

FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S USE OF SYMBOL, ROGER HAIGHT'S CHRISTOLOGY, AND THE RELIGIOUS WRITER

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[The author argues that Flannery O'Connor's fiction and critical prose are informed by a theological understanding of symbol, a narrative Christology from below, and a consciousness of her task as a religious writer of modernity. This places her work in mutually constructive conversation with the writing of postmodern Christology, represented, for instance, by Roger Haight's Jesus Symbol of God.]

IF IT'S A SYMBOL, to hell with it."¹ When Flannery O'Connor, American Catholic novelist of the Protestant South (1925–1963),² made this celebrated defense of the Eucharist, she voiced a characteristic religious ambivalence concerning symbol.³ This ambivalence is not only evident in ecumenical conversations,⁴ but also among those who consider symbol

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¹ O'Connor's remark is written to her correspondent "A" in a letter dated December 16, 1955, in *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979) 125.

² O'Connor identified herself in this way: "The two circumstances that have given character to my own writing have been those of being Southern and being Catholic" ("The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald [New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969] 196).

³ See Nathan Mitchell, O.S.B., "Symbols are Actions, Not Objects: New Directions for an Old Problem," *Living Worship* 13 (February 1977) 3–4.

⁴ Paul Tillich anticipated this ambivalence in his Protestant readers: "When saying [that] . . . [the language of faith is the language of symbols] I always expect the question: 'Only a symbol?'" On the contrary, he replied, "One should never say 'only a symbol,' but one should say, 'not less than a symbol'" (*Dynamics of Faith* [New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957] 45).

integral to Catholic theological imagination and liturgical life.⁵ Although Karl Rahner declared “the whole of theology” to be “incomprehensible if it is not essentially a theory of symbols,”⁶ he cautioned elsewhere that “a purely figurative and symbolic interpretation [of the Eucharist] . . . would say less than the Tridentine dogma.”⁷ Writing in Rahner’s wake, Tad Guzie declared “our ability to *think symbolically*, to let the symbols of our religious heritage speak to us” is still in need of renewal.⁸ For contemporary Roman Catholics as for O’Connor, it would seem that a good symbol is hard to find.

While a defense of the use of symbol in Catholic theology and liturgy exceeds the scope of this article, I focus here upon the common symbolic imagination that I have found in Flannery O’Connor’s fiction and prose writings and in Roger Haight’s Christology. I argue that O’Connor the “literary theologian”⁹ and Haight the systematic theologian¹⁰ share a common theological language of symbol, a common christological starting point in relation to their respective audiences, and a common task as religious writers “writing the transcendent from below.”

⁵ For an excellent overview of the current conversation, see Peter E. Fink, “Theoretical Structures for Liturgical Symbols,” *Liturgical Ministry* 2 (Fall, 1993) 125–37.

⁶ Karl Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” in *Theological Investigations* 4, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 221–52, at 235.

⁷ Karl Rahner, “The Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper,” in *ibid.* 4.287–311, at 299.

⁸ Tad W. Guzie, *Jesus and the Eucharist* (New York: Paulist, 1974) 59.

⁹ George A. Kilcourse Jr., *Flannery O’Connor’s Religious Imagination: A World with Everything Off Balance* (New York: Paulist, 2001) was published after this article was completed. The book intersects fruitfully with my own conclusions at many junctures. For a bibliography of O’Connor criticism, see Lorine M. Getz in *Flannery O’Connor, Literary Theologian: The Habits and Discipline of Being*, vol. 1 (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1999), who will devote a subsequent volume of her projected three-volume study to O’Connor’s “literary theology” (xii). Getz acknowledges that while “O’Connor recognized her literary work as part of the body of Christian ‘religious’ literature, . . . she never claimed the role of theologian for herself,” and concurs that O’Connor “was [not] in any sense a systematic or historical theologian,” but “rather a literary one” (1 no. i). While Getz’s category of “literary theologian” is useful when applied to O’Connor in apposition to Haight, I will employ the more inclusive category of “religious writer” in order to cast a wider net at the conclusion of this article.

¹⁰ Readers desiring an introduction to Haight’s theological method should consult Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1990; reprinted, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001). See also Haight, “The Case for Spirit Christology,” *Theological Studies* 53 (1992) 257–87; Haight, “The Situation of Christology Today,” *Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses* 69 (1993) 315–34; Haight, “Jesus and Salvation: An Essay in Interpretation,” *TS* 55 (1994) 225–51; Haight, “The Impact of Jesus Research on Christology,” *Louvain Studies* 21 (1996) 216–28.

A COMMON THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE OF SYMBOL

First, O'Connor and Haight share a common theological language of symbol. Although, as Haight observes, "the term 'symbol' has somewhat different meanings in different contexts,"¹¹ when understood in its own context, there is no such thing as "merely a symbol" for either of these writers. While O'Connor's view of symbol as a religious category was that of a Tridentine, doctrinally orthodox Roman Catholic who subordinated the religiously symbolic to the ultimately "real," her literary use of symbol does not separate those categories so neatly. As a fiction writer, O'Connor understood that "the word symbol scares a good many people off . . . They seem to think that it is a way of saying something that you aren't actually saying, and so if they can be got to read a reputedly symbolic work at all, they approach it as if it were a problem in algebra . . . [But] for the fiction writer himself, symbols are something he uses as a matter of course."¹²

However, theologians also use symbols to speak and write about God "as a matter of course." In his controversial but challenging *Jesus Symbol of God* (1999) Haight uses the category of symbol to construct a historically conscious, systematic Christology from below in which Jesus is both concrete symbol, or medium of God and "center of Christian faith." At the same time, Haight intimates a narrative Christology that invites readers to think symbolically as they follow the historical Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels into the dogmatic worlds of Nicaea and Chalcedon and classical Christology, and ultimately into our own postmodern world beyond those texts. This symbolic imagination is necessary and appropriate for the theologian because "All language about God is symbolic." Yet Haight frames the concept of symbol in its rigorously sacramental sense when he explains: "If something is 'merely' a symbol, it is no symbol at all, for a symbol . . . truly reveals and makes present what it symbolizes."¹³

As one who also used symbols "as a matter of course," I presume that O'Connor would have respected Haight's use of symbol within his own context, even if she were to ask him how his theological understanding of symbol contrasted with her literary use of symbol. I proceed, then: (1) to distinguish between literary symbols and religious symbols, using Northrop Frye's categories; (2) to examine each author's more specific definition of symbol, and to summarize its characteristic features; (3) to watch each author at work as they use symbol in their fiction and Christology, respectively; and (4) to compare and contrast their understandings of symbol.

¹¹ Roger Haight, S.J., *Jesus Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999) 199.

¹² Flannery O'Connor, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969) 63–86, at 71.

¹³ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* 199, 197.

Literary and Religious Symbols—Preliminary Distinctions

When Northrop Frye uses the term, “symbol,” it denotes “any unit of any literary structure that can be isolated for critical attention.”¹⁴ To differentiate a literary symbol from a religious symbol, Frye distinguishes between “intrinsic” symbols and “extrinsic” symbols. Intrinsic symbols function as unifying motifs; they do not point beyond themselves, or beyond the world of the text. Hence, literary symbols function minimally as “intrinsic symbols.” Extrinsic symbols, on the other hand, point beyond themselves to that which they signify and thus function as “signs.” Thus, religious symbols function minimally as “extrinsic symbols,” although a fully developed understanding of religious symbol would transcend the category of “sign.”¹⁵ With this preliminary distinction between the “intrinsic” literary symbol and the “extrinsic” religious symbol in mind, I proceed to examine the literary and religious conceptions of symbol found in O'Connor's fiction and Haight's Christology.

Flannery O'Connor's Use of Symbol: An Overview

As a writer of fiction, O'Connor preferred to use symbols than to define them. Before I look at her definition, I recall some symbols that she used in her stories: a “Lady Ph.D.'s wooden leg” that is stolen by a Bible salesman whom she tried to seduce in “Good Country People”; the bread that young Tarwater hungers for in spite of himself in *The Violent Bear It Away*; the metaphor and reality of “The Displaced Person” as it is reflected in all the characters of that story; The Misfit's portrait of Jesus and the Grandmother's gesture that prompts The Misfit to shoot her in “A Good Man is Hard to Find”; the icon of the Byzantine Christ tattooed indelibly onto “Parker's Back”; and Ruby Turpin's vision of the communion of saints in the shadow of her husband's hog pen.

Holding these symbols before our eyes, we can better understand her definition: “Symbols are details that, while having their essential place in the literal level of the story, operate in depth as well as on the surface, increasing the story in every direction.” When those “details” operate in this symbolic way, “the mind is led on by what it sees into the greater depths that the book's symbols naturally suggest,” and “the truer the sym-

¹⁴ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (New York: Atheneum, 1966) 71.

¹⁵ Ibid. 88. See also Paul Ricoeur's discussion of Frye's theory of symbol in “Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, or the Order of Paradigms,” in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdes (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1991) 242–55. Ricoeur correctly argues here that “for Northrop Frye, literary symbolism does not imply a category of symbols in the broad sense that Cassirer [and, I would add, Ricoeur himself] gave this term” (at 247).

bol, . . . the more meaning it opens up."¹⁶ O'Connor calls this multileveled interpretive strategy "anagogical vision."¹⁷

Some of these "details" are barely noticeable at the beginning of a story, and yield their significance slowly, like the seed growing secretly, through repetition and narrative nuance. Other symbols explode with a "surplus of meaning" at the end of a story, like The Misfit's shotgun in "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Yet for O'Connor, all symbols are "like the engine in a story" that generate meaning and give it increasing momentum as the story unfolds. In other words, these symbols are active, dynamic, and open to the reader's actualization. When these symbols become conscious to the author and her readers, they are transformed from seemingly incidental "details" to "big things that knock you in the face" with their significance.¹⁸ At their most profound level, they enable us to "penetrate the concrete world to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality,"¹⁹ which O'Connor identifies concretely as "the Incarnation,"²⁰ more generally as "the good,"²¹ and, on a transcendental level, as "mystery."²² Thus, the purpose of symbol in her fiction comprehends both literary creation and religious communication.

From this definition, we can discern six characteristics of symbols as they typically function in O'Connor's fiction: (1) Symbols are *literary*, or intrinsic (Frye): their immediate context and reference is the story that engenders them, and the reader must enter the world of the story in order to understand its symbols. (2) Symbols are *concrete*: they are "details," objects, persons, actions, or gestures in a story—not abstractions or concepts. (3) Symbols are *anagogical*: they operate on more than level in the story. (4) Symbols are *interactive*: they elicit and require the reader's participation for the completion of their meaning. (5) Symbols are *revelatory*: in their concreteness they provide a window through which we can see mystery. (6)

¹⁶ O'Connor, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction" 71–72.

¹⁷ Ibid. 72.

¹⁸ Flannery O'Connor, "An Interview with Flannery O'Connor," by Katherine Fugin, Faye Rivard, and Margaret Sieh (College of St. Teresa, Winona, Minn., October 1960), in *Conversations with Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Rosemary M. Magee (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987) 59.

¹⁹ O'Connor, "Novelist and Believer," in *Mystery and Manners* 154–68, at 157.

²⁰ O'Connor, Letter to "A.," August 9, 1955, in *Habit of Being* 93–95, at 94.

²¹ O'Connor, "Catholic Novelists and Their Readers," in *Mystery and Manners* 169–90, at 179.

²² O'Connor never defines "mystery," but in her vocabulary it connotes the transcendent dimension, in which she includes both the supernatural realm of grace (e.g. "God") and the darker mystery of the human condition (e.g., "the Devil"). Yet she insists that "the real novelist . . . with an instinct for what he is about, knows that he cannot approach the infinite directly, that he must penetrate the natural human world as it is" to get there ("Novelist and Believer" 163).

Symbols, even intrinsic or literary ones, are *true* in a sense that points beyond themselves to a deeper reality, and the meaning they reveal is proportional to that "truth."

O'Connor's Use of Symbol as Analogical Symbolic Realism

Because O'Connor described her fiction as "Christian realism" that communicated "mystery through manners, grace through nature,"²³ her use of symbol in her fiction falls broadly into the category of "symbolic realism." Acknowledging that she, like "every writer, when he speaks of his own approach to fiction, hopes to show that, in some deep and crucial sense, he is a realist," she hastened to add that "the realism of each novelist will depend on his view of the ultimate reaches of reality."²⁴ As we have seen, the realism of her fiction was refracted through the lens of "anagogical vision," or "the kind of vision . . . that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or situation." At the heart of this reality, on whatever level it was apprehended, O'Connor intuited "the divine life and our participation in it."²⁵

This "anagogical" way of seeing is also "analogical." O'Connor writes, ". . . God has given us reason to use and it can lead us toward a knowledge of him, through analogy."²⁶ David Tracy describes the theological language of analogy as "a language of ordered relationships articulating similarity-in-difference. The order among the relationships is constituted by the distinct but similar relationships of each analogue to some primary focal meaning, some prime analogue."²⁷ I characterize O'Connor's use of symbol accordingly as "analogical symbolic realism." To see more specifically how her symbolic realism operates, however, we must look not only at what she says that symbols do in her fiction, but also at what her symbols do that might have escaped the notice of their author.

I begin with a "detail" that O'Connor frequently used to illustrate her use of symbol, Hulga's wooden leg in "Good Country People." In this story, a Bible salesman named Manley Pointer steals Hulga's wooden leg during an encounter in which she is trying to seduce him. On the surface level of the story, according to O'Connor, this perverse theft is nothing more than "a low joke." On a deeper level, however, the wooden leg is a

²³ For O'Connor on "Christian Realism," see her Letter to "A," August 2, 1955, in *Habit of Being* 91–93, at 92. For the fuller description quoted above, see "The Church and the Fiction Writer," in *Mystery and Manners* 143–53, at 153.

²⁴ O'Connor, "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," in *Mystery and Manners* 36–50, at 40.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 72.

²⁶ O'Connor, Letter to Alfred Corn, in *Habit of Being* 479–80, at 479.

²⁷ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1987) 409.

symbol of the “wooden part of Hulga’s soul” that reveals significant information about her character to the astute reader. But as O’Connor says, “It is a wooden leg first. It has its place on the literal level of the story, but it operates in depth as well as on the surface.”²⁸

If the first level of O’Connor’s anagogical vision consists in a literal reading of the story, with all of its specificity of concrete detail, and subsequent levels invite the accumulation, intensification, and symbolic ordering of that detail into configurations of deeper, more pervasive meaning, the end of this anagogical process in O’Connor’s fiction is the reader’s experience of “mystery,” or an experience of transcendence. As she explains more specifically, “The fiction writer presents mystery through manners, grace through nature, but when he finishes there always has to be left over that sense of Mystery”²⁹

A theft that is noticed less often in “Good Country People” is exemplary of this “surplus of mystery.” Pointer also absconds with Hulga’s glasses, so that when she watches him vanish across the fields with her personal effects, she sees him walking on water—a “blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake.” Earlier in the story, Hulga is described with “eyes icy blue, with the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it.” Yet she describes herself to Pointer as someone who has “taken off [her] blindfold and sees that there’s nothing to see,”³⁰ unaware as she speaks that he has removed her glasses.

While a Bible salesman with a fetish for women’s artificial body parts, who carries whiskey and obscene playing cards in his briefcase where Bibles should be is not our usual image of Jesus Christ, this character, like the Jesus of the Gospels, reveals to Joy/Hulga Hopewell “her deeper affliction,” and in so doing opens her to the possibility of healing, as many of O’Connor’s more perverse characters do in her fiction. Thus, we may need to put on or take off our own glasses, as the case might be, and look not only at the symbols in her stories, but also at the way in which O’Connor is teaching us to see and to read symbolically.

From Literary to Religious Symbol in O’Connor’s Fiction

To see and read symbolically is ultimately to participate in what O’Connor called “the Catholic sacramental view of life,”³¹ even though O’Connor differentiated the categories of “symbol” and “sacrament” in her theology. As she explains, “The [fiction] writer . . . is looking for one

²⁸ O’Connor, “Writing Short Stories,” in *Mystery and Manners* 87–106, at 99–100.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 153.

³⁰ Flannery O’Connor, “Good Country People,” in *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971) 271–91, at 273 & 288.

³¹ O’Connor, “The Church and the Fiction Writer” 152.

image that will connect or combine or embody two points; one is a point in the concrete, and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye, but . . . just as real to him . . . as the one everybody sees."³² Thus, in *The Violent Bear it Away* young Tarwater's hunger for a discarded loaf of bread in the bakery window and simultaneous revulsion for anything less than "the bread of life" symbolizes a spiritual hunger that grows in intensity and "increases the story in every direction," until Tarwater becomes "aware at last of the object of his hunger," a hunger "so great that he could have eaten all of the loaves and fishes after they were multiplied."³³ Both the bakery bread and the multiplied loaves coalesce in a symbol of "the bread that Christ is"³⁴ that is grounded in the literal, concrete matter of the story at the same time that it presages "mystery" and makes it visible. What O'Connor wrote about her story "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" applies no less to this one: "If the story grows for you, it is because of the mystery of the Eucharist in it."³⁵ Yet if the story "grows" for us, it is also because of O'Connor's consummate integration of literary and religious symbol.

To summarize, when O'Connor defines symbol as a "detail" within the story that operates on more than one level to communicate the meaning of the story to the reader, she begins with a literary, or intrinsic definition of symbol. That is, she understands symbol as a literary device that is operative within the self-contained world of the story. But when she asserts as well that good fiction moves "through the concrete situation to some experience of mystery," she implies an understanding of symbol that is more than a "mere" literary device.

Moreover, a hierarchy of symbol is discernible in her thought when she writes, "The truer the symbol, the deeper it leads you, the more meaning it opens up."³⁶ In other words, some symbols are "truer" than others, but the purpose of all symbols in a story is to communicate reality, or, as she learned from Tillich, "ultimate concern,"³⁷ by opening up the meaning of a story on all of its levels. Moreover, "truth" for O'Connor embraced all of

³² Ibid. 42.

³³ O'Connor, *The Violent Bear it Away*, in *Three by Flannery O'Connor: Wise Blood, A Good Man is Hard to Find, Everything That Rises Must Converge* (New York: Signet Books, 1962) 446. Subsequent references to *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear it Away* will be from this edition; subsequent references to "A Good Man is Hard to Find" will be from *The Complete Stories* (see n. 30 above).

³⁴ O'Connor, Letter to Janet McKane, May 17, 1963, in *Habit of Being* 519–20, at 520.

³⁵ Ibid. 124.

³⁶ O'Connor, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction" 72.

³⁷ While O'Connor's extant library does not include any of Paul Tillich's works, she was clearly familiar with his work. "We [Catholics] have very few thinkers to equal Barth and Tillich," she admitted to her correspondent "A," and wrote to Cecil Dawkins, "The only concern, so far as I see it, is what Tillich calls 'the

reality in its positive and negative aspects, just as “mystery” itself embraced both “God” and “the Devil.” If we correctly understand the reality to be communicated as that of “mystery” or transcendence, then O’Connor’s use of symbol in her fiction is ultimately religious and theological, even if she considered symbol a weak theological category when applied to the Eucharist. To corroborate this claim, we turn to Roger Haight’s use of symbol.

Roger Haight’s Use of Symbol: An Overview

While O’Connor and Haight define symbol from different perspectives, they have in common the symbolic renewal of 20th-century Roman Catholic dogmatic theology. At the hands of Maritain, Lonergan, Rahner, and Schillebeeckx, the concept of symbol was applied to Jesus Christ, the Church, and the sacraments to provide a theology from above characterized by “symbolic realism.”³⁸ Building on this theological legacy in conversation with the work of Paul Tillich, Mircea Eliade, and Paul Ricoeur,³⁹

ultimate concern.’ It is what makes the stories spare and what gives them any permanent quality they may have” (*Habit of Being* 306, 221). However, she critiqued popular interpretations of Tillich, explaining that “as a novelist, the major part of my task is to make everything, even an ultimate concern, as solid, as concrete, as specific as possible” (“Novelist and Believer” 155). Yet Tillich also insisted upon the “element of concreteness” inherent in any symbolization of God, e.g.: “The man who glorifies Jahweh, the God of the Old Testament, has both an ultimate concern and a concrete image of what concerns him ultimately” (*Dynamics of Faith* 46). Hence one can discern an affinity between Tillich and O’Connor’s appeals to the concrete.

³⁸ For an overview, see Stephen Happel, “Symbol,” in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Joseph Komonchak et al. (Wilmington: Glazier, 1987) 996–1002, at 1001; Haight, *Dynamics of Theology* 129–45, 149–52; Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* 196–97; Paul Avis, “Symbolic Realism,” in *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 144–57. See also Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, trans. J. F. Scanlan (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1949) 44–49; Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1971) 64–69, 112–15; Rahner, “Theology of the Symbol” 221–52; Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963).

³⁹ See, e.g. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951) 239–41; *Dynamics of Faith* 41–54; “The Nature of Religious Language,” *Theology of Culture*, ed. R. C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University, 1964) 53–67; Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961); *Myths, Rites, Symbols: A Mircea Eliade Reader*, ed. W. Beane and W. Doty, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1962) 191–218; *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. E. Buchanan (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

Haight employs the category of symbol to construct a historically mediated Christology from below that addresses the challenge of postmodernity. His definition of religious symbol, description of its characteristics, and application of it in *Jesus Symbol of God* is dedicated to this task.

Just as O'Connor's definition of symbol reflects the concrete symbols that she employs in her fiction, Haight's definition of symbol is based upon those used in his Christology. Before I look at Haight's definition, I recall some of them: "The Spirit of God,"⁴⁰ the "story of creation," the "event and story of the exodus,"⁴¹ the kingdom of God,⁴² the cross,⁴³ Resurrection,⁴⁴ and Jesus Christ as quintessential "symbol of God."⁴⁵ Highlighting these resonant "details," I proceed to examine Haight's theology of symbol, beginning with his definition of a religious symbol in *Dynamics of Theology*: "A religious symbol is anything finite that discloses and points to what is other than itself and strictly transcendent, but which at the same time makes that transcendent other present by participation in it."⁴⁶ Haight refines this definition in *Jesus Symbol of God* to read: "The religiously symbolic is always that which reveals something other than itself that is transcendent, and which bears its presence in history and to consciousness."⁴⁷ What has been added in a more explicit way is the historical mediation of symbol which is fundamental for the writing of a Christology from below.

Haight's extended definition of symbol in *Jesus Symbol of God* is elaborated in four steps. First, he defines a symbol as "something that mediates something other than itself," or "makes present something else."⁴⁸ Hence a symbol is other than what it symbolizes. Second, he distinguishes symbol from sign, explaining that a symbol does not merely point in an arbitrary way to something else, but it participates in that reality and makes it present. Although it is other, it is also truly present in that "other." Third, he distinguishes between two kinds of symbols: *conceptual symbols*, which are "words, notions, concepts, ideas, sayings or texts that mediate a deeper consciousness of a level of reality that goes beyond their overt meaning"; and *concrete symbols*, which "refer to things, places, events, or persons, which mediate a presence and consciousness of another reality."⁴⁹ Fourth, and finally, he identifies Jesus as a concrete symbol of God in accordance with this definition, but also by virtue of the "engaged participatory knowledge" of those who have experienced God in Jesus, including his own

⁴⁰ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* 447. ⁴¹ *Ibid.* 199.

⁴² *Ibid.* 62–64; 79–80; 96–99.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 121–26.

⁴⁶ Haight, *Dynamics of Theology* 134. ⁴⁷ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* 199.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 197.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 197.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 11–15; 195–98; 202–7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 13.

readers: "We know that Jesus is a concrete symbol of God because people encountered God in him and still do."⁵⁰

Building on this definition, Haight highlights six characteristics of religious symbols: (1) They participate in transcendence and point to its "mystery." (2) They demand participation in what is symbolized for their completion. (3) They are multivalent, or susceptible to more than one meaning. (4) They reveal the essence of human existence that transcends its particular historical actualizations. (5) They activate cognition in their mediation of meaning. (6) They are dialectical, or capable of embracing contrary aspects of the truth that is symbolized.⁵¹

Haight and O'Connor's Use of Symbol: a Synthesis

If we draw the strands of Haight's religious symbols through the loom of O'Connor's literary symbols, we arrive at this synthesis: (1) Symbols are *religious*, or according to Frye's distinction, *extrinsic*: they are not "mere" textual conventions, but they point beyond themselves to the transcendent reality that they signify. (2) Symbols are both *concrete* and *conceptual*, but concrete symbols have priority in Haight's Christology, just as O'Connor's definition of literary symbol begins with the concrete. (3) Symbols are *mediational*: they not only point to the reality they signify, but participate in it and make it present, just as O'Connor's "anagogical vision" involves her symbols in "the divine life and our participation in it." (4) Symbols are *interactive*: they not only participate in the reality they symbolize, but they demand participation in what is symbolized for their completion, just as symbols in O'Connor's fiction elicit and require the reader's participation for the completion of their meaning. (5) Symbols *reveal and conceal*: while they are truly revelatory of human existence and transcendent "mystery," symbols will always leave those who interpret them with "that sense of mystery" that O'Connor equates with the ending of a good story. (6) Symbols are *dialectical*: they both are and are not what they symbolize, and their "truth" resides in that dialectical tension, no less than in their analogical relation, just as O'Connor's "analogical symbolic realism" embraces both negative and positive aspects of reality in its field of vision.

Conversely, while O'Connor begins with the concrete as a potentially transparent conduit of mystery, Haight begins with the transcendent and its inherent opacity, which cannot be represented adequately or rendered concretely without the use of symbol. Thus, symbol for Haight is not a mere literary device or "detail," but an integral medium of religious communication that "introduces human beings into spheres inside themselves and levels of reality outside that would not be known without this media-

⁵⁰ Ibid. 198.

⁵¹ Ibid. 200–2.

tion." Moreover, Haight's symbolic realism is predicated on a "strong" concept of symbol as a participatory medium warranting the still stronger claim that "on the religious level a symbol is a sacrament,"⁵² while for O'Connor, "sacrament" is perceived as a stronger category than a literary or religious symbol. Finally, while O'Connor's view of symbol is focused by an "analogical vision" that we have called "analogical symbolic realism," Haight's imagination of symbol presupposes an analogical framework but seeks to recover a "dialectical symbolic realism" inherent in the language of Nicaea, Chalcedon, and in the symbolic theology of Rahner.⁵³ I turn, then, to see how this "dialectical symbolic realism" informs Haight's imagination of Jesus as a concrete "symbol of God."

Haight's Use of Symbol as Dialectical Symbolic Realism

In *Jesus Symbol of God*, Haight's christological focus is on the "concrete symbol Jesus," because, as Haight insists, "the recognition of the Real, that is, ultimate transcendent reality, will always take on the form and character dictated by the situation and circumstances of the culture of the people involved."⁵⁴ Hence as a concrete symbol, "Jesus reveals by means of his living a human life, through his teachings and his actions," and it is in and through "that concrete life" that God is made present in history,⁵⁵ just as, for O'Connor, the "concrete" is the avenue through which the fiction writer lures the reader into "an experience of mystery." Yet "the theologian encounters God in Jesus; for the historian Jesus is a human being. The mediating truth of these opposites lies in a symbolic interpretation of Jesus as the Christ."⁵⁶ Because this symbolic interpretation of Jesus is based upon religious and historical texts, Haight's use of symbol integrates religious and literary categories no less than O'Connor's symbolic imagination in her fiction does.

⁵² Haight, "Jesus and Salvation" 230.

⁵³ As Haight writes: "Chalcedon and Nicaea together represent in a formal way the dialectical structure of Christian faith; Jesus Christ, a historical symbol of God, makes God present in history. Jesus of Nazareth was a human being with a human existence and identity consubstantial with us. But Jesus, as the religious symbol that constitutes Christian faith, makes God present in the world. Nicaea represents and defends the divine dimension of Jesus Christ; Chalcedon reasserts his integral human existence" (*Jesus Symbol of God* 298). And of Rahner he observes, "Despite the classical character of Rahner's Christology, he also endorses a 'Christology from below,' proposes strong statements of Jesus' humanity and encourages critical examination that prohibits a facile use of the communication of idioms" (*Jesus Symbol of God* 326).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 13.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 359.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 202.

From Religious to Literary Symbol in *Jesus Symbol of God*

Just as O'Connor begins with the literary symbol and proceeds to use it on a more transcendent, or religious level, Haight begins with a definition of religious symbol that is inclusive of literary signification as well. For example, just as the reader must enter the world of "Good Country People" to grasp the symbolism of Hulga's wooden leg, so one must be willing to enter the symbolic world of Christians on some level in order to grasp the meaning of Jesus as the central symbol of Christian faith. Similarly, while O'Connor likens symbol to "the engine in a story" that generates meaning beyond its literal level, Haight refers to symbol as a "vehicle of knowing" that projects beyond the limitations of conceptual language when one is dealing with "transcendent subject matter."⁵⁷ Most importantly, the "genetic structure" of *Jesus Symbol of God* that traces the history of the original development of Christology from the pages of the New Testament to Nicaea and Chalcedon and on toward modern and postmodern imaginations of Jesus is, according to Haight, "first of all a history, a story, a drama in which the unfolding of events have a beginning and . . . an end with the proclamation of Jesus as the Christ and a more developed understanding of what this might mean."⁵⁸ Within this christological "story" we watch the concrete symbol Jesus accumulate meaning as the narrative unfolds, extrapolates, and ultimately explodes the world of its author as readers encounter this Jesus in new ways and draw him forward into their own situations and contexts.

In this Christology, then, Jesus as a concrete symbol of God is both a religious and a literary symbol, and what ultimately connects these understandings of symbol is Haight's appeal to the imagination as "the bridge between concrete reality and our understanding of it."⁵⁹ Explaining that "all knowledge is drawn out of the data of the external senses and mediated to understanding though . . . concrete images . . . that are stored in the memory," and that "all imaginations of Jesus are accompanied by some imaginative portrayal,"⁶⁰ Haight argues that "all christology should lead back to [the historical] Jesus."⁶¹ Accordingly, Haight grounds the concrete symbol Jesus in his historical concreteness through four portraits of the historical Jesus that emerge from current Jesus research, namely, Jesus as Prophet, Teacher, Healer, and Savior/Liberator, each of which he identifies as a "genre of Jesus."⁶² Because the resulting "imagination" of Jesus takes narrative form both in the New Testament and in the historical Jesus research that Haight surveys, this literary use of symbol does not dilute its

⁵⁷ Ibid. 201, 209.

⁵⁹ Ibid. xii–xiii.

⁶¹ Ibid. 191.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 40.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 37.

⁶² Ibid. 59.

strength as a religious medium, but rather reinforces it through a use of concrete textual "detail." Thus, Haight and O'Connor's use of symbol converges in the priority they give to the concrete. But before I move to the next section, I must come back to where I began, with their divergences.

We have already seen that the language of symbol is expressed differently in different contexts. While I have concentrated thus far on reconciling their respective literary and religious conceptions of symbol, O'Connor's view of the religiously sacramental differs from Haight's identification of symbol with sacrament by virtue of symbolic participation. For O'Connor, the fundamental "mysteries" of the Christian faith are not "just" symbolic. Her comment that if the consecrated Host were "only a symbol," then "the hell with it," was preceded by, "I believe that the Host is actually the Body and Blood of Christ, not a symbol."⁶³ In a letter to a Protestant student experiencing a faith crisis, she reiterates this radical dogmatic realism: ". . . I am a Catholic and I believe . . . what the Church teaches—that God . . . has revealed himself in history and continues to do so through the Church, and that he is present not just symbolically in the Eucharist on our altars."⁶⁴ While O'Connor the fiction writer "used symbol as a matter of course," and, as we have seen, employed literary symbols in a religious way, it would seem that O'Connor the Catholic distinguished what was sacramentally "real" from what was "only a symbol." The point of difference is well expressed by Northrop Frye, whose reflections on T.S. Eliot's subordination of art to sacrament might describe O'Connor's understanding as well:

According to Eliot, it is the function of art, by imposing an order on life, to give us the sense of an order in life, and so to lead us into a state of serenity and reconciliation preparatory to another and superior kind of experience, where "that guide" can lead us no further. The implication is that there is a spiritually existential world above that of art, a world of action and behavior, of which the most direct imitation in this world is not art but the sacramental act. This latter is a form of uncritical or pre-critical religious participation that leads to a genuinely religious contemplation, which for Eliot is a state of heightened consciousness with strong affinities to mysticism. . . . [Hence] the function of art, for Eliot, is . . . of the subordinated and allegorical kind.⁶⁵

O'Connor, like Eliot, distinguished the "sacramental act" from the sacramental vision of her art, but like Haight, she gave precedence to sense experience, and hence the concrete, in the communication of all knowl-

⁶³ O'Connor, Letter to "A," December 16, 1955, in *Habit of Being* 123–26, at 125 & 124.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 479.

⁶⁵ Northrop Frye, "The Road of Excess," in *Myth and Symbol: Critical Approaches and Applications*, ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1963) 18.

edge, whether artistic, sacramental, or theological. While O'Connor did exempt the Roman Catholic sacrament of the Eucharist from the category of symbol, and professed a full-blown Christology "from above," she was convinced that "If the Catholic writer hopes to reveal mysteries, he will have to do it by describing truthfully what he sees from where he is."⁶⁶ From where she was, then, she wrote from "below" as all of us do, and must, trusting that her own narration of concrete detail embedded in the sense experience of a "world charged with the grandeur of God" would lead readers "to go through the concrete . . . to an experience of mystery."⁶⁷ Similarly, the Jesus that we meet in her fiction is encountered from below, in all of his historical concreteness and dialectical ambivalence, for, like Haight, she saw no other alternative when writing for a modern, mid-20th-century audience for whom there was "no sense of the power of God that could produce the Incarnation and the Resurrection."⁶⁸

From a Common Audience to a Common Christological Starting Point

O'Connor and Haight share a christological starting point "from below" because they write for comparable modern and postmodern audiences whom they perceive as more diverse and secularized than their respective Roman Catholic constituencies. "The great mistake that the unthinking Catholic reader usually makes is to think the Catholic writer is writing for him," O'Connor wrote.⁶⁹ "My audience are the people who think God is dead," she explained; "at least these are the people I am conscious of writing for."⁷⁰ Writing from what she called "the modern consciousness, that thing Jung describes as unhistorical, solitary, and guilty," she confessed that "to possess this within the Church is to bear a burden, the necessary burden for the conscious Catholic. It's to feel the contemporary situation at the ultimate level."⁷¹ Accordingly, her fiction attempted to embody the "theological truths of the Fall, the Redemption and the Judgment" for a "modern secular world" that no longer believed them.

In order to communicate with the "modern" reader of her time, O'Connor, like Haight, was willing "to take [her] audience seriously"⁷² and thus begin "from below," just as Haight's *Jesus Symbol of God* is written from below for a postmodern audience "in a way that is intelligible to

⁶⁶ O'Connor, "The Church and the Fiction Writer" 150.

⁶⁷ See n. 34 above.

⁶⁸ O'Connor, Letter to Dr. T. R. Spivey, October 19, 1958, in *Habit of Being* 299–300, at 300.

⁶⁹ O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 185.

⁷⁰ O'Connor, *Habit of Being* 92.

⁷¹ O'Connor, Letter to "A," July 20, 1955, in *ibid.* 90.

⁷² Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* 28.

educated people at the beginning of the third millennium, those both inside and outside the church. . . ." As a theologian deeply conscious of his own post-modern context "at the ultimate level," Haight undertakes his Christology "convinced that Christianity in the twenty-first century must confront new problems and issues that will generate genuinely new understandings and behavior patterns in and by the churches . . ." Yet Haight also seeks to write a Christology that "[remains] faithful to its originating revelation and tradition,"⁷³ and argues that "neither of these tasks can be accomplished . . . without "[taking] into account the audience [or audiences] . . . to which one seeks to communicate."⁷⁴ For this reason both Haight and O'Connor begin their Christology and their fiction "from below," where we now follow them into the next section.

A COMMON CHRISTOLOGICAL STARTING POINT: "FROM BELOW"

We have seen that Roger Haight's Christology begins "from below," and its starting point is the historical Jesus. Were O'Connor to read, "We know that Jesus is a concrete symbol of God because people encountered God in him and still do,"⁷⁵ she would not have found it difficult to imagine Jesus as "a concrete symbol of God," since her own fiction corroborates that imagination. "Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead, and He shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance," declared The Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find."⁷⁶ Whether Jesus is imagined "from above" or "from below," he functions artistically here as a "concrete symbol of God." Before we look more carefully at the Jesus who is imagined in this story, we proceed to probe O'Connor's Christology as it is intimated in her writing about fiction writing,⁷⁷ and to place it in what I hope will prove to be a suggestive conversation with Haight's Christology.

⁷³ Ibid. xii.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 28.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 198.

⁷⁶ O'Connor, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," in *The Complete Stories* 117–33, at 132.

⁷⁷ For a survey of some contemporary Christologies reflected in O'Connor's book reviews and fiction, see Rose Bowen, "Christology in the Works of Flannery O'Connor," *Horizons* 14/1 (1987) 7–23, and Kilcourse, "The Christic Imagination," in *Flannery O'Connor's Religious Imagination* 90–123. From O'Connor's writing on Karl Adam, Romano Guardini, Teilhard de Chardin, and Francis X. Durrwell, Bowen links O'Connor's Christology with her ecclesiology, both of which are "from above," although Bowen does not use this language. Building on Bowen's study, Kilcourse probes Guardini's contribution to O'Connor's Christology more deeply to find adumbrations of a "Christology from below." While neither of these studies came to my attention until after my own was in its final stages, our projects are complementary. While Bowen has documented O'Connor's sources for a "proper Christology" from above and finds that Christology reflected in her fiction, I argue that O'Connor employed a Christology from below in her fiction for apologetic and

“A Proper Christology”: From “Above” to “Below”

“The best way to understand the uniqueness of Christianity,” O’Connor wrote in a book review, “is by a proper Christology,”⁷⁸ by which she meant what Haight, after Rahner, describes as a Christology from above. This Christology takes an authoritative belief in Jesus as the Christ as its starting point and “‘descends,’ following the pattern of the incarnation itself” as that doctrine is extrapolated from the Johannine image of the Word made flesh.⁷⁹ While the term “Logos Christology,” which Haight identifies as the paradigmatic Roman Catholic Christology, would be too abstract for O’Connor, she attributed the uniqueness of her fiction to its preoccupation with “Christ and the incarnation,” or “the fact of the Word made flesh.”⁸⁰ The old priest, Father Flynn, in “The Displaced Person” presupposes this descending “Logos Christology” in that fragment of conversation with his reluctant catechumen, Mrs. Macintyre, when he begins to explain, “For . . . when God sent his Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ our Lord . . . as a Redeemer to mankind . . .”⁸¹

A Christology from below, on the other hand, begins with Jesus of Nazareth and “ascends,” “following the pattern of resurrection and exaltation,”⁸² and within Haight’s Christology the historical Jesus of Nazareth is appropriated as a “concrete symbol of God.” But Haight also argues, “There is no intrinsic reason why Logos Christology must begin ‘from above’;”⁸³ and, in her fiction, O’Connor’s Christology typically does not. “The serious writer has always taken the flaw in human nature for his starting point,”⁸⁴ O’Connor explains, and to choose that starting point is, like Rahner, to begin with an anthropology, and, like Haight, to “open the doors of the religious question inside the autonomously human.”⁸⁵

artistic reasons, and read her fiction through that lens. Both starting points are fruitful and necessary for a more comprehensive study of O’Connor’s Christology.

⁷⁸ O’Connor, *The Presence of Grace and Other Book Reviews*, comp. L. J. Zuber, ed. C. W. Martin (Athens: University of Georgia, 1983) 55.

⁷⁹ See Karl Rahner, “The Two Basic Types of Christology,” *Theological Investigations* 13 (New York: Seabury, 1975) 213–23, to which Haight refers in his definition of these two typical Christologies (*Jesus Symbol of God* 29–30). As Haight explains, Rahner’s Logos Christology is a development of Johannine Christology, but reflects as well the inculturation of the Greek patristic tradition and Nicaea and Chalcedon, as well as Rahner’s own “reappropriation of this tradition through the modern turn to the subject and a certain anthropocentrism” (ibid. 436).

⁸⁰ O’Connor, Letter to Cecil Dawkins, June 19, 1957, in *Habit of Being* 226–27, at 227.

⁸¹ O’Connor, “The Displaced Person,” in *The Complete Stories* 194–235, at 229.

⁸² Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* 30.

⁸³ Ibid. 436.

⁸⁴ O’Connor, “Novelist and Believer” 167.

⁸⁵ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* 436.

O'Connor also explains, "In good fiction . . . you have to go through the concrete situation to some experience of mystery."⁸⁶ When Mrs. Macintyre, speaking from her "flawed human nature," counters Father Flynn's Logos Christology with "As far as I'm concerned, Christ was just another D.P.,"⁸⁷ she is constructing a credible Christology from below, even if she does not yet grasp the "mystery" that her concrete identification of Christ with her own "Displaced Person," Mr. Guizac, portends.

Yet O'Connor's Christology was more complex than that of her characters, both those who spoke for the Church and those who spoke from their own concrete situations. Indeed, she acknowledged that for the novelist, there were more important things than a "proper Christology."⁸⁸ Thus, we must distinguish between the "explicit Christology" that O'Connor professes dogmatically and the "implicit Christology" which invigorates her fiction, even though these two strands are often inextricable in her work. While her "explicit" Christology presupposed "a solid belief in *all* the Christian dogmas," which for her "as a born Catholic" were "given and accepted before [they were fully] experienced,"⁸⁹ the incarnational Christology out of which she wrote was not dogmatic, but existential. As she explained, "Writers like myself who don't use Catholic settings or characters, good or bad, are trying to make it plain that personal loyalty to the person of Christ is imperative, is the structure of man's nature. . . . The Church, as institution, doesn't come into it one way or another."⁹⁰ She appropriated even the dogma of the incarnation, which she claimed as her "ultimate reality," as "a gateway to contemplation,"⁹¹ not a confining ecclesiastical door.

O'Connor's Christological Imagination: Seeing, Believing, and Hoping

O'Connor's Christology encapsulated a way of seeing, a way of believing, and a way of hoping. First, it constituted a way of seeing through what Haight would call a "soteriological" lens, or a particular vision of the Christian experience of salvation.⁹² "I see," she wrote, "from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in

⁸⁶ See n. 34 above.

⁸⁷ O'Connor, "The Displaced Person" 229.

⁸⁸ O'Connor, "The Church and the Fiction Writer" 153.

⁸⁹ O'Connor, Letter to Shirley Abbott, March 17, 1956, in *Habit of Being* 147–48, at 147; Letter to "A," August 28, 1955, 97–99, at 97.

⁹⁰ O'Connor, Letter to "A," July 5, 1958, in *Habit of Being* 289–291, at 290.

⁹¹ O'Connor, Letter to "A," August 2, 1955, in *Habit of Being* 91–93, at 92.

⁹² Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* xii.

its relation to that."⁹³ While Haight prefers the word "salvation" to that of "redemption" because it embraces a wider soteriological frame of reference, both of these terms refer "to the most fundamental of all Christian experiences,"⁹⁴ that of experiencing the saving power of God in an encounter with Jesus Christ. Seen in this light, for example, O'Connor teaches us to read "A Good Man is Hard to Find" not just as "an account of a family murdered on the way to Florida"⁹⁵ but as "a duel of sorts between the grandmother and her superficial beliefs, and The Misfit's more profoundly felt involvement with Christ's action which set the world off balance for him."⁹⁶

Thus, we can speak of a christological imagination operative in her fiction that is centered in the redemptive or salvific work of Jesus Christ, just as the imagination of the historical Jesus as one who mediated salvation grounds Haight's construal of Jesus as a concrete symbol of God.⁹⁷ Inherent in this way of seeing, however, was also a way of believing, and in her essay, "Novelist and Believer," O'Connor described her own christological faith in language that is personal, experiential, incarnational, and theocentric:

[T]he central religious experience . . . concerns a relationship with a supreme being recognized through faith. It is the experience of an encounter, of a kind of knowledge, which affects the believer's every action. . . . All my own experience has been that of the writer who believes, . . . in Pascal's words, in the "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and not of the philosophers and scholars." This is an unlimited God and one who has revealed himself specifically. It is one who became man and rose from the dead. . . . This God is the object of ultimate concern and he has a name. . . . The problem of the novelist who wishes to write about a man's encounter with this God is how he shall make the experience . . . understandable, and credible, to his reader.⁹⁸

In other words, her "way of believing" was fundamentally "revelational,"⁹⁹ and this christological confession corroborates Haight's assertion that "the core revelational experience, its center of gravity, is best con-

⁹³ O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer & His Country," in *Mystery and Manners* 25–35, at 32.

⁹⁴ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* 336.

⁹⁵ O'Connor, "On Her Own Work," in *Mystery and Manners* 107–18, at 114.

⁹⁶ O'Connor, Letter to a Professor of English, March 28, 1961, in *Habit of Being* 437.

⁹⁷ Lest readers question the salvific power of a symbol, Haight explains, "To call Jesus a symbol of God does not entail shifting the structure of Christology away from the narrative of salvation. It should rather be seen as capturing in the idea of symbol the dynamic process of coming to a faith that is salvific" (*Jesus Symbol of God* 337).

⁹⁸ O'Connor, "Novelist and Believer" 160–61.

⁹⁹ As Haight defines it, "Revelation is the encounter in faith with the transcen-

ceived in Christian terms in the language of personal encounter with God,” or again, that all “revelation of God in the end is a matter of experiential and existential encounter.”¹⁰⁰ It insists, however, on the incarnational structure of this encounter, while Haight would remind O’Connor that “the language of incarnation, of God assuming flesh, is not literal [but truly symbolic] language.”¹⁰¹ Whether or not O’Connor would have conceded her “literal” language of incarnation in a theological discussion,¹⁰² the Christology of this confession that is incarnated in her fiction shares with Haight’s Christology, as we have seen, a common starting point—from below. From that vantage point, both prioritize concrete historical imagination and experience; both express this experience in the language of encounter with the transcendent God through Jesus Christ in a way that is “understandable and credible” to their audiences; and both are driven by a christological “way of hoping” that we will return to at the conclusion of this discussion. For the moment, we turn to O’Connor and Haight’s use of the concrete image in concert with a dialectical imagination to ground their respective Christologies from below.

A Christology from Below, the Concrete Image, and the Dialectical Imagination

Just as Haight’s Christology from below presupposes that “all knowledge is drawn out of the data of the external senses and mediated . . . through . . . concrete images,”¹⁰³ O’Connor insisted, “The novelist begins his work where human knowledge begins—with the senses; he works through the limitations of matter, and unless he is writing fantasy, he has to stay within the concrete possibilities of his culture.”¹⁰⁴ Yet O’Connor wrote fiction for a culture in which “nothing is so little felt to be true as the reality of a faith in Christ,” and her struggle as a writer was “to succeed in making the divinity of Christ seem consistent with the structure of all reality”¹⁰⁵ in

dent. In Christian terms, revelation is the presence of God encountered in faith” (*Jesus Symbol of God* 5–6).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 6, 359.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 439.

¹⁰² Although O’Connor wrote that she “took” the doctrines of the Church “literally,” that did not keep her from interpreting them symbolically. In explaining the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, she wrote, “Now neither of these doctrines can be measured with a slide rule. You don’t have to think of the Assumption as an artist has to paint it—with the Virgin rising on an invisible elevator into the clouds . . . Dogma is the guardian of mystery” (Letter to Cecil Dawkins, December 23, 1959, in *Habit of Being* 363–66, at 365).

¹⁰³ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* 37.

¹⁰⁴ O’Connor, “Novelist and Believer” 155.

¹⁰⁵ O’Connor, Letter to “A,” July 5, 1958, in *Habit of Being* 289–91, at 290.

precisely that context. Admitting to her correspondent, "A," "I have never found a writer who could make Christ talk,"¹⁰⁶ she chose rather to write "in the bleeding stinking mad shadow" of the Jesus who haunted her characters' imaginations, in the confidence that readers would follow in the wake of her ascending Christology.

Yet her characters' christological imaginations as well as her own are truly dialectical; implicit in the concrete human "Jesus" that is imaged is the adumbration of his divinity as well. Thus, for Tarwater in *The Violent Bear it Away*, his vision of "trudging into the distance in the bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus" finds its reward in "a broken fish, a multiplied loaf" of Jesus "the bread of life."¹⁰⁷ This dialectical movement between the "bleeding, stinking" historical Jesus and the Christ of faith who by faith is "the Bread of Life" also energizes Hazel Motes' imagination of Jesus in *Wise Blood* when he sees "Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown."¹⁰⁸ Yet for both Tarwater and Motes, their encounter with Jesus, like that of the first disciples, begins "from below," with the human Jesus of Nazareth beckoning them to follow him.

O'Connor describes her use of this dialectical method when she writes, "When fiction is made according to its nature, it should reinforce our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in concrete, observable reality." But readers must also come to her fiction with "the kind of mind that is willing to have its sense of mystery deepened by contact with reality, and its sense of reality deepened by contact with mystery."¹⁰⁹ Recall, for example, the image of Manley Pointer "walking on water" in the finale of "Good Country People." While on one level this evocation of Jesus as "symbol of God" disguised as a bogus Bible salesman functions ironically as a closing joke, it functions symbolically for those who "get" the joke,¹¹⁰ by intimating the presence of Jesus in a guise that neither the saved nor the churchly nor

¹⁰⁶ O'Connor, Letter to Cecil Dawkins, January 11, 1960, in *ibid.* 369–70, at 369.

¹⁰⁷ O'Connor, *The Violent Bear it Away* 357, 315.

¹⁰⁸ O'Connor, *Wise Blood* 16.

¹⁰⁹ O'Connor, "The Church and the Fiction Writer" 148; "The Nature and Aim of Fiction" 79.

¹¹⁰ As O'Connor explains: "[I]t is the peculiar characteristic of fiction that its literal surface can be made to yield entertainment on an obvious physical plane to one sort of reader while the selfsame surface can be made to yield meaning to the person equipped to experience it there" ("Writing Short Stories" 95). What O'Connor claims here for all fiction is strikingly true of her own, and I am reading her fiction here in the light of the christological meaning it yields when interpreted through the lens of Haight's Christology.

Hulga herself would anticipate or acknowledge.¹¹¹ If we understand this joke, we have begun to grasp the logic of O'Connor's classic christological "plot" or narrative Christology.

O'Connor's Narrative Christology and "A Good Man is Hard to Find"

By O'Connor's narrative Christology, I simply mean the story of Jesus as it unfolds within her own stories through situation, action, character, and symbol. O'Connor not only portrays Jesus through the actions and imaginations of her characters, but through the concrete symbols of Jesus that some of these characters become in what she calls their "slow participation" in Christ's death and redemption.¹¹² However, while O'Connor might agree with Hopkins that "Christ plays in ten thousand places . . . to the Father through the features of Men's faces," she did not typically choose those who were "lovely in limbs and eyes not his" as his symbol-bearers in her fiction. If we seek those in whom Jesus is concretely symbolized, or through whom the grace of God is mediated,¹¹³ we must search her stories for the "least likely suspects." As O'Connor explains, "Grace, to the Catholic way of thinking, can, and does, use as its medium the imperfect, purely human, and even hypocritical."¹¹⁴

"A Good Man is Hard to Find" includes two of these "least likely suspects," the Grandmother and The Misfit. In its portrayal of The Misfit's imagination of Jesus as a "concrete symbol of God" and the Grandmother's symbolic identification with Jesus, this story consummately exemplifies this "christological plot." It is no accident that the most explicit characterization of Jesus in O'Connor's fiction is provided not by the cassocked and catechizing Father Flynn, but by The Misfit, an escaped convict and murderer with scholarly-looking spectacles and a theological bent. However incongruously or aptly, The Misfit's Jesus functions in that story as a "concrete symbol of God," or one who "mediated God," and in whom "people

¹¹¹ I am indebted to conversations with Peter J. Bailey, Professor of English at St. Lawrence University, for suggesting this reading of the story.

¹¹² O'Connor, "The Church and the Fiction Writer" 148.

¹¹³ Haight calls this process of symbolic mediation as "symbolic causality," and suggests that "the same historical and sacramental or symbolic causality is carried forward after Jesus' death and resurrection by the disciples who formed a community and which became the church," and that "the revealing salvation of Jesus Christ continues to be historically mediated: it requires historical agents" (*Jesus Symbol of God* 359). Accordingly, I suggest here that in O'Connor's fiction, the "historical agents" of salvation are not usually the ones we ourselves would have chosen.

¹¹⁴ O'Connor, Letter to John Hawkes, April 14, 1960, in *Habit of Being* 389–90, at 389.

encountered God”¹¹⁵ more profoundly than Father Flynn’s catechetically correct instruction concerning God’s “Only Begotten Son.”

The Misfit’s Jesus functions as a concrete symbol, first, as exemplar of a concrete, historical “Southern imagination” in which, according to O’Connor, “a Christianity of a not too unorthodox kind and . . . a strong devotion to the Bible . . . has kept our minds attached to the concrete and the living symbol”¹¹⁶ at the same time that this imagination of Jesus is refracted through The Misfit’s own experience “from below.” By the “concrete and living symbol” O’Connor means the Christian Scriptures, which provided her characters, in particular the southern “poor,” with a shared “mythos,” or “sacred history,” and connected them “to the universal and the holy” in ways that allowed “the meaning of their every action to be heightened and seen under the aspect of eternity.”¹¹⁷ Listen to the way in which The Misfit’s “narrative Christology” integrates this Scriptural mythos with his own story in response to the grandmother’s terrified invocation of “Jesus, Jesus”:

“Yes’m,” The Misfit said. . . . “Jesus thown everything off balance. It was the same case with Him as with me except He hadn’t committed any crime and they could prove I had committed one because they had the papers on me. . . .

“Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead,” The Misfit continued, “and He shouldn’t have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn’t, then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him.”¹¹⁸

We are told earlier in the story that The Misfit “was a gospel singer for a while” and that his “daddy . . . was buried in the Mount Hopewell Baptist churchyard.”¹¹⁹ Perhaps his own imagination of Jesus was formed from that Southern fundamentalist background in which roadside billboards of “Jesus Saves” were intersected by lengthening shadows of “The Old Rugged Cross.” What stands out in this portrait, however, is The Misfit’s identification with Jesus as a convicted criminal (“it was the same with Him as with me”) and his equally lucid acknowledgment of the crucial difference between them (“except he hadn’t committed any crime and they could prove I had committed one”). As biblically literate readers, we naturally

¹¹⁵ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* 203.

¹¹⁶ O’Connor, quoted in Robert Fitzgerald’s Introduction to Flannery O’Connor, *Everything That Rises Shall Converge* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965) xxiv.

¹¹⁷ O’Connor, “The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South,” in *Mystery and Manners* 191–209, at 203.

¹¹⁸ O’Connor, “A Good Man is Hard to Find” 131–32.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* 129, 130.

recall the thief on the cross next to Jesus in Luke's crucifixion narrative, whose similar confession might have inspired The Misfit's. Like Mrs. MacIntyre in "The Displaced Person," however, The Misfit begins his christological reflection with his own concrete situation, which also engenders the "religious question" that provokes The Misfit to find "no pleasure but in meanness."

Secondly, The Misfit's Jesus, as a fictional composite of the "historical" Jesus of the Gospels, can be interpreted as a "concrete symbol of God" in the language of O'Connor's Logos Christology. As Haight suggests, "Christology that begins with research into the historical Jesus is led to presuppose not the "humanity" of Jesus, but the concrete image of him as a historical figure, a human being. . . . That which dwells in the human being Jesus, from the first moment of his existence, is God as revealing presence and word. Thus, the human being Jesus is the symbol and expression of God as Logos present to him."¹²⁰ According to The Misfit, this Jesus is reputedly "the only One that ever raised the dead," but in this narrative he is not conclusively "raised from the dead." On the surface of this story, he is not the risen Christ, but the Jesus of the Gospels who, among his "deeds of power"¹²¹ raised the dead.¹²² By virtue of this action he becomes a concrete symbol of the God "as Logos present to him" who traditionally "gives life to the dead" (Romans 4:17).

Yet the fact that this action has "thrown everything off balance" for The Misfit, and potentially for his readers keeps dialectically open the question of who this Jesus is, as well as the possibility that the One who raised the dead is the One who was raised from the dead. But we must proceed with caution here. Since O'Connor characteristically referred to Jesus as "Christ," and used the title of "Christ" intentionally in stories like "The Displaced Person," we should pay close attention to The Misfit's "Jesus" in this story. The name "Jesus" signals The Misfit's construal of Jesus from below, not O'Connor's "proper" descending Christology. Yet as O'Connor has already pointed out, The Misfit's dialectical imagination of Jesus reveals a "profoundly felt involvement with Christ's action" that momentarily puts the Grandmother's "pray to Jesus" piety of desperation to shame.

Finally, The Misfit's portrayal of Jesus presses the religious question, or the "God" question, that this criminal's "pleasure in meanness" dramatically poses. In Haight's language, we recognize an experience of negativity, or those "foundational experiences of bewilderment" in the face of ulti-

¹²⁰ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* 442.

¹²¹ See Matthew 11:20; Mark 6:2; Luke 19:37; Acts 2:22.

¹²² For example, Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:35-43); the Widow of Nain's son (Luke 7:11-17); Lazarus (John 11:1-44).

mate meaning, human suffering, moral failure and finitude that are fundamental to religious experience.¹²³ The Misfit poses this question in the guise of “fundamental options” to follow Jesus or to persist in meanness, but the question is intensified by the grandmother’s “mumbled” response, “Maybe He didn’t raise the dead,” to which The Misfit replies, “I wasn’t there so I can’t say he didn’t. . . . I wisht I had of been there. . . . If I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn’t be like I am now.”

At this moment, “the grandmother’s head cleared for an instant,” and she saw The Misfit as “one of [her] own children” and “reached out and touched him on the shoulder.”¹²⁴ The grandmother, as we remember, inadvertently causes the fateful encounter with The Misfit that she warns her son Bailey of at the beginning of the story, by directing them to a back road that would have brought them to an old family homestead if they had been in Tennessee, and not in Georgia, and by literally letting her cat out of his basket to alight on Bailey’s shoulder and startle him into losing control of the car, so that the car careens off the road into a ditch. While some of O’Connor’s readers, including the novelist John Hawkes, interpreted the grandmother as an evil character, O’Connor was delighted when Hawkes’s college freshmen “resisted this interpretation.” She hastened to explain in an answering letter that “they resisted it because they all had grandmothers or great-aunts just like her at home, and they knew, from personal experience, that the old lady . . . had a good heart.”¹²⁵ In other words, these readers interpreted the story appropriately, “from below.”

While O’Connor alerts us that we “should be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace in the grandmother’s soul” and “not for the dead bodies” in this story, she also says that “in my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace.”¹²⁶ But while The Misfit imagined that he would have recognized Jesus “if he had been there,” he did not recognize him in the “concrete symbol” of the grandmother’s gesture, or perhaps recognized him too well, and “shot her three times in the chest.” In that moment, however, this “flawed” but graced old lady becomes a Jesus surrogate and, by virtue of her “slow participation in Christ’s redemption,” a “concrete symbol of God,” just as, in Haight’s Christology, “the revealing salvation of Jesus Christ continues to be historically mediated” by the *imitatio Christi* and “putting on of Christ” of latter-day Christians like the grandmother.¹²⁷

¹²³ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* 354.

¹²⁴ O’Connor, “A Good Man is Hard to Find” 132.

¹²⁵ O’Connor, “On Her Own Work” 110.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* 112, 111.

¹²⁷ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* 359, 361.

The Christological Plot as a Way of Hoping

I introduced this discussion of O'Connor's christological imagination by suggesting that it constituted a way of seeing, a way of believing, and a way of hoping. When we end a story with six dead bodies, one of whom is described as half-sitting, half-lying in a puddle of blood, "with her face smiling up at the cloudless sky," we either ask in bewilderment where the hope is, as some readers of O'Connor's fiction continue to do, or, having been trained by now to see God "in the concrete details," we see hope smiling at us like a Cheshire cat from a puddle of blood. Whether, however, from discomfiture at hope's absence or the equally strong conviction of its presence, O'Connor's narrative Christology is crafted in Christian hope, from beginning to ending. This discussion concludes by considering the ways in which O'Connor and Haight's Christologies converge in eschatological hope, whether that hope is projected in its presence or extrapolated in its absence.¹²⁸

First, following Haight's conviction that the intuition of negativity is, paradoxically, a prerequisite for the emergence of hope,¹²⁹ O'Connor "mortally and strongly [defends] the right of the artist to select a negative aspect of the world to portray," because "the human condition includes both [affirmative and negative] states in truth and art."¹³⁰ She cautions her readers that in an "unbelieving" world where the "believing artist" cannot take belief for granted, "the novelist will have to do the best he can in travail with the world he has," even if "he may find in the end that instead of reflecting the image at the heart of things, he has only reflected our broken condition, and, through it, the face of the devil we are possessed by." While this may be "a modest achievement," it is nonetheless "a necessary one."¹³¹

How does O'Connor craft hope into the shocking finale of "A Good Man is Hard to Find"? As do all of the stories in this collection, which O'Connor introduces as a narrative meditation on original sin, this story surely and deliberately reflects "our broken condition." However, the smile on the grandmother's dead body tells the theologically initiated

¹²⁸ See Haight: "Eschatological statements about the reality that will obtain in God's absolute future do not qualify as matters of a specific knowledge. Such convictions are usually considered functions of hope based on the beliefs that arise out of a faith encounter with God in Jesus Christ. In effect, one projects present faith experience into the absolute future, and one extrapolates what seem to be the necessary conditions and implications of the convictions borne in a present-day encounter with God's saving presence in Jesus Christ" (*Jesus Symbol of God* 390).

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* 370–72.

¹³⁰ O'Connor, Letter to "A," September 8, 1956, in *Habit of Being* 172–74, at 173.

¹³¹ O'Connor, "Novelist and Believer" 166.

reader that O'Connor wants us to move beyond that brokenness to "an experience of mystery." Since we have just overheard a conversation about whether or not Jesus really raised the dead, we are invited to speculate upon the murdered grandmother's answer to the question, but O'Connor has too much respect for her audience to intrude at this point with her own eschatological hope.

Thus, readers not preoccupied with the hope of "a happy death," or unconvinced by the grandmother's beatific vision, must see what they can make of The Misfit, and consider what The Misfit might make of the grandmother's gesture as he continues to recollect it. That he pronounced his victim "a good woman" after putting down his gun and cleaning his glasses was, for O'Connor, a small but significant sign of hope. While many of her readers identified The Misfit with the devil, O'Connor's way of hoping instructed her otherwise. "I prefer to think that, however unlikely this may seem, the old lady's gesture, like the mustard seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in The Misfit's heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become."¹³² In short, she hoped for him the same destiny as her other Christians *malgré eux*: Hazel Motes, Tarwater, and Parker.¹³³

Concluding with Hope: "Everything That Rises Must Converge"

That destiny, plotted christologically, involved a slow process of becoming through symbolic identification the figure of Jesus Christ that one imagined, but in the end, it constituted a communal, comic, and cosmic vision, not merely a process of individual redemption. O'Connor borrowed from Yeats to describe her intent in the stories comprising "A Good Man is Hard to Find": "I believe that there are many rough beasts slouching toward Bethlehem to be born, and that I have described the progress of a few of them."¹³⁴ For her final collection of stories, she borrowed the title "Everything That Rises Must Converge" from Teilhard de Chardin, and proceeded to apply the metaphor in the title story "to a certain situation in the Southern states & indeed in all the world."¹³⁵

That the setting of the title story was a recently desegregated bus in Georgia with its usual cross-section of O'Connor's Southern grotesques reassures us that what she wrote of Teilhard was equally true of herself: "[Her] vision sweeps forward without detaching itself at any point from the

¹³² Ibid. 113.

¹³³ "Parker's Back" was the last story O'Connor wrote before her death on August 3, 1964. See *Complete Stories* 510–30, at 529–30.

¹³⁴ O'Connor, Letter to "A," July 20, 1955, in *Habit of Being* 90.

¹³⁵ O'Connor, Letter to John Hawkes, April 20, 1961, in *Habit of Being* 438–39, at 438.

earth.”¹³⁶ Yet in these final stories she shifted the focus of her Christology from the fall and Christ's redemptive action refracted through “the progress of a few” to creation and its consummation in Christ's resurrected, mystical body. With Haight and Schillebeeckx, these stories suggest that “in the final analysis Christology is *concentrated* creation: creation as God wills it to be.”¹³⁷

Teilhard's evolutionary vision of “Christogenesis” exceeds our grasp in this article. O'Connor admitted that it exceeded hers as well. However, she found in Teilhard “a kindred intelligence” that provided her with a cosmic model of her own incarnational theology, intersected by Paul's vision of the Mystical Body. Five years before she read and reviewed *The Phenomenon of Man*, O'Connor described her own “mystical” theology of the body:

[F]or my part I think that when I know what the laws of the flesh and the physical really are, then I will know what God is. We know them as we see them, not as God sees them. For me it is the virgin birth, the Incarnation, the resurrection which are the true laws of the flesh and of the physical. Death, decay, destruction are the suspension of these laws. I am always astonished at the emphasis the Church puts on the body. It is not the soul she says that will rise, but the body, glorified.¹³⁸

As O'Connor's own body succumbed to lupus, she wrote less about incarnation and resurrection, and nothing about “proper” Christologies, except through her stories. Because she believed firmly that “a story is a way to say something that can't be said in any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is,”¹³⁹ her last stories are her Christology and her eschatology. Indeed, the stories themselves are concrete symbols of the ultimate transcendence that they signify. In these last stories, sinners are still sinners; good men and women are still hard to find; evil is still a fact of the human condition. Yet her reading of Teilhard offered her not exactly a new christological lens, but a wider, more universal, and ultimately more hopeful one. In a review of *The Divine Milieu*, she wrote, “It is doubtful if any Christian of this century can be fully aware of his religion until he has reseen it in the cosmic light which Teilhard has cast upon it.”¹⁴⁰ All of the late stories, but especially “Parker's Back” and “Revelation,” are written in the clarity of this cosmic light. Yet they reflect no less the “continuous eschatology” of Haight, which emphasizes “the continuity between the exercise of human freedom in this world and the

¹³⁶ O'Connor, *Presence of Grace* 130.

¹³⁷ See Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* 392 n. 52.

¹³⁸ O'Connor, Letter to “A,” September 6, 1955, in *Habit of Being* 99–101, at 100.

¹³⁹ O'Connor, “Writing Short Stories” 96.

¹⁴⁰ O'Connor, *Presence of Grace* 108.

final state of things” rather than their ultimate disjunction, and sees the resurrection itself as “a model of continuous eschatology.”¹⁴¹

In the first story, the icon of the Byzantine Christ tattooed on Parker’s back can be seen as the “concrete symbol” of the Omega-Christ, while Parker must continue to follow this Christ in the life he lives with a wife who has accused him of committing “idolatry,” an outraged employer whose tractor he has wrecked while transfixed by his own vision of a burning bush, and a child on the way. Moreover, in “the haloed head of a flat stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes” that were “to be obeyed”¹⁴² and in the symbolic participation of Parker in the mystery of that obedience, O’Connor, like the tattoo artist in the story, inscribed her most fully realized symbol of the Logos Christology that she necessarily drew “from below.”

In “Revelation,” Ruby Turpin, a “country female Jacob” who “shouts at the Lord across a hog pen,”¹⁴³ has an eschatological vision after she has been pronounced “a wart hog from hell” by a psychotic woman at the doctor’s office, and, more disastrously, by her own outraged voice echoing back to her the voice of the “Lord.”¹⁴⁴ As Haight would affirm, “All of creation, the full range of human behaviors, ordinary and everyday relationships are the stuff of salvation. . . . When the separation between creation and salvation is broken down, one will be able to see the whole of life as sustained by God’s creating and by God as Spirit’s loving presence and saving power because they are the same thing.”¹⁴⁵ Yet “to see the whole of life as sustained by God’s creating and by God as Spirit’s loving presence and saving power” is to see, as Ruby Turpin, did, that “everything that rises shall converge.” Ruby’s revelation is O’Connor’s “concrete fictional symbol” of Teilhard’s cosmic theological vision:

There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. [Ruby] raised her hands from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. 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 niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the

¹⁴¹ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* 391.

¹⁴² O’Connor, “Parker’s Back” 522, 527.

¹⁴³ O’Connor, Letter to Maryat Lee, May 15, 1964, in *Habit of Being* 577–78, at 577.

¹⁴⁴ O’Connor, “Revelation,” in *Complete Stories* 488–509, at 500.

¹⁴⁵ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* 392.

God-given with to use it right . . . They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. . . . Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile.

At length she got down . . . and made her slow way on the darkening path to the house. In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.¹⁴⁶

What this vision lacks in political correctness it returns in prophetic imagination, as its author sought to “describe truthfully what she saw from where she was,” mere months before her death in the summer of 1964 in Milledgeville, Georgia. It is the closest O'Connor came to a theology of liberation, which she projected into God's mysterious but continually materializing future. It is also a vision that complements the Christ-symbol branded on Parker's back with that of the community of saints who “continue the causality of Jesus' revelatory salvation through history,”¹⁴⁷ imagined through the singular lens of O'Connor's symbolic world. While I have called this revelation an eschatological vision, O'Connor called it “purgatorial.”¹⁴⁸ Yet these “last things” are not unrelated. From the perspective of his own continuous eschatology, Haight acknowledges that “the construct of purgatory . . . still enjoys a certain credibility” in the light of the responsibility of human freedom and its frightening predisposition toward evil.¹⁴⁹

With or without a belief in purgatory, Ruby is content to bring up the rear of the procession, among those whose “shocked and altered faces” revealed “that even their virtues were being burned away.” From the perspective of O'Connor's “christological plot,” however, the conduit from here to there is a concrete symbol: a bridge constructed on a slender purple streak of sunset seen by a Southern woman whom most would write off as a “bigot.” Moreover, those traversing this bridge, from the last to the first, are coming “from below” and are still on the way, whether walking through fire, or, at the end, like Ruby, making “her slow way on the darkening path back to the house” where, more fortunate than Parker, a kinder if none the wiser husband awaits her.¹⁵⁰

A Common Christology: A Reprise from Below

While the bridge I have constructed between O'Connor's fiction and Haight's Christology may appear no less fragile than Ruby Turpin's, I

¹⁴⁶ O'Connor, “Revelation” 508.

¹⁴⁷ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* 359.

¹⁴⁸ See O'Connor, Letter to Maryat Lee (see n. 143 above).

¹⁴⁹ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* 393.

¹⁵⁰ O'Connor, “Revelation,” 508–9.

argue here that both writers begin their respective christologies “from below” out of consideration for particular audiences who require that starting point. I have then attempted to correlate the systematic Christology of *Jesus Symbol of God* with the narrative Christology unfolded in O’Connor’s fiction when both are read in conversation with each other. I contend that O’Connor constructs a credible Logos Christology from below in her fiction for an audience not disposed to begin from above, and, in so doing, anticipates Haight’s proposal of a postmodern Christology from below.

Looking all too briefly at the figures of Jesus encountered in *Wise Blood*, *The Violent Bear it Away*, “Good Country People,” “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” “The Displaced Person,” “Parker’s Back,” and “Revelation,” I suggest that Jesus functions positively in those narratives as “a concrete symbol of God,” both as he is imagined by O’Connor’s characters and as those characters become symbolically identified with the Jesus of their imaginations. I have also extrapolated from these narratives the typical structure of O’Connor’s “christological plot,” in which the “least likely suspect” is the most likely Jesus-surrogate, or agent of Jesus’ symbolic causality, in the story. I have construed the implicit Christology of O’Connor’s fiction as a salvific way of seeing, a revelational way of believing, and an eschatological way of hoping, and I have correlated these with Haight’s systematic language of salvation, revelational encounter, and continuous eschatology. Finally, I propose that their Christologies converge in O’Connor’s fictional and Haight’s theological category of the “concrete symbol,” which provides them, with all religious writers, a locus and a nexus for “writing the transcendent from below.”

CONCLUSION: WRITING THE TRANSCENDENT FROM BELOW

The word “religious” conceals a concrete symbol denoting the act of binding sacred things together. While all writers reach for transcendence “from below” when they bind words and thoughts together through the concrete exercise of the symbolic imagination, I use the term “religious writer” here to bind together writers from a variety of disciplines who write from an explicitly religious perspective.

In an informal typology of religious writers¹⁵¹ in “The Task of the Writer in Relation to Christian Living,” Karl Rahner includes: (1) the “explicitly Catholic” creative author who writes as a lay person on “the Christian reality as he himself experiences it,” and (2) the “*ex professo*” Catholic

¹⁵¹ While the word “religious” is less precise than Rahner’s interchangeable use of “Christian” and “Catholic,” it describes the kind of writing that concerns us here more adequately without violating Rahner’s intended meaning.

author “whose writings are directly theological and religious in character.”¹⁵² Identifying both the “creative writer”¹⁵³ and the theologian¹⁵⁴ as Catholic religious writers, Rahner reflects further on their task in “The Future of the Religious Book,” which ponders “the religious writing of the future.”¹⁵⁵ While the incipient theology of writing in these articles cannot be probed here, it draws O'Connor and Haight into a wider community of religious writers who are “writing the transcendent from below.” Using Rahner's reflections as a touchstone, I conclude with five elements of religious writing common to O'Connor's fiction and Haight's Christology.

First, religious writing, like all writing, begins “from below.” To write from below means to write as human beings to human beings in the fragility and the mystery of our humanness. Because “authorship,” according to Rahner, possesses religious relevance precisely as a “human activity,”¹⁵⁶ what O'Connor says of the fiction writer applies to the writing of all religious authors: “Fiction is about everything human and we are made out of dust, and if you scorn getting yourself dusty, then you shouldn't write fiction.”¹⁵⁷ Rahner corroborates, “[Religious writing] must begin . . . with human activities, with work, love, death, and all the well-worn and familiar matters with which human life is filled.”¹⁵⁸ Finally, it begins from below in order to address readers who must “live the Christian life not as a particular ‘calling’ apart from the rest of life, but rather as the brightness, the power and the ultimate mystery of [their] own lives.”¹⁵⁹

Secondly, religious writing is rooted in the concrete. O'Connor advises the religious writer to “go through the concrete to an experience of mystery,”¹⁶⁰ and Rahner concurs: “Creative or imaginative writing must be concerned with the concrete, and not try to manipulate abstract principles like puppets in a dance.”¹⁶¹ Yet Rahner distinguishes between the conceptual language of the professional theologian and the lay writer's language of “Christianity . . . made actual in the concrete,”¹⁶² while Haight reminds all religious writers that “theoretical knowledge is always tied to concrete

¹⁵² Karl Rahner, “The Task of the Writer in Relation to Christian Living,” *Theological Investigations* 8, trans. David Bourke (New York: Herder & Herder) 127–28.

¹⁵³ This is Rahner's term (*ibid.* 127).

¹⁵⁴ Regarding the *ex professo* theological author, Rahner declines to elaborate, for “this would constitute a new and quite distinct subject, and in order to deal with it we would have to return to the fundamentals and begin all over again” (*ibid.* 128).

¹⁵⁵ Karl Rahner, “The Future of the Religious Book,” *Theological Investigations* 8, 251–56.

¹⁵⁶ Rahner, “Task of the Writer” 112.

¹⁵⁷ O'Connor, “The Nature and Aim of Fiction” 68.

¹⁵⁸ Rahner, “Future of the Religious Book” 252–53.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 254.

¹⁶⁰ See n. 34 above.

¹⁶¹ Rahner, “Task of the Writer” 120.

¹⁶² See Rahner: “[I]f the theologians were more cautious and more careful in

images,”¹⁶³ since “even our most abstract ideas and propositions always carry along, or imply, or create some concrete imaginative construal.”¹⁶⁴

Third, religious writing engages the imagination as a bridge between concrete reality and the transcendent dimension that it seeks to elucidate. As a tool of the religious writer, the imagination is a creative and constructive activity of the mind that begins “from below” with the raw material of concrete, historical sense experience and forms, orders, reconstructs, and transforms that material into “a new creation” that is fully realized in the act of writing.¹⁶⁵ Such writing, Rahner suggests, “must . . . constantly be making its own original attempts to create [the world of faith] afresh.”¹⁶⁶ However, the prerequisite for a flourishing religious imagination is a climate that recognizes the intrinsic connection between the exercise of imagination and prophetic vision. Thus, O’Connor insists, “An impoverishment of the imagination means an impoverishment of the religious life,” and consequently of religious writing.¹⁶⁷

Fourth, religious writing uses symbol and symbolic communication “as a matter of course” to imagine and evoke the transcendent. Such writing, Rahner avers, “will never speak of God as though it knew all about him and had succeeded in expressing the whole truth . . . in theological statements and moral maxims,” but will rather respect the symbolic nature of its discourse.¹⁶⁸ This article began with a discussion of symbol out of a conviction that all “real” communication is symbolic, whether artistic, scientific, theological, or the language of ordinary conversation. Therefore “the ability to think symbolically and to let the symbols of our religious heritage speak to us” is as crucial for religious writing today as it was when this challenge was first proffered.

Fifth, and finally, if religious writing begins from below, is rooted in the concrete, reaches for transcendence across the bridge of the imagination, and uses symbol and symbolic communication to traverse that bridge, it will be communicative, in the most profound sense of that word, embody-

formulating their theories, and if the laity were bolder in their faith, . . . then the message [of] Christianity . . . would be more comprehensible, more penetrating, and more convincing” (ibid. 127–28, at 128).

¹⁶³ Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God* 37. ¹⁶⁴ Ibid. 191.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Haight’s description of the process of theological imagination: “The imagination . . . may express itself in concrete images or root metaphors; it may use abstract or rationally derived concepts and logic; it may construct models that sum things up or go to the heart of the matter . . . Its goal is to make things fit, to discover a unity in the plurality of the data, to make preliminary sense out of it, to begin to understand it (*Dynamics of Theology* 208).

¹⁶⁶ Rahner, “Future of the Religious Book” 254.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. 191–92.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. 255–56.

ing what Wallace Stevens calls “the bread of faithful speech.”¹⁶⁹ To paraphrase O'Connor, “If the writing grows for you, it is because of the mystery of the Eucharist in it.” Invigorated and challenged by this mystery, it should invite conversation between religious writers of all persuasions who, like Haight and O'Connor, seek faithfully to “reveal mysteries . . . by describing truthfully what [they] see from where [they are].”

¹⁶⁹ Wallace Stevens, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” in *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965) 129.