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**VIOLENT RAPTURE IN THE AGE OF COMFORT: MAPPING CHARDINIAN
CONVERGENCE IN O'CONNOR'S SOUTH**

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THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

**VIOLENT RAPTURE IN THE AGE OF COMFORT: MAPPING CHARDINIAN
CONVERGENCE IN O'CONNOR'S SOUTH**
BY SCARLETT WILSON

The body of scholarship regarding Flannery O'Connor generally falls into one of three camps: biographical or historical readings of her work that attempt to either characterize a period of her life or ascertain her political beliefs, using her stories to reveal religious allusions that show her attempt to reinforce Christian morals, or, finally, readings engaging with a generally Girardian framework to show her criticism of Christianity itself. Biographical documents show O'Connor's lifelong devotion to the Catholic faith, which, for many readers, problematizes the subversive prevalence of violence and blasphemous imagery in her body of work. However, these perspectives overlook the immense impact that 20th-century French Jesuit theologian and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin had on her work, especially during her final years. As my argument will show, O'Connor critically responds to Teilhard de Chardin's theory of convergence in a way that anticipates the later theories of French anthropologist René Girard regarding the social connections between violence and religion. Using the theories of these two thinkers in conjunction with discourse from the tradition of kenotic Christology, (a line of theological thinking which assumes that God partially or totally emptied himself of power when incarnating as Christ), I analyze four recurring stylistic devices that illuminate O'Connor's own original theological framework: setting, pedagogical encounters, disfigurement, and the role of violence in relationship to revelation.

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Introduction

“Only some deeply grounded and fully paradoxical view of God can make sense of the notion that God knows and loves each of 5.9 billion of us. ”

- *Annie Dillard, For The Time Being*

Both within her own circle and within the literary world, Flannery O'Connor has had a complicated relationship with religion. Though an acknowledged and consistent Catholic in the American South, her similarly devout community denounced her violent and often scathingly ironic stories as inappropriate depictions of both Christianity and Southern culture, while literary scholarship largely reduces her to either a Southern Gothic writer or a progressive Catholic writer, alternatively a regionalist critic of Christianity or an unconventional Gothic preacher writing, as one scholar puts it, “prophetic altar calls to a tired world” (Bruner, 219). Though her Christian protagonists struggle with moral bankruptcy and generally approach a narrative “revelation”, the tendency to reduce her writing to a personal spiritual agenda ostensibly stems from the relative literary and political underrepresentation of both Southern and Catholic writers in the mid-20th-century United States. O'Connor herself explicitly expressed frustration at being pigeonholed by the critical community and even nods to her dilemma in “The Partridge Festival” (1961). When Calhoun, a young, aspiring writer tells his small-town Southern aunts of his plans to write a novel, they dismiss him, remarking “Maybe you’ll be another Margaret Mitchell” and remind him that his future writing necessarily represents Southern culture, saying “I hope you’ll do us justice...few do” (*The Complete Stories* 424). This reduction of her writing to regionalism largely limits scholarship to either biographical readings of her fiction or attempts to decode what must inevitably be a Christian didactic agenda.

However, these readings overlook her voice in a critical age in U.S. history during which theologians struggle to justify the use of Christianity itself in light of its failure to mitigate the unprecedented political violence of the 20th-century as well as its struggle to survive problematizing scientific advancement. The conflict in O'Connor's South not only rejects the notion of a crumbling Christian foundation but documents the intricacies of a recapitulated Christian-American identity and a rebirth of its church. Her contributions to the legacies of both Christian theology as well as religious anthropology, especially during the final years of her life, are often overshadowed by the tendency to focus on the uniqueness of her voice in the canon. In her exploration of human violence, O'Connor counterintuitively responds to contemporary theology that presents Christianity as an evolutionary mechanism driving humanity towards an ideal society (transcendence, if you will). To contextualize this exploration, I will use three theoretical models that might seem dissonant at first, but contribute to a broader, more nuanced foundation for approaching O'Connor's final stories.

As many biographical documents show, O'Connor began reading and enthusiastically reviewing translations of the writings of early 20th-century French Jesuit theologian and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin as early as 1959, five years before her death in August 1964. His immense influence on her fiction during this period is undeniable; the title of her last short story collection, *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965) comes directly from Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man* (1950), referring to his theory of convergence. In contrast with contemporary Catholic dogma, Teilhard de Chardin believed that Christianity serves a human evolutionary function that culminates in a united, transcended human existence or 'convergence' of individual humans (and groups) with one another and with god. However, to

eventually attain spiritual convergence, humans must struggle against and reflect upon their respective diminishment--circumstances that cause suffering such as disease, disability, or psychological impairments; those who refuse to grow and learn from their diminishments, labelled immobilists, miss the opportunity for convergence and fail to evolve. His writings further posit that evolution drives both nature and humanity towards increasing complexification, or entropy and complication, which in turn fuels evolutionary change towards an Omega point, or point of divine unification and total convergence. This complexification includes the formation of the noosphere, or the ramified network of human thought and ideas that ostensibly functions as an evolutionary plane similar to the biosphere. Exploring O'Connor's critical relationship to Teilhard de Chardin crucially informs her interpretation and deployment of his ideas, but more importantly explores how O'Connor presents society through the lens of convergence theory, namely by showing how the contemporary American Christian, largely sheltered from suffering and ambiguity, succeeds in achieving convergence and under what conditions this revelation actually manifests itself.

Crucially, O'Connor's prosaic, micro-level incarnations of convergence consistently incorporate Christian reflection in conjunction with the commission or experience of violence, suggesting that physical violence itself plays a vital and undertheorized role in the convergence model. In this thematic vein, she anticipates the thinking of later French anthropologist René Girard--notably his theory of sacrificial violence in *Violence and the Sacred* (1972). Though O'Connor clearly did not live to encounter his ideas, her fiction's intervention into the evolutionary functions of violence and religion nonetheless contribute to the theoretical legacy of Christianity as an anthropological necessity. Girard argues that the Judeo-Christian religion

sprang directly from a social need to control human aggression and infighting as a result of innate mimetic desire, or jealousy over perceived resources. Violence towards a scapegoat figure alleviates the inevitable social tension that accumulates between jealous people (men, typically) and attains a sacred status due to its sacrificial role in keeping the community together and containing aggression. Thus, biblical figures such as Abel, for instance are considered sacred avatars for their sacrifice while Cain represents common humanity, perpetually overcome by bestial aggression. Like Teilhard de Chardin, Girard considers the Christ-event a paradigm shift in human capacity to attain peace, but not necessarily from an evolutionary perspective. Instead, he interprets the crucifixion as a singular violent event that ideally inspires the community to see the futility in violence and turn away from it. He posits that being confronted with the unsustainability of perpetual sacrifice will inspire the repudiation of violence itself: that the traumatic insight borne of such revelation will achieve what Teilhard de Chardin would ostensibly describe as convergence, a cohesive, inclusive human community whose members actively reject all forms of violence.

Finally, underpinning both Teilhard de Chardin's as well as Girard's projects is the theological tradition of kenosis, a line of Christian thought originating in the idea that God emptied himself into the body of Christ, thus lessening or even repudiating his divine powers and, through altruistic sacrifice, epitomized the Christian ideal. According to kenotic Christology, the ideal Christian chooses to adhere to the example as Christ as closely as possible, striving to act with humility and altruism, thereby attempting to empty oneself of material preoccupations and proprietary self-interest to become an instrument of divine will. Though the legacy of kenotic Christology spans centuries and multiple Judeo-Christian expressions, perhaps

one of the most easily identifiable figures (and one with which O'Connor repeatedly engages) is that of the saint or ascetic whose self-denial and service to teaching and/or martyrdom indicate sacredness and adjacency to god. Reading these figures within a Girardian complex, however, questions the merit of their social function. Though scholars such as Susan Srigley suggest in her Girardian readings of O'Connor that ascetics can be viewed in the traditional kenotic light as they contain a perceived innate violence by turning it inward (the 'love' of Christianity materializing in a Christ-like *self-sacrificial* violence) (37-8), such a reading underemphasizes Girard's ostensible rejection of the ascetic. Girard's theory attempts to identify the structural means of dismantling *macroscopic* human reliance on sacrificial violence, while ascetic practice focuses on an isolated individual's personal attempt to achieve a morally transcendent state. The fundamental oversight in Srigley's account is that it limits the scope of his theory to individual moral exemplarity. If we are to regard Christianity as an anthropological machine, ascetic self-sacrifice must be similarly qualified by its impact on human interaction: specifically, how does the ascetic impact society? Is he or she more or less successful in bringing *society*, especially contemporary society, to a post-violent state, or is the contemporary ascetic perhaps noble from a moral perspective but ultimately dysfunctional from a social one? Furthermore, how does whether or not a scapegoat is intentionally sacrificed contribute to the dismantling of the scapegoat system as a whole? I posit that O'Connor, given her interest in Teilhard de Chardin's broad, evolutionary model of Christianity, suggests that her opinion of the ideal Christian necessarily involves his or her effect on others and social functioning, especially in light of potential imminent convergence -- and the consequent dismantling of normative partitions and as well as implicit as well as explicit mechanisms of social segregation.

Furthermore, the relative comfort and security of the white, post-war American lifestyle complicates the attempt to achieve the 'selfless' or truly altruistic aspect of kenosis. For instance, to what extent can education constitute a form of violence, given the fraught legacy of proselytism?

These three perspectives anticipate a species-wide transformation of a traditional Christian human culture stretched to its breaking point. Moreover, each theoretical framework necessarily involves immersion in the secular. Like O'Connor's fiction, they all explore the utility of Christianity in an increasingly atheistic and empirical era of human understanding, one which rejects miracles and the active benevolence of a protective god in favor of the immanent dramas found in psychology and political policy. However, Girard and Teilhard de Chardin reject the incompatibility of religion and the developing secular perspectives of human origin; they embrace Christianity with the vocabulary of anthropology and evolutionary biology, respectively, and from the merger they anticipate a resulting human transcendental peace, despite the recent memory of the World Wars. The rich legacy of kenosis serves a similar purpose in its recurring promptings to consider *how* the post-violent/convergent state is best achieved on an individual level and how sacrifice (specifically through suffering) contributes to this transformation. Despite these promptings, Girard's thesis and the legacy of kenosis problematically interpret suffering as an indication of moral sanctity as well as the result of an imperfectly applied Christianity. Both frameworks insinuate, to an extent, that for the sacred to exist, its avatars or embodied personae must suffer at the hands of an inherently imperfect Christian or alien and hostile agent, which suggests that religion itself reinforces the perceived need -- even desire -- for the existence of the violent oppressor.

In Girard's perspective, the pragmatic, post-violent world outgrows the training wheels of sacrificial Christianity, while in the kenotic ideal, a cooperative community enjoys freedom from the imminent threat of extrinsic violence but must also inherently suffer in a certain capacity. O'Connor addresses this disagreement over the role of suffering by suggesting that at least in the contemporary moment, extrinsic (that is, non-ascetic) violence is both imperative and inevitable in the journey towards convergence. She rejects Girard's idea that revelation alone can lead to social transformation because, in the contemporary moment, political passivity in light of violence constitutes an act of violence itself; she argues that prosaic, white, middle-class comfort, though ostensibly pacifist, does not indicate a repudiation of violence but widespread participation in a violent mechanism that blinds the community to the violence of the mechanism itself, an active turning away from the manifold expressions of violence that are variously occluded or disavowed. Implicit in this interpretation is the inability for the revelation of violence to be taught without the active participation of the individual in the violence itself, either as oppressor or victim; it must be physically experienced, undeniably tangible.

O'Connor thus rejects first-world comfort as an indication of the triumph of the Christian world-view over violence, instead revealing political intolerance, moral passivity, and closed-mindedness to be contemporary manifestations of prevailing violence or, at the very least, direct precursors to active violence. This comfort indicates the lack of an emergent and immediate motivation to act altruistically (a transposed memory of the Christ-event, so to speak) and facilitates spiritual stagnation, putting individuals at risk of participating in or permitting violence around them. This genre of latent violence seems innocuous, manifesting in problematic but non-confrontational behaviors, such as subtle racist microaggression or a preference for

political and/or racial isolation, yet these propensities directly result in physical altercations. O'Connor's protagonists often recognize the violent potential of their political or ethical beliefs through retrospective revelatory experiences involving a confrontation with human suffering. O'Connor thus presents this singular trauma not so much as a kenotic event as a device that activates the kenotic capacity; she suggests that the Christian ideal involves a *recognition* of one's implicit participation in violence before the repudiation of violence itself can be made. By extension, she implies that this recognition inherently activates the human ability to choose a future of violence or convergence -- that until this revelation occurs, the Girardian model dominates human volition; that regardless of intention, we are slaves to the political regime, religion, or philosophy that satiates our appetite for comfort until we are forced to experience the negation of comfort (that is, suffering). Only after experiencing this trauma can the individual appreciate the destructive potential of passivity and recognize the emergent need to repudiate violence.

These frameworks provide the critical vocabulary with which to identify O'Connor's own educated and intricate consolidation of secular and Christian realities and her practical efforts not to convert the atheist, but to confront the reader with the particular insidiousness of contemporary latent structures of violence and the evolutionary and moral cost of comfort. What many refer to as her Southern grotesques directly refer to participants in this latent violence due to their subscriptions to ideological and political mechanisms that advance the violent Girardian machine; the geography of material spaces and homes come to represent the indulged body which enjoys the rewards of the mechanism, disincentivizing revelation and independent will. In exchange for satiating the human appetite for comfort, which parallels corporeal temptation in

the kenotic model (or mimetic desire in the Girardian model), the mechanism renders the individual an agent to advance its ideological prerogatives. For instance, the stereotyped racist is not an individual but a cog within the (Girardian) mechanism of racism, which in turn secures the racist's comfort; to disengage with racism, that is, recognizing the physical violence it produces, signifies the birth of the individual, independent of the need for the comfort the racist agenda affords and thus capable of discerning one's independent will from the self-interested prerogatives of the violent machine. Further participation in racism after the revelation then becomes an intentional choice to embrace (as Girard would say) the Kingdom of Violence while repudiation would signify a step towards convergence, or the Kingdom of Love. Instead of "altar calls", I posit that O'Connor's stories encourage her readers towards a more truthful relationship with our own moral capacity -- our souls, if you will-- and to challenge the weakness of the stereotypes within us all. Secular or otherwise, she encourages us to nurture the part of the self that transcends the body and physicality it represents, offering an invitation to transcend the bestial and, more simply, the dangerously routinized and unthinking dimensions of social life.

To most accurately engage with O'Connor's most compelling theological discussions within the scope of the Girardian, Chardinian, and kenotic perspectives, I have selected five of her nine final short stories written after 1959 (that is, after she is confirmed to have studied Teilhard de Chardin) with the reasoning that these stories all reflect the most mature depictions of her radical religious framework. Four are from her posthumously published *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965) and can therefore be considered in direct conversation with Teilhard de Chardin, while another, "The Partridge Festival", was written during the same period as the

others but not included in the collection. Although her other final stories certainly address similar theological dilemmas, these representative five chart an evolution in O'Connor's approach to both the individual's journey towards convergence as well as the spiritual utility of contemporary violence. This will become more apparent in the following sections, but for the sake of clarity, I will briefly summarize the five stories chronologically in order of composition.

"The Comforts of Home", written in the fall of 1960 follows a historian, Thomas, who lives with his widowed mother in a small Southern town. After meeting Star Drake (also known as Sarah Ham), a young nymphomaniac consistently in trouble with the law, his mother decides to welcome her into their home as an act of charity. However, the introverted, sexually timid Thomas perceives Star as a threat to his comfort as she flirts with him and provokes him. To justify his discomfort, he expresses the fear that an abundance of virtue yields an abundance of misfortune, referring to the classical philosophy of moderation. He begs his mother to expel Star, but she continually refuses and instead encourages him to empathize with her disenfranchisement. As a result of his frustration, Thomas begins to hallucinate his domineering, manipulative late father who belittles him for what Thomas perceives to be a comparative lack of masculine power. He eventually concocts a plan to have Star arrested, which includes planting a gun on her, but the plan unravels and in attempting to shoot Star, kills his intervening mother instead.

The second story, "Everything That Rises Must Converge", written in 1961, follows a similar narrative arc to the first. Julian, an aspiring writer who moves back from university to live with his mother, expresses frustration with her antiquated racial intolerance and her nostalgia for her pre-bellum aristocratic lifestyle. He considers himself a martyr for enduring her

problematic attitude, comparing himself to Saint Sebastian. He accompanies her to her reducing class at the Y because she fears riding the recently integrated public bus alone. After arguing over whether integration positively or negatively affects society, Julian becomes sullen and reflective until a large black woman resembling his mother boards the bus with her small son and sits with the two. Julian's mother and the woman make casual conversation until both reach their stop and exit the bus together. However, out of misguided benevolence, his mother offers a penny to the child and the mother, recognizing the gesture as demeaning and offensive, hits her with her purse. Dazed, Julian's mother begins to mutter incoherently while Julian chastises her for her lack of tact. As she collapses onto the sidewalk, Julian is jarred from his cynicism as he runs for help in the departing daylight, finally forced into compassion.

O'Connor sets the third, "The Partridge Festival" (written before March 1961) again in a country town. Calhoun, a cynical, self-professed non-conformist, decides to leave the city to visit his aunts in their small town, Partridge, to gather information about Singleton, a wealthy resident who murdered six city officials because they did not allow him to enter a local festival without paying a registration fee. Calhoun considers him a modern-day Christ figure, aspiring to write a book about him. He eventually meets Mary Elizabeth, a young student home from university with a similar admiration for the murderer. They antagonize one another, each competing to appear more intellectually audacious than the other until they eventually decide to visit Singleton in the state hospital. The pair continues to compare him to Christ and as they near the hospital, they increasingly anticipate a profound spiritual change upon meeting him. However, when Singleton arrives at the visitation room, he makes crude, ineloquent remarks, suggesting his superiority over his fellow citizens, and sexually harasses Mary Elizabeth, chasing her around

the room until the guards eventually subdue and extract him. Once back in the car, Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth sit in silent discomfort before staring intently at one another, an act that suggests the beginning of a romantic connection.

In contrast to the above, O'Connor sets the fourth story, "The Lame Shall Enter First" (written in the summer of 1962) in a city (versus country/small town) setting. A widowed psychologist, Sheppard, works in a boys' reformatory and lives with his young son Norton, whom he perceives as selfish and ungrateful. When one of his patients, a Christian zealot from the country, named Rufus Johnson, shows intellectual potential, Sheppard takes a special interest in his education and attempts to dissuade him of his religious beliefs to replace them with an interest in science, going as far as to opening his home to him when he leaves the reformatory. However, Johnson resents Sheppard's secularity. Beyond generally antagonizing him, Johnson tricks Sheppard into providing a false alibi for his continued criminal activity and uses Norton's unresolved grief over his mother's death to convince him of the superiority of biblical dogma over secular understandings of mortality. Johnson continues to antagonize Sheppard until he finally rejects the boy after the police again arrest him for vandalism. Meanwhile, Norton hangs himself ostensibly in order to see his mother in the afterlife. Sheppard realizes the impact of his neglect only after he discovers his son's body hanging from the rafters in the attic.

Finally, "Revelation" (written before spring of 1964) returns to the town and follows Ruby Turpin, an obese, domineering farmer's wife. Turpin accompanies her husband to the local clinic to be treated for a wound. In the waiting room she qualifies each person according to their race and class, discriminating between "trashy" and "common" people (491). Through her daydreams, O'Connor reveals Turpin's belief in a divinely constructed social hierarchy, which

Christ intentionally maintains and populates according to favor. As she chats with her fellow “decent” people in the waiting room she expresses her gratitude towards Christ for “making everything the way it is” (499), and in reaction to this exclamation, the daughter of one of the patients throws a book at her and attempts to strangle her, calling her a warthog from hell.

Dazed, Turpin eventually returns home and expresses frustration at God for allowing such misfortune to befall her as well as questioning the divine intent behind the girl’s message. She compares herself to Job as she ironically protests the injustice of her misfortune. While watering the pigs on her farm, she receives a vision (perhaps due to her head injury) in which a mass of souls climb a bridge to heaven in an order inconsistent with the social hierarchy, with black and poor people entering before “decent” folk like herself.

“Their Own Side of the Fence”: Setting and the Geography of Identity in the Integrated South

The perception of Southern identity has been dominated by its relationship to territory both from cultural and historical perspectives. From its attempt to physically secede from the Union during the Civil War to its legacies of social stratification based on intergenerational land-ownership (such as pre-bellum aristocracy and later, sharecropping), connection to geography crucially informs the understanding of individual and communal identities. On the social scale, an individual's ownership of land and his or her ancestral origin (which ostensibly includes race) indicate his or her position in the social hierarchy, which dictates where each community member lives, how they behave, and how much relative political power they wield. O'Connor's characters faithfully express these preoccupations with territory, often to the point of embodying regional stereotypes of the geographical identities they represent. In O'Connor's moment, racial integration poses an immediate threat to the territorial domination of white identity by transgressing against the norms of the social hierarchy and redistributing public land. The birth of new, integrated space crucially changes the geography of the Southern identity, dividing white, domestic geography into three distinct categories: the home (or the familiar, proprietary), the foreign (spaces belonging exclusively to another group), and the liminal space (integrated or similarly shared public spaces). The distinction between these spatial territories and the emphasis on the image of movement or travel evokes the language of Chardinian convergence; to physically converge insinuates the physical mutual approach and amalgamation of unlike mediums, while immobilism (which marks those who refuse to converge) indicates physical inertia. Using Chardinian vocabulary to read the interaction of O'Connor's characters

with their respective settings suggests that successful convergence depends on a character's travel to foreign territory, confrontation of the novel, and a rationalization of the latent violence the individual inevitably participates in, especially within the context of racial or political segregation.

Immobilist characters generally perceive their identity as intimately related to their associated geography, which usually relates to an aspect of political power. For instance, Julian's nostalgia for his mother's antebellum childhood house most clearly shows this connection between identity and space:

“[his mother says] ‘The house had double stairways that went up to what was really the second floor -- all the cooking was done on the first. I used to like to stay down in the kitchen on account of the way the walls smelled. I would sit with my nose pressed against the plaster and take deep breaths.’ ...[I]t remained in [Julian's] mind as his mother had known it...appear[ing] in his dreams regularly.” (408)

Later referring to it as “the house that had been lost for him” (419), Julian's nostalgia constructs a physical space to compensate for the innate right to superior political status (and land-ownership) “lost for” him and which he perceives his Southern whiteness to allow him. Through his mother's recollections, he vicariously takes “deep breaths” of plaster in the kitchen, ingesting whiteness and filling his body with it, suggesting that the house and the power it represents supplies the tangible, physical aspects of his whiteness. Moreover, Julian uses the memory of the lost, castle-like house to mentally ingest this idealized, selective memory of pre-bellum whiteness to literally turn his head against the wall, ostensibly away from black slaves working in the kitchen, thus remaining blind or apathetic towards the black exploitation of

labor involved in securing the house. Though he attended university and understands the white ethical failure of slavery, he nonetheless regards the Civil War a melancholic “loss” of both power and identity which forces him to access his whiteness only through this ‘ideal’ yet intangible depiction of it. Just as his mother uses her memory of geographical origin to inform her own racial identity, Julian’s mental reconstruction of this geographical symbol of his ancestors’ political dominance dictates the way he understands whiteness: as a physical indication of one’s right (perhaps not to own slaves), but certainly to own land, wealth, and political domination. As a result, he perceives himself as victimized, a white person disenfranchised from his whiteness through the fault of others. Though he performs the progressive university student stereotype, challenging his mother’s resistance to integration and (vainly) attempting to befriend black people, O’Connor suggests that this adopted identity cannot supercede the Southern connection to land; his understanding of political identity (whiteness) itself *depends* on his innate right to power and the innate undeservedness of others (black people) to power.

More importantly, this political association between geography and whiteness acts as a proxy for the body, in addition to his perceived identity in relation to others. He visualizes his body as a silent monument to pre-bellum whiteness into which he can recede; he describes an “inner compartment of his mind” (411) as “the high-ceilinged room sparsely settled with large pieces of antique furniture” (423-4) which ostensibly refers to the room with double stairways in his mother’s childhood home. Here he “establish[es] himself when he [cannot] bear to be a part of” his surroundings, where he is “safe from any kind of penetration” and “free from the general idiocy of his fellows” (411). This geography is an intentionally paradoxical space; here he

“establish[es] himself”, yet is himself both creator and created, just as the house is both Julian and geography. Julian is thus both sign and signifier for the antebellum South; he not only inhabits the political identifiers of ‘whiteness’ and perceived ‘eliteness’ but embodies white supremacy itself, embracing the valuable (versus antiquated or old-fashioned) “antique furniture” of antebellum memories. His identification makes his perception of self abstract, invincible, and bodiless, representing the signs and signifiers of white maleness itself: by “establish[ing]” himself as both a house and the occupier of the house, as both creator and created, he eliminates the need to “bear” social interaction with others and even corporal experience itself. His refusal or inability to move out of the house, so to speak, impedes his ability to converge, physically and spiritually with others. This mental structure further informs the primacy of the antebellum nostalgic stereotype despite the adoption of the contradictory university student stereotype; even if he leaves his geography to change the occupier of the house, he is still his essential geography.

Furthermore, Julian already perceives that he suffers, as a Southern prince robbed of his throne; his mental ‘suffering’ is ostensibly due to his martyring by the post-Reconstruction South’s denial of his innate right to supremacy. Reinforced by his comparison to Saint Sebastian “waiting...for the arrows to begin piercing him” (405) as he waits for his mother to prepare to leave the house, this ironic suffering is particularly informative from the perspective of kenosis. His self-perception as a saint at once shows that his suffering indicates his sacredness or, more appropriately, his exceptionality, but his reluctance to “bear”(411) the discomfort of interacting with the physical world shows a discontinuity between his perception of suffering and his ostensible lack of actual suffering. The emotional turmoil he claims to experience not only originates in self-interest as opposed to altruism, but simultaneously shields him from the

extrinsic forces that could actually cause him to physically suffer. A Girardian framework underpins this rationalization of suffering; the self-insulation and uncomplicated superiority that Julian enjoys mirrors the Girardian community's blindness to their complicity in the martyring of the scapegoat. His selective nostalgia, which overlooks the role of the exploitation of black people (the scapegoat) in his social privilege similarly overlooks the continued suffering of the black community and its continued bolstering of his privilege. He turns away from "bearing" the violent reality of the antebellum legacy but embraces the symbolic "arrows" of its gradual dismantling, indicating a growing internal tension indicative of a Girardian potential for aggression. This tension, along with his turning away, intensifies when Julian boards the integrated bus with his mother and witnesses the continued racial bigotry of other white people, which threatens to undermine the moral justification of his comfort.

This mapping of interpersonal and intergroup geography reveals a cultural disinclination towards convergence due to the close association between identity and possession of land. O'Connor further typifies convergence as both a psychological and physical process; while Julian must dismantle his mental house in order to function with those different from him, he also must co-inhabit physical space. This dilemma marks a Chardinian intersection with the tradition of kenosis, which emphasizes the experience of the body; because the tradition maintains that God diminished himself to become incarnate/mortal through Christ and Christ in turn sacrificed himself for the benefit of humanity, to emulate Christ is to relinquish the material and suffer through the body as a gesture towards the spiritual. However, characters such as Julian lack this ability due to the ontology of their self-perception; by receding into himself, he rejects the body itself. The selfless element of kenosis, for O'Connor, requires a mental dimension of

kenosis to be accessed in addition to the physical, or a mental sacrifice of self to connect and converge with others. Given the possessive and fraught claims to land and by extension, the perception of the self and the body, the integrated space presents a unique opportunity for the sharing of self within liminal territories. The integrated space also catalyzes the Girardian function of antebellum nostalgia as a whole; integration pluralizes the geographical owners of the public space, forcing the reallocation of power and territory and encouraging latent tension to surface, thus threatening community violence. Moreover, integration undermines the symbolic symbiosis between physical territory and identity itself, challenging the viability of Julian's internal space (and by extension, his suffering) and forcing the white identity to redefine itself in light of conceded geography. The integrated space thus functions as an invitation to struggle with hypocrisy and to address the underlying (violent) motivation of racial segregation.

The liminal space also provides a space where mental barriers between the consciousness and the body can be transgressed; by offering elements of novelty alongside elements of familiarity, the setting is no longer "unbearable", but physically compelling. When he boards the integrated bus with his mother, Julian first recedes into his "mental bubble" and refuses to interact with the physical world around him, instead fantasizing about befriending "better types [of black people]...ones that looked like professors or ministers or lawyers" and punishing his mother by bringing home "a beautiful suspiciously Negroid woman" (414), or more precisely, co-opting black bodies as objects with which to achieve personal prerogatives. He is only "tilted out of his fantasy" when he observes a black woman resembling his mother board the bus: "out of the dark a large, gaily dressed, sullen-looking colored woman got on...Her bulging figure was encased in a green crepe dress and her feet overflowed in red shoes...She carried a mammoth red

pocketbook that bulged throughout as if were stuffed with rocks” (415). Encountering a black person who defies Julian’s notion of “type” actively “tilt[s]” him out of his “compartment” (against his will) and forces him into corporeal experience of the present moment. Though he fails to see the woman as a human, focusing on the inadequacy of clothing to contain her inhuman “overflow[ing]” feet and the unnatural “mammoth” pocketbook he imagines filled with bestial “rocks” instead of money, the woman and her similarity to Julian’s own mother (which he at first does not realize) present him with an intermediary between objectified blackness and the familiarity of his mother. Instead of being surrounded by an environment he “cannot bear”, the woman enters the scene as a half-familiar liminal reference point, allowing him enough security to enter the experience of the body. His vivid description of her appearance indicates his forced abandonment of the internal compartment of his white identity, instead explicitly engaging with the contemporary moment without the lens of prejudice. This abrasive, involuntary confrontation with novelty challenges comfortable, preconstructed realities and facilitates the articulation of underlying conflict, enabling self-understanding through moral meditation without the interaction’s unravelling into violence. Though Julian only ostensibly recognizes his hypocrisy after the woman assaults his mother, the integrated geography exclusively enables this interaction.

O’Connor therefore identifies spaces such as the integrated public institution as a liminal area integral to ultimate revelation, almost mimicking the notion of a church, or a space where god may walk and communicate with the Christian (in so much as god represents a unifying, transcendent force). Though racially integrated public institutions constitute the most timely¹ and

¹ In 1961, the writing of “Everything That Rises Must Converge” coincided with the Freedom Rides demonstration, which tested the Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation in interstate transportation. (Keane)

explicit incarnation of this geography, encountering revelatory violence also occurs in institutions which facilitate the interaction between previously isolated groups. This phenomenon extends through most of the selected stories: Turpin's conflict with Mary Grace occurs in a clinic waiting room populated with diverse clients (489), Sheppard meets Johnson in a reformatory (449), Thomas's mother houses Star after she meets the girl in the municipal jail (386), and Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth visit Singleton in a state hospital (442). These liminal areas delegate between two conceptual spaces, facilitating transition between the comfortable, spiritually stagnant location of the home on one hand, and the radical, transformative unknown space, which facilitates rumination on the violence encountered in the liminal space.

However, the Chardinian model maintains that human complexification and eventual convergence are inevitable, unavoidable forces, and O'Connor seems to agree; while the liminal space undoubtedly facilitates the revelatory process and even renders it inevitable for its inhabitants, it is not necessary for convergence to occur. For instance, convergence inevitably confronts even her most isolated character, Thomas, in "The Comforts of Home". Despite his adherence to a philosophy of ethical moderation, Thomas is "not cynical" and sees virtue as "the principle of order and the only thing that makes life bearable", maintaining that his life is "made bearable by the fruits of his mother's saner virtues -- by the well-regulated house she kept and the excellent meals she served" (386). The home acts as almost an extension of the body he is entitled to, as he describes it as "home, workshop, church, as personal as the shell of a turtle and just as necessary" (395). He interprets her charity towards Star as her virtue which "got out of hand", thereby inviting "a sense of devils" into the house, or "denizens with personalities, present though not visible" (386). Like Julian's mental home, Thomas's personal territory and

sense of self intimately converge as a single entity, yet unlike the impenetrable mental bubble, invaders threaten Thomas's interior comfort. His mother's charity towards Star forces him into a type of pseudo-physical kenosis; her presence in his home, if it is to be considered a psychological extension of his body, indicates both a physical penetration and a forced self-sacrifice of personal territory. While the liminal space urges Julian towards convergence, Thomas's isolation in his home offers nothing familiar or safe with which to mitigate Star's radical foreignness, leading to the relative severity of his eventual violent episode in comparison to Julian's. As he perceives the imminent destruction or reduction of his power and sense of identity, he imagines supernatural, mystical "denizens", unknowable and insidious, as a symptom of Star's threat to his comfort, referencing a Girardian religion's mystical justifications for violence (that is, if religion deems an entity/scapegoat as inexplicably 'evil', it sanctions destruction by the community). Formerly held at bay by his mother's ability to make life "bearable", these "demons" represent the increasing aggressive tension of competition over scarce resources -- what Girard would refer to as inevitable mimetic desire O'Connor depicts as a type of ethical insecurity as Thomas's justification for withholding charity steadily crumbles.

Just as Julian fails to see his own hypocrisy in his objectification of black bodies, Thomas similarly fails to recognize the moral failure of his selfish obsession with comfort. Unmolested, his home represents the ideal of his dogma and the functioning of his moral justification for a selfish life; he can control his mother's benevolent virtue to ensure their protection against the ills of unrestricted virtue and thus not feel obligated towards the less fortunate. However, the loss of his immoral father as a 'regulator' to balance his mother's virtue allows her virtue to exceed the boundaries of the home and invite "devils"/Star into his home. Thomas's murder of his

mother resembles Julian's failure to protect his; in the blind service of their ideologies (Thomas' moderation and Julian's antebellum nostalgia), they unintentionally commit a gross moral failure in the effort to defend a justification for comfort, or, more specifically, to avoid confronting their own roles in violence. The severity of this failure reveals the severity of the threat that the loss of comfort or territory presents to protagonists; O'Connor views the threat to comfort almost as severe as the threat to life itself, requiring a reflexive, sometimes murderous counter-attack.

This association between the loss of territory/comfort and perceived death manifests itself in a character's travel to a radical foreign space, which demands the absolute repudiation of the familiar. While both Thomas and Julian play immobilist roles before the inevitable impact of convergence, Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth in the later "The Partridge Festival" instead seek out and anticipate revelation by visiting the incarcerated Singleton in the state hospital. The two travellers imagine their journey in the geographical terms of a gospel: "The boy sat helpless while the car, as if of its own volition, turned and headed toward the entrance. The letters Quincy State Hospital were cut in a concrete arch which it rolled effortlessly though. 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here,' the girl murmured" (439). The car's independent "volition" evokes both the inevitable hand of convergence as well as the arbitrary vehicle of death, to which the passengers are "helpless" to control, foreshadowing the inevitability of what Calhoun later refers to as "some strange tranquility" (440) resulting from his meeting with Singleton. Mary Elizabeth's allusion to Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* also further suggests the pair crosses a mortal threshold in meeting with Singleton, both allegorizing death as a stage in the journey towards god. More importantly, O'Connor establishes the hospital, a radically foreign environment, as a geographical setting in which Calhoun's "strange tranquility"/"revelation" (440) is finally

possible; Calhoun's crossing into the radical setting enables revelation through its emulation of death, representing a voluntary self-emptying and the death of the diffused ego. 'Radical' travel, so to speak, thus comes to function as a kenotic behavior. Though neither Mary Elizabeth nor Calhoun necessarily act altruistically, their symbolic death refers to the death of the territory-based self; by repudiating the familiar, they repudiate both comfort and reliance on a dogma to justify passive violence. Furthermore, they seek a psychological connection with Singleton (misguided or otherwise), as Calhoun literally seeks to emulate him, indicating a suspension of the self in order to embody another self, which, though problematically misanthropic, nonetheless involves a kenotic element in placing others above the self.

In addition to showing how the Southern perception of identity and contemporary reliance on comfort impedes spiritual growth, O'Connor's geographical continuum (running between the home and radical foreign binaries) critically diagnoses Southern insistence on social segregation. Though segregation ontologically impedes the possibility of interpersonal convergence and likewise disincentivizes kenotic altruism, it more importantly relies on boundaries to operate. Julian's mother corroborates this idea in her insistence that black people "were better off when they were [slaves]", that "[t]hey should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence" (408). Her fearful insistence on a fence, on the division between the white community and the black, othered community intrinsically rejects the possibility of a liminal space and also emphasizes the need for territory as a basis for "rising". While "their own side of the fence" refers to a potentially benevolent 'separate but equal'² racially divided space for the black community, it problematically reinforces hierarchical social stratification based on the primacy

²For reference, the court case overturning the doctrine of "separate but equal" justification for racial segregation, *Brown v. Board of Education* took place in 1954, less than six years before "Everything That Rises Must Converge" was written.

of land and class. Moreover, by rejecting a liminal space, she denies her own capacity to “rise”, or converge, or identify with a greater, more inclusive human family. Her statement conflicts with both itself as well as the axiomatic title of the story, “Everything That Rises Must Converge”: she fails to see that “rising” ontologically invalidates the utility of a “fence” as they cannot contain the risen. In other words, the social emphasis on hierarchy and the individual’s materialistic dependence on territory and comfort fundamentally oppose the traditional Christian value system and, more importantly, cultivate violence; maintaining boundaries between the owned and unowned, what material informs the self and what material is foreign, inhibits collective peace and necessarily promotes mimetic desire and, according to Girard, inevitable, perpetual victimizations of scapegoats. The title’s editorial imperative, that the risen “must” converge implicitly suggests the converse: that those divided by fences do not rise.

Overall, O’Connor’s secular mapping of the spiritual landscape, not between heaven and hell, but between an almost masturbatory personal isolation and a tendency towards radical social integration/travel reveals her admiration for Teilhard de Chardin’s convergence framework as well as a trepidation concerning the compatibility between not just Southern, but American perceptions of identity and the capacity to achieve a post violent state. She characterizes a spiritually antagonistic xenophobia intervening in the convergence process; an aversion to the novel based on the bloody history of American greed and a subsequent recession into the structures that reassure us of our comfort and innocence. Not only does O’Connor’s writing betray an anticipation of post-slavery retribution against the white former aristocracy, but she criticizes this anxiety as an impediment to ultimate convergence -- that to use this fear, this tendency to put up fences as a justification to continue participation in Girardian violence, is an

action that indicates a preference for the Kingdom of Violence over the Kingdom of Love.

Ultimately, O'Connor suggests a fundamental incompatibility between self-imposed isolation and the convergence model, maintaining that ultimate convergence transcends the hierarchical divisions and the proverbial fence; that those who rise are lifted up by those on the other side.

“Unbearable”: Pedagogical Encounters and the Cult of Comfort

The Book of Job in the Old Testament opens to God praising Job, a pious and very prosperous man, for his exemplarity as a Christian when Satan remarks that Job’s wealth and fortune alone motivate his devotion and that removing these would lead him to denounce God. God, in turn, maintains his belief in Job’s unwavering faith and grants Satan permission to victimize Job in order to test his strength. God looks on while Satan kills his children, burns his son’s house down, and afflicts him with sores and nightmares; his friends advise Job to repudiate his God due to his passivity in light of Job’s suffering, but as predicted, he refuses, remaining steadfast in his faith. Ultimately, God speaks to the group from a hurricane, praising Job lengthily for his virtue and denouncing his friends before bestowing Job with new, increased wealth and prosperity. He emphasizes humans’ inability to perceive divine knowledge and therefore discredits Job’s comforters as unworthy to give counsel because they incorrectly perceive the will of God. Central to this moral dilemma is the question of how a good Christian behaves to most effectively please God and how one can most effectively deduce what this behavior entails, despite an ostensible inability to access true divine knowledge. Job’s exemplarity (which O’Connor explicitly reimagines in “Revelation”) reveals the human need for a type of pedagogy to rationalize ideal Christian behavior that in some way addresses the universal prevalence of suffering despite a presumably omnipotent God (although, as previously noted, the kenotic tradition challenges this notion). However, O’Connor’s portrayals of these pedagogical intermediaries, or dogmas, as I will commonly refer to them, often result in a jarring violent action that calls into question its functionality. In fact, these dogmas function similarly to the role of Girardian religion in their justification of the sacrifice of the scapegoat, revealing that the

often quotidian, innocuous dogma itself conceals the individual's culpability in violence. Just as the community who participates in the scapegoat mechanism practices the violence its religion simultaneously denounces and justifies, O'Connor's protagonists often remain blind to their hypocrisy until the moral comfort the dogma provides is threatened. The violent mechanism is activated in light of this threat and the potential for violence inevitably realized, culminating in the undeniability of the violent revelation.

This insistence on a rationalizing intermediary between unknowable divine will and ostensibly instinctual hedonistic will is suspiciously acute and urgent in O'Connor's stories; protagonists often attempt to persuade others of their respective dogma but unintentionally reveal its violent potential in the process. For example, Thomas's fervent efforts to "[show]" (383) his mother the danger of her charity towards Star result in matricide; Julian's attempts to "teach" (414) his mother racial tolerance lead to her assault; Sheppard's benevolent attempts to seduce Johnson away from Christianity blind him to the struggles of his own son, etc. In fact, almost all of O'Connor's stories are complicated by or center around characters who cite some form of suffering as a moral license to interpret the ideal way for others to behave. However, unlike Job's ordeal, this alleged suffering is often emotional rather than physical and fails to impede the physical comfort and psychological well-being of the character. I posit that the circumstances surrounding these encounters reveal both O'Connor's rejection that comfort and revelation can coexist (rejecting the spiritual superiority of the ascetic, or that arbitrary suffering automatically designates sacredness) as well as insisting that *true* Christian/convergent behavior must result in a net loss (suffering) on behalf of the Christian; as Job's narrative suggests, O'Connor corroborates that only in the absence of any sort of benefit is faith/self-sacrifice notable.

The motivation behind moral pedagogy often originates in an understanding of those from foreign territories as inherently wrong or in need of correction, indicating that these dogmas demand an individual's exclusive subscription and antagonism toward other dogmas. "The Lame Shall Enter First" engages specifically with how the construction of stereotype arises from this mandatory exclusivity and ultimately instigates unintentional violence. The pragmatic city-bred Sheppard, who refers to Johnson's religious zeal as "[r]ubbish" and "ignorance" (451), associates his criminal behavior with "boys [that] had been transplanted abruptly from the country to the city" (449), emphasized by Johnson's stereotypically fanatic, backwoods grandfather, who leaves his grandson to "bury some Bibles in a cave and take two of different kinds of animals and all that" (457). Sheppard, a self-perceived "city" stereotype himself, blames the corruption of "the country" for Johnson's deviance, reducing him to its zealous fanaticism imprinted on a *tabula rasa*. He reduces Johnson to a *victim* of the country, interpreting his genuine insidiousness as an extension of the "country" prerogative/agenda. He positions his own "city" prerogative in opposition to the country's antagonistic influence; the boy is "ignorant" but teachable; victimized by the geography of dark "caves" and bestial, primitivism, but correctable through Sheppard's own oppositional influence. Sheppard's drive to "save" (474) Johnson from non-empirical Christian beliefs ironically connotes an urgency to correct an inherently sinful, ignorant, or misdirected "country". This ostensibly noble but latently dehumanizing prerogative convinces Sheppard of the kenotic potential of his own attempts to convert Johnson. It both reinforces Sheppard's confidence in his own altruism, securing his comfort and thus fulfilling his ideological contract with the (hypocritical) atheistic ascetic-proselytism to which he subscribes as well as reinforces his self-perception as a sacred figure worthy of teaching others the correct

way to behave. Despite Johnson's obvious resistance to Sheppard's intellectual pursuit, the teacher fails to see his own abilities as anything other than successful (merited by the assurance of his dogma), which leads to his underestimation of Johnson as an ideological adversary. The two are thus reduced to avatars in conflict on behalf of their respective dogmas; by embodying stereotypes, Johnson becomes both signified by and a signifier of the country ideology, just as Sheppard becomes both an extension and product of the city ideology, reducing their pedagogical interaction to a conflict between two immobile actors. Assured by the comfort of his dogma and middle-class suburban insulation from the threat of harm, Sheppard fails to anticipate the inevitable devolution into violence the aggression of his ideology causes. He realizes neither the futility of his efforts to convert Johnson nor the subsequent neglect of his son until he discovers Norton's body, the irrevocable proof of his complicity in violence.

Inherent in this example is a central tension and negotiation between Sheppard's desire to fulfill his idealized self (a selfless role model for children, a teacher) and the obligation to act in accordance with his dogma, the proselytic asceticism that justifies the avoidance of his own inadequate son in favor of Johnson, who appears to be a better candidate for his teachings. This tension, between the desire to fulfill an idealized version of oneself and the temptation of comfort, emerges in most of the selected stories, notably through Calhoun and the tension between his nonconformist ideal identity and his prosaic reality, as well as through Thomas and the tension between his father's authoritarianism and an ideal pacifist moderation. This tension is similar to the tension between the Girardian community's appetite for aggression and desire for peaceful security; religion, which justifies the release of aggression similarly finds its analog in characters' dogmas. Unlike Girard's religion, which secures the relative peace of the community

and diverts potential infighting to the scapegoat, O'Connor's dogma only results in violence when its moral justification for comfort is threatened, indicating a preference for comfort over security. In Sheppard's case, his ascetic dogma dictates that he must "save" Johnson from his religious enthusiasm and show him the "light" of empiricism to reinforce his own identity. However, Johnson recognizes the self-interest veiled by Sheppard's outward charity and seeks to expose his own hypocrisy to him, thus threatening the function of the dogma and thereby prompting a violent defense.

This observation calls into question the utility and true altruism of the ascetic tradition. O'Connor refers explicitly to Sheppard's asceticism, sparsely adorning his bedroom with only "an acetic-looking iron bed" on the "bare floor", a desk, and a "heap of Little League uniforms...piled in one corner" (455). Considering the intimate relationship between a character's perception of self and their home/personal geography, the contents of Sheppard's room associates him (or rather, his self-perception) with social service and self-denial, concisely describing the traditional ascetic. Though explicitly atheist, his secularized asceticism nonetheless adheres to the tradition of emulating Christ through charity and self-denial, but simultaneously calls into question his motivations; if he repudiates religious sanctity, what does self-denial afford him? Consciously, he claims that self-denial and social service help him cope with his wife's death, telling Norton, "If you stop thinking about yourself and think about what you can do for somebody else...you'll stop missing your mother" (448).

However, his aggressive obsession with "saving" Johnson suggests that this apparent altruism more accurately functions as a way to establish his own power. Sheppard betrays this desperation for power when he tells Johnson, "I'm stronger than you are and I'm going to save

you. The good will triumph” but, tellingly, Johnson replies, “Not when it ain’t true...[n]ot when it ain’t right” (474). Sheppard thus equates his strength with his ability to “save” Johnson and exert his will over him, showing that his asceticism represents not self-sacrifice for others, but a means to confirm and exercise his own power. Furthermore, Johnson’s qualification of “good” as either right or wrong, true or false, suggests that because Sheppard’s self-interest motivates his asceticism, it does not fulfill its kenotic intention and is therefore not “right” nor “true”³. Though charity ostensibly contributes to the communal good regardless of motivation (self-promotion or altruism alike) O’Connor, through Johnson, argues that true and right intention are necessary for the ultimate “triumph” of good, or, to extrapolate, convergence. The kenotic tradition maintains that one help others at the expense of the self in order to more closely resemble Christ. Read within the context of Teilhard de Chardin and Girard, true kenosis is the convergent state of being; in the post-violent reality, kenotic behavior prevails, as it is the antithesis of violence and most closely aligns with Christ-like behavior. Further assuming that convergence represents a human consolidation with Christ, kenotic behavior must inherently involve the prevalence of love *despite* suffering and victimization. The “wrongness” of Sheppard’s asceticism and, O’Connor suggests, asceticism itself, lies not in his secularity, but in his treatment of suffering and charity as tokens to exchange for power and not as a gesture of love, or a byproduct of love. The behavioral demands of his dogmatic framework obscure this wrongness or falseness in its suggestion that self-denial through the sharing of resources itself constitutes love. In fact, his reliance on the ascetic dogma *inhibits* his capacity for love; only after Johnson finally rejects Sheppard’s assistance when he is arrested, and Sheppard realizes his

³ The language of “truth” and “goodness” has been argued by Michael Mears Bruner’s *A Subversive Gospel* to refer to the Platonic transcendentals of beauty, goodness, and truth.

incidental violence towards Norton does he experience a “rush of agonizing love...like a transfusion of life” (481-2). O’Connor thus presents asceticism, and by extension, other dogmas that promote moral comfort, as a barrier to accessing the true kenotic state. The insistence on charity and self-denial focuses on the superficial traits of Christ and distracts from his most primary characteristic, radical love.

Problematically, references to hagiographical or biblical ascetics nonetheless litter the stories as foils to their respective protagonists, showing a problematic cultural emphasis on the value of suffering. In both “The Comforts of Home” and “Everything that Rises Must Converge”, the protagonist engages explicitly with a hagiographical figure: Thomas justifies abstaining from an “excess of virtue” (385) because “if Antony of Egypt⁴ had stayed at home and attended to his sister, no devils would have plagued him” (386), while Julian compares himself to Saint Sebastian⁵ waiting for “the arrows to begin piercing him” (405) before accompanying his mother to her reducing class. In fact, this anticipation of suffering actively alienates the two protagonists from corporeal experience and by extension, their respective pupils. O’Connor repeatedly describes Thomas’s environment as “unbearable” and “unendurable” (385-7, 390, 395, “insufferable” (396)) and he displaces his sexual frustration into intellectual masturbation, “vigorously” (393) reading alone in his office attempting to quell “a disturbance in the depths of his being, somewhere out of the reach of his power of analysis” (393). Julian, too, escapes into “the inner compartment of his mind” when he can not “bear to be a part of what was going on around him” (411). Both characters present an extreme reluctance to suffering, or even corporeal experience, either attempting to “analyze” psychic discomfort from a place of hiding or

⁴ Antony of Egypt notoriously withdrew from society and battled “temptations” from the devil. (Petruzzello “St. Antony of Egypt”)

⁵ Saint Sebastian, a martyred saint, was murdered after converting Roman soldiers. (Petruzzello “Saint Sebastian”)

collapsing into their own mind as a way to escape it. They demand that for reality to be “bearable”, it must yield to fit the rules of their dogmatic understandings and therefore be free from unrationalized suffering. Thomas’s mother must reduce her virtue or receive a punishment in magnitude equal to her virtue just as Julian’s mother must inevitably bend to progressivism and relinquish antebellum, white ideology; the good must meet evil, progressivism must progress, and the world must make sense and become “bearable” and explainable. This extreme aversion to suffering shows a marked misunderstanding of the existence of violence itself -- the only way with which they can engage with the foreign notion of discomfort is through references to remote hagiographical stories until they witness it firsthand. Thomas understands suffering as part of a natural mechanism that offsets virtue to keep nature in equilibrium while Julian perceives that he actively suffers while “enduring” his mother. Both further regard suffering as an indication of virtue or a sign of moral superiority.

However, read through the lenses of kenotic thought and the notion of Chardinian diminishment, this insulation from discomfort foretells a spiritual stagnation and ultimate inability to access revelation or convergence; kenosis demands suffering (or, at least, self-sacrifice), while Teilhard de Chardin’s theories posit that struggling with one’s physical and mental limitations (diminishment) brings one closer to convergence. Both perspectives emphasize the role of the physical body as a critical tool of gaining spiritual knowledge. By refusing to respond to uncontrollable physical cues (such as Thomas’ arousal) or escaping from the contemporary moment, both protagonists remain insulated from the opportunity to struggle and gain spiritual knowledge, rendering them Chardinian immobilists. More urgently, Girard’s theory suggests that since both misunderstand and remind blind to violence, they lack the ability

to either repudiate or embrace it -- this obsessive subscription to constant comfort not only facilitates complicity to violence around them but also predisposes them to the direct commission of violence in defense of their comfort (as is seen in Thomas' murder of his mother). In fact, Girard would argue that this commission of violence is imminent as tension from innate mimetic desire builds, which contradicts Teilhard de Chardin's qualification of a relatively benign, if unfortunate immobilist. O'Connor's portrayals reveal a hybrid perspective -- she suggests the inevitability of a violent event not as a result of mimetic desire, but rather due to resistance to the inevitability of complexification, which threatens comfort, and by extension, the home. These violent events force spiritual learning in the form of Girardian revelation and by definition, establish a tangible connection with the body and mortality. O'Connor therefore embraces the tradition of using suffering as a pedagogical tool, but not in the conventional image of a saint -- considering the ease with which Julian perceives suffering, she more accurately qualifies pedagogical suffering as necessarily physical and extrinsic.

While her references to the suffering of saints contrasts with the domestic discomfort of Julian and Thomas, a direct reference to the suffering of Job shows a much simpler interpretation of divine intent, or how a Christian should ideally behave based not on an Old Testament jealous God, but on the love of Christ. While Turpin rests at home after Mary Grace assaults her in the office, she

“raise[s] her fist and [makes] a small stabbing motion over her chest as if she was defending her innocence to invisible guests who were like the comforters of Job, reasonable-seeming but wrong” (503).

O'Connor ironically inverts the biblical situation; instead of accepting suffering and defending the fickle actions or inactions of God to others (as Job notoriously does), Turpin indignantly, "stabbing" with her fist, asserts her "innocence" and the injustice of her suffering. Unlike the obedient Job, she furiously demands that God explain her punishment despite the original story's insistence that divine knowledge is unknowable. Her embodiment of a subverted Job reveals her rejection of the pedagogical value of Job's suffering; she does not need to be 'taught', for she is saved, nor does suffering mark her favor in God's eyes. However, Turpin's experience departs singularly from Julian and Thomas's in her experience of violence; the epistemological contradiction between her self-decided salvation and her subjection to what she interprets as divine punishment forces her to accept either an absent, fickle god, or her spiritual need for punishment. Though Turpin struggles to rationalize the suffering she experiences within an understanding of suffering as either punitive or a mark of the damned, her injury forces her to turn to God to teach her, asking, "How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?" (506). Instead of comparing herself to a damned soul, or even a human member of the "inferior" groups she refers to (491), she assumes that damnation (or membership in "inferior" groups) indicates a lack of humanity and like her pigs, subject to the will of the saved, just as humans are subject to the arbitrary and abusive will of their hierarchical superior, God.

By allowing Mary Grace to transgress the boundaries of the hierarchy, Turpin's perception of God reveals the violence of her deterministic dogma and implicates her in culpability. She challenges God, saying, "Call me a wart hog from hell. Put that bottom rail on top. There'll still be a top and bottom!" (507). "Putting the bottom rail on top" refers to a Civil War anecdote in which an escaped slave in the Union army encounters his former Confederate

slave master and tells him the ‘bottom rail is on top this time’, referring to their inverted power dynamic. However, the image also evokes Acts 17:6 and the concept of the Jews (a political minority) eventually securing a power inversion over their oppressors, emphasizing tension between the Christian narrative and the Southern political narrative. In other words, the Confederate elite cannot inherit the Christian narrative of a just but oppressed people if they simultaneously admit their political advantage of being on ‘top’ of the ‘bottom rail’. Turpin’s deterministic dogma allows her to justify the white South’s political role as simultaneously oppressor and Christian in parallel narratives because God ultimately orchestrates and delegates all suffering. To resolve this political ambiguity, Turpin insists on the need to preserve the “traditional” institution of hierarchy as a divinely-created social model -- emulating on a Job-like silent obedience of divine omnipotence. Mary Grace’s transgression against her hierarchical place challenges the conservative⁶ justification for slavery; if pre-bellum slavery was, in fact, not an arbitrary manifestation of Job-like suffering, but a greed-driven moral atrocity, a Mary-Grace-like sin against the ‘natural’ order of things, Turpin loses the moral reference points separating the white from the black, bestial from the human, the “wart hog” from the self because she is directly implicated in the collective sin. “How am I a hog and me both?” (506) she asks, or, how can she be of the bestial tribe of sin and simultaneously saved? Her perpetuation of hierarchy necessarily denotes her bestial selfishness, and her assault confirms it; if God has the power to spare her from suffering at the hands of Mary Grace, he had the power to spare slaves from suffering at the hands of white slave-owners. God’s inaction thus equates her with the “hogs”, undermining the foundation of her dogma.

⁶ The language of this conservatism evokes the language of the New Conservatives, a group of writers who popularized the concept of traditionalist conservatism, which emphasized the importance of tradition over social change. (Henrie)

In Turpin's case, suffering directly challenges the basis of her dogma and prompts her to accept unconditional love as the epitome of divine knowledge; the experience of suffering literally teaches her of her vulnerability to suffering. In the book of Job, God demonstrates the immensity of his power to destroy and to create, repudiating the audacity of the comforters to suggest deviance and denying their ability to discern his motives. However, Turpin's God freely addresses her demands, ostensibly giving her a vision of his divine answer, depicting a God who is not only uninterested in behavior or social class (showing her "whole companies" of different social castes "rumbling toward heaven" simultaneously (508)), but who embraces her and shows her unconditional favor despite her ostensible implication in sin. This inclusive image replaces the hurricane, substituting radical tolerance for punitive power. All are saved; no sinners burn. Suffering thus, in this case, represents not a way to please God nor to necessarily understand the machinations of God, but an event that forces the sufferer to acknowledge that radical love is the only antagonist to violence, and that to act in the image of God is to similarly love radically.

Ultimately, O'Connor embraces extrinsic physical suffering as the ideal pedagogical method for acquiring divine knowledge due to its absolute negation of love. Like the Girardian decision for or against the Kingdom of Violence, one must understand their own complicity in both violence and suffering and their own ability to turn away from it. By recapitulating violence as an exclusively human decision from which comfort is derived, O'Connor forces the individual to address their own complicity in selfishness; truth and comfort are incompatible and the latter must be relinquished to access the former. She further diagnoses the destructive role of dogmatic and cultural pedagogy on the understanding of divine intent. Neither suffering nor its absence, she argues, can impart wisdom, spiritual superiority or salvation without the removal of comfort.

However, the Girardian function of dogma, in place of religion, obscures an individual's ability to experience moral discomfort due to the individual's reliance upon comfort and aversion to suffering. She thus recapitulates the plight of spirituality not as a Catholic balancing act of mitigating sin with good works, nor an anxious Protestant denial of indulgence, but a simple, truly kenotic, Christ-like, radical embrace of the entire community and the audacity to repudiate the familiar in order to embrace the unknown.

Diminishment and Disfigurement: The Public Role of the Sacred Sinner

Although often radical instigators of violence, antagonists such as Singleton, Star, and Johnson employ a unique ability to incite Christian revelation in their respective misguided protagonists. Compellingly, these characters all bear signs of physical or mental Chardianian diminishment, from Star's alleged nymphomania to Johnson's club foot; these marks of suffering crucially inform their unique ability to both see a protagonist's hypocrisy and, albeit often unknowingly, inspire a confrontation with the Girardian revelation of violence. Their extraordinary relationship with diminishment ostensibly accounts for this psychic clarity, which, by extension, also suggests their increased proximity to convergence despite their markedly violent, antagonistic behavior. O'Connor's discussion of the outsider or outcast, marked by extreme physical diminishment or disfigurement suggest that she envisions them on one hand fulfilling the role of a priest or counsellor in guiding the protagonist to enlightenment, and on the other, a physical reminder of the limits of the flesh, a living memento mori. Contrasted with the image of the insular ascetic which also participates within the tradition of attributing suffering with sacredness or privilege in the eyes of God, O'Connor thus imagines a crucial place for these outsiders within her contemporary interpretation of Christianity which combines an anticipated Girardian understanding of the scapegoat with the kenotic legacy's tradition of equating suffering with a means of achieving divine knowledge or understanding.

O'Connor imbues her outcasts with almost supernatural, intense traits to both distinguish them from the hypocrisy of ascetic tropes such as Sheppard or symbolic suffering like Julian's, and to portray their reception as radically discordant with the social environment. When Sheppard meets him in the reformatory, Johnson's "thin dark hair hung...fiercely like an old

man[']s” despite his youth and shows “fanatic intelligence” (449), indicating a mysterious wisdom both inaccessible to Sheppard due to his youth yet paradoxically founded on the lived experience of age. Despite his youth, Johnson is not pedantic, but “intelligent” like an old man; he is also, however, described as “fierce” and “fanatic” which ostensibly refer to country stereotypes but more importantly indicate a pointed dangerousness. Moreover, the narrator also describes his “monstrous” (450) club foot with threatening, almost inhuman connotation, noting “the end of an empty sock protruded [from the brace] like a gray tongue from a severed head” and that it is “raised always to [Johnson’s] knee like a weapon ready for use” (450). These details demand attention, suggested when Sheppard’s “eyes [drop] involuntarily to the foot”, the “black deformed mass swell[s] before his eyes” (450). These unsettling details both alert the reader to the imminent threat Johnson poses to Sheppard’s comfort and also identifies the foot’s being seen as a source of kenotic violence -- its ability to physically expand under Sheppard’s gaze indicates its corroboration of Johnson’s radical, almost supernatural novelty, as it represents the source of his exile from the sphere of comfort. Despite Sheppard’s optimistic insistence that Johnson can and should belong in his own domestic world of comfort and excess, his reception of the foot as a symbol intimately related with death, entropy, and monstrosity suggests that Johnson’s deformity (to use O’Connor’s vocabulary) negates his ability to fully enter the cult of comfort.

Extreme psychological diminishment also marks an antagonist’s exile from the domestic sphere and engages the protagonist’s attention in a similar manner. The narrator describes Star’s “psychopathic personality” as “not insane enough for the asylum, not criminal enough for the jail, not stable enough for society” (388), and Thomas regards it as “the most unendurable form

of innocence” (390). Her psychological diminishment notably disconnects her from geography -- not only is Thomas unable to realistically place her in any physical location, but he finds rumination on this radical homelessness “unendurable”, especially in contrast to his own vice-like obsession with his own comfort. Resonating again in this failure to empathize with Star is the concept of “enduring” or “bearing” as a kenotic necessity; even though he physically does not experience Star’s diminishment, it still affects him deeply and causes him to avoid her. He cannot bear, even mentally, to displace his dogmatic comfort to extend empathy towards her, as it would inherently suggest a problem with moderation: if Star, who is ostensibly incapable of distinguishing virtue from vice, only experiences misfortune, then why does her suffering prevail? Her extreme disenfranchisement also threatens the “moderate” status of his comfort, suggesting that instead of keeping him safe from Saint Antony’s “demons”, what he deems to be a humble emotional reliance on his home represents a non-virtuous indulgence. The discomfort of “enduring” empathy signifies both an invitation to struggle with diminishment and attain virtue as well as a direct threat to his dogmatic system.

Though the tradition of kenosis emphasizes personal suffering as a way to increase virtue, its intersection with Girard’s theory problematizes the connection between suffering and sacredness or rather, between sacredness and virtue. Girard’s scapegoat attains the sacred state by being victimized to ensure the peace of the broader community -- therefore the community delegates virtue solely based on the comparatively unvirtuous outcome of its own actions. Kenotic discourse, on the other hand, would sustain that the process of being sacrificed or experiencing violence builds virtue within the individual, given their experience of an event that resembles Christ’s persecution, but more specifically, that such unresponsive endurance is a

radical expression of selflessness. New Testament scripture, especially the writings of Paul corroborates this perspective of glorifying the sufferer through its frequent esteeming of the “meek” over the powerful and Christ’s attentions to the blind and disenfranchised in contrast to the rich or powerful⁷. However, this perspective also inspires ambiguity around O’Connor’s deformed figures, or, as Johnson refers to himself, the lame, who ostensibly do not suffer for the good of the community, but who are inherently victimized to no one’s benefit. In this case, these individuals fulfill kenosis’s method for attaining divine knowledge, but not Girard’s (insomuch as sacredness assumes a state of virtuousness); because they do not suffer for the sake of the community, they are unlikely to be considered sacred. O’Connor certainly uses suffering, in the form of violence, as a means to jar characters into revelation, which follows the kenotic perspective but also rejects suffering as an automatic indicator of virtue, at least in the traditional sense of the word. The rampant participation of Star and Johnson in violence and other sin clearly either complicate a traditional sense of virtue or indicate just the opposite: that those who chronically suffer fail to perceive or respect the ethical boundaries virtue requires.

Chardinian diminishment further complicates this notion, as it identifies struggling with misfortune as the potential to approach the convergent state, which the lame are inevitably inclined to do despite their violent inclinations. O’Connor also takes this perspective into consideration in her construction of this trope but emphasizes individual volition as a crucial limiter on this capacity; the constant diminishment of the lame indicates their lack of a need for the revelation of violence and their ability to clearly perceive the function of dogmatic analogs for Girardian religion. For instance, Johnson immediately identifies Sheppard’s self-interest in

⁷ As shown through such aphorisms as “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” (Mark 10:25)

his charity, while Star perceives Thomas' comfort as symptom of his sexual repression. However, choosing the post-violent state is a matter of incentive; because the lame will ostensibly never stop suffering and permanently be exiled from the cult of comfort regardless, convergence would hold little value. In sum, the fact that O'Connor's lame uniquely exist outside of the Girardian system combined with the clarity gleaned from their suffering put them in a unique position to be able to influence revelation in others. Furthermore, this indication recapitulates virtue (from a kenotic sense) as not a behavioral inclination towards pacifism or selflessness, per se, but an ability to understand human motivation and ostensibly the resulting inclination to expose hypocrisy. The community still perceives sufferers as sacred due to their radicality and repudiation of comfort, but mistakenly attribute this sacredness to a spiritual courageousness to endure misfortune.

Beyond symbolically challenging the comfort and hypocrisy of their respective protagonists, lame antagonists also force characters around them into both self-sacrifice and a state of physical engagement, drawing a distinction between spiritual rumination involving involuntary physical experience, a kenotic function which also guides the protagonist towards the cusp of revelation, and spiritual rumination without the presence of a physical impetus, which, while ostensibly worthwhile, fails to increase understanding. Star's radicality, for example, forces Thomas into corporeal experience; after she "violate[s]" (395) his home, his "flushed face ha[s] a constant look of stunned outrage", as he smells her "small tragic spearmint-flavored sighs", and perceives that she "appear[s] to adore [his] repugnance to her" and intentionally "draw[s] it out of him...as if it added delectably to her martyrdom" (395). Star "draws out" Thomas' consciousness of his body which forces him to involuntarily experience

her “spearmint-flavored sighs” and the “flush[ing]” of his face. Like Julian’s unconscious “tilt” out of his mental compartment⁸, O’Connor describes Thomas’s “constant look of stunned outrage” in the passive voice, obscuring the identities of the tilter and the giver of outrage, characterizing his experience as uncontrollable, overwhelming, and outwardly attributed to an absent, ostensibly spiritual actor. The body’s reflexive reactions provide an urgency to struggle with and rationalize the apparent reaction lest lose control over the body. These reactions evoke the Girardian dysfunction of mimetic desire; Thomas’s “repugnance”, resembles the aggression caused by mimetic desire, similarly tempting him into violence to expend this tension.

Predictably, he fails to meaningfully engage with this experience, instead focusing on his own victimization over the discomfort it affords him with rather than questioning the source or meaning of this involuntary “outrage”, or “enduring”, which would ostensibly lead him to revelation and reveal the failure of virtue in his moderation dogma. By refusing to challenge his own beliefs and remaining immobile to the Girardian revelation, Thomas chooses to indulge the bestial drive of aggression when his comfort is threatened, only discovering the latent violence of his decision after he kills his mother. Crucially, Star’s radical physical body activates the bestial consciousness and makes the need to regain control urgent and jarring, suggesting that encountering the lame provides a vicarious diminishment to the community, thus eliminating the explicit need for violence to induce revelation. Though Thomas admittedly fails to experience revelation in time to anticipate the violent event, this failure shows O’Connor’s explicit

⁸ I would like to point out that this interpretation points out a particularly problematic aspect to O’Connor’s view of diminishment. If, like Star’s diminishment “tilts” Thomas into physical experience, it follows that the black woman Julian encounters on the bus experiences diminishment as a result of her blackness. The uncomfortable implication is that O’Connor may have seen blackness as a diminishment comparable to physical or psychological disability, a fact which I would like to point out but leave to the reader to evaluate. Clearly, this problem demands a separate analysis in its own right.

subscription to the evolutionary connotation of Teilhard de Chardin's theories. That is, Star represents the changing, complexifying environment Thomas must adapt to, lest be tragically overlooked by natural selection and, by extension, fail to converge.

In addition to providing a physical, nonviolent, impetus for revelation, lameness also represents an important foil to the image of obesity stemming from an indulgent lifestyle. Though the lame experience perpetual diminishment, the obese in O'Connor's stories (specifically Julian's mother and Turpin) turn away from this diminishment and instead participate in expansion of the self (antithetical to an emptying or sacrificing of the self) through an excess of comfort. Turpin, whose chair "[holds] her tight as a corset" claims "I wish I could reduce...but me I just look at something good to eat and I gain some weight" (489-90). This reluctance to lose weight resembles Thomas's insistence on not being able to "endure" sharing his home with Star and exhibits a similar reluctance to resolve an issue that does not pose an immediate threat. Or more specifically, it exhibits a reluctance to conceptualize weight as a symptom of a problematic appetite. Like Thomas's repugnance, both sources of diminishment fail to be realized as potential sources of spiritual growth; both characters "wish" they could cast off their respective diminishments, but reluctant to sacrifice comfort, the diminishments become burdens instead of badges of strength or sanctification. These reactions indicate the prevalence of the bestial appetite over rationality and self-control, anticipating Turpin's later designation as "a wart hog from hell" (505). Moreover, her weight correlates directly to her extraordinary insulation from suffering, the severity of which is humorously portrayed through her attribution of her assault to the suffering of Job, (discussed in part two) shown through her anticipation of even more suffering (on the way home, she "would not have been startled to see a burnt wound

between two blackened chimneys”⁹ (502)). However, most notable in this portrayal of Turpin’s neglected diminishment is the extreme lack of incentive to grow towards convergence and the implication that the tension between her acute sensitivity to suffering and her belief that she does not deserve to experience it will grow to the point in which she will go to extreme, violent lengths to safeguard her comfort, as Thomas does. This threat carries particular insidiousness given her overt commentary over the inferiority of certain racial and social groups and the presumed inevitability of convergence (and by extension, a potential victim).

This threat is realized in Singleton, whose main diminishment manifests as his immobilism and an obvious decision to choose the Girardian Kingdom of Violence, repudiating convergence. A perceived “Christ-figure” (435) to Mary Elizabeth and Calhoun, and to whom the latter regards as the “light of...purity” in contrast to Calhoun’s own “doubleness” (424), Singleton foreshadows Calhoun’s propensity for violence; by seeing the murderer as a more perfect version of himself, Calhoun glorifies violence, perceiving it as a symbol of uncompromising individuality. Singleton not only threatens social harmony with his violence, but also threatens the function of aristocratic Southern culture: the town barber describes him as wealthy, but “too big a skinflint to have his hair cut”, “half...foreign”, and the dubious product of one of the Singleton women’s “nine-month vacation” but the last of his line (430-1). From the community’s perspective, Singleton epitomizes American-Gothic decay; his perhaps genetically transmitted derangement taken into consideration with the dubiousness of his lineage connote a Faulkner-esque incest anxiety, while either his “foreign” nature or the internal decay of the noble line reflect his alien political and spiritual irresponsibility. Singleton inherits Southern wealth but

⁹ One of Job’s first misfortunes is the burning of his son’s house, indicating the loss of his children.

neglects the Southern paternalistic tradition by refusing to patronize local business as well as failing to adhere to Catholic mores, challenging the capacity of cultural aristocracy or ‘tradition’ to uphold moral community values. O’Connor thus deploys him as a symbol for physical and spiritual inertia and stagnation and from a political perspective, the failure of unadaptable traditions¹⁰ to promote social harmony. Calhoun’s attraction to Singleton, though tempered with prosaic irony, presents a very present and insidious threat to both Southern culture and peaceful social functioning; the “revelation” Calhoun anticipates more accurately describes his attraction to violence itself revealed to him only through interaction with the violent.

O’Connor’s “disfigured” antagonists thus serve imperative functions in her reimagination of the convergence model. They often show protagonists the violent consequences of their idealizations by counterexample, at times even implicating them directly in such violence, as Johnson does to Sheppard, or providing a vicarious diminishment by challenging the established comfort of a potential immobilist. The antagonists’ chronic, physically recognizable diminishment exclusively allows them this ability due to both the sacred status granted them by their radical presentation of human suffering as well as their inherent exile from the possibility of comfort, which mimics Girardian mimetic desire in its cyclical inspiration of tension and its function as a precursor to violence. O’Connor diagnoses a human disconnection with the body in her social moment as the isolating effects of comfort disincentivize interactions within the community, especially among diverse social groups; this resulting isolation from the traditional community inspires the need for dogma to justify the undeniable suffering of remote, contemporary scapegoats. The “lame” figures ultimately contribute to O’Connor’s optimistic

¹⁰ This discussion of traditional Southern culture could also refer to the discourse of the New Conservatives.

interpretation of the evolutionary future of a converging humanity because they crucially introduce the possibility of attaining revelation without the need for physical violence. She deploys these antagonists like prophets of a corollary to the Gospel, foretelling not good news, per se, but the opportunity to adapt and transcend through a radically accessible vicarious kenosis.

The Future of Violence and Revelatory Evolution

In light of the ultimately optimistic theories of Girard and Teilhard de Chardin, the immense amount of misfortune and tragedy in O'Connor's body of work begs the question: if the Girardian revelation is ultimately a constructive force-- that is, in its ability to bring us closer to the convergent state --then why do her characters require violence as a condition for revelation, even with the presence of a "lame" intermediary? Convergence, as O'Connor interprets it, seems to be a zero-sum game; if violence is *necessary* for the elimination of violence itself, can it ever truly be eliminated? Must Sheppard lose his son before he realizes his hand in harming him, just as Julian and Thomas must lose their mothers? In broader terms, does convergence itself demand a steady supply of blood? Read in isolation, these three stories suggest a certain evolutionary brutality to convergence; the revelation will always come too late to intervene in the inevitable violent act. However, "Revelation" and "The Partridge Festival" depict two endings that diverge from O'Connor's signature violence, which suggests a final theological pivoting in the last of her fiction. Moreover, the motifs of sight and vision, especially seeing oneself, play an increasingly central role in narrative revelations, suggesting that the corporeal experience of visual recognition plays an essential role in the revelatory mechanism.

O'Connor's use of sight and seeing varies widely in these final stories. In the earlier "Everything That Rises Must Converge", verbs and nouns referring to sight and seeing overwhelmingly drive the action forward while Julian rides the bus; for example, when the black woman who resembles Julian's mother boards the bus:

"He *saw* his mother's face change as the woman settled herself next to him and he realized with satisfaction that this was more objectionable to her than it was to him. Her

face *seemed almost gray* and there was a *look* of dull recognition in her *eyes*, as if suddenly she had sickened at some awful confrontation. Julian *saw...*" (415 my emphasis)

The narration leans heavily on seeing and eyes, especially watching from within Julian's "mental bubble"; "see", "look" and "looked" account for the most frequently used verbs in the narrative besides the passive voice and "going", accounting for 42 occurrences together (this figure excludes other forms of these verbs such as saw, looking, etc.). The almost subconscious fixation on the passive act of sight contrasts starkly with the final scene of the story in which his mother's eye actively "remain[s] fixed on him, rake[s] his face...[finds] nothing, and close[s]" after which he runs for help as the darkness blinds him, or the "tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow" (420). Counterintuitively, Julian *loses* his sight as a result of his revelation. The recognition of his own guilt in his mother's assault marks a fall, a permanent expulsion from the world of sight into to "the world of guilt and sorrow", suggesting that despite his Girardian revelation of violence and his subsequent potential for convergence, this is not the proverbial 'happy fall', but a permanent, immersive loss of clarity. O'Connor uses the verb forms of 'sight' and 'seeing' almost interchangeably with the passive voice, suggesting Julian's pre-revelation, passive "sight", or rather, his failure to intervene on his mother's behalf constitutes a flawed, false, or immoral manner of seeing, one that is presented as a contrast to his active, vivid description of his mother's foil on the bus.

In later stories, protagonists perceive their own physical image in respective antagonists, such as in "The Lame Shall Enter First", when Sheppard insists on his ability and renewed will to "save" Johnson and Johnson's violent repudiation of such salvation: "The boy's eyes were like

distorting mirrors in which he saw himself made hideous and grotesque” (474). Sheppard’s self-recognition refers not to empathy with Johnson so much as a warning of what he will become if he fails to recognize his passive and complicit role in Johnson’s violence, but he fails to understand the full gravity of the experience, interpreting it instead as a “distortion” or “grotesque”. These earlier stories diagnose a problem with spiritual sight and an inability to see oneself clearly which stems from a character’s resistance to hypocrisy -- Julian’s self-perception as a precocious victim and Sheppard’s self-perception as a self-sacrificing ascetic obscure the selfishness of these pursuits. Their inability to recognize the ironic, self-serving behavior in their cruelty or in their attempts to control others (Julian’s mother and Johnson, respectively) reveals this sustained ‘blindness’. Violence often attempts to bridge the disconnect between the ideal self and the actual self without sacrificing a character’s personal comfort, alienating the hypocrites from their own hypocrisy.

However, “The Partridge Festival” and “Revelation” diverge significantly from O’Connor’s tradition of sight. In the former, Calhoun’s revelation consists of the act of looking itself, though at Mary Elizabeth:

“They sat silently, looking at nothing until finally they turned and looked at each other.

There each saw at once the likeness of their kinsman and flinched. They looked away and then back, as if with concentration they might find a more tolerable image...Round, innocent, undistinguished as an iron link, [Mary Elizabeth’s face] was the face whose gift of life had pushed straight forward to the future to raise festival after festival.” (443-4)

They mutually see their “kinsman”, Singleton, (whom they pretended to be related to in order to visit), in the faces of one another, finally identifying their deification of him as a morbid form

of blindness and a dangerous propensity towards committing comparable violence themselves. Calhoun initially seeks Singleton out to cure himself of hypocrisy; although he describes his “real self” as “the rebel-artist-mystic” (424), he enjoys the prosaic task of selling appliances (he describes his own “guilt, for his doubleness, his shadow...in the light of Singleton’s purity” (424)). The pair’s mutual recognition of “the likeness of their kinsman” in one another denotes the ostensible success of Calhoun’s purification; that is, he becomes aware of his power to follow Singleton and become a “pure” version of his idealized self, recognizing his capacity to “become” Singleton. However, he finds the concept intolerable, as his experience exposes him to the violence necessary in becoming his idealized “rebel-artist-mystic”; this moment, in which he recognizes himself and his potential for purity, he makes the Girardian decision towards the Kingdom of Love, turning towards Mary Elizabeth and the “gift of life” despite her “undistinguished” and prosaic destiny. Crucially, Calhoun is *not* “pure”; he shows no signs of necessarily repudiating his identity as a rebel. Rather, the most transformative aspect of his revelation instead lies in his acceptance of his own hypocrisy -- the ability to defy the cultural insistence on a consistent (usually geography-based) identity and instead accept personal imperfection. His repudiation of violence (in rejecting the Christ-image of Singleton) necessarily involves accepting the convergence of both of his selves, the prosaic and the rebel, in a sort of radical self-love.

While the final revelation in “The Partridge Festival” indicates an uncharacteristic optimism, “Revelation” reveals a more chilling attitude towards the efficacy of revelation.

Intriguingly, and novel in this selection of O'Connor's stories¹¹, Turpin's revelation consists of an explicitly divine vision:

“A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black [people] in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics...And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right...They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead...she remained where she was, immobile.” (509)

Read in comparison with the book of Job, this image correlates to the whirlwind from which God confronts Job, ostensibly as a display of his unimaginable power (and by extension, his unimaginable will) (Job 38.1 *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*). O'Connor's reimagination of this scene through Turpin's revelation clearly disposes of the domineering, Old Testament God authority in preference for the laissez-faire, kenotic God of the Gospel, or more accurately, of convergence. Instead of demonstrating his power to punish, God demonstrates his radical capacity for love, welcoming the inclusive “vast horde”, treasuring the “trash” in white robes and embracing the “battalions” of “freaks and lunatics”. Moreover, this vision also differs from other revelations in its penetrative quality; the narrator describes the vision physically entering

¹¹ Another notable example of a character experiencing a divine vision and which may serve as a valuable comparison appears in “Parker's Back” in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*.

Turpin's eyes, "settling]" in contrast to Calhoun's active looking or Julian's blinding, suggesting that the vision blinds nor awakens her, foreshadowing the lack of transformative potential. However, unlike Calhoun, Turpin turns away from the Kingdom of Love -- her observation of her "tribe"'s "shocked and altered faces" and the burning of their virtues indicates her indignation, disgust even, towards the lack of "good order and common sense" (508), but more importantly, the lack of God's preferential treatment. When the vision fades, Turpin remains silent, disgusted, and "immobile", an indication of her Chardinian immobilism, or refusal to struggle towards convergence.

These two stories, written near the end of O'Connor's life, show both an increasing preoccupation with the mechanics of sight as well as a reappraisal of the necessity of violence in achieving revelation. In contrast to earlier protagonists, Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth experience a relatively benign violent episode and still achieve revelation ostensibly due to their ability to recognize their own hypocrisy. Despite their successful convergence, Turpin's similarly mild trauma and subsequent vision *fail* to convince her of her contribution to violence or inspire a repudiation of her intolerance. O'Connor seems to be using violence and the action of sight or witnessing in conjunction with one another to suggest that they both share the ultimate function of inspiring empathy. While more immobilist characters require more of a violent physical impetus (such as Thomas), others, such as Calhoun or Julian, may only need to vicariously experience a traumatic event or the suggestion of violence through observing others. The characters' visual relationships to their respective revelations further suggest that empathy derived from the act of watching and witnessing parallels physical suffering derived from physical violence in its kenotic capacity. Though physical suffering (ideally) forces the

individual to humanize those who suffer by forcing him or her into the scapegoat position, empathy is a more evolved form of the kenotic mindset, requiring the individual to mentally suspend the experience of the self in order to imagine the experience of others -- to truly become selfless in order to help or understand another person. This phenomenon emerges in Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth both when they interact with Singleton as well as when Calhoun recognizes both Singleton and himself in the face of Mary Elizabeth. This interaction -- the recognition of the self in others-- also indicates that empathy enables the ability to develop self-understanding that one can only gain through using others as reflections of the self, suggesting that convergence and kenosis ultimately require interaction with the community. This is apparent in Sheppard's self-recognition in Johnson, which directly precedes his rejection of the boy and enables his (too late) eventual realization of his neglect of Norton. This pivot to empathy over violence in her final stories suggests a hesitant optimism regarding the possibility of a post-violent convergence but is necessarily complicated by characters who refuse convergence, such as Turpin.

The most chilling aspect of "Revelation" lies in its anticipation of atrocity implied by Turpin's continued immobilism. After ruminating on her interpretation of the social hierarchy, Turpin encounters problematizing exceptions to her rules:

"But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the new people with a lot [of] money were common and ought to be below she and Claud [her husband] and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there were colored people who owned their homes and land as well...Usually by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her

head, and she would dream they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven.” (492)

The jarring Holocaust image, packaged almost innocuously in Turpin’s dream, succinctly presents the emergent violence in her sustained world-view. The ease and lack of alarm over her logical path from social hierarchy to genocide suggests her unrealized complicity in potential atrocity. O’Connor employs anastrophe to obscure causation in the image, using “ridden” as a transitive verb to insinuate a voluntary ‘rider’, yet literally indicating the existence of an obscured subject acting upon the people in the box car. The omission of the grammatical subject indicates Turpin’s turning away from “bear[ing]” the mental distress inspired by those who complicate her social worldview and her impulse to destroy the complication. Though perhaps not as physically violent as the preceding stories, “Revelation”’s undisguised correlation between a tendency to turn away, or refusal to bear psychological or emotional distress and wartime atrocity reveals the urgency and importance O’Connor attributes to imminent revelation/convergence. The Holocaust image additionally reveals O’Connor’s suggestion that the Girardian scapegoat cycle increases in severity and destruction as new historical precedents replace others in the cultural imagination. Turpin’s dream of Nazi concentration camps (an image that is less than fifteen years old in the cultural memory) eliminating the problematic groups and not, say, a military execution or even simple segregation suggests that genocide supplants the former place of simple homicide (specifically, lynching, which would ostensibly be a more familiar image than one of a remote war) as the preferred method of removing undesirable community members. This perceived escalation of both imagined and real violence suggests that while Turpin may seem relatively innocuous when compared to other, more overtly

violent protagonists, her social attitudes, coupled with her immobilism, reflect a potential for the greatest atrocity.

O'Connor additionally anticipates the wartime threat of fascism as a symptom of the deferment of revelation/convergence in "The Lame Shall Enter First". Contrasted with Sheppard's ascetic bedroom, discussed in part two, the over-adornment his late wife's bedroom, with its "wide" bed, "mammoth" dresser, perfumed air, and the mirror that "glint[s]" even in the "semi-darkness" (455) suggests an unfronted potential for revelation, an invitation to struggle with grief (diminishment) towards convergence. The obscured, fecund bedroom symbolizes a neglected aspect of Sheppard's psychological/spiritual state and therefore a point of moral vulnerability and hypocrisy. Johnson, of course, exploits this vulnerability and defiles the untouched sanctity of the shrine, using the late wife's silver comb to style his hair in "Hitler fashion" (455-6). Unlike the "box car" reference in "Revelation", the fascist capacity infects the mind independent of the protagonist's outward actions; Johnson creates the image from Sheppard's own spiritual blindspot and without his knowledge or complicity, attesting to the destructive potential of ideological violence and the ease with which fascism flourishes by exploiting unresolved human emotions. While characters like Thomas commit moral failure (killing his mother) with independent volition and in reaction to an ideological threat to their comfort, Johnson, an independent, active, malicious entity, manipulates Sheppard into complying with Hitler-esque demands. As it does for the global community in World War II, the revelation of his complicity in violence comes too late for Sheppard.

O'Connor further suggests that revelatory failure (immobilism or a decision to turn away from revelation) encourages increasingly problematic social attitudes, such as the resistance to

integration and a nostalgic steadfastness to archaic social hierarchies, as depicted by characters such as Julian, his mother, and Turpin (and discussed in more detail elsewhere in this paper). She anticipates Girard's interpretation of an archaic, anthropological Christianity subsisting upon sacrificial violence and presents his religion machine, though once anthropologically relevant, as a bloodthirsty mechanism that can no longer satiate the globalized, comparatively evolved human community.

O'Connor thus presents the stakes of successful revelation as much higher than traditional Christian personal salvation; successful convergence relies on the continuing human realization that ideologies facilitating inter-group violence and division threaten the survival of the community as a whole in their perpetuation of the scapegoat model. She anticipates worsening repetitions of World War II-like episodes of human atrocity and waste as the Girardian scapegoat mechanism continues to offer insufficient alleviation of social tension as human communities complexify. In so many words, the stakes increase as our history of violence compounds. Though Teilhard de Chardin viewed convergence as inevitable, O'Connor is more hesitant, insisting on a contemporary urgency to unite and encourage diversity within our communities. The gradual decrease in the severity of physical violence in her later stories seems to suggest that while physical suffering inspires the revelatory state, the act of looking or watching also functions as a penetrative impetus to revelation. Moreover, this pattern evokes the stylistic differences between the Old Testament and the New Testament; O'Connor's earlier ruthless critiques, characterized by matricide and suicidal children, overtly condemn hypocrisy and a lack of self awareness, which eventually gives way to the more ambiguous, merciful narratives of Calhoun and Turpin, which emphasize divine love and acceptance. She seems to

follow this pattern to suggest that despite the ironic justice of earlier stories, violence is still ultimately a destructive force. While Sheppard and Thomas ostensibly undergo revelation at extreme costs, humanity is nonetheless destroyed in the process. The evolution present in this selection implies a gradual reduction of violence; while more violence might be initially necessary (and inevitable in complexifying communities with new tensions), eventually its utility will cease as more of the community converges and empathy (specifically through the action of seeing or looking at others) replaces violence as a transformative episode. Ultimately, her argument suggests that the need to physically experience human empathy will in turn ideally evolve into the Girardian ideal -- that the revealing of violence within social structures will lead to its logical repudiation, erasing the need to witness violence before it is repudiated. Turpin's immobilist narrative and the threat of subsequent world wars and increasingly atrocious violence, however, shows O'Connor's sustained wariness in trusting 'inevitability' and an urgent call towards active convergence.

Conclusion

O'Connor's later stories depict the development of her own response to the consolidation of Christianity with empirical, scientific disciplines of her contemporary moment. Following the tradition of Teilhard de Chardin, O'Connor imagines the drama of ongoing convergence playing out in prosaic Southern life, but anticipates Girard in her crucial diagnoses of the social structures impeding it. She recognizes the increasing damage of cyclical atrocity and scapegoating as an emergent antagonist to the inevitability of Chardinian convergence and the prevalence of further human destruction if her communities do not realize the latent violence of their subscriptions to moral dogma. She further portrays a society increasingly disconnected with both empathy and corporeal experience in anticipation of suffering; this aversion to suffering suggests an aversion to a kenotic struggling with spirituality itself and an obsession with comfort.

O'Connor's unique and intricate analysis of the mid-century American spiritual condition is often overlooked and underrated as a crucial acknowledgement of the need for religion to address its moral shortcomings in light of the increasing global violence that World War II atrocity brought to light. In light of God's silence, and the silence of others to rationalize this violence as well as to acknowledge the emergent contradictions between outdated religious beliefs and advancements in empirical disciplines, O'Connor constructs an audacious and unprecedented theological bridge between the secular and Christian realms. She applies anthropological and evolutionary theories to answer theological questions, justifying the utility of both in relationship to one another and reimagining the ultimate future of humanity as a fusion of the secular and the Christian, an ultimate convergence of perspective. Her subversive

anthropological mapping of a society driven by Girardian forces toward Chardinian destinations both diagnoses critical social shortcomings as well as novel reincarnations of kenosis. By the end of her life, it is uncertain whether O'Connor ultimately shared the optimism of Teilhard de Chardin regarding the inevitability of convergence, but I suspect that she hoped her fiction would function as a type of vicarious kenosis for her readers in order to inspire self-interrogation.

Though the majority of O'Connor's stories take place in the South, her arguments are more accurately address a broader American crisis of faith; she crucially characterizes a pivotal moment in the American consciousness in regards to religion. From a religious perspective, she almost depicts a moment at which humanity has tested, to the best of its ability, God's omnipotence and benevolence and proven both to be lacking. God could not prevent the Holocaust, nor did he orchestrate slavery, nor the Civil War; humanity is thus forced to look at its reflection and take accountability for a history of blood, greed, and increasingly unfathomable self-destruction. O'Connor's protagonists eventually come to achieve this self-knowledge through one medium or another, even when it means being driven to prove their own violent nature through otherwise unimaginable brutality. O'Connor thus suggests that inheriting this legacy of blood, this original sin, automatically inspires our natural need to repudiate our guilt, to construct dogmas that alienate us from sins committed and elicit our consent to suffering still actively occurring.

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