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Models of Sacrifice and the Art of Christian Tragedy

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Abstract

This thesis is a literary investigation of sacrifice in works of tragic literature and the Bible. In Part I, this thesis critiques René Girard's scapegoating model of sacrifice and demonstrates the interpretive limitations that his theory of sacrifice imposes upon works of tragic literature and the Bible. In the first chapter, this thesis examines Euripides' play *The Bacchae*. Contrary to Girard's assessment of works of classical Greek tragedy as texts that come to the defense of the tragic victim, I argue that this play participates in an elaborate re-mystification of scapegoating. Next, I conduct a tragic reading of the first twelve chapters of Exodus—focusing specifically on the birth of Moses and the story of the Passover. Contrary to a Girardian reading which simplifies the conflicts in Exodus to an irreducible opposition between Egypt and Israel, a tragic reading of the biblical narrative reveals a much more complex relationship between these groups. Using Christopher Fry's play *The Firstborn* as a literary framework for investigating the biblical narrative, I read Moses as a tragic figure who struggles to come to grips with his own identity as a man raised by Egyptians and yet born an Israelite. Most importantly, Fry's play dramatically highlights the sacrificial costs of the Israelites' deliverance in Exodus—namely the infanticidal genocide of the firstborn of Egypt. In Part II of this study, I describe an alternative to Girard's model of sacrifice which appears in the Gospel of Mark as well as in the work of Flannery O'Connor. In my reading of the Gospel of Mark as a work of Christian tragedy, I argue that at the Last Supper Jesus poetically improvises a model of eucharistic sacrifice that radically reconfigures the relationship between humans and the divine. According to this eucharistic model of sacrifice, the sacred is configured within the very materials of artistic representation. Consequently, the Jesus of Mark's Gospel not only transfigures the opposition between oppressors and the oppressed but most importantly the opposition between the sacred and the profane. This study concludes with an investigation of the Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor. Through a close reading of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and *Wise Blood*, I argue that O'Connor's work employs a model of eucharistic sacrifice to bring about a moment of transfiguration that defies interpretive closure. Finally, this thesis argues that by exploring this eucharistic model of sacrifice it may be possible to conceive of new approaches to imagining the relationship between readers, texts and the sacred.

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<i>The Habit of Being</i> (HB)	

Introduction

This thesis is a literary investigation of sacrifice in works of tragic literature and the Bible. The purpose of this investigation is not to resolve definitively the numerous debates concerning the proper form of tragedy and its relevance for contemporary approaches to literature. Instead, tragedy will serve as a framework for interpreting a range of literary portrayals of sacrifice. The idea of sacrifice has been the subject of much scholarly debate. And like tragedy, debates over the meaning and importance of sacrifice continue among theologians, literary critics, philosophers and scholars from numerous other disciplines. In this study, I will explore the ways that sacrifice functions as a literary device in works of tragic literature and the Bible. The preeminent scholar of sacrifice today is René Girard. Since the publication of *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), Girard's theory of sacrifice has had a profound influence on contemporary literary and biblical scholarship and has provoked widespread debate among scholars of various academic disciplines.¹ Girard's interpretation of sacrifice is based upon a theory of mimetic rivalry and scapegoating which he develops in order to explain how violent conflicts emerge in human society as well as how they are resolved. Although his interests are primarily anthropological and sociological, Girard's theory of sacrifice originated from a literary theory of mimetic desire which he developed in his book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961). In his later anthropological studies, he continues to focus on literary portrayals of sacrifice and mimetic rivalry in works of classical Greek tragedy and the Bible. Girard's work serves as both an inspiration for this study as well as a point of departure. Despite the unique clarity and coherence of his theory of sacrifice, I will suggest here that Girard's sociological critique of sacrificial violence simplifies literary conflicts to the irreducible

¹Girard's work on sacrifice has generated a great deal of scholarly debate in recent years. On the one hand, scholars in the field of religious studies have contended with his theory of sacrifice as violence. In his book *Sacrifice Imagined*, Douglas Hedley argues that the notion of sacrifice remains highly relevant to contemporary political and ecological debates. Hedley argues for an interpretation of sacrifice as a renunciation of the will (*Sacrifice Imagined: Violence, Atonement and the Sacred* [London: T&T Clark International, 2011]). On the other hand, as an advocate of Girard's critique of sacrificial violence, in *Saved from Sacrifice*, theologian S. Mark Heim has expanded upon Girard's theory of sacrifice in order to develop a theology of atonement that is centered around Jesus' revelation of sacrificial violence upon the cross (*Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006]). This study will provide a literary critique of Girard's theory of scapegoating sacrifice and focus particularly on the interpretive limitations it imposes upon works of tragic literature and the Bible. In the second part of this thesis, I will suggest an alternative to Girard's scapegoating model of sacrifice, and in this way, my study follows a line of argument similar to the work of Hedley and McClymond. The main difference being that these scholars approach sacrifice from the perspective of theology and religious studies whereas I will approach the subject mainly from a literary perspective.

opposition between victims and their oppressors; consequently, his critique of violence enforces a form of interpretive closure upon works of tragic literature and the Bible which significantly diminishes their narrative complexity. In this thesis, I will describe an alternative to Girard's scapegoating model of sacrifice that resists simplifying literary conflicts to an irreducible opposition between oppressors and the oppressed. This model of sacrifice, which I have termed eucharistic sacrifice, provides an approach to interpreting literary conflicts that resists interpretive closure.

The thesis begins with a critique of Girard's theory of sacrifice in order to demonstrate the interpretive limitations that his model of scapegoating imposes upon works of tragic literature and the Bible. In Part I of this thesis, I will discuss the limitations of Girard's approach to sacrifice through a close reading of Euripides' *The Bacchae*, and the story of the Passover in Exodus chapters 1-12. Girard regards works of classical Greek tragedy as well as the stories of the Old and New Testaments as texts which come to the defence of their tragic victims in an effort to demystify the practice of scapegoating. However, I will demonstrate that in order to fulfil its religious and civic function in Greek society and to bring about a dramatically ironic and cathartic ending, *The Bacchae* offers a highly sophisticated mystification of the practice of scapegoating. In the next chapter, I critique Girard's approach to interpreting the Bible, by reading the story of the Passover in Exodus as a form of tragic literature. I will draw upon Christopher Fry's retelling of the story of the Passover in his play *The Firstborn*. In *The Firstborn*, Moses is portrayed as a tragic figure who struggles with his own ambiguous identity—he is an Israelite raised by the daughter of the Pharaoh, and the deliverance of his people from Egypt is predicated upon the death of his adopted cousin Ramses—the firstborn son of the Pharaoh. In contrast to a Girardian reading of the Passover, which simplifies the story to an irreducible opposition between oppressors and the oppressed, Fry's retelling reveals the sacrificial costs of the Israelites' deliverance.

In Part II of this thesis, I will discuss Girard's reading of the New Testament and particularly the Gospels. In contrast to Girard, I will suggest that the Gospel of Mark fails to offer any unambiguous rejection of sacrifice. However, crucially it does offer an alternative to his model of scapegoating sacrifice. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' eucharistic sacrifice transfigures the seemingly irreducible

opposition between the oppressed and the oppressor in the story. This disruption of the oppositions at stake in the story resists the sort of interpretive closure that Girard's theory of sacrifice enforces upon readings of the Gospels. Most importantly, through the eucharistic sacrifice of the Last Supper, Jesus introduces a new model of sacrifice which is on the one hand capable of addressing the problem of sacrificial violence elucidated by Girard, while on the other hand revealing the extent to which human existence remains tied to the experience of sacrifice. Through his participation in the sacrificial meal of the Last Supper, Jesus reconfigures what it means to participate in the divine and consequently the sacred by sharing in the sacrificial costs of human existence. Moreover, by representing this new mode of access to the divine in the form of symbolic and nonetheless real representation of his own body and blood, the Jesus of Mark's Gospel initiates a Christian literary tradition in which participation with the sacred may come through the very act of representation itself.

Therefore, in the final chapter of this thesis, I will discuss the work of the Catholic novelist Flannery O'Connor and examine the ways that a eucharistic model of sacrifice can be employed to interpret some of the enigmatic conflicts portrayed in her stories. The conflicts that take place in O'Connor's short story *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and her novel *Wise Blood* may be interpreted according to a eucharistic model of sacrifice. As a writer of Christian tragedy, human suffering is not merely a means to a cathartic ending for O'Connor but rather the opportunity for an experience of tragic compassion. This literary experience of tragic compassion is motivated by the recognition that the reader plays his or her own part in the suffering of the tragic figure. Contrary to a Girardian rejection of sacrifice, O'Connor's work demonstrates that sacrifice remains tied to the very act of reading and interpretation. Finally, this thesis argues that sacrifice like tragedy has the potential to be re-imagined and reconfigured according to new literary and perhaps religious forms. Moreover, literary portrayals of sacrifice may provide the opportunity for a religious experience of the divine. A reconsideration of sacrifice according to a eucharistic model may provide new possibilities for interpreting the seemingly irresolvable conflicts at stake in works of tragic literature and the Bible.

The texts examined in this thesis span the history of the Western literary tradition. I will approach all of these stories as different forms of tragic literature. Yet in this study, the terms ‘tragedy’ and ‘tragic’ are employed in a manner that is highly debateable from the perspective of literary critics. The term ‘tragedy’ will not be used to describe a distinct literary genre but instead to indicate a number of different types of narrative that contain portrayals of suffering that may be interpreted as sacrifices.² This statement alone may constitute for some a definition of tragedy. However, as the following discussion will demonstrate, such a description is highly debatable and thus merits further critical investigation. In the following discussion, my aim is not to provide a comprehensive overview of the many important discussions that have taken place in tragic theory over the past fifty years or more but rather to glean from these various debates an understanding of tragedy and the tragic that will function as a rationale for exploring the texts in this thesis as works of tragic literature.

Approaches to Tragedy

In the opening chapter of the *Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy* (2007), Jennifer Wallace states, “To write a textbook on tragedy is a contradictory process, since textbooks are, by nature, pedagogical and unambiguous while I believe that tragedy—both as theatrical form and aesthetic concept—is quite the opposite” (9). Although tragedy both as a concept and as an artistic form has proven difficult if not impossible to define, Wallace suggests that as an artistic form “it has traditionally searched for meaning or explanation, but whether it has found them is—and has been over the centuries—a matter of debate” (9). The task of defining a term such as ‘tragedy’ is made somewhat less daunting by the fact that I will approach this abstract concept primarily as a literary term. In which case, the language of literary criticism may be employed in the process of arguing for or against competing notions of tragedy. Western literary criticism has inherited from Aristotle a range of key terms such as *hamartia*, hubris, irony, and catharsis to describe the basic characteristics of tragic figures and the ideal components of tragic plots. Although, as we will observe shortly, literary critics frequently disagree about the meaning

² For example, I will be reading the story of the Passover in Exodus and the Gospel of Mark as tragedies, which is not to say that these stories necessarily belong to the genre of tragic literature in precisely the same way as the dramatic works of Euripides or Sophocles. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern in the biblical stories certain literary features that are commensurate with the various descriptions of tragedy outlined in the following sections of this chapter.

and importance of these terms, such concepts nonetheless serve as the customary starting point for investigations of tragic literature. I will begin with a brief summary of Aristotle's description of tragedy in the *Poetics*, and then examine some of the crucial critical debates that have taken place in recent decades concerning the fundamental attributes of tragedy.

Aristotle defines tragedy as the "imitation of an action that is admirable . . . effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions" (10). Although he outlines six qualitative parts of tragic drama (plot, character, diction, reasoning, spectacle and lyric poetry), according to Aristotle, the primary purpose of tragic drama is to imitate actions rather than persons, and as a result he argues that the most important aspect of tragedy is plot (11). Ideally, tragic dramas should portray actions that appear in "accordance with probability or necessity" (16). For Aristotle, tragedies ought to consist of plots that possess not only a clearly defined beginning, middle and end, but they should also demonstrate a certain internal coherence. There is little room for happenstance in Aristotle's theory of tragedy. Each event in a tragic drama should lead naturally to the next and adhere to the basic logic of cause and effect. Moreover, tragic plots should also possess a certain magnitude: they should not be longer than that which "can readily be held in memory" and yet also be complex enough to be considered artistically beautiful (14). Plots can either be simple or complex: both simple and complex plots contain a catastrophe that is ideally expressed in the form of a change from good to bad fortune. In complex plots, which are more appealing to Aristotle, the catastrophe comes after the tragic figure experiences reversal (*peripeteia*), recognition (*anagnorisis*), all of which culminates in a final scene of suffering (*pathos*).

Following the primacy of plot, Aristotle identifies character as the second most important component of tragedy. If the term plot may be used to describe the actions that constitute the trajectory of tragic dramas, then for Aristotle character is related to the decisions that precipitate those actions. The term *hamartia*, which could be translated as either tragic flaw or mistake, links the actions of the individual to the larger sequence of necessary events that constitute tragic plots. The actions that take place in tragic dramas are meant to be both probable and necessary. The protagonist must undergo a change from good to bad fortune which culminates in a scene of suffering that brings about an experience

of catharsis for the audience. The protagonist must not be a so-called decent person because the suffering of someone who is good does not “evoke fear or pity but disgust” (20). Likewise, Aristotle argues that plots in which villains suffer for their misdeeds are not even to be considered tragic; in such a case, the audience is likely to consider the protagonist’s suffering to be just rather than tragic (21). The only person left is “the sort of person who is not outstanding in moral excellence or justice[.] . . . [T]he change to bad fortune which he undergoes is not due to any moral defect or depravity, but to an error of some kind” (21). However, this notion of accident or error is at odds with the deterministic nature of Aristotle’s ideal tragic plot. How is it possible to consider the protagonist’s actions mistaken if they take place according to the laws of probability and necessity? One possible solution to this problem is to distinguish between the limited self-knowledge of the protagonist and the omniscient perspective of the audience. As a result, the actions of the protagonist may be interpreted ironically. At the moment of error, the audience may have access to the knowledge which is in that instant unavailable to the protagonist. Consequently, the apparent contradiction between the inevitability of tragic events and the *hamartia* of the protagonist is seemingly resolved. For example in Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, an ironic reading of the play may assume that we as the audience, along with the prophet Teiresias, have access to the secret which Oedipus himself is blind to. Thus his moment of recognition, which culminates in an act of self-blinding, is merely the instant at which Oedipus becomes aware of what the audience, and presumably Teiresias, has known from the outset—namely that he has murdered his father and married his mother, and that consequently he is indeed the source of the plague that has beset Thebes.³ For Aristotle, the audience’s ironic knowledge serves to heighten the dramatic tension of the work and intensify the feelings of pity and fear that Oedipus’ suffering provokes, thus making the experience of catharsis all the more powerful and pleasurable.

³ Ironic readings of *Oedipus the King* are common among modern interpreters of the play. See for example, Paul Ricoeur (*Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Dennis Savage [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970]) and Charles Segal [*Oedipus Tyrannus: Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001)]. Contrary to this tradition of ironic readings, A. Samuel Kimball has provocatively suggested a reading in which it is Oedipus rather than Teiresias or even the audience who possesses the revelatory knowledge about the meaning and source of the plague (*The Infanticidal Logic of Evolution and Culture* 203-22).

Although it is clear that Aristotle's theory of tragedy emphasizes the importance of dramatically ironic endings, Douglas Muecke notes that Aristotle does not make use of the term irony in the *Poetics* (*The Compass of Irony* 47). However, he argues that Aristotle does refer to events which may be considered ironic in his analysis of tragedy. Muecke cites one example in which Aristotle expresses his approval of astonishing events which nonetheless seem to adhere to some purposeful design. According to Aristotle, it is not chance occurrences but rather events which take place "contrary to expectation but because of one another" that bring about the most intense experiences of pity and fear:

This will be more astonishing than if they come about spontaneously or by chance, since even chance events are found most astonishing when they appear to have happened as if for a purpose—as, for example, the statue of Mityls in Argos killed the man who was responsible for Mityls' death by falling on top of him as he was looking at it. Things like that are not thought to occur at random. So inevitably plots of this kind will be better (*Poetics* 17).

This is of course a clear example of a situation or turn of events that may be considered ironic, and Aristotle suggests that tragedies ought to imitate these sorts of actions. Once again the attributes of tragic drama are dictated primarily by the conventions of plot. According to Aristotle's definition, tragedy consists of events that are dramatically ironic because they contain a change of fortune from good to bad, which is both necessary from the perspective of the audience and nonetheless unexpected from the perspective of the protagonist. Therefore, ironic events and situations are built into the very framework of Aristotle's conception of tragic drama.

The dramatically ironic situations brought about by both the *peripeteia* and the *anagnorisis* of the protagonist culminate in a scene of supreme suffering. Aristotle defines suffering as "an action that involves destruction or pain . . ." (19). The suffering of the tragic figure marks the occasion for the final important component of Aristotle's description of tragedy—catharsis. The suffering of the protagonist paradoxically gives rise to pity and fear and also purifies the audience of these very same emotions. Just as tragic plots are meant to adhere to the laws of necessity and probability, likewise for Aristotle the experience of catharsis constitutes one of the fundamental aims of tragic drama. Although he emphasizes the importance of constructing plots that are complete as well as internally coherent, endings are nonetheless crucial for ensuring that a play is both sufficiently ironic and cathartic. If a tragedy ends

before the audience is provided with an experience of catharsis, then by Aristotle's definition the play itself is incomplete—and thus does not meet his standard for tragic plots. Similarly, if the protagonist suffers due to some moral discrepancy rather than from some misjudgment or frailty of character then crucially there can be no cathartic ending. In summary, Aristotle's description of tragedy in the *Poetics* demonstrates that stories may be considered tragic if they contain endings that are both dramatically ironic and cathartic, and in order for catharsis to occur, the tragic figure whose suffering evokes pity and fear must be neither particularly good nor particularly bad.

Traditionalist Approaches to Tragedy

Literary debates over the meaning of terms such as catharsis and the possibility of alternative conceptions of tragedy continue today. In the process of this discussion, it will become evident that contemporary definitions of tragedy vary from one scholar to the next, and practically no two critics are precisely alike in their contribution to the longstanding literary debates about the meaning of tragedy. That said, the field may be divided into at least two main groups: traditionalists, who adhere rather stringently to an Aristotelian conception of tragedy and as a result are critical of attempts to interpret modern as well as contemporary literary works as forms of tragic literature, and non-traditionalists who have sought to liberate tragedy from the confines of this classical definition for the sake of expanding the canon of tragic literature as well as reinvigorating the notion of tragedy for modern readers.

Of the many traditionalist scholars of contemporary literary criticism, George Steiner is perhaps the most provocative. In his book *The Death of Tragedy* (1961), Steiner famously argues that tragedy as a dramatic form is not a universal phenomenon, and the notion of reenacting “private anguish on a public stage” is the product of Western and more precisely Greek culture (3). Although he maintains that the very idea of tragedy is essentially a product of the Hellenic artistic imagination, Steiner nevertheless suggests that tragedy did not finally perish until sometime around the end of the seventeenth century. Steiner adheres to a distinctly Aristotelian conception of tragedy.⁴ He suggests that “any realistic notion

⁴ Steiner approaches tragedy from both an historical and formalistic perspective (*The Death of Tragedy* [London, Faber: 1961]). Although he does not present any particular definition of tragedy, his argument is largely upon a certain historical understanding of tragedy as a uniquely Hellenic artistic form, and likewise he adheres to an Aristotelian conception of the ideal form of tragic plots. On the basis of these two basic assumptions about the nature of tragedy, he may appropriately be considered

of tragic drama must start from the fact of catastrophe,” and in a distinctly Aristotelian fashion he asserts that “Tragedies end badly” (Steiner 8). Moreover, tragedies not only end with scenes of agony and despair, but most importantly for Steiner, their endings offer no rational explanation for suffering nor any form of reprieve—tragedies do not provide us with pithy morals, nor do they offer us any final sense of hope or meaning to be recovered after the catastrophes that constitute tragic conflict have subsided. According to Steiner, “The tragic personage is broken by forces which can neither be fully understood nor overcome by rational prudence. . . . Tragedy is irreparable” (8). His emphasis upon the mysterious and unexplainable character of tragedy places him somewhat at odds with Aristotle’s rationalistic theory of tragedy. For Steiner, tragedy is best understood as a literary form originating in ancient Greek culture.⁵ Only works that maintain a basic connection to the thematic concerns of classical Greek tragedy may be considered tragic. However, creating great works of tragedy is not simply a matter of replicating certain themes or patterns of plot. From Sophocles to Milton, the great writers of tragedy also convey what Steiner identifies as a tragic vision of life and reveal to us the absurdity of human suffering: “There is no use asking for rational explanation or mercy. Things are as they are, unrelenting and absurd. We are punished far in excess of our guilt. . . . It is a terrible, stark insight into human life. Yet in the very excess of his suffering lies man’s claim to dignity” (9). Like Aristotle, endings are crucial to Steiner’s conception of tragedy. He claims that “there is in the final moments of great tragedy, whether Greek or Shakespearean or neoclassic, a fusion of grief and joy, of lament over the fall of man and of rejoicing in the resurrection of his spirit” (Steiner 10). Consequently, the downfall of the tragic figure becomes a parable of the rise and fall of the human spirit. In tragic drama, we bear witness to both the finitude and greatness of the human condition with all its accompanying pain and joy. The human in this instance is

a traditionalist despite the fact that Steiner himself attempts in his later work to distance himself from such a perspective. Recently, Steiner has claimed that he does not subscribe to any strict definition of tragedy: “. . . I prefer not to work with any formulaic, legislative definition of ‘tragedy’ as it is used to label a literary genre. All such definitions . . . tend to be variants on Aristotle’s *Poetics*, a text which raises far more problems than it solves. What I aim for is a generative nucleus of supposition, of reasoned intuition, a minimal but indispensable core shared by ‘tragedies’ in literature and extending, by analogy, by metaphor, to other expressive modes” (“‘Tragedy,’ Reconsidered.” [*New Literary History* 35.1: 2004], 2). Despite this seemingly generous approach, Steiner does not allow for the possibility of modern tragedy.

⁵ According to Steiner the last great works of tragic literature, Racine’s *Athalie* (1691) and Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* (1671) captured the agony and mystery of classical Greek drama. But the optimism of the Romantics and the progressive political and intellectual movements of the Enlightenment brought about a world in which the artistic imagination of the poet would no longer be capable of producing tragedy.

not an average person but rather an individual whose status renders them susceptible to great accomplishments as well profound failures in the eyes of their audience.

Another important aspect of traditionalist conceptions of tragedy is the assertion that as a literary genre works of tragedy ought to be rigorously distinguished from the merely ‘tragic’ experiences of daily life, which hold no profound or universal meaning. W.B. Yeats, George Steiner, and more recently Timothy Reiss, all maintain that “[t]ragedy . . . must not be confused with experience” (Wallace 2). According to this view, tragedies cannot be concerned with the day-to-day experiences of suffering that plague the common man. The tendency of modern writers to focus their attention on such thematic concerns is one reason that tragedy has disappeared according to Steiner. He argues that the dramatic works of the eighteenth century were no longer concerned with the public tragedies played out at the “palace gate, the public square, or the court chamber” (Steiner 195). Instead, Steiner suggests that “[i]n the eighteenth century there emerges for the first time the notion of a private tragedy” (195). The turn to private tragedy is also simultaneously a turn towards the bourgeois and the life of the common individual. Steiner’s resistance to so-called private tragedy demonstrates a fundamentally Aristotelian perspective in which tragic dramas are intended to portray the lives of individuals of noble birth. In order to bring about a properly cathartic ending, the tragic figure must suffer a fall from some enviable position. According to Steiner, the democratization of society which took place during the Enlightenment dismantled many of the hierarchical structures that once furnished the political and sociological context for great works of tragedy.

It has been over fifty years since the publication of *The Death of Tragedy*, but Steiner still remains doubtful about the possible reemergence of tragic drama. In his more recent discussions of tragedy, he continues to conceive of tragedy as an artistic form that presents its audience with a fundamentally pessimistic worldview—this tragic vision emerges from the ontological conditions of life in a world characterized by suffering and isolation: “Without the logic of estrangement from life, of man’s ontological fall from grace, there can be no ‘tragedy’ ” (Steiner: 2004, 4). Steiner’s concept of a tragic vision of life relies somewhat problematically upon a theological notion of original sin:

Fallen man is made an unwelcome guest of life or, at best, a threatened stranger on this hostile or indifferent earth [.] . . . Thus the necessary and sufficient premise, the axiomatic constant in tragedy is that of ontological homelessness . . . of alienation or ostracism from the safeguard of licensed being. There is no welcome to the self. This is what tragedy is about (2-3).

This distinctly Augustinian concept of original sin appears at odds with his presumption that tragedy is fundamentally a product of the artistic vision of ancient Greek tragedians. However, for Steiner original sin has very little to do with dogma or Christian belief in particular. Instead, it persists thematically in tragedy as a theological concept that is woven into many ancient stories of human conflict and striving. Original sin and the fall from grace are simply different ways of describing the human condition as it is portrayed in tragic drama. What Steiner refers to as “authentic” tragedy necessarily involves some notion of sin, but unlike the religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity, in which the fall is only one part of a larger story of redemption, Steiner claims that “[a]bsolute tragedy, whether in Euripides’ *Bacchae* or Kafka’s parable of the Law, is immune to hope” (4). Tragedy may entail certain theological dimensions for Steiner, but it does not have recourse to any form of soteriology—tragic dramas involve sin, isolation, and divine retribution but there can be no salvation.

Consequently, he considers Christianity and tragedy to be fundamentally incompatible. He claims that “Christianity made total tragedy implausible. Whatever the sorrow or transient injustice, there is, as Milton put it, ‘no time for lamentation now.’ The fall of man, pivotal to absolute tragedy, is a *felix culpa*, a necessary prologue to salvation” (13). Steiner is certainly not the first literary critic to assert that Christianity and tragedy are fundamentally opposed to another. In fact he is one of many twentieth century scholars that have offered us a theory of tragedy that opposes the seemingly pessimistic spirit of tragedy to the optimism of a religious belief in redemption. Writing in 1924, I.A. Richards asserts, “The least touch of any theology which has a compensating Heaven to offer the tragic hero is fatal” (246). Similarly, Karl Jaspers also affirms the opposition between Christian salvation and tragic knowledge and claims, “The chance of being saved destroys the tragic sense of being trapped without chance of escape. Therefore no genuinely Christian tragedy can exist” (13). Debates over the relationship between

Christianity and tragedy represent one important dividing line between traditionalist and non-traditionalist conceptions of tragedy.⁶

All of the scholars mentioned above affirm an essentially Aristotelian conception of tragedy which is defined according to plot. In summary, traditionalist conceptions of tragedy adhere to a mainly Aristotelian preference for stories that end badly, in which there can be no promise of redemption or escape from suffering. Similarly, in line with Aristotle's requirements for character, tragedies must not be concerned with the suffering of the common person but rather the downfall of an individual of high status and importance in society. Because a religious belief in redemption presumably allows for the possibility of finding spiritual and perhaps physical relief in the midst of suffering, traditionalist conceptions of tragedy consider Christianity's message of salvation incompatible with the despair and hopelessness embodied in classical works of tragic literature.

Nevertheless, escape from suffering and redemption are not necessarily synonymous experiences. The stories that I will investigate in this thesis all involve suffering of some kind, but they also contain themes of redemption and hope that may be capable of counteracting the absurdity of human suffering. As I will demonstrate, the redemptive narratives of the Bible demonstrate that redemption involves both suffering and sacrifice. Contrary to Steiner's analysis, original sin is not the only, nor perhaps the most pervasive, theological dimension of tragedy. Another important theological concept that tragedy shares in common with the religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity is the notion of sacrifice. The story of the Passover in Exodus reveals the terrible costs of the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt, which is predicated upon the infanticidal genocide of the firstborn of Egypt and the death of the paschal lamb. Similarly, in the Gospel of Mark we are presented with a story of redemption in which Jesus' death on the cross completes the sacrificial narrative foreshadowed at the Last Supper. Although these stories are part of a religious tradition that maintains a belief in redemption, their narratives are no less tragic. Such stories are tragic because they show us that redemption entails sacrifice—they do not present us with

⁶ Jennifer Wallace notes that the assumption that religious belief is inimical to tragedy remains prevalent among literary scholars today. However, she argues that "it can be countered that some of the most fundamental concerns of tragedy are deeply theological in nature" (*The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2007], 182). In my reading of *The Bacchae*, I will focus particularly upon the religious significance of classical tragedy and its role in the religious and civic life of the ancient Greeks.

protagonists who escape suffering but rather with individuals who continue on through the pain of living in a world that is at times hospitable but more often hostile to their existence. Their suffering provokes in us an emotional response that is common to works of tragic literature. In this thesis, I am utilizing a distinctly non-traditionalist conception of tragedy that distills the essence of tragic literature to a certain emotional experience of pity and fear rather than a set of formalistic elements. Although the purpose of this study is not to offer a particular theory or definition of tragedy, it is nonetheless important to establish a certain critical basis for my own readings of Exodus 1-12, the Gospel of Mark and the fiction of Flannery O'Connor as works of tragic literature. By interpreting these various texts as works of tragic literature, I am taking an admittedly non-traditionalist approach to the concept of tragedy. As the following discussion will demonstrate, this non-traditionalist approach to interpreting tragedy shares certain critical insights with my own effort to free the notion of sacrifice from the rather narrow confines of Girard's theory scapegoating.

Non-traditionalist Approaches to Tragedy

It is perhaps understandable that many scholars fall back on Aristotle's *Poetics* as one of the earliest and most thorough accounts of the literary attributes of tragedy. Nevertheless, Ulrich Simon suggests at the outset of his book *Pity and Terror* (1989) that "most of us are liable to change our attitudes to tragedy" (xiv). Consequently, Simon argues that "It is commonly acknowledged that the worst way of approaching tragedy is to deal in generalities. The endless definitions have only contributed a yawn of boredom. No one is now willing to spend time on Aristotle's definition" (1). Instead, he suggests that when it comes to drawing conclusions about tragedy, we should be dealing with particular texts rather than broad assumptions. Debates between traditionalist and non-traditionalist scholars revolve around the "question of whether the definition of tragedy ultimately depends upon its content or its form" (Wallace 3). Wallace argues that "Although the definition of tragedy must take account of both form and content . . . ultimately the source of tragedy lies in its capacity to elicit the audience's response" (3). But this of course gives rise to questions concerning what the appropriate response to tragedy is. As Wallace notes, the Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton "makes a passionate case for the politics of

compassion” (5). For leftist critics such as Eagleton, and Raymond Williams before him, debates about tragedy and our response to it are not simply literary but perhaps more importantly political.

Traditionalist conceptions of tragedy are regarded by both Eagleton and Williams as forms of intellectual elitism which seek to diminish the importance of everyday experiences of suffering.⁷ Most importantly, they each argue that our understandings of tragedy and of sacrifice may change, and that these concepts may be reinvented in order to advance certain contemporary political concerns.

In his book simply titled *Modern Tragedy* (1966), Williams demonstrates a non-traditionalist emphasis upon the emotional effects of tragedy, and also highlights the relationship between tragedy and sacrifice:

The rhythm of tragedy . . . is a rhythm of sacrifice. A man is disintegrated by suffering, and is led to his death, but the action is more than personal, and others are made whole as he is broken. . . . Sacrifice, even if it is a single kind of action, can have many meanings in particular contexts. Yet behind the powerful word, is it not possible to see, in fact, different kinds of action? In our own culture, the idea of sacrifice is profoundly ambiguous. The simplest form of sacrifice, in which a man is killed so that the body of men may live or live more fully, we have almost abandoned. We know the idea, from other cultures and periods, but it retains emotional significance in one case only: at the centre of Christian belief (156).

According to Williams, both tragedy and sacrifice may be understood analogously as rhythms whose basic patterns are at once familiar and nonetheless capable of change. The older rhythms of tragedy are related to archaic forms of ritual sacrifice and cathartic purification. In the modern era, Williams claims that “Our emotional commitment, in a majority of cases, is to the man who dies, rather than to the action in which he dies. At this point a new rhythm of tragedy enters, and the ceremony of sacrifice is drowned, not in blood but in pity” (157). In contrast to Steiner, Williams emphasizes the potential for our conceptions of tragedy to change while at the same time maintaining some connection to its archaic origins in rituals of sacrifice. Moreover, Williams’ interpretation of the relationship between the old and new rhythms of sacrifice suggests the possibility of interpreting Christianity as a repository for the rhythms of sacrifice once embodied in classical tragedy. The rhythms may change and shift over time but the relationship between ancient and modern conceptions tragedy will remain intact as long as Christianity continues to tell the story of Christ’s passion. The tragic figure in Williams’ account is not

⁷ Although I will not here be concerned with the political debates that come into focus in their work, both Eagleton and Williams address the subject of sacrifice in their studies of tragedy as a resource for political thought.

simply an individual of elite status as in traditionalist conceptions of tragedy. Rather, the tragic figure is simply the individual who is sacrificed—the scapegoat whether noble or ignoble is at the center of tragic conflict, and its death brings about a sense of renewal for those who both participate in and bear witness to its death. In his analysis of the relationship between tragedy and sacrifice, Williams anticipates a certain literary interest in the role of the scapegoat which will be central to Girard’s theory of sacrifice.

Following Williams, the contemporary counterpoint to Steiner is Terry Eagleton. In his book *Sweet Violence* (2003), Eagleton suggests that tragedy is difficult to define because “like ‘nature’ or ‘culture’ the term floats ambiguously between the descriptive and the normative” (8). In order to compensate for this ambiguity, he simply provides an inventory of the many definitions of tragedy which literary critics have offered up in recent years, and then subsequently dismisses each of them in turn. Most importantly, Eagleton attempts to break free from some of the binarisms of traditional approaches to defining tragedy:

The traditionalist conception of tragedy turns on a number of distinctions—between fate and chance, free will and destiny, inner flaw and outer circumstance, the noble and the ignoble, blindness and insight, historical and universal, the alterable and the inevitable, the truly tragic and the merely piteous, heroic defiance and ignominious inertia—which for the most part no longer have much force for us (*Sweet Violence* 21).

Eagleton notes that conservatives and so-called radicals may disagree about whether or not such forms of tragedy are desirable, but nevertheless “[b]oth camps agree that tragedy really *does* hinge on these dichotomies; it is just that the former regrets their passing while the latter rejoices in it” (22).

Consequently, he attempts to demonstrate that there are other conceptions of tragedy which do not adhere to the strict dichotomies of traditionalists. Eagleton argues that certain alternative conceptions may prove “surprisingly close to contemporary radical concerns” (22). By liberating tragedy from the constraints of formalistic and genre based definitions, non-traditionalist scholars such as Eagleton allow for the possibility of approaching various forms of narrative as works of tragic literature.

In the final chapter of *Sweet Violence*, Eagleton contemplates the religious origins of tragedy in rituals of sacrifice. He notes that leftist scholars such as Williams have an understandable aversion to theories that may seek to define tragedy in terms of its religious origins. According to Eagleton, “Talk of

blood sacrifice, dying gods and fertility cults smacks of naturalization of history, an opposing of the mythic to the rational and the cyclical to the historical, along with a dubious belief that suffering is an energizing, revitalizing part of human existence” (274). He suggests that the idea of sacrifice has been used as a way of expressing obligations such as “relinquishing one’s own desires in the service of a master’s” and it maintains “overtones of self-repression and self-laceration,” which leftists are rightfully suspicious of (Eagleton 275). However, Eagleton argues that like the notion of tragedy, which may be liberated from the strict confines of traditionalist conceptions, the idea of sacrifice may also be freed from many of these oppressive connotations: “Sacrifice can mean just what the left suspects it means. But it also means that there are times when something must be dismembered in order to be renewed” (Eagleton 275). Instead of advocating the death or sacrifice of an individual for the good of the society as a whole, Eagleton suggests that we must be willing to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of political change. He claims that in order for “political change to take root we must divest ourselves of our current identities . . . and this demands a painful process of self-abandonment” (Eagleton 275). Consequently, he seeks to reinvent the notion of sacrifice by transforming it from a ritual act which comes at the expense of the other into an act of self-giving.

Eagleton suggests that ritual sacrifice, the act of killing a scapegoat so that the community may be renewed and maintained, should be regarded as a thing of the past. He cites the transition in Christianity from its origins in acts of Hebrew worship, centered upon the offering of sacrifices to God, to the New Testament’s inversion of “the usual idea of sacrifice by making God himself the victim” (Eagleton 276). Consequently, Eagleton argues, “This definitive consigning of ritual sacrifice to the past involves redefining it in ethical rather than cultic terms as a self-giving for others” (277). In his discussion of sacrifice, Eagleton draws upon the work of Girard and his description of the scapegoat in *Violence and the Sacred*. He specifically applies Girard’s theory of the tragic figure as a scapegoat or what is known as the *pharmakos*, the Greek name for the sacrificial victim. As a non-traditionalist, Eagleton maintains that the tragic figure according to Eagleton is not necessarily the person of wealth or status but rather the oppressed. He cites the Old Testament’s use of the term *anawin* to describe the “destitute and

dispossessed,” and claims that “[t]he *anawin* are the dregs and refuse of society, its tragic scapegoats” (Eagleton 277). Suffering, like tragedy, takes place within a political and social context that is constructed through human action. One response to tragedy is to seek to dismantle the oppressive systems that have contributed to the scapegoat’s demise. According to Eagleton, “To pity the *pharmakos* . . . is to identify with it, and so to feel horror not of it but of the social order whose failure it signifies” (279). Although he utilizes much of the terminology of Girard’s theory of the scapegoat, Eagleton ultimately concludes with an affirmation of the value of sacrifice that is not present in Girard’s thesis: “The structure of a world increasingly governed by the greed of transnational corporations is one which has to be broken in order to be repaired. If this is the lesson of the *pharmakos*, it is also the faith of political revolution” (296). Consequently, political change for Eagleton entails sacrifice, not the sacrifice of another, but rather a sacrifice of self in which we are meant to abandon oppressive forms of political identity in order to adopt new and more just political and economic systems.

In summary Eagleton’s analysis of tragedy and sacrifice in *Sweet Violence* provides four important insights which will provide a critical basis for my own study of sacrifice in works of tragic literature. Firstly, Eagleton demonstrates that the idea of the tragic may be revitalized by challenging traditionalist conceptions of tragedy which attempt to simplify its meaning and content according to certain formalistic definitions. In contrast to scholars such as Steiner, Jaspers, and Richards, who maintain that tragedy is a fundamentally pessimistic art form, Eagleton and Williams see tragedy as a potential resource for social progress and political change and consequently not fundamentally immune to hope. Secondly, if the idea of tragedy may be revitalized and adapted to the concerns of modern readers, concerns which for Eagleton are mainly centered upon a radical politics, then it may also be possible to articulate new conceptions of sacrifice which break from the rigid forms of the past. Thirdly, Eagleton interprets the suffering of the tragic figure as a kind of sacrifice. Suffering, whether real or imagined, takes place within a social and political context that is constructed through human agency. The death of the scapegoat is never purely an accident or the consequence of tragic destiny—as the *pharmakos*, the scapegoat’s death is constructed in a manner that is either similar to or perhaps even the same as the

enactment of a religious ritual. Therefore, because tragedies are typically stories about human suffering, they may also be considered stories about sacrifice. Finally, it is apparent that Eagleton does not wish to abandon the notion of sacrifice but to reinvent it for more supposedly humane purposes.

Approaches to Sacrifice

A study of religion is perhaps the most immediately accessible context for beginning an investigation of the concept of sacrifice. However, unlike the common set of terms which literary critics utilize in order to contest various conceptions of tragedy, religious language varies drastically not only from tradition to tradition but also within the unique communities that constitute these different faiths. As Dan R. Stiver observes, “Religious language tends to be shrouded in imprecision and mystery. It can hardly be verified and is profuse with symbol and imagery.” And as a result, “The characteristic response has been to segregate religious language as the language of faith from the language of reason in various ways such as reason preceding faith . . . or faith preceding reason . . .” (*Religious Language*, 1996: 12). Religious rituals like religious language resist schematization; the wide range of religious practices which may be regarded as sacrificial cannot be sufficiently explained on the basis of single theory of sacrifice. In her book *Beyond Sacred Violence* (2008), Kathryn McClymond argues that Girard’s theory neglects numerous other religious rituals such as vegetal sacrifice which do not strictly adhere to his understanding of sacrifice as violence. According to McClymond, this disregard for alternative forms of sacrifice by modern theorists demonstrates the extent to which its study remains embedded within a largely Christian context in which the crucifixion is the paradigmatic example of sacrifice—the story of Jesus’ crucifixion stands as the typological model for all other instances of sacrifice. Girard’s theory of sacrifice is no exception to this Christian typological approach to interpreting sacrifice. In this study I have chosen to use the term ‘model’ as a way of indicating that our efforts to conceptualize the abstract notion of sacrifice are structured according to certain metaphors or narrative structures.⁸ Girard’s theory of

⁸ Initially, the term ‘model’ may appear to be a somewhat scientific term that is perhaps akin to the language of structuralism and New Criticism. However, the term ‘model’ may also be interpreted as way of indicating a metaphorical approach to understanding a concept such as sacrifice that may otherwise be difficult or even impossible to conceptualize. In this sense, a ‘model’ functions as an artistic creation that is only ever capable of partial representation. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida makes use of the term model as a way of highlighting the already fictive qualities of concepts which may otherwise be regarded metaphysically (Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997]).

sacrifice relies upon two important narratives: an anthropological account of scapegoating among early humans and the story of Jesus' crucifixion as the culmination of this history of sacrificial violence.

In recent decades, a number of theories have been developed to explain the emergence of religious rituals of sacrifice in ancient Greek religion and myth, but they have proven less influential than Girard's. First published in German in 1972, the same year as Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*, Walter Burkert's book *Homo Necans* presents a theory of sacrifice that is based upon the history of humankind's evolutionary transition from omnivorous apes to hunters. Unlike other animals which demonstrated a strong predatory instinct, Burkert argues that humans are not naturally predators, but they developed the skill of hunting over time. Nevertheless, humans were susceptible to the same threat of intraspecific or intraspecies violence that is characteristic of other groups of animals. This intraspecies violence was directed toward the animals that early humans hunted for food. According to Burkert, "In hunting, intraspecific aggression focuses on the hunted animal and thus is deflected from man" (75). In order for this aggression to be successfully deflected onto their prey, hunters had to perceive a similarity between the animal and a human which may otherwise fall victim to intraspecies violence. As a result the prey was interpreted as kind of brother whose death provoked feelings of guilt and remorse among the hunters, but at the same time the killing of the animal was also cause for celebration because its death meant food and thus life for the hunters and their community. The contradictory emotions which accompanied the hunters' experience of killing their prey would ultimately be expressed in various religious rituals of sacrifice. Burkert claims, "Although sacrifice began in the hunt, it appeared at its most meticulous and brilliant in the ancient city cultures[.] . . . It maintained its form and perhaps even acquired its religious function outside the context in which killing was necessary for life" (23).

Burkert outlines three basic movements within a wide range of sacrificial rituals: first there is a time of preparation or sacralization in which the officiant prepares for the ritual killing, then there is the "unspeakable" act in which the sacrifice takes place, and then finally a cathartic time of feasting and celebration after which order is once more restored to the community. Burkert's theory of sacrifice, like

Therefore, my use of the term 'model' in this study is part of a more general effort to demonstrate the ways in which sacrifice may only be understood metaphorically.

Girard's, asserts that "a sense of community arises from collective aggression" (35). However, Burkert notes that in *Violence and the Sacred*, "The practice of eating in sacrifice is not taken into account by [Girard]" (35). Although this may at first glance appear to be a minor difference between the two theories, due to Burkert's awareness of the relationship between eating and sacrifice, sacrificial rituals are not only associated with aggression but also a search for nourishment and for life. Consequently, Burkert does not suggest any kind of ethical or sociological critique of sacrificial violence. Instead, the emergence of sacrifice is viewed as an important development within the history of human evolution and survival.

In this thesis, I will address the importance of the shared meal as a form of sacrifice which constitutes and sustains human communities in my readings of the story of the Passover in Exodus and the Last Supper in the Gospel of Mark. I will contrast the sacrificial meal that takes place in Exodus to the eucharistic sacrifice which appears in the Gospel of Mark. My analysis of these texts will draw upon the work of A. Samuel Kimball in his book *The Infanticidal Logic of Evolution and Culture* (2007). Kimball provides a theory of sacrifice that is rooted in the principles of evolutionary biology. According to Kimball, "Indeed, one of the most basic human perceptions is doubtless that existence costs. So fundamental is this insight that it is implied in the etymological kinship of the two terms—'existence' and 'cost' are Latin cognates from a common Indo-European stem—that make up this redundant predication" (21). Because existence costs, Kimball notes that human survival depends upon our ability to shift "more of the costs of existence onto others or the environment than competitors for their part are able to deflect" (37). He claims that "Such economization is fundamentally sacrificial. More importantly, it is necessarily infanticidal" (Kimball 37).⁹ This theory of sacrifice is based upon an evolutionary model in which biological organisms, and most importantly humans, must compete with other life forms in order to

⁹According to Kimball, "Infanticide—fatal violence against infants and children, more generally against a person of a successor generation—is a recurrent, though seldom remarked, theme in much Western literature" (*The Infanticidal Logic of Evolution and Culture* [Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007],15). He makes a distinction between infanticide, which refers "literally, to the killing of infant offspring but includes the destruction of the young in general, one's own or those of others, among animals and humans," and the infanticidal, which designates "an act, an attitude, an intention, or a practice without a literal infanticide taking place" (19). The infanticidal marks a biological and cultural limit which cannot be surpassed or escaped regardless of the various philosophical and religious traditions which have attempted to transcend this limit. He claims that "The apprehension that the costs of economization are another name for a violence that is unavoidable sacrificial of, in fact infanticidal toward, other human life is, this study claims, one of the most intimate insights of the Judaic, Greek, and Christian traditions" (25). Nevertheless, Kimball argues that these very same traditions have resisted a complete recognition of this infanticidal limit. Girard's rejection of sacrifice may be interpreted within the context of this larger effort on the part of Western and particularly Christian scholars to reject the sacrificial and infanticidal limits of human life.

secure a finite set of resources in order to ensure their survival. Kimball's thesis has wide-reaching and expansive implications for scholars of religion, theology and literature. However, for the present task, the most important implication of his thesis is the suggestion that this economic model of sacrifice is embedded within biological existence. Like Burkert, Kimball's thesis does not allow for an ethical rejection of the practice of sacrifice. Instead, he elucidates the extent to which humans remain biologically, psychologically, and philosophically tied to the practice and logic of sacrifice.

Tragic Theory and the Turn to Sacrifice

The theories of sacrifice outlined above are part of the expanding scholarly interest in sacrifice. According to Wallace, "It is possible to detect, by the middle of the twentieth century, a growing belief that tragedy was more amenable to the insights of anthropology than to philosophy" (134). Such anthropological studies of tragedy have provided a more complex account of its origins in the sacrificial rituals and celebrations of ancient Greece.¹⁰ Wallace identifies two major intellectual developments in anthropological approaches to the study of tragedy. The first approach maintains that "ancient Greek culture was very different from modern western culture and therefore the study of it should be more akin to ethnographical study than to historical approaches which assumed lines of continuity between the past and the present" (Wallace 135). And the second is based on the structuralist approach of Claude Levi-Strauss which "was premised on the idea that culture was organised within a system which was logically coherent and which could therefore be interpreted" (Wallace 135). Girard's theory of sacrifice belongs to

¹⁰ The group known as the Cambridge Ritualists or the Myth and Ritual school, which included classical scholars such as Jane Ellen Harrison and Gilbert Murray, began their work in the early twentieth century. In his preface to *The Myth and Ritual School*, Robert Ackerman describes the work of the Cambridge Ritualists as follows: "The problem they worked on was the origins of Greek drama. On the basis of the comparative anthropological study of 'primitive' religion they concluded that drama evolved from certain magical fertility rituals performed in the worship of a deity who died and was reborn" (*The Myth and Ritual School: J.G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists* [London: Routledge, 2002], xi). Although their work has been influential, their conclusion concerning the origins of Greek tragedy has proven far too formulaic for contemporary scholars. Walter Burkert is perhaps the most prominent contemporary scholar of ancient Greek religion. In his article titled "Greek Sacrifice and Ritual," Burkert states from the very outset that "we ought not to expect that we can reduce so complex a phenomenon as Greek tragedy to one single formula of origin" ("Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual." [Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies 7:2: 1966], 87). Consequently, Burkert does not set out to determine a single explanation for the origin of tragedy; instead, he seeks to uncover its sacrificial underpinnings through an investigation of the word 'tragedy' and its relationship to the ritual killing of a goat. He concludes that "the tradition of a goat-sacrifice deserves to be taken seriously; it leads back to the depths of prehistoric human development, as well as into the center of tragedy" (121). Similarly, in the introduction to her book *Tragedy and Athenian Religion*, Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood claims that the "central conclusion of [her] investigation into the ritual context of tragedy. . . is that tragedy was generated in the context of a rite of *xenismos* of Dionysos that was part of the City Dionysia" (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2003: 11). She claims that the "*xenismos* sacrifice eventually developed new forms, so that it became what we may call 'prototragedy,' a new genre that involved the exploration of religious matters" (Inwood 11).

this structuralist approach to anthropology. He interprets all aspects of ancient Greek religion including the emergence of tragic drama in relation to his theory of scapegoating sacrifice. Wallace suggests that “Girard’s account of tragedy as sacrifice is useful because it sheds light upon Aristotle’s notion of *catharsis* and the question of how tragedy ‘effects relief’ or indeed gives pleasure. In the ambiguous figure of the *pharmakos*, we can see the double meaning of tragedy as the source both of benefit and of harm, of enjoyment and of disturbance” (137). She concludes that in the end his theory of sacrifice “might appear too formulaic and removed both from the details of the text and from history to be anything more than provocative food-for-thought” (Wallace 137). Nevertheless, Girard’s theory of sacrifice has gained influence among many contemporary scholars because it takes a firm stance on a problem that has plagued human life from its very origins—namely the problem of violence. His theory of sacrifice relies upon a scapegoating model that is based upon a story of originary human violence against an innocent and arbitrary victim. Consequently, sacrifice is regarded as a kind of criminal act exacted upon an innocent human victim. All other forms of sacrificial ritual are a variation on this original act of murder. This single scapegoating model establishes the basis of his critique of sacrifice as a form of archaic violence which human society has given the capacity to transcend by accepting the Gospels’ call to reject the sacrificial violence.

Girard’s theory of sacrifice emerges from his investigations into the psychology of conflict in works of literature. In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961), Girard elucidates a literary theory of mimetic rivalry and triangular desire which he later expands upon in his investigation of the anthropological function of sacrifice. According to his theory of mimetic desire, conflicts emerge when two or more individuals converge upon an object of mutual desire. As the term mimetic implies, Girard’s theory maintains that humans develop a desire for a particular object by imitating the desires of others. When two or more individuals begin to vie for a single object of desire, the mimetic relationship may quickly develop into a rivalry that becomes violent as their competing desires intensify. Girard’s triangulates his theory of desire by positing the existence of an object, a subject, and a mediator in literary conflicts. According to this scheme, a mediator may be understood as an individual who possesses a particular

object of desire which the subject seeks to attain. When the mediator and the subject are distanced from one another in the narrative, the mediation of the subject's desire takes place externally. In which case, the subject looks to the mediator as a kind of model to emulate in the pursuit of a common object of desire; consequently, the subject becomes a kind of disciple of the individual that mediates his or her desire. However, when the subject and the mediator exist in proximity to one another the mediation takes place internally. The mediator obstructs the subject's efforts to attain the object of his or her desire. As a result, the relationship between the subject and mediator becomes one of intense rivalry. In the midst of this mimetic struggle, the differences between the two rivals may disappear altogether as the subject begins to assume the attributes of the model; curiously, the object of desire may be discarded as the conflict between the subject and mediator escalates. The mimetic struggle over an object is transformed into a struggle for ascendancy between the two rivals.

Girard's theory of mimetic desire gives rise to questions about how the conflicts associated with mimetic rivalry may be resolved. In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard develops his literary theory of mimetic rivalry into an anthropological theory of sacrifice as scapegoating. He argues that mimetic rivalry is capable of enveloping entire communities. If left unchecked, the violence that results from mimetic rivalry may escalate even further to what Girard describes as the experience of reciprocal violence which is characterized by a seemingly endless exchange of reprisals. In order for peace to be restored, the process of mimetic rivalry must be interrupted by redirecting the antagonisms of rival factions onto a sacrificial victim or scapegoat. According to Girard, human society originates in an act of scapegoating sacrifice. This originary violence is subsequently commemorated and repeated through religious rituals of sacrifice in which the scapegoat is regarded as sacred. Sacrificial religions emerged as a way of both preserving the beneficial effects of scapegoating while also seeking to mystify the sacrificial violence that societies rely upon as a means of resolving conflicts and maintaining peace. Consequently, the role of religion in primitive as well modern societies has been to safeguard humans from recognizing the sacrificial violence upon which peace and stability relies; religion transforms

destructive internal violence into beneficial violence through sacrificial rituals in which a scapegoat is interpreted as both a source of violent conflict and its cure.

Girard speculates that the first instance of scapegoating took place among a group of people in the throes of conflict. In order to resolve this conflict, the group arbitrarily aligned themselves against a member of their own community. The arbitrary and presumably innocent victim is what Girard terms the surrogate victim. As a substitute or surrogate for the entire community, the death of this individual serves simultaneously to establish peace between rival factions and bring about a unification of the remaining members of the community. Girard describes the experience of unification that results from death of the surrogate victim or scapegoat as a moment of violent unanimity. The original act of scapegoating in which a group of people arbitrarily seizes upon one of their own according to Girard is also an act of violence that founds the community. Consequently, the practice of scapegoating may be linked to the various rituals that communities participate in as a means of establishing both religious and political identity. According to Girard's theory scapegoating, there are only two basic sociological categories present at any one time—persecutors united in their aggression toward a victim and the scapegoat that is the recipient of that aggression.

The purpose of sacrificial rituals according to Girard's thesis is to transform the original act of destructive violence against one of the community's own members into an act of beneficial violence directed at a scapegoat who is perceived to be an outsider. He argues that "The function of sacrifice . . . not only allows for but requires a surrogate victim—in other words violent unanimity" (VS 101). Unlike the surrogate victim, who is a substitute for the entire community, the ritual victim is "always substituted for the surrogate victim" (VS 101). The Greek word for this sacrificial substitute is *pharmakos*, which can be interpreted as either the cure for violence or its remedy (VS 94-98). The ritual sacrifice of the scapegoat is interpreted as a symbolic purification of the contagion of violence that threatens a community. Consequently, Girard makes a connection between the *pharmakos* and another closely related term the *pharmakon*:

Like Oedipus, the victim is considered a polluted object, whose living presence contaminates everything that comes in contact with it and whose death purges the community of its ills[.] . . . It

is not surprising that the word *pharmakon* in classical Greek means both poison and the antidote for poison, both sickness and cure—in short, any substance capable of perpetrating a very good or very bad action, according to the circumstances of the dosage (VS 95).

The identification of the *pharmakos* as an innocent, sacrificial victim is vital to Girard's critique of sacrificial violence. By identifying the scapegoat as the innocent victim of sacrificial violence, Girard establishes a theoretical basis for his ethical critique of violence in human society.

In the years following the publication of *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard commits himself to a sociological critique of scapegoating. In *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (1978), *The Scapegoat* (1982), *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (1999), and his numerous published essays on sacrifice, Girard applies the basic tenets of his theory of sacrifice to the problem of violence in religion and society. Although his work takes an interdisciplinary approach that is only partially concerned with literary criticism, Girard nevertheless assumes a critical approach to interpreting tragic literature and the Bible that essentially reduces the complex relationships within these various texts to the fundamental opposition between persecutors and the persecuted. Girard categorizes works of Greek tragedy as well as the books of the Old Testament as texts that critique the practice of scapegoating sacrifice; however, he argues that the scapegoating mechanism is most completely revealed in the Gospels. By taking the story of Jesus' crucifixion in the Gospels as the paradigmatic revelation of scapegoating, Girard interprets the sacrifices that take place in works of tragic literature typologically as anticipations of this essentially Christian revelation. .

The Gospels' revelation of the scapegoating mechanism is fundamental to Girard's sociological critique of sacrifice. In an early analysis of Girard's work published in *Semeia* in 1985, Burton Mack explains that Girard makes a certain transition in his critique of scapegoating "from text to history, showing that his theory of collective murder and the surrogate victim, possible only by the delusion of the persecutors, can be used to read the texts of violence another way—as documents of the human history of violence" (141). As a New Testament scholar who is sceptical of the historicity of the Gospels, Mack is critical of this move. In very broad terms, this move may be interpreted as a shift from epistemological questions posed by literary texts to the ontological concerns involved in elaborating a sociological or

anthropological critique of violence. What is obscured in this shift from the epistemology to ontology is the fact that Girard's anthropological theory of sacrifice is based upon a hypothetical instance of original scapegoating violence which is of course highly questionable. All of the evidence for this original act of scapegoating is embedded within literary texts which are subject to various interpretations. As such, I wish to shift the discourse back to questions of epistemology and most importantly questions of literary interpretation. In doing so, it becomes clear that Girard's ontological distinction between persecutors and the persecuted is derived from a certain epistemological basis in literary texts which from the perspective of tragic literature is highly unstable—and thus open to further interpretation.

On the Task of Reading

Girard interprets biblical and non-biblical texts through the filter of his sociological critique of scapegoating. This approach reduces the conflicts portrayed in the Bible and within various works of tragic literature to an irreducible opposition between oppressors and the oppressed. Literary portrayals of sacrifice, however, reveal a much more complex relationship between victims and oppressors as well as between readers and the narratives themselves. Moreover, as Adrian Poole argues, "Tragedy teaches us that the objects of our contemplation—ourselves, each other, our world—are more diverse than we had imagined, and that what we have in common is a dangerous propensity for overrating our power to comprehend this diversity" (*Tragedy*, 1987: 1). This understanding of tragedy allows for a certain ambiguity and openness to the process of interpretation that is at odds with Girard's own sociological and anthropological approach to interpreting works of tragic literature and the Bible. This sense of openness will guide my own readings of the various texts in this thesis.

We can return to Jennifer Wallace and her attempt to make this ambiguous notion of tragedy somehow intelligible for those who are uninitiated into the complexities of tragic theory. Like Aristotle, Wallace describes tragedy in terms of its effects, and most importantly what purpose tragedy may serve for us today. She states that her book will consider how tragedy "can help to make sense of terrible events, how it shapes sorrowful experience" (9). In contrast to traditionalist conceptions of tragedy, she states that it is appropriate to make comparisons between "theatre and other efforts to make sense of

suffering: other artistic representations, such as sculpture and painting; eyewitness accounts and photographic images of war and atrocity; memorials and rituals; theological and psychoanalytic debate” (Wallace 9). The various texts examined in this thesis will be read as tragedies because their narratives provoke in us the emotions of pity, fear, grief, devastation, and perhaps compassion, which are associated with great works of tragic literature. The moments of suffering portrayed in these stories may be interpreted as forms of sacrifice because they take place within a narrative framework that is constructed through the imagination of their authors—as readers, we also play an active role in the construction of these narratives. Through the interpretive activity that takes place between writers, texts, and readers it may be possible to formulate alternative models of sacrifice, new paradigms of tragic experience, and perhaps new conceptions of the sacred.

My approach to interpreting the literary works in this thesis may be described as kind of religious reading. In his book *Breaking the Fall* (1989), Robert Detweiler describes what a religious reading entails: “It would be religious in its very openness to others; its willingness to accommodate and adapt; its readiness to entertain the new, the invention, while honouring the old, the convention; its celebration of the text’s possibilities rather than a delimiting of them” (35). The experience of reading religiously may also be understood as a liturgical experience which seeks to “regain the group-celebratory nature of story enactment by transferring it to the reading experience” (Detweiler 38). Finally, drawing upon Stanley Fish’s notion of an interpretive community, Detweiler suggests that humans always interpret within the framework of some sort of belief system. Consequently, he claims that “One must . . . always believe in something, and if that something is radical scepticism or undecidability, it is still a position of belief” (Detweiler 41). Consequently, my approach to the various texts discussed in this thesis will be that of an undogmatic but nonetheless Christian reader.

By approaching the biblical texts in this thesis as works of tragic literature, I wish to produce interpretations of these texts which may be capable of breaking free of some of the ideological, theological, and critical constraints that have been imposed upon them throughout their long history of interpretation. In his analysis of the relationship between ideology and interpretation, George Aichele

claims, “Every reading expresses one ideology or another, and conflict between readings is often conflict of ideologies” (318). Most importantly, he suggests that ideology is in the end inescapable:

All readers read from concrete social and material locations, and no reader has privileged access to some site of valid, objective truth, such as the mind of the text’s author, the social context of its production , or ‘what really happened’. In so far as such authorities are invoked, it is because some ideology sanctions them (Aichele 318).

When it comes to interpreting the Gospels, Aichele suggests that the influence of ideology becomes more apparent because “the reader must work harder to make sense of the text—that is, to explore and contain its connotations” (318). Consequently, he claims that many biblical scholars and theologians compensate for the ambiguities and difficulties of a text such as the Gospel of Mark by reading it alongside the other canonical gospels. According to Aichele, “Acceptance of the canon as the proper intertextual frame for reading the Gospels restricts the possibilities for understanding them” (318). On the one hand, by approaching the various texts in this study as works of tragic literature, I will attempt to read “against the grain of the Christian canon and tradition” in an effort to discover “new connotative possibilities” (Aichele 318). On the other hand, my ideological and theological assumptions will become apparent throughout the course of these readings. As Aichele suggests, “Like historical readings, literary readings of the Gospels are also theological readings. They may not be overtly theological, but they will never entirely avoid the theological” (319). This will certainly be the case in my reading of the first twelve chapters of Exodus and the story of the Last Supper in the Gospel of Mark. In my reading of Mark’s Gospel, I will discuss a eucharistic model of sacrifice, which has been a topic of debate among Christian theologians since the church’s inception but has only rarely featured within literary discussions of sacrifice in tragic literature.

Part I: The Scapegoating Model of Sacrifice

Chapter I

Narrative Complexity and Scapegoating in *The Bacchae*

The religious and civic function of classical Greek tragedy is manifestly sacrificial. Moreover, from a literary perspective, *The Bacchae* produces multiple scapegoats in order to bring about its dramatically ironic and cathartic ending. Consequently, this play does not seek to *demystify* the practice of scapegoating, but instead it may be interpreted as a more sophisticated expression of scapegoating sacrifice. In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Girard claims that there are certain groups of texts which seek to disclose the practice of scapegoating and its effects in society and those which seek to disguise it. Girard's dichotomous classification of literary texts provides us with clear insight into the interpretive limitations that his critique of sacrificial violence imposes upon works of tragic literature. His theory of sacrifice establishes two basic groups within the context of social and literary conflicts—persecutors and the persecuted. Consequently, he identifies two basic types of literary works—texts of persecution and texts which reveal persecution by taking the side of the victim. However, this classification of literary texts reduces the conflicts at stake in tragic literature to an irreducible opposition between protagonists and antagonists. Moreover, Girard's model of scapegoating sacrifice is not able to address the complex relationship that exists between the narrator, the text and the reader. I will begin by first outlining the key characteristics of tragedy which prove problematic to the interpretive limitations Girard imposes upon literary texts and finally demonstrate the ways that, contrary to Girard's assessment, Euripides' *The Bacchae* participates in a sophisticated form of scapegoating.

Narrative Complexity and the Problem of Scapegoating

After developing his scapegoating model of sacrifice in *Violence and the Sacred*, in his later work Girard articulates a critique of violence in society that is the result of his reading of works of tragic literature and the Bible. According to Thomas Cousineau, "In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Girard suggests that the Hebrew Bible, the Gospels, Greek tragedy, and the plays of Shakespeare are characterized, in contrast to what he calls 'persecution narratives,' by their readiness to come to the

defense of an unjustly persecuted victim” (*Ritual Unbound*, 22). Nevertheless, Cousineau argues that the distinction between texts that endorse the practice of scapegoating and those that reject it is not quite as tidy as Girard’s analysis suggests. In his investigation of scapegoating in works of modernist fiction such as *The Great Gatsby*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and *Heart of Darkness*, Cousineau argues that the “distinction between accepting or rejecting scapegoating does not apply to these novels” unproblematically because “their narrators tend to defend the designated victims in ways that ironically produce a *remystification* of sacrifice” (17).

According to Girard, stories in which the narrator comes to the defence of the scapegoat may be understood as distinct from so-called texts of persecution which fail to acknowledge the plight of the scapegoat. In *The Scapegoat*, Girard distinguishes between so-called texts of persecution and texts that take the side of sacrificial victims. Moreover, he identifies two different types of scapegoats—a “scapegoat of the text,” which exists as a “hidden structural principle” within a story, and a “scapegoat in the text,” that may appear as “a clearly visible theme” (TS 119). A text that contains a hidden structural scapegoat “can be defined as one of persecution” because it unquestionably assumes the perspective of the persecutor. As a result such a text does not acknowledge its exploitation of the scapegoat (TS 119). However, he suggests that a text which thematizes the plight of the scapegoat should not be considered a “text of persecution” because it seeks to reveal “the truth of persecution” (TS 119). In the analysis above, Girard quickly moves from the ontological concerns of his sociological critique of scapegoating to certain epistemological concerns related to literary representation. If Girard’s scapegoat of the text is a hidden structural principle, then how is it possible to ensure that we have effectively detected the presence of this hidden scapegoat? How can we be sure as readers that we are not also implicated in the practice of scapegoating portrayed within the text? Cousineau claims that in coming to the defence of the scapegoat, the narrators of modernist novels “often encourage the community of readers assembled around them to direct its own scapegoating impulses against other targeted figures” (17).

Cousineau’s thesis in *Ritual Unbound* demonstrates that scapegoating is not only a matter of narrative perspective but also of interpretation. Even if a narrator is capable of coming to the defence of

the scapegoat in some unambiguous manner, there is no guarantee that the reader will perceive this effort to be a rejection of scapegoating sacrifice. Cousineau suggests that stories which direct readers toward the plight of the scapegoat “create a highly unstable relationship between the scapegoat, the community that persecutes him, and the narrator that comes to his defense” (17). According to Cousineau, “The moral interest of these works lies—not in the defense of the victim or even in the imputing of blame to the fictional community—but in the revelation of the complicity that makes ourselves as readers an all-too-real community whose own scapegoating impulses have been enlisted in the narrator’s cause” (17-18). Because literature is always bound up with questions of interpretation, Cousineau demonstrates that from a literary perspective it is not entirely possible to distance ourselves from the practice of sacrifice or to be sure that our perspective as readers has not been complicit in sophisticated forms of scapegoating.

The narrative complexity which Cousineau observes in works of modernist fiction is perhaps even more apparent within the context of tragic drama, where the relationship between the reader and the text of course resembles the relationship between the audience and the actual tragic performance. The audience plays a vital role in the definition of tragedy Aristotle’s definition of tragedy in the *Poetics*, and currently, tragedy continues to be interpreted by many contemporary scholars in terms of its dramatic effects. For Aristotle, the primary aim of tragic drama is to bring about endings that are dramatically ironic and cathartic, both of which demonstrate the extent to which tragic dramas are constructed as participatory events that served both a religious and political function in ancient Greek society. Similarly, Jennifer Wallace states that “ultimately the source of tragedy lies in its capacity to elicit the audience’s response” (3). Consequently, she claims that “this is why tragedy has traditionally been contemplated in the theatre, since this is the place where licensed witness takes place and is positively demanded” (Wallace 3-4). Wallace’s comments highlight two important components of tragic drama that demonstrate its narrative complexity—firstly, tragic drama takes place within the context of a real and nonetheless imagined theatrical space, and secondly the audience’s participation is fundamental to our understanding of tragedy as a story which provokes both pity and fear.

From a formalistic perspective, it is possible to identify two key components of tragedy which demonstrate the complex relationship that exists between readers and the texts themselves. Through the experience of catharsis, readers participate in the scapegoating logic of tragic dramas. Catharsis according to Aristotle's description is fundamental to the audience's emotional engagement with tragic drama. This emotional experience is a result of bearing witness to the predetermined moment of suffering on the part of the protagonist. In this way, it may be considered part of a certain sacrificial exchange between the audience and the tragic figure who furnishes us with this purifying experience.

Girard has elucidated the sacrificial logic of catharsis. However, he does not account for the vital role which the audience or the reader plays in the experience of catharsis. He traces Aristotle's notion of catharsis back to its origins in rites of purification that resembled the shamanistic act of expelling illness through the use of symbolic object which acted as substitute for the actual illness: "The Greek term for an evil object extracted by means of a similar ritual is *katharma*. This term was also used as a variant of *pharmakos* to designate a sacrificial human victim" (VS 286). Girard concludes that the "word *katharsis* refers primarily to the mysterious benefits that accrue to the community upon the death of a human *katharma* or *pharmakos*. The process is generally seen as a religious purification and takes the form of cleansing or draining away impurities (VS 287). Girard suggests that by defining tragedy as an essentially cathartic experience, Aristotle "asserts that tragedy can and should assume at least some of the functions assigned to ritual in a world where ritual has disappeared" (VS 290). Nevertheless, because the tragedian presumably comes to the defense of the tragic protagonist, Girard downplays tragedy's commitment to bringing about cathartic and consequently sacrificial endings.

In addition to the experience of catharsis, works of classical Greek tragedy also contain endings that are dramatically ironic and consequently sacrificial. Although the word irony does not appear in Aristotle's *Poetics*, Douglas Muecke speculates, "The word *peripeteia*, which sometimes appears as 'irony' in translations of the *Poetics*, might perhaps be regarded as in part supplying the need for a word signifying 'irony of events'" (48). He notes that dramatically ironic situations are so common to tragic drama that "we may suppose that there was no pressing need to distinguish it with a name" (Muecke 48).

The protagonist's change from good to bad fortune is not unexpected in works of classical Greek tragedy, although the manner in which it occurs may be nonetheless shocking. As an essential feature of Aristotle's description of tragic plots, the downfall of the tragic figure is both a necessary and expected feature of any tragic plot. Works of classical Greek tragedy demonstrate a certain sacrificial teleology—the tragic figure is determined from the outset to suffer. In works of tragic literature, the human agent is firstly the tragedian whose imagination produces the orderly set of events which leads to the protagonist's downfall, and secondly the audience or reader, who experiences both pity and fear while bearing witness to the tragic events. The dramatic tension and the moment of impending catharsis are made ever more intense by our ironic insight into the source of the protagonist's downfall. In traditionalist conceptions of tragedy, it is the tragic flaw, the error in judgment, which the audience interprets as the justification for the suffering of the tragic protagonist. However, as Eagleton argues, "By no means [do] all Greek protagonists concede that their suffering is justified, accept their guilt or confess that the calamity follows from their own behavior. And they are mostly quite right not to do so. It is the theorists of tragedy, not the victims of it, who imagine that they do, or at least that they should" (137). Tragic suffering takes place within a social, political and most importantly literary context that is never immune to questions of human agency and responsibility which involve everyone caught up in the dramatic performance. Thus, the suffering of the tragic figure may be regarded as a kind of sacrifice that takes place within the literary framework of classical Greek tragedy. Most importantly, the tragedian as well as the audience or reader as it were, becomes part of the sacrificial movements of tragedy through the process of narrating and bearing witness to these moments of tragic suffering.

The complex relationship that exists between tragic drama and its audience reveals one of the primary limitations of Girard's sociological reading of literary works. Girard's critique of sacrificial violence relies upon a categorization of society into two main groups—persecutors and the persecuted scapegoat. He employs these sociological and consequently ontological categories in his interpretations of literary works. However, as with any form of artistic representation, tragedy gives rise to numerous epistemological questions which in turn challenge such efforts to transpose literary patterns of human

conflict back onto ‘real life’ experiences of violence. When it comes to questions of human suffering and violence, Edith Hall observes that “Many tragedies suggest that several causes have combined to create the suffering that they represent. It is not always easy to distinguish the metaphysical from the ontological, or the ethical from the epistemological” (178). Consequently, tragic literature brings the epistemological and ontological assumptions of Girard’s critique of sacrifice into sharp relief and reveals the extent to which these assumptions may be subject to further enquiry.¹¹

Religious Explorations and Mythological Antagonisms

Girard’s dichotomous classification of literary texts is further complicated in *The Bacchae* by the fact that the play is set in the imaginary city of Thebes. The imaginary city of Thebes played a crucial historical role in the construction the Athenian’s social, political, and religious identity. Froma I. Zeitlin has provided an insightful description of the relationship between classical Greek tragedy’s imaginary setting, Thebes, and the historical city of ancient Athens. Firstly, Zeitlin argues that the city of Thebes “occupies a very small territory, no larger than the extent of the stage in the theater of Dionysus under the shadow of the Acropolis at Athens” (1986: 101). Although the scenery onstage would have been minimalistic, Zeitlin states that the setting would have been known to the Greek audience “from what over and over again the tragic poets cause to transpire there as they treat the different myths that share a common terrain in Thebes” (101). She continues:

We think immediately of the saga of the house of Laius that situates Oedipus at its center and extends beyond him to the dramas of his children—his sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, and his daughters, Antigone and Ismene. But there is also the prior story of Cadmus, the Spartoi, or Sown Men, and the founding of the city through autochthony (birth from the earth) and fratricide, as the

¹¹ Girard attempts to resolve these ontological and epistemological difficulties by claiming that in the Gospel’s the ‘truth’ about scapegoating is historically and at the crucifixion. In his analysis of Girard’s theory of sacrifice, Charles K. Bellinger states, “The high point of revelation is the Gospel’s depiction of the crucifixion of Christ, which tears the mask off of culture’s insistence that it is in the right when it executes people. The Gospels expose this lie by showing that Christ is innocent and that those who are killing him are in the wrong” (*The Trinitarian Self: The Key to the Puzzle of Violence* [Pickwick Publications: Eugene, 2008], 43). This revelation for Girard brings about an epistemological awareness of scapegoating, which affects a certain ontological distinction between, as Bellinger’s analysis demonstrates, oppressors and the oppressed. According to Bellinger, “Girard’s theory arises out of his perception that conventional literary criticism and social science are limited in their explanatory power. They are a bit dull-witted at times. To be brought into a more lively engagement with the reality of human psychology and culture, these disciplines need to be opened to a broader horizon of thought that is provided by the scriptures and by the refraction of scriptural insights in authors such as Shakespeare and Dostoevsky” (44). Bellinger’s comments demonstrate the curious double-bind of Girard’s so-called anthropological and sociological critique of scapegoating: on the one hand, Girard’s theory of sacrifice is considered to be based upon a certain scientific approach to sacrifice that is then applied to literary texts, but on the other hand, the source of this knowledge is the revelation of sacrificial violence in the Gospel’s literary portrayal of the crucifixion. In the chapter four of this thesis, I will examine the contradictory nature of Girard’s approach to interpreting the Gospels.

Sown Men fight one another to their mutual destruction with the exception of five who survive to inaugurate the history of the city. And, thirdly, we must include the myth of the god Dionysus himself, the son of Zeus and Semele, who, reputedly born at Thebes, returns home to claim recognition of his divinity and to establish the cult of his worship in his native city (101-102).

By linking all of these myths to the imaginary space of Thebes, Zeitlin suggests that “we look at Thebes as a *topos* in both senses of the word: as designated place, a geographical locale, and figuratively, as a recurrent concept or formula, or what we call a ‘commonplace’ ” (102). Although I am approaching *The Bacchae* primarily as a tragic narrative rather than a performance, Zeitlin’s description of Thebes as a *topos* that operates both figuratively and geographically as a dramatic space demonstrates the extent to which tragedy as form of artistic representation resists epistemological and ontological schematization. The dramatic action of the play is constantly taking place between the imaginary space of Thebes and the geographical area of the stage which was of vital religious and political significance for the Greek audience. There would have been no clear line between artistic representation and religious celebration.

The public performance of a tragedy was also an opportunity for the Athenian audience to explore its own religious and civic values. In her description of the relationship between three important cities of Greek tragedy, Zeitlin claims that Thebes operates as a “negative model to Athens” (1989: 131). Consequently, the city of Thebes functions as a fictional space for Athens to project its own social and religious anxieties. According to Zeitlin, Thebes is an anti-Athens “where the city puts itself and its values into question” (144). Greek tragedy operates on a number of interpretive levels at once. On the one hand, it offers a fictional portrayal of events which unfold in the mythical city of Thebes. And on the other hand, it is a ritual performance in which the city of Athens explores questions of its own religious and political identity. Therefore, Athens pursues self-identity and explores its mythological values through the conflicts that take place within the fictional city of Thebes. These conflicts take the form of certain agonistic struggles which form the basis of Greek tragedy’s dramatic action.¹² Once again what is

¹² The mythological antagonisms that form the basis of the dramatic conflicts in Greek tragedy are connected to two basic components of the tragic performance—the *agōn*, which is also related to the stichomythic exchange, and the experience of catharsis. According to Andrew Brown, the word *agōn* “means ‘contest’, and is used by modern critics to denote a set-piece legalistic debate between two or more characters” (*A New Companion to Greek Tragedy* [Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1983], 33). Brown suggests that there are no definitive criteria for determining whether or not a particular scene ought to be considered an *agōn*. Nevertheless, he suggests that some form of the *agōn* may be observed in the works of Euripides as well as Sophocles (Brown 33).

at stake in the tragic performance is not simply an artistic exploration of religion and politics, but it is also an historical expression of the Athenian audience's pursuit of civic identity.

According to Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, the myth of Dionysus forms the religious backdrop to the performances of classical Greek tragedy, and she argues that "this core aspect was the reception and welcoming and entertainment of the god [...]" (73). However, the religious celebration of this reception also paradoxically involves the story of the Athenian's resistance to accepting Dionysus as a god. Consequently, the dramatic conflict in *The Bacchae* emerges from within the context of a mythological story of antagonism between Dionysus and the city of Thebes. The play begins with a retelling of the story of Dionysus' mortal mother Semele, who conceives a child by Zeus but is eventually slain by the god when he appears to her in his divine form. Although divine and human spheres of existence constantly intersect in myth as well as in tragedy, their convergence frequently ends in disaster. Pentheus is clearly presented as the victim of sacrificial violence in the play. However, Pentheus also demonstrate some mix of *hamartia* and *hubris* which renders him susceptible to sacrifice. Dionysus also demonstrates his own extreme form of *hubris*. In the end, his ego is stroked by the suffering of Pentheus. Consequently, *The Bacchae* explores the complex and often dangerous relationship between humans and the divine.

The play explicitly addresses questions of religious piety and the nature of the gods. Through its re-enactment of the mythological founding of the Dionysian cult, the play stages a convergence between the human and the divine that ultimately ends in disaster. Peace and order are restored through the death of Pentheus and the disappearance of Dionysus. The transcendence of the gods is affirmed through the play's portrayal of the risks involved when gods and humans consort. In the end, the opposition between humans and the divine is secured through the death of Pentheus. Although the blame for his death is relegated to numerous other characters in the text, responsibility is also ultimately ascribed to Dionysus whose final disappearance marks a return to peace. Consequently, both Pentheus and Dionysus may be interpreted as scapegoat within the play.

Girard accounts for the strange convergence which takes place between Pentheus and Dionysus by interpreting them in terms of his theory of the sacrificial crisis.¹³ *The Bacchae* paradoxically celebrates and condemns excess. With a play such as this, it is not difficult to discern the relationship between Greek tragedy and the ritual celebration of the Dionysian festival. According to Girard, the festival is a time when “unnatural acts and outrageous behavior are permitted” and as a result the social hierarchies are temporarily suspended, and consequently “this destruction of differences is often accompanied by violence and strife” (VS 119). For some societies, festivals represent the “happy ending” to the sacrificial crisis and the expulsion of the sacrificial victim which restores order “becomes itself a cause for jubilation” (VS 121). However, societies may also respond to the sacrificial crisis and the sacrificial expulsion with “an extreme austerity and an increased rigor in the observance of all interdicts” (VS 121). Regardless of whether a culture seeks to resolve the sacrificial crisis through the observance of celebrations or austerity, sacrifice brings an end to the social turmoil and restores the oppositions previously lost in the crisis. In *The Bacchae* we find each of the responses to the sacrificial crisis which Girard outlines above. The death of Pentheus on the one hand represents a return to austerity, reverence and a proper relationship between humans and the divine, and on the other hand the expulsion of Dionysus at the end of the play is cause for celebration as the disruptive fury of the god finally departs from the land of Thebes.

In his analysis of the relationship between festivals and the sacrificial crisis, Girard focuses specifically on the myth of Dionysus. He applies his theory of the relationship between festivals and the sacrificial crisis to the mythological content of *The Bacchae*. He argues that the myth of Dionysus in Euripides’ play functions in much the same way as the myth of Oedipus in *Oedipus the King* (VS 127).

¹³ Girard interprets all aspects of tragic drama in terms his own anthropological model of scapegoating sacrifice. The agonistic struggles which give rise to tragic drama are interpreted in terms of a conflict between differing forms of sacrificial violence. When sacrificial rituals fail to uphold the distinction between destructive violence and beneficial violence, Girard argues that “purification is no longer possible and impure, contagious, reciprocal violence spreads throughout a community” (VS 49). According to Girard’s triangular model of desire, mimetic rivalries may escalate to such intensity that the differences between rivals begin to disappear as they each assume the attributes of the other. Likewise, he suggests that the sacrificial crisis can be understood “as a crisis of distinctions—that is, a crisis affecting the cultural order” (VS 49). He claims that this crisis of distinctions is a central concern for primitive religion as well as Greek tragedy: “A single principle is at work in primitive religion and classical tragedy alike, a principle implicit but fundamental. Order, peace, and fecundity depend on cultural distinctions; it is not these distinctions but the loss of them that gives birth to fierce rivalries and sets members of the same family or social group at one another’s throats” (VS 49).

But in *The Bacchae* the “playwright’s task was made easier because the bacchanal perpetuates an essential aspect of the sacrificial crisis: the destruction of differences” (VS 127). The oppositions between men and women, humans and animals, and most importantly between humans and the divine are disrupted by the presence of Dionysus in the play.¹⁴ Along with the loss of sexual differences, demonstrated by a number of cases of mistaken sexual identity which occur throughout the play, Girard notes that the play also stages a “loss of distinction between man and beast” as well as the “seemingly indelible distinction between man and god—in this instance, between Pentheus and Dionysus” (VS 128).

In his reading of *The Bacchae*, Girard suggests that Dionysus may appear in one context as maleficent force and elsewhere as a beneficent one, thus embodying the dual nature of the scapegoat or *pharmakos*. Nevertheless, he does not consider the god to be a scapegoat within the context of the play. Instead, he argues that “Dionysus plays the role not of victim, but of executioner” (VS 250). Because Girard’s scapegoating model of sacrifice is only capable of accounting for the existence of one scapegoat at a particular time, he must choose between Pentheus as the scapegoat or Dionysus, and consequently he chooses the human rather than the god. As the “incarnation of violence,” Girard claims that Dionysus may either play the role of the scapegoat or the persecutor (VS 250). He also notes that “there are moments in Dionysus’ career when he relinquishes the role of executioner to assume that of victim of the *disparagmos*” (VS 250-251). However, in *The Bacchae* it is Pentheus rather than Dionysus who suffers dismemberment. And according to Girard’s classification of literary works, the play presumably takes the side of the human victim rather than the god. Nevertheless, Girard’s interpretation of Dionysus as the executioner glosses over the highly sophisticated role that the god plays in the tragic drama.

Scapegoating and Sacrificial Teleology

The conflicts in Greek tragedy cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between good and evil. Instead, tragedy enacts a series of revolving oppositions whereby the reciprocal violence that plagues the community is embodied in the stichomythic exchange of the tragic dialogue (VS 150). According to Girard, the reversals that take place in the stichomythic exchange are ultimately brought to an end by the

¹⁴ Girard notes that in *The Bacchae*, “The poet underlines the destruction of distinctions as the god sweeps away all the barriers that usually divide mortals: wealth, age, sex, and so on” (VS 126).

death of a single scapegoat. Typically, the combatant who loses the stichomythic exchange is the one who is sacrificed (VS 150-51). The death of the scapegoat ensures that the oscillations and loss of differences which characterize the sacrificial crisis are settled and the community restored to a momentary state of equilibrium. The restoration of order and the sense of resolution which typifies the cathartic climax of tragic drama cannot be accomplished without the narrative seeking in some way to stabilize the oppositions which have been in turmoil throughout the play. The theological appeals to the authority and mystery of the gods serve to distance the audience from the sacrificial violence of the plays. The experience of catharsis relies upon this distancing, which allows the Greek audience to bear witness to the suffering of the tragic victim while nonetheless rejoicing in the fact that they are not the ones to fall victim to the judgement of the gods.

However, in *The Bacchae* it is possible to identify at least two scapegoats operating at once in the dramatic action of the play. Pentheus fulfils the basic role of the sacrificial victim who dies as a means of restoring order and peace to Thebes, and Dionysus who bears the blame for the violence which ensues in the tragic conflict.¹⁵ But by the end of the play we find that responsibility is shunted onto the divine. The act of shifting blame onto the gods may be interpreted as a remystification of sacrificial violence. The play stages a temporary suspension of Thebes' social and erotic inhibitions. This suspension of social norms is sanctioned by Dionysus himself. Dionysus encourages practically every manner of excess when it comes to honouring him as a deity. The only act which he cannot apparently tolerate is that of disbelief and irreverence on the part of Pentheus. By refusing to participate in the bacchanalian celebration, Pentheus invites divine judgment upon the city. Reverence in this instance is a matter of reaffirming the opposition between humans and the divine. At the very outset of the play, Dionysus claims that he has come to teach Thebes that his "Bacchic revels are something beyond her present knowledge and understanding," and to vindicate his mother by revealing himself "before the human race as the god

¹⁵ The biblical parallel to this dual scapegoating pattern may be found in the Old Testament's account of the Day of Atonement (Lev.16:6-10). Paul Fiddes suggests that the meaning of Hebrew Word *kipper* "may come from word-roots meaning 'to wipe away' or 'to cover'. But the fact that sacrifice was understood to expiate sin in the sense of 'wiping away' or 'covering it over' by divine mercy, is clear not from linguistics but from the very idea of sin itself" (*Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* [Darton, Longman & Todd: London, 1989], 72). He explains that sin was conceived of as either an illness or uncleanness that needed "be cleansed away" (72). Consequently, in the ritual of the Day of Atonement there is the killing of a scapegoat as well as sending out of the scapegoat who bore the burden of the community's sins (Fiddes 72).

whom she bore to Zeus” (Vellacott 182). These claims are part of a larger effort on the part of Dionysus to assert his ascendancy by re-establishing the fundamental opposition between humans and the divine. Firstly, by affirming the necessary and nonetheless mysterious function of the bacchanal, Dionysus asserts his own wisdom and understanding over that of Thebes. And secondly, by refuting claims that his mother gave birth to a mortal rather than a god, Dionysus attempts to resolve once and for all the question of his own divinity.

In the opening scene of the play, Dionysus appears disguised in the form an effeminate young man. He reveals that he has come to Thebes to vindicate his deceased mother Semele, who was the daughter of Cadmus and sister to Agauë. Through the influence of Agauë, Semele’s sisters apparently questioned her claims that she had been impregnated by Zeus, and as a result they failed to acknowledge the child’s divinity. According to Dionysus, Semele’s sisters claimed that “this lie about the fatherhood of her child was the sin for which Zeus had struck her dead” (Vellacott 182). After establishing his cult in numerous foreign lands, Dionysus claims that he has chosen Thebes as the “first place in Hellas where, at [his] command, women have raised the Bacchic shout, put on the fawnskin cloak, and take my weapon in their hands” (Vellacott 182).¹⁶ Dionysus sets a plague of madness upon the women of Thebes that drives them out into the wilderness to dance and to hunt like wild animals. Likewise, the old men of Thebes, including Cadmus, have become infatuated with the Bacchae and are gradually drawn to the foot of Mount Cithaeron to join in the celebrations. Pentheus returns to Thebes to find his grandfather Cadmus and the blind-seer Teiresias dressed in fawnskin and carrying the fennel-wand of a Bacchant. After proclaiming his disapproval, he orders his men to find and arrest “this effeminate foreigner, who plagues our women with this strange disease and turns them into whores” (Vellacott 192). Pentheus’ men capture Dionysus, and Pentheus takes him for an imposter and has him imprisoned. However, the god is not one to be easily subdued. Dionysus quickly escapes and further madness ensues.

¹⁶ According to Robert Graves’ account of the origins of Dionysus, the god is portrayed as a sort of world traveller and industrious conqueror. And yet like so many prominent mythological and literary figures, his story begins with his escape from infanticide (*The Greek Myths*. Vol. 1. 1955. Amended 1957. Rev.1960. [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955], 103). After being torn apart by the Titans and “boiled in a cauldron,” Dionysus is “reconstituted by his grandmother Rhea” and sent to live with King Athamas and Ino who raises him “in the women’s quarters, disguised as a girl” (Graves 104). He is forced to flee once more to the Heliconian Mount Nysa where he is said to have invented wine (Graves 104). Dionysus supposedly “sailed to Egypt, bringing the vine with him; and at Pharos King Proteus received him hospitably” (Graves, 104). Graves states, “The main clue to Dionysus’s mystic history is the spread of the vine cult over Europe, Asia and North Africa” (107).

Although Dionysus appears to hold a grudge against the entire city of Thebes, he identifies Pentheus as a particularly problematic figure. The initial irreverence which he ascribes to all of Thebes is quickly transferred to the solitary figure of Pentheus: “Now Cadmus has handed over his honours and his throne to his daughter’s son Pentheus. And this Pentheus is a fighter against God—he defies me, excludes me from libations, never names me in prayer. Therefore, I will demonstrate to him, and to all of Thebes, that I am a god” (Vellacott 183). Paradoxically, Dionysus decides to appear in human form so that he can ensure that the Bacchae will not be prevented from celebrating the bacchanal. He claims that “if the Theban city in anger tries to bring the Bacchae home from the mountains by force, I will join that army of women possessed and lead them to battle” (Vellacott 183). The city of Thebes is essentially divided into two related and nonetheless distinct groups—the women who along with Agauë suffer a plague of madness as recompense for slandering Dionysus’ mother Semele, and the men of the city who along with Pentheus have failed to give Dionysus the reverence he is due. By taking the form of an effeminate youth, Dionysus is capable of moving freely between these two groups in order to create disruption and confusion throughout Thebes. The conflict between Dionysus and Pentheus rapidly takes centre stage. In the end, Dionysus’ plan to lead the women in a battle against the opposing forces of Thebes is reduced to a rather petty act of mob violence directed against the tragic figure of Pentheus.

According to Girard’s description of the substitutionary logic of the scapegoat, Pentheus operates metonymically as the one member of the community who bears the burden of guilt which in fact belongs to all of Thebes. As a king, Pentheus functions politically as representative for the entire community. Girard claims that sacrificial victims must be isolated or marginalized figures who exist both inside and outside of the community (VS 271). The hostilities of the community may only be transferred onto the scapegoat if there is a metonymic relationship between the tragic victim and the community. Consequently, the scapegoat must be associated closely enough with the Theban community to be identified as the contaminated source of the sacrificial crisis, and yet he must also possess some characteristics that make him distinct from the rest of the community. Pentheus occupies just such a position. As the king of Thebes, Pentheus is at once an essential part of the Theban community and

nonetheless distanced from it due to his royal status. According to Girard, in order for the sacred king to be transformed into a sacrificeable victim, he must be made to appear somehow distanced from his own community (VS 227). This process begins from the very outset of the play. Like Dionysus, Pentheus enters the play from outside the city. Pentheus' separation from the community is further enhanced by his initial refusal to partake in the bacchanal. In the moments following Dionysus' arrest, the chorus pronounces its judgment upon Pentheus, and thus begins the process of scapegoating that will eventually lead to his shocking dismemberment: "O what anger lies beneath Pentheus' voice and sullen face— Offspring of the dragon's teeth, And Eichion's earth-born race, Brute with blood jaws agape, God-defying, gross and grim, Slander of his human shape! . . . From great Olympus; touch this murderous man, And bring his violence to a sudden end! (Vellacott 198). In this passage, the chorus does not identify Dionysus as the source of the disruption and violence in Thebes but rather Pentheus.

Girard does not regard the god as a type of scapegoat; however, he does note a certain unmistakable symmetry between Dionysus and Pentheus. He suggests that the two figures are mirror images of one another: "There is no aspect of Dionysus that fails to find a reflection in Pentheus" (VS 128). They are each in their own ways traditionalists—Dionysus "the defender of divine and human laws" and Pentheus "a pious conservative, a guardian of traditional values" (VS 128). However, they each have a dark and transgressive side. Dionysus drives the women of Thebes to madness and seeks to draw Pentheus into the bacchic celebrations through deception and manipulation. Likewise, Pentheus harbours a secret desire to engage in the bacchanal. Dionysus plays this desire to his advantage and brings Pentheus dangerously close to transgressing the taboo of incest. After dressing him in the costume of a Bacchic devotee, Dionysus calls to Pentheus: "Come, perverse man, greedy for sights you should not see, impatient for deeds you should not do—Pentheus! Come out of the palace and show yourself to me, wearing the garb of a frenzied Bacchic woman, ready to spy on mother and all her company!" (Vellacott 210). This insinuation of incest is perhaps enough to doom Pentheus. However, Dionysus continues to taunt his adversary, and in the process Pentheus falls victim to the delusion of deification that is produced when he dons the costume of the god.

After foppishly worrying over the appearance of his costume, under the influence of Dionysus, Pentheus raises the thyrsus in his right hand. This gesture of potency and patriarchal authority enhances his delusional state, and he imagines that he has acquired superhuman strength. He inquires, “Do you think I could lift up on my shoulders the glens of Cithaeron, with all the women revelling there...Shall we take crowbars? Or shall I simply set my shoulder, or my arm, against the mountain peaks, and tear them up with my hands?” (Vellacott 211) At this point, Dionysus leads Pentheus to his death as he proclaims his victory over the man, “Stretch out your hands, Agauë, and you her sisters, daughters of Cadmus! I am bringing the young man to his battle; and I and Dionysus shall be victors” (Vellacott 212). These lines represent a rather sudden shift in the dramatic framework of the play. The first person ‘I’ of the actor momentarily breaks from his dramatic persona. The break in character reveals what is of course already apparent to the audience—the two figures on stage are each playing the part of Dionysus—and consequently they are both imposters. By momentarily breaking character, the actor draws our attention to the fact that even the god is being played according to the whims of the tragedian. As a result, the image of the divine is disclosed as an agent of the tragic fate which awaits Pentheus. Most importantly, this disruption in the interpretive framework of the text reveals the instability that exists between the scapegoat of the text and the scapegoat in the text.

This momentary break in the dramatic framework of the play reveals the play’s commitment to bringing about a cathartic and dramatically ironic ending. By pre-emptively pronouncing his victory over Pentheus, the voice of the tragedian interjects into the action of the play to indicate a necessary shift toward the scene of suffering which has been predetermined from the outset of the play. Pentheus has already played the fool for Dionysus and the audience, and now it is time for him to meet his fate as the sacrificial victim of the play. All of these actions conform to the sacrificial teleology of the tragic performance and reveal a connection to the ritual sacrifice to Dionysus. Walter Burkert suggests that sacrificial rituals often involved a “comedy of innocence” in which those involved in the ritual attempt to free themselves from the feelings of guilt that accompany the killing:

In the ambivalence of the intoxication of blood and the horror of killing, in the twofold aspect of life and death, [the rituals] hold something fundamentally uncanny, we might almost say tragic.

Our information about the goat-sacrifice to Dionysus is scanty. Whether we are entitled to see in the goat Dionysus himself impersonated, or to understand both goat and Dionysus as representing an “eniautos-daimon [annual spirit]” or even the dying king, is difficult to assess. The ancient texts call the goat the enemy of Dionysus, making his death a triumph of aggression. . . . On the other hand, there is the “comedy of innocence,” making the vine-gnawing goat responsible for his own death. And perhaps there was even a kind of mock resurrection, analogous to the Buphonia: the *tragōidoi* are said to have received a wineskin full of wine—*askoi* (wineskins) were made of goatskin. So we are reduced again to the basic ambivalence of sacrifice, and perhaps this ambivalence is the most essential feature (1990: 16).

Burkert’s description of the hostility between the scapegoat and Dionysus mirrors perfectly the dramatic conflict in *The Bacchae*. Moreover, Pentheus meets his death only after he takes on the costume of Dionysus and subsequently presumes to have obtained the god’s divine powers in the process. All of these movements adhere to the ritual pattern outlined by Burkert. Contrary to Girard, these moments in the play do not reflect a critique of sacrificial violence but rather a sophisticated form of scapegoating.

By donning the garb of a bacchant, Pentheus is transformed into a feminized version of his previous self. His concern for the minor details of his costume and dress intensifies the humiliation that accompanies the comedy of innocence that is performed at his expense. In his book, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (1978), Oliver Taplin observes the sacrificial underpinnings of this scene: “What is it that is so sinister about all these fussy trivialities? Partly it is the pleasure the god takes in humouring his victim’s degradation, partly it is the pointlessness of such concerns for a man doomed to death, partly there may be the sense that, as for a sacrificial victim, everything must be just right[.]” (76). Thus, in this pivotal scene, Dionysus simply administers the sacrificial movements of the tragic performance. Pentheus’ humiliation is not played out solely on behalf of the god; as in all aspects of the tragic performance, it is also a spectacle for the audience as well.

The play draws to a close with the mock resurrection scene which Burkert has described. In the aftermath of the violent encounter between Pentheus and the Bacchae, Agauë remains under the spell of Dionysus and returns to Thebes with the severed head of her own son. Agauë asks Cadmus what brought her to Cithaeron in the first place, and he replies, “You were mad; the whole city was possessed by Dionysus” (Vellacott 222). It is clear that the contaminating force in the play is Dionysus. He is the

source of the madness and the one responsible for the death of Pentheus. Dionysus is portrayed as pernicious and vindictive god who offers destruction in return for insult.

Although Pentheus suffers at the hands of women, specifically his own mother and her sisters, Cadmus states that Dionysus chose to direct the punishment that belonged to the entire family solely toward Pentheus. Speaking to Agauë, Cadmus claims, “He was like you in not reverencing Dionysus. Therefore the god has joined all in one destruction, you and your sisters, and Pentheus, to strike down my house and me” (Vellacott 223). Likewise, after attending to her son’s dismembered body, Agauë describes Pentheus as “a king lured to a shameful death by the anger of a god” (Vellacott 224). Immediately after uttering these words, Dionysus appears in glory to proclaim his divinity before all of Thebes. At this point Dionysus claims responsibility for Pentheus’ death, and he asserts his divine right to “pursue vengeance to the utmost limit; that mortal men may know that the gods are greater than they” (Vellacott 225). Cadmus scrutinizes the god for being too harsh in his punishments, claiming that “Gods should not be like men, keeping anger for ever” (Vellacott 226). And Dionysus coldly replies that his father Zeus had “ordained this from the beginning” (Vellacott 226). And at that, Cadmus and Agauë accept their fate as exiles. As they exit the scene, Agauë reflects upon her bacchanalian garb, “My holy ivy-wreath, my thyrsus-rod, all that reminds me how I served this god!” (Vellacott 228). In this moment, responsibility is shifted from the bacchantes onto the god of tragedy himself. As the second scapegoat in the play, Dionysus cathartically delivers the bacchantes and the audience from their feelings of pity and fear. In the end, the opposition between humans and the divine is restored to a momentary state of equilibrium through the sacrificial death of Pentheus. On the one hand, Pentheus’ death is presented as the necessary consequence of his irreverent treatment of Dionysus, and on the other, the play portrays the god as vengeful deity whose wrath knows no bounds. After Agauë makes her final exit from the play, the chorus concludes: “Gods manifest themselves in many forms, Bring many matters to surprising ends; the things we thought would happen do not happen; The unexpected God makes possible: And that is what has happened here to-day” (Vellacott 228). With these closing remarks, the chorus gives the lie to the

fiction which tells us that the death of Pentheus is at once justified and yet unforeseen by the chorus as well as the audience.

As the most prominent scapegoat in the play, Pentheus is sacrificed and consequently initiates the departure of his structural counterpart Dionysus. Up to the very end, *The Bacchae* oscillates between a justification of Dionysus and a lament for the death of Pentheus. Like the scattered limbs of Pentheus, blame for his death is cast in every direction. Contrary to Girard's scapegoating model of sacrifice, according to which a group aligns itself against a single arbitrary victim, in *The Bacchae* we are presented with a second scapegoat—the god Dionysus. According to Girard, in rituals of sacrifice, violence is transformed into a transcendental and beneficent force by placing “sacrificial operations under the jurisdiction of the divinity” (VS 266). Nevertheless, according to this process, the god may be considered a scapegoat for the community's own feelings of guilt and shame. However, Girard resists this possibility because his sociological critique of sacrificial violence relies upon a fundamental opposition between persecutors and the persecuted, namely between Dionysus and Pentheus. Although *The Bacchae* does indeed stage a disruption of these oppositions—it is mainly concerned with staging a disruption of the opposition between humans and the divine. In the end it seeks to reaffirm this opposition by on the one hand sacrificing Pentheus as the scapegoat for the sins of the community, and on the other, scapegoating Dionysus as the ultimate source of the violence that in fact is shared by the entire community of Thebes.

The Bacchae offers a complex poetic exploration of the relationship between humans and the divine. Although it does not present us with any definitive conclusions on the matter, the play demonstrates that the delicate balance between humans and the divine is necessarily secured through sacrifice. In the midst of dramatic conflict, the distinction between Pentheus and Dionysus is temporarily lost. They each assume the attributes of the other. But Pentheus is the one who suffers as result of this convergence between humans and the divine. He is dismembered, his remains are scattered, and every trace of his presence is eliminated from the play. Similarly, the disturbing presence of Dionysus vanishes from the final scene. At the close of the play, the chorus holds the gods responsible for the terrible events that have taken place in the play. The antagonism between the Theban community and Dionysus forms

the necessary conditions for both the emergence of the dramatic conflict as well as its resolution. As one of many scapegoats in the play, Dionysus' divine status renders him at once responsible for the violence in the play and yet paradoxically beyond reproach. In this sense, he is the ideal scapegoat because he represents both the source and the cure for violence. His departure from the play marks a return to the peace and harmony that is only possible when the god remains at a distance from his people. By constructing an ending in which the god disappears from the play, the tragedian brings about a sense of closure that is nonetheless reliant upon the practice of scapegoating. The Thebans' feelings of guilt over the scapegoating of Pentheus are in the end relieved by deflecting the responsibility onto the figure of Dionysus. Therefore, despite the obvious opposition that exists between Pentheus and Dionysus, the two figures each function as scapegoats in the text because they bear the burden of blame for the conflict that plagues Thebes.

According to Girard's reading it is Dionysus who brings violence and Pentheus as the scapegoat whose death temporarily restores peace to Thebes. However, Adrian Poole has detected the potentially therapeutic and at times ambivalent role which Dionysus performs in the play: "Ease, easy, easeful: Dionysus is the god who brings release from care, anxiety, difficulty, oppression. In many of the choral odes the blessings and attractions of such freedom are celebrated with a vigour and grace that it is impossible to resist. Impossible, and perhaps dangerous" (221). He notes that this ease very quickly becomes violent, "In Euripedes, Pentheus' body is ripped to pieces with inhuman ease, and the smithereens are scattered over Cithaeron" (227). Poole suggests that there is tenderness and frailty demonstrated in Cadmus' careful gathering of the victim's remains, and this frailty is reflected in the precision and composition of the human form. Nevertheless, he suggests that there is "also a kind of cruelty, even glee, when we watch its intricate precisions through the eyes of Dionysus, when we share the 'ease' of Dionysus the artist, the god of tragedy" (227). Poole's analysis directs us once again toward the interpretive difficulties posed by works of tragic drama. As a dramatic re-enactment of human suffering he claims, "Tragedy is a special, unique kind of *pharmakon*. It embodies our most paradoxical feelings and thoughts and beliefs" (Poole 239). Tragedy itself demonstrates an irresolvable tension

between life and death, and it demonstrates dualistic nature, which Girard ascribes to the scapegoat. It does not privilege life over death, nor does it affirm violence over peace. Instead, in tragic drama these forces converge and are revealed to be paradoxical and nonetheless undeniable features of human life. The paradoxicality of tragic drama is disruptive to Girard's sociological critique of sacrificial violence and his attempt to maintain a pure distinction between persecutors and the persecuted.

Conclusion

In this discussion of *The Bacchae*, I have identified several obstacles to Girard's efforts to interpret works of classical Greek tragedy as texts which reject the practice of scapegoating sacrifice, as well as his dichotomous classification of literary texts. Girard's distinction between texts of persecution and texts which come to the defense of their tragic victims involves certain epistemological judgments which are shown to be problematic from a literary perspective. These epistemological judgments are further complicated by the indeterminacy of Thebes as an imaginary and historical *topos* of classical Greek tragedy. According to Aristotle's definition, tragic narratives demonstrate a commitment to bringing about dramatically ironic and cathartic endings. The principles of dramatic irony and catharsis each demonstrate a sacrificial teleology—the suffering of the protagonist is a predetermined aim or endpoint for works of tragic literature. The tragedian plays an obvious role in constructing these events, but likewise the experiences of catharsis and dramatic irony also entail a certain degree of participation on the part of the readers who anticipate and subsequently bear witness to the downfall of the tragic figure. Finally, I have demonstrated that *The Bacchae* employs not one scapegoat but at least two in order to bring about its dramatically ironic and cathartic ending. In light of these obstacles, Girard's effort to distinguish between a scapegoat of the text and a scapegoat in the text is shown to be highly problematic. Consequently, the distinction which he makes between texts of persecution and texts that come to the defense of their sacrificial victims proves equally problematic.

Chapter II

Sacrifice and Redemptive Narrative: Christopher Fry's *The Firstborn* and the Tragedy of Exodus

In this chapter, I will extend my critique of Girard's theory of sacrifice and the interpretive limitations that his critique of scapegoating imposes upon the Bible and in particular the book of Exodus. Through an examination of Moses as a tragic figure and a close reading of the story of the Passover in first twelve chapters of Exodus, I will argue that the redemptive narrative of Exodus resists a Girardian interpretation which seeks to reduce the story's conflicts to the fundamental opposition between persecutors and the persecuted. The previous chapter began with a critique of Girard's classification of works of tragic literature and the Bible into two main categories: texts of persecution and texts which come to the defense of their scapegoats. In my the last chapter, I argued that *The Bacchae* not only the fails to unambiguously come to the defence of the tragic scapegoat, but in order to bring about a dramatically ironic and cathartic ending, the play utilizes both Pentheus and Dionysus as scapegoats. Girard's sociological critique of scapegoating relies upon an ontological categorization of people into two basic groups: persecutors and the persecuted—oppressors and the oppressed. However, *The Bacchae* challenges any such reductive interpretation of the conflict between Dionysus and Pentheus. They are each in their own way transgressors, and in the end they each demonstrate a haughtiness and pride which renders them susceptible to scapegoating. But in the case of Pentheus, his punishment is surely disproportionate to his crimes. And as for Dionysus, he is merely the transcendental force which mediates the sacrificial urges of the audience—he is not alone in his guilt.

As a form of artistic representation, tragedy disrupts the basic distinction between so-called real and the imagined events. The stage in the theater of Dionysus occupies a liminal space where questions of religious piety and transgression are posed in a paradoxical manner which neither wholly approves nor disapproves of the suffering of the tragic protagonist. Girard attempts to replace the epistemological ambiguity that is inherent to tragedy with his own ethical concern for the plight of the sacrificial victim.

Consequently, he imposes significant interpretive limitations upon literary texts by simplifying their conflicts to an irreducible opposition between oppressors and the oppressed.

The Bacchae is essentially a religious play and its theological justifications for sacrificial violence emphasize the tremendous void that separates humans from the divine. The antagonism between humans and the divine forms the mythological basis for the dramatic conflict in *The Bacchae*. Tragic fate and human fallibility operate within a cosmological scheme in which the gods are both unquestionably powerful and nonetheless distanced from the suffering of human life. The gods may exact bitter judgement upon a man, but it may nonetheless be his own failings that bring about the catastrophes in his life. In *The Bacchae*, sacrifice is the primary means of restoring the delicate equilibrium that exists between humans and the divine. Most importantly, in this instance sacrifice is a distinctly human endeavour. Like the audience itself, the gods may look on with both approval and sometimes astonishment as the fate of the tragic victim unfolds. Nevertheless, the drama is a spectacle which they savour like the smoke that rises from the burnt offering of the scapegoat; they do not partake in the sacrifice nor do they contractually bind themselves to the officiants on the basis of such offerings. Theological appeals to the authority of the gods emerge as simply another means of restoring the sense of order that is lost in the midst of crisis.

Tragedy draws its content from a highly adaptable range of mythological themes, which often affirm the mysterious and capricious character of the gods. Tragedies do not present a unified vision of the world, or what is sometimes referred to as a tragic vision.¹ Instead, Kathleen Sands suggests that “they tell of worlds and times that are broken such that no coherent view of them can be had” (43). Greek tragedy presents its audience with a picture of the gods that is often as fragmented as its characters. Although peace is restored to the world of the play through the cathartic death of the scapegoat, the conflicts in Greek tragedy give rise to difficult questions about the nature of the gods and the ultimate

¹ According to Walter Burkert, scholars from scientific fields such as biology and sociology are often unaware “that Christian theology and metaphysics are by no means the only and definitely not the earliest form of religion and religious ritual . . .” (*Ancient Mystery Cults*, [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987] 46). Burkert argues that “[i]n Christianity there are articles of faith, to be believed and to be confessed, whereas in the mysteries there is reference to a sequence of rituals that have taken place” (46). Contrary to the tendencies of Western scholarship to think of ancient religion in theological terms “ritual does not need explicit theology to be effective” (Burkert 46).

value of human life. Such questions reflect certain epistemological concerns which emerge from the ontological conditions of life in a tragic universe. However, tragedy does not provide definitive answers to these questions; nor does it seek to resolve the paradoxical tensions of living a sacrificial existence. Instead, in the deterministic schema of Aristotelian tragedy, resolution and catharsis come through sacrifice, and the purgation of pity and fear that suffering evokes is the primary end of tragic drama.

The Old Testament and Tragedy

From the very outset of the Old Testament, biblical narratives as Robert Alter suggests persistently demonstrate “the basic perception that man must live before God, in the transforming medium of time, incessantly and perplexingly in relation with others [.]” (*Biblical Narrative*: 1981, 20). In this way, the Bible and Greek tragedy are each concerned with the difficulties and travails of the human condition—a condition that may itself be considered tragic. Moreover, works of tragic literature and the stories of the Bible are each concerned with the problem of sacrifice and the difficulties of living in communities plagued by conflict. The Bible contains stories that are at once mythological, historical, and theological. Like works of Greek tragedy, biblical narratives provide an opportunity for religious and political exploration. In Exodus, we are presented with a story in which God becomes actively engaged in the events of history in order to redeem a people. However, when the human and the divine converge in Exodus the results are often violent.² In *The Bacchae*, the gods are vindictive and subject to fits of rage, but they are nonetheless interpreted as a source of absolute justice. Likewise, the movements of the God of Exodus are paradoxically merciful and yet full of wrath. A tragic reading of Exodus 1-12 demonstrates the ambiguous nature of biblical narrative and the kinship that it shares with the world of ancient Greek tragedy. However, Girard approach to the Bible emphasises its capacity for revelation

² Thomas B. Dozeman investigates what he calls “the theological problem of divine power” in Exodus (*God at War : Power in the Exodus Tradition* [New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996], 3). Dozeman conducts a literary investigation of the way that character and plot develops in the exodus tradition. He claims that his approach is “adapted to the character of pentateuchal narrative, with its close ties to Israelite cultic tradition and hence its tendency to undergo transformation as the worship practices of Israel changed” (3). Dozeman’s approach to salvation history demonstrates the extent to which the theological notion of redemption or salvation introduces an element of indeterminacy or incompleteness to biblical narrative. According to Dozeman, “The essential feature of salvation history is not that the divine acts in human affairs, nor is it the uniqueness of Israel as the object of divine action. These features are characteristic of the earliest forms of the exodus tradition. Rather the essential component in the construction of salvation history is that weaving together of a sequence of episodes into a canonical history introduces promise and hence incompleteness to the story” (3).

rather than the tendency toward ambiguity—like works of classical Greek tragedy, the Bible is also for Girard a text which takes the side of the victim.

Girard maintains that the Bible's unique ability to uncover the victimage mechanism is the result of its ethical imperative to take the side of the victim and to condemn the oppressor. In his reading of the story of Cain and Abel, he states that the "condemnation of the murder takes precedence over all other considerations" (THW 147). Consequently, he claims that there is an "ethical dimension in the Bible" which makes it unique. Biblical myth is distinct from so-called 'world myth' because it demonstrates a significant "change in perspective that consists in taking the side of the victim, proclaiming the victim's innocence and the culpability of his murderers" (THW 147-48). Although the biblical myths of the Old Testament involve portrayals of sacrifice, Girard asserts that these stories successfully reveal the presence of the victimage mechanism in society and thus may be classified as texts which come to the defense of the oppressed. Because the God of the Old Testament is clearly portrayed as being both violent and often vengeful, he claims that "Genesis and Exodus are only the beginning" (THW 154). The books of the Law and of the Prophets all demonstrate an "increasing tendency for the victim to be brought to light" (THW 154). However, the complete revelation of scapegoating does not occur according to Girard until the Gospels.

Nevertheless, some biblical scholars such as James Williams have applied Girard's critique of sacrificial violence more comprehensively to these early books of the Bible. In his book *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred* (1991), James Williams maintains that the God of the Old Testament may be essentially interpreted as the liberator of the oppressed. According to Williams, "The Exodus text as we have it narrates a process of struggle to witness to the revelation of the innocent victim. The plight and the liberation of an oppressed people, and first of all their little ones, the newborn male children, are at the heart of the story" (72). Moreover, Williams asserts that the advocate for these unrecognized victims is none other than the "God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, and of Moses" (72). In my own reading, I will suggest an interpretation of the slaughter of the innocents in Exodus that is not strictly confined to the firstborn of Israel but rather all the firstborn in Egypt. As one of the many children subjected to

infanticidal violence in the story, Moses functions as a metonymy for all the firstborn males cast into the Nile. The story of Moses' birth is a tale of both abandonment and rescue, and the heroine is none other than the daughter of Pharaoh. Consequently, I will not attempt to read the story of Moses' birth and the Passover solely from the perspective of Israel or from Egypt but rather from the marginalized position of the various scapegoats within the text.

According to Williams, it may be possible to read the story of Exodus from the perspective of the Egyptians. In which the case, he claims that "from the Egyptian standpoint the departure of the Hebrews from Egypt was actually a justifiable expulsion" (Williams 89). He suggests that the story may be summarized as follows:

The Egyptians faced a major crisis precipitated by a group of people suffering from various diseases. For fear the disease would spread or something worse would happen, this motley lot was assembled and expelled from the country. Under the leadership of a certain Moses, these people were dispatched; they constituted themselves then as a religious and national unity. They finally settled in Jerusalem and became the ancestors of the Jews (89).

Williams' reading does very little to cast Egypt in a favourable light. According to this retelling of the story, the Egyptians remain firmly in the position of oppressor and the Israelites the afflicted and consequently oppressed. In his discussion of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, he criticizes Freud's efforts to interpret Moses as an Egyptian noble who inspired the Israelites to accept monotheism.

Williams points out a number of anti-semitic tendencies in Freud's work and suggests that his reading of Jewish origins has three important effects: "(1) It is ambivalent in that it partially communicates a basis for a derogatory attitude toward the "Jews." (2) It expels the Jewishness of Jewish origins. (3) It eliminates the oppression of Israel and its innocence as a victim of Egypt" (94). It is of course debatable whether or not Freud's psychoanalytic retelling of the Exodus story has the effects which Williams' critique suggests. Nevertheless, his resistance to a retelling of the Exodus story which questions the historical origins of Moses as an Israelite demonstrates a crucial tendency in Girardian approaches to biblical interpretation. For Girard, the Bible is revelatory because it discloses a fundamentally sociological and therefore historical phenomenon of sacrificial violence. Consequently, Girard shifts from epistemological assertions concerning biblical and literary interpretation to ontological assertions

about the nature of violence and the purpose of sacrifice in human society which conform to his theory of scapegoating. According to this approach, the position of Israel as the persecuted and the Egyptians as persecutors is no longer open to interpretation. Questioning this fundamental opposition would disrupt the scapegoating model of sacrifice which a Girardian reading imposes upon the text. Although a Girardian approach to biblical interpretation may not regard the Bible as strictly historical, scholars such as Williams nonetheless accept its supposed revelation of scapegoating violence as an historical event. Thus Williams' reading of Exodus as a critique of the Egyptians' persecution of Israel is not particularly innovative because it already fits with the historical assumption of various traditional readings of the story. Nevertheless, as with any form of literary representation, the first twelve chapters of Exodus contain a number of ambiguities which disrupt the epistemological framework of Girard's theory of scapegoating.

According to Jacobus Marais, the temptation to disregard the epistemological uncertainties inherent to literary texts is part of the very nature of artistic representation:

The epistemological problem with representation is that the reader looks through the representation to reality without seeing the representation itself. Literary texts, by their nature as fictional entities, create the illusion, which is an inevitable part of the modus operandi of literature, which creates many of the problems of representation, because, when readers enter the illusory frames of reference which a text evokes, they tend to forget that it is a constructed, manipulated world that they enter, not the "real world as it is" (11).

Marais concludes that "it is exactly because of its epistemological dimension that representation is, or should be, such a central concept in Old Testament hermeneutics" (11). Consequently, he suggests that once the biblical text is understood as a literary construction, "the mode of representation becomes all important" (Marais 12). Marais claims that the literary form of the texts themselves may convey to us what sort of world we are entering and that the reader should know in advance "whether the world she/he is entering is . . . a fantastic world, an historic world, an ironic world or a tragic world" (12). Although as a biblical scholar Marais may wish to maintain some distinction between these different forms of representation, from a literary perspective these various modes of representation are not necessarily dictated by the texts themselves, but rather they are mainly dependent upon the reader's own perception

of the texts. Indeed, it may be possible to see each of the various modes of representation reflected in a single text. I have determined from the outset of this study to approach the first twelve chapters of Exodus as tragedy, and doing so I am admittedly transposing this literary framework onto the biblical narrative.

In examining the story of Moses' birth and the Passover, my intention is not necessarily to question the extent to which Israel is indeed a victim in Exodus but rather to demonstrate the ways in which the opposition between oppressor and oppressed, persecutors and the persecuted is disrupted by approaching the biblical narrative as a tragedy. This investigation will demonstrate the ways in which narratives that may be considered redemptive are intimately tied to the problem of sacrifice. As a result the story of Moses' birth and the Passover in Exodus bear traces of numerous unseen scapegoats that may be revealed by approaching these stories as works of tragic literature.

My tragic reading of the birth of Moses and the story of the Passover has been inspired by the modern British playwright Christopher Fry and his play *The Firstborn* (1946). The play takes place in Egypt and its dramatic action includes two of the plagues which are featured in the book of Exodus—the plague of darkness and the death of the Egyptian firstborn. In his foreword to the second edition of the play, Fry notes that its title “at first may seem to quarrel with most of the action, since the chief protagonist is Moses” (vii). Nevertheless, he suggests that the “figure of life which Ramses presents will be seen to take a central place from his first entrance to the end” (Fry vii). In *The Firstborn*, Fry offers a truly unique and incredibly moving retelling of the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt. He portrays Moses as a tragic figure who struggles to come to grips with his own identity: he is a man raised by Egyptian royalty and nonetheless destined to deliver his own enslaved people from the grip of the Pharaoh.

Fry's play is of course a modern retelling of the birth of Moses and the Passover.³ Nevertheless, the artistic liberties that he takes serve to highlight some of the tragic elements which are nonetheless

³ Schoenberg's *Moses and Aaron* is perhaps the most well-known modern retelling of the story of Exodus. Schoenberg's opera also cast Moses as a tragic figure who is burdened with task of delivering God's words to both Egypt and Israel (*Moses und Aron : Oper in drei Akten* [Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, c.1958]). In Schoenberg's portrayal of Moses' encounter with the burning bush, Moses rather than God is first to speak. Although at first glance this revision appears to diminish the magnitude of Moses' first encounter with the voice of God, the voice of Moses in Schoenberg's opera is nonetheless overwhelmed by the many singers who form the mysterious, polyphonic voice of God. Moreover, Schoenberg's Moses begins this discourse with a

present within the biblical narrative as it has come to us today. Most importantly, Fry's tragic interpretation of Exodus conveys the complexity of Moses' character in a way that is often obscured in religious readings and ideological readings of the biblical narrative. In the sections which follow, I will investigate the first twelve chapters of Exodus and attempt to uncover some aspects of its narrative which lend themselves readily to the sort of tragic retelling that Fry's play accomplishes. This approach to reading the Bible stands in stark contrast to an ideological approach such as Girard's which seeks to reduce literary conflicts to a fundamental and irresolvable opposition between persecutors and the persecuted. In the following discussion, I will once more contend with a Girard's dichotomous classification of literary works by demonstrating that sacrifice remains central to the redemptive narrative of Exodus 1-12.

Enigmatic Beginnings

Through its creative retelling of the story of Moses' birth, *The Firstborn* portrays an intimate connection between Moses and his Egyptian family. Fry begins the play with a retelling of the story of the baby Moses' rescue from the waters of the Nile. The story is told from the perspective of Anath, daughter of the elder Pharaoh and sister to his successor, Seti the Second. In her recollection of the rescue, Anath states that her father issued a pronouncement "That all the boys of Jewdom [s]hould be killed. Not out of spite [but] necessity" (Fry 4). Then one day while wading in the Nile, Anath says that she found floating "[a] tiny weeping Israel who had failed to be exterminated" (4). Her attachment to him is instantaneous: "When I stooped with my hair dripping on to his face he stopped in a screwed-up wail and looked. And when I found my hands and crowded him into my breast, he buried like a burr. And when I spoke I laughed, and when I laughed I cried, he was so enchanting. I was ready to raise a hornet's nest to keep him; in fact I raised one" (4). Anath also tells the story of Moses' transition to adulthood and his emergence as military leader in the Egyptian army. He is well loved and revered by the people of Egypt, and then one day while inspecting a building project he comes to the defense of Jewish bricklayer who was being beaten by his taskmaster: "The General of Egypt, the Lion and the Prince recognized his

prayer of profound self-negation. In *Moses and Aaron* as in Exodus, Moses encounters God in solitude, and with great difficulty he brings the message of God's revelation to a world that it is often unwilling to listen.

mother's face in the battered body of bricklayer; saw it was not the face above his nursery, not my face after all. He knew his seed. And where my voice had hung till then now voices descending from ancestral Abraham congregated on him. And he killed his Egyptian self in the self of that Egyptian and buried that self in the sand" (Fry 6). The dramatic conflict in the play mainly centers on Moses' struggle to come to grips with the dilemma of his identity as an Israelite by birth and as an Egyptian by something more than mere association. Although Fry's play clearly emerges from his own unique reading of the Exodus story, the following analysis will nevertheless highlight some features of the biblical narrative which lend themselves to such a dramatic retelling.

According to Joseph Cohen, the story of Moses' birth was initially a legend that was distinct from the story Israel's deliverance from Egypt, and he suggests that the initial theme of infanticide is incongruent with the story of the Israelites' flourishing in Egypt (5). He also claims that the story of the Israelites' enslavement was historical whereas the story of Moses' nativity is clearly based in legend (Cohen 5). Taking these observations into account, in my own reading I will approach the story from a literary perspective as it has emerged through a long history of Christian readings as essentially a single story that is unified by the theme of redemption and deliverance; however, in the course of my investigation, I will depart significantly from a reading of Exodus as salvation history.⁴

Exodus begins with an account of two seemingly distinct communities struggling to cohabitate. However, the autonomy of these two groups is questionable from the outset. The opposition between these two groups emerges as the narrative describes a series of sacrificial acts that very quickly establish explicit religious and political boundaries between Egypt and Israel. At the beginning of Exodus, the emergence of Israel as a distinct community is portrayed as a threat to the social and economic stability of Egypt, and from the outset Pharaoh takes measures to prevent this potential revolution:

Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, but the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, that the land was filled with them. Then a new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt. "Look," he said to his

⁴ Gerhard von Rad is perhaps most well-known for his formalization of this approach to biblical interpretation. Dwight Daniels describes von Rad's notion of salvation history and its relationship to biblical interpretation: "According to von Rad the Old Testament depicts a history of God with men and focuses to such an extent on this history that all its contents are colored by this concern. He therefore advocates a salvation-historical approach to the theology of the Old Testament" (*Hosea and Salvation History: The Early Traditions of Israel in the Prophecy of Hosea* [De Gruyter: Berlin, 1990], 1).

people, “the Israelites have become much too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.” So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labour, and they built Pithom and Ramses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly (Ex.1:6-13).

Although the first chapter of Exodus begins with a description of Egypt’s oppression of Israel, the conflict between them emerges from a state of relative peace between the two communities. J. P. Fokkelman argues that the “conclusion of Genesis and the first section of Exodus explores the question of whether the combination Israel-Egypt is a conjunction or disjunction” (60). Fokkelman claims that Exodus “directly signifies the ultimate disjunction between Israel and Egypt, as the water of the Nile, which to the Egyptian is in all aspects the water of life, is chosen as the site and means of death for the Israelite male babies” (60). As the story of Exodus unfolds, we see that despite the Pharaoh’s efforts to transform the Nile into a site of death, it nonetheless operates simultaneously as a source of life for the baby Moses. The story of Moses’ exposure and rescue, the saving that is also an abandonment, highlights the indeterminacy of the Nile as a symbolic space that simultaneously unites and divides the two communities. Like Moses’ own body, the Nile becomes a contested site in the conflict between Egypt and Israel. According to Fokkelman, the disjunction between Israel and Egypt is presumably initiated by Pharaoh’s command to kill the firstborn of Israel.

In his commentary on Exodus, William Propp argues that Pharaoh’s plan to kill only the firstborn males of Israel demonstrates a reasonable and nonetheless sinister logic: “Were genocide Pharaoh’s sole aim, he could order all Hebrews slain on the spot. But he would thereby lose thousands of slaves” (141). Propp claims that Pharaoh sought to preserve the female Israelites in order to marry them off to other slaves so that their children would also be considered slaves. According to this interpretation, Pharaoh’s command would ultimately serve to eradicate the Israelites as a distinct community. However, this interpretation of Pharaoh’s command is nonetheless paradoxical if the infanticidal genocide is a part of an effort to prevent an overabundance of slaves from overthrowing the Egyptians. Thus, it is unclear whether Pharaoh’s infanticidal genocide is meant solely for the Israelites or if it is also directed toward the Egyptians as well.

There is no widely accepted explanation for the Pharaoh's infanticidal genocide of the firstborn in Exodus. Although infanticide is a persistent theme throughout Western literature, its prominence and significance has been largely ignored by scholars.⁵ In his book *The Infanticidal Logic of Evolution and Culture*, A. Samuel Kimball investigates the theme of infanticide in Western literature. His study of the Bible begins with Genesis and its preoccupation with "securing the future through the begetting of children" (25). And traces the theme of infanticide through the biblical "accounts of creation, the expulsion from Eden, the story of Cain and Abel, the Babel disaster, and the Flood" (Kimball 100). His study of the Old Testament concludes with the culmination of the theme of infanticide in the *akedah*. Kimball argues that by agreeing to sacrifice his son Isaac, Abraham discloses the sacrificial and infanticidal costs of human existence:

Through God's directive to the father to sacrifice his child and give up his reproductivity, the narrative forces the name *Abraham* to speak its infanticidal meaning. Abraham the particular historical individual may or may not be infanticidal in the sense of harbouring violent impulses toward his second son. But because existence costs, Abraham cannot avoid being infanticidal. His infanticidality does not belong to him as a personal attribute, it inheres in existence in general (161).

Throughout the Old Testament, the blessing of God and the flourishing of Israel is expressed in terms of a continuation of life from one generation to the next. Kimball claims that most readings of the *akedah* interpret it "as a test of Abraham's faith in a God who repudiates the practice of sacrifice" (26). However, he suggests that such readings must interpret God's initial request for Abraham to sacrifice his son in light of the reprieve God grants Abraham which comes only after he has agreed to kill Isaac: "Nearly all readings of the *akedah* embrace with relief this seemingly reassuring resolution. They can do so, however, only by treating the first command as a means by which God would manifest the self-evident

⁵ A. Samuel Kimball observes that "infanticide—fatal violence against infants and children, more generally against a person of a successor generation—is a recurrent, though seldom remarked, theme in Western literature" (*The Infanticidal Logic of Evolution and Culture* [Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007], 15). Kimball's thesis draws a distinction between the empirical phenomenon of *infanticide*, the killing of an infant, and the *infanticidal*. "[T]he adjective form of infanticide—infanticidal—is ambiguous. One can use the word *infanticidal* to designate an act, an attitude, an intention, or a practice without a literal infanticide taking place" (19). Despite the absence of an actual victim or slain infant, the infanticidal may be expressed in covert ways in which the deathly consequences of an empirical infanticide are disguised within "broad institutional practices and broad social processes—economic, political, military—the nature and results of which a culture takes for granted or otherwise does not conceptualize in infanticidal terms" (Kimball 20). These social and institutional practices may be interpreted as an effort to cope with a fundamental condition of biological existence, namely, that existence costs. Kimball notes that the words are in fact "Latin cognates from a common Indo-European stem . . ." (21). Ultimately, the survival of any living thing depends on its ability to economize the cost of existence. Kimball's description of the role of economizing institutions is an accurate description of the role of slavery throughout human history.

moral authority of his second command” (Kimball 26). This kind of teleological approach effectively removes “the spectre of divine infanticide attaching to God’s call” (Kimball 26).

In Exodus we find that once again the theme of infanticide emerges, but this time there is a strange similarity between the infanticidal tendencies Pharaoh and the God of Exodus. Although a thorough examination of this relationship is well beyond the scope of the present study, it may be argued that the infanticidal genocide which takes place at the beginning of Exodus can be interpreted in light of the larger theme of infanticide which pervades the Old Testament. As such, the Pharaoh’s command to kill the firstborn may be considered part of the larger biblical theme of the paradoxical relationship between reproductivity and infanticide, sacrifice and redemption, life and death, which runs from Genesis all the way through to the New Testament.

After he commands the Hebrew midwives to kill the firstborn sons of Israel, Pharaoh administers a similar command to all of his people. Propp’s literal translation of the verse highlights the ambiguity of the command: “Now, Pharaoh commanded all his people, “All the son born, throw him into the Nile, but all the daughter let live” (142; 1:22). The NRSV glosses the ambiguous language of the Pharaoh’s command and translates the verse as follows: “Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every boy that is born *to the Hebrews* you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live” (1:22). In his textual analysis of this verse, Propp notes that “Acts 7:19; Jub. 47:2 and possibly Ezekiel the Tragedian 12-13 report that the Israelites were commanded to immerse their children themselves, as Moses’ mother in fact does” (143).⁶ However, he suggests that this interpretation of the passage “is probably a midrash rather than reflective of a variant “*the people*” . . . referring to the Hebrews” (Propp 143). According to Propp, the ambiguity of the language of the command and its potential reference to Hebrews as well as Egyptians is “presumably an authorial oversight” (147). Moreover, he notes that one scholar implausibly interprets the Pharaoh’s command as an act of infanticidal genocide upon his own people. However, Propp does not offer any textual or historical evidence to refute such an interpretation.

⁶ Francesca Stavrakapoulou argues that child-sacrifice was regularly practiced among the Israelites despite the fact that the ritual was strictly prohibited (*King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice: Biblical Distortions of Historical Realities Sacrifice* [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004]).

Buber argues that the slaughter of Israel's firstborn in the first chapter of Exodus "has nothing to with the story of the hard labour" and that "it bluntly contradicts the logic of narrative," because according to Buber "slave economy naturally aims at an increase in the number of working hands" (34). Rather than conveying an historical event, he claims that the story of the slaughter of the firstborn of Israel "has clearly come into being through the motif of the saving of the boy Moses," and this too he claims is "truly a motif of legend" (Buber 34). Nevertheless, the motif proves essential to Buber's understanding of the biblical narrative's primary historical interest which is to convey the story of the Israelites' liberation from Egypt:

In the Biblical narrative of the saving of the boy Moses the meaning is obvious: in order that the one appointed to liberate his nation should grow up to be the liberator—and of all analogous legends this is the only one containing this historical element of liberating a nation—he has to be introduced into the stronghold of the aliens, into that royal court by which Israel has been enslaved; and he must grow up there. This is a kind of liberation which cannot be brought about by anyone who is not connected with the slaves; but only by one of the latter who has been brought up in the midst of the aliens and has received an education equipping him with all their wisdoms and powers, and thereafter "goes forth to his brethren and observes their burdens" (35).

Buber suggests that Moses' mother "chose to make the "box" of papyrus, in which the child was exposed, in the shape of one of those shrines wherein pictures of the gods floated on the Nile during festivals, in order to be certain of rescue" (35). Although he maintains that Moses' mother sought to rescue her son from the infanticidal genocide enforced by the Pharaoh, Buber indirectly recognizes the infanticidal implications of her actions by suggesting she "exposed" the child by placing Moses in the papyrus container and launching it into the Nile.

The story of Moses' abandonment and rescue reveals the complex relationship that exists between Egypt and Israel at the beginning of Exodus. Not only does Exodus begin with a paradoxical account of Israel's growth in the midst of oppression, but as Fokkelman observes, it presents us with "another paradox of growth during oppression: Moses is raised by an Egyptian princess despite Pharaoh's command. Her compassion crosses the boundary dividing flock-tending Semite from Egyptian *Herrenvolk*" (59). Although he suggests that the Egyptian princesses' actions were indeed an act of charity, Fokkelman nonetheless maintains in his interpretation of the act a rather rigid distinction between

Israel and Egypt. His use of the term *Herrenvolk* to describe the Egyptians is perhaps an allusion to the master-race of Nazi Germany. Even in adopting the abandoned Hebrew child, the princess fails to free herself from the characterisation of Egypt as a vile oppressor of God's chosen people.⁷ Consequently, her act of charity, the saving which makes Israel's salvation possible, disappears from sight just as Moses' early life as an Egyptian becomes a footnote in the story of his triumphant deliverance of Israel. However, the infanticidal violence which begins the story of Exodus remains present in the figure of Moses, whose very name carries with it the traces of his paradoxical saving and abandonment.

In his analysis of Moses' name, Buber attempts to characterize Moses as essentially a product of Hebrew culture despite the indeterminate etymology of his name. As a result, Buber not only diminishes Moses' attachments to Egypt, but he also glosses over the infanticidal implications of Moses' name. Although Buber acknowledges the Egyptian origins of Moses name, he suggests that the Hebrew etymology fits most suitably within the thematic framework of deliverance:

That Moses bears an Egyptian name, no matter whether it means 'born, child (of somebody)' or something like "seed of the pond, of the water", is part of the historical character of the situation; he derives from a largely Egyptianized section of the people. Whoever wishes to make an Egyptian of him on that account deprives the tale of the foundation on which it rests. The narrative itself sets out to explain the name on the basis of Hebrew etymology as meaning "he who is drawn (out of the Nile)". But the form of the Hebrew verb . . . can only mean "he who draws forth". And as it seems to me, it was the covert purpose of the etymology to indicate this: the intention was to characterize Moses as the one who drew Israel forth from the flood (36).

This interpretation reveals the extent to which Buber has already foreclosed the indeterminacies of Moses' name by imposing a theological reading of Exodus that emphasizes Moses role as a deliverer of the Hebrew people. By interpreting Moses solely as a liberator, "one who draws forth", the other meaning of Moses' name is lost. As the "one who is drawn out," Moses serves as a metonymy for the Israelite boys who are abandoned in the Nile. Instead, as Buber's reading of the early life of Moses demonstrates, the difficulties and indeterminacies of such a reading are foreclosed by an ideological and

⁷ Fokkelman attempts to interpret God's movements in the book as an effort to reveal himself to both Egypt and Israel. Fokkelman claims, "The dialogic being of God, already evident in the creation of man in his own image and reflected in the man-wife dialogue, culminates in Exodus when God assigns exceptional status to his covenantal people . . ." ("Exodus." *The Literary Guide to the Bible* [London: Collins, 1987], 64). Despite the fact that Fokkelman's emphasis here is on the exceptionality of the Israelites, he claims that "God wishes to be known as much by Egypt as by Israel" (64). However, the way that God chooses to reveal himself to Israel as opposed to Egypt presents a number of challenges for efforts to conceive of God's actions in Exodus in terms of a single redemptive movement.

theological approach to the story which emphasizes Moses' exposure as a saving rather than an abandoning.

The Tragic Figure of Moses

The paradoxical relationship between saving and abandoning, salvation and death is a persistent theme throughout Exodus 1-12, and as the story of the Passover demonstrates, the Israelites' deliverance in Exodus comes directly at the expense of the Egyptians. The narrative places Moses at the very centre of the conflict between the two communities. In the following section, I will describe the ways in which the conflict between Israel and Egypt is mediated through the tragic figure of Moses. As an Israelite orphan and as an Egyptian prince, Moses emerges as a tragic figure whose body becomes a contested site in the conflict between Israel and Egypt. In this conflict, the God of Israel makes his claim upon Moses through an encounter in which God threatens to take his very life. This strange encounter defies interpretation at every turn. It is not altogether clear whether it is indeed God who threatens Moses, some demonic force, or perhaps both. Nevertheless, the indeterminacies of this encounter, and the questions it raises about Moses' identity are resolved through the narration of a sacrificial rite of circumcision which seems to secure the opposition between Israel and Egypt.

The biblical passage narrating Moses' encounter with an enigmatic spirit who threatens his life is perhaps one of the strangest events to occur in the early part of Exodus. Exodus 4:24-26 has of course been the subject of much scholarly debate stemming from the obscurity of the language used to narrate this encounter, as well as the theological challenges this passage poses for efforts to formulate a non-paradoxical view of God's movements in Exodus. Nevertheless, this passage serves as an important prelude to Moses' return to Egypt, and it sets the scene for God's display of unilateral power in the form of an infanticidal genocide that threatens both Egypt and Israel alike.

As we will see later in the story of the Passover, the night serves as a passageway through which Moses and the Israelites pass into new phases of their deliverance from Egypt. However, in the midst of these passageways, the night also functions as an indeterminate space in which God's character appears both erratic and vengeful. In the night, the violence God threatens to direct toward Egypt draws

dangerously close to Moses and the Israelites. In Exodus the night becomes a narrative space for the staging of the sort of radical reversals and disruption of societal distinctions which Girard associates with the exceptional time of the festival. Just as Greek tragedy re-enacts the sacrificial crisis and its resolution through the sacrifice of a surrogate victim, likewise the indeterminacies of the biblical narrative in Exodus are temporarily resolved through the narration of sacrificial rites which bring an end to the violence that threatens both Egypt and Israel (Ex.4:24-26,12:7-14).

Like Girard's description of the symmetry between Pentheus and Dionysus in *The Bacchae*, there is also a remarkable symmetry between the characters of God and Pharaoh in the early part of Exodus. In Exodus 4, the nocturnal encounter takes place just after God claims Israel as his firstborn son, and subsequently announces that he will kill the firstborn son of Pharaoh:

And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders that I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go. Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, "Israel is My son, My firstborn. "So I said to you, 'Let My son go that he may serve Me'; but you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will kill your son, your firstborn" (Ex.4:21-23).

By announcing his plans to kill the firstborn of Pharaoh, the God of Exodus also demonstrates the infanticidal violence which formerly characterized the figure of Pharaoh at the very outset of the story.

As the preceding passage demonstrates, God explicitly announces his desire to claim ownership over Israel. This desire comes into obvious conflict with Pharaoh who not only claims authority and ownership of Israel, but also attempts to extinguish the Israelites' cultural identity by transforming them into a slave population. Therefore, in the exceptional time of the night, the differences between God and Pharaoh begin to disappear; the spirit of God takes by violence and appears taken by violence—the divine and the demonic are no longer discernible from one another. The infanticidal violence that was previously embodied by the figure of Pharaoh is now expressed in the form of God's divine wrath.

As the differences between Pharaoh and God become less defined in the exceptional time of the night, the recipients of God's demonic wrath are also subject to reversals and indeterminacy. As the passage continues, it is unclear whether the demonic spirit of God seizes upon Moses or his son Gershom:

Now it came about at the lodging place on the way that the LORD met him and sought to put him to death. Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and threw it at Moses' *feet*, and

she said, “You are indeed a bridegroom of blood to me.” So He let him alone. At that time she said, “*You are a bridegroom of blood*”—because of the circumcision (Ex.4:24-26).⁸

Moreover, there appears to be a radical shift in the story between verses 21-23 where God demonstrates his favour toward Israel, and verses 24-26 where God threatens to strike down Israel’s deliverer, or his son, or perhaps both on the eve of their return to Egypt.

When viewed separately, these passages do indeed appear contradictory. Nevertheless, they bring into focus one very important theme in Exodus, and that is the fearful mystery of God’s divine power.⁹ Although God clearly expresses his interest in freeing the Israelites from Egypt in this passage, the story of this demonic visitation disrupts interpretations which may place Israel beyond the reach of God’s wrath. These indeterminacies are as problematic for the story as they for the reader. In Greek tragedy, the solution comes in the form of the sacrificial victim; similarly in Exodus, Zipporah redirects the threat of violence through a hastily executed act of circumcision—a sacrificial act which serves to stabilize the opposition between Israel and Egypt, as well as between Pharaoh and God.

Before moving to a more detailed analysis of the literary function of Zipporah’s act of circumcision, it is important to establish whether or not circumcision in general may be considered a form of sacrifice. In her book *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, Francesca Stavrakapoulou investigates the infanticidal legacy of one of Israel’s most infamous kings, Manasseh. Stavrakapoulou argues, “One of the most prominent afterlives of child sacrifice is probably its transformation into a circumcision rite” (305). In the Hebrew tradition, circumcision is interpreted as a means of ensuring fertility and is likened to the pruning of fruit trees. In addition to this supposed physiological benefit, circumcision also serves to secure the religious and cultural identity of the child. Consequently, Stavrakapoulou suggests, “Within the Hebrew Bible, circumcision is one of the most outstanding ideological symbols, both defining “Israel” as the people of YHWH and distinguishing “Israel” from foreigners. As such, the continuing practice of

⁸Propp’s literal translation of the passage reads as follows: “And it happened on the way, at the night-stop, and Yahweh met him and sought to put him to death. But Zipporah took a flint and severed her son’s foreskin and applied to his *legs* and said, “For you are a bridegroom/son-in-law of bloodiness to me” (*Exodus 1-18 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [New York, N.Y. ; London : Doubleday, 1999], 4:24-26). The Hebrew *raglayim* may either be translated as feet or genitalia, and Propp speculates that “it is probably Moses’ penis that is meant here” (129).

⁹In his reading of Exodus, Simon observes, “The demonic destruction is about to kill him at night on leaving the Midianite territory. But this mysterious power is also the nameless God who has to be appeased, placated by blood. The ambiguity of the Holy One remains unpredictable throughout Moses’ life” (*Pity and Terror: Christianity and Tragedy* [New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989], 28).

circumcision may be one of the longest-lasting “afterlives” of child sacrifice” (307). Similarly, A. Samuel Kimball relates the infanticidal implications of the rite of circumcision to the more general problem of divine judgement in the Old Testament.

The bloody *'ôwth* of circumcision marks the spiritual identity of the Jewish male child who has a right to life. But it also marks the pagan identity of the Egyptian child who did not have this right. Like the rainbow following the Flood, the *'ôwth* of circumcision symbolizes life only in simultaneous relation to its (infanticidal) cost. The covenantal symbol here arises not from infanticide withheld but from the contrast between infanticide forborne and infanticide carried out (117).

Rather than attempting to interpret circumcision as an act that either symbolizes or in fact ensures reproductive success, or as an act which necessarily limits reproductivity, Kimball suggests that circumcision demonstrates the problematic relationship between life and death in a world where existence costs. Consequently, it is possible to interpret Zipporah’s sacrificial act as a symbolic manifestation of the sacrificial and infanticidal economy which underwrites the story of Exodus.

Symbolic Circumcision

The opposition between Israel and Egypt is mediated by the tragic figure of Moses. His body becomes the contested site for the identity politics which take place between these two seemingly irreconcilable adversaries. The rite of circumcision narrated in fourth chapter of Exodus 4 is a sacrificial act that seems to once and for all determine Moses’ identity as an Israelite. However, the rite is shrouded in indeterminacy as it is also the site of his violent and enigmatic encounter with God. The night visitation of Exodus 4:24-26 becomes the site of a narrative sleight of hand in which the foreskin of Moses’ son symbolically replaces that of his father. In the midst of Zipporah’s improvised sacrifice, the question of Moses’ circumcision disappears from the story, and in its place we are presented with the bloody foreskin of his own infant son.

The rite of circumcision that Zipporah carries out in Exodus 4 is the first sacrificial ritual mentioned in Exodus. Moreover, up to this point, the story has provided no clear indication as to whether or not Moses has himself been circumcised. Consequently, there is a great deal at stake in interpretations of this passage. If circumcision, as previously noted, is one of the most important ways of constructing

cultural identity for Hebrew males, then the fact that Moses' circumcision is not explicitly presented in Exodus may be considered at the very least a problematic narrative oversight. The question of Moses' identity seems to be one issue at stake in Exodus 4:24-26.

In this passage, we are presented with a narrative sleight of hand which draws the reader's attention momentarily away from the question of Moses' identity and directs it instead toward the bloody foreskin of his son Gershom. In this moment, Zipporah connects two seemingly distinct cultural forms of circumcision into a single utterance that thereafter would come to form the liturgical basis of Hebrew circumcision: "Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" (Ex.4:25). By pronouncing this ritual utterance at the moment she presses Gershom's foreskin to Moses' penis, Zipporah enacts a symbolic circumcision of her own husband. Thus the actual sacrificial act of circumcision which performed on Gershom is transformed into a fictive sacrifice that is pronounced in word rather than in deed upon Moses. The fictive quality of this event is connected with Moses' tragic flaw: he is of uncircumcised lips—one who cannot speak. In the nocturnal encounter, God seizes upon Moses, and he is utterly speechless in the event. It is Zipporah's voice rather than his which dissuades God. Moses is practically erased from this scene along with the question of his own circumcision, and in his place we are presented with Zipporah's bold and nonetheless enigmatic sacrifice.

By symbolically circumcising Moses, Zipporah makes explicit what may otherwise be considered implicit in other acts of circumcision narrated in the Old Testament—namely that circumcision is a symbol that is always already deconstructive. Indeed, circumcision may to some extent be considered the act which binds its Jewish practitioners to the text and to the community within which the text operates; and yet at the same time, circumcision is an act of cutting or scissioning which separates human communities. As the story of the nocturnal encounter demonstrates, the rite of circumcision is one of many sacrificial acts which temporarily resolve the indeterminacies that take place in the encounter between humans and the divine. It is a scissioning that simultaneously binds the Israelites to God and sets them just beyond the reach of his divine wrath.

In her study of the theme of circumcision in the work of Jacques Derrida, Inge-Birgitte Siegumfeldt suggests that throughout Derrida's work, the notions of secrets, sacrifices, and scission all "converge on a single figure: the figure of circumcision" (283). Siegumfeldt investigates Derrida's notion of "religion" or what is otherwise known as his notion of "religion without religion" as a "cutting to which is also a cutting from: a scission that involves secrets and sacrifices" (283). She claims that the figure of circumcision can be "traced through the entire body of his writings as a kind of subtext, where it seems to furnish an image for the practice of deconstruction" (Siegumfeldt 283). Siegumfeldt argues that circumcision "appears to function as a trope for familiar Derridean themes such as openness and indeterminacy, especially if we take a closer look at *Archive Fever*, where the paternal inscription in Freud's family Bible becomes at once an excision and an incision, illustrative of a reconfirmation of the Jewish covenant" (284). Most importantly, she claims that circumcision may be understood as kind of deconstructive act:

Circumcision would seem to furnish a symbolic model for the practice of deconstruction. It functions, more specifically, in its association with the "Jewish" motifs of name, prophet, and blank space, as a marker of the constitutive aporias of deconstruction. Jewish in derivation, it is mobilized in the service of all disaffiliation—including dissociation from Judaism in any of its fixed doctrinal forms. It signals the paradox of an origin and an identity that are neither origin nor identity: the notion of the Jew as never "himself" but cut adrift as the "wandering Jew," captured and undone in dispersion, diaspora. The name is therefore not the site of an embodiment, but (like the name of the Jewish God) points to an identity that is always elsewhere, beyond reach of definition (288).

Consequently, the deconstructive movement of circumcision may be understood as a form of "binding through scission, cleaving to by cleaving, forging belonging through sacrifice" which comes "to bear on a range of figures in Derridean thought" (Siegumfeldt 291). Such figures include the circumcision of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac in the *akedah*—which also happens to be a story that deals with the problem of infanticidal violence and one of the greatest requests for sacrifice in the Old Testament.

The circumcision that Zipporah carries out appears to bring a sense of stability to the indeterminacies that come in the exceptional time of the night. At first glance, Zipporah's actions appear to bring an end to the enigmatic encounter with God and resolve the question of Moses' identity. However, by approaching Moses as a tragic figure that at times fails to fit conveniently within the role of

heroic liberator, it is possible to uncover a range of indeterminacies which the biblical narrative nonetheless seeks to overcome through its narration of sacrificial acts. Moses' symbolic circumcision is one important aspect of his status as a tragic figure. His identity remains enigmatic despite the narrator's efforts to conceal the bodily evidence that could perhaps resolve the question of his circumcision once and for all. Nevertheless, Zipporah's sacrifice does serve to interrupt the revolving oppositions which occur in the exceptional time of the night. By symbolically staging the event of Moses' circumcision through the substitution of Gershom's foreskin for his father's, Zipporah improvises a fictive gesture which effectively thwarts God's wrath. This sacrificial act resolves the revolving oppositions which occur in the night. As a result, the narrator executes a temporary scissioning of the problematic symmetry that exists between the divine wrath of God and Pharaoh, as well as the cultural identity of Israel and Egypt. On the one hand, this scissioning may encourage interpretations that potentially reinvigorate the conflict between the narrative's opposing forces. And on the other hand, such sacrificial scissions may also reveal the ways in which Egypt operates as the necessary condition for the possibility of an Israelite community.

Buber's reading of the night visitation highlights many of the indeterminacies which are present in the story. He interprets Zipporah's sacrifice essentially as an act of Hebrew circumcision despite the fact that as a woman she is traditionally prohibited from performing the ritual. Buber considers the passage as part of Exodus' thematic presentation of God's effort to claim Israel and consequently Moses as his own—an interpretation which serves to reaffirm the fundamental opposition between Egypt and Israel. According to Buber, "The story is told with archaic stiffness," it can nonetheless be comprehended by focusing on the narrator's interest in the term "*hathan-dammim*" (Buber 56). His analysis of the passage acknowledges the fact that a variety of cultures practiced the rite of circumcision. Rather than a ritual performed solely by the people of Israel, he notes that "in Arabic the word *hathana* means to circumcise; and since among the ancient Arabs as among certain tribes to the present day, the adolescent youngster was circumcised shortly before his wedding, the bridegroom was a *hathan*, a cut one" (Buber 56). Moreover, the rite of circumcision which Zipporah carries out in the passage is not necessarily according

an exclusively Israelite form of the ritual. However, Buber is very careful to avoid the identity crisis which could potentially emerge from such a reading and instead suggests that Zipporah transforms the ritual into its Israelite form. Buber suggests that “At the moment of peril Zipporah carries out the bloody ceremony on the child; that is she replaces the Midianite custom by that of the Israelites, which, in accordance with the story in Genesis, can be regarded as having been the practice of the latter since the earliest times” (56). Most importantly, he claims: “Zipporah’s purpose is to have the child represent and personify the entire clan, and she adds the protective words that for her, the clan mother, and hence for the clan, he has already become a *hathan* through the shedding of blood (*dammim*). Through this action she places her clan, both the born and the unborn, under the God of Israel and thus conciliates him” (Buber 56). However, Buber’s analysis overlooks one crucial aspect of the story—Zipporah is not an Israelite but rather a Midianite. Consequently, her performance of the circumcision need be not considered a uniquely Israelite ritual. Nevertheless, Buber claims that Zipporah initiates the sacrificial ritual through which Israel makes “its covenant in the flesh with the God” (Buber 58). Thus the ritual of circumcision is not interpreted as an act which places the Israelites in solidarity with the numerous other cultures that perform the rite, but it is instead considered to be an act which demonstrates Israel’s exclusive relationship to God. Once again, Buber seeks to resolve the indeterminacies present in the story of Exodus by imposing a theological and ideological reading of the story that focuses exclusively on the theme of God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt via the heroic figure of Moses. The violence which threatens to overtake Moses and his family remains problematic for Buber despite his efforts to interpret Zipporah’s sacrificial act as an effort to placate God.

When challenged with the task of deciding whether the story of the encounter is the product of various stories in the Hebrew tradition that initially featured a demon rather than God, or other variations that suggest that God took upon himself the attributes of the demonic in order to eliminate them from Israel, Buber identifies three possible ways of reading the passage:

Either YHVH has been made to replace the original demon in the already-fashioned account of the nocturnal terror; or this correction had already taken place in the tradition; or else the tradition had already found YHVH here as the active party, and did not dare to make any change even for the

honour of their god. This third assumption is the only one which reveals the whole significance of the tale for the history of faith (57).

He does not hesitate to associate God with the demonic spirit which threatens to kill Moses. According to Buber, “It is part of the basic character of this God that he claims the entirety of the one he has chosen; he takes complete possession of the one to whom he addresses himself” (57). Consequently, Buber identifies Moses’ hesitancy to obediently pursue God’s plan to redeem Israel as a sort of tragic flaw that merits the threat of God’s divine wrath.

The theological challenges that such a threat presents are not lost on Buber. The question of evil presents itself, and he quite understandably stops short of pursuing a theodical enquiry into the relationship between God and the demonic. Instead, he claims that in the nocturnal encounter between God and Moses, we are presented with the “unmistakable language of a tradition which also points to the obscure yet perceptible threshold of experience” (Buber 59). Buber presents us perhaps unknowingly with yet another deconstructive principle. He speaks of the threshold which demarcates the limits of possibility at the very edge of impossibility—where God and the demonic are one. He concludes his discussion of the night visitation by reflecting upon Moses’ confession to God that he is “of uncircumcised lips” (Ex. 6:12; 6:30). In the night, God threaten Moses with his divine wrath. The incomprehensibility of this experience brings the narrative to the very limits of iterability. Likewise, Buber suggests that Moses’ confession points to a deeper, more tragic condition to life, a condition that surpasses the mere lack of obedience which might prevent Moses from doing the will of God. According to Buber, Moses possesses “a kind of uncircumcision which cannot be eliminated by any circumcision, an absence of liberation which is clearly not organic but penetrates to the core of the soul, an absence of liberation and impossibility of liberation; not a mere defect in the instruments of speech but a fundamental inhibition of expression” (59). Finally, Buber directs us to one of the deepest and yet most difficult themes of Exodus—the impossibility of conceiving of redemption in terms which are non-sacrificial. The narrative of deliverance in Exodus is challenged not only by the problematics of sin and of the flesh, but also the limitations of language.

The Tragedy of the Passover

The Firstborn dramatically highlights the ways in which the Israelites' deliverance is predicated upon the death of the Egyptian firstborn. As the sacrificial costs of the Israelites' redemption, the infanticidal genocide of the Egyptians' firstborn reveals instability of the opposition between oppressor and oppressed in Exodus. In this respect, Fry is faithful to the story of the Passover in Exodus, but crucially *The Firstborn* enhances the biblical narrative's account of the infanticidal genocide of the Egyptian firstborn by placing Moses by the side of his adoptive family in the final scenes of the play. In this way, we are told the story of the Passover not only from the perspective of the Israel but also Egypt.

Throughout the course of the play, Moses spends his time negotiating with the Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave Egypt in peace and mediating internal conflicts among the militant factions of the Israelite community. Threatened by civil war within and by invasion from abroad, Seti invites Moses to resume his position as an Egyptian general, an offer which he rejects but only after some deliberation. Similarly, Moses' nephew Shendi accepts a post in the Egyptian army in an effort to gain his freedom from slavery. The play stages the conflict between Israel and Egypt as kind of civil war which threatens the peace and stability of the Egyptian community which is nonetheless sustained upon the oppression of the Israelites. Fry draws a parallel between Moses' nephew Shendi who is the son of Miriam, and Ramses the firstborn son of Seti the Second:

Ramses lives a boyhood almost identical with Moses' own; he and the Hebrew Shendi between them draw the frontiers of combat altogether differently from the lines laid down by accepted human action. Ramses is the innocence, humanity, vigour, and worth which stand on enemy side, not altering the justice or necessity of Moses' cause, but linking the ways of men and the ways of God with a deep and urgent question-mark (vii).

The final act of the play is indeed filled with questions. As darkness descends upon Egypt and the killing of the firstborn draws near, Aaron recounts the Israelites' observance of the first Passover meal: "We have all had to eat lambs' flesh, seasoned with bitter herbs. . . . And then we have splashed the blood three times over the doorways. That is quite inexplicable. It is drying in the night air, at this moment while I speak. What happens, I ask myself, when it is dry? It means our freedom" (Fry 69).

As in *The Bacchae*, the relationship between humans and the divine in Exodus proves to be a dangerous one. Scapegoating sacrifice once again functions as a way of stabilizing the revolving oppositions at stake in the biblical narrative. The story of the Passover in Exodus 1-12 demonstrates a resistance to the complete transfiguration of the opposition between oppressor and oppressed, Egypt and Israel, and most importantly the human and the divine. The opposition between God and the figure of Pharaoh is also secured by an enigmatic night time visitation in which infanticidal violence directed upon the firstborn of Egypt. We are presented here with yet another narrative sleight of hand. In the story of the Passover, God's divine power is once again deflected through a sacrificial rite in which the blood of the paschal lamb protects the Israelites from the infanticidal violence that would otherwise have been visited upon Egypt and Israel alike.

The story of the Passover brings into focus the complex relationship between redemption and sacrifice in Exodus: it is not only about deliverance but also divine judgement. The tragic figure of Moses is burdened with a message of salvation for Israel that is at the same time a death sentence for the firstborn of Egypt. There is a deeper and perhaps more problematic opposition at work in the story of Exodus, which transcends the fundamental opposition between Egypt and Israel, Pharaoh and God. In Exodus, both Egypt and Israel become subject to the threat of infanticidal genocide which overwhelms both communities. Nevertheless, through circumcision, this threat is transformed into the very basis of the Hebrew faith by interpreting the infanticidal genocide not as a disaster but as an act of divine deliverance. Although, the story of Exodus manages somewhat successfully to represent this threat as a blessing upon the Israelites, a number of indeterminacies remain present in the narrative—indeterminacies which potentially reveal the cost of the Israelites' deliverance. The story of the Passover, like the story of divine demonism in the fourth chapter of Exodus, also portrays the visitation of an enigmatic and wrathful God whose spirit threatens the firstborn of Egypt and Israel. Once again, sacrificial rites emerge within the story as a means of resolving the indeterminacies and dangers associated with the God of Exodus.

Moses' status as heroic liberator appears to grow more defined as the story progresses; likewise, in the midst of the plagues, the privileged status of Israel also becomes more clearly defined. To begin with the plagues seem to spread across all of Egypt. The plague of blood is said to have caused all the waters of the Nile and those bodies of water surrounding it to turn to blood (Ex.7:19-21). Similarly, the plague of frogs and the plague of gnats also appear to affect all of Egypt. However, just before God releases the plague of flies onto Egypt he proclaims:

“But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people live, so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may know that I the Lord am in this land. Thus I will make a distinction between my people and your people. This sign shall appear tomorrow” (Ex.8:22-23).

By virtue of God's sparing of Israel from the majority of the plagues, the Israelites begin to emerge as a distinct community that is nonetheless bounded by divine judgement. The plagues also follow a sacrificial logic according to which God demonstrates his favour toward Israel through his judgement upon Egypt—with each subsequent plague, the community becomes more clearly distinguished from Egypt. The very land which they stand upon, Goshen, is transformed into a sacred space that is surrounded on all sides by the violent consequences of God's judgement. After a series of complex verbal exchanges involving all the major figures in the story, God announces to Moses that he will “bring one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; afterwards he will let you go from here; indeed, when he lets you go, he will drive you away” (Ex.11:1). In this chapter, Moses rather than God announces the impending infanticidal genocide of the Egyptian firstborn:

Moses said, “Thus says the Lord: About midnight I will go out through Egypt. Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the female slave who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the livestock. Then there will be a loud cry throughout the whole land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again. But against any of the Israelites not even a dog will bark against either people or animals, so that you may know that the Lord distinguishes between Egypt and Israel” (Ex.11:4-7).

Moses' proclamation mirrors the infanticidal threat which God announces in Exodus 4:22-23. By reiterating this proclamation, Moses reaffirms both the covenantal status of Israel as God's firstborn, and the price of maintaining that covenant, namely the death of the firstborn of Egypt.

The infanticidal genocide which God plans to carry out on the eve of the Passover resembles the actions of Pharaoh at the outset of the story. However, unlike the infanticidal genocide which Pharaoh threatens to carry out on both Israelites and Egyptians at the beginning of Exodus—we are told that God’s violence is directed solely toward Egypt. This violence, like the exposure and abandonment of Moses, is presented as a divine act of saving rather than an infanticidal genocide which aligns the power of God with that of Pharaoh. Moreover, it is clear that the Israelites’ deliverance is predicated upon this slaying. The sacrificial logic of God’s covenant, the decision *for* Israel which is simultaneously a decision *against* Egypt, is made explicit in God’s plan to kill the firstborn of Egypt as a means of securing the Israelites’ escape from Egypt. Nevertheless, in the exceptional time of the night, we are once again faced with the enigmatic spirit of God who threatens to destroy the firstborn of any household that does not bear the mark of the sacrificial lamb on its doorpost. In Exodus 4, Zipporah interrupts the indeterminacies that emerge on the eve of Moses’ return to Egypt by improvising a sacrificial rite of circumcision. Likewise, on the eve of the Passover, the opposition between the power of God and of Pharaoh must again be secured through the narration of sacrificial rites which serve to transform the event from a unilateral display of divine judgement into an act of deliverance.

Unlike Zipporah’s improvised sacrifice of Gershom’s foreskin, the first Passover meal is a meticulously planned ritual which involves the entire Israelite community—and yet it still maintains a certain sense of urgency that resembles Zipporah’s roughly executed circumcision. After giving his instructions regarding the selection of the paschal lamb and its sacrifice in preparation for the communal meal, God states that the Israelites are to “take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it” (Ex.12:7). The sacrificial blood of the lamb, like the bloody foreskin of Gershom, is intended to protect the Israelites from the nocturnal visitation of God’s wrath:

You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. This day shall be a day

of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance (Ex.12:10-14).

God appears to deliver these instructions to both Moses and Aaron, representing a return to the partnership which had seemingly dissipated during the story of the plagues. Propp suggests that “on a symbolic level, Moses’ “uncircumcised” lips hinder transmission of the laws of *Pesah*, one of which is the requirement of circumcision” (383). Thus the tragic figure of Moses becomes perceptible once more in light of the faltering lips which betray his indeterminate status within the Israelite community. In the exceptional time of the night, the oppositions within Exodus become subject to reversals and oscillations. The fundamental opposition between Israel and Egypt, Pharaoh and God, is in the end secured through the blood of paschal lamb.

The story of the Passover is not only a tale of divine mercy but also of divine judgement.¹⁰ In the exceptional time of the night the spirit of God seizes upon the sacrificial victims whose deaths mark the beginning of Israel’s departure from Egypt. By commemorating this night in the form of a festival celebrating their deliverance, the Israelites re-enact the story of God’s infanticidal genocide within the context of a communal meal in which the death of the Egyptian firstborn is symbolically replaced with the body of the paschal lamb. The indeterminacies that are present in the story of the Passover mirror the uncertainties and upheavals which Girard associates with the time of the festival.¹¹ The opposition between Israel and Egypt, Pharaoh and God, once more becomes uncertain in the exceptional time of the night. Nevertheless, these indeterminacies are temporarily stabilized through the sacrifice of the scapegoat whose blood deflects God’s wrath and simultaneously secures the opposition between Egypt and Israel.

¹⁰According to Kimball, “The ritual focus of the Passover, of course, is the remembrance of infanticide averted. The infanticide in question is God’s massive extermination of the firstborn children and animals of the Israelites’ captors, the Egyptians[.]” (98).

¹¹Historically, the Passover remained an exceptional time of celebration. Marie-Zoe Petropoulou claims that unlike other Jewish festivals which required a priest “to carry out both the public and private sacrifices, at Passover every Jew was allowed to act as a priest, and so to slaughter the victim” (*Animal Sacrifice in Ancient Greek Religion, Judaism, and Christianity, 100 BC to AD 200* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008], 184). Thus like the Dionysian celebrations which stage a temporary transgression of ‘normal’ social and religious behavior, the Passover allows for a transgression of the typically rigid laws governing sacrifice. Citing Philo’s account of the festival, Marie-Zoe Petropoulou states, “The reason for such a ritual exception... is that this rite represents a thank-offering for and reminder of the exodus from Egypt. The Jews were so joyful at leaving the land of divinized idols that, after their departure, they slaughtered the sacrificial victims without waiting for the priests” (184).

Like the practice of circumcision, the ritual marking of the doorposts with the blood of a sacrificial victim was not unique to Israel. In his commentary on the Passover, Propp observes: “Scholars have long noted the extraordinary similarity between *Pesah* as described in Exodus 12 and a Muslim sacrifice called *fidya* ‘redemption[.]’ . . . *Fidya* is not uniquely Arab or Muslim” (434). Propp notes that these types of rituals are typically “performed in times of danger” (435). Such dangers may include times of plague as well as times of transition such as “birth, first haircut, circumcision, marriage, travel and the inauguration of new projects” (Propp 435). The application of blood over doorways is presumably meant to prevent evil spirits from entering the home. According to Propp the blood is able to protect the household from evil spirits because it “deludes demons into thinking a human has already died . . .” (435-36). On the basis of inscriptions found on certain Punic stelae, Propp states the substitutionary function of the lamb for the child reflects the following pattern: “. . . a lamb has replaced a child who, according to the Punic mode, might himself have been sacrificed[.]”(436). He claims that “[i]n the Bible, we find comparable substitutionary sacrifices in the Binding of Isaac...and the Redemption of the Firstborn...The equation *person = sheep* and *society = flock* in fact pervade the Bible” (Propp 436). Finally and most importantly, he argues that the sacrificial victim should be “wholly surrendered to the gods” and thus every trace of it destroyed as in the case of a holocaustic sacrifice (Propp 436). The *Pesah* is of course not a holocaust but a meal, and so he claims that “sharing food creates fellowship both among celebrants and between celebrants and the demon or deity at whom the rite is directed. Ingesting the meat may also reinforce, or even actuate, the fictive equation of victim and sacrifice underlying vicarious sacrifice” (Propp 436). To a certain extent, Propp’s analysis of the substitutionary function of the paschal lamb helps to clarify the underlying logic of the *Pesah*. However, his analysis fails to apprehend the ways in which the *Pesah* maintains a connection to the sacrificial death of the firstborn of Egypt.

The disappearance of the paschal lamb does not serve to enhance the substitutionary logic of the meal but rather to disguise it. Consequently, the Passover meal is a dissimulation that involves both sacrifice and storytelling in order to achieve its symbolic function—as Propp’s analysis suggests, the Passover meal is a fictive gesture in which the body of the paschal lamb is a symbolic substitute for a

human victim. Thus, the paschal lamb in the context of the meal may either stand for the firstborn for whom the blood has already been a substitute or the firstborn of Egypt, who will nonetheless be slaughtered as the purchase price of the Israelites deliverance. In the end, the body of the paschal lamb as well the bodies of the firstborn of Egypt disappear from the story. Two sacrificial rituals are narrated in Exodus 12, and as a result the story of the Passover portrays a doubling of the substitutionary action associated with sacrifice of the paschal lamb—this doubling enhances the fictive quality of the sacrificial meal that commemorates not only God’s sparing of the Israelites but the slaying of the Egyptian firstborn. In the Passover meal, we are once again presented with a narrative sleight of hand—the body of the paschal lamb is held up as the sacrificial scapegoat which acts as symbolic representation for the Israelites who are spared at the Passover as well as the Egyptian firstborn who like the lamb must die for the sake of Israel’s deliverance.

The necessity for obeying God’s command to identify themselves with the blood of the lamb seems to suggest that the Israelites like the Egyptians may just as likely become the subject of divine wrath amid the uncertainty of their nocturnal encounter with God. Consequently, in the first instance, the blood placed over the doorposts averts the infanticidal violence that threatens both Egypt and Israel. Like circumcision, the marking of the blood over the doorpost is a deconstructive act—it is simultaneously a binding to and a cutting away. It is an act that on the one hand distinguishes Israel from Egypt and yet at the same time it reveals the extent to which even the Israelites’ privileged status may be subject to change in the exceptional time of the night. Secondly, the consumption of the paschal lamb constitutes a rather different form of sacrifice than the rite of *fidya* which, according to Propp, is a practice that accompanies the birth of a child or some other transitional event. The consumption of the paschal lamb follows the basic pattern of scapegoating sacrifice in which the animal is a substitute for a human victim. Propp makes this substitutionary scheme clear by suggesting that a person may be equated with a sheep and the flock equated with society. Nevertheless, this substitutionary scheme raises one important question concerning the Passover meal: Who does the paschal lamb symbolically replace?

Perhaps one key to interpreting the substitutionary function of the paschal lamb is the fact that the lamb is not only sacrificed but also ceremonially eaten. By consuming the paschal lamb, the Israelites communally acknowledge the cost of their imminent freedom and the reality that their own livelihood comes directly at the expense of the lives of the Egyptian firstborn. When Moses communicates God's instruction for observing the Passover to the elders of Israel, the two sacrificial rituals are combined in a way that seems to suggest that the Passover meal and the *fidya* are essentially a single sacrificial act:

Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go, select lambs for your families, and slaughter the passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood in the basin. None of you shall go outside the door of your house until morning. For the LORD will pass through to strike down the Egyptians; when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over that door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you down. You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children. When you come to the land that the LORD will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this observance. And when your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this observance?' you shall say, 'It is the passover sacrifice to the LORD, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.'" And the people bowed down and worshiped (Ex.12:21-27).

The Passover rituals of future generations abandon the blood rite of the *fidya*. There is of course a great deal of scholarly speculation about why the Israelites abandon the blood rite; among the various historical and religious reasons for abandoning the blood rite, the story of Exodus itself seems to suggest that the two sacrificial rituals are each directly linked to God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt.

Conclusion

The story of divine demonism and the story of the Passover each portray moments in which the indeterminacies that take place in the night are temporarily resolved through sacrificial rites which stabilize the opposition between Egypt and Israel as well as between Pharaoh and God. These sacrificial rites may be considered fictive because they not only operate symbolically as substitutes for the humans that are the initial object of God's divine wrath, but also because their deployment constitutes a dissimulation that disguises the indeterminacies within the story. Nevertheless, Derrida claims that "dissimulation is never better dissimulated than by means of this particular kind of dissimulation that consists in making a show of exposing it, unveiling it, laying it bare" (*The Gift of Death* 38-39). In Exodus the enigmatic power of God is exposed along with the bloody foreskin of Gershom and the blood

of the paschal lamb. The tragic figure of Moses stands in the midst of the indeterminacies that take place in the exceptional time of the night. Zipporah's symbolic circumcision of Moses and the blood of the paschal lamb each successfully avert God's wrath. Nevertheless these gestures operate deconstructively as they simultaneously reveal and disguise the indeterminacies that emerge during the nocturnal encounter with God. Although these sacrificial acts may be regarded as deconstructive, their meaning is for the most part already situated within a teleological narrative which presupposes the meaning of these acts as signs of God's blessing rather than indications of his infanticidal wrath. Nevertheless, Moses remains as a problematic reminder of the paradoxical theme of saving and abandonment that persists throughout the first twelve chapters of Exodus.

Although the tragic figure of Moses is at times obscured, his indeterminate status as a member of the Israelite community remains vital to the story of their deliverance. His privileged status among the Egyptians allows him access to the Pharaoh with whom God contends, and throughout the story of the plagues Moses intercedes in prayer for the Pharaoh and the people of Egypt alike. Indeed, the text includes two instances of Egypt's charity to the Israelites in the midst of both Pharaoh and God's oppression of the land (Ex. 11:2-3, 12:35-36). There is perhaps no act of charity more noteworthy than the adoption which occurs at the very outset of the story. By receiving Moses into the household of Pharaoh, the Egyptian princess leaves a mark upon Moses that cannot be erased—he has experienced the benefits of the very transfiguring compassion which the story itself seems to resist.

In the final scene of *The Firstborn*, Moses is struck with the realization that Ramses will be killed on the night of the Passover and he questions the sense of justice behind this genocide: "When other boys were slaughtered I was spared for Israel. Surely I who have been the go-between for God can keep one firstborn living now for Egypt?" (74). The play draws to a close with Moses taking responsibility for the plague and asking, "Can I deflect it now? Can we so rope our lives together that we can be a miracle against death?" (82). Despite Moses' efforts to protect Ramses, as one of the firstborn of Egypt, he is destined to die—his breath is taken from him, and he is suffocated by the darkness around him.

According to Fry, "In the last scene he suffers a momentary spiritual death . . . at the moment when the

firstborn's physical death creates the Hebrews' freedom; and his resurrection from that, to become the great leader, though only hinted at as the curtain falls, carries with it something of the life of Ramses"

(vii). Moses' repeated affirmation of his own uncircumcised lips in Exodus has been taken by some to be a figurative avowal of his own enfeebled speech rather than affirmation of his status as an outsider to the Israelite community. However, as Martin Buber suggests, this "circumfession" may also be considered an avowal of the impossibility of redemption. As the prophet of this impossibility, the tragic figure emerges on the day following the Passover not as a hero but as a man who has endured two infanticidal genocides in his own life—the first made him an alien among both Egypt and Israel alike, and the second set the stage for his heroic deliverance of a people who nonetheless reject him throughout his life. Consequently, Moses is a tragic figure who suffers under the agonizing presence of a God who simultaneously kills and delivers—he bears witness to the sacrificial costs of the Israelites' redemption.

Part II

The Eucharistic Model of Sacrifice

Chapter III

The Eucharistic Model of Sacrifice in the Gospel of Mark

In my reading of *The Bacchae*, I contended with Girard's assertion that works of classical Greek tragedy reject the practice of scapegoating by coming to the defense of tragic victims. I also demonstrated the ways in which tragic drama as a literary form is disruptive to his dichotomous classification of literary texts. As a dramatic performance, *The Bacchae* takes place in a liminal space where the imaginary world of the play overlaps with the geographical space of the theatre. The theatre provided an opportunity for ancient Greek society to explore its own religious and civic identity. Thus the tragic performance reflects the ritual patterns of a sacrificial religion that remained committed to the practice of scapegoating. Moreover, *The Bacchae* makes use of multiple scapegoats in order to bring about a dramatically ironic and cathartic ending. The notion of having multiple scapegoats operate within the same literary space is profoundly disruptive to Girard's model of scapegoating sacrifice, which may only account for a fundamental opposition between two main groups at any given time—persecutors and the persecuted. According to this scheme, the individual who dies must be considered the innocent victim. Girard's scapegoating model of sacrifice imposes significant interpretive limitations upon literary texts, and simplifies the narrative complexity of tragedy as form of literary representation.

In the second chapter of Part I, I utilized Christopher Fry's play *Firstborn* as a literary framework for investigating the story of Moses' birth and the story of the Passover in Exodus 1-12. Contrary to a Girardian reading of Exodus which simplifies its literary conflicts to the irreducible opposition between Egypt as the oppressor and Israel as the oppressed, I identified aspects of the biblical narrative which proved disruptive to this opposition. By using Fry's play as an interpretive guide through the text, I approached Moses as a tragic figure who mediates the conflicts not only between Israel and Egypt but most importantly between humans and the divine. The story of his enigmatic nativity, which is paradoxically an abandonment and a saving that places him in the arms of an Egyptian woman, and the story of his symbolic circumcision and traumatic encounter with the God of Exodus provide a literary

basis for Fry's dramatic retelling of Moses as tragic figure who struggles to come to terms with his Egyptian upbringing and his Israelite identity. Finally, through my reading of the Passover, I analysed the significance of the paschal lamb as a scapegoat that discloses the sacrificial costs of the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt. The paschal lamb may be interpreted as both a substitute for the Israelites who are spared on the night of the Passover as well as reminder of the infanticidal genocide upon which Israel's deliverance is predicated. Contrary to Girard's classification of *The Bacchae* and Exodus as texts that reject the practice of scapegoating, in Part I of this thesis I have demonstrated that when approached as forms of tragic literature, neither of these texts offer an unambiguous critique of scapegoating. In Part II of this thesis, I wish to examine the interpretive limitations of Girard's approach to reading the Bible and more specifically his interpretation of the Gospels.

In this chapter, I will examine one important literary moment in the Gospel of Mark—Jesus' eucharistic sacrifice at the Last Supper. Once again, I will approach this story in the Gospel of Mark as a work of tragic literature. As a form of literary representation, Jesus' eucharistic sacrifice disrupts the opposition between persecutors and the persecuted, protagonist and antagonist, and perhaps most importantly the opposition between humans and the divine. Consequently, I will suggest that what I will call the eucharistic model of sacrifice introduced by the Jesus of Mark's Gospel provides an alternative to Girard's scapegoating model of sacrifice. In contrast to the interpretive limitations which Girard's model imposes upon literary texts, the eucharistic model of sacrifice resists interpretive closure and provides a way of interpreting literary conflicts that does not reduce them to the fundamental opposition between persecutors and the persecuted. In the final chapter of Part II, I will utilize this eucharistic model of sacrifice as a framework for interpreting the literary conflicts in two stories by the Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor—her short story *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and her novel *Wise Blood*. As a writer of Christian tragedy, O'Connor employs a model of eucharistic sacrifice to disrupt the opposition between protagonists and antagonists. These transfigurative moments defy interpretive closure and consequently provide an opportunity for an experience which may be considered liturgical.

Girard and the Gospels

For Girard questions of interpretation ultimately come down to the interpreter's ability to discern the presence of scapegoating in society and to subsequently embrace the critique of violence which Girard perceives as the primary message of the Bible. He argues that "the Gospels reveal the full and complete truth about the origin of myth, about the illusory power of mimetic snowballing, about everything that the myths do not and cannot reveal because they are duped by it" (THW 125). The following passage effectively summarises his approach to interpreting the Gospels:

The revelation of the surrogate victim as the founding agent in all religion and culture is something that neither our world as a whole nor any one particularly "gifted" individual can claim to have discovered. *Everything is already revealed.* This is certainly the claim of the Gospels at the moment of the Passion. To understand that the victimage mechanism constitutes an essential dimension of that revelation, we will not need to take up the comparative analysis and constant cross-references that were necessary in the examples of religions of violence; we need only give our fullest attention to the letter of the text. It speaks incessantly of everything we have said ourselves; it has no other function than to unearth victims of collective violence and to reveal their innocence. This is nothing hidden. There is no secret dimension that the interpreter must painstakingly seek to discover. Everything is perfectly transparent (THW 138).

What is revealed in the Bible, claims Girard, is not theological but rather anthropological—its message concerns human relations and the effects of mimetic rivalry, desire, and violence. Modern theoretical approaches fail to apprehend this revelation because they are themselves deeply embedded in the logic of scapegoating. The Bible not only reveals the presence of the victimage mechanism in society but also demonstrates the extent to which scapegoating sacrifice is no longer a practicable solution for controlling the violent urges of society. He claims that the Passion of Christ in the Gospels "has no other function than to unearth victims of collective violence and to reveal their innocence" (THW 138). Girard is careful to emphasize that his approach to interpreting the Gospels is thoroughly incompatible with anti-semitic interpretations which seek to hold the Pharisees and consequently the institutional religion of Judaism itself responsible for the death of Jesus.

Girard argues that Jesus completes the demystification of scapegoating which is partially accomplished in the Old Testament as well as in various works of tragic literature. In the Gospels, Jesus redeems humanity by showing us the truth about scapegoating and exhorting humanity to reject sacrificial

violence. Consequently, Girard seeks to posit an interpretation of Christianity which rejects the practice of sacrifice and affirms the non-violence of God. For Girard, sacrificial violence is fundamentally rooted in human relationships as opposed to humanity's relation to the divine. He considers Christianity to be a faith that rejects scapegoating sacrifice in the name of the one whose death marked the end of sacrifice for his followers. God's rejection of sacrifice extends even to Jesus' own death. There is no redemption through sacrifice.¹ According to Girard interpretations which emphasize Jesus' death as expiatory or propitiatory only serve to further mystify the practice of scapegoating which the Gospels presumably seek to disclose: "There is nothing in the Gospels to suggest that the death of Jesus is a sacrifice, whatever definition (expiation, substitution, etc.) we may give for that sacrifice. At no point in the Gospels is the death of Jesus defined as a sacrifice" (THW 180).² Yet paradoxically, Girard attempts to affirm the redemptive power of Jesus death in the Gospels, and consequently he states that "the Passion is presented to us in the Gospels as an act that brings salvation to humanity. But it is in no way presented as a sacrifice" (THW 180). From a theological perspective, Girard's attempt to deny the sacrificial meaning of Jesus' death while simultaneously affirming its redemptive qualities is problematic. For Girard, interpretations which emphasize Jesus' death as expiatory or propitiatory only serve to further mystify the practice of scapegoating which the Gospels presumably seek to disclose. Girard claims, "There is nothing

¹ Although the language of sacrifice permeates Christianity in terms of its worship and theology, in light of Girard's work many theologians have begun to question its importance for Christian belief and practice—focusing much critical attention on Christian theologies of atonement. In his book *Options on Atonement* (2007), Stephen Finlan provides an overview of recent theological attempts to revise Christian theologies of atonement while nevertheless rejecting Girard's explicitly non-sacrificial interpretation of Jesus' death. However, he also discusses a number of recent critiques of atonement by theologians such as Raymond Schwager and Walter Wink which adhere more rigorously to a Girardian non-sacrificial perspective. Finlan notes, "Some very interesting theological approaches involve a critique of atonement and yet, ironically, some of the theological problems observable in authors supporting or reshaping atonement recur in different form in these author's critiques" (103). Finlan advocates a more progressive approach to formulating a theology of atonement that may make use of recent modern critiques of sacrifice while nonetheless maintaining a firm grounding the biblical language of salvation and redemption. Consequently, it is apparent that on the one hand, Girard's theory of sacrifice continues to exercise a tremendous influence upon scholars of literature, theology and religion. And on the other hand, there is a need to seriously consider alternative conceptions of sacrifice which may do justice to the complexity of religious ritual and artistic representation.

² Once again Girard's analysis is hindered by his rather narrow conception of sacrifice as violence. Wolfhart Pannenberg claims that in order to understand Jesus' "substitutionary expiatory significance" we must approach the question by "clarifying the context of meaning of Jesus' path to the cross" (*Jesus God and Man* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press], 251). According to Pannenberg, an understanding of Jesus' death as an expiatory sacrifice is itself embedded in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life of service to humanity: "The substitutionary significance of Jesus' suffering and death seems to have been discovered from two starting points in early Christianity. The one was the Lord's Supper tradition and the other was Jesus' saying about his serving in the disciples' midst (Luke 22:27b), which appears in Mark expanded to the saying about ransom (Mark 10:45). In fact Jesus' having suffered death for our benefit fits in the context of the service to men that stamps his whole activity" (258). Pannenberg offers us a more broad approach to understanding Jesus' expiatory purpose in the Gospel, which includes not only his sacrificial death but most importantly his sacrificial living.

in the Gospels to suggest that the death of Jesus is a sacrifice, whatever definition (expiation, substitution, etc.) we may give for that sacrifice. At no point in the Gospels is the death of Jesus defined as a sacrifice” (THW 180). Yet paradoxically, Girard attempts to affirm the redemptive power of Jesus’ death in the Gospels, and consequently he states that “the Passion is presented to us in the Gospels as an act that brings salvation to humanity. But it is in no way presented as a sacrifice” (THW 180). Girard’s effort to deny the sacrificial meaning of Jesus’ death while simultaneously affirming its redemptive qualities is problematic because it entails a certain idealization of the crucifixion that is tantamount to remythologizing of Jesus as the innocent scapegoat—a move which Girard himself attempts to resist.

According to Girard, the ‘good news’ of the Gospels is essentially its message of non-violence and rejection of scapegoating. Salvation does not entail forgiveness or freedom from sin; instead the message of the Gospels saves us from violence (THW 196-99). Violence is a distinctly human phenomenon. In order to be freed from our addiction to violent acts, we must be shown the way by some outsider who is not himself implicated in the violence of society, and for Girard, the only person capable of this task is Jesus Christ. For these reasons, Frederiek Depoortere suggests that Girard subscribes to “the divinity of Christ and the doctrine of the incarnation, for the truth about violence can only be brought to light by someone who is not held captive by violence. Yet, such a person cannot be generated by a world completely dominated by violence. Consequently, the only logical conclusion is that Jesus was not an ordinary human being, but God incarnate” (49). This conclusion has of course been the subject of some debate among biblical scholars.

In an early engagement with Girard’s work by biblical scholars, Burton Mack argues that rather than disclosing the scapegoating mechanism, the Gospels “make the mechanism constitutive for early Christian social formation by means of a double deception” (1985:33). After discovering the basic pattern of the scapegoating mechanism in literary works, Mack claims that Girard attempts to “move from text to history, showing that his theory of collective murder and the surrogate victim, possible only by the delusion of the persecutors, can be used to read the texts of violence another way—as documents of the history of human violence” (141). The Gospels for Girard reveal the truth about the scapegoating

mechanism because they are the first texts in human history to be written on behalf of the victims (Mack 145). Consequently, Mack concludes that Girard “must regard the account as historically accurate” (145). But in fact Girard’s privileging of the Gospel accounts goes well beyond questions of historicity. To Girard, they are revelatory and what they convey is not history but a “superior knowledge which must originate with Jesus” (Mack 145). This presents one of the most problematic aspects of Girard’s reading of the Gospels—in order for Jesus’ death to definitively reveal the plight of the scapegoat, he must be innocent, and according to Mack this is not historically possible. Instead, he claims that after the historical Jesus’ death, some people carried his prophetic message as wandering preachers while still others formed communities centered on the activities which they understood to be reflective of Jesus’ own way of life (Mack 149). In this process of early social formation, these groups began to associate Jesus with various mythological figures such as “eschatological prophet, Son of Man, Christ Lord, Son of God, and so forth” (Mack 149). The crucifixion became an important source of identity for these early groups because it was rich source for mythological elaboration and it allowed these groups to distinguish themselves from existing forms of Judaism and the surrounding Graeco-Roman world (Mack 149). According to Mack, the interpretation of Jesus’ crucifixion which was most useful for constituting this new social group was also the story which lent itself most readily to mythological elaboration—the myth of Jesus as martyr: “A movement which lacked at first the markers necessary for social ordering fixed upon the violent death of Jesus as a foundational event. And it generated the most amazing set of mythologies and rituals—a Christ crucifixion as saving event; a son of God sent to give his life as a ransom; a meal in which those who dared to receive such a gift gave thanks for it” (154). Thus, the double deception according to Mack involved first the mythologizing of the historical Jesus as an innocent victim, and then various theological elaborations on that myth which became constitutive for the formation of the early church.

Mack’s analysis unfolds in precisely the opposite direction as that of Girard. Mack moves from the epistemological concerns of history and what he perceives to be the sociological and ontological truth about the formation of the early church and the myth of Jesus’ divinity. Girard moves from the

epistemological insight that the revelation of Jesus is a true event in history disclosed in the literary texts of the Gospels and then derives an historical and sociological critique of violence on the basis of that revelation. Mack's critique firstly challenges Girard's interpretation of the Gospels as a source of revelatory truth, and secondly attempts to demonstrate the extent to which the social formation of the early church depended upon a mythological account of Jesus as a scapegoat. Finally, he argues that the books of the New Testament emerged from within the context of certain social processes. In order for the Gospels to fully disclose the scapegoating mechanism in the way that Girard describes, such 'revelation' would entail a complete detachment from the historical facts concerning the emergence of the Gospels as socially constructed.

Nevertheless, proponents of Girard's theory of sacrifice remain convinced of its veracity. In his book *Violence and Difference* (1992), Andrew McKenna suggests that Girard's approach to Scripture and revelation introduces a new paradigm in which "what is revealed does not come from on high, but from below—indeed from underfoot" (202). Consequently, the Bible is regarded as a kind of manifesto for humanity's pursuit of a solution to the problem of sacrifice. In light of this new paradigm, McKenna claims, "The Bible's authority is autochthonous, self-contained. Its universal interest is scientific, not soteriological" (202). Revelation is no longer associated with the divine representation but is instead a matter of human representation. This revelation may be considered self-evident for Girard as the truth of the Bible presents itself to a willing interpreter; revelation occurs when the reader's eyes become opened to the scapegoating mechanism that is unveiled in the Gospels and become aware of its presence in contemporary society. According to McKenna, the revelatory power of Scripture brings people "face to face with their own violence, which they can no longer mistakenly interpret as divine. They are faced no longer with the difference between the human and the divine, profane and sacred, but with the difference between persecutor and victim which is irreducible" (203). It is precisely this irreducible opposition between the persecutor and the persecuted which I have called into question in throughout the course of this study.

Each of the scholars discussed thus far neglect one vital concern when it comes to questions of biblical and literary interpretation and that is the importance of recognizing the epistemological uncertainties which accompany all forms of artistic representation. In this study, I have used the literary notion of tragedy as an epistemological framework for critiquing Girard's ontological exposition of sacrificial scapegoating. Girard's theory of sacrifice is derived from certain epistemological judgements about the nature mimetic rivalry in literature. In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard translates his literary theory of mimetic rivalry into an anthropological critique of sacrificial violence which focuses on two basic groups of people—persecutors who are unified by their mutual pursuit of violence and the scapegoat who is the victim of this collective violence. Thus Girard shifts his focus from the epistemological concerns at stake in various forms of literary representation to the ontological concerns of anthropology and sociology. In order to forward his critique of sacrificial violence in literary works, Girard makes a distinction between texts of persecution and texts which come to the defense of their victims. However, in my examination of *The Bacchae* and first twelve chapters of Exodus, I demonstrated that neither of these stories offers an unambiguous rejection of scapegoating. Moreover, as forms of literary representation these works are ambivalent when it comes to accepting or rejecting the practice of sacrifice and the necessity of scapegoats. This ambivalence is characteristic of tragedy.

Tragic literature portrays Girard's ontological concerns in terms of situations that it represents as represented, as subject to the epistemological problems of representing, and consequently of knowing. As readers, we persistently attempt to move through epistemological questions posed by literary texts to ontological assertions; however, tragedy demonstrates that these assertions remain plagued by uncertainty and thus open to further questioning. In this chapter, I will approach the story of the Last Supper in the Gospel of Mark as a work of tragic literature that fails to offer any unambiguous solution to the problem of sacrifice. Following in the footsteps of tragic figures such as Moses and Job, in the Gospel of Mark we are presented with the very incarnation of God who is nonetheless captured by the tragic circumstances of a world where uncertainty, indecision, and sacrifice converge in the darkest of nights. Through his improvisation of the eucharistic sacrifice at the Last Supper, Jesus enacts a radical transfiguration of the

opposition between protagonist and antagonist, persecutors and the persecuted, perhaps most importantly between humans and the divine. This transfiguration may be understood as a moment in which the biblical narrative challenges our ability to discern the difference between oppositions that at different points in the story appear to be fixed. In contrast to Girard's scapegoating model of sacrifice, which reduces literary conflicts to the fundamental opposition between oppressor and the oppressed, the eucharistic model of sacrifice directly reveals the subjectivity of our epistemological responses to literary representation.

Sacrifice and Atonement

According to Girard, the Christian Bible not only reveals the presence of the victimage mechanism in society but also demonstrates the extent to which scapegoating sacrifice is no longer a practicable solution for controlling the violent urges of society. He argues that "it is important to insist that Christ's death was not a sacrificial one. To say that Jesus dies, not as a sacrifice, but in order that there may be no more sacrifices is to recognize in him the Word of God: 'I wish for mercy and not sacrifices'" (*Girard Reader* 184). God's rejection of sacrifice extends even to Jesus' own death. For Girard, there is no redemption through sacrifice. Instead, the promise of redemption for Girard is to be found in the rejection of sacrificial scapegoating. Although the language of sacrifice permeates Christianity in terms of its worship and theology, in light of Girard's work many theologians have begun to question its importance for Christian belief and practice—focusing much critical attention on Christian theologies of atonement. In his book *Options on Atonement* (2007), Stephen Finlan provides an overview of recent theological attempts to revise Christian theologies of atonement while nevertheless rejecting Girard's explicitly non-sacrificial interpretation of Jesus' death. However, he also discusses a number of recent critiques of atonement by theologians such as Raymond Schwager and Walter Wink which adhere more rigorously to a Girardian non-sacrificial perspective. Finlan notes, "Some very interesting theological approaches involve a critique of atonement and yet, ironically, some of the theological problems observable in authors supporting or reshaping atonement recur in different form in these author's critiques" (103). Consequently, Finlan advocates a more progressive approach to

formulating a theology of atonement that may make use of recent modern critiques of sacrifice while nonetheless maintaining a firm grounding the biblical language of salvation and redemption. It is apparent that on the one hand, Girard's theory of sacrifice continues to exercise a tremendous influence upon scholars of literature, theology and religion. And yet on the other hand, there is a clear need to seriously consider alternative conceptions of sacrifice which may do justice to the complexity of religious ritual and artistic representation.

In his book *Saved from Sacrifice* (2006), Mark Heim argues that the God of Christianity not only "opposes scapegoating sacrifice" but has also put an end to the practice within Christianity altogether. As a result, he suggests that Christianity points "the way to a life without sacrifice," which he understands as also "a way of life without victimization" (244). Heim's theology of atonement casts Jesus as a heroic liberator of humanity from its reliance upon sacrificial scapegoating. However, in contrast to Girard, Heim maintains a fundamental belief in sin which must in some way be atoned for in order to reconcile humanity to God. Consequently, he interprets Jesus' death as an act of saving: "Christ's saving death becomes an event of life-changing intimacy, whose compassion takes on the special shape of each heart that receives it, meeting and transforming each unique profile of sin and loss" (325). Therefore by insisting upon the redemptive effects of Jesus' death, Heim's attempt to recover a Christian theology of atonement departs significantly from Girard's conception of salvation as the act of rejecting the practice of scapegoating.

Girard's critique of atonement is significantly hindered by the limitations of the scapegoating model of sacrifice to account for the many potential notions of sacrifice which emerge from the perspective of Christian theology. Paul Fiddes claims that the idea of atonement "insists that salvation depends upon the restoring of a relationship between human beings and God, who are estranged from each other" (3). According to Fiddes, reconciliation between humanity and God is possible because of the crucifixion. This is precisely the view of atonement which Girard wishes to refute because it idealizes the scapegoating of Jesus. However, if the life of Jesus as it is conveyed in the Gospels is approached from a perspective which emphasizes the entire scope of his ministry as an attempt to reconcile humanity

to God, then it is possible to articulate other possible forms sacrifice which bring about atonement. In his book *Jesus God and Man* (1977), Wolfhart Pannenberg claims that in order to understand Jesus' "substitutionary expiatory significance" we must approach the question by "clarifying the context of meaning of Jesus' path to the cross" (251). According to Pannenberg, an understanding of Jesus' death as an expiatory sacrifice is itself embedded in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life of service to humanity:

The substitutionary significance of Jesus' suffering and death seems to have been discovered from two starting points in early Christianity. The one was the Lord's Supper tradition and the other was Jesus' saying about his serving in the disciples' midst (Luke 22:27b), which appears in Mark expanded to the saying about ransom (Mark 10:45). In fact Jesus' having suffered death for our benefit fits in the context of the service to men that stamps his whole activity (258).

Pannenberg offers us a broader approach to understanding Jesus' expiatory purpose in the Gospels, which includes not only his sacrificial death but most importantly his sacrificial living. Nevertheless, the crucifixion is fundamental to Pannenberg's conception of atonement.

In this chapter, I will not attempt to offer an alternative theological conception of atonement but rather suggest one way of interpreting the relationship between Jesus and his disciples in the Gospel of Mark. From a literary perspective, the eucharistic sacrifice which Jesus performs at the Last Supper is inseparable from the crucifixion—the two events are intertwined, the meaning and significance of one is rendered in terms of the other. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus reconciles humanity to himself through by offering his body and blood as nourishment for his disciples (14:24). By transforming his body and blood into the bread and wine of the communal meal, Jesus founds a new covenant not on the violent death of a scapegoat but on the eucharistic gift of the Last Supper. My reading of the Last Supper explores not only the ways that Jesus' eucharistic sacrifice is disruptive to Girard's scapegoating model of sacrifice, but also the extent to which this sacrifice provides a new way of conceiving of the relationship between humans and the divine. By participating in the communal meal with his disciples, Jesus reconfigures the relationship between humans and the divine. In this meal, what Jesus shares in common with his disciples is a mortal appetite—a necessity and a desire to eat which implicates Jesus in the sacrificial economy of living an all too human life in a world where existence costs. The eucharistic sacrifice of the Last Supper is a tragic story that is curiously and nonetheless powerfully told with food. Through his

pronouncement “This is my body,” Jesus articulates a profound literary moment in which the bread and the wine of the Last Supper are connected to his imminent crucifixion. Through this fictive utterance Jesus links the meal to his own sacrificial death while also shifting humanity’s relationship to the divine from its basis in forms of scapegoating sacrifice to a covenant founded upon an act of artistic representation. The eucharistic model of sacrifice not only provides an alternative to Girard’s conception of sacrifice as scapegoating, but it also provides a basis for reconsidering the relationship between humans and the divine. By embedding the sacred within a story that is told with food, the Jesus of Mark’s Gospel provides a way of communing with the sacred through artistic representation.

The Gospel of Mark as Tragedy

Approaching the Gospel of Mark as a work of tragic literature is itself a highly debatable endeavor. For literary critics such as Karl Jaspers and George Steiner, Christianity and tragedy are incompatible because as a literary genre tragedy is as Steiner argues fundamentally “immune to hope” (2004: 4). However, contrary to such traditionalist approaches, scholars have explored tragedy as a way of reinvigorating certain aspects of the Gospels which have been obscured over their many centuries of interpretation. In his book titled *This Tragic Gospel* (2008), Louis Ruprecht attempts to elucidate a notion of “tragic compassion” that he argues is vital to Christianity but has been overshadowed by the triumphalism of texts such as the Gospel of John. In Ruprecht’s reading of the Gospels, we find yet another irreducible opposition—in this case it is the opposition between the tragic Gospel of Mark and the triumphant Gospel of John.³ According to Ruprecht, “More than two Christian roads diverged after Jesus’s death and rising, to be sure, but these two paths proved to be determinative. Death or new life? Agony or triumph? Benediction or bloodbath—or both? Should we turn to Mark’s gospel or John’s evangel for wisdom and discernment?” (35). He claims that in the Gospel of Mark we are presented with the reality that “[t]he way to new life takes us through death—there is no gain without a commensurate

³ In his reading of Mark’s gospel as an authentic tragedy, Ruprecht argues that John’s gospel, or so called evangel was in fact written with the intent of usurping apostolic authority from the other three gospel writers (*This Tragic Gospel: How John Corrupted the Heart of Christianity* [San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008]). Ruprecht’s argument is based on his interpretation of the gospel of John as a text that is ultimately wary of a Christology that was culturally derived from Jews and Greeks alike. In addition, Ruprecht cites the persistence of a number of so called Gnostic gospels as evidence of the early Church’s conflicts over Christology. Ruprecht observes that “Christians in the third and fourth centuries battled over the definitions of the Incarnation and the Trinity with the same ferocity Christians apply to abortion or same-sex relationships these days”(149).

loss—and it is only through the loneliness of Gethsemane that Christ came into his Kingdom” (36). Ruprecht considers Mark a tragedian who was “building on the classical Greek model of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and their countless Roman imitators” (80). He argues that the New Testament has its origins in an historical and cultural context that was essentially Greek, and therefore, the New Testament may be regarded as “important chapter in the history of Greek literature” (81). Consequently, he suggests that “Mark’s gospel carries the exciting possibility of reimagining Christianity as a tragic faith” (89).

For Ruprecht, the tragic faith of Christianity is one that is defined by compassion rather than a spirit of triumph. Consequently, he maintains that the Jesus of Mark’s Gospel may be considered a failure because his “defeat is total, the abandonment complete, and the scandal of it all almost unbearable” (94). In this way, Ruprecht attempts to reconcile Christianity to a traditionalist conception of tragedy which maintains that stories must end badly if they are to be considered tragic at all. Therefore, according to Ruprecht, the pain and suffering of the crucifixion is a central focus of Mark’s gospel. And as for tidy endings, Mark is purposefully ambiguous: “The first word of Mark’s gospel was *beginning*; the last word is not *end*, because there is no end. Rather, the last word is *fear*, a tragic emotion that creates the possibility of a new kind of Christian compassion” (95).⁴

Finally, in order for Ruprecht to regard the crucifixion as tragic, he emphasizes the importance of Jesus’ death over his resurrection. He argues that Mark’s decision to elide any description of the resurrection was motivated by his desire to present a gospel that does “*not* take your pain or suffering away. Just the opposite, in fact; this gospel insists that you look directly at pain and suffering, taking the full measure of a broken world that has the capacity to break us, too” (97).

In many ways, Ruprecht’s project bears some resemblance to Girard’s critique of sacrificial violence. They are each concerned with re-imagining the Christian faith in a way that emphasizes compassion and shuns the violence. Ruprecht suggests that the tragic Gospel of Mark shows us that Christianity does not deliver believers from suffering but through suffering. By identifying

⁴The earliest authoritative sources for the Gospel of Mark end at 16:8. The resurrection scenes which occur in Mark 16:9-20 appear to be later additions (*The Holy Bible: containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocraphyl/Deuterocannical books: New Revised Standard Version* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995], 52).

compassionately with the suffering of others, Christians come much closer to imitating the tragic figure of Jesus who suffers without the promise of resurrection in Mark's gospel. Both Girard and Ruprecht attempt to utilize the insights of tragic literature to re-imagine the fundamental beliefs and practices of Christianity. Consequently, the complexity of tragic literature and the Gospels is minimized for the sake of promoting a particular ethical or perhaps moral agenda.

Tragic stories offer us something more than portrayals human suffering. As I have demonstrated with the texts discussed thus far, tragedies contain portrayals of suffering which may be interpreted sacrificially and perhaps also symbolically. Consequently, for Simon the Gospel of Mark may be considered supremely tragic because what it portrays is of cosmic importance for Christianity. In *Pity and Terror* (1989), Ulrich Simon argues that "The usual ingredients of tragedy do not arise in the case of Jesus. . . . In short, Jesus cannot be tragic in the accepted sense, since he is presented without sin, or 'flawless'" (43). Although Simon asserts that the New Testament is undoubtedly about suffering, he argues that this preoccupation with pain does not necessarily entail a relationship to tragedy:

Is the centrality of the death of Jesus related to tragedy? None of the writers in the New Testament uses such language to explain the inexplicable. To this day the trial and the execution of Jesus remains a mystery, and, although monographs have been written in their thousands, the reasons for the death of Jesus cannot be given. The only certain comment that can be accepted without contradiction is that his death is not a mere accident. But when it comes to the charges against Jesus, such as the threatened destruction of the Temple, or a blasphemous claim to be God, or a political and military plot against Rome, we are on no certain ground at all. The bald 'Crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffered, and was buried' states external facts with utmost economy, but does not disclose reasons. If Jesus is regarded simply as one of the thousands of rebels who were cruelly put to death, to be classed as a criminal by the outside world, it is impossible to assign a deeper, universal, and therefore tragic meaning to his death (44).

Nevertheless, Jesus' death is assigned a deeper meaning by Christianity, and Simon states that "the death of Jesus is not only meaningful but is the meaning of human existence and therefore the whole cosmic order" (44). The death of Jesus can be considered tragic because it is symbolic; he dies not simply as an anonymous scapegoat at a particular place and time in history, but instead his death "recapitulates all that has gone before, makes sense of, and eternalises the fragments of experience" (44). Jesus' death has cosmological implications for Simon, and as a result it is clear that he interprets Jesus' death from a theological perspective. He suggests that the "anonymous crucifixion in Jerusalem may be said to

disclose a cosmic ordeal, of which the prefigurations of Christ's death are symbolic" (Simon 44).

Although he considers Jesus' death as symbolic and consequently redemptive, Simon suggests that its symbolic status should not detract from the reality of Jesus' suffering: "There is no sham death, no 'docetic' semblance of suffering, no resuscitation after death. The Christ must suffer and be killed, and this is precisely what happened on Good Friday. A side was pierced in the dead body and blood and water spurted out of it" (44). Simon's emphasis upon Jesus' broken body and spilt blood directs us to perhaps one of the most important prefigurations of his death in the Gospel of Mark.

In contrast to Aristotle's notion of catharsis whereby the audience is purged of their feelings of pity and terror, Simon argues that "The witnesses of the death of Christ feel the terror of the scene and a pity in their hearts beyond all grief. They are not purged by or from pity and terror, but they feel both, drawn into the orbit of death" (45). He notes that the Gospel of Mark ends simply with the words "and they were afraid" (16:8). However, he does not consider fear to be Christianity's last word. Instead, he notes that despite the fact that Jesus' death was catastrophic to his followers, "transcendentally the death is seen as triumph, undertaken royally by the Messiah and determined by God before the material creation itself," and therefore he claims that "[i]n this transcendental understanding death becomes sacrifice" (Simon 45). Simon argues that "the death of Jesus mirrors all the uncertainties of human behaviour and all the certainties of the divine will" (47). This observation draws out the further parallels between Jesus' death and the fate of the tragic figure. Simon distinguishes between the two by referring to the uniquely Judaic and subsequently Christian sacrificial framework within which Jesus' crucifixion takes place. Firstly, he argues that the "Passover is the focus of the fulfillment of sacrifice," and "[s]ince Christ died at the eve of the *Pesach*, or perhaps the day before the feast, it seemed natural, as it still does, to correlate the death of the sacrificial lambs with that of the Christ" (47). This identification of Jesus with the figure of the lamb is "mysterious" because as Simon notes, "It defies nature, for a man is not a lamb" (47). This mysterious identification is carried over into the eucharistic sacrifice in the motif of the *Agnus Dei* (John 1:29). Simon considers the Day of Atonement as a second ritual framework which reflects the presence of the divine will:

The *Kapper* of the holocaust is not repeated by Christians, for the body of the dying Christ was not burnt but buried. Nevertheless the associated phenomena are handed on in the Christian Church and in the Christian belief. The call for general repentance, contrition for the past, the horror of sin and disobedience, the fear of retribution and catastrophe, the appeasement of God, the propitiation offered by God in Christ, the defeat of the evil powers, the carrying of the guilt by the righteous for the unrighteous, and, above all, the continuance of the priestly office, in imitation of the celestial High Priest—all this derives from a cultic past with tragic overtones (47-48).

According to Simon, the Passion of Christ echoes both the celebration of the Passover and the solemnity of the Atonement, and serves to connect elements of the Hebrew faith with a “non-Hebrew future” (48).

In the next section, I will address precisely how the Last Supper differs from the traditional Passover meal which would have been so foundational to Jesus and his disciples.

Food and Social Fictions

In his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, John Drury observes that Jesus’ role is in many ways that of a rebel and transgressor of social and religious norms. According to Drury, “Jesus seems most at home with outcasts: publicans, sinners, and lepers. Transgression of the boundaries of the taboo, like the crossings of the boundaries of personality, gives the story much of its force” (412). He claims that such boundaries are “social fictions, myths which await their demythologizers” (412). Jesus replaces the social fictions which divide the communities in the Gospel of Mark with new narratives that inspire new communities. However, these new narratives prove nonetheless divisive for those who would seek to maintain the social fictions which Jesus persistently disrupts. In the Gospel of Mark, bread appears as a curious feature of many of Jesus’ interaction with the disciples. On two separate occasions Jesus miraculously multiplies loaves of bread to feed the crowds of people who follow after him (Mark 6:35-44, 8:1-10). On another occasion, Jesus and the disciples are stranded on a ship with only a single loaf (Mark 8:14-21). According to Drury, “The scene is simple but symbolic: Jesus and his (presumably twelve) disciples in a ship at sea with one loaf of bread. It is a classic little icon of the primitive Christian Church” (414). He claims that this scene prefigures the most important scene in which bread is once more a central focus, “There is, after all, one loaf still to be given, and it will matter more than any of the others. At his last meal of all Jesus will take the loaf and say: “Take, eat: this is my body.” All the other loaves lead to that” (416). Drury’s analysis reveals the importance of food and particularly bread as

literary device. Jesus tell stories with food, but it is important to note that the food is itself symbolic and functions as kind of story within a story which is connected to the larger thematic concerns of the text.

Food operates symbolically as a way of distinguishing communities from one another as well as constituting communities who share meals and particular eating habits in common. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus uses food as a way of transgressing social boundaries and constituting new communities which are based upon the charity that is embodied in the gift of the communal meal. Gillian Feeley-Harnik, in her book *The Lord's Table* (1994), conducts an in-depth study of food symbolism in the Judaic and Christian traditions. Although, Feeley-Harnik's interests are primarily historical and anthropological, her study nonetheless provides an important perspective on symbolic importance of food for Judaism as well as Christianity. The communal meal serves as a way of representing the relationships between people and between God in both the Old and New Testament. She states that in Judaism, "The power and authority of the Lord is manifested in his ability to control food: to feed is to bless" (72). According to Feeley-Harnik, there are numerous instances throughout the Old Testament in which God's provision of food is interpreted as a sign of his favor, or his withholding of food as a sign of God's judgment. She suggests that Judaism assumes that "the food God provides is his word; the food embodies his wisdom," and therefore "eating God's wisdom should establish a binding agreement, a covenant, among the eaters to abide by his word" (82). Consequently, food is not only a sign of religious identity but it is also constitutive of political identity as well. Citing passages from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, Feeley-Harnik suggest that in the Old Testament, "One social group is distinguished from all others in the practice of dietary rules; Jews are distinguished from non-Jews. The rules make a political as well as religious statement. The distinction of Jews from gentiles is represented in the separation of clean animals from abominable things" (95). Moreover, food and the problem of sacrifice are persistently linked with one another in the context of religious debates concerning the manner in which meat in particular is prepared and consumed both communally and individually.⁵

⁵ In his first letter to the Corinthians the apostle Paul deals with debates over whether or not it is acceptable to eat food sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8:1-10:27).

In her analysis of the Last Supper, Feeley-Harnik relates the significance of the Passover Seder as a celebration of the founding of Israel as a distinct community to Jesus' formation of a new community through his eucharistic sacrifice: "With the institution of the Passover; the Lord founded the nation of Israel and initiated a new time; the month of Passover was made the first month of the new year (Ex.12:1-2). With the sacrifice of Jesus, "a new humanity" was born into a "new heaven and new earth" (120). She asserts that the Last Supper is a revision of the Passover meal that essentially reconfigures the logic of the ritual:

The eucharist, commemorating the last supper in which Jesus prefigured his crucifixion and resurrection, is a symbolic representation of salvation in food patterned exactly after the passover. The difference is that in this case...the significance of the meal—the food, the host, the quests, the circumstances—is absolutely reversed. Temple and sacrifice, family, priesthood, and nation are radically redefined (130).

Through Jesus' eucharistic sacrifice, the disciples are joined into a community with one another and with Jesus; this community is formed by the consecratory utterance which transforms the body of the sacrificial victim into a body that is to be consumed as an expression of the disciples' earthly appetites.

The Eucharistic Model of Sacrifice in the Gospel of Mark

The communion that takes place between Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper is not simply a moment in which his followers are delivered *from* their reliance upon the scapegoat, the paschal lamb of the Passover, but it is also a moment in which the Lamb of God is offered *unto* their earthly appetites. This encounter relies upon a profound fiction, the consecratory utterance, "This is my body." In this enigmatic proclamation, Jesus identifies himself as the sacrificial victim in the bread and wine of a new covenant, and through the fictive utterance transforms the notion of sacrifice. By partaking of Jesus' body and blood, the disciples confess their reliance upon the crucified Jesus as the cost of their redemption, and nevertheless this cost is reconfigured in the eucharistic sacrifice in the form of the very bread and wine that fulfils their physical need for nourishment.

Jesus' improvisation of the eucharistic sacrifice is perhaps his most compelling creative gesture in the Gospel of Mark. Likewise, it may also be his most controversial. At the Last Supper, the Jesus of the Mark's Gospel offers his body and blood as a gift to the very disciples who are nonetheless destined to

betray him. In the moment that Jesus offers the bread and the wine of the Last Supper with his disciples, the opposition between oppressor and oppressed, friend and enemy is transfigured. In Mark's narration of the Last Supper, the scene is heavy with accusations of betrayal, which Jesus explicitly announces even as he offers the Eucharistic sacrifice to his disciples:

When it was evening, he came with the twelve. And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me." They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, "Surely, not I?" He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born." While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mark 14:17-25).

The eucharistic sacrifice involves two distinct elements—the symbolic blood rite and the communal meal. Just as the story of the Passover joins the two rites in the celebration of the Passover, in Mark the blood rite and the communal meal also appear as a single ritual which Jesus associates with his own imminent crucifixion. Blood is a powerful religious symbol, and it is an important element of both Judaism and Christianity. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel's covenant with God is secured through rituals involving blood. Blood can be a symbol of life or death, but of course in order to see blood it has to be shed, and the shedding of blood is either a criminal or sacred act in the Old Testament. In this dramatic performance in Mark's Gospel, the blood of the sacrificial victim is transformed into the wine of the covenant; the wine is itself a prefiguration of the blood of Jesus that is destined to be shed on the cross. This transformation does not resolve the indeterminate meaning of the blood but rather heightens its symbolic power by disclosing it as an *aporia*; the duality of the blood is not eliminated in the eucharistic sacrifice—instead it embodies the tensions between life and death, peace and violence, sacrifice and murder, all of which are irreducible features of the symbolic power of the blood. Nevertheless, by equating his own blood with the wine of a celebratory feast, Jesus transforms his expiatory sacrifice into a symbol of celebration; the blood that is shed upon the cross is miraculously restored to the sacred Body of Christ. It is a poetic transfusion in which the blood of the grape is infused with the atoning power of

Jesus' blood. The atonement in this sense is not only the reconciliation of humanity to God but of the blood of Jesus with the blood of the grape. Like the symbol of blood, the symbol of the wine too is an aporia—its fermentation entails decay, and nevertheless the sweetness of the grape's juice gives way to an even more powerful substance; the wine grows ever more intoxicating in the midst of its decay. Thus wine rather than blood becomes the metaphorical representation of a new covenant that is established between Jesus and his disciples.⁶ The Gospel of Mark provides us with literary symbols which maintain the crucial connection between crucifixion and the bread and wine of the Last Supper. In its literary context, the expiatory significance of Jesus' crucifixion is inseparable from the broken and yet risen body of Christ that is represented in the bread and wine. At the Last Supper, Jesus symbolizes his body in the form of the bread that he shares with his disciples; the image of the bread also possesses the aporetic tensions between life and death that are implicit in the wine of the covenant.

In his analysis of the relationship between the eucharistic sacrifice and the Christian idea of atonement, Fiddes argues that the principle of thanksgiving is central to humanity's communion with God. By partaking of the eucharistic sacrifice, Christians acknowledge "the way that God goes on offering himself into human lives, constantly entering the pain and predicament of human experience" (78). In this way, Fiddes acknowledges something that may be considered tragic at the heart of the eucharistic sacrifice. Moreover, he connects the eucharistic sacrifice to the Old Testament practice of common offering, "This common meal, eaten in the presence of God (Ex. 24:11), represented the special bond of peace between God and his people" (Fiddes 78). Consequently, Fiddes suggests that in the Christian tradition the eucharistic sacrifice is a version of the communion sacrifice: "The followers of Jesus eat and drink in the presence of their risen Lord, and as the bond of the new covenant, the Eucharist focuses the nature of all life as a costly but joyful fellowship with God" (78). This interpretation of the eucharistic sacrifice is of course a theological reflection in which Jesus' resurrection is presented as an antecedent to the early church's celebration of this meal. In the Gospel of Mark's account of the Last

⁶ Aquinas addresses the question of whether the wine used in the sacrament ought to be fermented or unfermented. He states that although it does not matter whether the wine is from grapes or from some other fruit, the "sacrament cannot be consecrated" with juice of the "unripe grape" or the "unfermented juice from the ripe grape" (*Summa Theologiae*. Vols. 58 (3a. 73-78) [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 39).

Supper the resurrection is perhaps only vaguely insinuated in Jesus' proclamation that "I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new in the Kingdom of God" (14:30). The earliest texts contain no final resurrection scene. What meaning could be found in the Last Supper if this question of the resurrection is left tragically unresolved?

A. Samuel Kimball has provided a radical interpretation of the eucharistic sacrifice through his comparison of this Christian ritual with the sacrificial rituals of ancient Greek religion. According to his analysis, the wine of the eucharistic sacrifice may coincide with the libations offered to the gods as a thank offering for victory in battle, and the bread may be related to the body of the scapegoat consumed after the sacrificial ritual. The purpose of ritual sacrifice in Greek culture was primarily to ensure safety and well-being in the form of food and protection from one's enemies (Kimball 239).⁷ The most beneficial parts of the meat are of course consumed by the officiant, and "the gods retain a personified form but remain ontologically other by virtue of neither sharing nor being affected by [the cost of] human appetite" (Kimball 245). Consequently, "In their pagan rite, when the Greeks deny their god a real share of their meal, they act out the defensiveness by which a group protects itself from the appetite of the enemy" (Kimball 245). The ritual sacrifice was often accompanied by imprecatory prayers against an enemy, which were ironically called *euchai*—which means a good prayer, or to boast (Kimball 339). Kimball argues that in the New Testament, "Jesus launches his critique of pagan ritual by reversing the direction of address in Greek sacrifice, an action by which he discloses and disrupts the economizing function of this rite" (244). In the eucharistic sacrifice of the Last Supper, "Jesus asserts his ontological sameness by virtue of his bodily existence, hence by virtue of sharing (the cost of) a mortal appetite" (Kimball 245). Consequently, through the words of the consecratory utterance Jesus identifies himself with the costliness of human existence. By transforming the logic of Greek sacrifice from a celebration of securing food at the expense of one's enemies into a commemoration of the costliness of existence,

⁷ Kimball argues that "Indeed, one of the most basic human perceptions is doubtless that existence costs. So fundamental is this insight that it is implied in the etymological kinship of the two terms—'existence' and 'cost' are Latin cognates from a common Indo-European stem—that make up this redundant predication" (21). According to Kimball, the reality that existence costs necessitates that "in a world of finite energy and material resources and limited reproductive opportunities, all living thing must economize to survive" (20). This economization is simply another name for the sacrificial logic according to which living things "transfer more of the costs of their existence onto the environment or onto their competitors than their competitors are able for their part to transfer" (Kimball 20).

Kimball argues that Jesus “reinterprets the real, the good, and the true (the meaning of *eu-*): he frees their meaning from their tie in Greek sacrifice” (Kimball 245). The good and the true are no longer conceived of in terms of a personal gain at the expense of one’s enemy but in terms of the complete and “absolute loss of the self-sacrificing divine friend” (Kimball 245). Consequently, Kimball argues that “Jesus brings [his disciples] toward an awareness that the costliness is absolute—indeed, that it is infinite, nothing less than the death of the Son of God—and there is no escape from it” (245). The Eucharist discloses the cost of the disciples’ existence by literally placing it on the very tips of their tongues: “Inserting himself as the divine essence of everything we ingest, Jesus makes explicit that in eating to live we economize by shunting the cost of our existence elsewhere (onto other people, other living things, the environment, even God)” (Kimball 239).

The implications of Kimball’s thesis are provocative and perhaps disturbing for theological interpretations of the eucharistic sacrifice. By partaking of the bread and wine of the eucharistic sacrifice, the disciples as well Jesus disclose the consequences of their fleshly appetites; no social fictions, no dietary rules can disguise the sacrificial reality of human consumption. Even Jesus himself must eat; it is a condition of his humanity. And yet by eating he becomes caught up in the problems and challenges of living in a world where every morsel of food is profoundly costly; thus, Jesus himself is not immune to the costs of existence. Kimball asserts that Jesus’ death does not offer salvation to humanity, but in contrast to Girard, he asserts that in the Eucharist, Jesus demonstrates there can be no escape from the sacrificial costs of existence which are in fact infinite—the only option is that Jesus must disappear into death. Therefore, he argues that in this sacrificial ritual of self-sacrifice “death is no longer a matter of victory or defeat but of an incalculable, measureless giving of oneself” (Kimball 246).

Kimball’s reading of the Eucharist leads him toward a deconstruction of Christianity’s tradition of logocentrism and onto-theology. At stake in this deconstruction is a critique of Christian notions of salvation, spiritual transcendence, the after-life, all of which he suggests are the result of the tradition of Platonizing Christianity. Kimball offers a complete reevaluation of what it means to follow after Jesus, suggesting that to pursue life in Jesus’ name “would not be to anticipate more life, and above all not an

immortal life, hereafter, for oneself. It would be, rather, to disappear, following Jesus' example, into the promise of life for the other through the gift of death" (Kimball 256). In this way Kimball, like Girard, moves from the epistemological questions posed by the literature and particularly the New Testament's portrayal of the Last Supper to ontological concerns about how to live in a world that requires sacrifice—or in his terms how to economize the costs of existence. However, they each come to radically different conclusions. For Girard, Jesus transcends the sacrificial economy of human existence and is thus capable of introducing a way of life without sacrifice, whereas for Kimball not even Jesus is capable of transcending the sacrificial costs of existence.

By interpreting the eucharistic sacrifice as a rejection of transcendence, Kimball situates his thesis within the larger context of a debate which Girard himself confronts in his critique of Nietzsche's idealization of Dionysus. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1886), Nietzsche develops an aesthetic theory of tragedy that is based upon two artistic drives: the Apollonian which represents the analytic and formalistic elements of artistic expression, and the Dionysian which represents the emotional ecstasy that great art and particularly the music of tragedy is capable provoking. In my chapter on *The Bacchae*, I suggested that in his reading of the play, Girard interprets Dionysus not as a scapegoat but rather as the embodiment of violence. His interpretation of Dionysus fits within a much larger debate concerning Girard's conception of Christianity and its opposition to supposedly mythological expressions of sacrificial violence. When faced with the choice between Dionysus and the Crucified One, Girard sides with the latter, as the ultimate innocent victim of scapegoating, whereas Nietzsche sides with Dionysus. But in making this decision, Girard once again imposes his critique of sacrificial violence onto a discussion that for Nietzsche is not fundamentally related to such anthropological or sociological concerns. Frederiek Depoortere summarizes Nietzsche's understanding of the difference between the Dionysus and the Crucified One as follows:

The difference between both types concerns an opposing evaluation, a conflicting interpretation of suffering and death. The Crucified One stands for the ascetic ideal, the ideal of the weak, of the 'slaves', who feel threatened by life and try to escape from it by fleeing to a *Hinterwelt*. They attempt to subject life to a meaning or aim beyond it, but in this way, Nietzsche claims, they pervert the problem of its meaning. The Dionysian ideal, in contrast, entails an identification with life, as it is[.] . . . The Dionysian person does not search for a meaning of life beyond life, but says

‘Yes!’ to it, even if it chastises him/her with suffering and death, s/he is convinced of life’s overabundance and creative power (53).

Nietzsche’s Dionysian ideal is similar to Kimball’s effort to reconfigure the sacred not as a transcendent force but rather as a ‘natural’ one in which death and sacrifice are themselves merely the condition of everyday life, even the life of Jesus. On the other hand, Girard sides with the Crucified One because he believes that Nietzsche’s Dionysian ideal amounts to an affirmation of sacrificial violence (Depoortere 55). He considers the Dionysian ideal to be an expression of mythological violence and Nietzschean *ressentiment*, which Girard interprets as a thirst for vengeance (Depoortere 59).

In his reading of Nietzsche, Girard searches for anthropological and sociological principles in the Dionysian ideal. However, as Nietzsche himself demonstrates, the distinction between Dionysus and the Crucified One according to his philosophical outlook is the difference between a tragic existence that affirms the finitude and ultimate value of life in the midst of suffering, and an ascetic life which searches for meaning beyond material existence. According to Nietzsche:

One divines that the problem here is that of the meaning of suffering: whether a Christian meaning, a tragic meaning . . . In the former case it’s held to be the path to blissful existence; in the latter, *existence* is held to be *blissful enough* to justify even monstrous suffering[.] The tragic man says Yes to even the bitterest suffering: he is strong, full, deifying enough to do so[.] The Christian says No to even the happiest earthly lot: he is weak, poor, disinherited enough to suffer from life in whatever form[.] (*Writing from the Late Notebooks* cited in Depoortere 50).

The Dionysian ideal emerges in Nietzsche’s philosophy not as a sociological principle but rather from the dialectical relationship between the Apollonian and Dionysian artistic drives which he outlines in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The Apollonian desire for beauty is a search for the transcendent within the immanent sphere of material existence; it is the search for meaning in a created objects. In the terms of the eucharistic sacrifice in the Gospel of Mark, the Apollonian desire seeks only to behold the bread and the wine, the body and the blood, and to appreciate them as poetic expression of Jesus’ own body. By contrast, the Dionysian is expressed as a desire to be immersed in the finitude of material existence, to revel in the loss of individual identity and to recognize that “[i]n spite of fear and compassion, we are the fortunate living beings, not as individuals, but as a *single* living being, with whose joy in creation we are

fused” (Nietzsche 91). This is the desire not only to bear witness to the eucharistic sacrifice but to participate in the meal and by doing so become like Jesus by sharing with him the experience of satisfaction which comes from fulfilling the sacrificial demands of a mortal appetite.

Kimball provides an interpretation of Jesus which effectively refutes Girard’s understanding of Jesus as the absolutely innocent victim of sacrificial scapegoating. He does this firstly by calling into question traditional Christian conceptions of the divine and secondly by introducing a radical theory of sacrifice in which all biological life is bound to an intranscendable sacrificial economy. Through his participation in the eucharistic sacrifice of the Last Supper, Jesus demonstrates that even he is not capable of living a non-sacrificial existence—an existence that may even be considered violent. Kimball calls into question the very nature of Jesus’ divinity, and in this respect his thesis is certainly more radical than my own. Kimball bases his theory of sacrificial economization upon the seemingly irrefutable ontological assertion that existence costs. Consequently, Kimball’s theory of sacrifice is based upon an evolutionary model in which humans must find a way to economize the costs of their existence in order to survive. Therefore like Girard, Kimball attempts to locate his epistemological judgements concerning the essential nature of human existence within an ontological framework that apparently confirms the truth of his theory of sacrifice. In the end they each attempt to move from the epistemological issues at stake in literary texts to ontological assertions about the nature of human existence.

On the one hand, Girard essentially reduces artistic representation to a form of revelatory knowledge which forecloses the possibility of reconceiving the nature of sacrifice and its relationship to the divine. Works of tragic literature and the Bible are consequently read as historical accounts of scapegoating violence, while transcendence is configured as an escape from sacrificial violence that only we as humans can accomplish. On the other hand, Kimball’s thesis attempts to foreclose a certain religious belief in Jesus’ transcendence while at the same time leaving open the possibility of a theological understanding of the divine which must nonetheless be pursued through an investigation of the radical implications of Jesus’ death. In this way, Kimball follows a theological path not unlike the radical dialectical theology of Thomas Altizer. In his memoir *Living the Death of God* (2006), Altizer

describes Nietzsche as the “purest thinker of the radical profane” (8). For Altizer, Nietzsche’s atheistic philosophy provided a way of conceiving of the absolute transcendence of God as being accomplished at the moment of his death on the cross. At the crucifixion, Jesus empties himself into a world of flesh and blood and the finitude of material objects. As I argued at the outset of this chapter, a Christian theology of atonement, especially a radical one such as Altizer’s, cannot easily dispense with the tragic necessity of the crucifixion. Christian theologies of atonement remain plagued by problem sacrificial scapegoating. However, Kimball’s thesis provides an approach to thinking about the death of God which is rooted in his mortal being rather in his violent crucifixion.

Conclusion

By way of concluding, however, I wish to shift the discourse back to questions of artistic representation rather than strictly theological or ontological questions about Jesus’ transcendence. By identifying his own body with the bread and wine of the eucharistic sacrifice, Jesus creates the possibility for atonement and an experience of the divine to take place through material objects and artistic representation. Louis Marin describes the ways that the consecratory utterance, “This is my body,” brings about a semiotic transformation in which the absent body of Christ is made present through “the transformation of an existing thing,” the bread and the wine, “into a produced body,” or in other words the Body of Christ (*Food for Thought* xvii). According to Marin the eucharistic sign and its consecratory utterance are excessive in the sense that the combination of the two produces an oscillation between language and the image that allows for a third presence to emerge amid the indeterminacy of the rite. Marin argues that the eucharistic sign’s ability to generate a produced body has invisible effects which “concern the substantial and opaque nature of the flesh and are realized in the mystery of the real presence of the divine body” (xv). It is difficult to ascertain precisely what Marin means in regard to the opacity of the flesh, but it seems that what he is concerned with here is the point at which the physical and the invisible converge in the eucharistic sign. Signs are forces according to Marin: “They are nowhere more powerful than in the sacramental word of the Eucharist; the proposition that is uttered as part of the ritual of this institution effect the transformation of an existing thing into a produced body. It is this

ontological transformation, which is at once a mystery and a miracle realized by the words of consecration, that we shall encounter elsewhere in stories and images. Having undergone a process of displacement, metonymy, projection, or metaphorical reversal, this transformation resurfaces in the play of the voice, in the play of space, and in the complex logic of discourse and writing” (xvii). By positing the eucharistic sign as the very basis of signification and representation, Marin offers some insight into the ways in which the eucharistic model of sacrifice may serve as an epistemological framework for interpreting various forms of artistic representation. He suggests that a range of images from “historical narratives, panegyrics, paintings, medals or portraits” all may be considered an “extensions of the utterance, ‘This is my body.’”(xviii).

Therefore, in a variation of Kimball’s thesis, it may be argued that through the eucharistic sacrifice Jesus does not forsake his divinity but instead he provides his disciples access to the divine by rendering his own body in the bread and the wine. In the eucharistic sacrifice of the Last Supper, the sacred is no longer represented as that which is separate from the so-called profane sphere of human existence, but rather in the bread and the wine, the sacred and the profane commune in a sacrificial meal. Consequently, at the Last Supper, Jesus and his disciples converge over the symbols of the bread and the wine; as they partake of this meal, they also take a share in the costliness of living in community with one another. Through the eucharistic sacrifice the divinity of Jesus communes with the finitude of human existence such that the mode of Jesus’ existence and the mode of human existence are no longer discernable from one another. In this meal the opposition between the human and the divine, the sacred and the profane, the persecutor and the persecuted is inscribed within a sacrificial economy which renders these oppositions undecidable. The Jesus of Mark’s Gospel accomplishes this radical reconfiguration of the relationship between the sacred and the profane through a brief and nonetheless provocative story involving food.⁸ Like the tragic performance of the Dionysian festival, the tragedy of Mark’s Gospel

⁸ My position runs counter to prevailing theological interpretations of the sacraments. In his argument for maintaining the distinction between the sacred and the profane, Michael Kunzler claims: “The Eucharist is . . . not only the sacrament of sacraments, rather as the centre of the whole liturgical life it is the quintessence and the festive event of the sacralization of the profane, which is all-embracing and eschatologically already in act, carried out by Christ in the Holy Spirit. Within it sacralization takes place, the transformation of a world closed in its worldliness of lust, into one directed towards God. Sacral therefore is the authentic reality of a world in communication with the living God, and this differs radically from the profane

reaches its climax in a sacrificial meal that is shared between Jesus and his disciples. The apostle Paul also demonstrates the tragic elements of Mark's Gospel in the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist. His account of the Last Supper ensured that the drama of the eucharistic sacrifice would be liturgically repeated time and time again by those who wish to follow after Jesus: "the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given many thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me'" (1 Cor. 11: 23-25).

Chapter IV

Flannery O'Connor and the Art of Christian Tragedy

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' eucharistic sacrifice transfigures the opposition between the human and the divine and between oppressors and the oppressed. Consequently, in contrast to Girard's theory of sacrifice as scapegoating, the eucharistic model of sacrifice provides an approach to interpreting literary conflicts which resists interpretive closure. In this chapter, I will discuss Flannery O'Connor's approach to writing fiction through a reading of her short story *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and her novel *Wise Blood*. The movements of grace in these tragic tales may be detected through the presence of a eucharistic model of sacrifice at work in the actions of the story's protagonist. O'Connor's emphasis upon fiction as an incarnational art and the importance of the sacraments to her own theological outlook provide a useful religious framework for exploring her stories as works of Christian tragedy.

The importance of the Eucharist for O'Connor is demonstrated in the story of an otherwise unremarkable dinner party, which is nonetheless famous among her religious-minded scholars. This anecdote tells us a great deal about her views on the Eucharist. In a letter to a friend written on December 16, 1955, O'Connor describes a conversation that took place at a dinner party in which her hostess implied that the Eucharist was merely a symbol:

Well, toward morning the conversation turned on the Eucharist, which I, being the Catholic, was obviously supposed to defend. Mrs. Broadwater said when she was a child and received the Host, she thought of it as the Holy Ghost, He being the "most portable" person of the Trinity; now she thought of it as a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one. I then said, in a very shaky voice, "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it." That was all the defense I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it, outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence for me; all the rest of life is expendable (HB 125).

This often cited anecdote concerning O'Connor's reverence for the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation is perhaps the best point from which to embark on an investigation of the ways that O'Connor's stories enact moments of transfiguration and conversion that repeat the transfigurative logic of the Eucharist.

In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, a eucharistic model of sacrifice is demonstrated through the Grandmother's unexpected recognition of The Misfit as one of her own children. By reaching out to touch The Misfit, the Grandmother offers a gesture of sacrificial love that is unexpected for the killer as

well as the reader. This surprising gesture is accompanied by a proclamation of kinship between the Grandmother and The Misfit. By claiming The Misfit as one of her own, the Grandmother speaks the all important words of consecration which join her momentarily into community with The Misfit. Likewise, the mystery of these words and actions in the story challenges our ability to interpret the meaning of the Grandmother's gesture. To perceive The Misfit as a worthy recipient of love is perhaps more than we can bear, and yet this is precisely what the text challenges us to do. In word and in deed, the Grandmother repeats the transfigurative logic of the Eucharist by disrupting the opposition between oppressor and oppressed, enemy and friend. This sacrificial gesture reaches the level of what O'Connor describes as the anagogical.

In my reading of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, I will elucidate the ways that the paradoxical gestures in O'Connor's stories, which she has described as anagogic, bring about a moment of conversion in which the oppositions at stake in her stories are transfigured. The convergence between a seemingly innocent grandmother and a serial killer named The Misfit in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* presses our notions of good and evil, the redeemed and the condemned, to their very extremes. This enigmatic tale of a family vacation gone wrong presents us with a moment of radical transfiguration that challenges our notions of good and evil. The New Testament's exhortative command to love one's enemy is demonstrated by the Grandmother's recognition of The Misfit as one of her own children. By reaching out to the Misfit, the Grandmother repeats the logic of the eucharistic sacrifice in which the opposition between oppressor and oppressed is transfigured through the gift of sacrificial love. As a writer of Christian tragedy, O'Connor's work demonstrates a concern for human freedom that resists the determinism of traditionalist conceptions of tragedy. The Grandmother and The Misfit in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* are presented as free individuals who are capable of transgression, charity, and most importantly redemption.

O'Connor is particularly concerned with creating paradoxical moments that challenge her reader's ability to interpret the events that take place in her stories. She claims that her fiction "takes its character from a reasonable use of the unreasonable, though the reasonableness of my use of it may not always be

apparent. The assumptions that underlie this use of it, however, are those of the central Christian mysteries” (MM 109). She admits that although there may be numerous ways of interpreting a story like a *Good Man Is Hard to Find*, there are “none other by which it could have been written,” and she claims that belief “is the engine that makes perception operate” (MM 109). As a Catholic writer, O’Connor’s beliefs are shaped not only by the theological and intellectual assertions of thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas but also by Christian mystics such as St. John of the Cross and Meister Eckhart. It is not simply the doctrine of transubstantiation that informs O’Connor’s creative vision but rather it is the mysterious experience of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist which shapes her sacramental approach to writing.

O’Connor frequently uses the word mystery to describe the unique features of her fiction and artistic vision, and oftentimes the term is used to indicate some paradoxical or aporetic tension in her work. Even in regard to a seemingly basic element of fiction such as plot, O’Connor preferred the notion of mystery over any conventional approach to constructing a story. In her reflections on the art of short fiction, O’Connor shuns an Aristotelian preference for the causal nature of tragic plots and instead asserts the importance of writing about complex individuals in unique circumstances:

A story is a complete dramatic action—and in good stories, the characters are shown through the action and the action is controlled through the characters, and the result of this is meaning that derives from the whole presented experience. I myself prefer to say that a story is a dramatic event that involves a person because he is a person, and particular person—that is, because he shares in the general human condition and in some specific human situation. A story always involves, in a dramatic way, the mystery of personality (MM 90).

The mystery of personality in O’Connor’s work involves the capacity of humans to commit acts of violence and charity, as well as the ability to sacrifice others or to render themselves vulnerable through gestures of sacrificial love. And yet along with mystery comes uncertainty—such paradoxical gestures of self-sacrifice challenge any straightforward interpretation. In O’Connor’s stories there is no unmediated experience of the divine. Consequently, the movements of grace in these stories, as in the Eucharist, are at times ambiguous but nonetheless real.

The movements of grace in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* become perceptible at the moment in which the opposition between oppressor and the oppressed, The Misfit and the Grandmother is transfigured. This transfiguration is initiated by what O'Connor has described as "some action, some gesture of a character that is unlike any other in the story, one which indicates where the real heart of the story lies" (MM 111). She suggests that such an action "would have to suggest both the world and eternity," and consequently it is an action which takes place on "the anagogical level, that is, the level which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it" (MM 111). In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, O'Connor draws her readers into a community that resembles the sacred community of the Eucharist. According to my reading of Mark's Gospel, the anagogic moment occurs in the instant at which Jesus pronounces the consecratory utterance, "This is my body," over the bread and the wine of the Last Supper. Jesus transforms the violence of the cross into a symbolic and nonetheless real gift of sacrificial love to his disciples—in this instant the opposition between oppressor and the oppressed is transfigured in the sacred community that is constituted by the consecratory utterance—murderers and deceivers alike participate in this community that is at one with God. Similarly, in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, a rather strange little family is formed between a killer and his victims on an abandoned road somewhere just outside of Toomsboro when the Grandmother of this family unexpectedly sees The Misfit as one of her own and he recoils from the sting of this unforeseen gift of love.

In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, a family consisting of a Grandmother, her son Bailey, his wife and baby, and their two children named John Wesley and June Star, find themselves stranded in a narrow gulch with their automobile overturned and their only hope of help turns out to be a group of mysterious men led by a wandering serial killer named The Misfit. And yet somewhere in this hopeless situation, the movements of grace may be found. When the Grandmother and the Misfit come face-to-face, O'Connor's story challenges us to imagine these two figures not only on equal ground but more importantly as members of the same family. In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* we are challenged to discern the movements of grace acting upon both the Grandmother and The Misfit in equal measure.

The violence which takes place in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* is perhaps so disturbing because unlike many stories in which violence emerges from a conflict over a particular object of desire, in this story the conflict is very simply a struggle between life and death. The story culminates in a convergence between these two forces as the Grandmother faces The Misfit who has already killed every other member of her family—there is nothing the Grandmother can offer The Misfit which he desires but her life, and likewise The Misfit has nothing to offer the Grandmother but death. At first glance, it is difficult to perceive any commonality between these two figures, and yet strangely that is what the story challenges us to do.

The story begins with a familiar and somewhat comedic scenario. Bailey has plans to take the family on a trip to Florida, and the Grandmother is decidedly opposed to the idea. She claims that news of an escaped killer who has supposedly fled to Florida should be reason enough for Bailey to change his plans: “I wouldn’t take my children in any direction with a criminal like that a loose in it. I couldn’t answer to conscience if I did” (137). Her appeals to visit a different part of the world, for example Tennessee, fall on deaf ears, and so as any self-respecting Grandmother would do, she goes along for the ride despite her adamant disapproval of her destination. On their way south, the family stops at Red Sammy’s Famous Barbeque. In her conversation with Red Sammy, the Grandmother expresses her dissatisfaction with the untrustworthiness of people in her day: “It isn’t a soul in this green world of God’s that you can trust,” she said. “I don’t count nobody out of that, not nobody,” she repeated, looking at Red Sammy (142). After ruminating on the possibility of The Misfit coming to rob his very own restaurant, Red Sammy offers his own observations on the state of humanity, “A good man is hard to find. . . . Everything is getting terrible. I remember the day you could go off and leave your screen door unlatched. Not no more” (142). It is clear that the Grandmother considers herself an honest and moral person, but like so many of O’Connor’s characters, her moral integrity is tainted by racial and social prejudice.¹ Although the Grandmother’s prejudices are unlikely to endear her to many readers, these

¹ Early on in the story, the Grandmother demonstrates her racial prejudices: “Oh look at the cute little pickaninny!” she said and pointed to a Negro child standing in the door of a shack. “Wouldn’t that make a picture, now?” she asked and then all turned and looked at the little Negro out of the back window. He waved (139). During her conversation with Red Sammy, the Grandmother suggests “in her opinion Europe was entirely to blame for the way things were now” (142).

flaws are somewhat insignificant in relation to the events which unfold in the story. The Grandmother's so-called tragic flaw turns out not to be her own prejudices.² Instead, it is something much less sinister but nonetheless dangerous—an overactive imagination. After leaving Red Sammy's Famous Barbeque, the Grandmother awakes with a distant memory from her youth: "Outside of Toombsboro she woke up and recalled an old plantation that she had visited in this neighbourhood once when she was a young lady. . . . She recalled exactly which road to turn off to get to it" (142-143). At this point we have very little reason to doubt that the Grandmother did indeed think that she had visited just such a plantation in the area. But knowing that her son would be unlikely to accommodate her desire to see the plantation, she creates her own little fiction in order to exaggerate the wonder of the plantation house in an attempt to rally the children to her cause: "'There was a secret panel in this house,' she said craftily, not telling the truth but wishing that she were, 'and the story went that all the family silver was hidden in it when Sherman came through but it was never found...'" (143). Her deception is a success, and Bailey steers the family's car onto the dirt road that leads them to nowhere but eternity.

It is not entirely clear how the car accident occurs. Rather than providing us with specific details about the wreck, the narrator instead provides the reader with a glimpse into the Grandmother's thoughts just before the car is overturned: "'It's not much farther,' the grandmother said and just as she said it, a horrible thought came to her. The thought was so embarrassing that she turned red in the face and her eyes dilated and her feet jumped up, upsetting her valise in the corner" (144). As the dust from the wreck settles, the Grandmother recalls that the house she had once visited was in Tennessee not Georgia, but decides it is perhaps best not to own up to this realization at that particular moment. In the aftermath of the car wreck, the children repeatedly announce, "We've had an ACCIDENT!" (144-146). O'Connor's use of capital letters highlights the comedic irony of the situation. At this point, O'Connor directs our attention away from the causal relationship between the events in her story. The physical circumstances which led to the accident are obscured, and instead our attention is focused on the Grandmother's

² Despite her obvious flaws, O'Connor suggests that the Grandmother should not be considered a bad character. According to O'Connor, "It is true that the old lady is a hypocritical old soul; her wits are no match for The Misfit's, nor is her capacity for grace equal to his; yet I think the unprejudiced reader will feel that the Grandmother has a special kind of triumph in this story which instinctively we do not all to someone altogether bad" (MM 111).

realization that in fact her deception was even greater than she herself had intended—the implications of her clever little story had surpassed her own intentions.

The Misfit and his companions quickly arrive at the scene. The Grandmother's family members are taken by The Misfit's crew into the dark forest that looms in the background of the story and each of them is executed. While all of this is taking place, the Grandmother is left to deal face-to-face with The Misfit and the story quickly reaches its climax with a very curious exchange between these two opposing figures. As two pistol shots ring out from the direction of the forest, signalling the execution of her remaining family members, the Grandmother faces her killer and sees reflected in him something altogether unexpected:

She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest. Then he put his gun down on the ground and took off his glasses and began to clean them (152).

It is unclear whether the Grandmother did indeed see The Misfit as one of her own children, or if instead she simply saw the distorted reflection of her own face in the smeared spectacles of her killer; in either case, this realization causes the Grandmother to reach out to The Misfit in love; the kindness of this gesture is in O'Connor's opinion "a kind of triumph" (MM 111). The Grandmother's gesture is as surprising to the reader as it is to The Misfit. Through this strange and unexpected gesture, we make contact with the mystery of grace which inhabits this exceptional moment.

Enemies and Transfiguration

A Good Man Is Hard to Find is an appropriate place to begin an exploration of O'Connor's work because it is so frequently read and yet so often mistaken for simply being a story about the murder of a family on their way to Florida.³ O'Connor's title, like much of her work is both ironic and nonetheless poignant in its evocation of the story's theme. Her story does not simply suffer from a shortage of moral

³ O'Connor insists that violence in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* may be considered a force either for good or evil. For her violence is itself a tool for revealing in a person "those qualities least dispensable in his personality, those qualities which are all he will have to take into eternity with him; and since the characters in this story are all on the verge of eternity, it is appropriate to think of what they take with them," and consequently she claims that "if you consider these points in connection with the story, you will come to see it as something more than an account of a family murdered on the way to Florida" (MM 114).

figures; it is practically devoid of them in much the same way that the apostle Paul in the New Testament diagnoses the fallenness of humankind. In my reading of *The Bacchae*, I argued that the play's dramatic conflict is based upon mythological conflicts that are structured according to the logic of scapegoating. Although it stages a temporary disruption of these mythological antagonisms, in the end the opposition between the human and the divine, and between oppressor and oppressed is once more restored in order to bring the experience of catharsis. *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* is also based upon a fundamental opposition between the fallenness of humanity and the righteousness of God. However, in contrast to *The Bacchae* which seek to reaffirm the opposition between humans and the divine as a means of mystifying the practice of scapegoating, the opposition between God and humanity is already transfigured in the world of O'Connor's short story according to the scandalous implications of the New Testament's message of forgiveness and reconciliation.

In his epistle to the Romans, Paul affirms the sinfulness of both Jews and Gentiles alike, and he argues that justification and redemption comes only through God's grace which is nonetheless a mystery to human understanding. Drawing from various portions of the Psalms, Paul proclaims:

What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written: "There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one." "Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of vipers is under their lips." "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery are in their paths, and the way of peace they have not known." "There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Romans 3:9-18).

The opposition between the fallenness of humanity and the righteousness of God in Paul's epistle to the Romans serves as a beginning point for a much larger discussion concerning forgiveness and reconciliation. In Romans 5, Paul asserts that "while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life" (Romans 5:10). Once again Paul consolidates all of humanity as enemies who are nonetheless reconciled to God through Jesus' death. In the final verses of Romans 11, Paul offers a complex and at times perplexing analysis of the relationship between the people of Israel, the Gentiles and God. In the

following verses, he abandons his references to Jews and Gentiles and begins to describe the fundamental opposition between humanity and God, and his hope for reconciliation:

Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all (Romans 11:30-32).

Once again, Paul echoes his assertion of humanity's fallen nature from the early part of Romans, and asserts that because all people are disobedient to God, the opposition between Jew and Gentile is made obsolete by God's reconciliation of all to himself. Finally, after asserting the unity of the church as one body that is nonetheless composed of many parts, Paul exhorts his followers to be living sacrifices to God by loving their enemies and forsaking vengeance:

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:14-21).

The exhortative command to love one's enemy thematically underwrites the enigmatic encounter between The Misfit and the Grandmother. It is this thematic concern which distinguishes O'Connor's story, as a work of Christian tragedy. In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, the Grandmother finds herself in the midst of a seemingly hopeless situation from which there is no foreseeable escape, and yet miraculously she offers nothing less than the gift of love to her enemy. By offering this gift, the opposition between the Grandmother and The Misfit is transfigured in a way that repeats the logic of the eucharistic sacrifice.

In contrast to Girard's scapegoating model of sacrifice which reduces literary conflicts to the fundamental opposition between protagonists and antagonists, the Grandmother's sacrificial gesture disrupts rather than secures the opposition between oppressor and oppressed, enemy and friend, in the story; the opposition between the Grandmother and The Misfit is transfigured by the gift of sacrificial love. By reaching out to touch The Misfit, the Grandmother crosses the physical boundary between oppressor and oppressed, and although The Misfit responds violently to this gesture, he is profoundly affected by the old woman's touch. The story's primary aim is not to offer a gruesome portrayal of

murder in which The Misfit is deprived of any moral agency, nor is its purpose to present the Grandmother as a hubristic individual whose wilful deception leads directly to her family's death as well as her own. The Grandmother's situation may be considered tragic because it is both necessary and nonetheless unexpected. However, the story goes beyond an Aristotelian conception of tragedy and achieves the status of Christian tragedy through the Grandmother's gift of sacrificial love. By reaching out in love to The Misfit, the Grandmother performs a sacrificial gesture which confounds the logic of scapegoating sacrifice because it disrupts opposition between persecutor and the persecuted in the story.

Raids on the Inarticulate

Jesus' eucharistic sacrifice in the Gospel of Mark involves both the words of the consecratory utterance, "This is my body," and the sharing of the bread and wine with his disciples. Likewise, the movements of grace in *A Good Man Is Hard To Find*, involve not only the words which the Grandmother speaks to The Misfit but also the actions which make this gesture complete. In *Flannery O'Connor and the Language of Apocalypse* (1986), Edward Kessler focuses on O'Connor's use of language in order to demonstrate "how metaphor transforms, if not transfigures, the phenomena of straightforward, referential prose" (7). According to Kessler, O'Connor's use of metaphor is not simply aesthetic (7). On the contrary, he claims that "O'Connor's metaphors constitute verbal strategies for engaging the unknown, for making what Eliot called 'raids on the inarticulate'" (Kessler 7). In an intriguing analysis of O'Connor's narrative style, Kessler argues that through her use of poetic metaphor, O'Connor attempted bring about a "momentary reconciliation of opposites" between the literal language of prose and figurative language of poetry (15). He suggests that O'Connor's use of the *as if* construction is indicative of the difficulties she had in "bringing about the marriage of fiction and belief, of worldly analogy and that mysterious power that undermines the ultimate value of the here and now" (Kessler 52). According to Kessler's analysis, the *as if* construction in O'Connor's stories operates as kind of compromise between metaphor and analogy or simile:

The compound conjunction is composed of a direct comparison *as* followed by a conditional *if* that undermines the validity of the comparison. Thus *as if*, and variants like *as though* function midway between simile or analogy . . . and metaphor, poetic utterance that is concerned with how we see (52).

O'Connor's use of the *as if* construction introduces a degree of ambiguity into her descriptions that is more commonly associated with poetry as opposed to realistic prose. In a pivotal scene which I have described in the previous section, the Grandmother faces The Misfit in *A Good Man Is Hard To Find*, and the narrator states that "She saw the man's face twisted close to her own *as if* he were going to cry and she murmured, 'Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!'" (152). Kessler claims that the "*as if* in O'Connor's work belies the explanatory voice heard in her letters and occasional essays" (53). Although Kessler suggests that O'Connor sometimes made "attempts to resolve fictional ambiguity" in her stories, he claims that such efforts weakened their literary form (53). He claims that ambiguity is necessary for distancing O'Connor's readers from the confines of the natural world and directing their attention to the presence of the divine at work in her stories:

Dynamic power in O'Connor, so often expressed through violent metaphors, can transform people and the natural world, but she refuses to declare the transformation except by the ambiguous means of *as if*. . . O'Connor's writing does not represent the physical world but serves as her means of apprehending and understanding a power activating that world. Thus she is true to Coleridge's (and essentially Aristotle's) ideas of mimesis: she does not copy external form; she imitates the life that animates both man and nature (Kessler 55).

Although Kessler's analysis helps to elucidate O'Connor's use of poetic metaphor, his analysis misconstrues the tension between the transcendent world of the spirit and the finite world of the so-called natural in her work. According to Kessler, "The *as if* is her bridge between the real and the imagined, but it is a bridge that cannot carry her or us to the other side" (55). Kessler's opposition between the literalness of O'Connor's prose and the figurativeness of her poetic language conflicts with the author's own sacramental and anti-Manichean understanding of the relationship between nature and the spirit. O'Connor describes fiction as an incarnational art because, contrary to Kessler, she believed that it was possible for her stories to offer her readers an experience of the divine that was no mere semblance. Kessler, on the other hand, attempts to ascribe the notion of a radically transcendent God to O'Connor's theological outlook that is perhaps more representative of his own theological views than it is of the author's:

O'Connor's God is not truly the "father" of men, but treated *as if* he were, and to deny the identity of bread and body, wine and blood does not undermine spiritual efficacy but asserts the supreme fiction that transcends the limits of representational language and unites us in a creating process[.] . . . Certainly O'Connor in theory or fiction would have avoided the heresy of identifying God with his creation (58).

Kessler appears to conflate an affirmation of the transcendence of God the Father with a Manichean distancing of God from the material world. He is perhaps correct in assuming that O'Connor would not have mistaken God's creation for the divine. However, as his interpretation of the Eucharist demonstrates, Kessler prefers to maintain a distinction between the *as if* of poetic language and a Catholic belief in the real presence of the Eucharist. Consequently, his understanding of the relationship between the spirit and matter, figurative and the literal, truth and fiction, cannot accommodate those instances in which God not only associates himself with his creation but actually goes so far as to become incarnate in the flesh as body and blood, and miraculously transformed into bread and wine.

O'Connor describes fiction as an incarnational art that is at odds with modern understanding of the relationship between matter and the spirit. She claims that to the Manicheans "all material things were evil. They sought pure spirit and tried to approach the infinite directly without any mediation of matter. This is also the modern spirit, and for the sensibility infected with it, fiction is hard if not impossible to write because fiction is so very much an incarnational art" (MM 68). O'Connor viewed the art of fiction as one important way of battling against the false distinction between spirit and matter which numbs readers' senses and prevents them from perceiving the movements of grace within the rather mundane circumstances of human existence. Contrary to the spirit of the modern age which she has described as Manichean, O'Connor's sacramental outlook maintains that for humans there is no unmediated experience of the divine. Through her fiction, O'Connor attempted to provide a sacramental experience that she perceived to be mainly foreign to her modern readers.

O'Connor's incarnational art is an extension of the eucharistic miracle in which the meaninglessness of inanimate objects such as bread and wine are poetically transformed into a means of human redemption. The words and images in her stories are capable of bringing about the very real movements of grace which she associated with the sacraments of her faith. For O'Connor the bread and

wine of the Eucharist are not merely symbols, and likewise her work does not simply consist of stories *about* redemption. As an incarnational art, O'Connor's fiction has the capacity to offer her readers something more than a mere semblance of an encounter with the divine.

It is possible for O'Connor's stories to make contact with the divine because through the incarnation God has already made contact not only with material things of creation but also with the very words, images, and signs of the artistic creation. O'Connor's expresses her own understanding of the relationship between the world, the mind, and God from an Augustinian perspective: "St. Augustine wrote that the things of the world pour forth from God in a double way: intellectually into the minds of the angels and physically into the world of things. To the person who believes this—as the western world did up until a few centuries ago—the physical, sensible world is good because it proceeds from a divine source" (MM 157). Through the production of words and images the writer becomes involved in a process of mimesis that is not separate from the double movement of God's kenotic creation of the world. O'Connor's stories become bread for hungry souls through the emptying of God's spirit into a world of words and flesh.

Words are not severed from actions in O'Connor's stories. The movements of grace in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* take place in both word and deed; as the Grandmother speaks aloud the words of consecration which join The Misfit to herself, she also reaches out her hand to consummate this strange and unexpected gift of love by touching the body of her killer. O'Connor attempts to articulate the inarticulatable mystery of the divine by emphasising not only words but also movements in her stories. The Hebrew *dabar*, word and event, and the *logos* made flesh of John's gospel are each expressed in the Grandmother's gesture of sacrificial love.⁴ According to O'Connor, the instances in her stories that ascend to the level of the anagogic are moments in which the readers and the characters alike "make contact with mystery" (MM 111). O'Connor suggests that this moment occurs when "[t]he Grandmother is at last alone, facing the Misfit. Her head clears for an instant and she realizes, even in her limited way, that she is responsible for the man before her and joined to him by ties of kinship which have their roots

⁴ Walter Ong elucidates the relationship the experience of language as sound and words as events. He claims that "anyone who has a sense of what words are in a primary oral culture, or a culture not far removed from primary orality, it is not surprising that the Hebrew term *dabar* means 'word' and 'event'" (*Orality and Literacy* [New York: Routledge, 1988], 32).

deep in the mystery she has been merely prattling about so far. And at this point she does the right thing, she makes the right gesture” (MM 112). In this moment, the Grandmother reaches across the chasm that cannot be bridged by words alone. It is a moment of both vulnerability and courage, and like Jesus’ own eucharistic sacrifice, it embodies the movements of grace associated with the gift of sacrificial love.

Tragic Destiny and Free Will

As a work of Christian tragedy, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* repeats the transfigurative logic of the eucharistic sacrifice in the moment that the Grandmother reaches out in love to touch The Misfit. In order for this gesture to be a genuine act of love, it must break free of the sacrificial teleology of Aristotelian conceptions of tragedy and truly surprise us through an act which defies interpretation. However, the question of freedom in tragic literature returns us once more to the theme of sin and betrayal which features so prominently in the redemptive narrative of Mark’s gospel. It is perhaps unfair to draw a comparison between the Grandmother in O’Connor’s story and the figure of Judas in Mark. Nevertheless, there are some similarities worth noting. In Mark’s Gospel, Judas’ plot to betray Jesus culminates in the seemingly harmless dissimulation of the kiss, and yet this kiss alone is enough to seal Judas’ fate as an arch betrayer. His dissimulation is often seen as unforgiveable despite the fact that it is an integral part of Mark’s story. Likewise, in O’Connor’s story, it is perhaps all too easy to cast a critical eye toward the Grandmother, who after all was convinced that the house she had once visited was down that abandoned road. O’Connor notes that some of her readers insist upon interpreting the Grandmother as evil:

I’ve talked to a number of teachers who use this story in class and who tell their students that Grandmother is evil, that in fact, she’s a witch, even down to the cat. One of these teachers told me that his students, and particularly his Southern students, resisted this interpretation with a certain bemused vigor, and he didn’t understand why. I had to tell him that they resisted it because they all had grandmothers or great-aunts just like her at home, and they knew, from personal experience, that the old lady lacked comprehension, but that she had a good heart (MM 110).

We should not read too much into O’Connor’s suggestion that the Grandmother had a good heart. Good and bad are very much relative terms for O’Connor, particularly when it comes to characterising people and actions in her stories. Evil on the other hand is a more serious matter for O’Connor. It is a term that

she primarily reserves for describing the devil himself, and as a result she resists equating even The Misfit with the devil (MM 112). The deception is itself merely one way in which the Grandmother demonstrates her freedom and most importantly her humanity.

O'Connor's concern for her character's freedom is an important feature of her work as writer of Christian tragedy. In Aristotelian tragedy, the protagonist's tragic flaw serves simultaneously as the source of her tragic downfall as well as the justification for her ultimate demise. For Aristotle, the purpose of tragic drama is to bring about an experience of catharsis for the audience—*hamartia* is merely the means by which the experience of catharsis is brought about. According to this Aristotelian understanding of tragedy, the Grandmother's fate is more or less sealed from the moment she chooses to deceive her son—the actions which take place up to the time of her shooting are merely precursors to the moment when she is executed, and we as readers are subsequently cathartically cleansed of the emotions of pity and fear that her death provokes. However as a writer of Christian tragedy, O'Connor's work resists this approach to understanding *hamartia* and catharsis. Instead of regarding *hamartia* as the source of the tragic figure's downfall, in Christian tragedy *hamartia* is transformed into a means of redemption rather than destruction. Consequently, the experience of catharsis also undergoes a transformation from an expiatory celebration of the tragic figure's downfall into a compassionate self-identification with the fate of the tragic figure.

The characters in O'Connor's stories are free because they are not constrained by the author's own moral or religious convictions. This freedom leads her characters to commit strange and often blasphemous deeds. She was well aware of the potential risks which her artistic vision posed to her so-called innocent readers. Her commitment to writing fiction that is true to life as well as her own artistic vision involves the risk of "corrupting" readers that are ill-equipped to read her stories. According to O'Connor, "It is very possible that what is vision and truth to the writer is temptation and sin to the reader" (MM 187). Fiction that fails to hazard such risks leaves very little space for the movements of grace which her stories seek to reveal. O'Connor's characters demonstrate their freedom by committing acts which may be considered either good or evil or at times both; her characters are simultaneously

capable of both transgression and charity. This is for O'Connor what makes the stories appear natural and believable. Her characters are neither good nor bad, they are simply human, and consequently, according to O'Connor, they are in need of redemption. The situations which arise from acts of freedom in her stories prepare her characters for their encounter with the divine. In this sense, the Grandmother's deception is an act of freedom which brings her in many ways closer to the moment of her experience of grace. As a finite and free individual, the Grandmother's propensity for dissimulation is both a blessing and a curse—this is indeed part of the mystery of freedom which O'Connor's stories explore.

However, freedom is not the only ingredient which is necessary for the construction of a redemptive narrative. O'Connor claims that in her stories "a reader will find that the devil accomplishes a good deal of groundwork that seems to be necessary before grace is effective" (MM 117). Her stories consist of the tension between both necessary and unexpected events. She is not interested in writing about individuals who are not free; likewise, stories that lack any sense of mystery are also of very little interest to her as a writer. She suggests that the strange relationship between freedom and fate in literature is a mystery that is very closely tied to the problem of evil and the presence of the devil:

To insure our sense of mystery, we need a sense of evil which sees the devil as a real spirit who must be made to name himself, and not simply to name himself as vague evil, but to name himself with his specific personality for every occasion. Literature, like virtue, does not thrive in an atmosphere where the devil is not recognized as existing both in himself and as a dramatic necessity for the writer (MM 117).

Her comments here tread a fine line between the world of her fiction, in which evil like violence is a literary device, and the natural world in which evil presents a very real threat to humanity. Nevertheless, she persistently seeks to establish a connection between these two worlds in order to reveal the movements of grace which are present in each of them. In order to make such a literary compromise with evil, it appears that for O'Connor even the devil remains constrained by God's own redemptive purposes. Consequently, the movements of grace unexpectedly emerge in fiction as in life despite of and sometimes even as a result of the presence of evil in the world.

Like the Grandmother who is ultimately surprised by the implications of her cleverly crafted story, O'Connor suggests that it is indeed possible for her as the writer to discover after the fact the movements

of grace in her stories. The action which appears both necessary and nonetheless unexpected “is always an action which indicates that grace has been offered. And frequently it is an action in which the devil has been the unwilling instrument of grace” (MM 118). She claims that this “knowledge” is not something she “consciously” puts into her stories, but it is instead something that she discovers from reading them (MM 118).⁵ The moments of discovery in which the movements of grace become detectable in the midst of seemingly hopeless circumstances are the points at which O’Connor’s stories ascend to the level of the analogical. In these instances, the characters in her stories, her readers, and perhaps the author herself are transformed into a kind of sacred community that makes contact with mystery and reaches across the silent void that separates words and humans from the divine.

Christian Tragedy and Sacred Texts

In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, O’Connor utilizes a eucharistic model of sacrifice in which the opposition between oppressor and oppressed is transfigured. This eucharistic model may be perceived in the paradoxical movements of the story that resist interpretive closure and thus make room for the mysterious movements of grace. Secondly, in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, we are presented with characters that are capable of both acts of transgression and charity. As free individuals, O’Connor’s characters are capable of breaking free of the deterministic constraints of Aristotelian tragedy and truly surprise readers with gestures that may be considered redemptive. The Grandmother’s gift of sacrificial love breaks free of the cathartic teleology of Aristotelian tragedy. As a result, she presents us with the unexpected movements of grace that O’Connor’s stories seek to reveal.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I will investigate the relationship between suffering and redemption in O’Connor’s work. Christian tragedy has the ability to transform stories about pain into experiences of compassion which surpass the scapegoating logic of catharsis. Nevertheless, the relationship between suffering and redemption in O’Connor’s work has proven to a problematic issue for readers and critics alike. Works of Christian tragedy possess many of the basic features of any work of

⁵ O’Connor claims to have made two discoveries about her own writing, each of which are in some way a surprise to her as a writer, “I have found, in short, from reading my own writing, that my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil. I have also found that what I write is read by an audience which puts little stock either in grace or the devil. You discover your audience at the same time and in the same way that you discover your subject; but it is an added blow” (MM 118).

tragic literature, and as a result it is often difficult to distinguish compassion from sacrificial catharsis when it comes to bearing witness to the suffering of tragic figures.

As a Christian writer, O'Connor's work has been widely examined by scholars who are interested in her ability to construct redemptive narratives. But as the following discussion will demonstrate, such religious readings often misconstrue O'Connor's use of violence as a means of redemption rather than as a literary device in her stories. In my reading of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* as a work of Christian tragedy, I emphasized the aspects of O'Connor's story which may be considered redemptive.

Nevertheless, it seems that there are some risks involved in making a story such as *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* into a kind of redemptive narrative. After all, the Grandmother's sacrificial gesture fails to divert The Misfit from his murderous ways—in return for the love she offers her killer, she receives three bullets to the chest. Even if violence is not the primary focus of the story, the Grandmother's death challenges us to understand precisely how such portrayals of suffering may be considered redemptive.

O'Connor uses violence as a way of heightening dramatic tension; through her construction of paradoxical and often disturbingly violent scenes, she creates moments of indeterminacy which resist interpretive closure. Consequently, she exploits her reader's infatuation with violence as a way of drawing him into the dramatic action of her stories; we are drawn into the redemptive movement of her stories through the emotions of pity and fear which they evoke. In her reflections on *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, O'Connor notes the relationship between her stories and the catharsis which takes place in works of Greek tragedy:

I don't have any pretensions to being an Aeschylus or Sophocles and providing you in this story with cathartic experience out of your mythic background, though this story I'm going to read certainly calls up a good deal of the South's mythic background, and it should elicit from you a degree of pity and terror, even though its way of being serious is a comic one. I do think, though, that like the Greeks you should know what is going to happen in this story so that any element of suspense in it will be transferred from its surface to its interior (MM 108-09).

As a writer of Christian tragedy, the cathartic experiences which O'Connor attempts to create are not ones which follow the logic of the scapegoating mechanism elucidated by Girard, nor does she seek to mystify the sacrificial violence upon which catharsis relies. Instead, her portrayals of violence and the

convergence between opposing forces in her work are rooted in the experience of Christian mystery that is embodied in the Eucharist. O'Connor's stories enact a transfiguration of the opposition between protagonist and antagonist, friend and enemy, and her stories leave the indeterminacy of these oppositions unresolved. Her stories lead us to a place of indeterminacy, and as a result the burden of interpretation is placed upon her readers. In the end, it is up to us to decide whether or not her tragic figures have indeed experienced redemption.

In her lectures, essays, and letters, O'Connor was not hesitant to proclaim her Christian outlook on the world: "I am no disbeliever in spiritual purpose and no vague believer. I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and that what I see in the world I see in its relation to that" (MM 32). Many critics have taken this explicit avowal of her Christian orthodoxy as the basis for interpreting O'Connor's stories and particularly the portrayals of violence which feature prominently in her stories. O'Connor's work as a writer of fiction is clearly concerned not only with the idea of redemption but the experience of redemption for her characters and most importantly her readers. Nevertheless, the complex relationship between violence and Christian redemption in O'Connor's stories has been the subject of a great deal of critical debate from the very outset of her literary career. Some critics have assumed that O'Connor's portrayals of physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering are essentially a means of communicating her own message of redemption, and that consequently her work demonstrates that reconciliation to God, whether in fiction or in life, comes through violence. However, such readings misconstrue O'Connor's work largely because they interpret her use of violence as a means of redemption rather than as a literary device. Violence is not necessarily presented as a means of redemption in O'Connor's stories because the question of her characters' redemption is left unanswered.

Violence does play an important role in O'Connor's stories as a literary device that aids in the construction of narratives which may be considered redemptive. However, O'Connor's use of violence may be interpreted in relation to Jesus' transformation of sacrificial violence into the divine gift of self-sacrifice in the Eucharist. The story of the crucifixion is inseparable from the mystery of the Eucharist.

And yet it is not the violence of the cross which brings about redemption, but rather faith in the crucified body of Christ transubstantiated in the Eucharist that provides nourishment to lost souls. Consequently, in the Eucharist sacrificial violence is transformed into sacrificial love through the divine gift of Jesus' own body which is offered unto the earthly appetites of the sacred community. In Mark's Gospel, redemption does not come through violence but rather in spite of it. Although Jesus' death is necessary in Mark, what is unexpected is the moment that Jesus transforms his death into a divine gift of love through the eucharistic sacrifice. Likewise, O'Connor's stories are not concerned with the necessary but with the unexpected movements of grace; the redemptive moments in O'Connor's stories are not those violent instances which bring her characters closer to death, but they are instead those moments when love and forgiveness unexpectedly disrupt the so-called natural order of sin, death, and decay.

Although O'Connor's stories are often concerned with the experience of suffering, as a writer of Christian tragedy, she transforms stories about pain into stories that are nonetheless redemptive. In his book *Breaking the Fall* (1989), Robert Detweiler identifies three types of sacred texts: texts of pain, texts of love, and texts of worship. Detweiler's criteria for distinguishing between these various types of sacred texts are helpful for distinguishing between works that merely exploit violence as means to an end, and works that operate as "metaphors of witness," which are capable of expressing the otherwise unspeakable experiences of pain (48). A work of Christian tragedy such as *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* demonstrates the characteristics of these different kinds of sacred texts. Most importantly, Detweiler effectively describes how the excesses of passion which verge on violence may be transformed into compassion. In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, the experience of catharsis is transformed into an experience of compassion that surpasses the logic of scapegoating sacrifice.

According to O'Connor, the violence in a story such as *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* serves as an effective literary device for "returning characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace" (MM 112). In this sense her use of violence may be considered redemptive, but not necessarily the work of God. On the contrary, violence in O'Connor's stories is the work of free and sinful individuals—and as she suggests the devil rather than God plays a significant part in these events. O'Connor does not

allow violence to be mystified or stripped of human agency. Nor does she allow a killer such as The Misfit to be regarded simply as an instrument of the devil whose actions render him beyond the reach of God's forgiveness. In her reflections on the story, O'Connor suggests that her reader "should be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace in the Grandmother's soul, and not for the dead bodies" (MM 113). This statement highlights two important aspects of O'Connor's approach to constructing redemptive narratives: firstly, that grace is an *action* that may be observed in her stories, and secondly that this *action* may be witnessed as a distinct movement within her stories.

O'Connor suggests that "Fiction writing is very seldom a matter of saying things; it is a matter of showing things" (MM 93). Although this statement reiterates one of the most frequent bits of advice offered to writers, "Show. Don't tell," it is nonetheless surprising how frequently O'Connor's critics misapprehend her portrayals of violence as gratuitous affirmations of the seemingly necessary relationship between suffering and redemption. O'Connor claims that for the "serious writer, violence is never an end in itself" (MM 113). Nevertheless, she suggests that "Violence is a force which can be used for good or evil, and among other things taken by it is the kingdom of heaven" (MM 113). In O'Connor's stories, violence is not distanced from human agency. Instead, it is directly linked to questions of human freedom and the tragic circumstance of life in a fallen world. Acts of charity and betrayal originate in the freedom of the human will, and in her stories the actions of free individuals may lead unexpectedly to either peace or to violence. Freedom entails uncertainty and risks violence; by giving her characters their freedom, O'Connor makes room for the unexpected and mysterious movements of grace in her stories.

Grace is mediated through the actions of characters that are sinful and nonetheless capable of offering forgiveness, mercy, and love. Just as O'Connor resists abstracting the experience of pain from the bodies which suffer in her stories, her stories also demonstrate that grace may be mediated through humans who are imperfect but nonetheless capable of profound acts of charity and forgiveness. According to O'Connor, "Grace, to the Catholic way of thinking, can and does use as its medium the imperfect, purely human, and even hypocritical" (HB 389). Readings of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* which maintain that the Grandmother must suffer violence in order to be redeemed demonstrate a

Manichean privileging of the spiritual over the material—the Grandmother’s body must suffer for the sake of saving her soul—this privileging of the soul over the body is antithetical to O’Connor’s understanding of redemption and the art of fiction. Moreover, as a Catholic, O’Connor rejects any simple division between the spirit and the flesh:

The Misfit is touched by the Grace that comes through the old lady when she recognizes him as her child, as she has been touched by the Grace that comes through him as her child, as she has been touched by the Grace that comes through him in his particular suffering. His shooting her is a recoil, a horror at her humanness, but after he has done it and cleaned his glasses, the Grace has worked in him and he pronounces his judgement: she would have been a good woman if *he* had been there every moment of her life. True enough. In the Protestant view, I think Grace and nature don’t have much to do with each other. The old lady because of her hypocrisy and humanness and banality couldn’t be a medium for Grace. In the sense that I see things the other way, I’m a Catholic writer (HB 389-90).

Once again, we see that her sacramental view of redemption emphasizes the movement of grace and associates it with the experience of two opposing forces making physical contact with one another. Most importantly, according to her own reading of the story, it is not only the Grandmother who suffers but also The Misfit. By reaching out her hand to touch The Misfit, the Grandmother momentarily makes contact with the suffering of her killer, and in that instant the opposition between oppressor and oppressed is transfigured. The Grandmother is in the end not a deceiver, and what she offers to The Misfit is not a kiss of betrayal but rather the embrace of sacrificial love. O’Connor speculates that this is not the end of The Misfit’s story but perhaps the beginning of something entirely new. It is possible that the Grandmother’s gesture “like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in The Misfit’s heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become,” but that O’Connor suggests is “another story” (MM 113).

For O’Connor, salvation does not come through self-mortification but through the crucified body of Christ which is sacramentally transformed into a divine gift of love through the eucharistic sacrifice. The redemptive moment in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* is not the instant in which the Grandmother dies, but rather the moment preceding her death in which she is awakened for the first time to the reality of her

own need for mercy and the profound kinship she shares with her killer.⁶ In this instant, she is awakened to the scandalous implications of *kerygma* of Christ. The transfigurative consequences of the eucharistic sacrifice place her on equal ground with a figure such as The Misfit—through her own gift of love to The Misfit, the Grandmother becomes open to the movements of grace, and at the same time she confronts The Misfit with the mystery of sacrificial love. The Grandmother in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* simultaneously participates in and accepts the movements of grace on a nameless road somewhere among the backwoods of South Georgia. On a deserted road at the edge of eternity, the Grandmother sees reflected in the face of The Misfit the image of her very own child. And in the instant she touches him, she becomes a mother of love.⁷ This encounter demonstrates the unique capacity of Christian tragedy to transform the experience of pain into an experience of love that nonetheless affirms the humanity and dignity of the Grandmother as well as The Misfit.

Metaphors of Witness and Texts of Pain

Although works of Christian tragedy, like other works of tragic literature, are essentially stories about suffering, they nonetheless attempt to identify with the plight of tragic figures in order to provide a sense of meaning to their otherwise unspeakable experiences of pain. In works of Greek tragedy, the death the scapegoat is justified through theological appeals which seek to mystify the practice of scapegoating sacrifice in order to ensure a cathartic ending. In contrast, works of Christian tragedy seek to humanize their tragic figures and provide an experience of compassion that resists the scapegoating logic of catharsis. In his discussion of religious reading and sacred texts, Robert Detweiler offers a helpful distinction between stories that exploit violence as a means of artistic self-gratification, and texts that help to provide meaning to private and often unspeakable experiences of pain. According to Detweiler, “A religious reading, therefore might be one that finds a group of persons engaged in gestures of friendship

⁶ By embracing The Misfit *as* one of her own, the Grandmother does what is impossible for Antigone to do within the theological and ideological constraints of Sophocles’ play. The Grandmother loves her enemy *as if* he were one of her very own children.

⁷ Richard Giannone approaches O’Connor as an ascetic who follows in the footsteps of the desert fathers. Giannone relates O’Connor’s involuntary physical and regional isolation to the self-enforced isolation which the desert fathers underwent as part of their monastic pursuit of wholeness with God. According to Giannone, “Self-denial is negative in word only for O’Connor. For her, at the heart of renunciation lies charity. In linking asceticism to concern for others, the hermit novelist reaffirms the essential aim of desert solitude. Above all, the hermits are fathers and mothers of love” (*Flannery O’Connor, Hermit Novelist* [University of Illinois Press, 2000], 17-18).

with each other across the erotic space of the text that draws them out of their privacy and its stress on meaning and power” (34-35). Communities of religious readers not only make use of existing sacred texts but also rewrite and identify new ones. He identifies three different types of sacred texts in his exploration of religious reading: “those written on the body in/as pain, those exchanged between bodies as pleasure, and those circulated among bodies as worship” (Detweiler 46). Detweiler states that his “prepositional pun ‘*on* the body’ is intentional,” and he suggests the literal body may be understood “as a text inscribed by instruments of pain to render it immediately and directly meaningful, in ways that collapse representation,” whereas the figurative body may be understood as “literary text that narrate such painful corporeal inscriptions” (46). Circumcision is one example of inscription which continues to feature prominently as a religious ritual in the West despite the fact that it has mainly lost its religious significance for secular society. Modern surgery is another common form of inscription in which the pre-existing text of the body is “interpreted by the surgical team and, via scalpel, rewritten” (Detweiler 46).⁸ And he suggests that each of these forms of inscription may be related to the pain which Christ suffers at the crucifixion:

Close to the centre of Christian myth and ritual is the passion of Christ, the mutilation, pain and suffering inflicted on his body in our stead, according to our theology of atonement: an inscription that we still read, Christian believers or not, in attitudes of guilt and awe. The pain of the crucifixion retains its power to affect us emotionally and is still at the heart of the Western sense of the sacred (Detweiler 46-47).

Nevertheless, Detweiler argues that it not the passion of the crucified and risen Christ which defines modern society’s economies of suffering, but rather the experiences of war and torture. Rather than understanding these economies of violence to be the products of human intention, we have for the most part chosen to ignore them or even worse considered them the sort of tragedies that emerge from so-called natural forces or the twisted mind of a malevolent God.

Pain and sacrifice are tied to one another in life as well is in tragic literature. The sacrificial rituals of inscription such as circumcision, the slaughtering of the scapegoat, and the death of the tragic

⁸ Although secular society has largely disregarded its religious significance, Detweiler claims that circumcision “figures as a portentous lack, the foreskin’s gratuitous absence setting off a chain of signifying interchanges that find no resolution as we attempt to create new narrations (medical, anthropological, sociological, aesthetic) that ‘explain’ this ritual’s survival” (46).

victim demonstrate the extent to which pain is an irreducible feature of both life and death. Like sacrifice and the very idea of tragedy itself, pain is an *aporia* that defies interpretation. Pain has the ability to subvert our experience of consciousness and can “cause us to lose interest, will-power and even comprehension” (Detweiler 47). Detweiler suggests that pain threatens us with what we fear most as humans—it can “make the world uninterpretable” (47). Perhaps tragedy is so difficult to define as a literary genre because it persistently portrays otherwise indescribable experiences of suffering and pain. The many kinds of texts that may be considered tragic are perhaps representative of the various ways that humans experience and attempt to make sense of pain. According to Detweiler, “Many gradations and variations of pain must occur, from discomfort to agony, but we have not developed an efficient lexicon to label them, for pain exceeds our capacity for articulating it” (47). Tragic literature elaborates a poetic language that attempts to figuratively articulate the experiences of pain, suffering, and sacrifice. Through its portrayals suffering and sacrifice, tragic literature, like the experience of pain, reminds “the mind that its separation from the body is after all a fool’s paradise, a fiction” (Detweiler 47). For O’Connor pain not only destabilizes the opposition between mind and body, but most importantly the opposition between the material and the spiritual. The inarticulateable experience of pain infringes upon our experience of consciousness and reminds us that there are many ‘real’ experiences that nonetheless resist conceptualization and interpretation.

The inexpressibility of pain inspires sacred texts and tragic literature alike. Nevertheless, Detweiler makes an important distinction between the sacred texts which convey the private experiences of pain such as “diary entries, letters, prayers, last words, warnings,” and the literary narratives he suggests “function as metaphors of witness” (48). The role of the writer is not to make a spectacle of pain by separating it from the traumatized and nonetheless sacred body to which it belongs. Instead, Detweiler claims that those who wish to read religiously “will seek to identify and celebrate such fiction that provides these private, sanctified texts a public voice, that offers these witnessed events in metaphors which transform the witness into language that does not profane it but that also makes it bearable” (Detweiler 48). Religious readings will distinguish between fiction which exploits “no matter how

private or horrific,” and fiction that seeks to offer completion to the fragmented narratives of those who suffer in the unimaginable places such as prisons, battlefields, and the impoverished, war-torn countries of the world (49). Detweiler’s distinction between sacred texts and those that exploitatively portray suffering is helpful for distinguishing between the redemptive narratives of Christian tragedy, and perhaps the merely tragic portrayals of human suffering that make pain spectacular rather than personal. As a tragic figure, The Misfit in O’Connor’s story is a person who has suffered in many of the unimaginable places where pain shatters individuals into fragmented selves:

“I was a gospel singer for a while,” The Misfit said. “I been most everything. Been in the arm service, both land and sea, at home and abroad, been twict married, been an undertaker, been with the railroads, plowed Mother Earth, been in a tornado, seen a man burnt alive oncet,” and he looked up at the children’s mother and the little girl who were sitting close together, their faces white and their eyes glassy; “I even seen a woman flogged,” he said (149).

In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, O’Connor challenges us to see the Grandmother and The Misfit on equal ground, each as fallen humans who are equally sinful and nonetheless equally worthy of redemption. Likewise, the story challenges us to view The Misfit as a person who is not only capable of redemption but also of love. The relationship between love and redemption is disrupted by violence. O’Connor’s preoccupation with both violence and redemption has led some scholars to suggest that her stories affirm the ascetic the value of suffering as a means of redemption.⁹ However, this understanding of redemption conflicts with a sacramental view of salvation in which redemption comes not through personal suffering but through the miracle of the Eucharist.

O’Connor does not seek to sensationalize or intellectualize the violence which her stories portray. Instead, we are presented with the utter meaninglessness of violence—it is presented as a brute force

⁹ In his investigation of redemption and violence in O’Connor’s work, John D. Sykes Jr. argues that in O’Connor’s work violence has a divine purpose. He argues that, “For O’Connor, the violence of sin requires a divine counterviolence that receives violence and turns it against itself in the interest of peace” (“O’Connor and the Body: Incarnation, Redemptive Suffering, and Evil.” *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: Flannery O’Connor--New Edition* [New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009], 141). According to Sykes, O’Connor’s work may be considered sacramental because “violence becomes the occasion for the sinner to join Christ, through his or her own body” (142). In a rather disturbing interpretation of the Grandmother’s death, Sykes suggests that her murder may be interpreted as “a kind of Eucharist in reverse” (142). Sykes claims by participating in Christ’s suffering, O’Connor’s characters are prepared for heaven (144). This rather masochistic understanding of redemption is based on a distorted notion of love that resembles the relationship between a torturer and his victim rather than a sacramental theology of salvation that is based on the miracle of eucharistic sacrifice. Moreover, Sykes’ reading misconstrues the theological implications of O’Connor’s portrayals of violence because he fails to apprehend the distinction which Detweiler makes between the sacred text of pain which is private, and those fictions which function publically as metaphors of witness to intimate experiences of suffering.

wielded by free and necessarily imperfect human beings. *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* is a story that shakes us from our complacency and reminds us once again what it means to feel the pain of life in a fallen world. Although, The Misfit recoils from the Grandmother's touch, he nonetheless appears before us as a person with a body that has been inscribed by pain. While the Grandmother suffers physically and emotionally, The Misfit suffers spiritually, and for O'Connor the two are not separate experiences. Most importantly, the Grandmother is not wounded by love but by sin, and The Misfit inscribes her body with pain. The Misfit speaks the language of pain because it is the only language he knows. According to Robert Detweiler, "The pain inflicted by the torturer on his victim is, among other things, a perverted language of love" (49). Interpretations that view the Grandmother's shooting as a means of redemption rather than as a profound violation of the woman's body evoke a perverted sense of love and salvation in which God plays the part of the sadistic killer. What is lacking in such interpretations is a sacramental understanding of humanity's relationship to God—in which the opposition between humans and the divine, the spirit and the flesh, and perhaps between the reader and the text is transfigured according to the logic of the eucharistic sacrifice.

Texts of Love and the Scandal of the Eucharist

At the very outset of this chapter, I argued that O'Connor's stories provide her readers with something more than the mere semblance of an encounter with the divine. Her belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist compelled her to affirm the redemptive potential of fiction as an art form that is capable of operating sacramentally. In very same letter in which she affirms the importance of the Eucharist to her own religious beliefs, O'Connor suggests that her short story *A Temple of the Holy Ghost* has the curious capacity to grow in the mind of her reader because "the mystery of the Eucharist is in it" (HB 124). Although she claims that the mystery of the Eucharist is present in her work, in O'Connor's fictional world, as in much of the Protestant South, there are no sacraments. Consequently, the characters in her stories fill this void with pursuits which are often destructive and nonetheless indicative of their desperate search for redemption and community. In O'Connor's stories, we search along with her tragic

figures for redemption in a world that is often lacking both compassion and forgiveness. We are drawn into an interpretive community that participates in the redemptive movements of the story.

Works of Christian tragedy portray moments of great suffering and unfathomable love. Through the art of Christian tragedy, texts of pain may be transformed into texts of love. These texts possess some of the attributes of the Eucharist in which we celebrate at once the broken and risen body of Christ. As a text of pain, the celebration of the Eucharist witnesses to Christ's suffering on the cross, and yet it is also a reminder of the love Jesus held for his disciples. The New Testament's prolific writer of love letters the apostle Paul offers us the words of institution in 1 Corinthians 11:24, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." Nevertheless, as Paul warns in this very same passage. It is possible to indulge too freely in the appetitive hunger to consume the body of Christ. There is a dangerous resemblance between works of Christian tragedy and the merely tragic portrayals of human suffering. Love can easily slip into exploitation, and the gift of sacrificial love may easily be transformed into oppression.

In order to describe the ways in which the free play of texts may be disintegrate into an experience of violent exploitation, Detweiler uses the analogy of two lovers who at first enjoy the "excitement of transgression, of going 'too far' with the other person by allowing and being allowed the violation that causes pain and humiliation" (49). He argues that eventually the excitement of transgression eventually gives way to "the repetition of established patterns" (Detweiler 50). The free play of lovers is transformed first into a violent game that seeks to cross every boundary, and having transgressed these limits, the lovers find transgression itself commonplace and unexciting. In the process of transforming the exceptionality of transgression into the mundane, the ability to feel pain and to perceive its affects on others also subsides. The inscription of pain itself becomes abstracted from the body—the marks remain visible but nonetheless uninterpretable. In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, The Misfit is only capable of viewing the Grandmother as a soul abstracted from the body which he has violated. The body and soul are separated in a Manichean manner which transforms the Grandmother's wounds into the means of her redemption through the destruction of her very flesh. The Misfit has become like the lovers, unaffected

by his own violent transgressions. After shooting the old woman in the chest, The Misfit rejects the satisfaction his cohort finds in the act of killing. The Misfit concludes the story with a Manichean rejection of the flesh, “It’s no real pleasure in life” (153). For The Misfit, all pleasure has been become twisted into the experience of violence, and as a result the raw act of killing has lost its cathartic effects.

In contrast to the distorted language of love that abstracts the experience of suffering from the body, Detweiler argues that love letters are capable of making bodies mysteriously present for those who would seek to touch and to embrace their absent lover. He suggests that the love letter “is a text exchanged between the ‘bodies’ of lovers in the sense that it is written almost exclusively when the lovers are separated, so that the letter substitutes for the absent erotic body; but it also suspends . . . the text inscribed on the body in/as pain, acting as a civilizing agent against the human tendency to conduct erotic encounter aggressively” (Detweiler 50). The love letter may also be described as a text that functions eucharistically. The absent body of Christ is produced through the bread and the wine of the Eucharist, and the consecratory utterance, “This is my body.” Like the love letter, which encourages the lovers “to reflect on the nature of their desire as interdependency,” the Eucharist redirects our desire to touch and to see the absent Christ, to contemplate the body of Christ as a source of spiritual nourishment (Detweiler 50). The body of Christ becomes a scandal for desire. The Eucharist transforms the desire for sacrifice into a desire for communion with the divine. In the final section of this chapter, I will describe the ways that works of Christian tragedy may function as the sort of liturgical experience that is embodied in the Eucharist. In O’Connor’s novel *Wise Blood*, the presence of the divine is most discernable by virtue of its profound absence in the story. The tragic figure of Hazel Motes desperately seeks to free himself from the image of the ragged figure of Jesus who moves “from tree to tree in the back of his mind” (WB 11). For some, the tragedy of Hazel Motes is found in his inability to resign himself to Christ, and so instead he is doomed to suffer self-blinding and affliction as the means of his redemption. However, such readings misconstrue O’Connor’s own sacramental understanding of salvation and consequently misapprehend the spirit of Christian tragedy.

The Novel as a Text of Worship

Faith is not a pre-requisite for writing a work of Christian tragedy, and in fact a certain degree of doubt proves useful for bringing into question the mechanisms which serve to mystify the practice of scapegoating sacrifice. Although scholars such as George Steiner have questioned whether the form of the modern novel is indeed compatible with classical notions of tragedy, twentieth century novelists such as William Faulkner, James Joyce and F. Scott Fitzgerald, to name just a few, explore the plight of tragic figures in their novels. Moreover, each of these writers has produced stories which contain tragic figures that are overwhelmed by the chaos of life in the modern world and who suffer both physically and perhaps spiritually. In works of modern literature, the *agōn* of opposing forces which sets works of Greek tragedy into motion is translated into an inner turmoil and agony that reaches into the very soul of the modern tragic figure. Modern novels have in many ways abandoned the grand conflicts of classical tragedy and turned inwardly to the world of private tragedy. However, this regard for private experiences of suffering and a concern for the travails of the ordinary human life in the modern novel is perhaps not an indication of the decline of tragedy but rather the emergence of a different form of tragic literature that may in some cases be best described as Christian tragedy. I suggested at the outset of this study that it may be possible to consider Christianity to be a kind of repository for the ancient rhythms of classical tragedy. Is it perhaps also possible that after the so-called death of God and the triumph of secularism in the modern era that the modern novel has become a kind of haven for Christian mystery? As a text of worship, O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood* offers readers a liturgical experience of compassion that repeats the mysterious logic of the eucharistic model of sacrifice.

As a modern writer, O'Connor was intensely aware of the existential crises that plagued humanity in the mid-twentieth century; the feelings of emotional and spiritual isolation brought about as a consequence of multiple wars, poverty, and the decline of local communities such as the agrarian societies of the American South. Although O'Connor's own religious views maintained a fundamental belief in the goodness of creation and the promise of resurrection, her stories are reflective of the struggles against nihilism and despair which dominate the many great works of fiction produced in the

early to mid-twentieth century. The protagonist of O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood* lives in body and soul the anguish of the modern tragic figure. Hazel Motes is an irascible man who sets out for the seedy southern town of Taulkinham after discovering that his family has disappeared and his childhood home has been abandoned. An old chifferobe is the only remaining trace of his family. Hazel is dispossessed and isolated from any semblance of community. In her own description of the novel's protagonist, O'Connor states that Hazel is "an illiterate Tennessean, [who] has lost his home through the breakdown of a country community. Home, in this instance, stands not only for the place and family, but for some absolute belief which would give him sanctuary in the modern world" (qtd. in Getz 47).

Like *The Misfit*, Hazel has been inscribed with pain throughout his life. Hazel bears both physical and psychological scars from the pain that has been inscribed upon his body throughout his life. During his time in the army, Hazel sought to rid himself of his soul and "to be converted to nothing instead of to evil" (WB 12). His sense of isolation and abandonment grows as he is sent to war far away from his home in Eastrod. Although he feels forgotten by the army, the narrator claims that "He was wounded and they remembered him long enough to take the shrapnel out of his chest—they said they took it out but they never showed it to him and he felt it still in there, rusted, and poisoning him—and then they sent him to another desert and forgot him again" (WB 12). But his physical scars are also connected to a deeper sense of self-loathing and rejection of his own body that emerges as a result of his upbringing in a family of puritanical Christians.

Hazel's convoluted understanding of sin and his own body develops as a result of his first sexual experience which takes place at a carnival freak show. As a boy he gains access to a tent filled with men looking into a casket shaped box which held a naked woman. Glimpsing the woman's figure, Hazel initially mistook her for a "skinned animal" (WB 35). Hazel's father was among the crowd of men who had paid to look at the woman lying uncomfortably in the box. After returning home from the carnival, Hazel is stricken with guilt at the sight of his mother. She beats him with a stick and subsequently informs him that "Jesus died to redeem you," but Hazel replies that he had never asked Jesus to die for him (WB 36). Nevertheless, he pursues his own act of penance. He fills his shoes with rocks and walks a

mile through the woods, “He laced them up tight and walked in them through the woods for what he knew to be a mile, until he came to a creek, and then he sat down and took them off and eased his feet in the wet sand. He thought that ought to satisfy Him” (WB 36). This act of asceticism eventually develops into the profound sense of self-loathing which Hazel experiences as an adult. O’Connor suggests that the only thing that Hazel inherits from his mother’s religion is “a sense of sin and a need for religion[.] . . . This sense of sin is the only key he has to finding a sanctuary and he begins unconsciously to search for God through sin” (qtd. in Getz 47).

Hazel’s spiritual journey in *Wise Blood* takes the form of a bitter rejection of the many destructive versions of Christ that are upheld by both the religious and irreligious people around him. From the very beginning of the story, Hazel is haunted by the memory of his grandfather who was an itinerant evangelist. The gospel that his grandfather preaches is a volatile mix of Calvinist predestinarianism and a Manichean rejection of the human body tainted by the sin of material existence. The grandfather’s sermons refer directly to Hazel as an example of God’s insatiable desire to claim the souls of the lost:

Did they know that even for that boy there, for that mean sinful unthinking boy standing there with his dirty hands clenching and unclenching at his sides, Jesus would die ten million deaths before He would let him lose his soul? He would chase him over the waters of sin? Did they doubt Jesus could walk on the waters of sin? That boy had been redeemed and Jesus wasn’t going to leave him ever. Jesus would never let him forget he was redeemed (WB 11).

The narrator states that even as a boy, “There was already a deep black wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin. He knew by the time he was twelve years old that he was going to be a preacher” (WB 11). Hazel eventually abandons his efforts to avoid sin, and upon arriving in Taulkinham he seeks the company of a local prostitute named Mrs. Leona Watts. However, he never truly finds comfort with this woman and is repulsed by the thought of having sex with her. Likewise in his relationship to the daughter of the street preacher Asa Hawks, Hazel paradoxically loves and rejects Sabbath Hawks. Hazel’s relationships throughout the novel are characterized by this strange mixture of attraction and repulsion. Although he initially sets out to challenge Asa Hawks’ distorted message of redemption, he is also strangely drawn to him. Nevertheless, Hazel constructs an alternative to Asa’s message of sin and judgment. After purchasing his own salvation in the form of a broken down Essex,

Hazel drives the car into Taulkinham and begins preaching to the townspeople about his new Church Without Christ. In chapter seven of the novel, Hazel describes his church to a young man passing by him on the street: “. . . I preach the Church Without Christ. I’m member and preacher that church where the blind don’t see and the lame don’t walk and what’s dead stays that way. Ask me about that church and I’ll tell you it’s the church that the blood of Jesus don’t foul with redemption” (WB 59). Hazel expresses his lack of faith through his rejection of Jesus’ blood.

Although Hazel rejects the so-called redeeming blood of Christ, he continues to desperately search for some sort of sacramental experience of the divine that is absent in the world of the novel. O’Connor uses the term ‘wise blood’ to describe the mysterious physical and spiritual urges which compel Hazel and his wayward companion Enoch Emery in their search for an experience of the divine. In a letter to the American novelist John Hawkes, O’Connor states that in the end Hazel is “saved by virtue of having wise blood; it’s too wise for him ultimately to deny Christ” (HB 350). And she states that in the non-sacramental world of the novel, “Wise blood has to be these people’s means of grace—they have no sacraments” (HB 350). Although O’Connor considers the “do-it-yourself religion” of the South misguided, along with these spiritual orphans she shares a common concern for the “fundamental doctrines of sin and redemption and judgment . . .” (HB 350). *Wise Blood* is in many ways an incredibly comedic novel; however, the suffering and the violence that takes place in the story demonstrates the seriousness of the protagonist’s search for God and a community. Bloodshed occurs at various times in the novel as a vivid reminder of the physical and spiritual pain that characters such as Hazel and his companion Enoch Emery have suffered throughout their lives.

Enoch finds a sense of meaning and purpose at the sight of his own blood. Unlike Hazel who prefers the mechanized world of automobiles to the fleshly world that he inhabits, Enoch finds a sense of meaning and purpose in his wise blood; he seeks meaning through the affirmative and perhaps even sacramental experience of communing with the world of material objects and bodies. Enoch’s interests begin to develop into a kind of religious obsession with objects that he hopes will bring about some profound transformation in his life. In this sense, Enoch is a mirror opposite of Hazel. By rejecting his

body, Hazel wishes to rid himself of any contamination that would place him in need of redemption. Hazel is at times nihilistic as he desperately pursues the destruction of his very own flesh; he seeks meaning through negation.

In the second half of the novel, Enoch begins to transform his bedroom into a place where his obsession for both objects and bodies may converge. As Enoch begins tidying and exploring the furnishings of his room, the narrator utilizes certain religious images to portray his dingy abode as a kind of cathedral. The room contained a washstand that consisted of a “tabernacle-like tablet which was meant to contain a slop-jar” (WB 74). Although Enoch did not have a slop-jar to place in the empty cabinet, the narrator claims that “he had certain reverence for the purpose of things and since he didn’t have the right thing to put in it, he left it empty” (WB 74). The artistry of the washstand is a source of both wonder and mystery to Enoch:

As far as Enoch was concerned, this piece had always been the center of the room and the one that most connected him with what he didn’t know. More than once after a big supper he had dreamed of unlocking the cabinet and getting in it and then proceeding to certain rites and mysteries that he had a very vague idea about in the morning. In his cleaning up, his mind was on the washstand from the first, but as was usual with him, he began with the least important thing and worked around and in toward the center where the meaning was (WB 75).

Enoch’s wise blood compels him to purchase a set of curtains, a bottle of gilt paint, and paint brush; although he does not initially know the purpose of the gilt, when he returns to his room he decides to paint the washstand’s slop-jar cabinet. Afterwards he realizes that “the cabinet was to be used FOR something” (WB 76). Enoch begins constructing a sacred space within his home in order to house the body of the new Jesus that is preached by Hazel. However, his sacramental urges are strangely misdirected toward the figure of the shrunken man whose frail body functions as a poor substitute for the sacraments which are wholly absent from the world of the novel. Enoch eventually steals the shrunken man from the museum and places the body inside of the makeshift tabernacle, but nothing happens. The mystery that his wise blood desperately seeks is not produced, and instead he is simply left with a fragile shrunken corpse that is quickly disintegrating into dust. As an object of desire, the shrunken man operates as an insufficient substitute for the sacramental experience that is in fact absent from the novel.

Disappointed by the shrunken man's lack of supernatural power, Enoch eventually wraps the shrunken figure in paper and delivers the new Jesus to Hazel's home. When he reaches Hazel's room, he finds Sabbath Hawks watching over a Hazel as he has fallen ill from the shrapnel that is poisoning his body. Enoch decides to leave the shrunken man in her possession with the promise that she will deliver the package to Hazel. Enoch is not the only in character in *Wise Blood* who is compelled to seek out an experience of community and of the divine through the brittle body of the shrunken man. Sabbath unwraps the package, and in a strange yet curiously touching scene, she cradles the shrunken man in her arms like a child:

She held him up and began to examine him and after a minute her hands grew accustomed to the feel of his skin. Some of his hair had come undone and she brushed it back where it belonged, holding him in the crook of her arm and looking down into his squinted face. His mouth had been knocked a little to one side so that there was just a trace of a grin covering his terrified look. She began to rock him a little in her arm and a slight reflection of the same grin appeared on her own face. "Well I declare," she murmured, "you're right cute, ain't you?" (WB 104)

Hazel awakes to find Sabbath holding the shrunken man. As he is gathering his belongings to leave Taulkinham in order to preach in another city, Sabbath addresses the shrunken figure and Hazel simultaneously: "Ask your daddy yonder where he was running off to—sick as he is?" Sabbath said. Ask him isn't he going to take you and me with him?" (WB 107). Hazel responds violently to the prospect of attaining companionship and receiving genuine love from Sabbath. He casts the shrunken man against the wall and the body breaks into pieces. In the midst of the altercation, Sabbath announces: "I seen you wouldn't let nobody have nothing. I seen you were mean enough to slam a baby against a wall. I seen you wouldn't never have no fun or let anybody else because you didn't want nothing but Jesus!" (WB 106-7). Hazel replies, "I don't want nothing but the truth!" (107).¹⁰ Hazel can only express

¹⁰ Sabbath's accusations appear unrelated to Hazel's destruction of the shrunken man. However, it is possible to detect the disturbing undercurrents that are present in this scene. On their first date, Sabbath asks Hazel whether or not a bastard could be saved in the Church Without Christ. Hazel claims that "There is no such thing as a bastard in the Church Without Christ[.] . . . Everything is all one. A bastard wouldn't be any different from anybody else." (WB 69). Sabbath then conveys to Hazel the story of a child that was sent to live with various family members throughout its life. The child ends up living with its grandmother, and Sabbath claims that "she couldn't stand to have it around because the least good thing made her break out in these welts" (WB 69). According to Sabbath, the grandmother's allergic reaction to the child eventually drives her to suicide. Giannone notes that despite her relative isolation as a writer, O'Connor "grasped the horrors of our time" and sought to address issues such as war, racism, infanticide, suicide and "sheer human loneliness" in her fiction (7).

himself in the form of a negation in which nothingness and truth stand side by side as the object of his paradoxical desire for knowledge as well as oblivion.

The spiritual landscape of *Wise Blood* is one of negation and contradiction. The town of Taulkinham is inscribed within a universe that is in the midst of some grand construction. The narrator notes that the “black sky was underpinned with long silver streaks that looked like scaffolding and depth on depth behind it were thousands of stars that all seemed to be moving very slowly as if they were about some vast construction work that involved the whole order of the universe and would take all of time to complete (WB 19). However, the narrator states that no one in the town “was paying any attention to the sky” (WB 19). Hazel and the people of Taulkinham occupy a rather strange negative space in which so many words and gestures may be interpreted as a negation of love and compassion. The intense experience of negation in the story is more than simply an aesthetic attempt at constructing a Southern Gothic novel. In *Wise Blood*, O’Connor constructs a fictional world where the presence of God is entirely absent.¹¹ As a result, there is no ‘authentic’ experience of Christ in the novel. If Hazel spends his life rejecting the versions of Christ which are thrust upon him, his rejection of these “ragged figures” is simply a negation of a negation. Contrary to the interpretations of many of the novel’s religious readers, Hazel Motes is not an atheist who eventually sees the light through his own self-blinding. Instead, in the world of Taulkinham there is truly no Christ in which to believe. Rather than accepting yet another brittle version of Christ, Hazel would rather accept the possibility that the only truth is the reality of death and suffering that is so clearly visible around him. Hazel’s pursuit of the *via negativa* culminates in an act of self-blinding that has obvious resonances with the story of Oedipus.

Hazel’s self-blinding comes quickly after one of his many violent encounters in the novel. Although Hazel fails to attract many followers to his Church Without Christ, a number of competitors manage to turn up in Taulkinham in an effort to cash in on Hazel’s revolutionary new faith. Hoover Shoats and his companion Solace Layfield form a street preaching partnership. Layfield plays the part of

¹¹ In his article titled “A Becoming Habit: Flannery O’Connor’s Fiction of Unknowing,” Joseph Zornado investigates the similarities between O’Connor’s work and the writings of Thomas Merton, and he investigates the connection between their work and the negative theologies of writers such as Pseudo-Dionysus, St. John of the Cross, and Meister Eckhart. He argues that “both writers recognized the power—and the definitive limits—of text” ([*Religion & Literature*. 29.2 (1997)], 30-31). As a result, he suggests that like Merton and the desert fathers, O’Connor “communicates mystery negatively” in her stories (31).

the Prophet and wears a hat and suit that resemble the ones worn by Hazel. After a night of preaching, Shoats and Layfield are followed by Hazel in his rat-colored Essex. Hazel rear-ends their car, and demands that Layfield take off the suit and hat, “The Prophet began to run in earnest. He tore off his shirt and unbuckled his belt and ran out of his trousers. He began grabbing for his feet as if he would take off his shoes too, but before he could get at them, the Essex knocked him flat and ran over him” (WB 115). Layfield attempts to whisper his dying confession to Hazel. As he calls to Jesus for help with his remaining breath, Hazel slaps him on the back and the man lay still and quiet on the road. Hazel inspects the bumper of the Essex and wipes the traces of Layfield’s blood away with a rag.

From this point on in the novel, Hazel struggles bitterly with the notion of salvation. He is pulled over by a patrolman just outside of town. Believing the patrolman is challenging him to a fight, Hazel agrees to drive his car to the edge of an embankment. The patrolman instructs Hazel to step out of the Essex and take in the view from the embankment. After Hazel turns to face the wide expanse in front of him, the patrolman pushes the Essex over the embankment and it tumbles into pieces. Hazel returns to town on foot, and on his way home he picks up a tin bucket and a sack of quicklime. His landlady Mrs. Flood asks him what he plans to do with the items, and he simply replies, “Blind myself” (WB 119).

If O’Connor’s story were to follow the pattern of Greek tragedy, Hazel’s blinding would represent the height of the story’s dramatic conflict. The suffering of the tragic figure would mark the climactic moment in which the protagonist finally receives recompense for his tragic flaws. However, unlike Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* in which the audience is cathartically cleansed through the sacrificial suffering of the tragic scapegoat, in *Wise Blood* we are asked to follow Hazel into his blindness. Along with somewhat shiftless Mrs. Flood, we are called to bear witness to his suffering and attend to his broken body. After his blinding, Hazel continues to inflict pain upon himself. He takes up his childhood practice of placing sharp objects such as rocks and glass into his shoes, and wraps his chest in barbed wire. Finally, Hazel wanders from the house on a bitterly cold night. The police find him lying by the side of the road in a ditch. He resists their efforts to take him back to Mrs. Flood. But the police assume that he is trying to leave town without paying her the rent that he supposedly owes. They hit him over the head

with a billy club and carry him back to Mrs. Flood in the squad car; Hazel dies somewhere along the way. In the final moments of the novel, Mrs. Flood is drawn to Hazel's lifeless body. She ponders his darkened eyes which appear "to lead into the dark tunnel where he had disappeared" (WB 131).

She leaned closer and closer to his face, looking deep into them[.] . . . She shut her eyes and saw the pin point of light but so far away that she could not hold it steady in her mind. She felt as if she were blocked at the entrance of something. She sat staring with her eyes shut, into his eyes, and felt as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn't begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther away, farther and farther into the darkness until he was a pin point of light (WB 131).

Incredibly, at the moment in which the novel appears to reach the heights of despair, O'Connor provides her readers with an opportunity to extend to Hazel Motes the gift of compassion. Like Mrs. Flood, we are called to bear witness to the broken body of the tragic figure. We are drawn into the darkness of his eyes, and in this void we search along with Mrs. Flood for some sense of meaning—some familiar image to interpret. O'Connor reduces this experience to the barest of poetic images. In the void of Hazel's eyes darkness and light converge. Amid the indeterminacy of this space, the soul of this broken man is transfigured. But Hazel is of course not alone in this moment. The novel's ending is told through the eyes of Mrs. Flood. And bound as we are to the eyes of the narrator, we must follow along with Mrs. Flood as she journeys through inner landscape of Hazel's soul. As we enter this space, we find ourselves searching for some glimmer of hope, some possibility that the irascible figure of Hazel Motes has found some place beyond the purely negative spiritual wasteland of Taulkinham. O'Connor leads us to a place of indeterminacy that may be interpreted in terms of the eucharistic model of sacrifice. Hazel Motes is transformed into a tiny "pin point of light" that defies interpretive closure. In this instant, the question of Hazel's redemption becomes the question of our own. By identifying with the tragic figure, we are joined into community that is not unlike the eucharistic community portrayed in the Gospel of Mark. By exploring the imaginary depths of Hazel's soul, we also explore the landscape of our own. The relationship between the reader, the narrator, and the tragic figure is one of undecidability. Consequently, the ending of *Wise Blood* repeats the logic of the eucharistic sacrifice poetically enacted through the consecratory utterance, "This is my body." The eucharistic model of sacrifice is demonstrated in the very

act of reading. As a ‘metaphor of witness,’ the story of Hazel’s suffering compels readers to look beyond the violence of the text and to see at its very heart the body of man who is desperately in need of compassion.

Although *Wise Blood* is an incredibly bleak novel, as a work of Christian tragedy, the novel may nonetheless be understood as a text of love which attempts to bring about an experience of compassion in the midst of overwhelming darkness. It is dominated by the profound sense of absence which Detweiler associates with the experience of religious faith. *Wise Blood* may be considered only one of many sacred texts which are “circulated among bodies as worship” (54). Detweiler suggests that a love letter is “a kind of text with redemptive potential, in so far as it shows how writing that imagines and addresses the other can elevate passion . . . into *compassion*” (50). He claims that the love letter is imbued with the sort of hope that is akin to a messianic expectation for a savior and a future that is always to come. Because these hopes remain unfulfilled, “There is thus an irony at work in the dynamic of the absence that motivates both the love letter and religious faith” (Detweiler 52). Nevertheless, he claims that in order for a novel to function as a love letter the writer must be the first to conceive “of *her* story as such a love letter, with all of the attendant anxiety and dissembling that belongs to love letters” (Detweiler 181). In the case of *Wise Blood*, O’Connor sends Hazel Motes, on a search for a community that perhaps only ends in the arms of the reader. At the very end of the novel, Hazel is delivered from a state of abandonment and isolation to a community of readers who may be capable of offering the sort of compassion that is so clearly lacking in the novel. Hazel Motes is not portrayed as a scapegoat whose suffering is either a means of redemption or the source of some experience of Aristotelian catharsis. The community of readers is called to surround Hazel Motes in his suffering, not to rejoice in it but rather to bear witness to it. And in bearing witness to his pain, we open ourselves to the mysterious movements of grace in the novel.

Conclusion

Throughout this study, I have focused on the different ways that sacrifice is portrayed in works of tragic literature and the Bible. I began my investigation with a brief discussion of Raymond Williams' assessment of the relationship between tragedy and sacrifice. Williams argued that "The rhythm of tragedy . . . is a rhythm of sacrifice" (256). The rhythms of tragedy may change over time but the ancient patterns of religious ritual and tragic drama remain nonetheless connected to the notion of sacrifice. And like tragedy, our notions of sacrifice are also liable to assume new rhythms and patterns shaped by the metaphorical experiences of tragic art and religion. In this study, I endeavored to explore the ways in which differing conceptions of sacrifice may produce different ways of reading and interpreting tragic literature. Consequently, the aim of this study was to interpret fictive portrayals of sacrifice according to two basic models sacrifice—a scapegoating model of sacrifice and a eucharistic model of sacrifice. The term 'model' has been applied not in an effort to create an overly formulaic and perhaps scientific approach to interpreting sacrifice, but rather to demonstrate that our understanding of sacrifice is a metaphorical one. In this case, works of tragic literature and the biblical narrative provide the occasion for metaphorical experiences of sacrifice which subsequently shape our understanding of this otherwise enigmatic concept.

Part I of this thesis was dedicated to critiquing Girard's model of scapegoating sacrifice and his dichotomous classification of literary texts into two basic categories—texts of persecution and texts which come to the defense of the scapegoat. In my reading of *The Bacchae*, I demonstrated the ways that tragedy as a form of literary representation is disruptive to Girard's dichotomous classification of literary texts. Moreover, in contrast to Girard's scapegoating model of sacrifice which only accounts for a single scapegoat operating at any one time in the text, I demonstrated that *The Bacchae* makes use of multiple scapegoats in order to bring its dramatically ironic and cathartic ending. In the second chapter of this thesis, I read the story of Moses' birth and the story of the Passover in Exodus 1-12 through the literary framework of Christopher Fry's tragic play *The Firstborn*. Contrary to Joseph Williams' Girardian

reading of Exodus, which simplifies its literary conflicts to the irreducible opposition between Egypt as the oppressor and Israel as the oppressed, I uncovered various aspects biblical narrative in which fundamental opposition between Israel and Egypt may be questioned. Inspired by Fry's play, I approached Moses as a tragic figure who struggles both with God and the communities in conflict around him. Finally, I suggested a tragic reading of the Passover, in which the paschal lamb functions as a scapegoat which discloses the sacrificial costs of the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt. I interpreted the paschal lamb as a substitute for the Israelite's who are spared on the night of the Passover as well as reminder of the infanticidal genocide upon which Israel's deliverance is predicated. Contrary to Girard's classification of *The Bacchae* and Exodus as texts that reject the practice of scapegoating, neither of these tragic stories offers an unambiguous critique of scapegoating. Most importantly, by demonstrating the limitations which Girard's critique of sacrificial scapegoating imposes upon literary texts, I have demonstrated the necessity for exploring alternative conceptions of sacrifice.

In Part II of this thesis, I approached the Gospel of Mark as work of Christian tragedy. I argued that the eucharistic sacrifice that Jesus improvises at the Last Supper may be understood as a poetic revisioning of the scapegoating model of sacrifice. At the Last Supper, the opposition between friend and enemy, oppressor and oppressed, and the human and the divine is transfigured in the community that is formed by the eucharistic sacrifice. In contrast to the scapegoating model of sacrifice, the eucharistic model of sacrifice resists interpretive closure by transfiguring the oppositions at stake in the dramatic conflict. The opposition between humans and the divine and between oppressor and oppressed in the Gospel of Mark become undecidable as result of the transfigurative logic of the eucharist sacrifice.

Finally, in the last chapter I discussed Flannery O'Connor's approach to writing fiction and by investigating her short story *A Good Man Is Hard To Find* as well as her first novel *Wise Blood* as works of Christian tragedy. O'Connor's emphasis upon fiction as an incarnational art and her religious commitment to the Eucharist made her an ideal author for examining the literary attributes of Christian tragedy. O'Connor's approach to writing fiction demonstrates a concern for the freedom of her characters which is at odds with traditionalist conceptions of tragedy. Most importantly, the literary conflicts that

take place in *A Good Man Is Hard To Find* and *Wise Blood* may be interpreted according to a eucharistic model of sacrifice. In O'Connor's short story *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, the mysterious movements of grace are manifested in the moment the Grandmother reaches out in love to touch The Misfit.

Similarly in my reading of *Wise Blood*, I argued that the suffering of the novel's protagonist Hazel Motes does not provide readers with an experience of catharsis that repeats the logic of scapegoating sacrifice. Instead, in *Wise Blood* we are called as readers to follow Hazel into his experience of blindness, and along with Mrs. Flood the reader is called to bear witness to his suffering in a way that transforms the experience of catharsis to that of compassion. In Christian tragedy, the model of scapegoating sacrifice and tragic catharsis gives way to a eucharistic model of sacrifice and tragic compassion.

After having elucidated the logic of the eucharistic model of sacrifice and its function in works of Christian tragedy, it may be possible to return once more to the texts examined in Part I of this thesis and seek out traces of this model at work in *The Bacchae* and first twelve chapter of Exodus. *The Bacchae* contains moments of realization or *anagnorisis* in which the audience as well the characters in the play experience a clarity of thought concerning the violent consequences of their actions. Aristotle defines this moment of recognition as "a change from ignorance to knowledge, disclosing either a close relationship or enmity, on the part of people marked out for good or bad fortune" (*Poetics* 6.4). This moment is according to Aristotle most pleasing when it accompanies a reversal or *peripeteia* in the tragic plot. It may be possible to interpret such moments of *anagnorisis* as momentary glimpses of the sacrificial teleology that dominates the dramatic action in works of Greek tragedy. This kind of realization occurs perhaps briefly as Cadmus wanders the stage reassembling the scattered limbs of Pentheus. Adrian Poole acknowledges what may be regarded as a eucharistic quality to great tragedies in his observation that "great tragedies impress us with the truth that every death is unique, no less than with the other truth that is the prospect which we all have in common" (234). In light of this shared experience of mortality, Poole claims that "Tragedy's medicine for misery consists not in a kind of forgetting but in a kind of remembering, a commemoration of suffering through which human grief is at one and the same time relived and relieved" (239). Thus contrary to traditionalist conceptions of tragedy, Poole demonstrates

that Christianity through its celebration of the Eucharist does in fact have something in common with great works of tragedy, but that indeed it may be possible to locate something eucharistic operating within the texts themselves.

Likewise it may be possible to trace the sacrificial and tragic rhythms of the Gospel of Mark back to their origins in the biblical narratives of the Old Testament. It is important to emphasize here that typological readings which seek to transpose the figure of Jesus Christ and his sacrificial death back upon the Old Testament are of course numerous and often reductive when it comes to ascertaining the range of meaning that are available in both the Old and New Testaments. This is one reason why I have sought in this study to interpret the eucharistic sacrifice in the Gospel of Mark not only in terms of its theological consequences but more importantly in terms of its literary consequences. By doing so it is possible to interpret a range of other sacrificial gestures in the biblical narrative according to this eucharistic model without simply reducing these instances typologically to versions of the passion of Christ. The story of Exodus begins with one very important gesture which may be interpreted as a form of eucharistic sacrifice. According to Christopher Fry's retelling of this event in *The Firstborn*, when Pharaoh's daughter looks upon the baby Moses with pity and compassion, she offers this child a love and charity that transgresses all of the oppositions within the story. The transfigurative logic of the eucharistic model of sacrifice may be perceived in this gesture. Here the gift of love disrupts the opposition between oppressor and oppressed and between Israelite and Egyptian in the story. If we were to follow this narrative thread throughout the story of Exodus we may find that the biblical narrative of Exodus indeed contains numerous other such disruptions that resist the interpretive closure enforced by the scapegoating model of sacrifice.

Consequently, the two models of sacrifice that I have described in this thesis may be employed as a means of describing two different approaches to interpretation. The irreducible opposition between oppressor and oppressed that Girard establishes in his critique of scapegoating demonstrates the difficulties involved in moving beyond the oppositional logic of narrative structures. Paradoxically, in his efforts to unambiguously reject the practice of scapegoating, Girard's interpretations of the Gospels and

tragic literature fall into another set of oppositions that retain the sacrificial logic of the very phenomenon he sets out to dismantle—namely the opposition between humans and the divine, the sacred and the profane. This is largely due to the fact that Girard seeks from the outset of his investigation to bracket theological interpretations and instead approach the problem of sacrifice from an anthropological and sociological perspective. In contrast to this rather formulaic approach to understanding sacrifice, I have taken a literary approach that emphasizes the ambiguous and often ambivalent nature of tragic literature.

In this study, I have argued that a eucharistic model of sacrifice necessarily introduces an element of undecidability in tragic literature and consequently resists interpretive closure. Girard's theory of sacrifice is based upon certain epistemological judgments which he translates into ontological assertions about the nature of violence in society. Girard's scapegoating model of sacrifice produces two basic sociological categories—persecutors and the innocent scapegoat who is persecuted. As Girard turns his attention back to the texts of Western literature, he interprets literary conflicts according to the fundamental opposition between persecutors and the persecuted. In his reading of the Gospels, Girard extends this irreducible opposition to include the sacred and the profane. As the paradigmatic innocent victim, Jesus transcends the sacrificial violence that plagues human society. In order to assert the Bible's revelation of the scapegoating mechanism in society, it is essential for Girard that Jesus be absolutely pure and thus immune to violence, which is to say he must be sacred.

In my reading of the Last Supper in the Gospel of Mark, I discussed A. Samuel Kimball's reading of the Jesus' eucharistic sacrifice. According to Kimball's theory of sacrifice as a form of biological economization of the costs of existence, by sharing in the bread and the wine of the Last Supper, Jesus participates in the sacrificial economy of human life. In contrast to Girard, Jesus is no longer presented as transcendently 'pure' but instead by participating in the communal meal of the Last Supper Jesus reconfigures the sacred in terms of radical affiliation with the profane—such that the difference is no longer decidable from an epistemological, ontological, and finally from a theological perspective. Through the eucharistic sacrifice of the bread and wine, Jesus symbolically represents his own disappearance into death. For Kimball, Jesus' death is final, and thus like the radical theologian Thomas

Altizer, he follows after Nietzsche in his affirmation of absolute transcendence in death. This matter of course requires further examination. Perhaps one of the implications of this approach to interpreting the death of God is renewed examination of the relationship between the Jesus of the Eucharist and Nietzsche's Dionysian ideal, as well as a new theological approach to thinking about the death of God.

Finally, I have argued that through the consecratory utterance, "This is my body," the Jesus of Mark's Gospel provides a means of communing with the divine through basic materials of artistic representation. The eucharistic model of sacrifice thus may function as a framework within which to reconsider the relationship between artistic representation and the sacred. Moreover, the eucharistic model of sacrifice that I have described in this thesis may form the basis of a more general approach to literary interpretation that is perhaps best understood in terms of Robert Detweiler's description of religious reading. According to Detweiler, "A religious reading . . . might be one that finds a group of persons engaged in gestures of friendship with each other across the erotic space of the text that draws them out of their privacy and its stress on meaning and power" (35). This manner of reading demonstrates a resistance to interpretive closure in the name of producing more charitable and creative approaches to interpretation. Problematically, any community is constituted according to a paradoxical logic of inclusion and exclusion that itself may be understood as sacrificial. Sacred communities are by definition sacrificial ones in the sense that their boundaries are circumscribed by an often arbitrary distinction between groups of people, cultures, and religious affiliations. Girard's theory of scapegoating sacrifice attempts to translate these arbitrary distinctions into a set of stable oppositions. Sacred communities are thus constituted according to a model sacrifice that is essentially exclusionary. However, if it is indeed possible to conceive of sacrifice according to a eucharistic model that is abstracted from the antagonisms of scapegoating, then it may also be possible to conceive of communities that resist interpretive closure and exclusivity. This is precisely the sort of inclusive community which Detweiler describes in terms of the *communitas* of religious readers. The community that is formed through eucharistic approach to reading and interpretation would remain open to the sort of questions and doubts that emerge in great works of tragic literature. In such a community of religious readers, we may

find many of the attributes of O'Connor's approach to writing works of Christian tragedy that are oriented toward the surprising and often mysterious movements of grace that are made possible through the transfigurative logic of the eucharist model of sacrifice. The sacred body of readers is constituted anew through each unique encounter with texts of worship that are capable of bringing about truly redemptive encounters with the divine. The boundaries of this sacred community are marked only by the limits of the human imagination to conceive of new metaphors of tragic experience and still more charitable forms of sacrifice and compassion.

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