Via Litteraria: Marilynne Robinson's Theology Through a Literary Imagination

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VIA LITTERARIA:
MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S
THEOLOGY THROUGH A LITERARY IMAGINATION

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Introduction

This project began as most good investigations do, with a burning personal question: What nourishes the souls of people in our time? One notes in modern American culture a shortened attention span; the inability to remain still, quiet, solitary. In 1965 around 55% of American Catholics attended Mass on Sundays; in 2016 that number stood at 22%.[1] Some 30.1 million American adults consider themselves "ex-Catholics," a number which should cause concern for leaders within the Catholic Church. At the same time people feel adrift and uncertain of the future; cultural divisions rankle people of good will; social media has replaced face-to-face communication; politics has grown course and caustic.

So what, in our day and age, can nourish the hungry, disquieted soul? What can address both the shortened attention span and the sense of drift from institutional faith commitments?

This project hazards an answer to these questions. A lazy historiography would claim the present moment as the most challenging and complicated age in history. We need not overstate the challenges of the present moment, but we do well to survey the lay of the land. To that end, we will begin with a survey of what Charles Taylor calls the "modern cosmic imaginary" — how individuals conceive of their lives vis-a-vis God, institutional faith, transcendence, etc. We will consider how we have arrived here by considering movements in European thought, with particular focus on how they have played out in literature. It will be argued that the aesthetic sensibilities of 19th century, and personalist turn in philosophy and theology, have led us to something of an impasse – an impasse requiring an imaginative step to traverse.

What role, if any, can literature play in mediating the individual, faith, and secular culture? In a modern world that offers many differing accounts of spiritual "fullness," what role does the Christian imagination have? Dominican priest Marie-Dominique Chenu was

[1] 2016 Cara Survey, available at http://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics/

instrumental in drafting the documents that would become Vatican II's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*). This foundational document addressed how the Church was to navigate the sacred and secular in the latter half of the 20th century. And in the explosion of theology after the Council (1962-65), Chenu wrote a 1969 article titled "*La littérature comme 'lieu' de la théologie*" ("Literature as the Site of Theology"). In it he argued first that Catholicism needs to recover its roots in Scripture, which for most of the Church's early history had nourished Catholic thought. Secondly, he hoped that the reconnection with Scripture would put Catholicism back in touch with human culture. Romantic poets and writers, he maintained, held Christian Scripture as a shared cultural canon for all of humanity; a contact point between believers and the broader secular culture. Chenu believed that the Church had been ignoring secular culture for the previous centuries, to its detriment.

Literature, then, is the *lieu* where sacred and secular meet. Just as God is poured out in the kenosis of the Incarnation, so too the Bible pours images and concerns into human language, and the Bible is where God raises human language and images to a new dignity. God is not revealed in a list of *propositions*, but in literary history, in a string of stories. Nicholas Boyle, in his book *Sacred and Secular Scriptures*, argues that "one light illuminates all the fields that a university is called to study… [L]iterature appears to us as a halo around the light, fading off into shadow – as if [they are gathered] round the canonical books of sacred scripture."[2]

It will be argued that the Word became incarnate in the world to lead us back to God the Creator, and this* exitus *and* reditus *is given and received in human language. In like manner, the words of great literature can direct our attention and reinvigorate the modern cosmic imaginary with a* Christian *imagination, instructing the reader to engage in a dive into the particulars of his or her concrete life. In mining those details, s/he can attain insights.

Nicholas Boyle, *Sacred and Secular Scriptures*, 7.

***We will call this trek of inquiry a* via litteraria *— connecting our lives with the life of God, by way of literature. To that end we will focus on the work of the American Christian writer of fiction and essays, Marilynne Robinson, who is a prime example of this* via litteraria.**

Road Map of the *Via Litteraria*

We begin our discussion with laying an important theological foundation. In **Chapter I: "Theological Grounds for the *Via Litteraria,*"** we will consider how storytelling and literature interplay with Scripture. From there we move to Augustine's account of words and sacraments as concrete signs (*signa*) which point beyond themselves to an otherwise invisible reality (*res*). This will lead to a brief history of grace and nature in Christian thought, as a way to see the point of contact between concrete experience and insights into deeper reality, what Christians call union with God. In the 20th-century turn to the subject, fiction becomes an ideal venue for discussing how grace is operative, because it draws on and nourishes the imagination.

Chapter II "Literary and Theological Imaginations" will consider the faculty of the imagination — what it is, what it isn't, and how it engages in creative *poiesis*. From there we will seek to formulate a "theology of imagination," drawing on insights from both 19th-century Scottish Presbyterian George MacDonald and 20th-century American Jesuit William Lynch. Rather than flying into abstractions and phantasy, the Christian imagination takes seriously the finite experiences of the human person. We will see what distinguishes "light reading" from "heavy" literature, with the help of Wolfgang Iser's literary theory. We will explore connections between the literary acts (writing/reading) and acts of faith, and see how both challenge the reader to (a) attention and (b) an empathic self-displacement for the sake of understanding an other.

Chapter III: "Marilynne Robinson and the Island of the Articulable" will take so much theology and theorizing and see if it applies to her work. We begin that chapter with a further discussion of the Romantic period, the challenges of what Charles Taylor calls the "modern cosmic imaginary," which is marked by cross-pressures and different interpretations of reality. Charles Taylor's extensive treatment of western (un)belief, *A Secular Age*, suggest that the North Atlantic currently inhabits a secular world, understood in three ways: Secularized public places ("secularity 1"), a general decline in belief and practice ("secularity 2"), and "secularity 3", which is important for our inquiry. Secularity 3, Taylor explains, consists of *new conditions for belief*, wherein "Christian faith exists in a field where there is also a wide range of other spiritual options. But the interesting story is not simply one of decline, but also…the occasion for *recompositions of spiritual life* in new forms, and for new ways of existing both in and out of relation to God."[3] For Taylor, Secularity 3 is the space within which both belief and unbelief are undertaken with full knowledge that there are other viable options for pursuing human flourishing. This is a time when believers and buffered non-believers alike have "doubts about their doubts." Literature, I will argue, is a non-coercive, safe venue wherein people can suspend their (dis-)belief to entertain a different cosmic imaginary.

Taylor identifies several "itineraries" – ways of proceeding in secularity 3 – to move forward. I submit for your consideration that Marilynne Robinson is one such itinerant, who highlights God's grace embedded in every moment of creation, if we but stop and pay attention to it. Robinson's fiction and non-fiction writing deftly challenging believer and non-believer alike to consider the unthematized backdrop of their beliefs; and she offers what a way to faith might look like for the skeptic.

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[3] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age, 437.*

Chapter IV: "Questions and Conclusions" will entertain thoughtful critiques to this project, and offer not final answers, but some concluding thoughts on the Christian imagination in the modern cosmic imaginary.

Chapter I: Theological Prongs for the *Via Litteraria*

Biblical Grounds for Literature

Ἀλλὰ σὺ γ᾽ οὐ θνῇσκεις, ἔστηκας γὰρ ζοὸς αίεί,
Ἐν γὰρ σοὶ ζῶμεν καὶ κινύμεθ᾽ ἠδὲ καὶ ἐσμέν.

But you are not dead: you live and abide forever,
For in you we live and move and have our being.
- Epimenides of Knossos

There is reliable biblical grounding for our theological inquiry through literature. Jesus explains to his inquiring disciples in Matthews' gospel why he speaks parabolically:

> *Because knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven has been granted to you, but to them it has not been granted. ...This is why I speak to them in parables, because 'they look but do not see and hear but do not listen or understand.' Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in them, which says:*
> *'You shall indeed hear but not understand,*
> *you shall indeed look but never see.*[4]

Insight only comes to those who are willing to probe the concrete details of Jesus' parables, and *visual/audial* language grounds levels of (mis-)understanding: One can *look at* parables' metaphorical images without *seeing* their meaning, and *hear* the words without *listening to* their salvific importance. Insights about ultimate reality are encoded in stories, but their meaning is not reserved only for scholars and professionals. In keeping with Jewish fashion, God is responsible both for the understanding of the disciples *and* the incomprehension of the crowds. The reader of Jesus' parables is encouraged, in no uncertain terms, to move from the willful incomprehension to the understanding of a disciple. The inability to see and understand parables is not a neutral epistemic stance, but one that carries moral responsibility. Jesus continues,

> *Gross (*ἐπαχύνθη*) is the heart of this people,*
> *they will hardly hear with their ears,*
> *they have closed their eyes,*
> *lest they see with their eyes*
> *and hear with their ears*
> *and understand with their heart and be converted* (καὶ ἐπιστρέψωσιν)*,*
> *and I will heal (*καὶ ἰάσομαι*) them.'*[5]

[4]Matthew 13:10ff. All Biblical references are taken from the New American Bible, except as noted.
[5] Matthew 10:15.

The New American Bible's translation of ἐπαχύνθη ("gross") lacks the linguistic nuance of "thick" or "dull" found in other translations. We learn that when people return (ἐπιστρέψωσιν), Jesus will heal (ἰάσομαι) them. The conversion spoken of here is not the metanoic changing of one's mind and will, but a movement of intransitive *return* (ἐπιστρέφο), which can be rendered as "to turn to one's self" or "to return." What precisely we are to (re)turn to will be treated throughout this project. Jesus' healing is not of a physical or spiritual ailment, but of a dulled imagination. By imagination (which will be treated more in depth later) we do not mean mere fantasy or fancy (as in, "Fancy that!"). Rather, a Christic imagination takes seriously the finite and definite — concrete, material circumstances and images — and glimpses insights of God's divine plan embedded in the finite details.

Parables, like the best of fiction, convey not factual history, but they aim to convey truth about human nature, relationships, and our place in the cosmos. After Jesus' exposition and explanation of several parables seed, Matthew recapitulates the centrality of storytelling for Jesus: "All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables. He spoke only in parables to fulfill what had been said through the prophet, 'I will open my mouth in parables, I will announce what has lain hidden from the foundation of the world."[6] The Logos becomes incarnated in the world; and we are given to understand that (a) meaning is embedded within the very foundations of the world (*κόσμου*), and (b) it is intelligible to those who care to hear it. Jesus, who is the Word of God, reveals truths of God under the unassuming guise of story. Through parable, Jesus highlights the familiar logic of secular living and challenges his disciples, by analogy, to model those behaviors in the sacred realm. By sanctifying the word, the Word models for humanity how to mine creation for truth, and to express that truth through story.

[6] Matthew, 13:34-35. The literal Greek records that Jesus "was speaking *not without* parables," *χωρὶς παραβολῆς οὐδὲν ἐλάλει*), a litotes designed to emphasize the importance of parables.

To win over the non-believers on the Areopagus, Paul is not above citing secular poets familiar to the audience: "For 'in him we live and move and have our being,' as even some of your poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'"[7] That pagan writers such as Aratus and Epimenides of Knossos could be elevated to the sacred canon of Christian scripture — understood as the revealed word of God — grants us further biblical warrant for considering where God's *logos* is at work, if imperfectly and incompletely, even in non-religious writing. Let us consider now how the tradition understands the role of words — in Scripture and sacraments — to point beyond themselves to transcendent reality.

Sacramental Grounds

Augustine on words and Scripture as signs. In *De Doctrina Christiana*, St. Augustine (354-430) offers a description of the relationship between a *res* and *signum*. A *res*, in general, is something that does not signify something else (*quae non ad significandum aliquid adhibentur*, I. II.2, 2f.), like a piece of wood, or a stone, or cattle. But there are *res* such as smoke or footprints, which point beyond themselves to something unseen, such as a fire or an animal. These are *signs*, defined as "things which are used to signify something" (*signa, res…quae ad significandum aliquid adhibentur* I.II.2, IIf.). Later he writes that "a sign is a thing which causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing itself makes upon the senses" (*signum est enim res praeter speciem, quam ingerit sensibus, aliud aliquid ex se faciens in cogitationem venire,* II.I.1, 5-7). In other words, a *sign* is a *res* which bears a relation to something else. Hence a fire, or an animal, may not be visibly present for perception, but their reality is nevertheless "learned by their signs" (*res per signa discuntur*, I.II.2, 1f.).

For Augustine, the most important signs that humans employ are words, which point to ('signify') a reality beyond them. Like visible smoke, the word "fire" is not a fire itself, but

[7] Acts 17:28.

points to the *res* [fire] which exists apart from the word "fire". The words we read in Scripture are important, in that they seek to point to truths of God, without exhausting the reality of God. If we were perfect, Augustine reasons, we wouldn't need Scripture as a mediator for grasping God; but original sin has led to confusion and obscurity, and so we are left striving to understand the ambiguities of Scripture. He writes in book two of *De Doctrina Christiana* that Scripture's subtleties and ambiguities teach us both *humility* and *patience*. The meaning (of parables, etc.) is not readily evident, and so we require *humility* to be instructed in proper interpretation. And we need *patience* with Scripture's obscurities, to reason carefully and make some peace with the Ricoeurian surplus of meaning we cannot totally master.

Sacraments as signs and causes of grace. The importance of a *signum* pointing to *res* beyond them grounds Augustine's sacramental imagination, as well. The Christian conception of "sacrament" did not emerge immediately; the Acts of the Apostles speaks of the rituals of baptism and breaking the bread (Acts 2:38, 41-42), but they were not linked together conceptually as sacraments. Contemporary pagans had used the word μυστήριον – the Greek implies something *hidden* or *secret* – to describe their own rites of initiation. To distinguish pagan from Christian rites of initiation, Tertullian (150-220) borrowed the Latin *sacramentum* from the oath Roman soldiers professed to the emperor. In this Christian appropriation, the *sacramentum* signaled a new oath, to Christ, through Baptism and the Eucharist.

In Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*, a *sacramentum* is a sacred sign designed by God to point to a *res divina,* a sign which contains that divine reality within itself.[8] Elsewhere Augustine identifies *sacramentum* as a visible sign that represents an invisible reality. In the sacrament of Baptism, for example, the visible washing which takes place represents an interior cleansing of sin. Pre-scholastic theologians understood *sacramentum* to be the "visible form of invisible

[8] Augustine of Hippo, *De Civitate Dei,* Book X Chapter 5.

grace" (*invisibilis gratiae visibilis forma*), and in the 12th century Hugh of St. Victor would define sacraments as *bodily or material elements* that are used in external, sensible ways, which – through a certain likeness – *make present invisible and spiritual grace*. Later, Peter Lombard would argue that the sacrament was a *signum* of God's grace and the form of invisible grace, in a manner that it was both the *image* and *causa* of that grace."[9] This appropriation of Aristotelian causal language was the first consideration that a sacrament was a *causa* of divine grace. Aquinas' more cautious definition was that of a "sign of a sacred reality, to the extent that it sanctifies human beings."[10]

We need not concern ourselves here with an exhaustive history of defining the sacraments. For the scope of our inquiry, it is valuable only to note how difficult it is to pin down just what a sacrament "does" *vis-a-vis* non-visible realities. Does it *point* to a reality, *embody* a reality, or both? Does it *point* to God's grace, *cause* grace, or both? As Herbert Vorgrimler notes, "there is no satisfactory general concept of 'sacrament,' because there is no general sacrament: there are only concrete individual sacraments. [But] attempts to summarize what is common have nevertheless contributed something to our understanding of the relationship between God and human beings."[11] Without trying to elaborate a full sacramental theology, let us say, with Augustine, that a **sacrament is a *sacrum signum* which points beyond the visible to the ultimate, invisible *res* – God's grace.**

It is worth noting that for Augustine, such a sacred sign need not be limited to the seven recognized Sacraments of the Church. In fact, Augustine listed over three hundred *sacramenta*, a

[9] For a full treatment of the development of sacramental theology, see Herbert Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994.
[10] *Summa Theologiae*, III, q.60, a.2.
[11] Herbert Vorgrimler, Sacramental Theology, 43.

list later reduced to the seven sacraments we recognize today.[12] The others – a group of aids to prayer and devotion – came to be known as sacramentals. In this essay, we will consider the extent to which literature, like Scriptural parables and the sacraments, can employ signs that point to a *res* — God's grace — beyond the visible limits of a text. Indeed, if words properly marshaled can signal a reality beyond them, then literature itself can be fertile ground for a properly *sacramental* imagination.

Before we leap into imagination, let us consider a slippery term we have just introduced: grace. What exactly is this "grace" we speak of? And how does grace relate to nature? Let us consider, in brief, a theology of grace that is suitable for our inquiry into a *sacramental imagination.*

A Brief History of Grace and Nature in Theology

Models of Grace and Nature. In the history of Christianity, there are alternative conceptions of what grace is and how it operates. Hence how "grace" may be employed in a literary imagination depends on one's *theology of grace*. For some, grace is the gift of God's favor which *contrasts* with our nature. John Calvin held that grace is adventitious to the natural order of things, and indeed runs up against human free will: "For any mixture of the power of free will that people strive to mingle with God's grace is nothing but a corruption of grace. It is just as if one were to dilute wine with muddy, bitter water."[13] This perspective negates human nature in order to emphasize divine grace. The danger is that it denies a goodness to the natural order, with grace introduced as an antidote to our irrefragably fallen nature. What is more, this grace is bestowed on some but not all. If grace is a gratuitous *gift* from God, then, it cannot be

[12] In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, sacraments are still called *mysteries*.
[13] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (II:V:15)

available to all — otherwise it would be a *given,* not a *gift*. For Calvin, there are graced and non-graced individuals; those predestined, and those consigned to separation from God.

A second model typical of the Romantic turn *compartmentalizes grace* beside nature. Schleiermacher maintained that grace is not a knowing or doing, but a *feeling interior* to the subject. Such a numinous retreat into one's private "holy place" distances the subject both from religious commitments and cool enlightenment rationalism. Religious commitments are abandoned in favor of literary aestheticism. Worship of a Judeo-Christian God, deemed too small for the great modern, gives way to the exaltation of Culture, as prescribed in Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*.

A third tenuous relationship of grace and nature comes in the Catholic Neo-Scholastic response to modernity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Here grace is understood as hovering somehow *above and apart from* nature, an external superstructure with little contact with humanity, apart from the sacramental life of the Catholic Church. It bears some resemblance to the Calvinist conception of grace, but it differs in that it can be summoned by a few ordained stewards.

Grace and Nature Together. In the 13th century Thomas Aquinas maintained that grace heals and perfects our nature precisely through the very human acts of knowing and loving. But for Thomas, grace remained an external, objective force, the account of which does not center around the "I" subject who encounters such grace. Yet certain strains of 20th century Catholic theology developed an understanding of nature and grace that took cues both from Aquinas and the personalist turn in twentieth-century philosophy and theology. Karl Rahner held that God's grace is co-present to us in our search for meaning, whether we acknowledge it or not. Such grace allows our openness upwards to the infinite horizon, i.e. to the mystery of God. Grace is

directional: God moving in on us, just as God is drawing us out into the abyss, which is God. Furthermore grace is not rare and exceptional; it is the air we breathe, a presence constitutive of our very being. For Rahner, there is no pure "nature" apart from grace at work in us.

Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan elaborated how the dynamic of grace leads us from our subjective experience to an encounter with transcendence: Our *experience* of the world around us leads us to seek *understanding***,** through reflection on that experience. From there we make a *judgment* based on competing accounts of understanding. We thereby move towards *true***,** accurate knowledge of reality. This consciousness leads to an occasion of making a *decision***.** With a sharpened consciousness of reality, our conscience requires that we pursue the good we find, leading to a *moral conversion*. And for the person open to faith, this pursuit of the good opens one to consider the Good, which invites a *religious conversion*, i.e., to God, our ultimate horizon.[14] With Lonergan, Rahner conceived of grace as a modification of the transcendent experience; grace does not crush or send us out to some distant horizon, diminishing or rejecting our human experiences. Rather, grace helps us to recognize God as that intimate presence within. From this conception of grace, the Church's mission is no longer conceived as saving the *massa damnata* beyond its visible bounds. Rather, the Church is called to "sniff out" and celebrate God's grace that is always and everywhere present. The role of the Church is thus to help others name experiences of grace.

Vatican II and a World of Grace. With Lonergan's and Rahner's pivotal recasting of grace — largely reflected in the conciliar documents of Vatican II — God is not absent from the world of our everyday lives, and thus God's presence can be detected in all truly human experiences. But God is not just another object or person among other objects in the universe; God is the very horizon within which we encounter all of created reality. Whether we have a

[14] For more on this, see Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1971), 93–94.

thematized belief in God or not, our humanity is inseparable from our saying "yes" to God. Put conversely, the only path to experiencing God is through the immediacy of our finite human experiences. To that end, Vatican II names the Church as a sacrament (*Lumen Gentium* §1), which interprets the sacramental signs of the times to find grace active in all dimensions of human experience (*Gaudium et Spes* §4).

It should come as no surprise, then, that this would have considerable impact on all realms of Catholic intellectual life. Grace was no longer confined to priests and scholars of sacramental theology (groups which tended to overlap). Indeed any discipline that treats what it means to be human could touch on questions of divine grace at work, e.g. Chenu's optimistic *rapprochement* with secular literary culture. The 20th century witnessed a considerable flourish of Catholic (and other Christian) literary giants whose work, either explicitly or implicitly, treated God's grace at work in the lives of unlikely protagonists. To this we now turn.

Modern Catholic Thought on Literature

Let us call this post-conciliar approach to theology the *via litteraria*, a way of speaking about God through literature. This *via litteraria* requires an active, sacramental imagination — an imagination keen to uncover grace at work — even where it appears absent. Examples from the 20th century abound: Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, which follows the meandering paths of the Marchmain family. Chesterton's Father Brown solved crimes not by Sherlockian deduction or superhuman intelligence, but by imagining how *he* would go about committing such crimes, based on what he heard in the confessional. Consider too the Whiskey Priest in Greene's *The Power and the Glory; the* Curé de Ambricourt in Bernanos's *Diary of a Country Priest;* the unlikely heroes of Flannery O'Connor's short stories. In each of these cases, God's grace is co-

present and active in the unsavory, unheroic characters in spite of their doubts, cowardice and trepidations. Later in the 20th century, American Christian Marilynne Robinson would endeavor to recover Calvinism from the dark corner of history. Her novels, which will be treated extensively in a later chapter, are completely in line with the Rahnerian conception of grace embedded in the "stuff" of living, moving, and being in the natural world.

Before we turn to Robinson, however, we do well to turn to survey twentieth-century thought on literature and belief, a field that enjoys the input of several important Catholic thinkers. For the scope of our topic, we will consider the input of Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Maritain, Nicholas Boyle and James Foot, put in conversation with several fiction writers, to see where the domains of fiction and religious might find resonances. **It will be argued that the *via litteraria* is an exceptional way to speak both (a) of God's grace operative even in the secular realm, and (b) of the contours of faith in a Taylorian secularity 3.**

Secular vs. Sacred Literature? As mentioned, Vatican II challenged strict distinctions between the sacred and secular. Here we consider the question of what distinguishes *sacred* art and literature, from "art and literature" in general. For Paul Ricoeur, any piece of literature and poetry can be a vehicle of revelation. "Revelation" in this initial sense is not necessarily theistic or religious; only that it reveals *something* in the reader. And unlike scientific discourse or ordinary communication, literary language is non-purposive and non-instrumental; it is intended for pleasure. Nicholas Boyle goes further in *Sacred and Secular Scriptures*, arguing that "literature is language free of instrumental purpose, *and* it seeks to tell the truth."[15] Secular literature, Boyle maintains with Aristotle, is designed to give pleasure and entertain. And the gift of poetry and secular literature is that it weaves together words in such a way that the reader

[15] Nicholas Boyle, *Sacred and Secular Scriptures: A Catholic Approach to Literature* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 125.

finds analogous revelations that can illuminate and redirect her own life. In this sense, Boyle writes, poetry and literature actually can be truth-*telling* not by propositional or scientific discourse, but through the illumination brought about within the reader.

The Christian sacramental imaginary, as it has developed in the 20th century, is keen to find grace embedded in the world. Put in Ricoeur's terms, for Christians, "the world beyond the text" is infused with grace, and the reader's task is to "sniff out" that grace. Yet Ricoeur maintains that the writtenness of a text sets it free from authorial intent: "What is finally to be understood in a text is not the author or his[16] presumed intention, nor is it the immanent structure or structures of the text, but rather the sort of world intended beyond the text as its reference."[17] Hence while a text may not purport to be "truth-telling," it nevertheless stirs the reader to consider where truth of humanity is embedded in a text. But to claim that literature is not capable of telling truths of (*inter alia*) human nature — as Ricoeur does — leaves us wondering what this "revelation" consists of, if not some insight into true reality. Perhaps Ricoeur is reluctant to imagine that secular literature is "truth-telling" because it might raise again the specter of author's intention, an intention which he denies. If secular literature is in the business of conveying truth, then it might also affect in some small way how the reader lives her life thereafter; such an affect moves it from being merely pleasurable to, in fact, being practical and purposive. Hence Ricoeur boxes secular literature into a non-purposive and pleasurable corner; it robs literature of the capacity to speak veridically of human experience.

Jacques Maritain wrote in *Art and Scholasticism* that Christian art is not a matter of religious people speaking only of the divine or the sacramental life of the Church. Rather, the

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[16] Many of the quotations herein contains gendered language from earlier times; rather than changing Ricoeur's (and several other writers') pronouns, let us take "man" and "his" to refer to humanity universally, as was presumably the intention of the original authors.

[17] Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation." *The Harvard Theological Review* 70, no. 1/2 (1977), 23.

extent to which a work of art (e.g., literature) is undertaken with love makes the work more or less "Christian":

> The quality of the work is here the reflection of the love from which it issues, and which moves the virtue of art instrumentally. Thus it is by reason of an *intrinsic superelevation* that art is Christian, and it is through love that this superelevation takes place. It follows from this that the work will be Christian in the exact degree in which love is vibrant. Let's make no mistake about it: what is required is the very actuality of love, contemplation in charity. Christian work would have the artist…[be] possessed by love. Let him then make what he wishes. If the work conveys a note less purely Christian, it is because something was lacking in the purity of the love.[18]

Elsewhere he is more succinct: "the definition of Christian art is to be found in its subject and its spirit. Everything, sacred and profane, belongs to it. God does not ask for 'religious' art or 'Catholic' art. The art he wants for himself is Art, with all its teeth."[19] Maritain's understanding of art flows naturally from the belief that grace is embedded in all human situations, regardless of whether religious language, themes, or commitments are explicit. Hence Terence's humanist motto — *Homo sum et humani nihil a me alienum puto* — permits the Christian to treat all fiction as a possible vehicle for revelation. Flannery O'Connor's fiction features unsavory characters who show us humanity with all its teeth. Let us turn now to consider her thoughts on the role of the Catholic fiction writer.

Flannery O'Connor on the Catholic Fiction Writer. In an essay on the Catholic fiction writer, O'Connor argues that a writer -- Catholic or otherwise -- is bound *not* by their faith commitments, but by the limits of concrete reality:

> It is generally supposed, and not least by Catholics, that the Catholic who writes fiction is out to use fiction to prove the truth of his faith or, at the least, to prove the existence of the supernatural. He may be. No one can be sure of his motives except as they suggest themselves in his finished work, but when the finished work suggests that pertinent actions have been fraudulently manipulated or overlooked or smothered, whatever purposes the writer started out with have already been defeated. What the fiction writer will discover, if he discovers anything at all, is that he himself cannot move or mold reality in the interests of abstract truth. *The writer learns, perhaps more quickly than the reader, to be*

[18] Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism,* Book VIII.

[19] Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, Book VIII.

> *humble in the face of what is*. What is is all he has to do with; the concrete is his medium; and he will realize eventually that fiction can transcend its limitations only by staying within them.[20]

The fiction writer of any (or no) religious commitment endeavors to describe the concrete as s/he sees it; when the work manipulates or shoe-horns reality into a theological framework — or appears to do so — the author's purpose is compromised and defeated. Insofar as lying is a deliberate misrepresentation of reality, then such writing is, effectively, *lying*.

Put another way, a religious-minded writer need not cut out or deny parts of the human experience to fit an abstract narrative of theology. An honest — i.e., intending to convey reality accurately — theological imagination takes full account of the natural world and the human heart's caprices within it. As O'Connor notes, "The limitations that any writer imposes on his work will grow out of the necessities that lie in the material itself, and these will generally be more rigorous than any that religion could impose."[21] The question of grace, as we noted earlier, revolves around whether grace is embedded in nature, adventitious to it, or wholly external to it. As O'Connor sees it, "[p]art of the complexity of the problem for the Catholic fiction-writer will be the presence of grace as it appears in nature, and what matters for him here is that his faith not become detached from his dramatic sense and from his vision of what is." Artists such as O'Connor and Robinson succeed precisely by training our imagination on the earthy concreteness of graced moments.

But the Christian fiction writer risks bait-and-switching her readers, springboarding from the natural world into the fuzzy realm of disembodied grace. The careful reader rightly enquires why the author has moved from describing reality to prescribing reality. Such a disjuncture proposes, for O'Connor, a disembodied supernatural world apart from a brutish natural world of

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[20] Flannery O'Connor, "The Church and the Fiction Writer: From March 30, 1957" in *America*. Emphasis added.
[21] O'Connor, "The Church and the Fiction Writer: From March 30, 1957"

good and evil. The result is abstract pieties about grace, hovering beyond the Manichean world of the good and evil, of the sacred and the secular. And the reader looking for a clean division between the innocent and obscene "would seem to prefer the former, while being more of an authority on the latter, but the similarity between the two generally escapes him. He forgets that sentimentality is an excess, a distortion of sentiment, usually in the direction of an overemphasis on innocence; and that innocence, whenever it is overemphasized in the ordinary human condition, tends by some natural law to become its opposite."[22] Solzhenitsyn notes that the line of good and evil runs through the heart of every person, and the greatest writers, Christian or otherwise, recognizes that complexity and seeks to describe it. To skip over human frailties and fallibility, O'Connor concludes, does not do justice to the story of Christ's own death and redemption.

O'Connor notes, too, that a Christian writer ought not shy away from describing the incongruities of concrete reality, precisely *because of* the broader Christian vision of redemption: "If the writer uses his eyes in the real security of his faith, he will be obliged to use them honestly and his sense of mystery and his acceptance of it will be increased. To look at the worst will be for him no more than an act of trust in God."[23] Literature by Christians, done well, does not force the reader to accept a Christian worldview, but draws her to consider the layered dimensions — the "surplus of meaning" — embedded in finite characters and plot details. O'Connor writes, "the Catholic writer and reader will have to remember…that the reality of the added dimension will be judged in a work of fiction by the truthfulness and wholeness of the literal level of the natural events presented." In his masterful new book *Wounded Angel*, Paul Lakeland argues that the best "literature is propaedeutic to faith, in that it throws up innumerable

[22] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 147-148.
[23] O'Connor, "The Church and the Fiction Writer: From March 30, 1957"

possibilities of access to transcendence. Literature, one might say, warms up the human capacity for faith, but it does not cause it, still less does it command it."[24] So how does literature exactly 'warm up' a reader for the capacity of faith?

The interior monologue of a protagonist entails a record of *thinking*, rather than a record of stable *thoughts*. So too on one's journey of faith, wherein one regularly entertains doubts, experiences glimpses of God's hand at work, but feels abandoned in the next moment. The life of faith is less a list of propositional claims, and more the sustained attention to meaning embedded in the world. When asked what role faith plays in her life, Robinson offered, "Frankly, I don't know what faith in God means. For me, the experience is much more a *sense* of God. Nothing could be more miraculous than the fact that we have a consciousness that makes the world intelligible to us and are moved by what is beautiful."[25] One danger for *religious* fiction is in offering images that are mawkishly sentimental and admit of only one interpretation. Indeed much "religious fiction" is dismissed on the grounds of being overly saccharine or didactic. Like pulp fiction meant primarily to entertain, such literature does not invite various interpretations of the world of the text; it merely states what it is.

In other words, quality fiction must discover as it goes, exploring the prior existence of the world around it. Readers, too stumble along the text and, in a sense, 'discover' details as they go along. James Wood writes that "fiction should seem to offer itself to the reader's completion, not to the writer's. This whisper of conspiracy is one of fiction's necessary beauties."[26] We find in fiction a false bottom to the world we have seen up to this point, and we are led to discover a world in the text analogous to, but not identical with, the world we already

[24] Paul Lakeland, *Wounded Angel*, 161.
[25] Sarah Fay, "Marilynne Robinson, The Art of Fiction No. 198" interview in *Paris Review* Issue 186.
[26] James Wood, "Julian Barnes and the Problem of Knowing Too Much" in *The Broken Estate*, 238

know. Great fiction, Wood writes, "must not stroke the known but distress the undiscovered."[27] This probing of the not-yet-discovered is the task of the imaginations of writer, character, and reader alike. The protagonist in a story might turn over in her head different interpretations of life events, stimulating a similar imaginative activity in the reader. As Aquinas notes, "when we wish to make someone understand something, we lay examples before him from which he can form phantasms for the purpose of understanding."[28] Adapted to our discussion, we might say that the path towards revelatory understanding in the text stimulates the act of understanding in the reader; the reader participates in the discovery of meaning. This act of the reader requires an engaged imagination; let us turn now to consider what this imagination is, and how it operates.

[27] James Wood, "Julian Barnes and the Problem of Knowing Too Much" in *The Broken Estate*, 238
[28] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 84, 7.

Chapter II: *Literary & Theological Imaginations*

Imagination vs. Fancy

Worthy fiction, as will be argued later, requires a generous imagination on the part of both the writer and reader of literature. In common parlance, imagination gets a bad rap; people say "you're just imagining things!" or "that's a figment of your imagination" to dispel unreal fantasies. But that is not how we employ the word "imagination" here. Before we treat the dynamics of theology and literature, let us take a brief survey of what does and does not constitute a literary imagination.

We might find it strange to begin our treatment of a Christian imagination in the Romantic period. Though most Romantic writers would not readily identify as (more than culturally) Christian, they were masters at expressing a reverence for the numinous and sublime. Their appreciation for transcendence puts them closer to traditional theism than to the Enlightenment rationalism to which they were primarily responding. And given this shared appreciation for transcendence, we can take from them some insights on the creative power of the imagination to explore realities beyond the empirically demonstrable.

***Coleridge's Imagination(s*).** Samuel Taylor Coleridge is perhaps best known for his poem, *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, yet his work in developing a distinctly Romantic epistemology provides a helpful distinction for our conversation. In his less-than-cogent *Biographia Litteraria*, Coleridge identifies three related but distinct creative capacities of the human mind. The first and second deal with the imagination: "The primary Imagination [sic] I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as *a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM*."[29] Coleridge's *primary imagination*

[29] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria,* 248. Emphasis added.

labors in the finite mind just as God's *eternal act of creation* labors to sustain all being. This act of imagination occurs even unconsciously, as when the mind gives some order to apparent chaos, or when the mind produces images. Anyone who summons to mind the image of her father, or the sound of his voice, is engaging her primary imagination. Next is the *secondary imagination*, which Coleridge considers, "an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet…differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate: or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead."[30] This secondary imaginative faculty is engaged by poets and writers who engage in active *poiesis* — from the Greek verb poieo, "to make" — seeking to shape disparate parts into a unified whole. Coleridge coins the term *esemplastic* ("shaping into one") to describe this power of an artist to "dissolve and diffuse" elements in order to create new, cogent ideas. To that end, Coleridge's secondary imagination strives to coalesce matter and spirit, intellect and feelings, etc. This advanced poetic faculty, he reasons, is reserved for truly great artisans, like Coleridge's inspiration, William Wordsworth.

But both the primary and secondary imaginations remain different from a third faculty of the mind, "fancy" (etymologically, a contraction of *fantasy*). The faculty of fancy does not create, but recombines existing "fixities and definites" in a "mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space."[31] A child might *fancy* a unicorn driving a car, or a poor man *fancies* being wealthy and living in a mansion. In both cases, elements of reality (horse + one horn + car, man + cash + mansion) are spun together to create an unbounded unreality. While Coleridge is not altogether clear on defining *fancy*, we might take from him the important

[30] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria,* 248. Emphasis original.
[31] Ibid., 248.

distinction that *imagination* — as we are employing it here — is entirely different from mere *fancy*. Our conversation understands imagination along the lines of Coleridge's passive, primary imagination and active "secondary imagination." These imaginative faculties aim at expressing the reality of life and human longings; as O'Connor has argued – and William Lynch will – the Christian imagination must take seriously the bounds of the concrete, if it is to be taken seriously as literature. Let us attempt now to construct a theology of the imagination.

A Theology of Imagination

George MacDonald. Scottish novelist and Calvinist preacher George MacDonald (1824-1905) offers a helpful formula for relating the creative imagination of the artist to the creative work of God. *Imago* simply means "likeness," and *imaginatio* is the process of rendering such a likeness. The imagination, for MacDonald, is the faculty "which gives form to thought--not necessarily uttered form, but form capable of being uttered in shape or in sound, or in any mode upon which the senses can lay hold. It is, therefore, that faculty in man[32] which is likest to the prime operation of the power of God, and has, therefore, been called the *creative* faculty, and its exercise *creation*."[33] Just as humankind is made *in imagine Dei*, so too all functions of the human intellect are patterned on the intellect of God. Thus MacDonald concludes that the imagination of humans is made "in the image of the imagination of God." In other words, what God's *creative act* is to creation, so the artist's *imagination* is to her painting, story, poem, etc.

But this is no mere analogy, writes MacDonald. For whatever the human creates is *ultimately* created by God: "Everything of man must have been of God first; and it will help much towards our understanding of the imagination and its functions in man if we first succeed in regarding aright the imagination of God, in which the imagination of man lives and moves and

[32] As noted earlier, rather than re-word all of MacDonald's and others' quotations to be gender inclusive, let us understand 'man' in its intended universal sense.
[33] George MacDonald, "On the Imagination: Its Function and Its Culture," in *A Dish of Orts.*

has its being." Just as the playwright writes characters, setting, plot and chorus, so God creates 'actors' (humans) on a stage (the world) to act (live the drama of life) with a chorus (birds and such) providing aesthetic accompaniment. "As the thoughts move in the mind of a man, so move the worlds of men and women in the mind of God, and make no confusion there, for there they had their birth, the offspring of his imagination. Man is but a thought of God." One wonders if Marilynne Robinson (a Calvinist at heart) had MacDonald in mind when she wrote in *Gilead*:

> Calvin says somewhere that each of us is an actor on a stage and God is the audience. That metaphor has always interested me, because it makes us artists of our behavior, and the reaction of God to us might be thought of as aesthetic rather than morally judgmental in the ordinary sense. …[I]t suggests how God might actually enjoy us. I believe we think about that far too little. It would be a way into understanding essential things, since presumably the world exists for God's enjoyment.[34]

The goal of a properly Christian imagination, for MacDonald, is to create beautiful things that raise the mind from *creata* to *creator*. "To do this, the man must watch its signs, its manifestations. He must contemplate what the Hebrew poets call the works of His hands." Thus a concerted attention to natural effects is the path by which we reason – or imagine – our way to the creative cause. Robinson writes that "so much of our beauty is inward, in the agility of our minds and souls, in the workings of memory and the capacity for art and invention… Given that beauty is…the signature of the divine in creation, that the aesthetic should be an aspect of human nature that reveals our affinity to God simply follows."[35] We are created not only to *behold* beauty, but to ponder its aesthetic origins and participate in the creative act ourselves. But how does one make this ascent from creation to creator? William Lynch offers theological and literary insights on this path from the finite to the infinite.

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[34] Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, 124.
[35] Matthew Sitman, "Saving Calvin from Clichés: An Interview with Marilynne Robinson" in *Commonweal Magazine* (October 20, 2017 issue), 19.

William Lynch and Embracing the Finite. Aesthetics alone can disappoint, if it does not take seriously the embodiedness of our existential hunger. In his groundbreaking work *Christ and Apollo*, Jesuit William Lynch (1908-1987) rejected aesthetic theories of literature that did not sufficiently take account of our finite embodiment. He despaired of the 'cultured gentleman' who is encouraged to take literature courses in college merely for literature's sake, a diversion from the banalities of everyday life, as if "literature is wonderful [but] has nothing to do with anything."[36] Isolating literary study as a field unto itself, apart from human experience, Lynch reasons, is the cause of the downfall of interest in literature. (We might say the same for abstract theological inquiry!) Rather "the literary process is a highly cognitive passage through the finite and definite realities of man and the world."[37]

Finite human experiences, Lynch maintains, submit to multiple interpretive dimensions of meaning, which can open up a reader to consider her theological origins. But the deeper dimensions only open up through particulars; appeals to non-descript generalities about humanity do not, for Lynch, give an adequate account for what it means to be human, precisely because they overlook human finitude. Lynch's book sets Christ – the embodiment of infinity in the finite – against Apollo. Lynch suggests we "let Apollo stand for everything that is weak and pejorative in the 'aesthetic man' of Kierkegaard, and for that kind of fantasy beauty which is a sort of infinite, which is easily gotten everywhere, but which will not abide the straitened gates of limitation that leads to stronger beauty."[38]

In Lynch's schema, basic human insights (psychological, theological, etc.) never arrive unmediated. One's knowledge is mediated by the finite and limited experience of the individual. Duns Scotus spoke of the thisness (*haecceitas*) of reality, and Lynch ties whatever insights we

[36] William Lynch, Christ and Apollo, 2.
[37] Lynch, 3.
[38] Lynch, 5.

gain to our very haecceity. Thus we should not – per Plato's suggestion – hurry too quickly from the many to the One, ignoring our finite experience in searching elsewhere for God and truth. Particularity is the bearer of truth, and "images are in themselves the path to whatever the self is seeking: to insight, beauty, or for that matter, to God."[39]

Redolent of Lonergan's epistemological ascent to insight and conversion, Lynch argues that there are no shortcuts to beauty or to insight, and "we waste our time if we try to go around or above or under the definite; we must literally go through it" (Lynch, 16). Lynch identifies four typical ways, in literature and theology, of avoiding the finite:

(1) The first he terms the *"magical view"* whereby finite things – people, things, etc. – are exploited to put one in touch with numinous visions of beauty or God. The finite acts as "a bag of tricks…to send the soul shooting up, one knows not how, into some kind of infinite or absolute; that accomplished, the devil take the finite" (Lynch, 17). The fruit of this, he warns, is the devaluation of the world's material reality, which plays out even in certain strains of Catholic sacramentality. Our finitude is a springboard into the heavens, but is not taken as a serious element of the really real.

(2) A second misapprehension of the finite deals with an *overly immanent view of the finite*. Here the imagination is employed to create a pleasurable aesthetic, a cultivated affectivity, a garden of *pathos* within oneself. Lynch names this intensified subjectivity "psychologism," which distorts or reduces the material reality of the external world to satisfy the interior subject. Theologically, Lynch finds a corollary in speculative theology and in the modernist movement of the 19th century within Catholicism, "in which all dogma was safely removed from application to the real and reduced to a set of symbols for the production of religious affectivity."[40]

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[39] Lynch, 15-16.
[40] Lynch, 18.

(3) A third misprision of the finite is what he calls the *"imagination of the double vacuum,"* pitting heaven and earth against one another. Here the imagination is employed to mine the incongruities and limits of the world to instill revulsion. Feelings of disgust, boredom, or anger at this fallen world propel the imagination to, in an act of rebellion, escape "into a tenuous world of infinite bliss" (Lynch, 19). One views only the most unsavory elements of embodiment and seeks to flee: better the hoary hopes of the heavens than the felt flatness of finitude. Lynch finds Graham Greene to be a literary exemplum to this perspective, and Karl Barth a theological one. For Barth, the Christ event comes to cancel human history, not valorize it: "[Christ's] greatest achievement is a negative achievement…On the day when mankind is dissolved the new era of the righteousness of God will be inaugurated."[41] It is worth noting that *Christ and Apollo* was published in 1960, shortly before Vatican II would reassess the relationship of the Church and the world.

(4) The final group consists of "facers of facts" – those who size up finite reality and find it to be a meaningless hellscape. Hence the "beautiful thing, say these facers of facts, is to accept the absurdity and limitation of reality with nerve, sincerity, courage, and authenticity."[42] Rahner's "On the Theology of the Incarnation" articulates this cynical perspective: "Man has ultimately no choice. He understands himself as a mere void, which one can encompass only to note with the cynical laughter of the damned, that there is nothing behind it."[43] Finite reality reveals only a *closed* finitude, with no exit – to borrow from Sartre – to the salubrious vacuum of heaven. Lynch places most existentialist literature (e.g., Camus) into this category.

Each of these four errant perspectives fails to take seriously the finite's capacity to generate insight *from* our embodiment. But "with every plunge through, or down into, the real

[41] Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*,97.
[42] Lynch, 20.
[43] Karl Rahner, "On the Theology of the Incarnation," in *Theological Investigations IV*, 111.

contours of being, the imagination shoots up into insight, but in such a way that the plunge down *causally generates* the plunge up."[44] Lynch diagrams this movement (from 1 to 2) as follows:

The astute theologian will notice that Lynch's schema is patterned on the incarnational *exitus-reditus* of Christian anthropology. In the Incarnation event, the infinite God takes on the finite, and models for humanity how to return to God. All of humanity proceeds from God (*exitus*), and through Christ is shown the way home (*reditus*). According to Aquinas, this *exitus-reditus* is patterned on the inner life of the Trinity. The Son (Logos) proceeds from the Father (a procession of knowledge) and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son (the procession of love). This patterns humanity's *exitus* as creatures capable of knowing and loving. Aquinas notes, "the only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity [2 Peter 1:4], assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods."[45] For Aquinas, humanity's *reditus* to God opens us to supernatural knowing and loving – indeed, to deification. Our hunger is real, and will only be sated by returning to the mystery of God.

Lynch employs this same Aristotelian dive into the finite, to explain how we come to knowledge (insight) by engaging seriously the finitude of our existence. Though the diagraming is different, we find parallels to Lonergan's epistemological ascent from experience and

[44] Lynch, 21-22. Emphasis original.
[45] Thomas Aquinas, *Opusculum 57*, 1–4.

reflection, upward to insight. We will now explain, in brief, Lynch's movement from the finite to insight.

Finite Embodiment Teaches. For Lynch, the question of time is the horizontal aspect of the finite. The "inexorable flow of temporality" permits nothing from the past or present to survive the instant, and the future remains an as-yet unknown. Humanity, in its creaturely angst, rebels against this in countless ways (in literature and habits of life like), as if one could preserve moments of peace, youth, vitality, and goodness in a single atemporal instance. Certain literary currents and philosophical trends prize a detached appreciation for the infinite and abstract: "The man of the infinite bears the marks of romantic enthusiasm, apparent greatness of soul, imagination, and ambition, while he who chooses and respects the finite, the limited, and concrete actual as a way to glory and beauty…comes to be regarded as an unimaginative plodder and an intellectual primitive."[46] Highly imaginative literary works, such as Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, and movements in art (such as Picasso's Cubist paintings) seek to condense all of time into a single, multi-dimensional moment that steps out of time.

For those aspiring to possess a "pure intelligence, with its aspirations toward brilliant, univocal clarity, inflexibility, totality of vision and simultaneity," engaging the temporal and finite is effectively submitting to death.[47] But the *finite intelligence* – Lynch's term for those willing to engage the finite and concrete – takes seriously all the dimensions of death. There is the death of every moment – the past which we will not get back. But also the rhythms of human life, which Lynch describes as "a moving structure of phases (birth, childhood, adolescence, prime, middle age, old age, death) so put together as by its very movement to produce insight

[46] Lynch, 51.
[47] Lynch, 57.

and illumination," insights which defy static, logical reasoning (Lynch, 58). Whatever elevated insights one attains are won through living the course of her life.

In *Housekeeping*, Marilynne Robinson has the narrator rebel against the tedium of time's march:

> "I hated waiting. If I had one particular complaint, it was that my life seemed composed entirely of expectation. I expected—an arrival, an explanation, an apology. There had never been one, a fact I could have accepted, were it not true that, just when I had got used to the limits and dimensions of one moment, I was expelled into the next and made to wonder again if any shapes hid in its shadows.[48]

But this rumination on the monotony of time moves her from bored disappointment to hope for something that lies beyond the present: "That most moments were substantially the same did not detract at all from the possibility that the next moment might be utterly different. And so the ordinary demanded unblinking attention. Any tedious hour might be the last of its kind."[49]

For Lynch, attempts to retreat to the life of the mind, apart from serious engagement with the concrete realities of existence, yield not insight but *sickness*: "We pay a terrible price if we try to remain children in the literal temporal sense; in fact, we grow old before our time because of all the stresses and strains of the fight against time."[50] Lynch's insights dovetail with our earlier discussion on the relationship of nature and grace. For Lynch, we do not come to insight about ourselves, others, or God, apart from engaging the finite. Rahner argues that God's grace is to be discovered not in the heavens but in the concrete experiences of our interiority: "When the longing for the absolute nearness of God, the longing, incomprehensible in itself…looks for *where* this nearness came—not in the postulates of the spirit, but in the flesh and in the housings of the earth, then no resting-place can be found except in Jesus of Nazareth, over whom the star of God stands, before whom alone one has the courage to bend the knee and weeping happily to

[48] Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping,* 166.
[49] Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 166.
[50] Lynch, 59.

pray: 'And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us'."[51] Rahner and Lynch remind us that if God should choose to share our lot of finitude, then all earnest inquiries into the divine should begin with probing the layers of meaning that our singular life has to offer.

For the purpose of our discussion of theology and literature, MacDonald has offered us some helpful insights. Just as God's infinite act of creative imagination yields the sensible world, so the finite imagination can produce a finite "world of the text" which invites multiple layered, and even competing, interpretations. Creation, like the best of fiction, invites wonder and scrutiny of purpose; but they elude exhaustive explanation. We will now consider what constitutes worthy literature, and how it might lead to consider a life of faith.

Literature as an Act of Faith

Wolfgang Iser on Attitude vs. Interpretation. To this point we have made only vague reference to distinctions between pleasure reading and the great literature that occupies our inquiry's attention. But this distinction is important, because it clarifies the *purpose* of any given work of fiction. Wolfgang Iser proposes an aesthetic response theory of writing, wherein fiction differs from purely informational prose. One is seeking to be informed, not entertained; in such prose, metaphor and ambiguity are undesirable, lest the reader be misled, e.g., directions to the museum. Fiction, by contrast, does not aim primarily to inform, but to entertain. Within fiction, there are entertaining pieces of fiction — detective stories, pulp fiction, so-called "trashy novels" — whose primary goal is to recount a clear plot and entertain us, but there is not much room for interpretation or ambiguity. The goal is not to redirect the imagination or soul of the reader, but to convey 'facts' of a storyline, to keep the reader pleasantly engaged. For such writing, the meaning floats close to the surface of the text. It invites an attitudinal response in the reader ("I like this story/I don't like this story"). To call it "light reading" is not to disparage it, only to

[51] Karl Rahner, "On the Theology of the Incarnation," 120.

identify that it does not weigh heavily on the mind or soul of the reader; it does not "lay a claim" on the reader as the second type of fiction does, what Iser calls "heavy reading." This latter type of reading offers multiple interpretations of the raw 'facts' of the story. In such writing, the meaning of events is not explicit, meaning that "the formulation will take place through the *guided activity* stimulated in the reader."[52] Here the reader's response is not merely attitudinal, but *interpretive*. This is not to say such texts are thicker, use bigger words, and treat only grown-up topics. Children's books such as *The Giving Tree* or *Chronicles of Narnia*, in spite of their simple prose and plot, invite the reader to self-reflection and interpretive appropriation. Similarly, a murder-mystery may be written for adults, but the text may not "read us" or call from us an interpretative response.

Lakeland's Attitudinizers vs. Interpreters. Lakeland draws Iserian parallels to the act of faith in our modern time. In the past, people may have simply accepted or rejected the claims of religious faith ("I like this story/I don't like this story"). The act of faith, as treated in medieval Christian though, did not begin with subjectivity, but with universal principles of human cognition, will, and intellect. But in the 19th century, the turn to the subject began to ask who the "I" is. In the phrase, "I believe," there is not just the one question (what is *belief*?), but a second: who is this "I" that is (or isn't) believing? Here again Taylor's idea of secularity 3 proves helpful, in conveying the modern condition wherein the (un-)believing subject feels the cross-pressures both of personal identity, and belief/unbelief. The modern person of faith does more than accept or reject belief; she constantly *interprets* the faith-encounter as reliable or not; worthy or not. As Lakeland puts it, "Today the act of faith is the acceptance of a claim upon us, one by means of which we interpret the secular world. Once we had believers and atheists.

[52] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, 46.

Today we have interpreters and attitudinizers."[53] Attitudinizers, he reasons, consider the secular world as a given, and seek either to accept or reject it (and in rejecting, perhaps they desire to change it for the better). But *interpreters* situate the material universe in a larger framework; without this external framework, the reasoning goes, one is unable to interpret it. "They may and do share much with those attitudinizers who recognize the ills of the secular world and wish to change it, but they will part company when asked why."[54] Where an attitudinizer might find certain elements of the world repugnant — suffering, poverty, sickness— the interpreter may share those sympathies, but situates them in a larger cosmic drama.

Like Iser's distinction, Lakeland's dichotomy may be too simplistic. Today there are certainly those who find their (un)belief very uncomplicated. One may possess a simple, unproblematized faith in God — "I like this story," full stop. There are likewise others who find the act of faith simply impossible — "I don't like this story." But in Secularity 3, many stand somewhere in the middle; they are cognitively open to a possible act of faith, but they may not know precisely what constitutes an authentic response. For them, the act of faith is not merely a matter of taste, but of interpreting *well* the raw data of life. To that end, Iser's distinction of types of texts is helpful. We first encounter texts which are strictly informational; they intend to convey information that explicitly intend one meaning, e.g., a recipe, or a how-to guide to sink repair. Next there are texts of fiction whose goal is entertainment (the aforementioned "light reading"). This is the unthinking reading suitable for the beach. But substantial, "literary fiction," requires the reader to actively engage her imagination in encountering the text. This "literary fiction" deliberately employs subtleties and ambiguities, suggestions and hints, that allow the reading subject to mine the text, uncovering meaning(s) for herself. Put different,

[53] Paul Lakeland, *Wounded Angel*, 38.
[54] Lakeland, 39.

meaning emerges between the subjectivity of the reader and the objective *writtenness* of the text. For Iser, the aesthetic object is neither the text *per se*, nor merely the reader-response (what does it mean in *me*?), but the convergence of reader-and-text. If a piece of fiction yields only a univocal meaning, the reader's primary task is confined to determine that one meaning (as with "light reading"). Conversely if the reading subject insists only on her own meaning — "the only meaning is what *I* find" — then nothing sensible can be said of meanings embedded in the text.

The Iserian aesthetic object thus emerges from placing a literary text in dialogue with a reader's response. Like in interpersonal interactions, a "conversation" does not neatly reside in one or the other party, but in the *space of interaction between the two*. Iser's aesthetic theory proves helpful for our discussion of great literature, in that it does not reduce literature's meaning either to the text or to the reader, but in that imaginative space in between. Lakeland calls this space between reader and writer "the place and time where the creativity of the author and the imagination of the reader conspire together to illuminate the enigmas of human life."[55] The focus of our discussion, then, is on this **Iserian "literary fiction," which admits of multiple interpretations in a space of convergence between reader and text.** Iser and Lakeland, like O'Connor before them, have argued that the best of literature invites interpretation on the part of the reader. But even before the interpretive act of reading, there is an implicit trust – a faith – established between writer and reader which merits our attention. I will argue that this is the same space within which the individual in secularity 3 makes an interpretive act of faith.

The Act of Faith and Act of Writing/Reading Considered

We turn now to consider what act(s) of faith are involved in the production and reception of narrative texts. Let us begin this by recalling the production and reception of Scriptural texts

[55] Lakeland, 43.

– the Bible – at the heart of Christianity. The perception that Christianity requires believers to cling to an improbable set of beliefs is, from the outside, not ungrounded; indeed the Christian makes some non-negotiable propositional claims: first, *that* an infinite God exists, and *second*, that this God elected to become human to save humanity. We will treat each in turn. First, the question of an infinite God. "Why do you torment me with your infinity, if I can never really measure it?" Karl Rahner asks in his slim volume *Encounters with Silence.* "Why have you kindled in me the flame of faith, this 'dark light' which lures us out of the bright security of our little huts into your sight?" The task of theology can be imprecise and slippery; our meager attempt to describe the infinite with finite reason, language, etc. One is struck by the magnitude of an infinite God, and the phrase *struck by* is fitting. People of faith are often struck from without or within, by an impulse that there is more to reality than meets the eye, that the language and words we have are insufficient to describe all of reality. For the Christian, God's self-revelation, by which God interrupts humanity, is the impetus and epistemic grounds of faith.

The Word that exegetes. In the Prologue to the Gospel of John, humanity moves from darkness and incomprehension to light and understanding, but not by our own intellect. We are given to understand that the Word, *Logos,* was present from the beginning, was with God, and indeed was God. All that exists, came to be through the Word. Without the Word, nothing came to be. What came to be through the Word was life, we are told, which is the "light of the human race" (Jn 1:4). This light shines in the darkness, and the "darkness has not *overcome* it." (Jn 1:5). The verb employed (κατέλαβεν, from λαμβάνω) hints not only at overcoming, but also *grasping*/*comprehending*. We, too, encounter the darkness of not fully grasping the immensity of God, who is beyond our epistemological grasp and language. Hence in John 1:18, we read, "No one has ever yet seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father's bosom, has *revealed*

(ἐξηγήσατο) him." "What would God, if there is a god, look like?" we ask ourselves, with the spiritual longing that Rahner mentions. If John's testimony is any indication, God "looks like" Jesus, who is at God's side. This Logos reveals – the Word *exegetes* (ἐξηγήσατο) -- God for our human comprehension.

If the divine Logos is capable of *exegeting* God for us, then we do well to pay attention to the exegetical power of human words to point beyond themselves, drawing us beyond the "false bottom" of human experience. Rahner treats the task of the artist — the writer, the poet, etc. — to use words to push the comfortable limits of our comprehension: "If God's incomprehensibility does not grip us in a word, if it does not draw us on into his superluminous darkness, if it does not call us out of the little house of our homely, clues-hugged truths into the strangeness of the night that is our real home, we have misunderstood or failed to understand the words of Christianity."[56]

Words Indicate Without Exhausting Mystery. For the Christian, faith does not presume to utter a final word on mystery, so much as name a felt depth of experiences beyond the readily explicable; a sense that there is more to the story in times of loneliness and fullness, sorrow and ecstasy, grief and joy. Anthony Domestico describes the shared frustration of the theologian and the poet; both "inevitably reach a moment when words fail, when the vision so exceeds its expression that an admission of defeat becomes the best way to express that vision."[57] Both poet and theologian can demarcate the limits of their arsenal of words; and in demarcating, they acknowledge a space beyond.

Where theologians attempt veridical statements about the mystery of God, the writer of fiction sets out to capture the humanity of his or her characters. In the process of making real a

[56] Karl Rahner, "Poetry and the Christian" *in Theological Investigations 4*, 359.
[57] Anthony Domestico, *Poetry and Theology in the Modernist Period*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 3.

character, the character may challenge the author's intended plans. Robinson describes the "emotional entanglement" that occurs in writing: "The characters that interest me are the ones that seem to pose questions in my own thinking. The minute you start thinking about someone in the whole circumstance of his life to the extent that you can, he becomes mysterious, immediately."[58] To begin to write requires trust that illumination will come in the offing; let us consider what acts of faith are undertaken by a writer.

Actus scriptoris *takes place in a "faith" community.* Rowan Williams finds that the poetic (i.e., "maker" of art) imagination itself requires an act of faith in the face of one's uncertainty: "Poetry is always a risky enterprise. You don't know where you're going when you start writing. One thing you do know is that you're not going to exhaust what you're talking about; the willingness to take the next step, to put the next word down, is itself an act of faith. You know you're not going to encompass it, conquer or control it. That's what makes poetry an act of faith.[59]" This act of faith, of submitting one's written word to others for evaluation and intelligible reception, we will call an *actus scriptoris*. The writer makes this act of faith within concentric communities that entail trust. There is a broad *linguistic* community, with shared understanding of words' meanings and metaphorical signaling. Therein lies a *literary* community of fellow writers, who inspire and challenge the writer to describe a fresh reality, or to treat a familiar reality in a creative, new fashion. There is one's community of *critics* — many of whom are fellow writers — who assess the merits of the writer's submission for quality, novelty, depth and (importantly) accuracy in describing some dimension of reality. Even science- and fantasy fiction aspire to convey truths of reality, if only by taking themes (e.g., valor, loss, fear, racisim, etc.) out of their traditional contexts to highlight the chosen dimensions.

[58] Sarah Fay, "Marilynne Robinson, The Art of Fiction No. 198" interview in *Paris Review* Issue 186.
[59] John F. Deane, "A Conversation with Rowan Williams," in *Image Journal*, Issue 80.

Reader's act of faith and the* Moi Aussi *Moment. There is, furthermore, a *reading* community who, by virtue of their shared act of reading, negotiate the meaning and veridical weight of the text *vis-à-vis* their own experience and sensibilities. There is, Williams maintains, great faith involved in the whole affair of writing for readers: "The trust that I am understood. The trust that I will discover something by speaking. By listening. The trust that our words are not, as some philosophers would like them to be, games in the dark."[60] Aristotle's *Poetics* articulates that the chief aim of a work of theater or fiction — e.g., a comedy or tragedy — is pleasure. We enjoy a tragedy not for the pain or loss characters undergo (unless we happen to be sadistic!). Rather we enjoy the representation of their plight to the extent that they enact a reality that, though different, nevertheless finds cognitive, emotional, or spiritual resonance with one's own experience of reality. The *truth* of such representations lies not in the artificial 'facts' of the plot, but in how beautifully, how *human(e)ly*, the story is enacted.

Poetic representation is undertaken not just for one's own pleasure, but for a community of others to appreciate. Whatever pleasure we may take in a tragedy lies in a *shared understanding* of loss and pain. Whatever consolation we draw from a tragedy comes from the solidarity of silent head nods, of *moi aussi* moments of insight while reading or spectating: "My struggles and joys are not aberrations in the universe, but constitutive of human experience." To this extent it makes no difference whether a community observes a play in common, or reads the same text in separate homes. The poet, playwright or writer of fiction endeavors to stir a shared, honest response — revulsion, sympathy, anger — in her reading community, through the creative power of her imagination stimulating the imagination of theirs.

***Interpreting* Silence.** This empathic solidarity does not always come easy for the reader, especially when the situation is far removed from his or her context. Artistic works worth their

[60] John F. Deane, "A Conversation with Rowan Williams"

salt lead readers to encounter an other, to experience an entirely different set of circumstances and sensibilities. For a non-religious, modern reader to read Endo's *Silence* challenges her to imagine how she might respond if she were a 17th-century Portuguese missionary priest working in Japan. Faced with imprisonment and the chance to save his flock from torture, would she too cast off Christian belief? A facile reading — one which does not take seriously the cosmic imaginary constellated around Rodrigues's decision — might be, "I would apostatize too…because Christianity is false anyway." But an empathic reading requires self-displacement and a suspension of disbelief to assess the merits of Rodrigues's decision *as if* she were him. A more empathic reading could yield the same decision, but for different reasons than a hasty dismissal of Rodrigues's Christian worldview: "I would apostatize too…precisely because the demands of Christianity are *true.*" This reversal requires an interpretative consideration of the demands of Christianity in distressed circumstances; namely, what happens when public reverence of Christian images inhibits, rather than helps, responding as Christ would? Probing deeper, we have a 17th-century missionary model framed in 20th-century sensibilities and sensitivities. A modern, historically conscious reader may answer, "I would apostatize too…because the zealous missiology he espouses is insufficiently inculturated and needs to be adapted to better embody Christianity."

The various interpretations of Endo's *Silence* make it, in Iser's taxonomy, a "heavy reading," because it invites a surplus of meanings and calls for a response from the reader. What unspoken principles make up the thematic backdrop — the Ricoeurian "world of the text" — such that a young priest of his time would be so anguished over his choices? What care does the text elicit, such that the reader takes Rodrigues's questions as one's own? Great literature calls

for an emphatic connection with its characters, so that the reader can move about within the world of the text and "try on" another's cosmic imaginary.

Literary Anthropology and Neuroscience. Iser calls this "trying on" *literary anthropology*, whereby a reader of a text — or an actor in a play — endeavor to fade out of her own reality in order to understand the reality of a character or role. An actor cannot totally appropriate Hamlet (Iser's example), since Hamlet is a character in a play, circumscribed by written text and limited stage directions. But the actor employs his whole body, intellect, and emotions to enflesh the role, representing analogically the Hamlet that he himself is not. In the attempt to embody this character analogically, what Hamlet *might be* emerges. This same dynamic occurs when a reader seeks to understand a character in fiction: "To imagine what has been stimulated by the 'as-if' entails placing our faculties at the disposal of an unreality and bestowing on it a semblance of reality in proportion to a reduction of our own reality."[61] The engaged reader of fiction, then, brings a novel (or a play, or a poem) to life by subordinating his or her own judgment of reality, in favor of treating the fictive characters as if they were real.

We find resonances here with a Christian anthropology, whereby the Word becomes incarnate to make fully real what humanity might be in the eyes of God. Jesus' embodied empathy models what constitutes – or should constitute – empathy for humanity. Regularly in Scripture, Jesus is "moved with pity" or "moved by compassion," depending on the translation. The Greek verb employed is visceral and earthy: *splanchnizomai* comes from the noun *splanchnon*, "guts, viscera." Hence Jesus' empathy involves a concrete, physical response to circumstances in the world. He sees a widowed woman weeping over her only son who has died, or sees a crowd that is hungry, and his *guts turn* within him on their behalf.

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[61] Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary,* 17, quoted in Lakeland 43.

These would be quaint theological and etymological musings, if they did not also echo in our very physiology. Research in recent years by neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has discovered what he calls "mirror neurons."[62] Human "mirror neurons" perceive external states and experiences, and replicate them within the neurological mappings of the human body and mind. So when we read of a character's acute anguish and feel moved, it is because our neurons are actually, physically replicating that feeling within us; when we wince at seeing some else trip and fall, it is because our neurons instantly respond with an unconscious, pre-cognitive empathy. Damasio's research gives neurobiological evidence supporting Iser's theory that remote external stimuli – including what is revealed in texts – can, in fact, *work* on and in the one reading herself. It is in this sense that literary fiction reads *us* when it engages our imagination.

Actus legentis and the actus credentis. Let us call this empathic act of the engaged reader, the *actus legentis*, by which we mean a **willful act of suspension of disbelief and self-displacement, undertaken to understand the intentions and actions of an other so as to assess the truthfulness of the other's worldview.** The truthfulness conveyed by a piece of literature alien to one's context and sensibilities cannot be assessed, apart from the world of the text the author creates. I cannot, for example, assess the depth of Rodrigues's anguish, apart from probing the scope of his worldview, however unthematized it may be. To imagine how I would respond in similar circumstances yields nothing revelatory or truthful, if it does not also consider — and submit to — the cross-pressures the characters themselves face. To refuse to engage a text at this level will yield not a fruitful interpretation, but an attitudinal judgment. It is the difference between saying, "I feel Rodrigues's anguish!" and "I can't believe a priest would ever apostatize. Catholics shouldn't read this." The latter attitude might account for the uproar the book causes still in certain quarters.

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[62] Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain*, 102-3.

There are, clearly, parallels to the act of religious belief, what we call *actus credentis.* As a person approaches a prospective faith commitment from the outside, he naturally desires to assess the truthfulness of the belief system. But like the appraisal of real estate, the truthfulness of an unfamiliar cosmic imaginary cannot be adequately assessed from the outside, without an attempt to grasp the interior world of belief. To understand accurately the Christian imagination, for example, one would have to acknowledge his own (perhaps unthematized) beliefs about suffering, redemption, and humanity's place in the cosmos. Literary fiction, which treats these themes extensively, offers a non-threatening forum to do just that. Nicholas Boyle writes that "the great tragedies, by giving us pleasure in the immediate awareness of…the absolute shared quality of pain and Care, furnish us with a hint or foretaste of the one great Christian truth: God, the source of all existence, suffers too, and therefore we can trust that in and beyond the suffering there lies redemption."[63] In reading fiction or watching a play, one expects to be entertained. The verb *entertained* is revelatory — as if held (*tentus*) between (*inter*) two worlds; suspended between one's own interior imaginary and the external world of the text. Graham Ward notes that "reading operates at a boundary between interiority and exteriority; it is the process of mediation itself in which we give to the text and we receive from it. Reading, as such, is a religious act."[64] We take Ward's *religious* here to mean the binding (*re-ligere*) force of reading – we are tied to it, and it to us.

This suspension — between the experienced truthfulness of one's own life and the suggested truthfulness of an other's — is not so much a fideistic leap of faith as it is a vulnerable step into the "Jamesian open space" Taylor speaks of in *A Secular Age.* One is not commanded to leap, once and for all, across a chasm from known truth to possible falsehood. The sustained

[63] Nicholas Boyle, *Sacred and Secular Scriptures,* 130-131.
[64] Graham Ward, *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory*, 122.

attention given to a novel, poem, or play allows the reader to "try on" the world of the text, to inhabit empathically the mind of the characters, to thematize what lies embedded in the world of the text. She can understand the characters' movements as long as she is willing to be *enter-tained.* She might recoil from taking an empathetic step toward understanding the character, but if she does not, she does not submit to be enter-tained by the text's invitatory depth. But to submit to be enter-tained is, in a way an act of attentive love. A character, miserable though he might be, does not have to be a pleasant or laudable character to be instructive. As Nicholas Boyle points out, the grittiness of such characters "only has to be loved enough to be worth representing, and worth the labor of understanding that goes into enjoying the representation."[65] Milan Kundera speaks of novels as being populated by "experimental selves" whom we might, if we submit to such transformation, try on and even *become*.

The *actus legentis* is no more a "leap of faith" than the movement of one considering the act of believing. One does not regularly hear of atheists spontaneously jumping into baptismal fonts, expecting immediate theological illumination and unwavering belief. Rather the *actus credentis* is gradual; one tempted to consider the Christian faith might first step into a darkened church, imbibe the silence from a well-worn pew, and let his eyes and mind wander about. Like the actor attempting to inhabit Hamlet, he brackets his sense of reality — for the time being at least — to entertain the Christian imaginary, played out in glinted mosaics and sooty statues; in stained glass stories and vertiginous architecture. The muted awe of tourists visiting Gaudí's Sagrada Família in Barcelona reveals imaginations engaged in wonder-ing reverence. What sort of vision, what sense of transcendence, could create and sustain such a vision? "To see divine immanence in the world is an act of faith, not a matter to be interpreted in other than its own

[65] Nicholas Boyle, *Sacred and Secular Scriptures*, 133.

terms, if one grants the reasonableness of the perceiver."[66] He considers himself a reasonable perceiver; and with his imagination engaged, he wonders: what sort of cosmic imaginary would yield such imagery, such imagination, such a space? How does his own spontaneous attraction to beauty, verticality, and symmetry resonate with the alterity of this Christian worldview? Soon he attends a liturgy to see how this worldview plays out in finite time and concrete space; he does not (yet) believe, and he may never. But his facile disbelief is fragilized; he senses that there is more to Christianity than the propositional truth claims and biblical fundamentalism he once believed (that word!) it to be. Having actively engaged a Christian imagination in place of his own, he has doubts about his doubts.

Cross-pressures for Christians. This dynamic, of course, cuts both ways in Charles Taylor's fragilized world of cross pressures. The Christian is enter-tained — is caught in the suspension of *belief* — whenever she engages with literature that problematizes the Christian vision of humanity. Albert Camus' *The Plague* forces the believer to accept a fragilized faith, vis-à-vis suffering: "the value of the religious imagination of [Camus'] work is that it demands that people of faith hold to their faith in full awareness of the challenge that secular reality and its attendant human suffering represent."[67] And Shūsaku Endo's novel *Silence*, a story loved and hated for problematizing Christian witness, asks the believer how far he or she would go to follow Christ, even if it meant *renouncing* Christ? The silence of God in the face of Christians suffering is movingly portrayed in the inner turmoil of Rodrigues. As mentioned earlier, the non-believer makes an *actus legentis* in 'trying on' the Christian imaginary to understand why a priest would be torn. And the believing reader, too, engages in the *actus legentis* in placing herself in the proverbial shoes of Rodrigues. This empathic move challenges the believer to consider,

[66] Marilynne Robinson, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer" in *The Death of Adam*, 120.
[67] Paul Lakeland, *Wounded Angel*, 95.

honestly, the lengths she might go in following Christ, who himself was scorned and reviled by those in the world. She must face the limits of her own belief by imagining at what point — under what hypothetical circumstances — she would also apostatize. The goal of such imaginative exercises is not to abandon one's belief, but to reveal the complexity of human resolve and perception of God's will.

Rowan Williams finds that art — poetry, literature, paintings — are successful not merely because they stir up aesthetic pleasure, but when they direct the imagination of the viewer to ontological depth:

> Success is when an artist, in Jacques Maritain's terms, produces an object that has the solidity, the *claritas,* in the medieval sense, the radiance, the luminosity, the density, of real things. The poem, the music, the visual artwork has that density that says that the world is full…not empty; …Words or images or musical sounds that are charged in that way are an extraordinary testimony to the fact that we human speakers have been given the bizarre and utterly unpredictable gift of doing something a little bit like God—producing a reality that is charged, that is present, and that passes the radiance on to another level.[68]

This task of producing a reality charged with radiance describes well the work of Marilynne Robinson, whose literature suggests grace present everywhere around us, even in situations where we might rather turn away. In her quest to rehabilitate John Calvin's theology, Robinson insists that the natural world is charged with God's grandeur — that is, divine grace — and it is the duty of the empathic reader to pay attention to where that unthematized grace is embedded in the unremarkable daily rhythms of life. To her life and work we now turn.

[68] John F. Deane, "A Conversation with Rowan Williams"

Chapter III: Marilynne Robinson and the Island of the Articulable

The State of Modern Belief

In his tour-de-force of western thought *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor acknowledges the benefits of being a buffered self in an anthropocentric world. Humanity can enjoy a sense of self-possession and inner peace, without the preoccupation of displeasing a moral order established by church institutions in the name of a deity. Scientific progress and Enlightenment inquiry have ushered in incredible advancements for human health, knowledge, and social order. But this comes at a cost: it also might come "as a limit, even a prison, making us blind or insensitive to whatever lies beyond this ordered human world."[69]

This leads to the buffered self experiencing *cross pressures* – a desire to reject external authority from faith and institutions, while still longing for spiritual fulfillment and a sense of belonging and meaning. Historically cultural élites responded in different ways to these cross pressures. One such path led to the rise of the heart-felt Christianity of the Pietist movement. Another path led to the Romantic axis, which sought to harmonize the interior battle of reason and desire, the chilly alienation experienced within communities, and the division of the individual from the great unity of nature outside of human artifice. Schiller's *The Gods of Greece* and Emily Dickinson's *Poem 1551* – which mourns the loss of religious belief as an *ignis fatuus* – speak to this sense of alienation from the divine.

Thoreau found in Walden Pond the "perennial source of our life." But here too lies a paradox: "we have a kinship with this nature; it is the source of our life…But at the same time, this Nature can be 'vast and dread and inhuman,' other, hostile, indifferent."[70] Taylor sees in our "modern cosmic imaginary" a so-called "Nova Effect": varied interpretations of humanity's

[69] Charles Taylor, *Secular Age*, 302.
[70] Taylor, 345.

place in a closed system of buffered selves. For some, like Emerson, it has resulted in a spiritual kinship with the natural world. For others, like Bede Griffiths and Gerard Manley Hopkins, love of nature was compatible with faith and (in Griffiths' case) communion with non-Christians. But by Taylor's lights, the most salient feature of the modern cosmic imaginary is that:

> it has opened a space in which people can wander between and around all these options without having to land clearly and definitively in any one. In the wars between belief and unbelief, this can be seen as a kind of no-man's-land; except that it has gotten wide enough to take on the character rather of a neutral zone, where one can escape the war altogether.[71]

The focus of this chapter will be the place of contemporary writer Marilynne Robinson in this post-Romantic, post-nova effect world. It will be argued that Robinson, while trenchant and polemical in her books of essays, takes a decidedly different tack in treating matters of faith in her fiction.

Marilynne Robinson is, for all intents and purposes, responding to the world she and we now inhabit. Today, as we have said before, both believers and non-believers are subject to doubts about the certainty of their certainties. One looks to one's peers in western societies to see an overall homogeneity of activity and preferences, with the notable exception being the "multiplicity of faiths" that offer competing frames of meaning.[72] This combination of uniformity and difference results in a *fragilization* of the individual, who is faced by the cross-pressures of pluralism. Taylor calls this "a spiritual super-nova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane."[73] The modern individual is faced with a dizzying array of options in the modern order – how to make sense of one's sensory experiences? This spiritual super-nova results not in the existential peace promised by a cool rationalism. Rather one feels the weight of isolation – a buffered self in a universe void of transcendent meaning or satisfying accounts –

[71] Taylor, 351.
[72] Ibid., 304.
[73] Ibid.,300.

from traditional religious commitments. This Taylor calls the *malaise of immanence,* fleshed out in a frenetic search for meaning and a "felt flatness" in everyday life. Later we will refer to Christian Wiman as an example of someone whose "felt flatness" and absence of faith was remedied by Robinson's fiction.

Subtler Language. Taylor recognizes in Romanticism a counter-modernity desire to create a universe of beauty, a middle space between theism and unbelief. This artistic realm is unencumbered by the moralizing weight of religion, but is aesthetically richer than a mechanistic, empty universe. Romanticism can borrow Christian language (recall Chenu) and metaphysical framework to create an aesthetic penumbra of transcendence, without having to commit to religion's moral or theological baggage. Hence the modern Romantic can overcome the malaise of modernity by *poiesis* – a manmade afterglow of transcendence, which is reverenced not in churches but music halls; not on pilgrimages, but in cultural tourism.

Taylor describes the Romantic poets and their successors' task of articulating an original vision of the universe, apart from religious commitments. This entails Shelley's idea of "subtler language," wherein this new vision is fleshed out to stir the *pathos* within the reader herself (recall again Lynch's misapprehensions of the finite). But we are left to wonder, "Why are we so moved? …[T]his mystery is now replaced *within* us. It is the mystery of anthropological depth."[74] The buffered self that hungers still for mystery and depth in literature demands this subtler language, one without recourse to earlier shared objective reference points (sacred history, the Great Chain of Being, etc.). This results in the challenge of the artist – the *poet* – to articulate meaning in a new key. But in a secular age wherein the modern person feels a sense of loss of meaning, and fragilized (non-)belief, what role does literature have to offer? Marilynne Robinson is forging a literary "itinerary" – to borrow Taylor's term – in the field of Christian

[74] Taylor, 356.

literature. We turn now to explore first her philosophical and theological commitments (as found in her essays), before trekking down the *via litteraria* she has paved for us.

Marilynne Robinson

Marilynne Robinson is, above all else, a writer curious of what it means to be fully human. In her essay "*The Strange History of Altruism"* she addresses the importance of how we phrase our questions in the search for human self-understanding: "There is something uniquely human in the fact that we can pose questions to ourselves *about ourselves,* and questions that actually matter, *that actually change reality*."[75] What and how we ask about reality will determine the types of responses we can receive. The challenge today comes from the rise of what she terms *parascientific literature*, defined as,

> a robust, and surprisingly conventional, genre of social or political theory or anthropology that makes its case by proceeding, using the science of its moment, from a genesis of human nature in primordial life to a set of general conclusions about what our nature is and must be, together with the ethical, political, economic, and/or philosophic implications to be drawn from these conclusions.[76]

This positivist literature, Robinson maintains, confidently claims to answer essential questions about the nature of reality, "*if only by dismissing them*."[77] The epistemological onus for dismissing metaphysics, she argues, is not on the person defending ontological realism, but on the one maintaining a "closed ontology" – what Taylor would call a closed, *immanent frame*.[78] By Robinson's reasoning, to claim that metaphysics cannot meaningfully speak of reality *is itself* a metaphysical claim. Robinson shares Taylor's rejection of the notion of secularism as subtraction (replacing God with science and reason): "If there is in fact an emptiness peculiar to our age it is not because of the 'death of God' and… it is not because an ebbing away of faith

[75] Marilynne Robinson, "The Strange History of Altruism" in *Absence of Mind*, 33. Italics added.
[76] Ibid., 32-33.
[77] Ibid., 33. Emphasis added.
[78] "So the buffered identity of the disciplined individual moves in a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular. All of this makes up what I want to call '**the immanent frame**.' …[T]his frame constitutes a "natural" order, to be contrasted to a "supernatural" one, an "immanent" world, over against a possible "transcendent" one." Taylor, 542

before the advance of science has impoverished modern experience."[79] Rather, in Robinson's estimation, if there is a modern malaise, it has something to do with "the exclusion of the felt life of the mind" from parascientific literature -- and the arts.

Even theology, Robinson maintains, risks contributing to this exclusion. "To the great degree that theology has accommodated the parascientific world view, it too has tended to forget the beauty and strangeness of the individual soul, that is, of the world as perceived in the course of a human life."[80] The surer bedrock for theology in a secular age then is not found in science, but in subjectivity, which is "the ancient haunt of piety and reverence and long, long thoughts." The elusiveness of the mind, she reasons, is a consequence of its centrality. Robinson maintains that "the absence of mind and subjectivity from parascientific literature is in some part a consequence of the fact that the literature arose and took its form in part as a polemic against religion."[81] If parascientific literature – we might note that she calls it *literature* – artificially delimits what it means to be human, then her project is to reintroduce the *felt curiosity* of the subject to the conversation. She is echoing Lynch's injunction: begin inquiry with the necessarily finite experience of the subject.

Robinson writes in "Freedom of Thought" that these accounts given in modern academia "did not square at all with my sense of things," because "the tendency of much of it was to posit or assume a human simplicity with a simple reality and to marginalize the sense of the sacred, the beautiful, everything in any way lofty."[82] And so Robinson's corpus of books and essays is her response. Indeed her novels, beginning with *Housekeeping* (1981), attempt to give voice to

[79] Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, 35.
[80] Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, 35.
[81] Ibid., 35.
[82] Robinson, "Freedom of Thought" in *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, 5.

the interior world of its primary subjects. We will treat this novel in-depth first, and later move to key elements in her second novel, *Gilead*.

Nature and Imagination in *Housekeeping*

The Buffered and the Porous Self. Ralph Waldo Emerson was fascinated by humanity's attempt to domesticate the disordered chaos found in nature. Emerson wrote that for the American builder of destiny –the *homo faber* – "nature is thoroughly mediate. It is made to serve. It receives the dominion of man…[who] is never weary of working it up... [He] reduces all things, until the world becomes at last only a realized will – the double of the man."[83] The American Dream – the archetypal male heading to the west, taming nature, and shaping his own destiny – takes this as the given destiny of autonomous individuals.

Nathaniel Hawthorne laments the intellect's attempt to domesticate nature: "We who are born into the world's artificial system can never adequately know how little in our present state and circumstances is natural, and how much is merely the interpolation of the perverted mind and heart of man."[84] The re-telling of this narrative in culture yields further alienation from nature. Hawthorne concludes, "Art has become a second and stronger nature, whose crafty tenderness has taught us to despise the bountiful and wholesome ministration of our true parent."[85] It is precisely this wounded relationship, of humanity to the natural order, that Robinson takes up in *Housekeeping*.

Robinson, whose doctoral studies focused on Shakespeare, was nearly forty before she started writing her own fiction. Her debut novel *Housekeeping* was never written to be published. She wanted to see if she could write a story with images and metaphors that would hold her own interest. *Housekeeping* reads like an impressionistic painting, offering the

[83] Emerson, "Nature," in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 240-241.
[84] Hawthorne, "The New Adam and Eve," in *The Complete Short Stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, 327.
[85] Hawthorne, 327.

narrator's (Ruth's) interior life as she moves from domesticity to the haunts of nature, memory, and the numinous. The slim book begins with Ruth's account of her small family: a sister (Lucille), grandparents (Edmund and Sylvia), mother (Helen) and aunts (Molly and Sylvie). Long before she was born her grandfather charged westward to build a homestead outside the fictive mountain town of Fingerbone, Idaho.[86] Edmund worked long hours for the railroad and left childrearing and housekeeping to his housebound wife, Sylvia. There is a large, black lake next to the mountain town that regularly rises at the moon's pull, flooding cellars and filling backyards with the smell of earthy decay.

The series of untimely deaths throughout *Housekeeping* reads like Greek tragedy. One moonless evening, a "black and sleek and elegant" train sails off the bridge that passes over the town's lake, sending all passengers – including grandpa Edmund – to their watery grave. Local boys and men attempt immediately to find survivors, but they cannot determine how, or where, the train settled on the lake's bed. Soon the ice of winter seals the lake over. There are two survivors, who were standing at the back of the caboose when the train derailed. But, Robinson writes with a wink, "They were not really witnesses in any sense, for the equally sound reasons that the darkness was impenetrable to any eye and [because] they had been standing at the end of the train looking back."[87] We are given to understand that human perception of reality is not all that it seems.

After abandoning Ruth and Lucille at Grandma Sylvia's house, their free-spirited mother Helen drives a borrowed car off a cliff into the same dark lake. She leaves no note of intention, and there is no trace of her sunken car. (So much for understanding the vagaries of human will.)

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[86] This seems somewhat autobiographical. Robinson herself grew up in Sandpoint, Idaho, a small town that developed around railroad switching yards on the shores of Pend Oreille Lake.
[87] Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 6.

In spite of all attempts to comprehend and domesticate nature, the mysterious world beyond us – and within us – remains inscrutable and indomesticable.

A central theme of *Housekeeping* is nature's decay and the new growth emerging from it. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt speaks of housekeeping as the "constant, unending fight against the processes of growth and decay through which nature forever invades human artifice, threatening the durability of the world and its fitness for human use."[88] But even this language of decay, Arendt maintains, reflects an anthropocentric artifice, where nature's unpredictable forces are viewed as *threats* to imposed stability. The act of housekeeping hopes to safeguard a home from the encroachment of nature and decay – insects and vermon, dirt and dust, flooding and feral animals.

The house itself serves as a metaphor for the buffered personal identity, which – in a world governed by human artifice – requires constant curating. For Robinson, housekeeping connotes self-preservation, keeping away the forces of nature by force of will. When Ruth's grandfather, mother, and grandmother die in succession, patriarchical and matriarchical duties fall away; but so does the protection such duties afforded.

Eventually their earthy aunt Sylvie (reminiscent of *sylvan*) who detests living in the family home, becomes the sisters' guardian. She serves dinner only after sunset, leaving the lights off to let the sounds of outside float in to occupy the house. Ruth and Lucille's lives are fragilized; the new routines of their house cannot provide stability; their clothes are dirty, they skip school, the house floods. Ruth's sister Lucille eventually fights this return to nature, insisting that the lights be turned on, and cleaning the house herself to restore order and cleanliness. Like Sylvie, Ruth grows to resent domestication, preferring long days at the lake to staying indoors at school.

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[88] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 100.

When Ruth and Lucille stay overnight once in the woods, Ruth embraces the moonless darkness of nature, but Lucille grows uncomfortable: "It was so dark that creatures came down to the water within a few feet of us. We could not see what they were. Lucille began to throw stones at them. 'They're supposed to be able to smell us,' she grumbled…never accepting that our human boundaries were overrun."[89] Suddenly we hear Robinson's phenomenological "subtler language" account for Ruth's sense of union with the natural world:

> Lucille would tell this story differently. She would say I fell asleep, but I did not. I simply let the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in my skull and bowels and bones. Everything that falls upon the eye is apparition, a sheet dropped over the world's true workings. The nerves and the brain are tricked, and one is left with dreams that these specters loose their hands from ours and walk away… Darkness is the only solvent.[90]

Ruth's aunt Sylvie has led her from a buffered self, to one where her interior world and the outer natural world can merge in Emersonian transcendence. In language redolent of Taylor's porous self, Joan Kirkby reads in Ruth's experience "a sense of wholeness without separation, a dissolution in which the ego's grasp of the self loosens and the boundaries between the self and world dissolves."[91] Later Ruth notes again a "correspondence between the space within the circle of my skull and the space around me," which leads her finally to hide in the wilderness and refuse to inhabit the house her grandfather built. In a grand gesture of defiance, she and Sylvie attempt to burn down the house and flee. But they find that this human artifice, too, has become just as damp and dank as the natural environment it was built to keep out. Even a willful act of destruction – arson – is foiled by natural elements. The house, like the self, is less buffered than we have been given to believe.

Religious language in *Housekeeping*. If *Housekeeping* opens space for Christian belief, it is not religious belief that is easily domesticated. Salvation-by-good-deedery distinguishes the

[89] Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 115.
[90] Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 116.
[91] Joan Kirkby, "Is There Life After Art?" 103.

town's churches, "and the obligation to perform these works rested squarely with the women, since salvation was universally considered to be much more becoming in women than in men."[92] Hence when the churchy women of Fingerbone appeal to Ruth and Sylvie, Ruth balks at their "desire, a determination, to keep me, so to speak, safely within doors." Ruth's wariness of churches notwithstanding, Robinson draws heavily on Biblical tales of woe: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the ark, Rachel, Job, Absalom, and Jesus commanding the disciples to become fishers of men. Robinson challenges the religious-minded reader to imagine, too, "all the nameless women"; *Housekeeping*'s nearly exclusive treatment of female characters goes along way to right the theological and literary imbalance.

Ruth, like her Biblical forebear, is separated from her true home; she finds in Noah a kindred picaresque spirit. She imagines Noah eagerly knocking down his house and using the planks to build an ark, with neighbors looking on in doubt. "A house should have a compass and a keel," Ruth concludes, and reasons that "looking out at the lake, one could believe that the flood had never ended."[93] If one's world is going to flood, the "stable foundations" of this world offer small solace. Robinson intimates that biblical figures, like the heroine and the modern quester, can be spiritual nomads on the seas of uncertainty.

It seems appropriate that after the Bible, Marilynne Robinson's favorite book is Melville's *Moby Dick*, a tale of humanity's fragile place on the sea.[94] In *Housekeeping*, the surface of Fingerbone's lake is the dividing line between the phenomenal world above, and the numinous world of memories and dreams of the dead (her mother, grandfather, et al.). Ruth describes the world above as "hardly a human world, here in the fatuous light." By comparison,

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[92] Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 183.
[93] Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 172.
[94] As detailed in Thomas Schaub and Marilynne Robinson. "An Interview with Marilynne Robinson," in *Contemporary Literature* 35.2 (1994), 234.

below the lake's opaque surface "is always the accumulated past, which vanishes but does not vanish, which perishes and remains."[95] The five senses, though important for observing the phenomenal world, are not the extent of our capacities for intuition. Earlier, as Ruth and Sylvie float across the lake in a boat, they wonder where the train lies, with the memories of its buried dead. Ruth waxes epistemological: "the wreck of my grandfather's train is more vivid in my mind than it would have been if I had seen it, for the mind's eye is not utterly baffled by darkness."[96] The limits of our sensory perception of the physical world are not, evidently, the limits of our capacity for sound intuitions. There is epistemic ground, if not explicit argument, for attending to the data of consciousness. But the 'supernatural' world beyond the sensible is not in some distant Heaven, but in the placid, impenetrably deep lake. Robinson masterfully embeds the limits of our incomprehension even here in the natural world – our buffered immanent frame is not so tidy, after all.

On one truant sojourn to the lake, Ruth and Lucille encounter "hoboes" under the train tracks. Ruth imagines that they in their tattered clothes, and the sisters in their own five-and-dime outfits, are survivors from the train that had careened off the tracks. Her imagination leads her to consider what the afterlife might look like:

> "perhaps we all awaited a resurrection. Perhaps we expect a train to leap out of the water, caboose foremost, as if in a movie run backward, and then to continue across the bridge. The passengers would arrive, sounder than they darted, accustomed to the depths, serene about their restoration to the light… Say that this resurrection was general enough to include my grandmother and Helen, my mother…Say that my grandmother pecked our brows with her whiskey lips, and then all of them went down the road to our house, my grandfather youngish and high-pocketed…then Lucille and I could run off to the woods, leaving them to talk of old times…"[97]

Ruth deploys her childlike imagination to consider what resurrection might look like. She does not make explicitly Christian theological speculations; she does not invoke God as the agent of

[95] Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 172.
[96] Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 166.
[97] Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 96.

restoration, or refer to Jesus' capital-R Resurrection. Instead she employs familiar illusions – e.g., a movie run backward – to imagine what resurrection looks like from the perspective of her finite experience. She imagines her mother and whiskey-lipped grandmother, and her grandfather in his youth. Hers is not an argument *sub specie aeternitatis*, but an imaginative rumination that seeks understanding of what lies beyond the readily comprehensible. Her words, like sacraments, signal inklings of a not-wholly-graspable reality beyond.

Elsewhere Ruth finds an advertisement for Christian missions in China, where her aunt Molly had worked when she was alive. *I will make you fishers of men,* it reads. Ruth daydreams about what may be caught up in those fishing nets, loosely employing Christian images:

> "Such a net, such a harvesting, would put an end to all anomaly. If it swept the whole floor of heaven, it must, finally, sweep the black floor of Fingerbone, too. From there, we must imagine, would arise a great army of paleolithic and neolithic frequenters of the lake…down to the earliest present…to the swimmers, the boaters and canoers, and in such a crowd my mother [who drove off a cliff into the lake] would hardly seem remarkable."[98]

At the end of time the fisherman's net draws all of history's forgotten dead into the boat. What the net or boat are, Ruth does not make explicit. Yet all things lost in this life — Ruth imagines — will be restored: "There would be a general reclaiming of fallen buttons and misplaced spectacles, of neighbors and kin, till time and error and accident were undone, and the world became comprehensible and whole."[99] The gathering of all things in the fisherman's net reveals an order and intelligibility that remains opaque here in the physical realm. And yet even the physical realm hints beyond; Ruth immediately jumps to images of "gulls fly[ing] like sparks up the face of the clouds," "gnats sail[ing] out of the grass," and a "discarded leaf gleaning at the top of the wind." From attention to these natural occurrences she concludes, "Ascension seemed at such times a natural law. If one added to it a law of completion — that everything must finally

[98] Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 92.
[99] Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 92.

be made comprehensible," then the fisherman drawing in nets might be a most suitable analogy for the sort of salvific work Christianity promises. How else to account for so many unanswered questions to life, so many fragments of reality and adventitious thoughts? Ruth ponders, "What are all these fragments for, if not to be knit up finally?"[100] We find here Robinson's characteristic blending of Christian imagery, inquiry into the natural world, and an analogical imagination that sniffs out resonances between the two. Let us visit Robinson's self-understood purpose of analogy in her literary work.

Analogical Thought in Literature and the Limits of Language

In a 1993 interview in Madison, Marilynne Robinson speaks of the language she used in *Housekeeping* as a means of exploring transcendent reality:

> I love nineteenth-century American literature. I was particularly impressed with use of metaphor in all the great ones -- Melville, Dickinson, Thoreau. It seemed to me that the way they used metaphor was a highly legitimate strategy for real epistemological questions to be dealt with in fiction and poetry…[I]n some profound sense, reality is of a piece. It's sort of like finding a genetic strand that opens a whole genealogy. It seems to me that reality must somehow be describable as linked through analogue.[101]

Metaphysical reality cannot neatly be contained by human cognition, but are intelligible only by *analogia* (to borrow from Aquinas). The writers Robinson admires were able to "use language as a method of comprehension on the largest scale, *at the same time using all the resources of the language and absolutely insisting that language is not an appropriate tool*."[102] Language is an imperfect tool for the artisan, because it has its own logic that "drifts toward self-invited order," yielding too-neat or too-small resolutions.

Hence in *Housekeeping*, Robinson refrains from didactic exegesis of the impressionistic vignettes she paints. The reader is left to grasp and intuit meaning, as she herself did in writing

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[100] Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 92.
[101] Thomas Schaub and Marilynne Robinson. "An Interview with Marilynne Robinson," in *Contemporary Literature* 35.2 (1994), 239.
[102] Schaub, 241. Emphasis added.

the book: "If you put *this* [story element] in relation to *that*, what is implied? And the first thing I would think is, Not much, or nothing, and then – it was strange – in the sense that it was like there *has* to be, there *has* to be, I mean I could *intuit* something I felt was like a movement or a principle of unity, but I didn't know what it was."[103] One finds in Robinson's fiction sentences that invite the reader to pause and ruminate; she offers numinous hints at the divine, without being explicit or ham-fisted with her descriptions:

> If I knew what [the final meaning] was, I didn't proceed. The whole interest of the book for me was in trying to be beyond my own grasp or outside my own expectations. I tried to set problems for myself that I truly experienced as real problems, and in a way what I was doing was testing my method, finding what I could make it yield. Of course if I had had any commitment beforehand to what it should have yielded, then I would have been ruining my experiment.[104]

Like Ruth herself, Robinson is wary of the fatuous light of language, which domesticates what it cannot fully contain: "there really are thousands of different ways of thinking about things, and we can't demonstrate that contemporary methods, locally applied, are more interesting or more conducive to health or survival or anything than others. It's a phony scientism."[105]

The role of art, Robinson maintains, is to offer *analogical thought* for understanding reality: "I think analogy is the essential form of thinking. I think that that is the basis of cognition and that art in a sense is occurring at the frontier of understanding because it integrates the *problems* of experience and the *ordering* of experience."[106] Robinson challenges science – or rather, a scientific materialism – that presumes a closed ontology, wherein we "say we know all we need to know in order to assess and define human nature and circumstance."[107] "Fact

[103] Schaub, 241. Emphasis original.
[104] Schaub, 241-242.
[105] Schaub, 243.
[106] Schaub, 244.
[107] Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, 34.

explains nothing," Ruth offers at the end of *Housekeeping*. "It is fact that requires explanation."[108] Indeed *Housekeeping* is a study in the limits of memory and perception.

On Nature and Beauty. Taylor maintains that when ontic commitments are suspect in our time, *subtler language* needs to be employed in discussing reality. For many heirs of Taylor's Romantic axis, even talk of purpose in nature is suspect. Yet *poiesis* about nature – the Romantic ruminations of Mary Oliver, or the imaginative dreamscapes of Ruth in *Housekeeping* – offers persuasive hints at deeper meaning. Taylor maintains that,

> The idea that nature has something to say to us hovers there in our culture, too far out for the buffered identity to be uncomfortable with it, but powerful enough to be evoked in a number of indirect ways—in art, in our feelings of renewal as we enter countryside or forest, in some of our responses of alarm at its destruction.[109]

In essays and fiction alike, Robinson weaves concern for the environment with her larger concerns about humanity's confused ontological place within it. The degradation of the material world results from the lost conversation that has gone on "between humankind and the world since Genesis." Robinson is skeptical of any attempts in a closed immanent frame to rectify this relationship; rather "re-establishing a sense of the sacredness of what is occurring here is probably the only antidote, because without that there is no final urgency about the rescue of either one."[110] Without being too didactic, *Housekeeping* conveys a sense of sacredness in creation.[111]

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Taylor – like several others we have considered here – maintains that aesthetics ultimately drives us to consider the ethical as well: how are we to live in this world? What

[108] Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 217.
[109] Taylor, *Secular Age*, 358.
[110] Schaub, 251.
[111] Her non-fiction account of nuclear pollution on the Irish Sea, 1989's *Mother Country*, is much more explicit in its connection of nature and ethical responsibility.

promises greatest fulfillment? Beauty is what will save and complete us. This can be found outside us, in nature, or in the grandeur of the cosmos. Art's role is to make beauty visible (or audible, or otherwise intelligible). This happens through creative *poiesis*, by employing language *sacramentally*, i.e., as signaling beauty and mysteries that lie beyond the words themselves.

The Limits of Language. In her 2012 essay "Imagination and Community" Robinson argues that in failing to describe the mysterious, human language nevertheless succeeds: "demonstrations of 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."[112] Robinson's own hope in fiction is to create space for the ineffable:

> I continually attempt to make inroads on the vast terrain of what cannot be said—or said by me, at least. …That is to say, the unnamed is overwhelmingly present and real for me. And this is truer because the moment it stops being a standard for what I do say is the moment my language goes slack and my imagination disengages itself.[113]

Like Ruth's fascination with the opaque dark lake in Fingerbone, Robinson is drawn *beyond* the phenomenal world because of her desire to understand what lies beyond our grasp: "We live on a little island of the articulable, which we tend to mistake for reality itself. We can and do make small and tedious lives as we sail through the cosmos on our uncannily lovely little planet, and this is surely remarkable. But we do so much else besides. For example, we make language."[114] The language we use to account for the divine – be it subtle or explicit – is at once insufficient and all one has for the task. T.S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton" conveys that "words strain,/Crack and sometimes break, under the burden" of conveying a poetic vision that tests the limits of language. And in theology, Rahner writes that "every theological statement is only truly

[112] Robinson, "Imagination and Community" in *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, 19-20.
[113] Robinson, "Imagination and Community," 20.
[114] Robinson, "Imagination and Community," 21.

and authentically such at the point at which one willingly allows it to extend beyond his [or her] comprehension into the silent mystery of God."[115]

Language's fungibility and slipperiness can serve to show both the breadth and the limits of human *poiesis*. Describing the multivalence of words such as "form," Ashley Leighton laments that, "it is a licence for inexactness and an opportunity for double-think. These, however, are also the reasons for its appeal. Its scope for invention is large and free. Promiscuously adapted to a multitude of meanings, it moves easily between them, thus, by its very nature, signalling the 'moving' quality which makes literary language."[116] Words, like thoughts, move through us and do not have the permanence which we often ascribe to them. But words, as Robinson notes, are all we have for the task.

A Jamesian Open Space. The former editor of *Poetry*, Christian Wiman, was raised Baptist but fell away from his shaky belief at an early age. He came to a much different understanding of faith in his thirties, when his marriage and a rare blood cancer raised questions of meaning in life. In his masterful book *My Bright Abyss*, Wiman speaks of the power of Robinson's language in *Housekeeping* to diagnose the spiritual malaise he experienced prior to returning to belief: "This seemed to me, besides being prose of consummate clarity and beauty, to so perfectly articulate not only the sense of absence…permeating every spiritual aspect of my life, but also…to bestow upon it an energy and agency, a prayerful but indefinable promise."[117] He identifies her language as biblical but "used in a secular context;" "spiritually suggestive" yet "contingent upon the natural world." Rather than didactically prescribing Christian belief, *Housekeeping* "cleared the metaphysical air, so to speak; it gave us – would-be believers, haunted unbelievers, determined secularists whose very passion for the book undermined their

[115] Karl Rahner, "The Word and the Eucharist" *in Theological Investigations 4*, 282.
[116] Ashley Leighton, *On Form,* 243.
[117] Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, 125.

iron exteriors – something to build on."[118] This world of language that Robinson creates is not the content of faith, but a "Jamesian open space" wherein metaphysical questions have space to ruminate. Taylor explains that this space is not a set of beliefs which one entertains about the human condition, "rather it is the 'sensed context' in which we develop our beliefs. Like the gentle winds on an open plain, in James's open space, one "can actually feel some of the force of each opposing position. But so far apart are belief and unbelief, openness and closure here, that this feat is relatively rare."[119] Wiman's account of Robinson's power to address him in his buffered fragility is testament to the efficacy of subtler-language literature.

We are each of us products of the background picture of our thinking, and open spaces give room to consider an alternate construal of the raw data of experience. Recall Robinson's capacious insight that "there really are thousands of different ways of thinking about things…."[120] And indeed she has different methods for confronting the malaises of modernity. Her formidable essays explicitly challenge certain Taylorian "spins" that render the immanent frame closed. Her second novel, *Gilead*, came twenty-four years after *Housekeeping* debuted. In it Robinson went beyond mere *hints* of transcendence. It is to *Gilead* that we now turn our attention.

The Sacramental Imagination in *Gilead*

Gilead considers John Ames, an aging Congregationalist minister in 1956, who is writing his life story in a letter to his young, unnamed son. Like *Housekeeping*, the story is elegantly written, marked by impressionistic understatement. Ames' tableaux of the daily life of a minister and father reveal the beauty embedded *within* creation. The vignettes cycle through Ames' childhood recollections of his father and grandfather; encounters of unexpected grace in the

[118] Wiman, 125.
[119] Taylor, 549.
[120] Schaub, 243.

sacraments; reflections on philosophy and religion from his days of study and writing sermons; and arguments with his highly educated brother Edward and agnostic antagonist, Jack Boughton. Like *Housekeeping*, the reader feels that she is taking in an impressionistic painting of words; one can turn to any given page to get a feeling for the whole.

Gilead's sometimes-joyful, often-melancholic vignettes read like the thoughts of another preacher, the curé of Ambricourt in George Bernanos's *The Diary of a Country Priest*. Robinson specifically mentions the book in *Gilead*: "I felt a lot of sympathy for the fellow, but Boughton said, 'It was the drink…the Lord simply needed someone more suitable to fill that position.'"[121] Unlike Boughton, Ames is not fixated on explaining why God "gives" the priest stomach cancer; he is instead drawn to how the curé navigates the questions of faith, meaning, and what mark he will leave in his small corner of the world. Ames is fascinated by this complex curé, whose diary reveals authentic doubts and periodic despair of even the believer (recall Fr. Rodrigues from *Silence*). Ames recounts "reading that book all night by the radio till every station went off, and still reading when the daylight came."[122] We are given to understand that Ames, a fragilized believer like this priest, is fascinated by the doubts and despair of a fellow clergyman. Ames's epistolary writing – about a life as a preacher, with its successes and failures, doubts and disappointments, impending death, etc. – reads as an American homage to Bernanos's French country priest.

Unlike *Housekeeping, Gilead* depicts the inner life of a Christian preacher, both explicitly and favorably. But Robinson knows that she is writing to more than just her fellow believers. Hence Ames takes the multilayered phenomenal world as the starting point for considering the divine. He offers a modest and cognitively indeterminate phenomenology of the sacraments:

[121] Robinson, *Gilead,* 46.
[122] Ibid., 46.

"There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. *It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that.* I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time."[123] For Ames the power of blessing lies not in a supernatural *bestowal* of sacredness, which a non-believer might dismiss as vestiges of enchanted superstition. Rather Ames rhetorically gestures to some mysterious reality, a *res* to which his "subtler language" can only point. His – and our -- sacramental imaginations are fully engaged.

Robinson uses Ames to advance the relationship of humanity to nature begun in *Housekeeping*. The minister regularly describes the beauty of creation as pointing to God's hidden purpose. He shares a love of the elements of nature with Feuerbach, who recognized the symbolic power of water used for baptism. But Ames's appreciation of nature is not of the immanent-transcendentalist sort: "[Feuerbach] is about as good on the joyful aspects of religion as anybody, and he loves the world. Of course he thinks religion could stand out of the way and let joy exist pure and undisguised. That is his one error, and it is significant."[124] What is this error of Feuerbach? Ames seems to echo Robinson's apprehensions about a closed ontology, which inhibits a capacious (and thus more accurate) appraisal of the depth and beauty of reality. Ames expands on this appraisal of nature vis-à-vis Feuerbach:

> There was a young couple strolling along half a block ahead of me. The sun had come up brilliantly after a heavy rain, and the trees were glistening and very wet. On some impulse, plain exuberance, I suppose, the fellow jumped up and caught hold of a branch, and a storm of luminous water came pouring down on the two of them, and they laughed and took off running…it is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing and only secondarily for growing vegetables and doing the wash.[125]

[123] Robinson, *Gilead*, 23. Emphasis added.
[124] Robinson, *Gilead*, 24.
[125] Robinson, *Gilead*, 27-28.

Much more than *Housekeeping, Gilead* offers didactic codas to these artistic impressions of Ames encountering beauty in the physical world. A Christian minister like Ames *recognizes in nature* elements (e.g., water) that appear to be gifts given precisely to honor the divine. With fellow itinerant Gerard Manley Hopkins, Robinson reminds us that God's grandeur is not to be found primarily out in the cosmos, or in the mechanistic order of the universe; the world *here* is charged with God's grandeur and grace. After the vignette of water on the branch, Ames warns his son, "I wish I had paid more attention to it…This is an interesting planet. It deserves all the attention you can give it."

But in Ames's care, our gaze does not remain on this planet. Perhaps Robinson, twenty-four years older than when she wrote *Housekeeping*, senses greater urgency in writing *Gilead* for connecting the dots between the natural world and the deeper realities it discloses. After preaching at a service about the "gift of physical particularity and how blessing and sacrament are mediated through it,"[126] Ames finished without letting his son partake of the bread and wine. His wife Lila takes their son up to the bread and wine after the service: "'You ought to give him some of that.' You're too young, of course, but she was completely right. Body of Christ, broken for you. Blood of Christ, shed for you. Your solemn and beautiful child face lifted up to receive these mysteries at my hands."[127] Ames moves from the beautiful image of a father feeding his son, to recalling the Christian belief that it points to: "They are the most wonderful mystery, body and blood. It was an experience I might have missed. Now I only fear I will not have time enough to fully enjoy the thought of it."[128] At some point in one's life, questions of meaning are no longer merely academic exercises, but important considerations of one's destiny, for believer and non-believer alike.

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[126] Robinson, *Gilead*, 69.
[127] Ibid., 69-70.
[128] *Gilead*, 70.

Robinson employs such vignettes – where even the *religious* leader is slow to see the sacred embedded in ordinary bread and wine – as a challenge to the dichotomy of transcendence *versus* immanence. In her essay "Psalm 8" she writes, "I have spent my life watching not to see beyond the world," she writes, but, "merely to see, great mystery, what is plainly before my eyes. I think the concept of transcendence is based on a misreading of creation. With all due respect to heaven, the scene of miracle is here, among us."[129] Robinson makes a case that greater theological weight be given to the inklings of religious experience that one has in the concrete. Later in *Gilead*, Ames warns of two insidious notions of Christianity in the modern world. The first is that religion and religious experience are illusions (Feuerbach and Freud, et al.). The other insidious notion, he writes, "is that religion itself is real, but *your* belief that *you* participate in it is an illusion. I think the second of these is more insidious, because it is religious experience above all that authenticates religion for the purposes of the individual believer."[130] Ames's appeal to authenticity – *trust your own experience and interior inklings* – is an invitation to reconsider one's stance towards belief in the Jamesian open space that *Gilead* opens up. With her occasional excurses on philosophy and theology, though, Robinson is more explicit about calling out the "spin" one finds in the background of one's "picture."

Literary Analogy in Theology. As noted earlier, Robinson trusts in analogy as the best means of conveying theological insights in literature. She is careful to ground her metaphysics in terms familiar to the physical, sensory world. Ames tries to account for eternal life in familiar images:

> I feel sometimes as if I were a child who opens its eyes on the world once and sees amazing things it will never know any names for and then has to close its eyes again. I know this is all mere apparition compared to what awaits us, but it is only lovelier for that. There is a human beauty in it. And I can't believe that, when we have all been changed and put on incorruptibility, we will forget our

[129] Robinson, "Psalm 8" in *Death of Adam,* 243.
[130] Robinson, *Gilead*, 145. Emphasis original.

> fantastic condition of mortality and impermanence, the great bright dream of procreating and perishing that meant the whole world to us.[131]

In Robinson's analogical conception of the afterlife, eternity retells the story of this world as the "epic of the universe": "In eternity this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets. Because I don't imagine any reality putting this one in the shade entirely, and I think piety forbids me to try."[132]

Robinson argues that analogy is "the essential form of thinking" -- the basis of human cognition -- because it "integrates the *problems of experience* and the *ordering* of experience." Here she employs analogy to show the power of art to expand and soften our closed ontological commitments -- to change how we conceive of our background "picture." Aquinas' *analogia entis* attempts to convey how all creatures exist vis-à-vis how *God* exists. In like fashion, Marilynne Robinson offers a *literary analogy* for theologically imagining how our visible finite reality might relate to whatever lies beyond the visible world. Our Taylorian "closed world system" – which many take to be a self-sufficient and closed to transcendence – may well be but an epic tale sung in the streets of eternity. If that is the case, then physical reality (as we experience it here and now) becomes, analogically, the meaning-laden "literature" of the transcendent reality.

Navigating Immanence and Transcendence and the Analogical Imagination

John Ames' grandfather and father designate the extremes to be avoided in pursuing a Christian humanism. Ames describes his grandfather, a preacher, as having a purely spiritual encounter with God, with no reference to grace at work in the created world. Having lost an eye in the civil war, Ames' grandfather viewed religious commitment in stark terms: "He lacked

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[131] Robinson, *Gilead*, 65-66.

[132] Robinson, *Gilead*, 66. Robinson seems keen to recast her Calvinism as more "this-world"-friendly than the writings of John Calvin would prescribe, but that is a topic for a different essay.

patience for anything but the plainest interpretations of the starkest commandments."[133] But Ames makes clear that his half-blindness was not merely physical, but had theological consequences: "Normally speaking, it seems to me, a gaze, even a stare, is diffused a little when there are two eyes involved. He could make me feel as though he had poked me with a stick, just by looking at me."[134] His monocular approach left him keenly aware of the transcendent. Afire with the old certainties of faith, Ames' grandfather lived life "at a dead run," without much time for savoring creation around him. "I believe that the old man did indeed have far too narrow an idea of what a vision might be. He may, so to speak, have been too dazzled by the great light of his experience to realize that an impressive sun shines on us all. Perhaps that is the one thing I wish to tell you."[135] We find echoes of Lynch's description of the univocal imagination, which flattens lived differences.

The other extreme is Ames' preacher father, whose overly rational reading of his experiences wore down his transcendent faith commitment. When Ames' father takes young Ames to the bare gravesite of his grandfather in Kansas, young Ames marvels at the beauty around him: "I saw…a full moon rising just as the sun was going down. Each of them was standing on its edge, with the most wonderful light between them. It seemed as if you could touch it, as if there were palpable currents of light passing back and forth, or as if there were great taut skeins of light suspended between them."[136] Yet Ames' father dispels any wisp of grace at work:

> "You know, everybody in Kansas saw the same thing we saw." At the time (remember I was twelve) I took him to mean the entire state was a witness to our miracle. I thought that whole state could vouch for the particular blessing my father had brought down by praying there at his father's grave, or the glory that my grandfather had somehow emanated out of his parched repose. Later I

[133] Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, 31.
[134] Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, 31.
[135] Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, 91.
[136] Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, 14.

> realized my father would have meant that the sun and moon aligned themselves as they did with no special reference to the two of us.[137]

Ames' father is likewise half blind, but with the other eye closed to the layers of transcendent explanation. Where a reductive scientism would give a non-purposive, physical account of the gravesite scene, Robinson is suggesting that a *layered explanation* need not compete with a scientific explanation. Robinson's sacramental imagination draws on material signs, such as a sun and moon equipoised on the horizon. The young Ames imagined this "great taut skein of light" to be a sacred sign, pointing to a divine reality that was at once beyond the signs, and mysteriously, irreducibly borne by them. Here, as elsewhere in *Gilead*, we see the Augustinian sacramental imagination at work.

Robinson, through the eyes of Ames, engages Samuel Taylor Coleridge's faculty of the imagination. We recall that Coleridge conceives of the imagination as a creative power of the mind, rather than merely a collector and sorter of memories. John Spencer Hill explains that "for Coleridge as for Wordsworth, perception is a bilateral rather than a unilateral activity; sense experience is a stimulus that evokes a response and involves (to borrow a phrase from Wordsworth) 'a balance, an ennobling interchange of action from within and from without.'"[138] For Coleridge, the product of an act of perception is the commingling of perceiving subject and perceived object. In other words, the net product of this perceiving act of imagination is not reducible to the subject (perceiver) nor his object (a perceived thing), but *a union of the two*. Iser's insight of convergence of reader and text comes to mind, as well. The imagination, for Coleridge, "functions as a fusing, synthesizing power – an *esemplastic* power whose operation generates a new reality by shaping parts into wholes, by reconciling opposites and drawing unity

[137] Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, 48.
[138] John Spencer Hill, *Imagination in Coleridge*, 3.

from diversity."[139] Imagination, then, is not merely the unearthing and recombining of sense impressions in the memory. Rather, for Coleridge imagination is a "vital and organic power common to all men" which permits the mind to "penetrate beneath the transitory surface of the material world, that is, to see into the life of things and experience the intimate relationship between the perceiving mind and the objects of contemplation."[140]

A central dialectical tension of *Gilead*, then, is Ames' attempt to navigate a path that avoids the poles of detached, univocal transcendence or flattened, equivocal immanence. Robinson employs Ames' grandfather, father and Ames himself as three modes of considering how the reader might live out her faith in the modern cosmic imaginary, which tends to see reality as a closed ontology. An opposing criticism is issued to people of faith, who would springboard from the concrete to the transcendental without taking seriously the embodied finitude(s) of creation. Here, then, we find resonances with Lynch's schema of engaging the finite to gain insight. Ames challenges his son (and Robinson her readers) to probe the "false bottom" of this material world, considering how the physical universe's operations resonate with the human subject's intuitions of a deeper force – grace – at work. With the power of a boy's imagination, something as mundane as a sun setting and moon rising on the horizon challenges readers to consider the vibrancy – or deficiency – of their own imagination. Dorothy Emmet argues that Coleridge's Romantic epistemology asserts that "we should be able not only to look, but to love as we look."[141] If the Christian claim that God is love is true, then choosing to consider the concrete world with loving attention can transform any human inquiry – be it in philosophy, science, poetry, or literature – into a theological one.

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[139] John Spencer Hill, *Imagination in Coleridge*, 3.
[140] John Spencer Hill, *Imagination in Coleridge*, 3.
[141] John Spencer Hill, *Imagination in Coleridge*, 41.

Chapter IV: Questions and Conclusion

Let us here anticipate a few questions and critiques, and offer some final thoughts – if not final answers – to our inquiry.

Critiques and Questions

Q1. *Why must we distinguish between "light reading" and "heavy" or "great" literature?*

We need not think of light reading as childish or low brow, and great literature as adult and high brow. As we noted earlier, such distinctions are Iser's; they are illustrative only insofar as they are not taken to be judgments on the quality of a text – or on the moral seriousness of the reader herself! Light reading, like mindless television or satire, intends to provide pleasure and entertainment. This is a valuable aspect of leisure, especially in societies like the United States that value long work weeks and taking work home. Body, mind, and spirit need to rest to be restored, and light reading offers this. "Great literature," ups the ante by adding a layer of engagement. Not only are we interested in pleasure, but in answering a question: "if I engage fully, can this book shape how I think about my life?" If the answer is *yes* (or even *sorta maybe*), then it is what we consider great. Such literature engages the imagination not merely for *pleasure*, but for an interpretive response when we encounter such a text.

Q2*. What is gained by calling someone a "great religious writer," as opposed to just a "great writer"?*

The Englishman Julian Barnes begins *Nothing to Be Frightened of* with the bittersweet observation, "I don't believe in God, but I miss Him." Can someone who has drifted from — or formerly renounced — belief be considered a "religious writer?" Religious-minded readers may object to lumping non-religious poetry or fiction in under the title religious literature. Debates continue about whether the likes of Emily Dickinson, for example, qualify as a Christian poet. Or

whether "recovering Catholics" such as Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy, or Robert Stone are to be considered religious.

Does treating religious themes explicitly make literature religious? And conversely, does avoiding explicitly religious language render them non-religious? Our discussion has maintained that a sacramental imagination sniffs out grace embedded in the concrete details of the world of the text. Hence for fiction to be classified "religious" it need not talk only of saints and relics, God or Scripture. But it does, as Lakeland notes, "have to open out into a world in which the claim of faith is admissible."[142]

Charles Taylor asks in *A Secular Age,* What is religion? If the term is understood as the great historic faiths, or a thematized belief in supernatural beings, then "religion" seems to have declined in the modern imaginary. "But if you include a wide range of spiritual and semi-spiritual beliefs; or if you cast your net even wider and think of someone's religion as the *shape of their ultimate concern*, then indeed, one can make a case that religion is as present as ever."[143] Great literature, as we have discussed it, deals much with the ultimate concerns, thematized or not, of their authors. Even the "immanent frame" that Taylor speaks of — wherein one understands the world as entirely natural without need of a supernatural penumbra, presumes (believes in?) a basic intelligibility of characters and plot, forces of good and evil, etc. McCarthy's *The Road* reads like an extended Christian parable, where the absence of God and grace are felt acutely. The eschatological imagery is, in form if not content, fed by the Catholic imagination of his upbringing. To play against the haunts of faith is to acknowledge the staying power of a religious framework, even after it is found wanting.

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[142] Paul Lakeland, *Wounded Angel,* 139.
[143] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 427.

And what of poets like Seamus Heaney, who considered Irish Catholicism a relic of the past? Rowan Williams thinks highly of his writing, such that "the last thing I'd call Seamus Heaney…is an agnostic, in the sense of somebody who floats uncertainly around; he has a real commitment to the language and all that it means. Very often we tie down the notion of belief to mean having a quick answer to what you think is true out there, rather than, how do you inhabit the world you're in, the speech you speak, and the vision you see."[144] Surely Heaney's poetry dabbles and plays around with intelligible elements of a Catholic sacramental world, with food and kinship, the sacred and the ordinary, interwoven. In "Clearances," his mind wanders to memories of peeling potatoes with his mother, instead of crying or praying during her last rites:

> *When all the others were away at Mass*
> *I was all hers as we peeled potatoes.*
> *They broke the silence, let fall one by one*
> *Like solder weeping off the soldering iron:*
> *Cold comforts set between us, things to share*
> *Gleaming in a bucket of clean water.*
> *And again let fall. Little pleasant splashes*
> *From each other's work would bring us to our senses.*
> *So while the parish priest at her bedside*
> *Went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying*
> *And some were responding and some crying*
> *I remembered her head bent towards my head,*
> *Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives -*
> *Never closer the whole rest of our lives.*

A spontaneous memory of kinship with her supplants the traditional prayers of his childhood faith, and yet he weaves the two together imaginatively, even as he pulls away from the latter to embrace the former. We are given to understand that a most natural, unremarkable routine – peeling potatoes with one's mother – can bear the mark of love that transcends even death.

Taylor notes that the distinction between the natural and supernatural arose not to protect a secular natural world from the supernatural, but to safeguard a terrain wherein God, not bound by the laws of nature, could remain sovereign. What has developed since is the disenchanted

[144] John F. Deane, "A Conversation with Rowan Williams."

realm of "nature" sovereign from recourse to a fuzzy-edged realm of capricious deities and sprites. Put differently, a religious epistemological distinction has been turned on itself, to foreclose a metaphysics that allows "God" to remain other. Robinson remains "not terribly persuaded by the word *supernatural*: I don't like the idea of the world as an encapsulated reality with intrusions made upon it selectively. The reality that we experience is part of the whole fabric of reality. To pretend that the universe is somewhere else doing something is really not true. We're right in the middle of it. Utterly dependent on it, utterly defined by it."[145] Consistent with Rahner's assessment of embedded grace, distinctions of "natural vs. supernatural" may have grown unhelpful. If Rahner is correct, then searches for grace apart from engaging the finite may yield only staid abstractions. Lynch warns that we not move too quickly from the many to the One, but let the engagement with the finite reveal insights on its own. Like, for example, the devotion stirred by unbidden memories of a mother's cooking.

Hence attempts to delineate what constitutes "religious literature" may be the wrong question for our inquiry. Robinson finds that great literature does not neatly fit into such binaries: "I don't like categories like religious and not religious. As soon as religion draws a line around itself it becomes falsified. It seems to me that anything that is written compassionately and perceptively probably satisfies every definition of religious, whether a writer intends it to be religious or not."[146] This admits of Robinson's grace-infused wordscapes as much as of O'Connor's bleak short stories with outsize characters. O'Connor prided herself on the gritty realism of her characters, many of whom she would call 'grotesque.' The religious writer can employ extreme images and characters, she reasoned, in order to draw the reader to see "a point

[145] Sarah Fay, "Marilynne Robinson, The Art of Fiction No. 198" interview in *Paris Review* Issue 186.
[146] Ibid.

not visible to the naked eye, but believed in by [the writer] firmly, just as real to [the writer], really, as the one that everybody sees."[147]

So efforts to list writers as religious or not, Christian or not, is missing a more fundamental question: *Does the convergence of subject and text admit interpretations of deeper meaning?* Will the person of faith find themes and descriptions that admit of layers of meaning, or does the text reveal a univocal, closed ontology? Do its words probe and expose a "false bottom" to experience, giving way to analogical, imaginative depth depth? A devotional book on the life of a saint may be beautiful and nourishing of one's faith, without fully engaging the reader's imagination. But to draw a neat line around only devotional texts — to exclude something human from the bounds of inquiry because it does not use coded religious language — is to foreclose the possibility of enter-taining a reader. To presume to have the last word on language of God is to have failed: *si comprehendis, non est Deus.*

Here again, Iser's distinction between light reading and great literature is instructive: does a text expect an attitudinal response to the text's explicitly univocal meaning, or does it invite interpretive responses to analogical depth? As the Christian imagination is interested in mining concrete reality to discover God's grace at work, great literature by definition is open to religious interpretation.

Q3. *What are the limitations of the relationship between the* actus legentis *and* actus credentis?

Clearly, any analogy includes unity and difference, and the dissimilarities are as important as the similarities. When one makes an empathic act of engaging a text as reader, she can enter the "world of the text" and be enter-tained by the text, as we have understood it. But the act of faith is different from the temporary suspension between an individual and a literary

[147] Flannery O'Connor, quoted in *A Secular Age,* 732.

fiction and the characters therein. We may sympathize with Madame Bovary or John Ames; but we do not entrust our lives to them. We enjoy *Hamlet*, but we do not worship him. An act of faith entails a total entrusting of self: the understanding, memory, will, and hope of salvation. Self-help books aside—which Iser would consider "informational prose" anyway – literature does not presume to offer a path to eternal happiness, or even a mundane "fullness." Whatever awaits us the Christian at the final reckoning will likely be different in kind and scale from the judgments a writer expects to face from her critics. Lakeland notes that "in religion, we both believe in and believe the voice of the holy. We may believe in fiction, in its power to address and challenge us, but we believe it only provisionally, since it is a fabrication (if not a lie). Religious faith, however, cannot be possessed provisionally."[148] In faith, we aspire to move from being *enter-tained* ("held between") two disparate worlds – mine and God's – in favor of being *intra-tained*, i.e., having our world held within the life of God.

Q4. *What about the dangers of the imagination? What insures that it tracks with reality, and is not subject to delusion?*

Richard Kearney notes that imagination is what opens the possibility of sin, since it is what allowed Adam and Eve to divert from God's original plan for them. Indeed, the imagination can, in tandem with one's free will, yield sinful outcomes. But a few distinctions are helpful. To begin with, we might refer back to Coleridge's helpful distinction between imagination and fancy; fancy is a re-ordering of concrete details from memory to formulate an unreality, whereas the imagination is geared towards seeing the present and future as yielding new insights. Hence Adam and Eve engage in unreal fantasy, introduced by a cunning snake. They fancy that they can be like God, knowing all that is good and evil. But this is precisely the problem of univocity: presuming that we know *just as* God knows; that we love *just as* God

[148] Lakeland, *Wounded Angel*, 209.

loves. Our knowing, loving, and creativity -- like our being itself -- is analogic to, and dependent upon, the kowing, loving, and creating of God. George MacDonald is right that our creative imagination is made in the image of God's creative imagination, and we align ourselves with God's creative imagination insofar as we seek the good. But *seeking* the good is not tantamount to *knowing* the good; this latter requires a discernment of spirits. To the extent that our imagination increases faith, hope, and love, it can be said to be reliably of God; to the extent that it discourages us, narrows our vision, or causes us to hatred and despair, it is not engaging in God's "dream" for the world. The tradition of Ignatian discernment, based on the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola, goes into considerable depth explaining the movements and countermovements of the good spirit. It is no small thing that Ignatius refers to the evil spirit as "the Enemy of Human Nature," who feeds the believer with all manner of lies that leave him or her doubtful, despairing, and stouthearted. The evil spirit is, in a word, master of the *fanciful,* whereas the consolations of God employ and expand the human imagination to desire the will of God.

If Jesus of Nazareth teaches us anything about how to encounter God, it is to approach God with childlike trust and wonder. Jesus was not afraid to get away from the crowds to pray, so that he could be attentive to the will of God the Father. Both the acts of faith and reading require sustained attention and, often enough, solitude, wherein one can encounter the other in truth. Even the non-religious prize "mindfulness," and in our technology-suffused age, both attention and mindfulness have proven elusive. Lakeland writes, the "simplification of life is a necessary precondition for the cultivation [of mindfulness]…our culture is not mindful. Faith should make us mindful. Good literature encourages mindfulness."[149] Insofar as both reading and a life of faith aim at uncovering reality beyond mere words, they would do well to starve the

[149] Lakeland, *Wounded Angel*, 128.

mind of distractions to let the imagination have room to breath. Lakeland concludes that even "routine religion is anything but mindful, and most people these days don't read the kind of books that promote mindfulness."[150] Tweets and think pieces can provide interesting information, but such prose does not necessarily stimulate the Christian imagination, let alone stir one to empathy for those who look and believe differently. Christian love and hope are grounded in the empathic imagination – imagining reality in a new way, moving into the future, taking full account of the challenges and limitations of the present. Without such love and hope, doctrinal religion is reduced to univocal propositions – grounds for division and flattened reality, rather than an encounter with the living God and the manifold differences of the human family.

MacDonald also highlights that we do not engage the imagination in isolation, but have others who can verify and help discern between fancies and reliable thoughts. A good teacher, he writes, "will point out to [his student] the essential difference between reverie and thought; between dreaming and imagining. He will teach him not to mistake fancy, either in himself or in others for imagination, and to beware of hunting after resemblances that carry with them no interpretation." Just as any private revelations are weighed and verified in a community of faith, so too the imagination is trained and directed within the literary communities that we discussed in chapter two.

Some Final Thoughts

The sense that there is more to reality than meets the eye recurs across cultures, space, and time, from the beginning of recorded human history to the most current science-fiction in films. Robinson argues that "extraordinary efforts have to be made to articulate feelings that are

[150] Lakeland, *Wounded Angel*, 128.

very deep and also very general. Those are the things that become the literatures of cultures."[151] The *homo faber* that Arendt et al. speak of spends considerable time building artifices of culture to establish dominion over nature. What if, instead, the work she performed was trying to re-harmonize the human person with the reality of the cosmos (*homo cosmologicus*)? And through this *poiesis*, she may come closer to understanding meaning embedded in a fuller picture of reality? Wiman, the Christian poet and writer himself, reasons that "It is no blasphemy to say that every man creates the God creating him. We are facets of a work whose finished form we cannot imagine, though our imaginations, aided by grace, are the means—or at least one means—of its completion."[152]

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Artistic creation, Taylor asserts, was esteemed as the highest human activity during the Romantic period. To the outsider, *Housekeeping* seems to be an aesthetic paean to immanent transcendentalism, given the unflattering view of church folk and popular piety in the text. But in the secularity$_3$ that typifies our time, Taylor notes that "things are not so simple. God is not excluded. Nothing has ruled out an understanding of beauty as reflecting God's work in creating and redeeming the world."[153] Pre-modern art was taken up with mimesis – attempting to reproduce faithfully reality as it was observed or held in faith. But the Romantic period introduced "subtler language," which holds power to move the reader/hearer/viewer without presuming to make ontic claims on her. The language of art creates a middle realm, "a free and neutral space, between religious commitment and materialism." And so secular Jewish aesthetes can stand to sing "Hallelujah!" for Handel's *Messiah* performed at the Boston Symphony Hall.

[151] Schaub, "An Interview with Marilynne Robinson," 237.
[152] Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, 106.
[153] Taylor, 359.

And atheists can visit Chartres cathedral and appreciate without assenting to the metaphysical commitments of medieval French Catholicism.

And Marilynne Robinson can write her fiction for theists and non-believers, lapsed Baptists and agnostic academics, ecologists and feminists alike, providing a numinous space wherein theism – even in immanent frames marked by closure – can become a viable option. If the Christian God grants humanity the free will of assent, perhaps writers who claim to speak of familiarity with this God should replicate that cognitive "open space," wherein mystery can be freely encountered, or freely rejected. Marilynne Robinson's literature holds out hope that once we encounter the enfeebled limits of our closed world, Mystery draws us out of ourselves and irresistibly unto itself: "Touch a limit of your understanding," Robinson writes in an essay, "and it falls away, to reveal mystery upon mystery. The one great lesson we can take from the study of any civilization is the appropriateness of reverence, and of awe."[154]

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We have covered much ground here; we began with considering the importance of literature and storytelling in the Bible, using the incarnate Word as a model for employing words. In the Christian development of sacraments, we took from Augustine the language of signs (*signa)* that point beyond themselves to a reality (*res*). We considered how these concrete signs precisely point to God in our discussion of nature and grace, especially as it has been developed in 20th century Catholic theologians who took seriously the personalist turn to the subject. Vatican II challenged the Church to sniff out signs of God's grace abiding in all fully human enterprises; no wonder, then, that so many Catholic writers stepped forward to take the *via litteraria* in discussing nature and grace, sin and redemption, etc.

[154] Robinson, "Decline" in *The Givenness of Things*, 119

Where a Romantic aestheticism and a Christian imagination part ways is on their visions of reality. Nietzsche argued that "only as an aesthetic phenomenon is the world and existence eternally justified."[155] Beauty is what saves us from the wretchedness of existence, and reality is tolerable to the extent that it can be rescued by aesthetics. Nietzsche's Apollo provides pleasant visible distractions from the meaningless suffering of Dionysian formlessness; Apollo is all we have to stave off existential dread. To that extent, the aesthete is not interested in truth-telling, but in soul-soothing, an analgesic to blunt existential dread. But in the Christian imagination, existence in the world begs the question, "why *this* instead of nothing?" For the Christian, the answer to existential questions is not meaninglessness, but God, who for Rahner is that *fundamental horizon* upon which we entertain all our existential questions. For the Christian imagination, God's abiding presence *within* creation — God's grace — recognizes all creation as laden with meaning. For the Christian, Nietzsche's principle is reversed. *Because* God has created and entered the world in Christ, our aesthetic aspirations are directed towards that deeper reality which sustains creation, which the Christian calls God.

Hence literature, even secular literature, can be truth-telling. A great play or novel, in creating a world of the text, represents characters who embody and reveal complex motives and actions of themselves and others. The sustained appeal of such fiction reveals that embedded in each of us lies a desire to mine life for meaning and unearth truth. The insights that characters (and readers) come to are mediated nowhere but through the concrete details and histories of the texts. The entire field of literature reveals to us that small, concrete details of a story *matter* because they *reveal* the world of the text as they constitute it.

Ricoeur held that the goal of interpretation is to help make sense of our embodied existence. Interpretation is not done in isolation, but, as we have argued, in concentric

[155] Friedrich Nietzsche, Birth of Tragedy, 5.

communities of inspiration, reception, and critique. Our interpretations are mediated and balanced by others' in a community that receives a shared text; so too with a community of faith. The writer makes acts in faith — that she will be understood, that her attempt at depicting reality will resonate with others', and that her work will be esteemed as veridical; i.e., reflective of truths common to human experience.

And the reader, when he encounters characters and cosmic imaginaries wholly different from his own, steps into a Jamesian open space to feel the crosswinds of differing worldviews embedded in the text. While light reading aims at mere entertainment and an attitude of satisfaction, great literature invites interpretations (possibly competing) of the characters and events in the text. The attention required to step out from one's own worldview to 'try on' another one. To be "enter-tained" by a challenging text's characters — lovable or not — requires an empathic self-displacement of the reader. Interpreting this alternative cosmic imaginary allows for what Ricoeur calls *appropriation* — making the text one's own — and broadening one's understanding of reality. No longer is Father Rodrigues an unintelligible alien character, but someone who is known through encounter in the text. Great literature can broaden one's self-consciousness to accommodate an other's concern and perspective, all from the safety and quiet of a reading chair. By analogy, when prospective believers engage in questions of God and ultimate meaning, they must suspend disbelief to inhabit the worldview of another. To that end, we have argued that a sacramental imagination —taking seriously visible signs of invisible realities — harnesses words, images, and rituals that point beyond themselves to a *res*. Great literature cultivates (a) sustained attention and (b) empathic self-displacement, skills that would go a long way to improving how people relate to one another and to God.

We take from Lonergan and Lynch that graces and insights are not wholly adventitious; they are mediated through reflection on concrete sense experiences. Hence the small details of life as we experience it matter. Rahner's insight that the revelation of God's abiding presence, which we take to be grace, is present to humanity always, if we can sustain our attention to recognize it in day-to-day life. Writers such as Marilynne Robinson embody this Christian, sacramental imagination. She employs "subtler language" that does not eliminate alternative interpretations of her fiction — indeed, her fanbase extends beyonds the comfortable confines of American Calvinists. Robinson trusts her words and images to point beyond themselves to a depth of meaning; her very act of writing challenges the reader to pay attention to the Christ playing in ten thousand places.

Ricoeur believed that the poetic imagination should lead to the ethical imagination; Western culture, he maintains, is not deficient in moral argument, but in a moral imagination. Insofar as great literature challenges its readers to self-displaced empathy for characters and situations, it opens readers to considering the joys and hopes, fears and anguishes of the other. This is consistent with Lonergan's movement from reflection on experience to reflection on the Good — to a moral conversion, wherein one can understand the moral predicaments of someone different from oneself.

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