because it does not convey the “astonishing nexus of self” that is represented in “the magnificent energies of consciousness that make whomever we pass on the street a far grander marvel than our galaxy” (*When I Was a Child* 8-9). If any single individual represents something more awe-inspiring than the Milky Way, then respect for that creature is not only appropriate but also necessary. Thus throughout Robinson’s nonfiction and fiction, there looms the presence of humans in their vulnerability, to underscore that those who are lonely, facing hardship, or do not belong to an inclusive community still require our respect and devotion.

Robinson's essays deepen our understanding of her transient characters in their frequent defense of the human mind and its inherent complexity and dignity. Discussing the subject of the human mind in each of her essay collections, Robinson appraises both the human mind's uniqueness and the Western humanist tradition of studying and honoring the mind in art and thought. Read together, her essays present a sustained argument for the continued investment in the humanities and vulnerable individuals. Set at or near the beginning of the civil rights movement, Robinson's Gilead novels ask what it means to live in a community of conflicting opinions and how those who are on the outside can be accepted into the community. On one level, the novels tell the story of people as they prepare for and, in the case of Lila Ames and Glory Boughton, cross threshold moments in life. John Ames prepares what becomes the text of *Gilead* as an "endless letter" (40) to be read after his forthcoming death. In *Lila*, the title character expresses her thoughts, doubts, and resolutions in her conversion to both Christianity and a non-transient life. *Home* documents Glory's gradual change from resentful person apprehensive of her return to the family home into a woman who will become, like her pastor father, "a steward of ultimate things" (20). Yet these personal changes are staged against the backdrop of national change and embodied in Jack's central conflict. Frequently fretted over by the Boughtons and Ames because he disgraced his family while a young man, Jack's story across these novels actually hinges on his relationship with his wife Della and their son Robert. Jack's malfeasance certainly influences the characters' interactions, but it is the revelation of his interracial relationship with Della that inspires the changes Ames and Glory experience at the end of their narratives. Although he does not appear in *Lila*, Lila's references to Jack and request to Ames that he pray for his wayward godson connect Lila's compassion for transients and outsiders to the other two novels' concern for a man who is outcast from his community but who

continues to bear the image of God.

The transients in the Gilead novels combine two characteristics of Robinson's ideal society: the protection of the vulnerable and the celebration of restlessness. Jack and Lila share much in common, such as the considerable time they spend drifting across America.¹⁰ Jack's transient nature is not self-imposed. To claim that it is suggests that he understands his restlessness enough to willingly abandon his family. Rather, his exile from Gilead comes about because he knows that on deep psychological levels he cannot control his actions, even if he knows doing so would provide a better life for himself and his family.¹¹ When his father asks Jack why he did not love them, he replies: "I did. But there wasn't much I could do about it. It was hard for me to be here. I could never—trust myself. Anywhere. But that made it harder to be here" (*Home* 273). Despite Jack's inner conflict, he demonstrates a remarkable sincerity towards his sister and his wife. Meanwhile, Lila's sojourn is thrust upon her by her upbringing. Rescued from severe neglect and abuse by Doll—Lila's supposed family call it "kidnapping"—Lila travels with Doll around the country as a migrant worker until she is old enough to find long-term work in towns. Though rooted in a location while she works in a store, a brothel, and then a hotel, Lila cannot forget that she has neither family nor ties to her surroundings. Jack and Lila are vulnerable figures because they must adapt to ever changing circumstances and because they

¹⁰ Sonia Gernes also sees transience as vital to Ruth's spiritual transformation in Robinson's first novel, *Housekeeping*: "As the novel progresses, [Robinson's] characters enter a world of transience and flux that merges with the mythical, and in doing so they pass through the stages of purification, contemplation and mystical union that traditional ascetical theologians such as Evelyn Underhill have cited in describing the mystical experience" ("Transcendent Women" 144).

¹¹ Jack's alcoholism plays a key role in his inability to live the sort of lives his brothers, sisters, and godfather have lived. As Rebecca Painter astutely points out, Robinson stays true to the times and describes Jack's relatives' response to his alcoholism as a "flaw in character rather than a genetically susceptible disease of the brain." See "The Reality of Grace in Robinson's Fiction," Note 13.

suffer from severe loneliness. In an interview with Wyatt Mason in *The New York Times*, Robinson explains that she views loneliness as a human condition rather than a problem (“The Revelations of Marilynne Robinson”). The loneliness that Jack and Lila feel grows directly out of their transient conditions. Their loneliness springs from their identities: Jack in his inability to be a part of his family and Lila in the circumstances of her upbringing. Neither deserves his or her loneliness; instead, each deserves the dignity shown to the respectable characters in Gilead. To underscore this point, the three Gilead novels resolve by documenting the eventual dignity afforded to them by some, if not all, of the Boughtons and Amesese.

In her fiction and nonfiction, Robinson does not see transience as an abnormality nor rootedness as the standard order of things; rather, she argues for an intentionality behind both, an intentionality that she believes helps describe the human condition more broadly and more sufficiently than accident-based models do. If intention were involved in human evolution, then those things that accident cannot explain, such as altruism, begin to make sense: “The anomalies that plague accident as an explanatory model...are no problem at all if it is assumed that accident does not explain us, that we are meant to be human, that is, to be aware and capable in the ways the mind...makes us aware and capable. And what are those ways? Every poem, theory, philanthropy, invention, scandal, hoax, and crime of violence tells us more” (*Absence of Mind* 72). Two things stand out here. First, Robinson lists acts that create something new—a poem, a theory, a good work, an irreversible crime—as vehicles for illumination. When we create, we provide insight into the human condition by describing who we are and what we do. Acts of creation shine a spotlight on humanity. Second, she ends with “tells us more.” Notably, she does not say, “gives us the answer.” There is no possibility for “all” with Robinson, and her fiction illustrates this. Characters search for more, but they never find enough. Again, the recurring

figure of the itinerant in Robinson's fiction is instructive. Jack and Lila frequently forgo safety and security for life on the road and the ongoing dependency on wit, luck and perseverance such a life requires. In doing so they symbolize the condition of all her characters. Some may find relative security, but all live in the world and are subject to the vicissitudes of life. Even more telling is that Robinson's itinerant characters are autodidacts. Despite a lifetime of spiritual apostasy and physical wandering, Jack can play his father's favorite hymns on the piano with measured grace, and he can debate the finer points of Calvin and Barth's theology with Ames. Lila steals a Bible from Ames' church and begins a course of study that entails copying passages from *Ezekiel* on a pad of paper. Robinson's itinerants, like her seminary-educated pastors, engage in lifelong learning. Through study and contemplation, Jack and Lila actively participate in the heritage of their Western culture. That they choose religious texts is no accident, of course, for these books and hymns firmly place them within a tradition that posits a spiritual purpose to their daily experience.

Although not strictly an itinerant character, Glory in *Home* depicts Robinson's ideal image of a person engaging in humanist disciplines in order to develop her own sense of purpose while also discovering meaning behind her family's experience.¹² Glory's capacity to bridge two generations of estranged Boughtons depends on her ability to communicate across theological and philosophical divides. She somewhat automatically thinks what her father might say when she considers the problem of the soul's definition. She also draws on his wisdom, which itself grows out of his time at seminary, his ongoing study, his preaching, and his lived experiences. She then extends his wisdom to Jack and, in the process, helps fulfill her father's desire to bring

¹² Figuratively, Glory is as much of a transient as Jack. She sees herself as transient in her soul, which she expresses through her indecision about returning home, the shame she carries regarding her failed engagement, and her inability to define a purpose for her life.

Jack into his counsel.

Returning to the past and understanding human experience in context lies at the heart of Robinson's humanism. She frequently asserts in her nonfiction that primary texts are not read any more and that scholars often believe they know a historical figure when in fact they only work with interpretations of historical figures. As noted above, she highlights John Calvin as a particularly telling example: "One does not read Calvin. One does not think of reading him. The prohibition is more absolute than it ever was against Marx, who always had the glamour of the subversive or the forbidden about him. Calvin seems to be neglected *on principle*. This...is such a good example of the oddness of our approach to history, and to knowledge more generally, that it bears looking into" (Introduction to *The Death of Adam* 12, emphasis in the original).

Robinson's essays on Calvin and Marguerite de Navarre appear in *The Death of Adam*; in the same volume, she locates the influence of McGuffey's Readers in the broader movement of abolitionist fervor in the American Middle West.¹³ In the same essay, she identifies various colleges in the Middle West, such as Oberlin, Oneida, and Weld, founded by abolitionists who were inspired by the Second Great Awakening to preach anti-slavery tenets in schools and churches. Robinson returns to these primary sources because she sees them as suffering from misreading at best and total dismissal at worst. Like Glory, Jack, and Lila, Robinson invests time into texts that once held important sway in order to better connect the past to the present, which itself is an act of appreciating the complexity of human experience in history.

Robinson advocates for autodidacticism and historical revisionism to promote the immaterial aspects of human life. Robinson's devotes much of her nonfiction to exposing

¹³ Robinson refuses to call it the Midwest, which she sees as belittling. See Brockes, "A Life in Writing."

dehumanizing tendencies in modern intellectual thought, and she does so in order to reaffirm the primacy of metaphysics and the arts, literature, music, and philosophy as the disciplines best suited to describe the human condition. In the introduction to *The Death of Adam*, she makes an impassioned plea that we return to a general understanding that the arts best teach us about immaterial things: “I want to overhear passionate arguments about what we are and what we are doing and what we ought to do. I want to feel that art is an utterance made in good faith by one human being to another...I miss civilization, and I want it back” (4). The return to civilization begins by reevaluating the past and rescuing it from both modern misconceptions and modern tendencies to abandon the immaterial as a serious object for rigorous study. In short, it requires a return to humanism, and in Robinson’s work specifically, an affirmation of religious humanism and its elevation of the soul as the seat of human dignity. Religious humanism and its disciplines—rereading, contemplation, recognizing the image of God in others—provide an intellectually and civically responsible ethos for those who pursue it because they affirm the individuality of each person while also providing means of studying and praising that individuality.

The ethos Robinson encourages also calls for people to push past their limitations and to engage in original and creative work. To establish a society of love, service, and equality, Robinson argues that we must also work to say what cannot or has not been said. To put it another way, humans must create new ways of thinking about and seeing their place in the world so that they recognize the value of their intellectual and artistic evolution. Robinson’s religious humanism, her belief in human complexity and subjectivity, and her critique of those who assert a purely material existence ultimately spring from her belief that the role of the human mind is to explore the unknowable and to try to describe it. In “Imagination and Community,” she writes,

“the failures of language...are, paradoxically, demonstrations of the extraordinary power of language to evoke a reality beyond its grasp, to evoke a sense of what cannot be said.” For a writer and teacher of fiction, engaging the unknowable is her primary duty: “I continuously attempt to make inroads on the vast terrain of what cannot be said—or said by me, at least...the unnamed is overwhelmingly present and real for me” (*When I Was a Child* 19-20). She readily acknowledges that she continually fails in the pursuit to name “what cannot be said,” but she recognizes this failure as productive. As she states in “Thinking Again,” “we...indeed continuously stand apart from ourselves, appraising. Every higher act of the mind, intellectual, aesthetic, or moral, is, paradoxically, also an exercise in self-doubt, self-scrutiny” (*Absence of Mind* 116). And so to dismiss “the greatest questions,” those questions she suggests that religion, philosophy, and science seek to answer but cannot because of the improbability of finding an answer, is to miss the point of human inquiry:

[Both Freud and Pinker] for all purposes dismiss [the greatest questions] as insoluble, as if that were a legitimate reason to dismiss any question. We may never know why gravity is so much weaker than, in theory, it should be, or know if we are only one among any number of actual and potential universes. But every real question is fruitful, as the history of human thought so clearly demonstrates.

And ‘fruitful is by no means a synonym for ‘soluble’...So long as the human mind exists to impose itself on reality, as it has already done so profoundly, what it is and what we are must remain an open question. (“Thinking Again” 130-1)

Since we live in “a world that changes continuously” (131), a world that we change continuously, we must continue to engage in the act of naming so that we can gain insights into

how we fit into it. Humanity's best chance at understanding its place in a mutable environment is to create myths, which are for her "visions of reality which form values and behavior" ("Darwinism" 58).

The work of saying what cannot be said and being continually aware of "the unnamed" in human experience forms much of John Ames' worldview in *Gilead*, and it does so to reveal that the kind of religious thought that Robinson espouses—religious thought derived from Calvin's theology—needs to open itself to vulnerability by engaging in honest speculation. Late in the novel Ames writes to his son that he has enjoyed pushing the limits of his understanding, even if it means potentially losing what he does know: "I have wandered to the limits of my understanding any number of times, out into that desolation...and I've scared myself, too, a good many times, leaving all landmarks behind me...And it has been among the true pleasures of my life" (191). Ames' willingness to explore what he does not know and to play with ideas that challenge his belief form the basis of his welcoming spirit. He can accept those who suffer and sin because he too has wandered beyond the "limits of understanding." In this particular moment he is thinking about the anxiety Jack Boughton brings to his life. Not yet aware that Jack is married, he worries that Jack will seduce Lila after he has died. He writes, "My present bewilderments are a new territory that make me doubt I have ever really been lost before. / Though I must say all this has given me a new glimpse of the ongoingness of the world. We fly forgotten as a dream...leaving the forgetful world behind us to trample and mar and misplace everything we have ever cared for. That is the way of it, and it is remarkable" (191). "Remarkable" is a favorite word of Ames' in *Gilead*. Here he uses it to summarize his feelings about leaving the world and to, as Isaac Watts wrote, "fly forgotten as a dream." He does not want to leave, but he knows he must. He does not want to lose Lila and Robby, but he knows he

cannot prevent that outcome. So to say it is remarkable is to say that it is both awe-inspiring and frightening at once. Pondering the life of his wife and child after he has departed requires Ames to tread into the unknowable he spoke of earlier. Rather than ignoring the exercise, Ames willingly pursues it to its logical conclusion, which is to say that he thinks about it until he can say nothing more about it except that it produces awe and fear.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “remarkable” as “deserving notice or comment; worthy of remark or attention. Hence: striking, unusual, singular.” That Ames views his life as “deserving comment” and “worthy of remark” is the impetus of *Gilead*. He writes to his son Robby because he believes human life is worth documenting and transmitting to another person. In addition to using ‘remarkable’ as he does above, he uses it describe perversity and horror in life, as when he describes life during World War I: “It took hundreds of [peach] pits to make just one [gas mask]. So we all ate peaches on grounds of patriotism, which actually made them taste a little different. The magazines were full of soldiers wearing gas masks, looking stranger than we did. It was a remarkable time” (43). He also uses it to ponder the mystery of a preacher mediating between the divine and the human: “There are three parties to [a good sermon], of course, but so are there even to the most private thought—the self that yields the thought, the self that acknowledges the thought, and the Lord. That is a remarkable thing to consider” (45). Ames’ differing uses of the word suggest two things: first that the human experience is worth contemplating and documenting, and second, that it is irreducible to a single understanding or final answer. But it is also probable that Ames uses the word ‘remarkable’ in the sense of trying to articulate something that has not been described or explained, as Robinson indicates in “Imagination and Community.” So it is possible to interpret Ames’ use of the word as partaking in the act of creating words about the ineffable, even if the only thing he can say about the

ineffable is that it is worth thinking of words for it. As Robinson indicates in “Imagination and Community,” “the unnamed is overwhelming present and real for [her].” Because she is intimately familiar with her characters, “people who do not exist,” she knows that imagination can create a community. Soon after writing about the “unsayable,” she turns to her concept of the imaginative community of love: “I would say, for the moment, that community, at least community larger than the immediate family, consists very largely of imaginative love for people who we do not know or whom we know very slightly” (21). The imaginative love Robinson refers to here is one that allows an individual to project camaraderie to another person without actually knowing them. Furthermore, it is an imaginative love that demands people extend respect to others because everyone partakes in the unknowable aspects of life that Ames finds remarkable.

To say that life is remarkable is to claim that it deserves to be documented and that it deserves to be studied through theology, art, and literature, but it is also a statement about making the ineffable real. For Robinson, to write about life and to try to name the unsayable is to move humanity closer to its identity as images of God. So Robinson comes closest to Rauschenbusch’s idealism in her defense of the humanities and its work to organize and describe the experience of human life. Her ideal American society begins when humans recognize the complex subjectivity of human life; engage in the humanist disciplines of rereading, contemplation, and creativity; embrace transience; and try to say what has not been said. Although she never fully succumbs to Rauschenbusch’s idealistic optimism—she regularly cites and recounts the military, economic, and environmental horrors of the twentieth century in her fiction and nonfiction—she does reveal a belief that humans can, and must, work to establish a

community based on love, service, and equality. Religious humanism provides the means to do such a thing.

Robinson's belief in religious humanism manifests in both her nonfiction and her fiction. Her defense of and study in the discipline frequently form the basis of her essays, and her belief in religious humanism to create positive myths that "form values and behavior" is apparent when reading her fiction. All of her major characters, John Ames, Robert Boughton, Jack, Lila, and Glory, engage in the disciplines of religious humanism, and they do so to the benefit of their own and their families' intellectual and spiritual wellbeing. Yet one of Robinson's nonfiction pieces stands apart from both her fiction and her nonfiction in that it speaks little of the religious humanism she espouses in her other writing. Published in 1989, *Mother Country* exposes the environmental disaster of the British nuclear reprocessing plant, Sellafield. Rather than standing apart as an anomaly in her oeuvre, *Mother Country* gives us the best glimpse of Robinson's political and social engagement. Exploring that book more closely before moving on to her fiction emphasizes her impetus to write books that have a measurable affect on their reading audiences and their larger cultural milieus.

At first glance, *Mother Country* differs most drastically from her other writing because of its rather ruthless tone. Documenting the environmental hazards of the Sellafield nuclear waste and reprocessing plant, Robinson combines her critique of the plant's existence with an invective against the British government's welfare policies. She states in the introduction to the book,

I am angry to the depths of my soul that the earth has been so injured...I feel the worth of my own life diminished by the tedious years I have spent acquiring competence in the arcana of mediocre invention, for all the world like one of those people who knows all there is to know about some defunct comic-book hero

or television series. The grief borne home to others while I and my kind have been thus occupied lies on my conscience like a crime. (32)

Robinson's tone here is overwhelmingly outraged. Throughout the book it borders on caustic. Her sense of urgency condemns herself and others for "mediocre invention," as if the years she spent reading and writing distracted her from what is truly important. Humanism is sacred for Robinson, but it is useless if not employed to identify and speak out against invidious government policy.

Robinson eschews subtlety for a direct attack against the British welfare policies and its handling of Sellafield. She writes, "The British nuclear industry creates leukemia in the young and hypothermia in the old, and yet it is profitable. Clearly bookkeeping is as expressive of cultural values as any other science" (4). Noting that Sellafield was in use as long as it was because it was profitable, Robinson emphasizes the moral failure of privileging national economics over the safety of its most vulnerable citizens. When told that Britain "has more naturalists per capita than any other country in the world" (16), Robinson suggests that the anecdote only proves that the British live within a paradox. A country that prides itself on its naturalists also uses "dioxin-contaminated defoliants," which is, "like plutonium, often called the most potent manmade toxin." And although the British take extreme measures to protect against rabies, Robinson argues that they seemingly ignore the fact that nearly one in sixty children die of leukemia in the villages near Sellafield. She writes, "To the extent that dramatizing one highly controllable problem creates an impression of caution and fastidiousness in matters of public health, the illusion is dangerous" (17). Robinson's charge here is inflammatory because it is more than a description of dangerous policies: it also suggests that duplicity and rapaciousness fuel public policy. She is less oblique later in the book: "I have suggested elsewhere that logic is

not a ruling passion among the British. My problem in writing this apocalyptic tale in a style suited to the importance of its subject is in fact that there is a particular, somber, officious foolishness about it all, and a forthright miserliness which it was, until lately, my error to consider beneath the dignity of governments” (153). Robinson’s tone throughout *Mother Country* continues in a similarly emphatic vein. She writes the book to inspire immediate change in public policy rather than advocating for a gradual change. Though the tact she takes to achieve this effect may not have seen the closing of Sellafield, it created enough of a stir to have the book banned in England and the author sued for libel by Greenpeace.

Robinson published *Mother Country* nine years after her debut novel, *Housekeeping*. Winner of the PEN/Hemingway Award, Robinson’s first novel is characterized by the quite tone of its poetic diction. For example, the main character Ruth describes the similarities between her deceased mother and her transient aunt by musing that “[appearance] paints itself on bright and sliding surfaces, for example, memory and dream” (131). Earlier, she describes the predawn darkness after spending a night beside a lake: “The absolute black of the sky dulled and dimmed and blanched slowly away, and finally half a dozen daubs of cloud, dull powder pink, sailed high in a pale-green sky, rust red at the horizon” (117). Her prose in *Housekeeping* proceeds quietly in a measured fashion as it depicts Ruth’s sensory impressions of a lonely life in Fingerbone, Idaho. Compared to the gentle prose of her first novel, *Mother Country* came as a shock to her audience because the anger with which she writes essentially effaces the distance between writer and reader. In fact, Robinson demands that her readers respond with the outrage she feels: “This book is essentially an effort to break down some of the structures of thinking that make reality invisible to us...my attack will seem ill-tempered and eccentric, a veering toward anarchy, the unsettling emergence of lady novelist as petroleuse” (32). As with her later nonfiction,

Robinson's writing challenges her readers to consider how they perceive the world and whether or not the facts and assumptions they have received are trustworthy. It also displays an immediacy not present in her other writing. Although it examines both abstract arguments and actual policy, it never wavers in its stated goal to produce direct protest against governmental policy in England.

Although *Mother Country* stands out from her other writing because it does not hide its moral outrage, it should be read as the driving force behind her later writing. In an interview with the *Paris Review* in 2008, Robinson described *Mother Country* as the work she was most proud of in her oeuvre. As she explains, *Mother Country* taught her how to live in the world differently:

It was a real education for me. It did as much as anything to undermine the education I brought with me when I started the project. It was as if I was writing a dissertation over again in my mind, trying to establish what would be the relevant thing to know and where to look next. Also, if I had not written that book, I would not have been able to live with myself. I would have felt that I was doing what we are all doing, which dooms the world. ("The Art of Fiction 198")

Robinson's comments indicate that *Mother Country* represented a threshold moment for her because it provided the incentive for the social and intellectual work she would later do to prepare her for writing about religious humanism.

Mother Country does more than just motivate Robinson's future concerns, though; it also provides her a method to achieve those ends:

It was largely as a consequence of the experience of writing *Mother Country* that I began what amounted to an effort to reeducate myself. After all those years of school, I felt there was little I knew that I could trust, and I did not want my books

to be one more tributary to the sea of nonsense that really is what most conventional wisdom amounts to. I am not so naive as to imagine that I have escaped that fate except in isolated cases and small particulars. But the research and criticism I have done have helped me to be of my own mind in some degree, and that was a feeling I had to achieve before I could enjoy writing fiction. (“The Art of Fiction 198”)

Robinson’s reeducation is both literary and political. To write meaningfully, to write so that she was not contributing another “tributary to the sea of nonsense,” necessitated a return to the past and a reexamination of the texts she had previously received uncritically. There is something beyond simple rereading here, though. Robinson’s hiatus also brought about a drive to inspire social and political change in her work.

Less anomaly and more of a wake up call, *Mother Country* reveals the deep link between Robinson’s fiction and nonfiction. The work she accomplished for and in *Mother Country* reveals the urgency in her later writing despite those books’ and novels’ usually measured tone. Moreover, *Mother Country* forces us to consider the ways her nonfiction and fiction work towards achieving actual change in society and governmental policy. As she states in *Mother Country*, the best hope for combatting the insidious effects of shortsighted and classist environmental policy is to institute a means for delivering, considering, discussing, and acting on information that influences how we live in the world. She writes towards the end of *Mother Country*:

There is no agora, where issues are really sorted out on their merits and decisions are made which, at best and worst, give permission to political leaders to carry out policies the public has approved. This model assumes information of a quality

that is by no means readily available to us. It assumes a reasonableness and objectivity which allow information to be taken in and assimilated to our understanding, and in this we are also thoroughly deficient. (230)

Robinson created her own version of an agora in her return to primary sources and her mission to re-humanize humanity. The model she envisions at the end of *Mother Country* is one that she develops for herself to find “quality information,” which she locates by avoiding commentary in preference for original sources. Her final words in *Mother Country* reiterate her desire to create a community of people who search original sources in order to form their own thoughts and who will act with “reasonableness and objectivity”: “My greatest hope...is that we will at last find the courage to make ourselves rational and morally autonomous adults, secure enough in the faith that life is good and to be preserved, to recognize the grosser forms of evil and name them and confront them...We have to...consult with our souls, and find the courage, in ourselves, to see, and perceive, and hear, and understand” (236). Robinson’s request implores her audience to become “rational and morally autonomous adults,” and it is in her later fiction that she models the kind of intellectual and civic behavior she advocates for in her nonfiction. By focusing intently on the inner thoughts of her characters—one of the three books is written from the perspective of the main character, while the other two occasionally dip into an interior monologue reminiscent of Joyce’s *Dubliners*—Robinson reveals her vision for a lived religious humanism. The “reasonableness and objectivity” of which “we are also thoroughly deficient” is overwhelmingly present in the characters that populate the Gilead novels.

Published between 2004 and 2014 and each garnering prestigious awards, Robinson’s Gilead novels, *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*, portray two families that live so as to create a Christian agora. They are relatively quiet novels that take place mostly in the minds of the three main

characters that ruminate on their lives in the small town of Gilead, Iowa. In that they focus on the lives of characters that move primarily between their churches and their homes, the novels could not be more different than the truculent historical exposé of *Mother Country*. Like Walker's *The Color Purple*, these are novels that emphasize the importance of the kitchen, the living room, and the front porch in human history. What happens in the home is as important and political as that which happens on the battlefield or in government buildings. In their narratives of domestic life in the Middle West, the books build their stories around characters that illustrate what Robinson's religious humanism looks like in practice. These characters draw on past human conduct—lived experience, intellectual study, and artistic endeavor—and then adapt what came before to the present moment in order to question, explore, and interrogate human behavior and apply what they have discovered to their situation in a small Middle Western town. Their brand of humanism is an ongoing project, and while it does not imagine ultimate answers, it does provide insights by which the characters can meaningfully act within their community, whether that be taking care of the poor, passing on received knowledge and doubts, or conversing in a common discourse while still maintaining a strong individual identity.

The three Gilead novels take place from the late forties to the mid-fifties and depict events concerning the families of John Ames and Robert Boughton, lifelong companions who are both ordained pastors, but in different denominations, and who are now in their late seventies and rapidly nearing the end of their lives. Narrated by John Ames, an elderly pastor who will soon die and leave behind a young wife and seven-year-old son, *Gilead* consists of stories collected from his past and the wisdom he has gained so that he can impart them to his son. The novel combines three main narratives: the first documents Ames' childhood memories growing up with his pacifist father and his hawkish grandfather, both of whom were ordained pastors. The

second narrative collects Ames' reflections on life as he nears its end and works to record memories, life lessons, and personal thoughts he wants to share with his son. The third narrative, which interrupts the first two, tells the story of Jack Boughton's return to Gilead after a twenty-year absence. Named John Ames Boughton in tribute to the older Ames, Jack's presence permeates the three Gilead novels. The black sheep of the Boughton family, Jack has returned to Gilead in a final effort to establish himself by trying to find work, somewhat wishfully trying to find a welcoming place for his interracial family, and trying to reconcile his unbelief with the steadfast faith of his father and godfather.

Home shares the story of Glory Boughton's return to Gilead to take care of her father in his final weeks. Though actually a novel about Jack's return, *Home* is narrated from Glory's point of view. The youngest of eight Boughton children, she attends to her father and brother's needs and tries to mentally, emotionally, and spiritually recover from a fraudulent five-year engagement with a married man who never intended to marry her. *Lila* portrays Lila and Ames' courtship, marriage, and birth of their son. Within this framework, the novel charts Lila's reconciliation of her past life as a migrant worker with her newly stationary life and conversion to Christianity. Told from Lila's perspective, the novel's present day action takes place between ten and seven years before the events in *Gilead* and *Home*, and while it is not a prequel per se, it foregrounds the special attention that the Gilead novels pay to the transient lifestyle. The novel's past action, told mainly through Lila's ruminations, tells of her origins and her life on the road with Doll, the woman who saved her from abuse and neglect when she was four or five years old. The portrait of American life Robinson builds with these novels is one of small town life in the years leading up to and including the civil rights movement, and it does so in order to create a modern myth of American religious humanism. The Gilead novels represent in fiction the

intellectual and political concerns Robinson elucidates in her nonfiction. Examining the ways that characters reread texts, how they engage in subjective contemplation, and why they turn to religion as they acknowledge a persistent mystery to life reveals Robinson's vision for a community that works within the parameters of the fourth element of the gospel: notably, Christ's absence and the work of believers during that absence.

Home is, for all intents and purposes, Jack's story. Although the story is told from Glory's perspective, and though her anguish over being fooled by her "fiancé" and returning to live in her quiet and unremarkable childhood home constitute vital parts of the narrative, *Home*'s pacing, plot, and action depend primarily on Jack's prodigal son story. The question arises then why Robinson chooses to tell the story from Glory's point of view. What narrative purpose does the book gain from seeing Jack's story through Glory's eyes and tracking Jack's conflict through his sister's thoughts? The answer to these questions hinges on Robinson's argument that sincere and careful contemplation of spiritual matters prepares people to take heroic action. *Home* delivers Jack's story through Glory because it forces the reader to contemplate with Glory the unsolvable problem Jack provides for his family: namely, how can a man redeem himself if he feels in his bones and blood that he is irredeemable? To answer the question about the narrative's perspective it is also necessary to understand how Glory views herself. She has returned home under ignominious circumstances. She has dealt with loneliness and abandonment since she was a child. As the youngest, her seven brothers and sisters eventually left her as an only child when they moved out of the house. Returning home after the disappointment of her fraudulent engagement means returning to long-avoided feelings of isolation and insignificance. Glory's heroic action, then, is to realize that she will become, like her father, a "steward of ultimate things," which is the highest calling a person can attain in the Boughton household.

Early in the novel, Glory acknowledges that her story would be different if she were male, and this awareness of the perceived limitations of her gender haunts her. She remarks that had she been a man she would probably have chosen the ministry because “to their father’s mind, the world’s great work was the business of men, of gentle, serious men well versed in Scripture and eloquent at prayer, or, in any case, ordained in some reasonably respectable denomination. They were the stewards of ultimate things” (20). Since her father’s definition of “the world’s great work” precludes women, Glory understands that she will never achieve the same kind of recognition from her father that her brother Jack has access to, despite his lifetime of disobedience and shameful behavior. Boughton indicates this hierarchy late in the book, when he tells Teddy, Jack’s younger brother, how much help he and Jack have been to him: “And I hope that I have made it clear that I thank God for you, that you have been a great blessing to me. In the time he has been home, Jack has shown great kindness to me. Glory, too, of course. Yes” (261). Boughton’s syntax dismisses Glory’s contributions by including her as an afterthought. The slight is intensified because Glory returned home to provide hospice care for Boughton. Although he cannot know her thoughts, the reader knows that his comments cut Glory severely because she frequently worries that her life has no meaning if she stays in Gilead. Her father’s dismissal of the good that she does there denigrates her place in this home that values “the world’s great work” of men.

Glory’s credentials demonstrate her capacity for doing the world’s great work that her brother’s can achieve. In the midst of her anxiety about returning home, she explains, “I am thirty-eight years old...I have a master’s degree. I taught high school English for thirteen years. I was a good teacher. What have I done with my life? What has become of it? It was as if I had a dream of adult life and woke up from it, still here in my parents house” (19). Glory is educated,

she has extensive work experience, and she excelled at her career. Yet she feels vulnerable enough in her return home to infantilize herself, to see herself as the youngest child who was left behind. At this point in the novel, she cannot recognize the full value of her work because her insecurities cloud her sense of self-worth. Remembering her interactions with her students, she thinks, “Why do we have to read poetry? Why ‘Il Penseroso’? Read it and you’ll know why. If you still don’t know, read it again. And again...She was helping them assume their humanity” (21). Glory participates in and helps others participate in the work of humanism. To “assume their humanity” they must read and reread until they learn to appreciate the aesthetic inquiries into human nature that Milton explored. The connection between humanism and religion is never far from any of the Boughtons’ minds, so Glory connects her teaching with her father’s work: “Her father taught his children, never doubting, that there was a single path from antiquity to eternity. Learn the psalms and ponder the ways of the early church. Know what must be known” (21). To teach Milton is to guide students towards the ultimate things that her father has passed down to them. As such, there’s “[no] need to be a minister. To be a teacher was an excellent thing” (21). Glory recognizes her work in the world to be of a kind with “the world’s great work,” but she only recognizes this in her vocation; she fails at this point in the novel to see it in her identity.

Wyatt Mason, in *The New York Times* article “The Revelations of Marilynne Robinson,” suggests that “[all] four of the novels are in conversation with—at times tacitly, at times explicitly—the stories of the Bible.” Like Faulkner, Robinson reworks Biblical stories for her own narrative purposes. Both bend the original texts in order to connect their stories to the spiritual significance of the primary source. Although it is tempting to read *Home* as Jack’s

prodigal son story, it is equally important to read it as Glory's prodigal daughter story.¹⁴ Glory has returned home a somewhat disgraced person, at least in her eyes. Her family believes that she was married and that it did not work out, a severe stigma in the Boughton household. They do not know that she was engaged to a married man who continually borrowed money from her. When she tells Jack, he replies, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe I have just been told that I am not the only sinner in this family" (120). They debate whether Glory's choice was a sin or simply stupidity, but the actual condemnation Glory feels springs from the unrelenting hope she invested in her fiancé and the children she imagined having some day. She explains the long reveries she engaged in, picturing the children they would have but that only she wanted: "So she imagined the children playing quietly, tiptoeing in from the patio now and then to whisper a secret or open a hand to show her an interesting pebble, then back out the door again so quietly, because Papa must not be disturbed" (306). Glory's dream resounds with silence and furtive moments, exemplifying the degree to which her hopes are unattainable, and she admits to herself that she overlooked her fiancé's true intentions because she desperately wanted "the children and the sunlit house" (307). Glory returns to Gilead much the same way the prodigal son returned to his father. She has spent her resources and she has nowhere else to turn, so she comes home as much out of desperation as she does to be a caretaker.

¹⁴ Critics and reviewers tend to read *Home* as Jack's story primarily, as if he is the only prodigal in his family. For example, Elizabeth Ellis writes, "*Home*...is Jack's story, set in [the 1950s], that creates all of the central conflicts...These conflicts become an extension of the New Testament parable of the Prodigal Son" ("Race, Religion, and Sentimentalism" 185). See also reviews by Will Joyner ("Back Home in Gilead") and Richard H. King ("Marilynne Robinson, *Home*"). Rebecca Painter argues that Glory's story is as biblically significant as Jack's, but she identifies her with Ruth rather than a prodigal daughter: "Glory's account of Jack's return to Gilead adds a female dimension lacking in the biblical parable. Her sisterly devotion to the family's wayward son, refusal to pass judgment, and all-embracing mercy most resembles the father's unconditional welcome in the original. Glory's loyalty to Jack and her family also makes her the second indelible Ruth figure in Robinson's oeuvre" ("Loyalty Meets Prodigality" 332).

The tragedy of *Home* resides in Jack's return to the road, but the triumph of the novel derives from Glory's ability to authenticate her life in Gilead. Unlike the Biblical prodigal son, Jack cannot stay, not because he is degenerate but because he knows he has no place among his family despite desires he may have to the contrary. Thus the narrative's redemption comes through Glory's story. She is the prodigal child who returns for good, ultimately choosing to look after the house and keep it in its current shape for the sake of her siblings, especially Jack. As he is about to abandon the family again, he tells her, "I'm not sure you should stay here, Glory...Don't do it for my sake. I shouldn't have talked to you about it the way I did" (316). She replies, "Don't worry. If you ever need to come home, I'll be here. Call first, just to be sure. No, you won't have to do that. I'll be here" (317). Glory's redemption stems from her finding peace in her new station. Her return was initially a desperate move. As she sees it at the end of the novel, it was actually to steward the family's house for Jack, the transient who she compares to Christ in his holy vulnerability. Speaking of Jack she thinks, "Who would bother to be kind to him? A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their face. Ah, Jack" (318). Quoting Isaiah 53:3, Glory pities her brother, but she also sees him as he is and loves him for it. She has accepted Jack into the family in a way that allows him to be himself rather than forcing him to lie to about his true nature, as he tried and failed to do with his father. She tends the house for Jack so that he will always have a home, even if he has to look at it from afar like he did when he hid from his family in his youth.

Glory ultimately assumes the mantle of "the steward of all things" in the novel's final scene when she imagines Jack's son visiting the house. For much of her adult life, the family home represented insignificance for Glory, but for Jack it remained the place he was drawn to but could not enter. He spent most of his childhood away from the house, isolating himself from

his family. They believed that he had not wanted to be with them, but he tells Glory that he usually hid in the barn, closer than any of them had imagined. So it is that the house represents a final dream of peace for his new family. The dream proves futile after he receives a letter from his wife explaining that she and their son cannot join him. Unexpectedly, two days after he leaves, his wife Della and their son Robert Boughton Miles—his surname given to him by his maternal grandfather—arrive at the house.¹⁵ They cannot stay long because the day is getting late and they would be putting themselves in danger by being out on the roads at night. After they leave, Glory thinks, “Jack could hardly bring himself to dream she would come here, and there was reason enough to doubt, though he could not stop himself from dreaming of it, either. They had the boy with them, Jack would be frightened for the boy, so they had to be back to Missouri before it was dark” (324). Jack dreams that his family will come to Gilead so that they can see the home that he treasured despite not fitting into it. He dreams of reuniting with his family, and he dreams of the domesticity that has always eluded him.

Jack will not see this dream fulfilled, but Glory believes that she will and, moreover, that in doing so she will give to Jack’s son the connection to his father that Jack was unable to establish with his. She closes the novel with another dream of a child, this time Jack’s: “She thought, Maybe this Robert will come back someday” (324). The capital *m* in “Maybe” is telling because at this point in the novel, Glory assumes the narrative voice. She thinks about briefly speaking with the now grown Robert and watching him verify in his mind the details of the house that his father had once told him about: “He will talk to me a little while, too shy to tell me why he has come, and then he will thank me and leave, walking backward a few steps, thinking,

¹⁵ Jack and Della are not allowed to be married in St. Louis because of miscegenation laws, so they consider themselves married “in the eyes of God” (*Gilead* 220).

Yes, the barn is still there, yes, the lilacs, even the pot of petunias. This was my father's house. And I will think, He is young. He cannot know that my whole life has come down to this moment" (325). Glory finds that she is the steward of ultimate things in that she preserves the Boughton legacy, not for those who have never turned away from it, but for those who never had the privilege of enjoying it.

Having assumed the mantle of steward, Glory can also envision the peace her brother desires for his family, and the narration suggests that her vision is prophetic rather than mere wish fulfillment. As with Cheshire's *High as the Horses' Bridles*, having a character's voice displace the third person narration of the text signifies a move from descriptive to prophetic speech. Grammatically, the final two paragraph-clauses complete the sentence she began with "He cannot know." She ends by saying, "That he has answered his father's prayers. / The Lord is wonderful" (325). She ends her vision with a benediction, blessing her brother by claiming that his prayers have been answered, blessing Robert by identifying him as the one to fulfill his father's dreams, and blessing the Lord for giving her this role as steward. Despite the prophetic voice she adopts, the vision does not erase the book's tragic mystery, which asks but does not answer why Jack cannot be the son Boughton wants him to be. Yes, Robert will return to the house his father spoke of, but Jack will never have the resolution he desired. At the moment when Glory's prodigal story finds redemption, Jack disappears from the Gilead novels. Glory's final benediction makes room for two conflicting events to occur: Jack will abandon the Boughton family again, but he will also succeed in bringing something good to this family, namely his own son. The book achieves this by suggesting that Glory can transfer the redemption she experiences onto Jack and his family. As Holberg explains, Glory embodies the love of God for her brother and his family: "And so, richly complicated and deeply flawed though she is,

deeply unhappy and lonely though she finds herself, Glory tries nevertheless to be what her name implies: the real presence of God to her family” (293). In her brother’s absence, Glory will carry out the work of redeeming his family’s tragedy. Robinson picks up the mystery of transmitting grace through words and images in *Lila*.

Robinson’s novels substitute contemplation for narrative action since they take place primarily within the main characters’ minds; as such, the novels’ conflicts occur internally. In that characters’ thoughts move the narratives forward, these thoughts also carry the weight of meaning for the characters and for the books. Robinson indicates the significance of contemplation in her 2009 interview with *The Guardian*. She explains, “It seems to me that the small drama of conversation and thought and reflection, that is so much more individual, so much less clichéd than—I mean when people set out on an adventure, I think 90 times out of 100, they’ve read about it in a brochure. That’s not the part of life that interests me” (Brockes). Thinking in Robinson’s novels is “individual” and “less clichéd” in that it focuses attention on an individual character with unique characteristics. Their private thoughts distinguish them from their family and friends, but they do not alienate the individual either. Rather, private thought allows for distinction. For example, in *Lila*, the eponymous main character somewhat compulsively fixates on the difference between her lonely life on the road and her new life as a wife and mother in Gilead, which adds a desperation to her narrative, while Ames’ reverence for theology, fatherhood, and loss make for a steady summing up of a life in *Gilead*. Both Lila and Ames share in their individual experiences of loneliness; instead of erasing their identities though, their relationship provides a way for them to connect while still remaining strong, individual characters in their own right.

Lila documents the interplay of community and isolation to explore how a person who has spent her life as a transient, always hiding who she is for fear of either imprisonment or shame, can connect with another human being whose life has also been defined by loneliness. As these two individuals learn to speak a similar language, they find the common ground to form a small community. Lila frequently remarks to herself and to Ames about the troubling nature of her thoughts and the perplexing things upon which they focus. During her pregnancy, she spends the days at home while Ames works at the church. Cleaning the house or reading the Bible, thoughts of her life before she met Ames overwhelm her: “She wiped [the dust] away, the room was perfect for a little while, and then she fell to thinking. Rocking for the sound it made, and thinking” (171). Her thoughts provide no comfort to her, though: “Why was she thinking about any of this? She was so scared that day, in that parlor with the drapes closed at noon and that damn credenza with the vase of dusty feathers sitting on it. Looking like a coffin” (183). Negative thoughts, memories, and feelings haunt Lila. Meanwhile pleasant memories, such as being picked up and swaddled by Doll when she was a child, make her question Ames’ sense of Christianity, knowing that Doll, the woman who saved her from abuse and neglect, had no interest in religion or salvation.

Lila’s haunted memories, such as her memories of absolute loneliness and shame, convict her to such a degree that she comforts herself by believing that she can abandon her new life with Ames and disappear down the road, much as Doll eventually did to Lila. For all her desire for peace, she cannot stop these thoughts: “I keep trying to read the Bible, but my mind goes wandering off. You wouldn’t want to know where. The things I find myself thinking about, with the Bible right there in my lap” (183). Lila’s tormented thoughts are a mark of her individuality. Although they rob her of peace, they also remind her of the formative moments in her life and

give her an identity as dignified as Ames'. Although he has led a life as a respectable and respected pastor, and although she has no sense of her origins other than Doll rescuing her from a cold porch at night, wandering for most of her life as a migrant worker, and working in a brothel, Ames inherently sees in Lila the dignity she finds in him. So much of *Lila* then, takes place in her thoughts to chart how she learns to see herself not only with the dignity he sees in her but also to show how she becomes, like Glory, a steward of ultimate things who can see the dignity of her life and, just as importantly, who has something to teach Ames about theology, despite his years of rigorous study.

Lila and Ames experience an immediate attraction to each other that neither sufficiently understands, but it is clear to her that she begins to connect to Ames intellectually when she reads the book of *Ezekiel*. Living in an abandoned cabin in Gilead, Lila begins her self-education by reading and copying the Biblical book. As she begins, she finds herself startled by the prophet's angelic imagery: "And out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the likeness of a man" (68). Lila draws a connection between Ezekiel's poetry and her life through the word "likeness." She thinks to herself, "She had the likeness of a life, because she was all alone in it. She lived in the likeness of a house, with walls and a roof and a door that kept nothing in and nothing out. And when Doll took her up and swept her away, she had felt a likeness of wings. She thought, Strange as all this is, there might be something to it" (68). Ames remarks to Lila that there are easier books to read in the Bible, but she largely ignores his advice because of Ezekiel's strikingly odd imagery. Although "likeness" draws her into the text because her life has only ever been a "likeness" of a life and not what she considers the real thing, the image of a baby rescued by God ultimately allows Lila to see her own dignity: "She was still thinking about Ezekiel, as much as

anything...*Then I washed I thee with water; yea, I thoroughly washed away thy blood from thee, and I anointed thee with oil.* The blood is just the shame of having no one who takes any care of you. Why should that be shame? A child is just a child” (135). Lila’s thoughts reveal her own sense of shame. Despite what she says about the child being just a child, she cannot escape the shame she feels for not having a family. Lila sees her likeness in the image of the child to the degree that she changes the Biblical text. In Ezekiel 16, the child is actually a baby newly born and still attached to the umbilical cord. Lila changes the wording to be a “child” because she was four or five when Doll rescued her after she had been “cast out” (Ezek. 16:5, KJV). As she begins to see herself in the Biblical text, she can begin to speak with Ames with words he understands. And though she does not have his education, she brings her own wisdom to the conversation. In order to do this though, she must overcome her insecurity about her origins and her life on the road.

Lila gradually learns that her shame is largely self-inflicted in that she internalizes the shameful gaze of others. Regardless, the shame she feels frequently overwhelms her. At one point in the novel, thinking that she acts like a “crazy women,” the narrator explains, “There was more shame in life than she could bear” (57). Throughout the novel, Lila feels the force of other people’s impressions so that she never feels part of a community unless she is with Doll. Her shame overwhelms her such that she constantly hides behind Doll’s legs as a child and refrains from speaking to other people whenever possible. Later in the novel, she thinks back to the last time she saw Doll and remembers the shame she felt when her supposed kin judged her without knowing who she actually is: “Why you should have to stand there feeling ridiculous with a bloodstain still on your shoe, just at the time when other people are out to insult you, and not one part of it is your fault or your choice, that’s the kind of thing she didn’t understand. Because you

do it to yourself” (181). Literally left out in the cold by her family, rescued by an itinerant woman, and trained with a meager set of skills, Lila feels the powerlessness of her life and associates this impotence with shame. As such, when she sees others judge her, or simply look at her, she turns their gaze into shame.

The process of internalizing people’s discourse permeates *Lila* because it is a book that examines Lila’s conversion from one life to another. She alters her view of the world as her experiences change, but she often does so by adopting discourses she hears from other people. In *Lila*, internalizing the words and ideas of others is not always or only a dehumanizing activity because the book suggests that Lila and Ames cannot enter into a new relationship without adopting how the other speaks. Robinson’s humanism is predicated on individuals studying the thoughts and work of others, which then allows them to adopt and adapt what they encounter. As such, internalizing language is more an act of educational synthesis than it is of dominance. In between memories of the men who judged her and her time at the brothel in St. Louis, Lila tells Ames that she needs more time to think about her previous life before she can tell him about it. She concludes the conversation by saying, “It’s so different here it makes me remember other places I been. I guess I have to do that. Sort things out a little. Seems like I don’t even know myself, everything’s so different” (188). Lila has to redefine her past through her present circumstances. She has to reimagine what she already knows about the world and her place in it by interpreting it in light of her new understanding of community and grace, which is provided to her by Ames and Ezekiel.

Early in life Lila internalized a sense of shame because of her insecurity; now that she has internalized grace, she looks back on her life in order to apply grace to her past. She wonders if Doll will receive the grace that Ames has shown her. She wonders if her other travelling

companions will have the chance or the desire to receive grace as well. Despite her feelings of shame, Lila does have a strong sense of self. Earlier in the novel, she thinks, “Here I am walking along the road all alone smoking a cig. They got hard names for women who do that kind of thing. I got to do it more often” (51). Lila’s character runs deeper than she can articulate, but she begins to appreciate it as she wrestles between the discourses of shame and grace. As she resolves the two discourses, she adds her own voice to the newly synthesized discourse, which allows her to answer doubts about Doll and her other companions.

Lila ultimately redefines Ames’ theology of grace so that she has something to teach the old pastor, which for Lila completes her sense of unity with the preacher. One afternoon at Boughton’s house, she listens to Boughton and Ames discuss theology, as is their want: “as she listened she understood that Doll was not, as Boughton said, among the elect. Like most people who lived on earth, she did not believe and was not baptized” (97). Doll’s fate in the afterlife concerns Lila as much as her own shame haunts her thoughts. As she contemplates her past life through contemplation and reading, she begins to reconcile her doubts as to Doll’s ultimate fate. “She could almost forget that the shame wasn’t really hers at all, any more than any child was hers, not even a child cast out and weltering in its blood, God bless it. Well, that was a way of speaking she had picked up from the old man. It let you imagine you could comfort someone you couldn’t comfort at all, a child that never even had an existence to begin with” (178). Adopting Ames’ “God bless it,” Lila begins to dismiss the shame she carried with her into Gilead. She has begun to integrate Ames’ discourse into her own, and doing so hastens the resolution of her conflict. She finds Ames’ discourse empowering because it allows her to extend grace to people in her imagination. In her interview with *The Guardian*, Robinson explains, “I’m interested in the figural quality of thought, its affinity to myth and dream, first of all in its emotional density and

its indifference to time” (“A Life in Writing”). In her nonfiction, she defines myth as “visions of reality which form values and behavior.” Similarly, Lila can adopt a new discourse to “comfort someone you couldn’t comfort at all” because she believes in the mythic aspects of grace that Ames’ discourse elucidates.

The paradox in Lila’s idea that she can comfort those she cannot comfort is more mystery than contradiction. Though she cannot physically comfort Doll because Doll is most likely dead—and certainly absent from her life—Lila can draw her on towards the grace she is learning to accept for herself. So much of Lila’s story centers on her baptism and gradual conversion. She has to learn to be the wife of a pastor, which also means that she has to reconcile her pre-Christian with her Christian life. She understandably feels intimidated by Ames and Boughton’s extensive knowledge of the Bible, Calvin, Barth, and any number of theological texts, but she refuses to give up what she knows to be true, namely that Doll and her other travelling companions, even all the lost people in China that Boughton speaks of, can and will find the same grace that is allotted to those who are “elect.” She does this by developing her sense of comforting those she cannot comfort. She remembers that Ames once told her, “We have to keep you with us,” and then thinks, “In that eternity of his, where everybody will be happy, how could he feel the lack of her, the loss of her?” (258). She answers the problem by suggesting that sorrow cannot exist in eternity, so Ames must pull Lila in with him because he loves her and he will not be sorrowful in eternity. In arriving at this conclusion, Lila combines her sense of the goodness of God (258) with Ames theology of grace and happiness in the afterlife.

When asked if Doll will join them in the afterlife, Ames’ best answer is that “God is gracious. I can’t reconcile, you know, hell and the rest of it to things I do believe. And feel I understand, in a way. So I don’t talk about it very much” (99). Lila needs more than Ames can

provide her here; his discourse reaches its limits, so she adapts it using her past experience with shame and grace. She will do for Doll what Doll did for her: “Then I’ll steal you, and I’ll take you away where nobody knows us, and I’ll make up all the difference between what you are and what you could have been by loving you so much” (16). Like Glory, Lila becomes a steward of ultimate things in that she develops an imaginative discourse that forms values and behaviors. Her discourse is one that draws Doll into the afterlife, as Ames has drawn her into grace, and her discourse is authoritative enough to be worthy of an audience. Thus the book ends with “Someday she would tell him what she knew” (261). Lila will teach Ames about the theological issue he cannot reconcile. Because she has developed this discourse of grace, she can steward Doll and her other companions into the same grace she discovered despite, or because of, their absence from her.

Extending grace to those who least deserve it troubles John Ames throughout *Gilead*. He has done his best to extend grace to everyone he knows and meets. As he tells his son, “When you encounter another person, when you have dealings with anyone at all, it is as if a question is being put to you. So you must think, What is the Lord asking of me in this moment, in this situation?” (124). That his father gave him this advice troubles Ames because his father had a falling out with his grandfather. *Gilead* is, among other things, a book about what it means to find significance in a life. This is the project he engages in as he looks back on his own life. Throughout this story that he is writing to his son Robby, he consistently returns to father and son relationships and the estrangement that often accompanies them. He tells Robby about the disagreement between his father and grandfather over whether or not Christians should engage in war or choose pacifism. His grandfather moved his family from Maine to Kansas and then Iowa to support the Free-Staters in Kansas before eventually leading men in the Civil War. Ames’s

father preaches strict pacifism, and like his son, sees in the Spanish Influenza God's rebuke of a world that pursued war. Ames also speaks of his father's estrangement and eventual reconciliation with Ames' older brother, Edward, which then brings about Ames' discord with his father. Ames tells these stories in part to explore what it means to live a life with unresolved estrangement when he is, according to his father, supposed to extend grace to everyone he meets. The question troubles him most when he considers his relationship with his godson, Jack Boughton.

As the "father of [Jack's] soul" (123), Ames knows he has a responsibility towards Jack Boughton, but he struggles to extend grace to him because Jack represents for Ames ultimate and irrational meanness. He writes, "Clearly I must somehow contrive to *think* graciously about him" (123, emphasis in the original). Ames' words are telling; grace for him begins by thinking about it—contemplation leads to physical action. Ames struggles to do this because he cannot reconcile Jack's past actions. As he tells Robby, Ames married young and had a daughter, but both his wife and the child died from the birth. Ames then spends most of his life as a widower. Boughton then names one of his sons John Ames Boughton to honor his friend and to symbolically give him the child he had lost. But Jack's actions growing up alienate him from both the Boughtons and Ames. The final straw for Ames comes when Jack impregnates a young girl and then abandons both mother and daughter. When the daughter dies a few years later, Ames discovers he cannot let go of the anger he feels over Jack's seemingly meaningless neglect of the father-daughter relationship that Ames coveted.

Ames' ability to reconcile with Jack comes about because of his contemplation and study. He reminds Robby that he regularly returns to Calvin's *Institutes*, Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*, Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*, and with Lila's prodding, his own sermons. He has

spent a significant portion of his life discussing theology and politics with Boughton. His project for Robby is, at its core, a contemplation of his own life and the estrangements, lessons, and joys that have accompanied it. All of these things prepare Ames for his reunion with Jack. Since Jack cannot freely discuss the true nature of his problems, he approaches Ames obliquely, through conversations about theology and Christianity in America. Their first few conversations end in frustration and misunderstanding because Ames believes Jack is trying to antagonize his faith, although Jack is trying to talk about saving his marriage without actually speaking about it. In a conversation ostensibly about predestination, Jack, who believes himself not of the elect, asks Ames, “Does it seem right to you...that there should be no common language between us?” (170). The lack of “common language” describes most of Jack’s relationships. Because he is hyperaware of his misdeeds and the seeming lack of purpose behind them, he tends to sabotage his conversations with Glory, his father, and Ames. Ames can only connect with Jack when Jack reveals that he too once again has a wife and child.

All of the Gilead novels follow the same structure in that they use paragraph breaks in place of chapters. This structure mimics the contemplation of the characters. In the same way that their minds move from subject to subject in a non-linear and continuous flow, so the paragraphs and sections of the novels proceed without strict divisions. The exception to this rule occurs in *Gilead* when Ames discovers that Jack has a wife and child. Rather than inserting a chapter break, Robinson uses a page break to disrupt the narrative. The blank page symbolizes Ames’ recalibration of Jack and his behavior. Himself newly married, which he views as a special blessing because of his early domestic tragedy, Ames can begin to see that same blessing in Jack. That Ames and Jack establish a relationship is crucial to Ames’ life because he has felt for a long time that he did a disservice to Jack by not properly christening him. Bitter to have

christened a child named after him instead of having his own daughter alive and present, Ames explains to Robby that he had christened Jack with resentment and that he feels “a burden of guilt toward that child, that man, my namesake” (188). Ames ultimately cannot solve Jack’s domestic problem, so Jack decides to leave Gilead for the last time. Before he does though, Ames intercepts him on the way to the train station and asks if he can bless him, which symbolically redeems both their relationship and Jack’s connection to the Boughtons. Ames remarks, “I told him it was an honor to bless him. And that was also absolutely true. In fact I’d have gone through seminary and ordination and all the years intervening for that one moment” (242). Ames also gives Jack his copy of *The Essence of Christianity*. As in *Home*, Jack’s story fails to resolve happily; and unlike in *Lila*, Ames and Jack fail to ultimately speak the same discourse, their final connection notwithstanding. The resolution in *Gilead* between Jack and Ames is that they form a community of contemplation and study. As Jack goes his way, he carries with him Feuerbach’s book, a book Ames cherishes because it celebrates beauty in doubt and unbelief (24). The brand of religious humanism on display in *Gilead* is one of recognizing the image of God in both Jack and Ames, despite their differences, and forming a community based on their their similar experiences.

Because of Jack’s particular story, the racial implications of religious humanism in the Gilead novels must be considered. As Jack tells Ames in *Gilead*, he had hoped to bring Della and Robert to Gilead so that they could escape the discrimination that caused him to lose his job in St. Louis. He asks Ames, “What about this town? If we came here and got married, could we live here? Would people leave us alone?” Ames writes, “Well, I didn’t know the answer to that one...I thought so” (231). Ames gives no definite answer to the question. He believes they would be accepted, but he cannot be sure. In *Home*, Jack quotes Ulysses S. Grant when he calls Iowa,

“our shining star of radicalism,” and thereby alludes to Iowa’s never having laws against interracial marriage and never having segregated schools (“A Conversation in Iowa”). Jack’s inability to raise a family in Gilead parallels Ames and Glory’s similarly thwarted domestic dreams, but on another level his tragedy directly links to the failure of Iowa and the United States to accept, as Obama puts it in his conversation with Robinson, “somebody in the Fifties that doesn’t look like [Jack]” (“A Conversation in Iowa”). Jack’s interracial relationship is only revealed at the end of *Gilead* and the end of *Home*. Each time the revelation comes as a shock to the protagonist. The narrative effect of revealing Jack’s true conflict at the end of the books and only after he has perplexed his family with what they believe are his old boyhood tendencies towards petty disobedience changes readers’ experience with the novels. Ending the novels with a civil rights conflict forces readers to reinterpret what they have come to understand about family and the problem of understanding one’s own complexity. These problems of complex human subjectivity are more than personal conflicts. In that they relate to or must be considered in light of Jack’s relationship with Della, they must be considered as political acts as well. Lila’s salvific grace for Doll extends to Jack and his family. Glory’s gradual transformation into the steward of her family’s legacy is the pinnacle of her life because it allows her to help Jack’s son fulfill his father’s hope. And Ames’ longtime grief, the loneliness with which he mourned his deceased wife and daughter, prepares him to finally accept Jack as a spiritual son and to love him, his wife, and his son as if they were family. The recognition of their complex subjective experience allows the main characters to act out the radicalism that Iowa abandoned and to establish the community of love, service, and equality that Robinson advocates for in her writing.

In her conversation with Obama, Robinson explains that her “interest in Christianity” inspires her respect for individuals: “Well, I believe that people are images of God...It’s the

human image. It's not loyalty or tradition or anything else; it's being human that enlists the respect, the love of God being implied in it." Her belief in the human being as an image of God provides the foundation of her community of imaginative love. As she tells Obama, democracy is "the logical, the inevitable consequence of" recognizing in others the image of God. Her defense of humanism, "that old romance of the self, the idea that the self is to be refined by exposure to things that are wonderful and difficult and imbued with what was called the human spirit," always includes a defense of "education, the arts, a humane standard of life for the whole of the community" ("Facing Reality" 76). Thus Robinson bases her respect for others and her advocacy for humanism on her sense of the ineffable in humans. For her, the endeavor to understand human life, to explain it and admire it in art and writing, derives from a dedication to an ineffable source of authority that inspires people to create, to question, and to build just civic communities.

There are more obvious examples of admirable civic behavior in the novels than Jack's multiracial family, Ames' grace, Glory's patience, and Lila's compassion. For example, Jack's younger brother, Teddy, "has a medical degree and a doctorate in theology and runs a hospital for the destitute somewhere in Mississippi. He is a great credit to the family" (87). By all measures of Robinson's religious humanism, Teddy should be lauded for his dedication to others, his dedication to learning, and his sacrificial line of work. That the Gilead stories are not Teddy's—that they are Jack's, and Ames', and Lila's, and Glory's—alerts us to Robinson's larger political move in the Gilead novels. Though it is easy to praise Teddy, it is much more difficult to admire Jack because he continually betrays those who love him. Robinson's religious humanism calls for an inviting into community on the basis of an individual's inherent worth, not their achievements or work ethic. If the community of Gilead were to do such a thing, Ames could answer Jack's question affirmatively and invite his family home. Instead, Jack must leave

because his family is most likely unwelcome. Fear of the other—in this case, a racially diverse family—dooms Jack’s final effort for a settled life.

Robinson identifies contrived fear as a major threat to positive civic action in America today. In response, Obama advocates for “a common conversation” (“A Conversation in Iowa”)—the kind of common conversation that Jack sought with Ames—to address this contrived fear. They then point to the value of a national book club’s ability to bring people together before the President extols Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton* as a work of art that bridges communities separated by race, education, political views, and aesthetic preferences. For both Robinson and the President, art carries the potential to inspire a common conversation that is absent from contemporary American political discourse. Thus, Robinson orients her fiction to speak to her reading audience and to show them how characters create bonds despite their religious differences and their past grievances. Her defense of religious humanism in her nonfiction further underscores her desire to eradicate contrived fear by pursuing a religious humanism that celebrates and grows human experience across cultures. Taken together, her work has as its goal a desire to dispel fear of others by revealing their innate dignity, a quality that for Robinson derives from a insuperable connection to the ineffable.

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CONCLUSION

In my introduction, I asserted that religious discourse in American literature is often more a process than a product. The process of mediating and internalizing discourse is evident in individual characters' journeys, such as Celie's gradual transformation from an oppressed Protestant believer to a self-authorizing pantheistic witness of the Great Mystery and Lila's internalization and modification of Ames' sense of the remarkable. At the same time, the process of religious discourse in American literature also manifests in the production of American literature about the ineffable. Thus, while Faulkner, O'Connor, Ellison, and Robinson purportedly write about a Christian God, they do so in radically unique ways. As an ineffable source of authority, the figure of the Christian God they represent in words resists concretization. Though each of these authors make recourse to the ineffable as an authoritative source, they uniquely configure their sense of it to fit their narrative and social contexts. The reading audience's understanding of the ineffable therefore grows with each unique representation of it. Since authors employ the ineffable to lend credence to their view of America and what it can become, readers come to see that the ineffable is used for both literary and political purposes.

Authors and artists employ Protestant representations of the ineffable in twentieth- and twenty-first-century American literature not to imagine a Protestant nation but to critique and reform injustice in America. American literature is as diverse as American experiences, and both resist simple definitions. Following Lundin, I argue that writing about America is writing about what America can become, while grappling with what it has been. The texts I analyze in this study do just that as they explicitly focus their gaze on what it means to live as a socially engaged person in America in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Faulkner, O'Connor, and Walker speak to universal human experiences, but their narratives gain force from their concern

with living in the South and the difficulty and urgency of de-authorizing oppressive traditions. Ellison and Simon concentrate their literary gazes on discrimination and oppression in an America that fails to enact its ideals equally to all citizens even as it enacts legislation that claims to enforce those rights. Cheshire and Ennis criticize religion generally, but they do so by situating it in America, which inevitably casts their critique within the American Imaginary's foundational myths and idealized aspirations. Though Robinson's larger project of a community of love encompasses all of humanity, her immediate literary concern is the reformation of American democracy that fails to live up to what she sees as the admirable examples set forth by Christian abolitionists and reformers.

Having turned their literary sights on the reformation of America, the authors in this study use religious discourse as an element of the narrative discourse and a call to action. In her introduction to "Giving Testimony: African-American Spirituality and Literature," Laura Winkiel writes "The stories [African Americans] tell are not merely stories of the past—they are visions for the future. That is, the imaginative potential of stories, the faith they build, motivates listeners and tellers to put their faith into action and create a different kind of future" (7). I argue that the authors in this study pursue a similar project to motivate their readers/viewers to "put their faith into action and create a different kind of future." Though frequently couched in religious discourse, the "faith they build" is for a more just American experience. They build this faith by constructing their stories so as to alert their readers to injustice and to offer visions of communities that address these deficiencies. Simon's narrative techniques are representative of the whole: *The Wire* first suggests that institutional oppression is unassailable to emphasize the enormity of the problem. It then locates the possibility for change in people who understand the game such that they can empower individuals, and thereby subvert the dominant power structure.

In the bleak picture of America he paints, he teaches his audience the rules of the game; in the example of Deacon Melvin, he offers the hope for change and builds faith in his audience that a more just American experience can be realized. Religion discourse in fiction begins as a literary element, but it transforms into appeals to enact “a different kind of future.”

The Summer 2009 issue of *Religion and Literature* collected thirty-three articles that attempted to answer the question: “what does the phrase ‘religion and literature’ denote?” (Monta 1). The articles convey the multiplicity of interpretative practices available to scholars of religion and literature. A study like the one I engage in requires both a pairing down and an appreciation of the many ways one can talk about the intersection of religion in American literature. As such, I applied a gospel framework to this study not only to identify particular examples of Protestant discourses but also to hint at the many ways that the gospel narrative interact with American literature. One could easily examine the element of suffering in Faulkner’s work, the specter of resurrection in *Gilead*, or the incarnation of the ineffable in *Horses’ Bridles*. The scheme I adopt for this study should point to the necessity of speaking about religion in a closed manner so as to better understand it in the particular. I do not claim that particular gospel elements are exclusive to certain texts. Rather than closing down interpretative possibility, reading the gospel in literature shows us the many ways it interacts with stories about America.

As evidenced in this study, I believe that American literature needs to be considered with respect to the ways it engages American religions because the “force of religion”¹ continues to play a considerable role both in American art and politics. The religious force remains

¹ I borrow this phrase from Andrew Delbanco. See his afterword to *There Before Us: Religion, Literature, and Culture from Emerson to Wendell Berry*.

progressive when it refuses to reduce the ineffable to a single image or description. There cannot be a final word about the ineffable, and yet even as we speak about the ineffable we use words that are very much part of the effable. The examples set forth by Shegog, Hazel, Shug, Hickman, Deacon, Josie, Jesse, Ames, Glory, and Lila suggest that the words one uses to describe the ineffable also turn back on the speaker and describe their own characteristics and motivations. Similarly, as Detweiler argues in his response to Culler, the ways critics of literature speak about religion and literature reveals what they value in literary criticism and the work of English departments more broadly. The choice to focus on religion and literature is to argue for its relevance to modern scholarship and to acknowledge that our writers and their audiences often see a purpose to the American experience. Though that experience may not be exceptional, it is nonetheless a driving force in the way art and politics evolve in America. In the way that religion and literature ties both American art and politics together, I believe that it provides critics and students with a means to understanding past problems and present challenges in the ongoing formation of American life.

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