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Guest-Edited by Julie Ooms

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CALL FOR PAPERS AND BOOK REVIEWS
Introduction

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The border where faith and violence brush up against each other is a fraught and frequently contested one. At this border, faith and violence each sometimes recoil, sometimes clash, sometimes mingle uncomfortably, and sometimes grasp each other tightly and with fervor. We see evidence of this struggle not only in our history and our literature but from our pulpits, every time we turn on the news, and in our daily discussions with colleagues, family, and friends. A colleague teaches about the Crusades; another, at a conference, might mention Mark Noll’s *The Civil War as Theological Crisis* in a conversation about American Civil War literature. A student in class responds, with harsh words that are their own kind of violence, to the reading of the Qur’an in a world literature course; on the drive home that evening, her teacher listens to breaking news coverage of another bombing for which ISIS is claiming responsibility. American Evangelicals may sometimes recoil from, and sometimes embrace, the violent rhetoric of a politician; Europeans may sometimes recoil from, and sometimes embrace, the Muslim refugees in their midst. The places in our work, our reading, our teaching—our public and private lives—where we see violence and faith meet, mingle, and clash are ubiquitous and unavoidable, and it would be hard to disprove that this has always been the case.

The border between faith and violence is contested ground, and because it is, it is ground that must be and has been traversed by people of faith seeking to understand how to live faithfully and well amidst such contention. One of the places in which Christians, in particular, walk along this border is in our careful study of the violence that permeates the books of the Bible, and the ways in which we address it in sermons, in individual study, and in other areas of our worship. How do we, for example, reconcile the Lord of Psalm 103, who is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,” who “does not always chide” and who does not “keep his anger forever,” with the Lord who is the impetus behind the slaughtering of the people of Canaan in the book of Joshua? How do we reconcile Christ’s treatment of the woman caught in adultery in the Gospel of John, in which he spares her a violent death by asking the one without sin to throw the first stone, with the narrative of the Levite and his concubine in Judges 19, in which the Levite allows his concubine to be violently raped all night and finally, after she has died upon the Levite’s host’s doorstep, does further violence to her body by dividing it into twelve pieces? Many other seeming contradictions could be mentioned, in which both the violence of God and his mercy are juxtaposed. Surely, theologians have for centuries taken this tension seriously and have faithfully sought to reconcile what some might seem to be dueling aspects of God’s nature. Just as surely, others have taken these
contradictions to be evidence of the nonexistence of God; violence, after all, is part of the Problem of Evil.

Even Christian theologies of atonement are caught up in the conflict on the border between faith and violence. One Protestant orthodox view of how the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ brought about salvation is one of substitutionary atonement, in which Christ was sent because God’s wrath demanded a sacrifice for sin, and that wrath was satisfied when it was poured out upon a perfect offering: Christ, a perfect substitute for sinners—a substitute of which the sacrifices of animals in the Old Testament had been merely poor, insufficient symbols. Such a view includes the uncomfortable stipulation that in the model of substitutionary atonement, God allows violence to happen to his beloved son in order for his mercy to fall on sinners. There are other views, however, some of which conflict and some of which exist alongside that of substitutionary atonement. For example, there is the model of Gustavo Gutierrez, whose book *A Theology of Liberation* casts the crucifixion in terms of Christ’s connection to the oppressed: in his death, Christ willingly identified himself with those who were oppressed by being oppressed—to the point of death—himself. Such a view does not shy away from the violence of the cross, but it does divert attention away from the idea that it was God’s wrath that put Christ on it. Among other things, this conflict among theories of atonement points not just to areas of theological tension about the crucifixion, but to the uncomfortable, fraught relationship between faith and violence, and the aspects of Christian faith that require us to confront, and even attribute our salvation to, violence.

The conflict between faith and violence reaches beyond our theology to the responses both Christians and other persons of faith have to the violence of war. In discussing this topic, we could mention philosophers. In John Yoder’s lectures on *Nonviolence*, for example, he states: “To be the kind of person who loves one’s enemies, to be a servant, and to be meek are themselves more adequate definitions of doing the will of God than are tactical projections about how to maximize the likelihood of bringing about certain desirable states of the total social system” (113). Reinhold Niebuhr, whose views in *The Irony of American History* conflict with Yoder’s pacifism, maintains that idealism is not enough to guide the individual’s as well as America’s thought and action about history, war, and the use of violence, because it denies the reality of evil within every human heart, and the ease with which our virtues—personal and national—turn to vices: “America’s moral and spiritual success in relating itself creatively to a world community requires, not so much a guard against the gross vices, about which the idealists warn us, as a reorientation of the whole structure of our ideals. That idealism is too oblivious of the ironic perils to which human virtue, wisdom and power are subject” (133). And of course, there are other views than Yoder’s and Niebuhr’s. The philosophical conflicts amongst varieties of Christian pacifism and other Christian views towards the violence of war figure even in the music in our churches. I recall, for example, singing triumphant choruses of “Onward Christian Soldiers” in services as a child, a hymn that likens the Christian life to a battle into which Christ leads us, and compares the Church to a “mighty army”: 
1
Onward, Christian soldiers,
marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus
going on before!
Christ, the royal Master,
leads again the foe;
Forward into battle,
see his banner go!

Onward, Christian soldiers,
marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus
going on before!

2
At the sign of triumph
Satan’s host doth flee;
On, then, Christian soldiers,
on to victory!
Hell’s foundations quiver
at the shout of praise;
Brothers, lift your voices,
loud your anthems raise!

3
Like a mighty army
moves the church of God;
Brothers, we are treading
where the saints have trod;
We are not divided;
all one body we,
One in hope and doctrine,
one in charity.

4
Onward, then, ye people,
join our happy throng,
Blend with ours your voices
in the triumph song;
Glory, laud, and honor,
unto Christ the King;
This thro’ countless ages
men and angels sing.
This song, while it certainly draws from biblical language for its metaphors, contrasts with hymns like “O God of Every Nation,” which plead with God for peace:

1
O God of ev’ry nation,
Of ev’ry race and land.
Redeem the whole creation
With your almighty hand;
Where hate and fear divide us
And bitter threats are hurled,
In love and mercy guide us
And heal our strife-torn world.

2
From search for wealth and power
And scorn of truth and right,
From trust in bombs that shower,
Destruction through the night
From pride of race and station
And blindness to Your way.
Deliver ev’ry nation,
Eternal God, we pray.

3
Lord, strengthen those who labor
That all may find release
From fear of rattling saber,
From dread of war’s increase;
When hope and courage falter,
Your still small voice be heard;
With faith that none can alter,
your servants undergird.

4
Keep bright in us the vision
Of days when war shall cease,
When hatred and division
Give way to love and peace,
Til dawns the morning glorious
When peace on earth shall reign
And Christ shall rule victorious
O’er all the world’s domain.

The tension between these two hymns, and that fact that both are often sung in the same church by the same congregation, is indicative of the complex relationship between faith and violence: we raise our voices as soldiers in a fight against
Satan’s fleeing host, united under one war-banner of Christ, who raises his cross before us; we raise our voices also as those who suffer under the slings and arrows of the present world, and we cry out to God to lead us not into battle, but toward peace.

The topic of this special issue is not only “Faith and Violence,” however; our focus here is on “Faith and Violence in Literature,” and this topic carries with it its own particular difficulties as well as fertile ground for discussion and debate. Within this topic, we find John Donne calling out to God to batter and break him: “Batter my heart, three-person’d God, for you / As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend; / That I may rise and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend / Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new” (115). We also might think, perhaps more immediately, of Flannery O’Connor’s menagerie of grotesques and the violence of the grace imparted in her stories: of Asbury Fox, in “The Enduring Chill,” lying back in bed wracked with fever as the Holy Ghost descends, implacable, “emblazoned in ice,” as a “purifying terror” (382); of Mrs. Turpin in “Revelation,” whom an ugly girl named Mary Grace strikes with a well-aimed book to interrupt her self-absorbed cry of praise to Jesus (499). In C.S. Lewis’s allegorical figure of Aslan in the Lion in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, we meet a resurrected king whose paws claw his enemies but that are velveted amongst those he loves; who is good, but not safe. And in Cormac McCarthy’s The Road, the violence of an apocalyptic landscape filled with desperate, inhuman cannibals is juxtaposed with the love of a father for his son as they “carry the fire”—a love at turns violent, despairing, and tender. In each of these works, hardly a sufficient sample of the literature that considers this contentious border, we see stories of how complex the relationship between faith and violence is, as well as how deeply it figures into human experience and the life of faith.

The six articles in this issue enter the contested ground between faith, violence, and literature from a number of directions. Rachel Roberts’s essay on Anne Dowriche’s The French Historie explores Dowriche’s commentary on three violent incidents from the French Wars of Religion, showing how Dowriche’s Protestant faith allows her to interpret incidents of seemingly senseless violence as part of God’s ultimate plan for his people. Jay Beavers’s essay argues that Cormac McCarthy’s characters Billy Parham and John Grady Cole are motivated by prophetic faith, a type of faith that exists only at the end of all things when all hope has been lost. Gregory Floyd explores the “spiritual ‘reductions’” in the work of Flannery O’Connor and Marilynne Robinson in order to show how each author uses violence to communicate spiritual realities through literature. And Thomas Britt discusses the work of filmmaker Terrence Malick in his essay, exploring the ways in which Malick engages the existence of moral evil through depictions of physical and emotional violence in his films.

The final two articles in this issue, Elizabeth Fredericks’s on teaching Derek Walcott’s poetry and Katie Magaña’s on teaching the memoir I Am Malala, both approach the boundary between faith and violence by discussing approaches to teaching literature at Christian institutions of higher education. Fredericks’s essay explores how teachers can approach an author whose work addresses violence motivated by race and nationality; Magaña’s argues that teachers can use
texts like *I Am Malala*, a book by a Muslim author, to address the concerns of violence, peace, and activism while acknowledging and respecting the complexities that divide Christianity from Islam.

Pedagogical angles are, I think, fitting ones upon which to close this special issue. Though this brief introduction can, unfortunately, do little more than generalize about the ways in which the border between faith and violence is at times contested and at times uneasily traversed, it is through further exploration and teaching that we, as scholars and teachers of faith, can help guide ourselves and our students through this contested landscape. In so doing, perhaps we may make headway; perhaps we may make inroads; perhaps we may allow some battle wounds to heal.

**Note**

1 Yoder’s robust philosophical defense of Christian pacifism is itself complicated and made ironic by the philosopher’s own actions of sexual violence against more than one hundred women; a denominational task force confronted him with thirteen charges of sexual abuse in 1992 (“The Failure to Bind and Loose”).

**Works Cited**


Satan and Saint Bartholomew’s Day: English Protestant Narratives of Huguenot Persecution in Anne Dowriche’s *The French Historie*

Rachel M. Roberts

**Introduction**

In *The French Historie* (1589),\(^1\) which employs what Danielle Clarke describes as “a martyrological mode of historical narration” (166), Anne Dowriche renders into dramatic verse three events from the French Wars of Religion. First, she narrates the Affair of the Rue St. Jacques in 1557, in which a number of Protestants were arrested following an illegal worship service; seven of this group were executed, while others remained imprisoned long-term.\(^1\) In her second section, Dowriche dramatizes the martyr’s death of Annas Burgeus (or Du Bourg) in 1559. He was a Protestant magistrate in Paris who spoke out openly against France’s King Henry II and was executed for treason and sedition.\(^2\) Finally, Dowriche recounts the still-contested events of the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, in which several thousand Protestants died.\(^3\) The Massacre was particularly troubling for Protestants because it followed closely upon a period of greater tolerance for Protestant leaders in France, and because it spread outward from a single politically motivated assassination attempt. In her account, Dowriche attempts to understand how such violence erupted so brutally and so quickly, deciding ultimately that the devil’s influence must be behind such deeds.

*The French Historie* capitalizes on the sixteenth-century popularity of Protestant martyrologies led by John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*.\(^4\) Tales of Christian martyrs have been told since the first martyr, Stephen, met his end (as narrated in Acts 7), but England’s participation in martyrology reflects the complexity of Catholic and Protestant relations in that country. The shifting religious policies of English monarchs (Edward VI, Protestant; Mary I, Catholic; Elizabeth I, Protestant) meant that England boasted both Catholic and Protestant martyrs (Freeman 1). During Elizabeth I’s Protestant reign, England looked back on the Protestants killed by their previous queen, Mary Tudor, as martyrs. These Protestant martyrs were immortalized most famously in Foxe’s ever-expanding and immensely popular *Acts and Monuments*. Dowriche’s *The French Historie*, then, follows Foxe’s successful example of telling the tales of Protestant martyrs.\(^5\) In contrast to Foxe, who focuses primarily on English history and the martyrs therein, Dowriche’s rarely-studied poem leaves the boundaries of England in order to describe the persecution of Protestants in the French Wars of Religion.\(^6\) In her preface, Dowriche explains this choice: “The noble Martirs of England are knowen sufficientlie almost to all; these excellent French Histories were seen but
of a few, being in worthinesse nothing inferior vnto the other.” Dowriche also
versifies her martyrology in a dramatic style, a sharp distinction from Foxe’s terse
prose. Dowriche notes in her preface “To the Reader” that the poetic mode sets
her narration apart from Foxe as well as from the author of her direct source,
Thomas Timme. Timme’s Commentaries (a translation from the French) is a
prose narrative and lacks the direct, dramatic discourse as well as the versification
that Dowriche adds to the tale. She also hopes to “restore again some credit” to
poetry, which she sees as being woefully secularized. Dowriche’s foreign subject
and her divergent form make The French Historie a potential novelty to English
readers; however, Dowriche’s creation of a politically English and rhetorically
Protestant narrative ensures that her audience will place The French Historie
within a strong tradition of English works addressing the violence of religious
persecution.

Dowriche’s recounting of all three events frames them for an English
audience seeking to understand the bitter persecution of their fellow Protestants.
Dowriche primarily accounts for this violence by creating an overarching
narrative of spiritual warfare between the dangerously foreign Catholics and the
Huguenots, who stand as the spiritual relatives of Dowriche’s English Protestant
audience. Dowriche creates this narrative through both literary and political
methods: first, through the rhetorical devices of martyrology and marginal
comments; second, through her political portrayal of both French and English
monarchs in The French Historie. By appealing both to her audience’s Protestant
reading habits and to their English identity, Dowriche emphasizes the physical
and spiritual danger posed by Catholics (and their demonic allies). In response to
this Catholic danger, Dowriche calls upon England and its queen to stand for
Protestantism, which for Dowriche is the manifestation of religious “truth,” in
both spiritual and practical ways. Dowriche’s rhetorical and political devices
together create a narrative in which this religious violence can be rationalized
because it fits into God’s providential plan, offering Protestants—particularly
Dowriche and her readers—the opportunity to rightly interpret these historical
events and, eventually, take action in support of “God’s truth,” or Protestantism.
In other words, Dowriche accounts for religious violence by creating a broad
spiritual narrative that moves her readers from interpretation to action through the
varied narrative techniques of Protestant martyrology, marginal notes that appeal
to Protestant habits of reading, the narrative of complicity and demonic alliance
surrounding the French royal family, and, finally, a patriotic address to England.

Martyrdom and the Marginalized Voice

Dowriche’s French Historie uses two prominent rhetorical devices that
guide Dowriche’s readers to a Protestant interpretation of the text. First, Dowriche
uses the dramatic rhetoric of Protestant martyrology to create from the French
Wars of Religion a narrative of spiritual warfare placing the martyred Protestants,
the guardians of “God’s truth,” in direct conflict with the great deceiver, the devil
himself. Second, Dowriche uses the rhetorical device of marginal glosses, a
Rachel M. Robert

technique with strong ties to Protestant Biblical interpretation, in order to show readers how to truthfully interpret the events she narrates within the relatively new but immensely popular framework of Protestant martyrology.

Despite Dowriche’s poetic style and foreign subject, she engages the martyrological mode of Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* in her *French Historie* (Martin 373). First, Dowriche’s simple style, the straightforward poulter’s measure, reflects Foxe’s matter-of-fact language, allowing the horror and pathos of each martyr’s story to speak for itself (Clarke 162-63). Dowriche’s choice of subject, though foreign, is not antithetical to Foxe’s English martyrology, for Foxe’s 1583 edition of the *Acts and Monuments* includes “A brief Note” on the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre (1583 *Acts and Monuments*, Book 12, pages 2175-2177). Dowriche, however, also includes earlier episodes from the French Wars of Religion and gives far more detail and weight than Foxe does to this foreign tale. Moving beyond these basic correspondences, Dowriche’s *French Historie* espouses several characteristics common to Protestant martyrology. However, in each case Dowriche expands upon these characteristics, including multiple details, voices, and examples to ensure that *The French Historie* provides as many connection points as possible for readers in search of spiritual exempla.

First, martyrs offer edifying role models for readers of martyrology, particularly regarding God’s will and suffering (Piroyansky 122). Dowriche’s first episode, describing Protestants arrested in the Rue Saint Jacques, depicts these prisoners comforting each other with the promise of God’s plan:

Declaring by the word that this came not by chance:
But God was he for some intent which lead this woeful dance.
Perchance to shew his will, perchance to trie their faith,
Perchance to plant his hidden truth by their most happy death…
Thus did they still remaine; to God they did commend
Themselves, their case, content to beare what ever God should
send. (324-27, 336-37)

These martyrs submit themselves to God’s will although, as the repeated “Perchance,” demonstrates, they did not always see clearly the reasons behind God’s direction. This lengthy speculation about God’s will humanizes the martyrs, suggesting that their faith does not give them a better understanding of the future than other mortals, but rather that the martyrs are characterized by a deeper hope in God’s purposes. Dowriche’s readers could understand and emulate such submission even in circumstances less dire than martyrdom, taking the steadfastness of these martyrs as a guide for their own lives.

In addition to promoting the exemplary value of martyrology, Dowriche adopts another common strategy of martyrological writing: she outlines the judgments God sends upon those who persecute these martyrs (Mitchell 73). Both Foxe and Dowriche utilize the bloody death of France’s King Charles IX to illustrate the sentence that awaits persecutors.7 Foxe briefly describes the manner of Charles’s death and concludes that this story “may be a spectable and example to all persecuting kinges and Princes polluted with the bloud of Christian
Martyrs” (1583 Acts and Monuments, Book 12, page 2177). Dowriche, however, literally dissects the ways in which Charles’s death both follows Scriptural precedent and illustrates the exact justice of a “bloody” death for a “bloody” persecutor. Dowriche prefacing her depiction of Charles’s death with several examples detailing how “The Lord according to his law with just reuenging hand / The bloodie tyrants strikes” (2214-15)—for example, the Biblical Abimelech, killed with a millstone dropped by a woman from a city wall in Judges 9. Dowriche then dilates upon how Charles’s death illustrates his faults in life:

The heart that was so proud, now feeleth the bitter paine
Whereat he iested when he saw his faithful subjects slaine.
The eares that would not heare the poore afflicted crie;
But greedelie to sucke their blood would credit euerie lie,
With blood are stopped up that they shall heare no more:
Such heavy plagues for wicked men the Lord hath stil in store.
The mouth that would not speake to doo his brother good,
In steed of words doth vomit out the clotts of filthie blood.
The nose that did detest of Truth the pleasant smell,
From filthie heart doth willinglie the stinking blood expell.
So that we plainlie see, that blood for blood doth crave,
And he shall not escape that seekes his brothers blood to have.

Dowriche’s careful elaboration of each body part and its symbolic connection to the persecutor’s actions illustrates how her martyrology is a message not only to the faithful, but to the wicked as well. In addition, Dowriche here enacts a literary dismemberment, dissecting Charles IX’s body before her readers. This poetic execution demonstrates her skillful use of martyrrological conventions to emphasize God’s hand against those who might harm the faithful Protestants.

Another important function of martyrrology is that it makes a narrative out of seemingly senseless events, affording readers a model for making sense of their own lives. In fact, readers of martyrologies were not expected to become martyrs themselves, but rather to contemplate the events of their own lives in light of the martyrs’ lessons about trust and suffering (Piroyansky 11). Readers who did not expect to face physical martyrdom could still emulate the submission to God’s will and interpretation of events as God’s reward or punishment that martyrs and martyrrological authors displayed. As a result, “sufferings no longer seemed unreasoned or chaotic, but rather part of a moral scheme” (Piroyansky 18). Dowriche carefully crafts the events of The French Historie into a “moral scheme” of spiritual warfare that gives her readers a clear motive for the violence against Protestants, validating the suffering of the French martyrs within a framework that pits Protestants in the service of “God’s Truth” against the forces of darkness—and in The French Historie, that darkness is dramatically centered on the character of Satan himself.

In her preface, Dowriche describes how readers should interpret the speeches she grants to Satan:
Wheresoeuer thou shalt find the Diuel brought in Poëticallie to make any oration to the King and States of France, as in manie places he is: then vnderstand, that vnder those speeches are expressed all the subtilties, villanies, cruelties and policies that were deuised, and by diuelish meanes put in practice against the godly, more liuely to set them down in their colors, as if it came from the diuels owne mouth, as no doubt it came from his spirite.

The speeches given to the devil, then, represent for Dowrieche the truly devilish origins of Protestant persecution, but the words themselves come from Dowrieche’s own invention. Paradoxically, she must—in the service of Protestant truth—feign the voice of the great deceiver and, through her own invention, literally bring her readers face to face with the devil. Interestingly, Christopher Marlowe’s *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (published 1604, but dated by David Bevington from the “late 1580s”) in which the demon Mephistopheles and Lucifer himself are prominent characters, appeared on the English stage within a few years of *The French Historie’s* 1589 publication (Bevington 245). Dowrieche’s Puritan-leaning audience would not necessarily have been theatregoers, but the correspondence between Dowrieche’s and Marlowe’s devils is suggestive. Both the playwright and the poet may be responding to similar cultural questions about the realities of good and evil as they manifest in the world. In some ways, Dowrieche’s Satan is stronger than Marlowe’s devils; the Satan of *The French Historie* “could not beare to see a new reformed life” (157) and goes on the offensive against Protestants, while Marlowe’s Mephistopheles describes how he and his fellow devils will only come to those who are “in danger to be damned” (1.3.52). Dowrieche’s Satan is an active force in the spiritual warfare that underpins the events she dramatizes in *The French Historie*.

Satan plays a role in all three episodes in *The French Historie*, where he is often the instigating presence for cruelty against the Huguenots. Dowrieche sets the stage for spiritual warfare by describing Satan’s preparation for an assault against the gospel:

```
His wilie wilfull craft by long experience bred
Hath taught him now an ancient feat to crush the gospels head.
Now summons he his men and servants to appeare;
Now help me at this need (quoth he) my frends & felows deer.
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(172-75)

Satan’s “ancient feat” turns out to be spreading rumors that distance the king from his subjects; such rumors harm Huguenots in all three sections of *The French Historie*. In the section on the Rue Saint Jacques, Dowrieche again references Satan’s rumors, this time as “the creeping craft of Sathan” (282). In part two, Satan appears like a ranting tragedy villain as he “In furie headlong runnes: he frets, he fumes, he raves” against the gospel (529). Throughout these early episodes, Dowrieche emphasizes Satan’s hostility to the gospel’s truth and his use
of false rumor to discredit and harm Protestants. Dowriche’s measured style also contrasts sharply with Satan’s unruly speeches, making Dowriche’s poem a controlled antidote to the dangerous influence of Satan’s words.

In the third episode of The French Historie, which details the events of the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, Satan plays his most explicitly villainous role. At the beginning of this section, Dowriche narrates how the influence of Protestant figures including Prince Henri of Navarre and the Admiral of France, Gaspard de Coligny “galde him [Satan] to the heart, that where he did deuise / To choake the word, that euen there the more it did arise” (1094-95). Satan’s anger leads him to call a council of “all his mates” (1096), whom Dowriche glosses as “the Queene Mother of France, the Guises, and the rest of the Papists” (marg. note 1100). In the speech that follows, Satan outlines a campaign of deception, instructing the King to “make show” of favor to the Protestant leaders in order to “trap them in your snare” (1112, 1139). Satan is thus the origin of the king’s deceptive kindness to Protestant leaders like Coligny, a kindness that lulls these leaders into complacency and eventually leads to their death when the king’s deception is revealed. Dowriche also strongly stresses Satan’s physical presence among his “mates,” for after their council, he “rose, and thankt them with his heart” (1096, 1148). Satan’s immediate presence and his deceptive role in events leading up to the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre are Dowriche’s addition to her source material; Timme’s Commentaries invokes Satan only in the abstract (as in, “At which good successes Satan was greatly grieued”), not as an actual presence (17). Dowriche’s Satan, a physical embodiment of deception in contrast to “God’s truth,” the Protestant faith, creates a narrative of spiritual warfare out of the seemingly senseless Protestant martyrdoms in France.

While Dowriche uses the character of Satan to solidify her Protestant narrative goals, the Protestant interpretive tradition is more strongly apparent in Dowriche’s use of marginal glosses. Through these glosses, Dowriche interprets French events in light of English Protestant conceptions of truth and interpretation. Her English Protestant audience would already be familiar with such marginal glosses from their reading of the Bible, for the marginal gloss is a well-documented tradition in religious texts. In one study on the subject, Evelyn Tribble notes the distinction between a true “gloss,” designed to assist understanding, and a misleading “gloze,” associated by Tyndale and other Protestants with Catholic glosses that obscured the truth of God’s word (155, 157). However, Protestant Bibles, including those by Tyndale and Luther as well as the Geneva Bible (1560) included copious marginal notes designed to assist readers in interpreting this most important text (Tribble 157-59).

Many of Dowriche’s glosses consist of straightforward clarification, such as those identifying who is speaking (see, for example, marg. notes to 106, 112, and 120). Other glosses provide Scriptural passages in support of the examples mentioned in the text; for instance, in the section detailing “The judgements of the Lord shewed vpon these bloodie persecuters in this first outrage,” nearly every line between 456 and 495 contains a Biblical example of a villain coming to a bad end (Cain, Saul, Jezebel), each with a supporting marginal citation (Genesis 4:15, 1 Samuel 19:10, 1 Kings 19:3). These straightforward comments and supporting
passages establish Dowriche’s voice in the margins of *The French Historie* as an authority who knows the Scriptures and can guide readers in applying Scripture to these events. Dowriche also uses marginal comments to interpret the poem’s text in particularly Protestant ways. These glosses are more than mere descriptors; they add to the readings presented in the poem an incontrovertible Protestant commentary on the evils of Catholicism or the holiness of French martyrs throughout the text. Since in early modern England the religious and the political were deeply tied, Dowriche’s Protestant emphasis foreshadows the more explicitly political lens that Dowriche later turns on the Catholic perpetrators. The following paragraphs contain examples from each of the poem’s three major sections (the Rue Saint Jacques, the trial of Annas Burgeus, and the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre) that demonstrate Dowriche’s Protestant marginal glosses throughout *The French Historie*.

In the first section of the poem, Dowriche’s glosses interpret the actions of the Protestant prisoners captured in the Rue Saint Jacques as signs of their faith and election. Early in the episode, as the Huguenots languish in prison, Dowriche records that these believers are “content to beare what euer God should send” (337) and that they make use of “solemn fasts & praier” to comfort themselves and plead their case before God (338). These descriptions of patient, praying believers clearly establish this group of Huguenots as godly figures, but Dowriche enhances her portrait in her marginal notes. First, she comments, “Patience a notable token of God’s election, and loue” (marg. note 334). Not only does she commend the imprisoned Huguenots; Dowriche describes this patience as proof of their election by God, thus touching on a major point of Protestant doctrine. By emphasizing not only the positivity but the spiritual necessity of patience as proof of election, Dowriche makes this line about the Huguenots’ contentment in prison far weightier than it first appears. Her use of the specifically Protestant vocabulary of election grounds her commentary in theological tradition and emphasizes the holy status of these soon-to-be-martyred figures.

Furthermore, Dowriche continues the commentary with a gloss that makes this holy status accessible to all Protestant readers: “Fasting and praier the onelie best weapons of the godlie in aduersitie” (marg. note 336). In this gloss, Dowriche confirms the holiness of the Huguenots’ choice to employ the “weapons” of prayer and fasting; she also, however, makes this gloss a general statement about “aduersitie.” Any believer facing adversity may take up the weapons of fasting and prayer, so these faithful Huguenots become an example for Dowriche’s Protestant readers in their own adversity. The unsettled state of religion throughout Europe kept the possibility of Protestant martyrdom in mind; meanwhile, the daily life of the sixteenth century, like any age, surely contained enough “adversitie” to make many Protestants desire some sort of godly weapon. Dowriche not only helps her readers discern the election of the imprisoned Huguenots, but she also demonstrates how these men and women could provide a strong example for their English counterparts.

Dowriche’s second major section follows a single martyr, Annas Burgeus (Du Bourg); her marginal comments on his interrogation underscore not only his Protestant identity but also major points of Protestant doctrine. As Burgeus is
questioned about “Saints, and Popish Masse, / Of Purgatorie” (760-61), he emphasizes in his reply Christ’s status as his “onelie staie” (764). Dowriche’s two brief comments on Burgeus’s speech underscore his defense of the Protestant faith. Her first comment is mostly summative: “Burgeus protestation concerning Poperie, & Popish ceremonies” (marg. note 764). However, by terming this a “protestation,” Dowriche intensifies the militantly Protestant nature of Burgeus’s reply. Dowriche next focuses on Burgeus’s claim that Christ is “the onlie heate by faith that purgeth sinne” (768). Her marginal gloss reads, “Christ our onelie Purgatorie. Heb. 1.3.” (marg. note 768). While Burgeus’s phrase only obliquely connects Christ and the Catholic doctrine of purgatory, Dowriche clarifies this association. She also adds a Scriptural reference, unusual for the poem in that it does not contain an exemplary Biblical character. Rather, Hebrews 1:3 describes how Christ “hath by him self purged our sinnes,” supporting Burgeus’s image of Christ as the “heate” that burns off the sinful nature. Dowriche’s clarification of Burgeus’s reference to purgatory, as well as her addition of Scriptural support, make this marginal gloss particularly authoritative for her Protestant readers, as she draws their attention to one of the main points of controversy between Catholicism and Protestantism: the existence of purgatory, where believers are purged from their sin before entering heaven. In emphasizing Christ as a purgative figure for believers, Dowriche reminds her readers that Protestants have no need of purgatory, clarifying Burgeus’s speech and assisting her readers in interpreting his Protestant declaration. This marginal interpretation of one of her characters gives Dowriche’s voice Scriptural weight.

The third major section of Dowriche’s French Historie treats the events of the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre. At a particularly significant point in this narrative, Dowriche directly addresses her readers in a marginal gloss, creating a voice that is not merely helpful in interpreting events but that tells readers how they ought to react to the horrors of St. Bartholomew’s Day. This comment attends the death of Theligni, Coligny’s son-in-law, to whom Dowriche grants a lengthy speech in which he regrets encouraging Coligny to trust Catholic speeches. The epitaph for this character in the text itself is simple, “Thus came this noble impe vntimelie to his graue, / For that he to a Papists oath too great affiance gaue” (1863-64). Theligni’s misstep of trust is emphasized, as is the “vntimelie” nature of his martyr-like death. However, in the margin (corresponding to an asterisk before “Papists”), Dowriche commands, “Beware of the guilfull promises of the Papists” (marg. note 1864). Her tone here is atypical for The French Historie because Dowriche addresses readers directly in a surprisingly firm tone that creates an intimate relationship between author and reader. Dowriche’s marginal glosses, even those that add inflammatory descriptors or emphasize Protestant agendas, are almost exclusively third-person, maintaining a certain distance from readers. This gloss, however, commands her readers to “Beware of…Papists,” emphasizing that fear of “guilfull promises” proposed by deceptive Catholics remained strong in Dowriche’s day. Again, as with the character of Satan, Dowriche’s text contrasts the deception of Catholics with the truth of the Protestant faith—as well as of Protestant interpretation, demonstrated in Dowriche’s glosses. Dowriche’s unusual direct address to her
readers in the margin of her text enhances the authority already in place from previous interpretive glosses; here, however, she allows her own voice to firmly command her readers’ actions as well as emotions.

In marginal comments such as these, Dowriche enhances the Protestant agenda of her text, emphasizes the Protestant nature of the Huguenot martyrs, and directly applies the events narrated in *The French Historie* to her readers. Marginal glosses, particularly in religious texts, can create confusion for readers: Where does textual authority reside? (Tribble 157). Dowriche suggests, through these glosses, that authority remains with her own voice, in the margins of the text. In this way, Dowriche’s glosses can be read as a powerful statement of authority whereby a literally marginalized voice is the most direct source of authority within the text. This marginalized voice is important for Dowriche as both a Protestant and a woman writer. The Protestants of whom she writes in *The French Historie* are marginalized, persecuted by the Catholic powers, who in turn are aided by Satan. Although Dowriche’s audience would have been English Protestants who were not marginalized in this way, the importance of the marginal voice parallels the martyrs’ voices that Dowriche dramatizes, challenging her readers to pay greater attention to the suffering of Protestants outside of England. In addition, Dowriche herself, as a woman writer in the realms of history and religion, is a marginalized figure. Even in the text of *The French Historie*, most of the voices and characters are male. By granting such interpretive power to the voice of the marginal gloss—a voice that corresponds closely to Dowriche’s own—she also suggests that marginalized voices of all kinds have the potential to be authoritative.

Dowriche thus dramatically utilizes both the rhetoric of martyrrology, including the voice of Satan, and an authoritative marginal interpreter to guide her readers into a Protestant narrative of spiritual warfare against Catholicism. Even more significantly, the powerfully interpretive voice of the marginal gloss challenges Dowriche’s readers to notice marginalized voices of all kinds, including Dowriche’s own voice as a woman writer and—most significantly in the context of religious persecution—the marginalized voices of the French Protestants against whom such violence is perpetrated.

**Treachery Monarchs and a Warning to England**

Dowriche’s narrative of spiritual warfare also includes political figures of the early modern world, drawing attention to the practical, as well as the spiritual, impact of persecution. One such political facet in *The French Historie* is the narrative of complicity centered on the French royal family’s participation in the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre. In this narrative, Dowriche repeatedly warns her readers to be wary of Catholic leadership. The interconnectedness of religion and politics in early modern England and France makes Dowriche’s warnings about deceptive Catholicism strikingly political. Dowriche’s treatment of the two powerful queens in this tale, Catherine de’ Medici and Elizabeth I, adds questions of gender to the already complex religious and political discussion by providing
contrasting portraits, one queen doing the devil’s work, the other called upon to do God’s. Dowriche’s address to Elizabeth I, in fact, explicitly urges England’s queen and her subjects to act in ways congruent with “God’s truth.” In these passages, Dowriche recommends not only spiritual awareness, but political action in support of persecuted Protestants. Thus Dowriche’s French and English political references, bound up as they are in the religious violence of her time, go beyond mere observation to recommend that her readers apply the lessons of the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre to their spiritual and political lives.

Although many aspects of the Massacre remain matters of intense debate, the basic sequence is as follows: on August 23, 1572, an assassin shot but failed to kill Gaspard de Coligny, the Admiral of France and a staunch Huguenot. The next morning, royal troops killed Coligny and other Protestants among the nobility who were with him. From that precise strike against Protestant leaders, remarkable violence spread among the common people of Paris and eventually to several French provinces. Dowriche portrays the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre as the result of premeditated deception on the part of the King of France (Charles IX). In fact, according to Dowriche, King Charles IX promotes a match between his sister, Marguerite de Valois, and the Protestant Henri of Navarre “in hope to catch / Them all within his snare” by inviting Protestants to the wedding and then killing them (1218-19). In presenting the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre as the fruit of a long-laid plot of Charles IX’s, Dowriche is following the example of her contemporaries (Jouanna 5). Protestants both in France and throughout Europe were hard-pressed to find a meaningful explanation for how the hopeful Valois-Navarre wedding could be so closely followed by the kind of violence that left thousands dead and brutalized. With the long eye of history, scholars have identified a nexus of economic, political, and religious tensions that contributed to Paris’s unsettled state. However, contemporary Protestant observers could make sense of the juxtaposition of tolerance (at the wedding) and brutality (the Massacre) only by reinterpreting the tolerant wedding as a deceptive trap that set up the brutal Massacre (Jouanna 5-6). Dowriche’s French Historie participates in this reinterpretation, attempting to make sense of sudden violence by viewing it as part of a deep-laid plot. Dowriche focuses her interpretation on the French royal family; because the Historie is also an instructive work, Dowriche ultimately uses Charles IX and the Queen Mother, Catherine de’ Medici, as negative examples for her English audience, including Queen Elizabeth I. Dowriche’s reinterpretation of the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre thus eventually leads her English readers to consider their own role in reacting to religious violence and aiding their fellow Protestants.

Interpreting the events leading up to the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre as premeditated treachery requires Dowriche and her contemporaries to vilify the French royal family, starting with King Charles IX (Jouanna 6). Dowriche enthusiastically blackens Charles’s character, using marginal glosses and narrative remarks to indicate his treachery. For instance, Charles’s reassurance to Coligny is glossed as “The fained words of the King to the Admirall” (marg. note 1325); the king’s oath to “reuenge [Coligny] by death of God I sweare” receives the condemnation, “This King was a horrible blasphemer” (marg. note 1331). By
reminding her readers that Charles’s reassurances are “fained.” Dowriche condemns his use of deception with regards to Coligny. Similarly, Dowriche’s emphasis on the King’s blasphemy solidifies Charles’s villainous character; in addition, portraying the king as a blasphemer marks him as a particularly spiritual type of villain, one who perpetuates spiritual, not just physical, injustice. Dowriche does not restrict her vilification of Charles IX to the margins, however; just after Charles’s reassuring words to Coligny, Dowriche’s narrator interjects, “O leauf and filthie lie! vnseemlie for a King” (1516). In this condemnation, Charles is not just a liar or blasphemer among fellow sinful humans; rather, Dowriche emphasizes the particular “unseemliness” of deception in a king. Thus Dowriche explicitly condemns Charles IX as both king and man, using marginal glosses and narrative interjections to blacken his character and emphasize his deceptive part in the events of St. Bartholomew’s Day.

Of course, as an English writer, Dowriche has patriotic as well as religious reasons to condemn the French king. England and France were old political enemies. England’s increasing nationalism and its sense of being a beleaguered Protestant bastion against such countries as France and Spain gave English readers additional reasons to be suspicious of Charles IX. Dowriche’s vilification of the French monarch thus stems from national or political, as well as religious, influences, and this political background enhances the willingness of English readers to accept the grim portrait of Charles IX that Dowriche paints. This pro-English, anti-French impulse adds to Dowriche’s authority as she draws moral lessons from this incident for her English readers.

The Queen Mother, Catherine de’ Medici, fares little better than her son in Dowriche’s French Historie. After Coligny’s attempted assassination, the Queen Mother stands up to speak before the King and his inner circle “like a diuelish sorceresse” (1414). The glosses to the speech that follow, in which she urges her listeners to seize “the profered time” to rid themselves of Protestant opposition (1433), capitalize on Catherine’s Italian background as Dowriche declares, “The queen mother was a good scholer of that diuel of Florence, Machiauel, of whom she learned manie bad lessons” (marg. note 1432). By emphasizing these Machiavellian aspects to Catherine’s speech, Dowriche blackens the Queen Mother’s character, suggesting that her Italian heritage has contributed to Catherine’s deceptive actions.

For English readers in 1589, Italy would have been associated not just with Machiavellian strategy but with Catholicism. As the center of the Roman Catholic Church, Italy represented the place from which Catholicism—and thus the recent abuses of Protestants—emanated. While Dowriche’s marginal comments here explicitly focus on the political aspect of Catherine de’ Medici’s Italian heritage, this Catholic undertone would have been clearly perceptible to an English Protestant audience. Dowriche’s readers are thus prepared to see, just a few lines later, that “The Queen mother was the chiefe deuiser of this bloodie strategem,” in reference to the attack on Protestant leaders (marg. note 1539). Catherine, as much as, if not more than, her son, is a chief player in the dark events Dowriche narrates. By placing the Queen Mother in the center of the St. Bartholomew’s Day events, Dowriche adds a sinister figure to the narrative arc of
premeditated treason and violence against Protestants. Catherine’s villainous character enhances Dowriche’s critique of the French royal family and their role in the Massacre.

While Catherine de’ Medici is a historical figure whose actions and motivations are the object of serious study for many scholars, Dowriche’s dramatic techniques and historical “amplification” (a term she uses in her preface), which result in Catherine’s strong speeches, also make Dowriche’s Catherine a literary character who reveals this author’s own rhetorical and interpretive goals. In fact, Elaine Beilin suggests that “Catherine de Medici may be the first female character created by a woman writer of this period” (“‘Some Freely’” 106). The other speakers in the text of The French Historie—Burgeus, Coligny, the King—are male. Catherine, the lone female speaker in the text, is a villain and an ally with Satan (a hard pill to swallow for modern readers who often look to women writers for positive portraits of women). However, Catherine’s speech is also the site of some of Dowriche’s most elaborate marginal notes, ones that spill from the side margin into the lower margin of the page as if to demonstrate Dowriche’s zeal to counteract Catherine’s speeches. Catherine’s words allow Dowriche to enter into a lively debate with her through the active marginal voice. In addition, Catherine also evokes other strong female figures—both negative and positive—that would be of concern to Dowriche’s English audience.

One such figure is Catherine’s own former daughter-in-law, the recently-executed Mary Stuart. Mary was beheaded in 1587 at Elizabeth I’s order for her role in the Babington plot, which planned Elizabeth’s assassination and England’s invasion by a foreign army. Although Mary’s policies during her personal rule in Scotland aimed at compromise between her Catholic and Protestant subjects, Mary’s behavior at her execution emphasized her Catholic faith as she held up a crucifix, prayed aloud in Latin and English, and wore red, the color of martyrdom (Warnicke 92-93, 249-50). In fact, Mary was considered by many contemporary Catholics as a martyr for their faith (Warnicke 255). Mary Stuart’s Catholic identity thus placed her in opposition to Dowriche’s Protestant audience. Mary’s strong ties to France made many in England uneasy, including Elizabeth herself, who in the wake of the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre feared that Mary’s partisans in Scotland would receive aid from the French (Warnicke 198). Dowriche’s audience would thus have seen Mary Stuart as a threat to English Protestants, and the Scottish queen’s recent execution and subsequent status as a martyr would have kept her place in this religious conflict alive.

Additionally, Mary’s participation in the Babington plot (see Wornald 182) would, in connection with her Catholic identity and French ties, have appeared to Dowriche’s readers as yet another example of the kind of Papist treachery Dowriche sees in the behavior of Charles IX and Catherine de’ Medici. Writing just two years after Mary Stuart’s execution, Dowriche could have expected her audience to connect Mary’s Catholicism, French lineage, and Papist plotting with the villainies of the French Catholics she details in The French Historie. In this case, Dowriche’s narrative of royal complicity and Catholic (even Satanic) plotting is a direct warning to England, for while Mary was no longer a
threat, such events as the Babington plot demonstrated the danger that Catholics posed to England’s queen. By evoking the duplicity of Catholics, with Mary Stuart’s life and death relatively fresh in her readers’ minds, Dowriche cautions her English audience that such Papist plotting is not limited to France, while once again, by contrast, emphasizing Protestantism’s alliance with “God’s truth.” In this way she authoritatively instructs her readers to apply the lessons of history to their own religious and political situation.

The historical and moral lessons Dowriche emphasizes with respect to Mary Stuart and Catherine de’ Medici have a clear target in another powerful early modern queen: England’s Elizabeth I. As Mihoko Suzuki has argued, the strong female voice of Catherine de’ Medici deliberately evokes Elizabeth. These two powerful figures were often compared, frequently in recounting the dangers of female rule—a subject Dowriche does not take up (Suzuki 182). Rather, Catherine de’ Medici’s manipulative rhetoric and the cruelty she displays in her speeches warn Elizabeth against any deception or cruelty in her own rule. England continued to preserve an alliance with France well after the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, and Elizabeth herself disapproved of the role of Protestants in rebelling against the monarchy during the French Wars of Religion (Suzuki 183). This sympathy toward France and disapproval of any stripe of Protestant would be a warning sign to Dowriche and her contemporaries. More explicitly, these signs of favor toward the Catholic powers in France could suggest to Dowriche that Elizabeth is in both political and spiritual danger. By portraying Catherine de’ Medici as a powerful female ruler who is oppressive and who is, in fact, allied with the devil, Dowriche warns Elizabeth I about the spiritual and political dangers of any sympathy for Catholic France.

In addition to this oblique address, Dowriche speaks directly to Elizabeth in the voice of her French narrator, who devotes at least half of the Historie’s conclusion to England. This narrator expresses the hope that France’s upheavals will teach its neighbor and rival to act decisively.

The Lord grant England peace and mercie from aboue,  
That from the Truth no trouble may their fixed heart remoue  
With wished life and health Lord long preserue and keepe  
That Noble Queene Elizabeth chiefe Pastor of thy sheepe:  
And that she maie finde out, and hunt with perfect hate  
The Popish hearts of fained frends before it be too late:  
And that in wofull France the troubles that we see,  
To England for to shun the like, may now a warning be.  
And where our wound is seene as ye so fresh to bleede,  
Lord grant to England that they maie in time take better heede.  
(2289-2298)

In this passage, Dowriche’s narrator calls on the “Noble Queene Elizabeth” to act decisively against deceptive Catholics (2292). The term “pastor” is particularly significant, since as Queen of England Elizabeth was also head of the English
Church (Wynne-Davies 285n2248). Thus Dowriche, by addressing the queen, also addresses all English Protestants with particular instructions.

First, the “Popish hearts” that Elizabeth is supposed to “hunt with perfect hate” are those belonging to “fained friends” (2294, 2293). These “fained friends” are surely the same Catholics (particularly Charles IX and Catherine de’ Medici) whom Dowriche implicates in her St. Bartholomew’s Day narrative. Thus Dowriche reminds her readers that Catholicism may result in treachery that causes danger to monarch and subject alike. Second, Dowriche has her Frenchman clearly name his tale a “warning” to England (2296), suggesting that English readers must “take better heede” (2298) than their French neighbors of the dangers of Catholicism. In the voice of her French exile, then, Dowriche clearly applies the tales of French persecution to English readers, reminding them that it is necessary to be constantly on guard against the dangerous enemies of “Truth.”

This direct address to Elizabeth also highlights the gendered aspects of Dowriche’s authority. While the dangerous figure of Catherine de’ Medici is one foil for Elizabeth, Dowriche also creates a contrast between the evil figure of France’s King Charles IX and the benevolent Queen Elizabeth I, creating a binary opposition between the evil king and the good queen. As a woman writer, moreover, Dowriche herself, the most outspoken woman in *The French Historie*, is directly addressing England’s female queen. Dowriche’s address to Elizabeth highlights the contrast between, on one hand, the French king whose subjects—like Dowriche’s narrator—must flee his country, and, on the other, England’s queen, in whose country the French narrator now rests.

In fact, an earlier reference to England, at the beginning of *The French Historie*, emphasizes the benevolent side of England, describing that country’s blessed state:

> I will no more lament in sad and mourning stile,  
> But thanke the Lord that set me safe within this pleasant Ile.  
> O happie England, thou from God aboue art blest,  
> Which hast the truth established with peace and perfect rest…  
> But still thou maist remaine as thou hast been of yore,  
> A Nurse to God’s afflicted flock, that he maie blesse thee more? (91-94, 98-99)

Calling England both “pleasant” and “happie,” Dowriche compliments her native land through the voice of her French narrator. Again, the “truth” for Dowriche refers to the Protestant faith, so England’s position as an establishment of truth emphasizes its Protestant character. If “peace and perfect rest” is a bit of an exaggeration for a country still struggling with religious divisions, England probably would look like a restful haven to a French Huguenot. This string of compliments directed at England appeals to Dowriche’s readers, showing that she has a proper understanding of her country’s worth and its alignment with the all-important Protestant “truth.”

However, this passage’s final question, addressing whether England will remain “A Nurse to God’s afflicted flock” (99) offers a challenge to English
readers—both Elizabeth and her subjects. Like Dowriche’s fictional French narrator, persecuted Huguenots fled to England; Dowriche’s brother, Piers Edgecombe, to whom The French Historie is dedicated, is one of the signatories on a letter of invitation to displaced French, Dutch, and Italian Protestants, encouraging them to relocate to available lands in Devon (Oldenburg 60). Dowriche was thus acquainted with the movement of religious refugees into England. Her suggestion that England “[n]urse” the “afflicted” French Protestants is more than mere poetic exaggeration. Rather, it is a decisive call to action. Her English readers should, of course, gain spiritual lessons from The French Historie and use those lessons to better defend God’s truth. However, England—and its queen—can also physically “[n]urse” the persecuted French Protestants by providing aid and space for real-life versions of Dowriche’s French narrator. Dowriche authoritatively recommends to both queen and country that they embrace the “afflicted flock” of persecuted Protestants, thus ensuring that England will remain “happie” both by relieving suffering and by defending God’s people and thus receiving his blessing.

In these addresses to England—both direct and indirect—as well as in her narrative of royal complicity and Catholic deception, Dowriche offers political advice to readers of The French Historie. They are to be suspicious of the deception of Catholics and the tyranny of Catholic monarchs; as English subjects they are to uphold England’s position as a country friendly to “God’s truth,” even to the opening of their borders to Protestant refugees. Dowriche also addresses Elizabeth I, encouraging the queen to “pastor” her country, uphold Protestant truth, and welcome the persecuted into her fold.

Conclusion

Anne Dowriche uses The French Historie as a way to understand religious violence. She uses both rhetorical and political methods, asking her readers to interpret acts of persecution in light of a larger narrative of martyrdom, Biblical scholarship, and spiritual warfare. Finally, however, Dowriche challenges her English Protestant readers to take action in the service of “God’s truth”—not only to take up the mantle of spiritual warfare, but also to reach out to those displaced by religious violence. Thus Dowriche’s poem, emphatic about the importance of Protestant reading and prayer, also has a political motivation, moving readers away from simple belief towards action reminiscent of the developing Protestant work ethic. Dowriche’s rhetorical movement from proper spiritual interpretation (martyrology, marginal commentary) to direct action (the narrative of French royal complicity, the challenge to England) demonstrates that, for Dowriche at least, religious violence should spur action. Dowriche’s own language is often inflammatory and violent, sometimes evoking an “eye for eye” approach to persecution. However, her plea for England to “[n]urse” those displaced by religious violence also asks her readers—once they have considered and interpreted the situation in light of the larger narrative of spiritual warfare—to take positive action that will relieve the sufferings of fellow Protestants. In other
words, Dowriche creates a narrative out of the Protestant persecution during the French Wars of Religion that calls on her readers to become spiritually and personally involved in the struggle to overcome deception and violence with the Protestant message of “God’s truth.”

Notes

1 Anne Dowriche, The French Historie: That is; A lamentable Discourse of three of the chiefe, and most famous bloodie broiles that haue happened in France for the Gospell of Iesus Christ. London: Orwin, 1589. I quote throughout from the digital facsimile available through Early English Books Online, regularizing long s in each quotation. Part or all of this poem is also available in anthologies by Travitsky, Martin, and Wynne-Davies.

2 According to Donald R. Kelley, those executed included “two…students, two lawyers…a physician” and a young woman, Philippe de Luns (92). The Affair of the Rue St. Jacques is often seen as a step in the escalation of violence against Huguenots during the late 1550s, when, as David Nicholls notes, “burnings of heretics were ceasing to be extraordinary occasions” (69).

3 Burgeus is referred to as Anne Du Bourg in most modern histories. Mack P. Holt writes that Du Bourg was the “most notorious” of the Protestant supporters in the Parliament of Paris (41) and that he “sealed his own fate when from prison he wrote a treasonous pamphlet” suggesting that the French people did not need to obey a monarch who went against the will of God (41).

4 In teasing out the massacre’s history and varied interpretations, I have found the work of Arlette Jouanna, Barbara Diefendorf (Beneath the Cross and A Brief History With Documents), Mack P. Holt, David Potter, and Luc Racaut to be most useful. The facts of the massacre are linked with the (unsurprisingly) partisan narratives of the time; even today, as Jouanna notes in The St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, historians remain divided upon major questions surrounding this event (1). The precise number of deaths is one point of debate among historians. Jouanna records a “plausible” estimate of 3,000 deaths in Paris and perhaps as many as 10,000 throughout France (3). Diefendorf’s total estimate is 5,000-6,000 (A Brief History, 1); the only true consensus is that the violence was widespread and brutal.

5 Foxe’s Acts and Monuments went through four editions in Foxe’s lifetime (1563, 1570, 1576, 1583), each with revisions and additions. These editions are collected at John Foxe’s The Acts and Monuments Online (Humanities Research Institute Online, 2011, 5 November 2015).

6 The French Historie is Dowriche’s only known work of length. Unfortunately, as Elaine Beilin notes, “we do not know about the reception of The French
Historie or about the existence of any sequels” (140). Dowriche also wrote a commendatory poem, “Verses written by a Gentlewoman, vpon the laylors Conuersion” to accompany a printed sermon of her husband’s (Hugh Dowriche, *The laylors Conuersion*, 1596). According to Joann Ross, “George Boase also credits Dowriche with *A Frenchman’s Songe, made upon the death of ye French King who was murdered in his own Court, by a traiterous Fryer of St. Jacobs order, 1st Aug. 1589*. Unfortunately, no copy of this later work is known to have survived” (115).

7 Dowriche’s poem is anthologized by Marion Wynne-Davies, Randall Martin, and Betty Travitsky. The work of Beilin (“‘Some Freely’” and *Redeeming Eve*), White (“Power Couples” and “Women Writers”), Matchinske, and Suzuki establishes a strong, if still compact, tradition of scholarship on Dowriche’s writing.

8 Charles IX died on 30 May 1574. He had never been robust; the later stages of his illness, probably tuberculosis, were heralded by “watery blood that seemed to seep from the pores of his body” as well as the more usual coughing or vomiting blood (Frieda 292).

9 I am operating under the assumption that Dowriche is the author of her marginal glosses, since they include interpretive commentary that supports her Protestant viewpoint; glosses could also be editorial, as in the case of Biblical commentary.

10 Secular texts also had their share of marginal glosses, or glozes; the most-studied example from the English Renaissance is undoubtedly Edmund Spenser’s *The Shepheards Calendar* (1579), with its commentary by “E.K.” The work of William W.E. Slight (“Edifying Margins” and *Managing Readers*) expands upon marginal glosses, while John N. King’s *Tudor Books and Readers* places this convention within broader print culture.

11 Clarke also notes the parallel between the Geneva Bible’s instructive marginalia and Dowriche’s (*The Politics of Early Modern Women’s Writing*, 164), as does Beilin (“‘Some Freely Spake Their Minde,’” 135).

12 Slight lists a variety of purposes for marginal glosses that includes amplification, annotation, emphasis, exhortation, explication, organization, and translation (*Managing Readers*, 25-26). Dowriche frequently uses amplification, annotation, and emphasis; but, as discussed more fully below, she also interprets events for her readers in a sort of extended explication or exhortation.

13 Beilin notes that Dowriche’s version of this speech, as compared to Timme’s, involves “clarifying the Scriptural basis of Burgeus’s thought” (“‘Some Freely’” 135).
Charles de Téligny, whom Jouanna describes as a more “moderate” Protestant than his father-in-law (24). Jouanna also mentions Téligny as supporting Coligny in his decision not to flee from Paris (89) and perhaps using inflammatory language regarding the attack on Coligny (101).

Clarke argues that the political aspect of Dowriche’s work is best summed up in “the need for political acumen on the part of the believers” (164). Beilin’s “‘Some Freely Spake Their Minde’” is another important text for the political aspect of Dowriche’s work.

The extent to which Charles IX (and his mother, whose role is discussed more fully below) was involved in planning any part of this tragedy is a matter of great debate that continues to the present day. Holt references what is probably the lowest common denominator of consensus; “whoever came up with the idea [of moving against Coligny and other Huguenot nobles], the king and Queen Mother supported it” (84). It also seems fairly clear that whatever intention was present did not extend to the mass killing of Parisian citizens (see Holt 85).

In fact, Catherine was from Florence herself; Jouanna notes that her background “facilitated the risky deduction that she was influenced by the Florentine Machiavelli” (7). This reference to Machiavelli is one of the more frequently analyzed passages in Dowriche’s work, as exemplified in the articles by N.W. Bawcutt, R.W.F. Martin, and Randall Martin.

Mary had strong ties to the French royal family; her mother was Mary of Guise, the sister of the duke of Guise and the Cardinal of Lorraine, both of whom Dowriche figures as sinister figures in the French royal plot against Huguenots. Moreover, Mary’s first husband was Francis II of France, to whom she was betrothed as a child. Mary was subsequently raised in the French court—largely, in fact, by Catherine de’ Medici (Warnicke 32-45).

**Works Cited**


“To hold what cannot be held”: Violence and Prophetic Revelation in Cormac McCarthy’s Border Trilogy

Jay Aaron Beavers

The novels of Cormac McCarthy have rightly earned a reputation for violence as well as for raising difficult philosophical and theological questions. Alongside depictions of extreme suffering, the novels ask questions of faith and belief to which there do not seem to be easy answers. Many critics have understandably concluded that the novels all gesture toward a nihilistic understanding of the world in which violence is both ever-present and meaningless. At best, according to scholars like Dianne Luce or Leo Daugherty, McCarthy’s works may suggest a Gnosticism in which the one truth of reality is the eternal conflict between light and darkness, spirit and matter, humanity and nature. According to such readings, there is a fundamental incompatibility between the violence, suffering, and pain in the world and the desire for faith in a good God that may eventually bring an end to affliction.

Many critics have tended to assume that the general absence of any real mitigation or resistance to the violence and suffering of the novels means that McCarthy either endorses destructive conflict or accepts it as the status quo. Vereen Bell set the terms of the debate early in the history of McCarthy criticism by declaring that McCarthy’s metaphysical position is “none, in effect—no first principles, no foundational truth, Heraclitus without Logos (Bell 9).” Denis Donoghue concurs, suggesting that the novels are essentially nihilistic because they offer the reader no place to stand and offer judgment on the frequently horrible actions of the characters (“Reading ‘Blood Meridian’” 401). Tim Parrish tries to explain the apparent futility of establishing clear ethical guidelines in McCarthy’s work by suggesting that the novels represent a world in which good and evil are in fact interwoven and dependent on one another (Parrish 73). This reading suggests that Donoghue is right and that there is no difference between the violence sometimes perpetrated by the apparently “good” characters like John Grady and Billy and the violence carried out by the “evil” characters like Judge Holden, Anton Chigurh, or Eduardo.

Critics have tried in various ways to explain the meaning of the violence found in the novels without reference to moral categories. Some suggest that if McCarthy’s representation of violence and suffering cannot support a moral or ethical reading, perhaps it is a means by which characters attempt to arrogate divine qualities to themselves (Ciuba 78). Scholars like Brian Evenson probe the relationship between violence and society, suggesting that McCarthy often depicts a durable and lasting violence that itself becomes a foundation for other social structures (43). In a similar vein, James Dorson argues that McCarthy’s novels
gesture towards the primal moment at which violence becomes reified in law, which then sets about covering over its origins (108). John Cant argues that violence perpetuates a “counter-myth” that reveals the fallacy of the American myths of progress and Manifest Destiny (7). But other critics argue that the violence in the novels is not meant to mean anything or deconstruct anything (Phillips 435). Violence simply exists in the world, so it exists in McCarthy’s novels as an innate characteristic of humanity (Shaviro 146; Evans 538).

On the other hand, there may be a way to address some of the questions raised by the violence of McCarthy’s dark landscapes that still leaves room for the kind of Judeo-Christian faith that McCarthy’s characters seem to flirt with from time to time. After all, violence and faith are not fundamentally incompatible in either Jewish or Christian faiths. Christians must be comfortable with violence in order to accept the work of Christ on the cross, but it becomes difficult to imagine any goodness coming from violence and suffering that are not in some way explained as meaningful or purposeful. It may be possible, however, to explain the relationship between the violence of the novels and the questions of faith often raised by his characters by drawing on a persistent element in McCarthy’s work: prophetic characters. The Old Testament prophets to whom McCarthy often alludes were men and women who were themselves intimately aware of the presence of suffering in the world and who also struggled to persuade their hearers to remain obedient to God, even, and especially, when he seemed to have abandoned his people to violence and exile.

McCarthy’s novels are filled with prophetic characters, both false and true. Though prophets are commonly understood as those bearing divine revelation about the future, the truth is that prophets were always primarily concerned with the present status of the people they served. Their role was not to foretell doom but to draw the people of God into a conversation and relationship with Yahweh and to admonish the community to extend charity to neighbor and stranger alike. The theologian Walter Brueggemann writes that the role of the prophet is to “nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around [them]” (13, italics in original). The prophets’ task is thus two-fold: they must criticize and contradict the dominant culture, something Brueggemann terms the “royal consciousness,” that is marked by stasis and the denial of the legitimacy of tradition, authority, and responsibility for others (42); and they must evoke and gesture towards an alternative reality rooted in the radical freedom and goodness of God (23).

The central prophetic characteristics of criticism and the gesture towards an alternative reality are both found, to varying degrees, in the main characters of McCarthy’s Border Trilogy: John Grady Cole and Billy Parham.1 In the end, as I argue, the central prophetic characteristic shared by both John Grady and Billy is their consistent willingness to care for others despite their complete failure to protect them. In other words, they are obedient to the prophetic calling to care for the weak and marginalized in society not because acts of charity have any positive effect on the world, but because of a deeply felt sense of righteousness and
responsibility. With their actions, more than their words, John Grady and Billy criticize the dominant culture of violence and self-interest and bear witness to the possibility of an alternative reality based on charity and mercy.

Both characters and the narrator develop a motif in Border Trilogy of messengers who are ignorant of the message they bear. Both John Grady and Billy are pictured as such messengers. In one scene, Billy “sit[s] the horse by the roadside like some pale witness of ill omen” (The Crossing 371), and in another he has “every air of those bearing grave news” (The Crossing 299), but the reader is given no indication that Billy knows the news he bears. Similarly, John Grady Cole is also described in terms that suggest he bears news silently:

After a while he pulled his hat down hard over his eyes and stood and placed his hands outstretched on the roof of the cab and rode that manner. As if he were some personage bearing news for the countryside. As if he were some newfound evangelical being conveyed down out of the mountains and north across the flat bleak landscape toward Monclova. (All the Pretty Horses 217)

The characters thus seem to possess the look of the prophet without any indication that they have any revelation to bring. In one key scene, however, the reader is offered an explanation for this seeming incongruity. Billy is told that

the truth may often be carried about by those who themselves remain all unaware of it. They bear that which has weight and substance and yet for them has no name whereby it may be evoked or called forth. They go about ignorant of the true nature of their condition, such are the wiles of truth and such its stratagems. Then one day in that casual gesture, that subtle movement of divestiture, they wreak all unknown upon some ancillary soul a havoc such that that soul is forever changed, forever wrenched about in the road it was intended upon and set instead upon a road heretofore unknown to it. This new man will hardly know the hour of his turning nor the source of it. He will himself have done nothing that such great good befall him. Yet he will have the very thing, you see. Unsought for and undeserved. He will have in his possession that elusive freedom which men seek with such unending desperation. (The Crossing 158)

The truth, then, may be borne by people unawares; anyone may stand as a prophet for another and, almost by accident, reveal the truth that leads to freedom. Even among the ancient Hebrew prophets, God’s revelation did not always come in the expected fashion, and it was frequently borne by those who were not prophets or who were false prophets in the service of the king rather than Yahweh. So it is possible to read the characters in the Border Trilogy as bearing prophetic messages for others without being aware of it.
John Grady and Billy often seem more aware of the alternative realities borne in prophetic revelation when they are in the presence of animals. For John Grady, horses are often associated with realities beyond our own in which what ought to be becomes what is. Early in *All the Pretty Horses*, the reader is told that John Grady’s connection with horses is such that he sits a horse not only as if he’d been born to it which he was but as if were he begot by malice or mischance into some queer land where horses never were he would have found them anyway. Would have known that there was something missing for the world to be right or he right in it and would have set forth to wander wherever it was needed for as long as it took until he came upon one and he would have known that that was what he sought and it would have been. (*All the Pretty Horses* 23)

John Grady is marked here as one with the potential to see beyond the given world into realities that are somehow better, and his relationship with horses, intuitive as it is, enables him to more fully realize such alternatives. Later, as he is riding a newly broken horse, John Grady tells it “things about the world that were true in his experience and he told it things he thought could be true to see how they would sound if they were said” (242). Perhaps most significantly, John Grady dreams of running with horses in such a way that the world is revealed to be a “resonance … which cannot be spoken but only praised” (162). Later in his life, John Grady says a “good horse has justice in his heart” (*Cities of the Plain* 53). John Grady’s experiences with horses tend to evoke an awareness of alternate realities, justice, and the knowledge of those things worthy of worship, all of which are important concerns of the prophets. He experiences transcendence often in the context of horses and in this way takes on the prophetic characteristic of gesturing toward an alternate reality marked by justice, freedom, and worship.

Billy Parham also experiences potential moments of revelation and prophetic calling, but instead of horses, it is wolves that haunt his dreams and to which he feels a deep sense of responsibility. At one point in Billy’s long journey to take the wolf he has caught back to her home in Mexico, he looks across the campfire to see the flames reflected in her eyes like gatelamps to another world. A world burning on the shore of an unknowable void. A world construed out of blood and blood’s alkahest and blood in its core and in its integument because it was that nothing save blood had power to resonate against that void which threatened hourly to devour it…. When those eyes and the nation to which they stood witness were gone at last with their dignity back into their origins there would perhaps be other fires and other witnesses and other worlds otherwise beheld. But they would not be this one. (73-74)
As with John Grady, Billy’s connection to wolves makes him more aware of other worlds in which life stands, trembling as it may be, against a nothingness that would destroy it. McCarthy’s narrator clearly allows for the possibility that the void will overcome life, and that wolves will finally become extinct, but as long as a single wolf remains, it calls to Billy of a world that resists annihilation with dignity and a beating heart. In this passage, Billy seems to apprehend that he is witnessing an extra-linguistic resonance that is somehow deeply tied to the blood and body of the wolf across from him. He has a sense that the wolf stands between this reality and another one that stands on the brink of collapse.

Later, after Billy has tried and failed to protect the wolf from the depredations of men, he imagines that she is running through the woods with
deer and hare and dove and groundvole all richly empaneled on
the air for her delight, all nations of the possible world ordained by
God of which she was one among and not separate from. Where
she ran the cries of the coyotes clapped shut as if a door had closed
upon them and all was fear and marvel. He took up her stiff head
out of the leaves and held it or he reached to hold what cannot be
held, what already ran among the mountains at once terrible and of
great beauty, like flowers that feed on flesh. What blood and bone
are made of but can themselves not make on any altar nor by any
wound of war. What we may well believe has power to cut and
shape and hollow out the dark form of the world surely if wind
can, if rain can. But which cannot be held never be held and is no
flower but is swift and a huntress and the wind itself is in terror of
it and the world cannot lose it. (127)

Here, in an exceedingly dense passage, Billy seems to be confronted by a sense of the “wolfness” of the wolf that cannot ever be caught or killed, that borders on the supernatural realm. This essential quality of the wolf connects the mortal and physical world with “the possible world ordained by God” (127) in which the wolf truly belongs and is properly revered, not because she is no longer dangerous but because the world has become large enough to contain the dread she inspires. Like John Grady, Billy, at times, seems able to sense the alternative realities that the prophets were called to evoke. It would be too much to say that these characters knowingly undertake such a prophetic ministry, but these experiences of transcendence, among others, remain with both of them and color their view of the world and their interactions with others such that they are ignorant bearers of revelation.

Like the ancient Hebrew prophets, both John Grady and Billy feel unaccountably and excessively responsible for others, be they people or animals (Heschel, The Prophets 9–10; Is. 1:17; Jer. 49:11). In All the Pretty Horses, Lacy Rawlins cannot understand why John Grady feels compelled to look out for the hapless boy who calls himself Jimmy Blevins. Indeed, though John Grady tries to look out for the younger boy, he is unable to protect Jimmy and ends up getting himself and Rawlins in deeper trouble as a result of their association. Even after
Cole’s near-death experience in a Mexican prison, John Grady feels responsible to take Jimmy’s impressive horse back to its rightful owner, though he has no idea who that is. Then, failing to find the owner, he is eventually accused of stealing the horse himself. After being acquitted of any wrongdoing by a judge and given legal ownership of the horse, John Grady cannot shake the sense that he is responsible for the horse and responsible to the memory of a boy who caused him nothing but trouble. In *The Crossing*, Billy tries to save the life of a wolf that has destroyed livestock near his home and then, failing to do that, trades his father’s rifle for the wolf’s corpse in order to bury it with dignity. Later, in *Cities of the Plain*, Billy is compelled to stop and help a group of Mexicans whose truck has broken down. The above examples are just a few of many found in the Border Trilogy, and just as often John Grady and Billy are themselves provided for by strangers. This quality of being responsible for others, especially for the weak and marginalized, is a prophetic characteristic that persists throughout both of their lives and establishes in the novels a kind of counter-economy to the dominant economy of violence, and gestures toward an alternative society based in sacrifice and mercy rather than destruction.

Like John Grady, Billy too feels responsible to care for people and animals to an extent that most would regard as excessive, not to say foolish. But Billy may give us even more clues as to the source of his strong sense of responsibility. Early in *The Crossing*, as he is traveling through Mexico with the wolf he has trapped, he is confronted by men who wish to buy the wolf. He refuses to sell her, saying “that the wolf had been entrusted to his care but that it was not his wolf and he could not sell it…. He said that the wolf was the property of a great hacendado and that had been put in his care that no harm come to it” (*The Crossing* 90). Normally, this might seem like a reasonable enough lie to tell, but Billy is not given to lying, especially to protect himself. Another explanation is that Billy does feel that he has been given the responsibility to care for the wolf, not as a possession, but as a gift and a duty. This responsibility seems to come from a source of authority who lives both in Morales, where Billy is riding, and “other places” (90). This authority, in other words, is not limited to the laws or territories of men. I argue that the hacendado Billy has in mind here is a divine presence whose authority transcends all others and who specifically entrusted the prophets with the revelation of his will to protect the weak and marginalized.

So, both John Grady and Billy can be read as nascent or potential prophets because they are sometimes figured as messengers, because they adopt postures which are critical to the way of the world, and because they gesture toward an alternative reality which dominance or rejection of the other gives way to responsibility for the other. But how does this help us to understand the violence of the novels, and what does it mean that John Grady and Billy’s efforts to protect others are always thwarted? These two questions are of a piece, and understanding God from a prophetic perspective will go a long way to helping answer them.

Many critics have been troubled by the way in which McCarthy’s novels seem to raise questions of theodicy without giving readers any clues as to how to
answer them. For such scholars, the only conclusion to be reached is that the novels simply depict worlds in which there is no room for ethical judgment and where Enlightenment reason and Christian morality are respectively horrifying and useless as ways of thinking about or explaining the world. The dictates of reason would seem to leave no room for notions like self-sacrificial love, for instance, and the dictates of Christian morality prove to be liabilities for those who follow them and unprofitable for effecting positive change in the world.

However, the ancient Hebrew prophets also struggled with these same sentiments millennia ago. The prophets had little to say to those who argued that God could not be both powerful and good if His people so frequently suffered. The theologian James Crenshaw argues that the prophets so often failed in their missions partly because they had no rational response to the problem of theodicy. Instead, prophets were eventually replaced by the wisdom and apocalyptic writers later in Israel’s history because these men and women were better able to offer rational justifications for God’s seeming failure to act in history (Crenshaw 106–7). The prophetic response to questions of theodicy was simply to insist on obedience to Yahweh. In other words, the response was not a reason but an admonition to action.

The ancient Israelites, like people in all times and places, seem to have wanted to understand why things were the way they were, but the prophets offered them a different kind of knowledge that may help us understand some of the difficulties modern readers have with McCarthy’s novels. Abraham Heschel puts it this way: “knowledge is not the same as thought, comprehension, gnosis or mystical participation in the ultimate essence. Knowledge of God is action toward man, sharing his concern for justice; sympathy in action” (Heschel, The Prophets 211). Put another way, the prophets pointed out that humanity does not know God in the way it knows other people or natural laws. “Knowledge” of God comes only through just, merciful, and loving actions, and these cannot be undertaken with a desire to comprehend but only by setting aside personal aspirations in order to seek the good of the other. The ways of God are simply not comprehensible to humanity, or at the very least they are not comprehensible to people who do not first understand obedience and right action. It may seem backwards to ask for obedience before understanding, but it is also a way of looking at the world deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

It is, perhaps, not surprising that the prophetic answer to the problem of violence and suffering was not a popular one. Not only did the prophets not offer the hope of a deeper understanding to their hearers, but they also persisted in demanding obedience to God when doing so seemed either ineffective or actively detrimental to the well-being of the nation. But, as Regina Schwartz has pointed out, scripture maintains a strict focus on the exchange between God and man much more than any content or meaning:

Over and over, the scripture avoids interest in the content of the conversation to focus instead on the call and answer: ‘Abraham,’ ‘My Lord,’ ‘Moses, Moses,’ ‘My Lord,’ ‘Jeremiah,’ the call that
Jonah tries to desperately to evade, the one that Isaiah is made qualified to hear, the death of Christ understood as an invitation accepted, a call heard, a prayer offered in praise and in pain. (Schwartz 62)

The prophets in the biblical record consistently foreground relationship with God and right action toward neighbors over the revelation of mysteries or the formulation of persuasive arguments. Thus, Heschel can proclaim that “the prophet casts a light by which the heart is led into the thinking of the Lord’s mind” (The Prophets 67). The prophetic appeal to obedience to God’s will, even and especially when confronted by violence and evil, gestures toward the possibility of “knowing” God in a different way, not through mere calculation or comprehension, but through sympathy with the divine person.

Like the ancient prophets, John Grady and Billy demonstrate a concern for the vulnerable and weak that is more than some cowboy code or ancient chivalry because it persists even when there is no possibility of positive change. The prophets urged obedience even when obedience meant failure and death, and John Grady and Billy obey even in a world where God seems to have vanished. Their stories are in many ways a chronology of the vulnerable people they fail to protect, and like the ancient prophets, they have a negligible impact in their own time. Crenshaw points out that the prophetic message almost never changed the hearts or minds of its hearers (91), and the prophets themselves often remarked upon the futility of their calling (Isaiah 6:9-10; Hosea 9:7). Ironically, then, John Grady and Billy’s failure to help those they come across, however obedient they remain to that calling, makes them more like the ancient prophets than they would have been if they had succeeded.

But obedience in the face of failure must not suggest that John Grady and Billy simply do not care what happens to those for whom they take responsibility; on the contrary, part of the prophet’s role is to bring to expression the horror and tragedy of earthly existence so that a proper mourning can take place. Brueggemann would argue, along with Heschel, that one of the primary goals of the prophetic agenda is to bring to expression the pathos of God, defined as “the capacity and readiness to care, to suffer, to die, and to feel” (41). In many ways, Billy seems to possess this capacity for pathos more deeply than John Grady. He is more easily shattered by the pain he suffers on behalf of those he cares for, but though he regards this as a weakness, it makes him a more truly prophetic character and may explain why he is allowed to live and ultimately find a certain level of peace at the end of the trilogy while John Grady dies young.

Billy fails to protect the wolf he has been at such pains to look after and is ultimately forced to shoot it to spare it a more horrible death in a dog-fighting pit. He trades a rifle worth many times the value of the wolf’s pelt for the carcass of the animal so that he can bury it and mourn it properly. In this scene, thick with religious imagery, he experiences a kinship with the wolf. He adopts the posture of a pieta with the wolf on his lap (The Crossing 126) and notes that the wolf’s blood tastes like his own (125). He mourns that which should be mourned and in
so doing engages, like Jeremiah, in the task of grieving on behalf of others even though no one seems to care (Brueggemann 52). Billy recognizes the true depth of the loss of the wolf in a way no one else in the book seems able or willing to do, and he adopts a prophetic posture in mourning the loss that others deny.

Billy’s same prophetic sense of responsibility is reflected in his decision to find and dig up his brother’s body in order to return it to their former home. When he finally finds Boyd’s resting place, he comes across an old woman praying in the church adjacent to the graveyard, and some part of Billy seems to recognize a kindred spirit in her:

[h]e knew her well enough, this old woman of Mexico, her sons long dead in that blood and violence which her prayers and her prostrations seemed powerless to appease. Her frail form was a constant in that land, her silentanguishing. Beyond the church walls the night harbored a millennial dread panoplied in feathers and the scales of royal fish and if it yet fed upon the children still who could say what worse wastes of war and torment and despair the old woman’s constancy might not have stayed, what direr histories yet against which could be counted at last nothing more than her small figure bent and mumbling, her crone’s hands clutching her beads of fruitseed. Unmoving, austere, implacable. Beforejust such a God. (The Crossing 390)

In typical McCarthy fashion, the description here can be taken more than one way. On the one hand, God is described as uncompromising, perhaps unmerciful. But the narrator leaves open the possibility that God does hear the prayers of the constant old woman and has potentially stopped more suffering from occurring. Like the image given to Billy of a trembling lifeblood standing against a devouring void, the narrator in the above passage suggests that terrible atrocities may have been halted by a frail old woman and her rosary. Just as prophets give expression to the character of the God in whose name they speak, the old woman is like the God to whom she prays. It may be for these reasons that Billy recognizes her. She, too, has experienced the anguish of loss and responds in obedience through prayer.

God is also revealed in the burdens these characters carry on behalf of others. Revelation comes by obedience to the will of God, in acts of charity, justice, and mercy towards the weak and vulnerable. Billy reflects this in his journey to Mexico with the wolf. He knows, as the old trapper Don Arnulfo told him, that one cannot catch a wolf. Once the animal is caught, it ceases to be a wolf. Wildness, danger, and freedom are essential elements of the creature which cannot be removed without loss. But Billy does not want to catch the wolf; he wants to preserve it by releasing it into an environment where it might have a greater chance of survival. He restrains it enough to keep it from killing him, but he knows that its wildness cannot be removed without destroying the wolf altogether. John Grady understands something similar about horses. He comes to regard the training of a horse as distinct from the “breaking” of it, and says that, if
one truly understood horses, one could train them just by looking at them (Cities of the Plain 54). John Grady sees the possibility of training a horse without destroying it, by preserving all the essential qualities that make the horse noble and good. In the same way, the prophets understood that something vital is necessarily lost when the revelation of God is translated into a spoken oracle (Heschel, God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism 116). Their goal was to saddle or muzzle the word of God just long enough to preserve its freedom in the world. It was an essential part of the prophetic ministry to remind the people that words and concepts are not meant to be fixated upon when it comes to divine revelation. In Heschel’s language, “[c]oncepts, [and] words must not become screens; they must be regarded as windows” (ibid). In other words, the revelation of God is never to be tied down to specific language or a single set of ideas but was to be allowed to reflect the freedom of God himself. Wolves and horses all take the place of the prophetic oracle in McCarthy’s novels. They are incarnate revelation which John Grady and Billy are called to bear, protect, and preserve in their wildness and freedom. In an ironic way, Billy’s failure to protect the wolf and John Grady’s failure to find the proper home for his horse are means of preserving the most important parts of the metaphorical revelations the represented. A domesticated wolf is something more tragic than a dead one. The wrong owner would be worse for the horse than for it simply to stay with John Grady. In the same way, the domesticated Word of God, or the Word revealed to a people unable or unwilling to hear it, is more tragic and dangerous than no Word at all.

The revelation of a transcendent God in the immanent world is a deeply disturbing and often violent experience that tends to create more questions than it answers. In a like manner, the prophets understood God as a mystery who could be understood more fully, but never exhaustively. The revelation of God, therefore, must always lead to more questions. One key example of potential revelation in the Border Trilogy comes through the significantly named Magdalena, with whom John Grady falls in love and for whom he eventually dies. She is noted as one who has a “special grace” and “a partaking of the godhead” (Cities of the Plain 251) due to her bouts of epilepsy, violent fits that cause her to bleed and lose awareness of her surroundings. Her pimp, Eduardo, questions any God whose touch would result in a fit, but the prophets would understand this as an appropriate response. Heschel points out that the form of prophetic consciousness consists in “the sense of being overpowered” (The Prophets xv). It is almost always a deeply disturbing experience to receive God’s mercy because it necessarily overthrows everything that experience and human reason might argue are important. So, it may be more than mere superstition to suggest that Magdalena’s epilepsy sets her apart as one given a special grace. The blind maestro who sometimes works at the White Lake brothel suggests that the young girl does not belong “here. Among us” (81). His implication is that she is perhaps angelic, that she truly belongs on another plane, perhaps a divine one. It may be that the otherworldly quality of Magdalena draws John Grady to her, in the same way that he is drawn to those elements of a horse that cannot be put on paper (Cities of the Plain 52). Regardless, Magdalena’s epilepsy is another
possible example of the disturbing, mysterious, and even violent revelation of God in the trilogy.

The prophets are those who persist in obedience to a God who is silent or even absent, and John Grady’s last moments may be his most prophetic in his final act of submission to a God who seems to have forsaken him. There is no happy ending for John Grady and Magdalena, and the young boy dies of the wounds inflicted by Eduardo when he takes revenge for Madgalena’s murder. Significantly, it is in John Grady’s final moments, when he is in the greatest physical and emotional pain, that John Grady seems finally able to pray. Earlier in *Cities of the Plain*, he tells the maestro that he does not know what to ask God for, but now he does. He prays simply, “Help me…. If you think I’m worth it. Amen” (*Cities of the Plain* 257). John Grady prays this prayer despite the manifest evidence of God’s failure to help him or Magdalena in any way. Though it may seem ironic, this pattern of obedience in the face of God’s seeming absence is the same one manifested by Christ, the greatest of all prophets. Christ too experienced the absence of God when he cried out “my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46) on the cross and then offered up his spirit to the Father who was not there (Luke 23:46).

It may seem problematic, or sacrilegious, to compare the death of Christ with that of a young cowboy who succumbed to the wounds he suffered in a knife fight he initiated with a pimp, but there is further textual evidence to support the assertion. When Billy returns, too late, to where John Grady lies, he sees a “square of yellow light that shone through the sacking [that] looked like some haven of promise out there on the shore of the breaking world” (*Cities of the Plain* 260). The split curtain Billy sees also alludes to the tearing of the veil dividing the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place in the temple of Solomon upon the death of Christ. Lydia Cooper suggests that John Grady’s final acts are “potentially redemptive, even Christological” (77), and the image of a torn curtain shedding light on a dark world in particular seems to evoke not only the Christological, but also the prophetic and revelatory significance of John Grady’s actions. It is possible to read this scene as a final prophetic act of obedience on John Grady’s part that in some way allows for the revelation of God.

Billy, however, does not experience the death of his friend in such charitable terms. Early in *Cities of the Plain*, he confesses that he has abandoned the dreams of his youth about the way the world ought to be. John Grady does not seem capable of giving up on his dreams, but Billy seems to have abandoned whatever prophetic calling formerly made him take great risks for the sake of a lone wolf and his brother’s corpse and now focuses on “just tryin to minimiz the pain” (*Cities of the Plain* 79). The death of John Grady seems to be too much for Billy, and the narrative leaves him for decades to wander about the American West doing various odd jobs and forming no attachments or friendships of any kind. He seems to have been hurt so much by yet another loss that he decides to minimize the pain by avoiding any further relationships with people.

When the narrative picks up with Billy again, he is a much older man and seems to feel he is coming to the end of his life. He even wonders if the stranger with whom he talks under a highway overpass is death come to claim him, nor is
Near the end of their talk, the stranger tells Billy that his life “is not a picture of the world. It is the world itself and it is composed not of bone or dream or time but of worship. Nothing else can contain it. Nothing else be by it contained” (Cities of the Plain 287). This odd quotation touches on several themes common to McCarthy’s many roadside philosophers. It insists that there is only one reality which we live and that the world cannot be some other way. Some of McCarthy’s more villainous characters tend to take this as an endorsement of their violence and depravity. If this reality is the only one, they suggest, there is no need to worry about how things might be. Of course, John Grady and Billy do worry about how reality might be or ought to be, which seems like naiveté to many of their interlocutors, but which I insist reflects their prophetic sensibilities.

But Billy’s stranger also adds a new idea that reality and life are composed of worship. This concept is hinted at in All the Pretty Horses when John Grady senses a world of resonance that can only be praised (162). Now, Billy is confronted with a stranger making the deeply prophetic proclamation that the world is formed of worship. Heschel argues that “[p]raise precedes faith. First we sing, then we believe” (Who Is Man? 116). He goes on to suggest that the purpose of knowledge is finally to worship God. Heschel articulates more explicitly what I have suggested John Grady and Billy enact in the Border Trilogy, that the knowledge of God comes not through cognition or calculation, but through sympathy expressed in worship. Praise leads to faith. Now, worship does not mean merely singing or praying, but also manifests in actions of charity, justice, and mercy in the world. Thus, Billy’s stranger articulates one of the clearest pictures of the prophetic alternative reality, in which human life is worshipful, enacting a love for God and neighbor and thereby coming to know God.5

At the end of their conversation, the stranger suggests that the way in which the prophets gesture toward an alternative reality, however foolish and idealistic it may seem, can offer an answer to the problem of violence and the threat of death. The man says, “[S]ince death comes to all there is no way to abate the fear of it except to love that man who stands for us. We are not waiting for his history to be written. He passed here long ago. That man who is all men and who stands in the dock for us until our own time come and we must stand for him” (288). The imagery here is decidedly Christological, and suggests that humanity is able to participate in the sacrificial love Christ demonstrates on the cross.6 As he stood condemned on our behalf, the stranger says, we must also stand condemned on behalf of others. The stranger’s words imply that John Grady’s and Billy’s acts of sacrificial kindness to the animals and people who cross their paths are acts of worship that recapitulate the expiatory love of Christ, and are thus expressions of the prophetic idea that love of neighbor is organically related to the love of God.

A change occurs in Billy after this conversation, and the novel closes with his return to a community and relationship he has avoided for decades. The first
indication that he has finally come to a sense of peace after his loss of John Grady is when he comes upon a tin cup by a spring and holds it “in both hands as had thousands before him unknown to him yet joined in sacrament” (Cities of the Plain 290). Billy’s years of wandering alone come to an end as he is restored to communion with humanity.

Billy Parham finally comes to live with a kind woman named Betty and her family, restored to community after fifty years of living alone. He protests that he does not know who he is any longer, and this is not surprising.7 Billy has avoided any such sharing and witnessing for most of his life and so has lost a sense of himself. He no longer knows the shape of his life’s narrative and has forgotten how to relate his story and himself to others, but it does not matter. Betty can read the story of Billy’s life written on his scarred and aging body: “She patted his hand. Gnarled, ropescarred, speckled from the sun and the years of it. The ropy veins that bound them to his heart. There was map enough for men to read. There God’s plenty of signs and wonders to make a landscape. To make a world” (291). Betty bears witness to Billy’s story, even though he cannot articulate it for himself, and in so doing restores him to community. More than this, it is the marks of mortality that truly tell Betty who this old man is. The aging and wounded skin, the arthritic bones, and the visible arteries evoke a sense of worship and awe in the woman. Here, Billy bears unaware the message of revelation, of “God’s … signs and wonders” (ibid). He is an ignorant prophet, but a prophet nonetheless whose very body bears witness to great suffering and violence to which he finally responds in obedience to the commands of God and love for others.

In his short article on McCarthy’s Outer Dark, Christopher Mettress suggests that the proper response to the mystery of the world, especially those unanswered questions raised by the presence of violence and suffering in the world, is to simply accept the mystery and proceed in obedience. He writes, “Ragged but serene are those who learn to stagger through the darkness of unknowing without any irritable reaching after reason and purpose, who learn to accept that they don’t need to know where they’re going if they’re being ‘sent there anyhow’” (Mettress 154). The ragged and serene figure Mettress refers to at the end of Outer Dark is another of McCarthy’s prophetic characters, and this description might just as well be applied to Billy at the end of Cities of the Plain. He too has been worn and hurt by a reality in which questions are not answered and kindness leads to suffering, and yet he is also graced by a sense of peace and rest as Betty comforts him at the end of his life.

John Grady and Billy Parham both respond to violence, suffering, and injustice with obedience to a calling which they do not seem able to articulate but carry like ignorant prophets, or messengers who do not know the message. In this way “the twin quests of these two heroes, John Grady and Billy, are … incarnations of a strong sense of hope” (Cooper 108).

Prophetic faith is itself violent to human preconceptions and self-centeredness. It shatters the illusion that humanity understands reality, or God, or even itself. On the other hand, violence and suffering seem to challenge faith
because they so often seem unjust, unjustifiable, and meaningless. But prophetic theology suggests that it is not important that people understand why violence exists in the world and that they would be no more satisfied if they did. Instead, the prophets urge that the proper response to violence and pain is to act with justice and mercy towards others, regardless of any efficacy of the act. In this way, the righteous can take destruction and suffering onto themselves, and participate in the suffering of God in Christ. They can participate in the love of “that man who is all men” (Cities of the Plain 288) and, in that participation in love, “abate the fear” of the violence and death that come for all (288).

Notes

1 To be clear, I am not arguing that these two are prophets in the same vein as Moses or Isaiah, but they do possess characteristics that help explain their sometimes strange behavior and which helps to shed new light on the juxtaposition of violence in the novels with the characters’ questions of faith and theology. The truth is that the label “prophet” has many definitions, encompassing those who revealed God’s will, those who merely pretended to, court prophets who served a king, and outsiders who spoke truth to power.

2 A story recorded in I Kings 13, for instance, tells of a true prophet, a “man of God” who came to prophesy the destruction of King Jeroboam’s altar at Beth-el. Having carried out the will of God he returned to his own land only to be stopped by a false prophet, an old man in the service of Jeroboam, who induced the man of God to eat and drink with him, in clear violation of the command God had given the true prophet. At this point, the roles reverse, and the old prophet is compelled by God to curse the man of God and pronounce his doom. As the story goes on, the old prophet not only bears a true revelation but is the very instrument by which God’s prophecy is carried out. According to one scholar, the story is intended as an extended meditation on the theme that the word of the Lord will be fulfilled, despite the weakness of its bearers and even unto the transformation of its enemies into affiants (Simon 116).

3 James Wood insists that McCarthy’s novels have always been interested in the problem of believing in God in a world full of suffering (47), but he is disappointed with the lack of answers provided in novels like The Road. Denis Donoghue argues that part of the power of McCarthy’s style comes from precisely the way in which he withholds any sense of meaning from, or ethical judgment on, the often horrific actions he describes (The Practice of Reading 261).

4 The prophets would not have recognized the impassible God of the Greeks and some Christian theologians. Heschel argues strongly against such a notion of God as a Hellenistic innovation which has no place in a properly prophetic theology.
5 In Ephesians 3:19, St. Paul articulates the same idea as the means by which the revelation of God in Christ was made known to him. Paraphrased, he expresses the wish that the Ephesians would come to know the love of Christ which is beyond all human knowledge so that they may truly “know” God by experiencing His “fullness.” Significantly for this paper, in this same chapter Paul admonishes the Ephesians to accept suffering as glory and the means by which to experience the love of God in the suffering of Christ.

6 The three traditional titles for Christ are prophet, priest, and king. In Christian theology, Christ is not only the fulfillment of messianic prophecies but himself a prophet and revelator of the will of God.

7 As scholars have pointed out, one of McCarthy’s central preoccupations seems to be to articulate the ways in which a person’s identity is composed in relation to others, in the sharing of stories and society, in the act of witnessing and being witnessed (Potts 130; Cant 7).

Works Cited


Bracketing and Embracing: The Spiritual “Reductions” of Flannery O’Connor and Marilynne Robinson

Gregory Floyd

This paper argues that there is a formal similarity between what the best fiction authors do and what phenomenologists call the reduction, which is the process of being “led back” (reduco) from an unreflective engagement with the world to a reflective one. Flannery O’Connor and Marilynne Robinson are two authors who attempt to wake us from our complacency to the fuller reality that surrounds us. In doing so, they furnish two examples of what we might call an “artistic reduction.” Reading them in this way helps us see in the midst of its literary presentation, the theological significance of their works. Thus, not only do these authors engage in the reduction and provide the opportunity for their readers to do so as well, we too as readers engage in a reduction whereby the necessarily rich, varied, and fictional life-worlds of Robinson and O’Connor can furnish us principles for our philosophical and theological reflection.

§1. Phenomenology, Art, and Literature

In its simplest formulation the philosophical approach named phenomenology attempts to clarify our experience of the world. Its basic presupposition is that our experience of the world is meaningful even if we are often wrong about what it means or judge its relative value incorrectly. Phenomenology attempts to discern the essential features of human subjectivity and also those of the world that must be the case for experience to show up for us as meaningful. Central to this clarification is a methodological procedure called the reduction. The term originates in the world of Edmund Husserl who claims that to understand the world of our experience we must in some sense be led back from it. We must shift from what he calls the natural attitude to the phenomenological attitude. The natural attitude is his name for our basic and unreflective ways of thinking about and interacting with the world. In it we see “consciousness caught in its belief, a captive of seeing, and woven with the world in which it goes beyond itself” (Ricoeur, 1996, 41). Thus, the process of reduction is part of a movement from an unreflective being-in-the-world to reflective consciousness, which is “the revelation of consciousness to itself as bursting from itself” (Ricoeur, 1996, 40).

Husserl himself suggests a certain kinship between his account of the reduction and the artistic gaze. In 1907 he wrote a letter to the Austrian playwright, Hugo von Hofmannsthal whom he had met the previous year during Hofmannsthal’s visit to the University of Göttingen. In the letter he expresses
what he sees as the close relation between phenomenology and the aesthetic attitude evident in Hofmannsthal’s dramas. According to Husserl, the artist, much like the phenomenologist, is engaged in an objectification of inner states, which takes place in an aesthetic register rather than a phenomenological one. Both attempts to bring to light dimensions of our subjectivity. Husserl does not only draw an analogy, but also makes the stronger claim that, “these states hold, in this aesthetic objectification, a particular interest—i.e., not only for the art lover in me, but also for the philosopher and ‘phenomenologist’” (Husserl, 1994, 133-36). In other words, in its engagement with human experience art offers us something for philosophical consideration. This article pursues this suggestion by examining the way in which a key element of the phenomenological method—the reduction—might serve as a frame for reading fiction.

While the reduction is a helpful way of engaging any work of literature, it is perhaps particularly helpful as a way of engaging religious texts that do not belong to the genre of academic theology. That there are a class of experiences that give themselves to human beings as religious has been the case since experiences have been recorded in narrative and writing. What the exact nature and import of such experiences are has traditionally fallen to the discipline of theology whose basic form, underlying its many permutations, is perhaps still best summarized by Augustine’s dictum *fides quaerens intellectum*—faith seeking understanding. Such understanding can take the varied forms of conceptualization, classification, comparison, criticism, and many others. Yet, despite the wealth of knowledge generated by theological reflection and speculation, it remains the case that the most forceful experiences and expressions of religious life are not contained in the manuscripts of theologians. Invaluable as these may be, they are at best *theologia secunda*, a theology at one remove. The truly great work of Christian living, its *theologia prima*, is written in the lives of women and men who when they write (and perhaps the best do not or cannot) write in the idioms and vernacular of what Heidegger calls *average everydayness*. They make use of the language, images, philosophies and theologies available to them to articulate something prior to and independent of them. In their diaries, poetry, or fiction they articulate certain essential features (*eidei*) of what it is to be before God. Reading these women and men with the principles of the reduction in mind helps us to see the theological sophistication of their work, and also to retrieve their insights and best intuitions from (at times) both the obscurity of their vernacular and decades, centuries, or millennia of inherited interpretation. We are put back in touch with the religious things themselves.

The works of two women stand out as particularly profound examples of this: the short fiction of Flannery O’Connor and the novels of Marilynne Robinson. Each in her own and very different way attends to our facticity with a kind unrelenting phenomenological rigor that describes in different profiles the believing soul *coram Deo*. In doing so, they furnish for us the seeds of contemplation. In O’Conner’s short fiction, for example, we are brought up against the nature of human limitation, its sinful consequences, and the half-hidden light of grace which peeks through the seams of the tragic fabric of her fictional worlds. In Robinson we are invited to contemplate the power of the
written word to disclose and evoke the experience of religious conversion as a return from exile.

In attempting to make these spiritual realities legible through literature, both women have recourse to violence, though it functions differently for each. For O’Connor, the depiction of real violence is not only a depiction of human sinfulness, but also a way of disclosing the depths of the human soul, which, though often dark, also harbor the possibility of spiritual redemption. In Robinson’s recent novel, *Lila*, her protagonist must reconcile two distinct forms of violence in her gradual experience of coming to faith (2014). She must first come to terms with her own personal history as a victim of neglect and abuse, but, second, she must struggle to understand her identity as the beneficiary of violence done on her behalf as an expression, however misguided, of love. These contradictory experiences of violence frame her discovery and interpretation of the Old Testament, her intuitive grasp of the religious, and the severe beauty of the world within and without. Both authors are engaged in a kind of “spiritual reduction” in which the experience of violence brings us back from an unreflective being in the world that sees neither tragedy nor beauty to a being-before-God. The reduction as a form of literary critique thus helps us to see the theological and existential sophistication of her work and retrieves her insights and best intuitions.

§2. A Literary-Artistic Reduction?

Developing Husserl’s suggestion to Hofmannsthal, Kevin Hart suggests that, “If the reduction is sufficiently understood *all thinkers and writers engage in it.* …[It is] the condition for writing that never appears as such” (Hanson, 2010, 12). Let us now put this claim to the test. The first step will be to discern amid the internecine *tir ami* of phenomenological accounts of the reduction a set of formal criteria by which we can judge whether this is the case and, if so, how it is true of literary and religious authors. The second step will be to ask how and where it takes place in the works of O’Connor and Robinson. I propose that we can think of the activity of the reduction as containing four interrelated structural moments: sedimentation, *Destruktion*, description, and the disclosure of wonder.

1. *Sedimentation*. Reduction loosens our “intentional threads,” loosening the world’s hold on us so that we are able to see our hold on the world. But the world to which we are beholden is not only the world of the natural attitude (Husserl), but also the world mediated by meaning into which we are thrown (Heidegger). For this reason, reduction is correlative to *sedimentation*, which Husserl defines as “the constant presuppositions of [our own] constructions, concepts, propositions, theories” (Husserl, 1970, 52). This creates a two-fold problem. On the one hand, it prevents us from accessing “the actual self-evidence” in our experiences on the basis of which we would be able to provide an account of what we do when, for example, we do science or when we pray. On the other hand, it prevents us from laying hold “of the implications of meaning which are closed off through sedimentation.”¹ This problem of sedimentation is one Husserl and
Heidegger are both preoccupied with, and combining their strategies we can suggest that it is overcome in the reduction by way of two moments: Destruktion, which frees those “implications of meaning” and description, which pursues them in new directions.

2. Destruktion. The language of Destruktion returns us to Heidegger, who takes the term from his reading of Luther. It is central to his work during his so-called “phenomenological decade” from 1917-1927 during which time he engages in a Destruktion that aims to recover those “primal experiences” that constitute life. Such a movement is both existential and textual. It is the character of the move from inauthenticity to authenticity (in which we return to ourselves), and, in an analogous sense, it is how we recover the “essential tendencies [of a text] which the text conceals.” (Hanson, 2010, 263). It is important note, however, that the negative moment of destruction always has as its immediate consequence the positive moment of description.

3. Description. Destruction of the sedimented meanings of a life or a text makes possible the disclosure of its inner vitality, what Husserl calls its “hidden reason” (Husserl, 1970, 52). Description is an account of such evidence prior to all “theory.” It avoids describing a phenomenon in the wrong way by importing a borrowed set of categories and subsuming it under them. Phenomenological description attends to the ground from which the appropriate categories of interpretation and conceptualization would emerge. It is the “painstaking” cultivation of an attentiveness that, according to Simone Weil, “suspend[s] our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object” (Weil, 2009, 62).

4. Disclosure of Wonder. Destruction and description make possible the final element of this movement of reduction: the disclosure of wonder in the face of the phenomenon that is either a paradox or a mystery. Thus, there is a motivational circularity to the reduction. It is begun in wonder, or at least an aporetic state that is prelude to wonder, and it terminates in wonder.

These four structural moments provide an account of the reduction at its most general level. We can now ask whether and how they are operative in the activity characteristic of a good author. Such a person might undertake the reduction in two distinct ways. First, she could bring to evidence a certain eidos, say of the modern malaise in Walker Percy’s The Moviegoer or of the horror of war in Picasso’s “Guernica.” In a second sense, she might undertake the reduction by edging us out of the natural attitude and our sedimented ways of seeing and being in the world by provoking in us the wonder that is the beginning of thought. The bracketing effected by the author of fiction—the willing suspension of disbelief in Coleridge’s felicitous phrase—is not a bracketing of the world, but of our standard ways of interpreting it in order to bring to evidence alternative ways of being therein. This is the case a fortiori for authors concerned with the description of religious phenomena. For such men and women make the essential, if implicit,
claim that we exist differently when we exist coram Deo. That is an intentional relationship marked by love and desire made legible by the reduction. This is not to suggest that the artist and the phenomenologist are engaged in precisely the same activity. That is an equivalence neither would find flattering, I suspect. Rather, it is to suggest that at a sufficiently basic level both are engaged in a shift in attitude that is describable in the terms of the reduction.

§3. The Spiritual Reductions of Flannery O'Connor

Let us take the work of Flannery O’Connor as a first test case and examine how she is engaged in the reduction on both the levels we have described. In the first sense, as an author of fiction she creates worlds in which a variety of human experiences are brought to evidence. One of those central experiences to which O’Connor would direct our gaze, an eidos at the heart of her literary activity, is human limitation. It is only against the screen of our limitation that we can see, let alone grasp the meaning of, the other themes animating her work, themes such as fallenness, mercy, and grace. This limitation is most often brought to evidence through the depiction of violence: we are limited in our ability to avoid undergoing violence, but also in our ability to avoid being implicated in it. In the second sense of the reduction, O’Connor attempts to provoke in her readers the shift in attitude that leads to wonder; admittedly, in O’Connor’s case, it is often a wonder under the modality of horror. As we engage with her stories, we are offered the opportunity to engage with those vital experiences to which the fictional characters often fail to return.

One could describe the entire force of O’Connor’s literary voice as directed against the sedimentation characteristic of modern life—a naïve and settled self-satisfaction with the present state of things that recognizes neither the abyss over which we are held, nor the possibility of redemption hidden within it. Such an unreflective interpretation of the world is characteristic of the protagonists in her stories. This “garb of ideas” is constituted by set of inter-related concepts, specifically, those of a meritorious individualism, a moral calculus of retributive justice, and a vague and “reformed” Deism in which the divine Being has ordered the world in such a way that the good prosper and the wicked are punished. This last topples over quickly into a functional atheism.

What these attitudes share is an inability to see the essential limitations of the human person and her predicament. In O’Connor’s stories this scotoma results in a lack of self-knowledge and a startling incapacity for compassion. However, the richness and sophistication of her analysis lies in the insight that human limitation is not equivalent to human sinfulness. She breaks apart the uncritical anthropology at the root of our own self-aggrandizing tendencies, which is both secular and religious. In doing so she reveals our radical situatedness, and that recognition of limitation opens out equally onto wonder, whether it takes the form of horror at the ravages of sin or astonishment at the possibility of redemption and grace. We will examine the remaining elements in light of O’Connor’s short story, “The Displaced Person” (O’Connor, 1990).
The weight of O’Connor’s aesthetic falls on the destructive moment of the reduction. She reveals our sedimented ways of seeing the world by examining limit situations in which these break apart. The violence in her stories effects a kind of cognitive violence in which the horizons of our thinking and valuing and forcibly broadened. One of her common techniques is the introduction a foreign element into an otherwise “harmoniously” functioning whole. In DP that whole is the life and household of Mrs. McIntyre. Widowed and then twice divorced, her first husband, “the Judge,” left her a farm, but no money. With the farm, as with her life in general, she has worked hard with little help to keep things afloat. In a moment of self-assurance she comments to Astor, her black farmhand, “[This world] it’s…swelling up. It’s getting so full of people that only the smart thrifty energetic ones are going to survive,” and she tapped the words smart, thrifty, and energetic out in the palm of her hand (O’Connor, 1990, 216). Later on in the same conversation she adds, “What you colored people don’t realize is that I’m the one around here who holds all the strings together” (O’Connor, 1990, 217).

In Mrs. McIntyre’s mind her greatest virtue and the reason for her moral superiority is that “She had survived” (O’Connor, 1990, 218). She has survived the “succession of tenant farmers and dairymen,” the “constant drain of a tribe of moody unpredictable Negroes” as well as the “incidental bloodsuckers” represented by the cattle dealers and lumber men.

She is prevailed upon by Fr. Flynn, a Catholic priest, to take in a family of Polish refugees fleeing the ravages of the European war. Always on the lookout for inexpensive labor, Mrs. McIntyre agrees to the request and the Guizacs are introduced into life on the farm. Their arrival upsets the balance of farm life in two ways. First, they do not fit neatly into the established social and racial hierarchy in which Mrs. McIntyre stands at the top and under her stand Mr. and Mrs. Shortley (who are poor, but white) and much further below them stand the two black farmhands, Astor and Sulk (who are poor and black). The Guizacs are, on the one hand, white, but on the other hand, foreign and therefore assumed to be “uncultured.” They are also unable to talk and in their silent presence become for Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. Shortley a kind of Rorschach test for their more and less subtle biases:

“They can’t talk,” Mrs. Shortley said. “You reckon they’ll know what colors even is?” and Mrs. McIntyre said that after what those people had been through, they should be grateful for anything they could get. She said to think how lucky they were to escape from over there and come to a place like this. “…in Europe where they were not as advanced as in this country…..” (O’Connor, 1990, 196)

For Mrs. Shortley, in particular, Mr. Guizac symbolizes her worst indeterminate fears: “Every time Mr. Guizac smiled, Europe stretched out in Mrs. Shortley’s imagination, mysterious and evil, the devil’s experiment station” (O’Connor, 1990, 205). Even more upsetting to the balance on the farm, however, is the fact that Mr. Guizac turns out to be a highly skilled, industrious, and efficient worker. In short order he is doing more work than the other farmhands combined causing
the Shortleys’ to quit the farm before Mrs. McIntyre can give them notice. He is also honest and unfamiliar with the racial distinctions that are assumed to be universal. Thus, in a set of actions that seem mutually contradictory to Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. Shortley, we learn that:

“When Gobblehook [i.e., Guizac] first come here, you recollect how he shook their hands [Astor and Sulk], like he didn’t know that difference, like he might have been as a black as them, but when it come to finding out Sulk was taking turkeys, he gone on and told [Mrs. McIntyre].” (O’Connor, 1990, 207)

Precisely how “foreign” Mr. Guizac’s notions are from her own becomes clear to Mrs. McIntyre when she learns that he is attempting to arrange a marriage between Sulk and his cousin who is 16, orphaned, and has been in a camp in Poland for three years. The moral indignation of Mrs. McIntyre, who has married three times herself and never for love, reaches a fever pitch. The moral reprehensibility of an interracial marriage is clearly the greatest moral affront she has encountered, moreso even than the “newsreel…of a small room piled high with bodies of naked people all in a heap, their arms and legs tangled together, a head thrust here, a head there, a foot, a knee, a part that should have been covered over sticking out, a hand raised clutching nothing” (O’Connor, 1990, 196). Secure in her self-righteousness she confronts Mr. Guizac:

“You would bring this poor innocent child over here and try to marry her to a half-witted thieving black stinking nigger! What kind of a monster are you!”

“[T]hat nigger cannot have a white wife from Europe. You can’t talk to a nigger that way. You’ll excite him and besides it can’t be done. Maybe it can be done in Poland, but it can’t be done here and you’ll have to stop.” (O’Connor, 1990, 222)

She continues: “I cannot understand how a man who calls himself a Christian … could bring a poor innocent girl over here and marry her to something like that” (O’Connor, 1990, 223). Mr. Guizac is dumbfounded and uncomprehending; his only riposte: “She no care black. …She in camp three year” (O’Connor, 1990, 223).

This could very well have been the end of the issue, but Mrs. McIntyre is so bothered by the fact that someone white like her, someone equally, “…smart, thrifty, and energetic” could hold such a view, that, against every calculation of economic self-interest, she begins to look for a pretext to dismiss Mr. Guizac. This, however, proves more difficult than anticipated for two reasons. For one, Fr. Flynn during his visits to the Guizacs has taken to conversing with Mrs. McIntyre on religious matters. He has proposed that she might have a moral responsibility toward these people to which Mrs. McIntyre has her a ready, tried and true response:
She was sorry that the poor man had been chased out of Poland and run across Europe and had had to take up in a tenant shack in a strange country, but she had not been responsible for any of this. She had had a hard time herself. She knew what it was to struggle. People ought to have to struggle. Mr. Guizac had probably had everything given to him all the way across Europe and over here. He had probably not had to struggle enough. She had given him a job. (O’Connor, 1990, 219)

We can see Mrs. McIntyre attempting to dismiss her intimations of moral obligation by minimizing the plight of the Guizac family and exaggerating her own: “She knew there was nobody poorer in the world than she was” (O’Connor, 1990, 221). But the priest’s question haunts her: “He had said there was no legal obligation for her to keep the Displaced Person if he was not satisfactory, but then he had brought up the moral one” (O’Connor, 1990, 228). The immoveable borders of her moral universe have begun to tremble, if only slightly.

Eventually she constructs a competing moral imperative with the help of the newly returned Mr. Shortley, who was a veteran of WWI. She spars with Fr. Flynn one final time:

“I’m going to let that man go,” she said. “I don’t have any obligation to him. My obligation is to the people who’ve done something for their country, not to the ones who’ve just come over to take advantage of what they can get,” and she began to talk rapidly remembering all her arguments.” (O’Connor, 1990, 229)

Yet even armed with a moral imperative and “all her arguments,” each time she faces Mr. Guizac she is unable to dismiss him. The story reaches a tragic climax when Mrs. McIntyre goes yet again to dismiss the displaced person, and she, Mr. Shortley, and Sulk all stand by in self-recriminating silence as a tractor rolls backward on the unsuspecting Guizac, breaking him in half:

Later she remembered that...she had started to shout to the displaced person but that she had not. She had felt her eyes and Mr. Shortley’s eyes and the Negro’s eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever. (O’Connor, 1990, 234)

This is a particularly rich scene in which many subterranean themes of the story collide into one another: the animating oppositions of foreigner and native, black and white, poor and wealthy, weak and powerful are all dissolved by a shared sinfulness, which implicates them in this final act of violence without requiring they raise a hand. On one level, O’Connor has provided us with a phenomenology of the sin of omission, which is one of the great horrors of the Shoah: not only that tremendous evil can happen, but that so many people could be complicit in it by failing to stop it. In that light, Mrs. McIntyre’s constant noting of the
differences between her and Mr. Guizac, differences of language, of war and peace, of moral attitudes toward race—these differences take on an irony of epic proportions. What she learns too late for the broken Mr. Guizac is that the sin of indifference leads to dark places indeed.

There is a striking line right before Guizac is killed. We are told that Mrs. McIntyre “could not see his face” (O’Connor, 1990, 234), which recalls her earlier admission that “the truth was that he was not very real to her yet” (O’Connor, 1990, 219). Previously unable to dismiss him because she cannot dismiss her intuition of a supervening moral obligation, now in this moment, she is capable of a much greater injustice because it is committed against an unnamed displaced person. Echoing in the readers mind, no doubt, are the words she uttered to the priest in exasperation just a few days earlier: “As far as I’m concerned, Christ was just another DP” (O’Connor, 1990, 229). Thus, in O’Connor’s capable hands Mrs. McIntyre’s sin of omission takes on local, global, and, indeed, cosmic significance.

For O’Connor, this theme of the face—without diverting to a discussion of Levinas—is tied to the theme of moral responsibility. Mrs. McIntyre, like many of her other characters, lives in a kind of moral solipsism where she is the ultimate arbiter of moral value (“the Judge,” her husband, having died). Her moral world is the world of the farm to which Mr. Guizac and the doctrines of the Priest represent equal threats, the latter by way of propositions and the former in his very person.

Were she to stop there, O’Connor would be a terrifyingly astute student of human sinfulness, a moralist perhaps. But she is a tragedian, not a moralist, and for Mrs. McIntyre to be tragic and not merely reprehensible she, like Oedipus, must share the burden of responsibility with fate. This story is disturbing precisely because Mrs. McIntyre is, in her own way, a sympathetically idiosyncratic character. She is morally weak and unable to face the intimations of her need for a kind conversion, but she is not diabolical. An index of this is her own reaction to Guizac’s death. After waking from her faint, “She only stared at him for she was too shocked by her experience to be quite herself” (O’Connor, 1990, 235), and indeed she will never be herself again. The experience of her sinful complicity has done what an appeal to virtue could not: it has convinced her of her need to change. Thus, instead of being transfigured by virtue, a process symbolized by the Peacock which Fr. Flynn loves to feed, she is transfigured by remorse; rather than blossoming outward, her atonement takes the form of confinement, first to her home and eventually to her bed. Her only visitor is the priest still feeding the peacock, still espousing the doctrines of the church.

In “The Displaced Person” the role of fate, which mitigates our moral evaluations of Mrs. McIntyre, is born by what Heidegger calls thrownness. Mrs. McIntyre is morally responsible for her actions, but impersonal forces not unlike the Greek Moirai set the conditions for the tragic climax. She is pitiable rather than simply horrific because she inhabits a certain and simple world into which she was born and according to which she has lived all 60 years of her life. It is only with the introduction of the foreigner that the previous orderedness is
suddenly disrupted and its categories called into question. Mrs. McIntyre comments to the priest at one point that, “Mr. Guizac is not satisfactory. He’s extra. He doesn’t fit in. I have to have somebody who fits in” (O’Connor, 1990, 225). Along lines strikingly similar to Heidegger’s analysis of a poorly functioning tool, the obstinacy [Aufsiissigkeit] of Mr. Guizac’s simple presence reveals the moral obligation he represents. Mr. Guizac is a challenge to the economic and instrumental categories with which Mrs. McIntyre views her human interactions. He stands out to Mrs. McIntyre not because he is missing or not working correctly, but because he “stands in the way” of her routine. Similarly, the moral obligation he represents is neither absent (i.e., unknown) nor unusable (i.e., inapplicable), but rather something that also “stands in the way.”

Thus, Mr. Guizac, like the unhandy but present and usable tools in Heidegger’s analysis, reveals to us something of the world to which he proves an obstacle. But of course what Heidegger teaches us is that the worlds into which we are thrown, the traditions that form us, and the very language within which our moral intimations take (or fail to take) shape are, in their origin, out of our control. Thus, Mrs. McIntyre’s worldview is not something for which she is entirely responsible. The origin of her moral failure does not lie principally in her racism, xenophobia, or opportunism, but rather in her inability to acknowledge these as limitations, which would allow for a kind of moral maturation to take place.

In conclusion, it is important to recall that for O’Connor, limitation is the fundamentally human condition. Therefore, it is not only a condition for violence, but also equally a condition for love. O’Connor’s work is concerned at other moments with those manifestations of redemption, i.e., with the small acts of heroism that can only be perceived against the screen of our human finitude such as Fr. Flynn’s continued visits to an infirm Mrs. McIntyre.

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In “The Displaced Person” Flannery O’Connor engages in a kind of spiritual reduction. Her work breaks through our sedimented ways of thinking, destroying an inadequate and unreflective anthropology that is racist and individualistic. In doing so, she describes the patterns of thought and behavior that lead to the kind of indifference that can be an occasion for great moral evil. However, her account of moral evil is legible against the broader depiction of human limitation described principally in the attitudes and conversations of Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. Shortley. “The Displaced Person” is not only a story about evil, but also about how evil happens. It leads us back from our unreflective ways of seeing the world to the forms of thought that lie at the root of both the casual racism of Mrs. McIntyre and the Shoah. This insight is designed to provoke in us a kind of wonder under the modality of horror at the violent possibilities that lurk within the human heart, and for O’Connor the point is that it could be any human heart. Mrs. McIntyre’s limitation is that she can be horrified at the images of the Polish prison camps, but not at herself.
§4. Marilynne Robinson’s *Lila*

An illuminating contrast to the aesthetic of Flannery O’Conner is the work of another American author, Marilynne Robinson. The contrast is illuminating because the distinct tonalities of these authors are nonetheless in service of a similar end: an exposition of human existence in which a sensitivity to the religious sounds registers of human experience that would otherwise go unheard. Whereas the work of O’Connor brings to our attention the nature, implications, and possibilities of human limitation, that of Robinson seeks to reenchant the world; or, better, to rediscover the enchantment that has persisted in the simplest and most recurrent of daily realities despite the deprivation of our physical and spiritual senses.

In a 2008 interview with the Paris Review, Robinson remarked that “…a mystical experience would be wasted on me. Ordinary things have always seemed numinous to me” (*Paris Review*, 2008). This reduction to the numinousness of ordinary things is part of Robinson’s particular genius. Like O’Connor’s construction of tragic situations, it breaks through our sedimented ways of thinking and perceiving the world. The spiritual reflections to which she invites her readers challenge equally the scientific naturalist who has rejected the possibility of transcendence and mystery in the natural order and the technocrat in whom distraction and overstimulation have conspired to deaden the sense of life. While O’Connor discloses the banality of evil with which we are so often complicit, Robinson reminds us of the goodness of the created order, an order that encompasses both the world of nature and that of human subjectivity. In her hand even the experiences of loneliness, anxiety, and guilt disclose, if not quite goodness, then at least the terrible beauty of even painful human emotion. In her most recent novel *Lila* the character Doll sums this up well: “I bet you cried the first time you were born, too. It means you’re alive” (Robinson, 2014, 12).

Pain, like beauty, breaks through the sedimentation characteristic of modern man and woman whose physical senses have been dulled and whose spiritual senses have been arrested in their development. Robinson’s fiction attempts to reanimate these calloused organs and make them tender—raw, even—and thus sensitive to the wonder around us. Only then can the evidence of the goodness and beauty of the world—of its sacramental vibrancy—be brought to light. Thus, far from a hindrance to the correct perception of the world, the religious sense teaches us to perceive a richness that other valuable but limited forms of sight such as scientific inquiry, historical criticism, or economic theory cannot exhaust. In turn, this richer, more affectively attuned experience of the world reinvests religious texts and traditions with meaning.

The Greek monk Maximus the Confessor spoke of the human being as a *microcosm*, a mini-cosmos. For Robinson, too, the world of self and that of nature are foils for one another each disclosing to the other by turns the mutability and hidden depths of life. For her, like Pascal, the self is that peculiar entity which is contained within the whole nature and yet contains the whole of nature. In her novels, *Lila* in particular, the rediscovery of the world and of the self are the dual trajectories of this cosmic re-enchantment.
The destruction that makes possible the re-enchantment of the world is a deconstruction of the “buffered self” which must be led back to a “porous self” capable of receiving life. This destruction breaks apart religious frames as often as non-religious, a process detailed in *Lila* through the characters of Lila Dahl and Rev. John Ames, each of whom must deconstruct and be deconstructed by the other. Here deconstruction means only the discipline of being open to the spontaneity of life and to joy in unexpected places. Yet, Lila also reminds us that hope is a costly virtue and the possibility of joy can be a dreadful thing. For example, she cannot hope for the birth of a child, but only wait on an uncertain future: “Wait. Don’t hope, just wait” (Robinson, 2014, 229). Yet, waiting for life to happen is insufficient. She must break out of a cycle of mistrust and suspicion an utter a *fiat* not only to faith, but also to life. Ames too must radically rethink his own future. He is in many way a Job figure, a widower, long-suffering, but unwavering in his faith. *Lila* invites us to consider what the cost might have been for Job to have a family again after the loss of his first. To fall in love a second time is to love differently, and to love differently is to learn something new about the religious. As Ames draws close to Lila, nomadic, feral, and beautiful, he must reconfront religious questions and expectations that had been settled, if not answered. In an insight that is itself a conversion, he says,

So things happen for reasons that are hidden from us, utterly hidden for as long as we think they must proceed from what has come before, our guilt or our deserving, rather than coming to us from a future that God in his freedom offers us. (Robinson 222)

The destruction of the buffered self is a kind of conversion. Like the seasons so wonderfully described in all Robinson’s novels, it also a fact of life and a consequence of time, and precisely in its repetition and predictability it is a salve. It is openness to life and to the world that manifests itself as a willingness to be surprised, to sense and perceive the spontaneous amidst the routine and to see in the routine a spontaneity secured for it by the effervescence of time.

As with O’Connor, in Robinson’s fiction the destructive element is of a piece with the creative one. As we break through the sedimentation of our own expectations and prefabricated paradigms we discover the “hidden reason” of the world. While O’Connor focuses our attention on limited situations that are stark and extreme, Robinson’s town of Gilead is by contrast familiar. It has a thickness to it. We can see the main road in and out of town, the old cabin on the outskirts, and the small church and local grocer. We have a sense for the way the space feels in Ames’ kitchen, for the way the wind blows through its open window, and what is likely to be on the shelves in his living room.

In keeping with Robinson’s emphasis on what we have called the descriptive moment of the reduction, her treatment of violence differs from that of O’Connor. For both women violence is a permanent possibility of human nature and a screen against which to see human existence more clearly. However, whereas for O’Connor this is often to signal the depravity of which we are capable, in Robinson’s *Lila* it is an indication of the moral complexity of human
life. As an example of this, Lila must reconcile two distinct forms of violence in her gradual experience of coming to faith. She must first come to terms with her own personal history as a victim of neglect and abuse and her own resistance to hope and joy that are its immediate consequences. But equally, she must struggle to understand her identity as the beneficiary of violence done on her behalf and as an expression of love.

As a young child Lila was taken from her home by a woman named Doll. That home was by all accounts a sad place of neglect and possibly of abuse. Nonetheless, the moral description for Doll’s action is kidnapping. Yet for Lila it was grace. Right from the start of the novel we are confronted with the morally complex actions of Doll which issue in one of its persistent themes, namely, the adequacy of words to experience. Even as Lila recounts her story later she senses the inadequacy of language: “Stealing a child, when Doll had come to her like an angel in the wilderness” (30). This is not an absolution, but it is a reminder that language can never replace attentive perception to the realities it purports to describe.

Doll reminds us of the permanent possibility of violence. She was born under the mark of Cain and she has a literal mark across her face by which she is recognized throughout her wanderings. Later in the novel she stabs and eventually kills a man. That man may have been Lila’s negligent father. He may not have been. She may have been acting in self-defense. She may not have been. What we would normally perceive as the essential details for a moral evaluation of her actions are left shrouded in ambiguity. Thus, we, like Lila, are left to learn how to relate ourselves to a violence we cannot commandeer through language.

Before Doll is taken away by the Sheriff, she gives Lila the knife as an inheritance of sorts. It is a symbol of the dual movement of destruction and description, of deconstruction and creation, of cauterization and healing. It enters the story at its middle though it has always been there. It changes hands, but not purpose: “A knife can’t weary with the use that’s been made of it.” (Robinson, 2014, 134). Before Lila it belonged to Doll and before her to someone else. Yet, Lila refuses to discard it because to do so would be to deny the reality of violence, and what is denied cannot be healed.

She could explain to herself why she meant to keep [the knife] there was no way to abandon guilt, no decent way to disown it. All the tangles and knots of bitterness and desperation and fear had to be pitied. No, better, grace had to fall over them. Doll hunched in the firelight whetting her courage, dreaming vengeance because she knew someone somewhere was dreaming vengeance against her. Thinking terrible thoughts to blunt her own fear. (Robinson 260)

For Robinson, like O’Connor, we are born into cycles of aggression, into sad narratives whose consequences we cannot foresee and whose endings we cannot always control. Lila confides to her unborn child that, “The world has been here so long, seems like everything means something. You’ll want to be careful. You
practically never know what you’re taking in your hand” (Robinson, 2014, 135). Yet this observation holds not only for the world of nature, but also for the world of grace. “What do you ever tell people in a sermon,” Lila remarks to Ames, “except that things that happen mean something?” (Robinson, 2014, 34). Thus, side by side we find the legacies of violence and of grace into which we have been born. The meaningfulness of the world is not a denial of original sin, but at once a confirmation of this truth and salvation from it.

In a surprising way it is these experiences that dispose Lila to the religious. They frame her encounter with the bible, and in particular the Old Testament. At one point in the novel, she picks up and begins transcribing the Book of Ezekiel: “In the day thou wast born thy navel was not cut, neither was thou washing in water to cleanse thee…No eye pitied thy. I passed by thee, and saw thee weltering in thy blood” (Ez. 1:36, 42). These lines recur as a refrain throughout the novel. Each time they reappear we are given to think anew what it means to “welter in thy blood.” Bothered by her interest in Ezekiel, Ames remarks that it is “a very sad book,” to which Lila responds, “Don’t matter if it’s sad. At least Ezekiel knows what certain things fell like” (Robinson, 2014, 126). Is the God who rescued Israel, when abandoned and weltering in its blood, so different from Doll? Ultimately, it is Lila who must teach the Reverend that, “It could be that the wildest, strangest things in the Bible were the places where it touched earth” (Robinson, 2014, 226). Indeed, it is Lila, on account of her rescue, nomadic childhood, and proximity to violence who can open up the world of the Old Testament to her older, theologically trained husband, and with that comes a mercy severely won.

In Lila’s experience are recapitulated the great themes of the old Testament, those of exodus and return, of liberation and the return to slavery, of wandering and settling and through them all, of nature and grace. But precisely for this reason she is capable of grasping the heart of the Gospels. It is only in moving through Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Lamentations and Job, that she can grasp that and in what way there is fulfillment of the old in the new. The continuity between her own experience, discontinuous as it is with that of her husband and the readers, is the key to her exposure to the religious. The ultimate vision of these interpenetrating orders is the Pelican, which Lila encounters by the hundreds one day by the river with Doll. A member of the natural order, the Pelican is also an ancient symbol of Christ hidden within the economy of nature waiting to enfold it—and Doll too—from within. It is a reminder from Robinson that grace, like the dust that falls evenly in a good home, is in all things.

Through Robinson’s literary reduction we are led back to the goodness at the center of things. Yet this is a goodness mixed with pain and radical gratuity:

Sorrow is very real, and loss feels very final to us. Life on earth is difficult and grave, and marvelous. Our experience is fragmentary. Its parts don’t add up. They don’t even belong in the same calculation. Sometimes it is hard to believe they are all parts of one thing. Nothing makes sense until we understand that experience does not accumulate like money, or memory, or like years and
frailties. Instead it is present to us by a God who is not under any obligation to the past except in his eternal, freely given constancy. (Robinson 223)

Robinson’s spiritual reduction ultimately leads us back to an enchanted realism: a realism that sees the world more richly than we are accustomed to, but for that reason more truthfully. Her fiction re-sensitizes us to the texture of existence. Within this small, nondescript town in the middle west of America the interior dimensions of the human soul are sounded—both the epic and the quotidian in their true and equal weight. In the end, the biggest obstacle to Lila’s peace is not the acts of violence that constitute her past, but a suspicion of hope, a constant preoccupation about the future that often prevents her from being in the present moment. Yet the wonder is that the immediacy of the natural world to which Lila is ineluctably drawn is itself the guarantee of the future. Not that it will be joyful—violence is a fact of the past and always a possibility of the future—but that the same providential care anchors both past and future in the present moment which is a constant invitation to perception. “One thing that comes with the tradition,” Robinson notes, “is the idea that you’re always being posed a question: what does God want from this situation? It creates a kind of detachment, but it’s a detachment that brings perception rather than the absence of perception.” (Paris Review, 2008).

Her enchanted realism holds that reality—natural and supernatural, secular and religious—is a seamless garment: “the reality that we experience is part of the whole fabric of reality” (Paris Review, 2008). The world is not other and apart from the divine, prone to its “selective interventions” rather it hums with mystery. And is not the wonder that the givenness of things is at all, enough for one day’s ills?

§5. Conclusion

For both O’Connor and Robinson an attentiveness to the religious freight of reality makes us more perceptive to the depths of human experience and makes the world within which that experience occurs a fuller, richer place. Here religion serves as “a language of orientation that presents itself as a series of questions” (Paris Review, 2008). Such questions have the possibility of eliciting answers from their hearers, which returns us to the second sense of the reduction, that of self-reflection and personal transformation.

In “The Displaced Person,” the revelation of Mrs. McIntyre’s limitation comes too late for her to avoid tragedy, but does it come too late for us? Lila is ultimately able to find the truthfulness of scripture amidst the truthfulness of the world; are we able to do so? Both authors invite us to reflective activity that, if we cooperate, helps us withdraw from the world of our daily concern in order to ask how we engage with it. Their stories offer us an examination of conscience that calls our subjectivity into question. O’Connor makes us sensitive to the obstinacy of moral claims that bring to evidence the hidden and average world within which we often operate unreflectively. Robinson recreates the world of nature and
human subjectivity in her novels in an attempt to disclose for us the world within our souls and at our fingertips whose reality is at times too much for us to bear. In neither case is this a naïve attempt to get beyond the world, but rather an attempt to rouse us from our complacency so that we may see the world differently, so that we might live in it differently.

Both women would find an unexpected advocate in Edmund Husserl. He reminds us that in every reader there lies “the capacity for reactivation” of what is essential in a text or tradition. This ability “belongs originally to every human being as a speaking being.” Traditions bear witness to our limitation and structure its forms, yet these same traditions also stand “open…to continued inquiry.” (Husserl, 1970, 351). O’Connor and Robinson work within such traditions. As writers of unusual caliber, their use of tragedy and beauty shake us out of our unreflective submission to the limited horizons of daily life and invite us to contemplate what is around and within us with a sufficient degree of dread and of awe. In this they are part of a tradition that sees wonder as the start of true understanding. Pity us yes,” Lila says, “but we are brave, she thought, and wild, more life in us than we can bear, the fire infolding itself in us” (Robinson, 2014, 261).

Works Cited


Toward a Single Solution: 
Terrence Malick and Violence in the World

Thomas Britt

One of the foremost imperatives for writing narratives is to include some measure of conflict. In narratives with human characters, conflict is popularly said to exist at the levels of self, other, and nature. Screenwriting sage Robert McKee prioritizes conflict by calling it a “law,” adding that “nothing moves forward in a story except through conflict … The Law of Conflict is more than an aesthetic principle; it is the soul of story” (*Story* 210 - 211).

Conventional narratives contain conventional conflicts, and entertainment genres train viewers to interact with familiar patterns that correspond to the levels of conflict therein. Well-trained viewers of scripted entertainment on screens of various sizes anticipate the encounters that dramatize conflicts of self, other, and nature. Some of these encounters involve fists, others weapons, and still others merely words and thoughts. The instruments of violence are finite. Their uses sometimes surprise.

Rare is the filmmaker who dissolves the barriers between the agreed upon categories of conflict in order to examine them in an interlocking manner. Terrence Malick, the filmmaker who is the subject of this essay, is unique for such an approach to conflict within his film narratives. This approach might be described as holistic, as Malick treats conflicts of self, other, and nature as essential and interconnected components of the human condition. There is an irony to this approach, as it concerns the human condition and yet it also appears to aspire to a depth of probing that exceeds humans’ ability to comprehensively understanding their position in space and time. As such, Malick’s conflict-driven narratives attest to the need for a greater outside witness or healer or intercessor, beyond man. They also require a more active viewer.

Returning briefly to screenwriting expert McKee, it is worth mentioning that he links Sartre to Heidegger, arguing that the scarcity of time pressures humans into risks and battles regarding the things we desire (211). As we are not omniscient, this scenario includes the likelihood that we, human subjects, do not predict the full range of consequences of those risks and battles. A Christian view of narrative would identify the particular situation of unfulfilled desire as the inciting dramatic situation of Genesis 3. The attitude of wanting more, and the temptation to “be like God,” produces a decision from which death, sin, and alienation result. Among other conflicts and violent interactions, this original conflict (a sin that produces needs and scarcities far direr than the perceived preceding lacks) informs the works of Malick. His 2011 film *The Tree of Life* shares a name with that other tree in the Garden, the immortality-granting tree that
God guarded after Adam’s sin. Of course, after Adam’s sin came violence and violence became so common to the narrative of human life that an authority like McKee can credibly call conflict not only a law but the “soul” of all stories.

Scholarly and critical attention has been paid to the philosophical weight of Malick’s films. Yet only recently have his films become so explicit in their Christian theology that his body of work could be understood as chiefly concerned with questions of faith and “the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life” (Eliot 105). In other words, as he has progressed as an artist, his films’ invocation of an outside mediator to resolve the conflicts within the stories has transformed from one vague possibility of his cinematic activity to its hallmark. Some scholars have responded (and contributed to) this contextualization of his filmography within a Christian worldview. Peter J. Leithart’s *Shining Glory: Theological Reflections on Terrence Malick’s Tree of Life* is one such book, and many other religion and/or film experts and commentators in the online community have begun to create a framework of Christian critical appreciation of Malick’s work.

My intention with the present essay is to attempt to affirm Malick’s status as a filmmaker concerned with philosophical and theological matters, but to do so from a standpoint that is (in existing scholarship) sometimes overshadowed by the complexities of those very qualities. That is to say, apart from philosophical and theological schemas, there is value in examining the mechanics of Malick’s screen stories as the products of constructed narratives that benefit from the simultaneity of the cinematic form. In their transition from script page to movie screen, Malick’s characters and settings are transformed by authorial techniques of subjective voiceover narration and elliptical/associative editing. I examine the way Malick constructs these stories for the screen and in the process explores violence, mankind’s fallen condition, and the bestowing of grace within a violent world in which sin may increase but grace abounds all the more (English Standard Version, Rom. 5. 20). I bookend my analysis of his pivotal 1998 comeback film *The Thin Red Line* with related analyses of *Badlands* (1973) and *The Tree of Life*.

Though he has been making films since the late 1960s, Malick has only given a handful of interviews, and some of the information in those interviews is not verified by outside sources. At times his films sometimes contain what seem to be autobiographical details and reflections of his education as a philosopher, but Malick’s decision to remain unknown apart from his works causes any parsing of his life for pointers to be (at best) unbidden and (at worst) invasive. For the purposes of this essay, two comments about violence from early-career interviews provide a record of the way Malick publically framed his film’s view of violence upon its release.

The following section on *Badlands* will begin by situating the film in relationship to an historical event that preceded the fictional narrative of the film. I will then discuss the narrative and cinematic techniques Malick uses to depict acts of violence that are committed by young people who live outside of a moral law that would condemn such violence. I intend to illustrate that *Badlands* is cinematically otherworldly because its pictures contain the recognizable features of rural American landscapes but its characters’ journey, their subjective
perspective of that journey, and their victims’ refusal to resist, are all features of some damned world that also contrasts sharply with the fairy tales Malick cites as inspirations. *Badlands* is a useful starting point for this exploration of Malick as a filmmaker whose works collectively appeal to some authority greater than man to settle or solve conflicts. The horror of *Badlands* is that such an authority is nonexistent or silent.

*Badlands* is reminiscent of, but not directly adapted from, the real life crime story of teenagers Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate, the notorious couple responsible for a spree of eleven murders in Nebraska and Wyoming in 1958. In *Badlands*, rebel Kit (Martin Sheen) kills the father of girlfriend Holly (Sissy Spacek) and they go on a murderous road trip that ends with Kit’s capture in the Badlands. Malick’s use of this true crime story for plot material follows Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde*, which in 1967 had revitalized the road movie and inaugurated New Hollywood with the true tale of Depression-era outlaws.\(^2\)

In a *Sight and Sound* profile from 1975, Malick described wanting “the picture to set up like a fairy tale, outside time, like *Treasure Island*,” a contextualization he “hoped … would … take a little of the sharpness out of the violence but still keep its dreamy quality,” reasoning that “[c]hildren’s books are full of violence” (Walker 83). Additionally, in an interview by Michael Ciment that originally appeared in *Positif*, Malick said of his perceptions: “What struck me was how violence erupted and ended before you really had time to understand what was happening … Kit and Holly—and in this respect they are truly children—don’t think that death is an end. It’s a ‘crossing to the other side’” (Michaels 110). Both of these observations, the first about form and tone, and the second about time and youth, to some degree absolve the characters from their participation in killing, from their choice to kill. This ambivalence about ownership of actions and consequences is the dramatic through line of the film.

Even before the *Treasure Island*/Adventures of Huckleberry Finn-influenced section of the film becomes fully evident, Kit and Holly exhibit a quasi-antinomian disengagement from the consequences of their actions. Malick might position this as a story outside of time, but Kit and Holly move the plot forward by existing outside of moral law. The murder of Kit’s father plays out as a rational process rather than a childish impulse: Kit wants Holly and her father objects. Therefore Kit visits, stares down, and kills the father in order to take the daughter. His later self-mythologizing confession to a ‘voice-o-graph’ record boasts “My girl Holly and I have decided to kill ourselves, same way I did her dad, big decision huh?,” but then describes their overall experience as “fun.”

Holly, who is the film’s narrator, reacts neutrally to many of the dramatic events of the film. She barely sheds a tear for her father, choosing instead to tell the viewer of the film, “I sensed that my destiny now lay with Kit...for better or for worse...and that it was better to spend a week with one who loved me for what I was than years of loneliness.” Neither Kit nor Holly’s confession expresses any repentance.

When the film does formally shift to a section that is recognizably influenced by the sorts of fairy tales Malick cites, the “fun” destiny of Holly and
Kit is indeed a child’s version of freedom. On the run, existing in nature with Kit, Holly is now free to do those things she was not able to enjoy under the authority of her father. She now lives in a fantasy world of forts and camps, she takes gun lessons, she wears eye makeup, and she dances to rock and roll. These lovers’ time in the woods and the very limited sort of freedom they enjoy parallels the Eden story in a few ways, but its explicit point is that Holly has traded a more lasting freedom for this short-term gain. There is evidence that she has a more complex inner life than Kit, as she looks at images in a stereopticon and imagines herself in other places and times. But here she’s stuck, in a circumstance arrived at through siding with Kit’s violent way out of her formerly sheltered life.

Joining the perceptual subjectivity and ethical subjectivism of Holly’s pervasive narration and time in nature is the staging of murder scenes so matter-of-fact that the threatened victims don’t protest before dying. One of them, Kit’s friend Cato (Ramon Bieri), at least tries to run away. But after he’s shot, he sits silently and bleeds out while Holly tries to make small talk about a pet spider that interests her. These victims die as if their lives and bodies were purposed to become fodder in Kit and Holly’s outlaw romance. Under Malick’s direction these encounters have the aura of foregone conclusions, sacrifices made to a retrospectively narrated journey of freedom.

In effect, what Malick illustrates in these encounters is the vacuum of judgment that exists when creation turns its back on “the reality beyond all predicates” and “the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are” (Lewis 30-31). Holly views this spree with Kit as “better” than alternatives (for the time being) and Kit repeatedly refers to the murders as “fun.” Not once do they truly acknowledge or encounter any moral law or consequence that effectively opposes those responses.

Their freedom to enjoy a killing spree doesn’t cleanly adhere to what McKee would later call the “law of conflict,” because within the plot they face no countervailing consequences. Nor do they have any moral guide to discipline them. Malick forms a direct contrast with the consequence of shame identified in Genesis 3 as Holly finally comes around to recognizing Kit’s aberrant violence, yet declares, “At this moment I didn’t feel shame or fear, but just kind of blah…”

This sort of unmooring was common to the new type of road movie emerging during the Vietnam Era. In Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie, David Laderman traces the paradoxical quality of aimlessness from The Wild Angels (1966) through Bonnie and Clyde and Easy Rider (1969): “The bitter, open-ended tone here, of moving on aimlessly and not going anywhere, is a strong characteristic of many road movie endings … even when the outlaw drivers are not shot down at the end … they are often shown continuing in their movement, in a kind of forlorn uncertainty, a melancholy spirit of unending, unfulfilled longing” (49-50). Malick’s refusal to have his murderous characters meet any final judgment in the plot of his film could create the impression that he doesn’t see their actions as deserving of condemnation.

Yet he also avoids the concluding manner of Bonnie and Clyde and Easy Rider, in which the antiheroic characters are so violently killed that audience
identification shifts to them in sympathy. *Badlands* concludes more ambiguously. Kit and Holly have behaved contemptibly but have also shaped public perceptions of themselves as desirable rebels. To the end, they control their own narrative. Holly tells us that she will eventually marry and that Kit will die in the electric chair. But those events are in the unseen and off-screen future. In the present, *Badlands* confronts the viewer with violence unanswered by any higher authority.

Malick’s next film *Days of Heaven* (1978) was both scripturally allusive and formally groundbreaking, particularly in its cinematography. But its overall arrangement of violence and faith is not sufficiently distinguishable from *Badlands* to warrant a separate exploration here. Furthermore, had Malick stopped making films at that point, or continued to make films in the mode of his first two films, then there would be little to no way to interpret his artistic voice as one concerned with the holistic treatment of conflict within narrative. *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* successfully established the formal properties that remain hallmarks of Malick’s entire career, but their exploration of interlocking spheres of conflict is tentative or disproportionate.

In *Badlands* in particular, none of the conflicts between individuals are staged in the way Hollywood genres or the emerging New Hollywood films situated characters in conflict. There is no emotive spark or physical spectacle, apart from one big fire. Nor is there much of an acknowledgment within the characters’ subjective experiences that they feel especially conflicted about their actions. Finally, there is no God or effective moral authority in the frame. *Badlands* is a vision of naturalistic humanism, full stop.

One way to read the absence of consequences or avoidance of responsibilities in Malick’s early films is as an experiential rendering of young romance overtaking or replacing a more specific authorial voice. By telling the stories of young lovers sacrificing all else for temporary happiness in a manner that illustrates the subjectivity of that experience, Malick does not force an encounter between the characters and the larger ramifications of their actions. Within the plot, they remain ignorant. Yet in the telling of that plot, he calls attention to the subjectivity of the organizing perspective, as well as the contradictions between what the young characters tell the viewer versus what the viewer perceives visually, intellectually, and emotionally. Therefore he does cause that vacuum of consequence and judgment to be an absence felt by the audience. It is the director’s subsequent film, a 1998 adaptation of James Jones’ *The Thin Red Line* (1962), which significantly expands his cinematic engagement with faith and violence through dialectical techniques in which characters embodying separate philosophies respond to one another and in which creation itself cries out for answers to the problems that plague human history.

As *Badlands* used the form of a recognizable genre, the road movie, to begin Malick’s inquiry about violence, *The Thin Red Line* uses the genre of the war film to radically advance his artistic perspective and spiritual deliberation of violence. Whereas *Badlands* is contained by the narrow perspective of two immature and unrepentant protagonists and a conflict involving two individuals against a world (and filmmaker) that fails to challenge them, *The Thin Red Line* presents the conflicting perspectives of dozens of characters enmeshed in a
legitimately global conflict of world war. Unlike the stark stillness and silence of violence in *Badlands*, the blood spilled in *The Thin Red Line* evokes God’s words to Cain: “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground” (Gen. 4:10).

Jones’ novel had already been adapted in a film directed by Andrew Marton in 1964. Kirkus’ synopsis of the novel outlines much of what appears in both film adaptations: “a “novel-without-a-hero, C-for-Charlie company itself is the protagonist- draftee and professional soldier; a ‘thin red line’ of draftees and hardened regulars land on Guadalcanal on the heels of the Marine Beachhead landing, to follow in the bloody footsteps of those who went before them” (1962). All of these aspects appear to some degree in Marton and Malick’s film adaptations. In both films, there are ensembles made up of men from various ranks in Charlie company, groups that offer multiple protagonists for audience identification. Their primary activity is the battle they face at Guadalcanal.

However, one significant difference between the film adaptations is in their arrangements of conflicts of characters within this ensemble. The script for Marton’s film, adapted by Bernard Gordon, focuses on the conflict between First Sergeant Welsh and Private Doll, a conflict that is established in the first chapter of Jones’ novel as one of many conflicts that course through the story. But Malick’s narrative is more complex, dramatizing a combination of conflicts between pairs of men. The first is that of Welsh (Sean Penn), a man who sees the world and war in strictly physical terms versus, versus Private Witt (Jim Caviezel), a man who believes in a spiritual reality accompanying or overpowering the physical world. Another significant clash is that between Lieutenant Colonel Tall (Nick Nolte), a man whose military career has left him bitter and hungry for a fight he can call his own, versus Captain Staros (Elias Koteas), a man whose devotion to God and responsibility to his soldiers serve as checks on his strategic actions and his conscience. Malick also devotes screen time to Private Bell’s (Ben Chaplin) memory of his wife Marty (Miranda Otto), for whom he has already sacrificed much before his experiences within the present plot, and to an overarching series of philosophical questions, mostly asked by the voiceover narration of Private Train (John Dee Smith) but applicable to all humans and nature.

The scale of the subject matter—a world war—gives *The Thin Red Line* an unavoidably more violent framework when compared to the two-against-the-world plot of *Badlands*. The battle scenes of a frontal assault and flanking mission to take out a fortified bunker on the hill are spectacular and horrible in their frank depiction of the assumed expendability of lives in combat. Malick, however, devotes a majority of the nearly three hour film to ideological (rather than physical) collisions of the characters mentioned above. Their conflicts are carried out in inner thoughts communicated to the viewer through voiceover narration and conversations between characters as they work out their inner and outer struggles. The topics of their arguments and inquiries are darkness and light, allegiance and disloyalty, death and life, and the problem of evil.

Malick’s original script for the film began with Welsh reprimanding Witt in the brig of a warship, but the film opens with a question asked by Train, a
secondary character, in voiceover narration: “What's this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself? The land contend with the sea? Is there an avenging power in nature? Not one power, but two?” In marked contrast to Badlands, which aside from frustrating the viewer with murder unpunished, refuses explicit probing about the roots of violence, The Thin Red Line is predicated on an attempt to reconcile warring forces of nature.

In the film, Witt seems to have found a kind of paradise among the Melanesians. He’s AWOL, and he is an outsider to the natives, but their peaceful lifestyle and communal ways put a smile on his face. Yet this is also a film very aware of the inner war that goes on in the heart. Thus Witt’s time in paradise is counterweighted by the memory of his dying mother and his puzzlement that she was not afraid to die. “I was afraid to touch the death I seen in her. I heard people talk about immortality, but I ain't seen it. I wondered how it'd be when I died. What it'd be like to know that this breath now was the last one you was ever gonna draw.”

Malick combines several cinematic techniques to illustrate this complex set of ideas. First is that the beginning of Witt’s dialogue functions as narration, playing under a visual of his observing a happy mother and child among the natives. He is then revealed to be saying this dialogue synchronously, before the spoken memory is further illustrated by a poetic and slowly moving tableau of that remembered death bed scene, sometime in the past and/or in memory. The scene of his mother’s death is staged in a dreamlike fashion, with the inclusion of symbolic images like a bird in a cage and a setting that joins the interior of a bedroom not with a ceiling, but with the sky. Here the open sky is the destination for his departed mother’s soul and a visual transition that brings the viewer back to the island with Witt. With The Thin Red Line, this multi-tiered approach to narrative, weaving subjective narration with synchronous dialogue scenes, elliptical and discontinuous editing and speculative imagery, becomes Malick’s default authorial mode.

Another noteworthy effect of this opening sequence is the grounding of the entire film in spiritual songs/chants sung by Choir of All Saints, Honiara. These Christian songs, particularly “Jisas Yu Holem Hand Blong Mi” and “God Yu Tekkem Laef Blong Mi,” transcend cultural and language barriers and reinforce the depiction of the native community as sacred. For the AWOL Witt, the peaceful community provides a spiritual retreat from combat. These songs share a function with the voiceover narration in that they are communicated primarily to the viewer watching the film, but they sometimes also extend to the diegetic action on screen.

Witt is caught and faces off with Welsh in the brig of a ship. Their conversation about Witt’s misconduct and punishment introduces two conflicting philosophies about the material world. For Welsh, “there ain’t no world but this one” and this one world is “blowing itself to hell as fast as everybody can arrange it,” so “in a situation like that all a man can do is shut his eyes and let nothing touch him. Look out for himself.” This self-preservation of one’s own man in the one existing world typifies Welsh’s pessimistic philosophy. Witt, on the other hand, claims to have “seen another world,” and the development of his character
throughout the film and in other encounters with Welsh, suggests that awareness of a spiritual world can be associated with a call to serve others and not the self. Because Malick has shown the viewer both worlds (Witt’s time on the island and Welsh’s domain in the ship), we have from the first act onward audiovisual and cinematographic bearings with which to follow the philosophical argument as it plays out for the duration of the film.

The rest of the first act of the film corresponds to the beginning of the novel and to the beginning scenes of Malick’s screenplay, as the men of C-for-Charlie Company prepare to move off the transport ship and into the Landing Craft Infantry, hoping to land on the Guadalcanal shore before being spotted and bombed. On the soundtrack, we hear the narrated innermost thoughts of the nervous men, including the private resentments of Lieutenant Colonel Tall. His thought process reveals debasing career choices that have brought him to this present experience: “Brown-nosed the generals. Degraded myself for them and my family. For my home.”

Below, in the second forward hold, Pvt. Bell talks about his wife, whom we see illustrated in lovely insert shots. Though the shots of his wife Marty share some of the stylistic components of the earlier flash to Witt’s dying mother, Marty’s function in the film is to remind Bell of what makes life worth living, to keep him alive. He thinks, “Be with me now,” as if Marty and her romantic love are worthy of religious devotion.

When the men arrive at their destination, the landscape is beautiful but hostile. Their physical introduction to this new strange place is accompanied by one of Train’s most scripturally resonant voiceover monologues, evidently spoken to and about God: “Who are you to live in all these many forms? You’re death that captures all. You, too, are the source of all that's gonna be born. You’re glory. Mercy. Peace. Truth. You give calm a spirit, understanding, courage. The contented heart.” Though we do not see Train say these words, his 1 John 4:4 arm tattoo seen earlier in the film helps to link the presence of his voice with the testing of spirits that these individual men experience in wartime.

Approximately 35 minutes into the film, the first casualties of war appear. In Jones’ novel, the first exposure to wounded and dying soldiers plays out thus: “C-for-Charlie, as one man, was curious to see: to see a man die. Curious with a hushed, breathless awe” (45). In Malick’s film, however, the moment is one of quiet anguish, not awe, and one that must be moved past quickly in order to soldier on. Because Witt’s punishment is to be a stretcher-bearer, his reemergence in the film includes exposure to additional wounded men. From Witt’s perspective, he figures all men might share “one big soul” and a common search “for salvation.”

An embrace of this kind of thinking would make fighting in a war and destroying others, a necessarily self-destructive endeavor. As of World War II, no amount of Enlightenment rationalism or proclamations of divine right had addressed the causes and costs of war in a manner sufficient to promote peace and prevent future wars. In Apocalypse Now? Reflections on Faith in a Time of Terror, Duncan B. Forrester observes that in the First World War, “people were deeply disillusioned by the fact that both sides claimed divine sanction for their
cause” and that “excited theological voices on both sides spoke with ‘passionate intensity’ in support of their nation’s cause” and that the realities of World War II and the Nazi movement suggested that “the whole Enlightenment project seemed to have disintegrated even in its central bastion” (22-23). After surveying other subsequent wars, terror and destruction, Forrester argues that “the old liberal optimism of the Enlightenment cannot survive in today’s world. We need a more realistic theology, which takes sin seriously, and is not afraid to speak of the remedy for sin, of guilt and forgiveness, of reconciliation and of hope even in face of all these horrors” (24).

The combat heavy second act of the film does not attempt to solidify the existence of a just war. Because the film is so experientially geared, its artistic momentum would cease (or at least be compromised) if the film broadened to reveal external conditions that would justify or condemn the overall effort. Instead, Malick uses the characters of Tall and Capt. Staros to examine principles of decision-making and discernment that result in life-or-death outcomes among men of war. Unlike Witt, whose spirituality is rather open and questioning, or Train, whose voice ponders attributes of creator and creation, Staros specifically prays to God for guidance.

Malick’s ongoing cinematographic attention to the beauty of the land now includes weapons situated in the foreground, cutting across the expanse of land, as well as the gradual introduction of the Japanese enemy as fellow human beings. In an apparent nighttime scene on the eve of battle, Staros prays to God, “Let me not betray you. Let me not betray my men. In you I place my trust.” I have thus far described Malick as attuned to the foundations of violence in man’s sinful desire to put himself above God/apart from God, so it is important to note that Staros prays primarily to not betray God or others. Even as a type of leader of the battalion, he seeks a position that allows him to “share” [his men’s] “hardships and dangers,” as his source character Captain Stein is described in the novel, and also to know and do God’s will instead of his own. Unlike Badlands, in which God’s absence is felt, in the Thin Red Line, His presence is sought.

During the assault, men are blown up and shot down, physically destroyed. Some individual death scenes play out more characteristically as “war movie” death scenes, but other bodies are claimed without a moment’s reflection. A dramatic dissonance forms between Staros, who is dismayed about the toll this battle is having on the “children” he is sending into the fight, and Tall, who cheers Staros for his success. Malick underscores the hopelessness of these fallen men with an insert shot of a struggling bird on the ground. Is this bird just now coming into being? Is the bird dying? Viewers have differing opinions on this point. The connection of this vulnerable bird to the action of men running towards gunfire from a bunker answers Staros’s hope and horror with a remembrance of the sparrows of Matthew 10:29: “And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.”

The confrontation between Staros and Tall here intertwines with the earlier argument of Witt and Welsh. If there is only this world, this battle, then Tall’s angry orders to send more men into battle are not to be questioned or refused. Yet Staros, like Witt, believes in a spiritual world and a higher authority
and defies Tall in order to heed that other voice that will not allow him to “order them all to their deaths.” He instead requests permission for reconnaissance to see if there’s a less deathly way to proceed. Malick highlights the gulf between the two men’s worldviews by contrasting Staros’s prayerfulness with Tall’s constant, conspicuous taking of God’s name in vain. Later, Tall asks Staros “How many men do you think it's worth? How many lives?” because he wants to see if Staros is willing to sacrifice the lives of his men. Staros cannot give him a number.

The worth of a single life is also pertinent to the ongoing discussion of Witt and Welsh, which continues now as Witt has volunteered to try to take the bunker. Welsh tells him, “You’re just running into a burning house where nobody can be saved. What difference do you think you can make? One single man in all this madness.” This declaration of man’s diminished value is not exclusive to Welsh in the novel or film adaptation of The Thin Red Line. Throughout, men define humanity as “dirt,” “meat,” and “dogs.” In Malick’s film, all three descriptions coalesce in one extended scene of a grisly activity—dogs eating corpses of fallen men lying on the ground.

These debates of men in war sound uncharacteristic of a war film because a majority of war films prioritize action, not philosophy. But by departing from convention in conveying his various characters’ perspectives and utilizing a holistic approach, Malick arrives at a theme about the pervasiveness of violence within the human experience, and pointedly so for a battalion running into near-certain death. Even the fallen enemy soldiers contribute a voice to this blend of perspectives on a shared violence: “Are you righteous? Kind? Does your confidence lie in this? Are you loved by all? Know that I was, too.”

By shifting the voice of the film to the “other side,” as it were, Malick isn’t so much engaging in moral relativism as he is exploring man’s participation in a war that is more encompassing than any nation or border or political cause can dictate. This is the view of violence Jacques Ellul outlines in Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective, concluding that “from whatever side the problem is approached, it invariably turns out that all violence is of a piece … violence never attains the objectives it announces as justifying its use. The objectives and ends it proclaims always relate to man—to man’s existence, condition, and destiny” (113). Train’s voiceover returns to question the enemy of good that would bring the horror of war into creation: “This great evil. Where's it come from? How'd it steal into the world? What seed, what root did it grow from? Who's doing this? Who's killing us? Robbing us of life and light.”

As the movie enters its final act, Malick calls into question the effectiveness of the characters’ coping mechanisms. Staros is relieved of his command by Tall, who cannot bear the “soft-hearted” approach of a man who doesn’t understand that “nature’s cruel.” Bell’s devotion to his wife, which has been conveyed through several romantic memories or fantasy scenes as flights from scenes of war, crumbles with the receipt of a letter in which Marty asks for a divorce. It is with great irony that she invokes “the memory of what we had together” to persuade him to grant her wish, as his memory of her love is what has sustained him. Malick reflexively calls attention to the subjectivity of these
memories as he revives scenes of Marty. The shooting style has not changed, but
the viewer’s awareness of her infidelity affects our perception.

Witt, too, experiences a shift. He drifts again to a native community,
which now seems to bear the scars of a hostile world. The world of war has
eclipsed his “other world” as well. In this film of many characters, he’s
ostensibly the protagonist. His final self-sacrifice, which results from trying to
keep the battalion safe from harm, is an act of concluding bravery, a suggestion
that there is a kind of sacrifice that conquers the world, but it occurs at great cost.

To review, in *Badlands* Malick stages the deaths of crime spree victims as
sacrifices to the desires of aimless young lovers, and in *The Thin Red Line* he
stages the death of Witt as a sacrifice that has purpose because of the character’s
belief in another world and another way, away from war. *The Tree of Life* is the
most formally ornate of the three films, and its arrangement of conflicts is
predicated on ancient questions of the necessity of sacrifice within a cosmic and
heavenly order that is much bigger than man alone.

The film opens with a textual statement of God’s supremacy over man:
“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? ...When the morning
stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” (Job 38:4.7). Though
the film was widely received to be the most experimental of Malick’s
films to date, its commentary on conflict is in some ways much more clear and
direct than the examinations of violence in *Badlands* and *The Thin Red Line*. The
stated theme of the film is to explore “the way of nature and the way of grace.”
One of the characters, Mrs. O’Brien (Jessica Chastain), speaks in voiceover
narration about the difference between these two ways through life: “Grace
doesn’t try to please itself. Accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts
insults and injuries. Nature only wants to please itself. Get others to please it too.
Likes to lord it over them. To have its own way. It finds reasons to be unhappy...
when all the world is shining around it... when love is smiling through all things.”
Her delivery is much like that of Train in *The Thin Red Line*, but the images that
correspond to her monologue are more contained than his nature scenes were. We
mostly see a single family, the O’Brien family, as they live their lives in central
Texas in 1956. This is a misleading introduction that sets up later aesthetic
wonder, as little beyond the introductory sequence is confined to a straightforward
understanding of familial development and interaction.

In the beginning pages of Malick’s original script for the film, he
identifies another theme that helps to explain the form of the film to come.
During a scene set in 1968, in which Mrs. O’Brien is mourning the loss of one of
her grown sons, the following action description denotes her emotional state: “Not
just her child—it seems that all creation has died. Nature has betrayed the heart
that loved it ... Apart from him she cannot see the work of God, or nature’s
order” (3, 5). The death of R.L., as he’s named in the film, affects the soul of the
entire family by throwing into question the ways of God in the lives of man.

In another timeline, closer to present-day, another of the grown sons,
architect Jack (Sean Penn) is thinking of R.L.’s death. His own life and work are
contextualized in a modern condition in which the world has gone “to the dogs”.
The mention and connotation of dogs and Penn’s presence in the film are textual
connections to *The Thin Red Line*. Though in contrast to that period film, *The Tree of Life* cannot be contained by a single historical instance of war or any wholly measurable units of time or place. In this film Malick’s story canvas is infinite, cutting between a luminous God appearing against darkness, the O’Brien family in midcentury, Jack in his modern environment, and what the script refers to as an “Eternity,” a time/place in which “the plain and ordinary has become a door to the infinite … beyond death” (Malick 124).

Much discussion of the film’s experimental techniques surrounds a 17-minute sequence that begins roughly 20 minutes into the film. This is a space of cinematic wonder. Mrs. O’Brien asks, “Lord. Why? Where were you?,” an expression of mourning. Adult Jack’s reverie and his mother’s question trigger the aforementioned sequence, which depicts the creation of the universe and the Earth and creatures therein. Much of this cosmic and terrestrial development involves violent activity, featuring explosions, fire, rushing water, and other forces of nature. By this point in his filmography Malick’s skill as a director balances his largest ever story world (the universe and its creation) with a simple grounding structure of nature and grace. Here it is the appearance of two dinosaurs that illustrates the choices available to creation (perhaps controversially in this case) in a kind of creation lower than man. One dinosaur sees another fallen or injured dinosaur and appears ready to strike it. However, he spares the fallen dinosaur and moves on. To read this scene as an instance of grace covering nature would be too obvious and exact an explanation were Malick not intentionally guiding that reading by the preceding narration of Mrs. O’Brien.

The plot of the film, crosscutting throughout the various times and places listed above, follows the various events of young Jack’s maturation. As he is born and grows and experiences the births of siblings, he has a young child’s view of life’s pleasures and pains. But for the purpose of this essay’s topic of faith and violence, there are a couple of sequences that best represent Malick’s most significant probing of these career-long subjects of interest. Both of these involve Mr. O’Brien (Brad Pitt), the father of the family and the film’s representative of Nature (as opposed to Mrs. O’Brien’s Grace).

Mr. O’Brien is a serious man who instructs his sons with the kind of advice reminiscent of Welsh and Tall in their conversations with the “soft-hearted” Witt and Staros. He says of his wife, “Your mother’s naive. It takes fierce will to get ahead in this world,” directly opposing her film-opening narration that advocated grace over nature. Malick uses his dense/layered directorial approach to add scriptural ideas to this general dichotomy. Specifically, a sermon on Job follows Mr. O’Brien’s advice to his sons.

The priest giving the sermon declares, “We run before the wind. We think that it will carry us forever. It will not. We vanish as a cloud. We wither as the autumn grass and like a tree, are rooted up. Is there some fraud in the scheme of the universe? Is there nothing which is deathless, nothing which does not pass away?” At this point in the sermon, the camera, which has revealed the presence of the family in church, shows the viewer a stained glass window with the image of Christ. The priest continues, “We cannot stay where we are. We must journey forth. We must find that which is greater than fortune or fate. Nothing can bring
us peace but that.” If the priest is correct, and if the story of Job is to be believed, and if Christ is the answer, then Mr. O’Brien’s faith in fierce will alone is a misguided piece of advice to pass onto his sons.

The learned behavior of nature instead of grace eventually instructs a growing Jack in the way of violence. Mr. O’Brien tries to teach his sons to fight by demanding that they hit him. None seems eager to do so. The scene in which he tells his sons to hit him is, in concentrated, pugilistic form, an illustration of the domineering approach to fatherhood that plays out in an intermittent manner in glimpses of family meals disrupted by his violent reaction to his sons’ behavior. He is authoritarian in his attitude at home, ill at ease because of career circumstances and quick to lose his temper at his sons. As Jack is deepening in his awareness of his father’s wrongs and contradictions, he also experiences the death of a young friend who drowns.

All of these events create in Jack a desire to rebel against God, or at least against good. He hurts a frog. He steals from a neighbor. He is cruel to his younger brother R.L. He reckons aloud to his father, “You’d like to kill me,” and then later prays to God to kill his father, “Let him die. Get him out of here.” Jack does all of this despite the influence of his mother, whose advice to her sons could not be more markedly different from her husband’s advice. She instructs, “Help each other. Love everyone… Forgive.” As a young man growing into an adult, Jack has before him two paths. These are reminiscent of the adult male mindsets that are on dialectical display in The Thin Red Line, the conflict between the material world perceived to owe one something or the spiritual world that allows us to live (and possibly give) our lives for others.

In this respect, what is significant about The Tree of Life is that Malick eventually offers viewers an illustration of the material mindset not merely opposed to the spiritual outlook, but potentially transforming into the spiritual one. Time passes, and Mr. O’Brien experiences a disappointment at work that makes him reevaluate his belief in fierce will/nature. This prompts a confession: “I wanted to be loved because I was great. A big man. I’m nothing … I lived in shame. I dishonored it all and didn’t notice the glory. I’m a foolish man.” Jack comes to realize he is more like his father than his mother, even in the presence of evidence that his father was wrong.

Concluding images of the O’Brien family in their past and present incarnations on an unnamed shore emphasize the mother’s view of the necessity of grace for a peaceful end. The Tree of Life is a film full of questions for God, accusations aimed at God, and prayers of need and thanks. Many questions the film raises are unanswered, as they are beyond man’s capacity to answer. As a statement of faith, it presents viewers with a vision of grace as the only healing power to counteract the foundational violence of man and man’s choices in his fallen state.

The journey from Badlands’ stark vision of material and physical pleasures that consume lives and burn out quickly to The Tree of Life’s affirmation of the eternal necessity of sacrificial grace occurs alongside the evolution of Malick’s approach to putting all manner of conflicts on screen. One persistent theme in his filmography, including the most recent films following The
Tree of Life, is that romantic love necessarily falls short of creating ultimate fulfillment. In To the Wonder (2012), a plot comparing marital union with spiritual unity with God features an emotional climax of a priest experiencing a crisis of faith, expressed in poetic voiceover narration. But the content of the narration isn’t original to Malick. It is the “Lorica of Saint Patrick,” which seeks to situate “Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me” as the soul of story. As a filmmaker increasingly identified with Christian theology, Malick continues to tell stories of a world in which inner, interpersonal, and external conflicts all spring from a common fracture. His holistic approach to dramatizing those conflicts has grown into an artistic voice that testifies to the one way to make the wounded whole.

Notes

1 Terrence Malick: Film and Philosophy, edited by Thomas Deane Tucker and Stuart Kendall, and Terrence Malick and the Thought of Film, by Steven Rybin, are two such recent titles.

2 In Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie (2002), David Laderman describes Bonnie and Clyde and Easy Rider (1969) as films that “remake the classical into the New Hollywood by embracing the liberation of life on the road” (43).

Works Cited

2 March 2016.


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Race, Violence, and Hybrid Identity: Teaching Derek Walcott’s Early Poetry

Elizabeth Fredericks

As teachers at Christian institutions of higher education, we rarely have much difficulty incorporating faith in the classroom. The texts we teach often demand it, particularly in literature surveys that cover a wide range of authors and literary movements, many of which were often directly engaged with faith or took faith as a given for both author and audience. Discussing violence can prove more fraught: the human capacity for brutality can be difficult to discuss, and the literary texts we explore with our students sometimes have aestheticized the violence until the actual victims and their suffering bodies vanish under the gloss of artistry. Issues of race and violence in the Christian classroom can be even more challenging, given that Christian institutions of higher education tend to have few students or faculty members of color. Instructors are often sincerely concerned about alienating minority students who have to deal with issues of race every day, and may worry about whether they have the ethos to address such texts as outsiders themselves to the issues of race and oppression on display. They may worry, too, about how white students will react when their own privilege is interrogated, or when they feel they are being implicated in issues of race and violence that they abhor on an intellectual level, yet ignore on the level of personal, daily engagement. Often, our instinct is to stay silent.

But we know we do our students and ourselves no favors when we shy away from discussing challenging topics like race and violence in the Christian classroom. The mission statements of many Christian schools include language of “service” and “ethics,” but our students cannot serve the world in an ethical fashion if they are not pushed to confront the realities of race, faith, and violence during their time at college. Furthermore, as the last several years in America have demonstrated, issues of race and violence remain emotionally and politically charged, and perennially relevant to the lives of our students, as discussed below. We as educators are responsible for initiating and leading these discussions with thoughtfulness and tact in order to prepare our students to carry out the mission statements of our institutions and to bring Christ to a world that still suffers the corrosive effects of racial violence. But how can we do this well? In this paper, I discuss how I have approached this issue in a British literature survey that gradually built to the explicit discussion of these issues in the work of Caribbean poet Derek Walcott. Walcott’s biracial identity and blended cultural heritage make him an ideal writer for a more diverse British literature curriculum that directly examines issues of race and violence in the classrooms. Walcott’s own thoughtful confrontation of race in his own life and country as well as his
contemplation of racial violence in other contexts models thoughtful engagement to both educators and students and offers avenues of discussion that approach a sensitive topic with nuance and charity.

Certainly the events of 2015 have demonstrated that race is still a powerful and sensitive issue on the campuses of Christian and secular colleges alike. Protests at the University of Missouri and Yale, following racial incidents on both campuses, ignited fierce debate about issues of race relations on American campuses (Hartocollis and Bidgood). Christian campuses have not been immune: for instance, Wheaton College faced considerable controversy around the termination of Dr. Larycia Hawkins following her decision to wear a hijab in solidarity with Muslims. Kristin Paredes-Collins notes that faith-based institutions are not immune to outbreaks of hateful imagery, and the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education includes incidents at several faith-based institutions in their annual tracking of racial incidents on college campuses (Paredes-Collins 122; “Campus Racial Incidents”). At Baylor University where I teach, we are approaching the centenary of the “Waco Horror,” the horrific 1916 lynching of Jesse Washington in front of 10,000 members of the community; while the event will be commemorated on its anniversary, responses from the community have been muted, and efforts to place a commemorative marker have progressed slowly (Hoppa).

Institutional responses to matters of diversity on campuses have often focused heavily on demographics; this approach theorizes that changing the racial composition of the school will naturally affect the treatment of issues of race and racial sensitivity, as students and faculty alike become more aware of those whose experiences are different from their own (Paredes-Collins 8). This approach is decidedly individualistic as well as passive; Deborah Taylor notes that “[w]hite evangelical Christians hold theological beliefs that stress individualism and have difficulty recognizing the impact of race and diversity on social structures,” which can cause them “to minimize the turbulent history of racial discrimination and desire a color-blind society” (52). This tendency can manifest in literary studies as a resistance to revising the literary canon, whether for the inclusion of women writers or authors of color. To take one side or another can be read as a declaration of some partisan or sectarian allegiance in broader ideological battles being waged both within academia and the broader culture.

Yet tackling the structural component of issues of race and violence is vital. By pushing students to question structures and systems, students can be guided, as educator Paolo Freire argues, to be neither the “proprietor of history or of all people” nor “the liberator of the oppressed”. Instead, students escape the “circle of certainty within which reality is also imprisoned” and are unafraid “to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled…to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them” (39). Intentionally working towards a more meaningfully multicultural curriculum does more, as Nina Asher points out, “to deconstruct stereotypes about minority cultures and peoples” and “to foster dialogue across differences, enabling teachers to get past essentialist representations characteristic of hallway multiculturalism” (17). Freire provides a valuable model for this in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, in which he argues that it is the weakness of the
oppressed that will free the oppressed and the oppressor alike to become more fully human (47). Creating space for those voices is thus not only vital for minority students, but crucial for majority students as well if they are to become free from their own participation in systems that deny the full humanity of others. And while Freire’s call for radical transformation may initially strike educators as off-putting, his preface acknowledges his debt to Christian models of cultural transformation, as his understanding of strength in weakness demonstrates.

His approach is less opposed than it might initially seem to the mission statements of Christian colleges; as J. Derek McNeil and Carlos Pozzi argue, “a more diverse Christian community is at the center of God’s work because it provides a fuller expression of God’s heart for all humanity” (95). Indeed, Freire’s insistence on educating students towards freedom finds a counterpart in the pedagogical writers of Christian educator Parker Palmer, who notes the teacher should be a “mediator between the knower and the known, between the learner and the subject to be learned”; teaching students to “imitate authority on their papers and exams” means “teaching a slave ethic…forming students who neither know how to learn in freedom nor how to live freely, guided by an inner sense of truth” (29). Freire’s project of humanization can thus deepen the commitment of Christian colleges and universities to lay the groundwork for meaningful expressions of diversity “by linking their efforts to their mission and their history, and (more importantly) their theology” (Perez 25).

The teacher in the classroom may not have much sway over institutional changes that may or may not be taking place. Nonetheless, professors have considerable power to support the desire to create a university in which students find themselves becoming more human, not by ignoring color but by acknowledging what roles race has played in the history of their discipline or in the subject matter itself. The arts are particularly well-positioned to do this kind of work. Suzanne Choo suggests that “engagements with the aesthetic in classrooms can foster a deeper understanding of moral obligations that transcend private interests or pleasures” (103). This requires, in part, a “hospitable” approach to the encounter with the work of art, a “critical openness to the world with a critical loyalty beyond the local” (Hansen 289; qtd in Choo). This attitude “prioritizes otherness before the self, the moral value over instrumental and aesthetic values,” thus ceding priority to the voice of the text or artwork and initially relinquishing one’s own opinion or response. It can be difficult to convince students to quiet their internal voice of reaction or response immediately, though, which is how an artist like Walcott becomes instrumental to the process, offering them an encounter with a culture and a history about which they are less likely to have a prefabricated opinion or response.

There are, of course, risks to acknowledge and pitfalls to avoid in trying to bring about this kind of meaningful encounter with a work of literature. First and foremost, instructors—particularly those working from a position of privilege—must be willing to reflect upon their own past experiences and perspectives critically in light of artists’ and students’ real experiences of racial incidents or violence. Taylor notes that “many White evangelical Christians tend to attribute racial problems to misunderstandings in individual relationships, rather than to
institutional obstacles” (14); however, in order to speak meaningfully to students about these issues, teachers must set aside their own desire to be blameless of racial injustice and acknowledge the reality of systems that perpetuate injustice, such as colonialism’s effects in Africa or structural poverty in America. Beyond that, it is vital to be intentional in the classroom, building an environment in which all students feel safe to contribute. A key element here involves establishing respectful discussion guidelines at the beginning of the semester as well as avoiding the temptation to call on students from minority groups to act as spokespersons for that group, which places an unfair burden upon them to speak for a group and distances them from their peers in the classroom (Franco 56). Teachers should also focus on designing assignments that guide students to consider cultural understanding (Taylor 54). Part of this includes sufficient scaffolding for readings involving writers of color so that they do not feel included as mere tokens of diversity, but are instead understood by students as natural developments out of the tradition whose work connects with past texts they have read as well as future texts they have yet to encounter (Chu 488-9).

In light of these needs and risks, why teach Walcott, an author who may be unfamiliar to many teachers beyond his inclusion in the Norton Anthology of British Literature? There are three major reasons. For instructors who are wary of tokenism, or the inclusion of minority writers only as an afterthought or add-on to an already-crowded syllabus, Walcott is a gifted artist who also provides fresh perspective on the evolving but mostly-white canon taught in most schools: he is the 1992 Nobel Laureate for literature and a longtime friend of fellow Nobel Laureates Seamus Heaney and Joseph Brodsky, as well as other leading lights of late twentieth-century literature. He perceives himself as working within the canon of British or Anglophone literature, drawing on classic sources such as Homer and Marlowe as well as modernist forebears such as James Joyce. His texts allude to or explicitly draw from other influences that instructors might include in their surveys, ranging from Shakespeare to Auden (not to mention American writers such as Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop). Critic and poet David Biespiel notes that Walcott’s poems “illustrate a useful, necessary, and yes, original foundational trust in elementary European poetic forms” that would build well on earlier readings (Biespiel).

Second, as a biracial author drawing on both Caribbean and European heritage, Walcott models for students a kind of hospitable encounter with the other. Although “hybridity” is a loaded term in contemporary scholarship, linked as it is to “racial ideologies of purity and miscegenation” (Bohata 129), Charles Stewart helpfully describes the interaction implied here as “the encounter between two mutually apparent zones of difference” whose meeting might result in a new mixture, such as the work of a poet like Walcott (53). The college setting is, for many students, an ongoing site for these encounters between “zones of difference,” and they often readily sympathize with the struggle to reconcile different (even opposing) components of their own lives; thus, they may connect quickly to Walcott’s simultaneous embrace of and struggle with the various sides of his heritage. This leads the third reason for Walcott’s inclusion: the “zones of difference” that collide in his person and his poetry are often sufficiently new to
students that they lack prefabricated opinions and can thus engage in a hospitable encounter with the other more readily than if they were encountering a struggle they already supposed they knew well. As Alexander Irvine suggests, Walcott’s work “determinitorializes” history, language, and culture by reinterpreting colonial influences through a Caribbean lens (Irvine 124-5). Through his work, students can look at the tradition they have been studying in a new way and find in it the voices that might have been suppressed or neglected by writers who worked from a position of implicit membership and privilege.

This blend of theory, praxis, and context comes together in the actual teaching of Walcott; the lesson in question occurred in April 2015 in a British Literature survey that began with Anglo-Saxon poetry and concluded with the contemporary British novel *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro. Prior to class, students completed a daily reading journal, submitted online, that recorded their response to the text as well as some analysis of the poetic material or an effort to connect its themes and content to other works we had read. Summary is explicitly discouraged in the reading journal in order to encourage students to generate material for discussion. The instructor reads the journal responses prior to class and incorporates students’ observations and ideas into the lesson plan as points for generating discussion. Our reading for the class session on Walcott included his poem “A Far Cry from Africa” and selections from the long poem “The Schooner Flight.” These texts were supplemented by contextual material on the Mau Mau Uprising as well as biographical information on Walcott himself.

“Far Cry,” written almost sixty years ago, dates from early in Walcott’s poetic career, and is contemporaneous with the Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya, an event which resulted in the internment of over one million Kenyans, during which time many died or were tortured by British forces. The poem is four stanzas of free verse with irregular rhyme. The first stanza introduces the Mau Mau Uprising and the murder of settler child Michael Ruck, juxtaposing colonial policy and murder against the natural imagery of the veldt; the second stanza continues and develops these themes, and contrasts the violence of the natural world with the more calculated, deliberate brutality of humankind. Walcott’s speaker links this situation in the first stanza to the Holocaust; in the third, the shortest stanza, he links the situation also to the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War. Only in the final stanza does he reveal his own stake in this crisis: as a person of mixed race, he feels torn between his African and European heritage, between his resentment of colonial rule but also his love of the literature that was bequeathed to him by the same people. The fourth stanza consists entirely of questions as the speaker reveals his internal struggle, and it offers no final resolution for the speaker or the readers.

“The Schooner Flight,” on the other hand, is a poem from Walcott’s poetic maturity; it was published in his 1979 collection *The Star-Apple Kingdom* and, in its eleven sections, tells the tale of a mixed-race speaker’s poetic vocation, disappointed romances, and experiences of the sea and islands of the Caribbean. Students read the first and fifth sections of this poem. The poem is not quite in free verse; it mostly hews to iambic pentameter with an irregular rhyme scheme which, combined with its blend of local dialect and a higher literary diction, offers
a kind of Caribbean-inflected blank verse that students can contrast to the highly elevated style of Milton’s blank verse in *Paradise Lost*. In the poem, the speaker, a biracial man who calls himself Shabine (a local term for a mixed-race person), is leaving home on a voyage of personal and poetic discovery aboard the schooner *Flight*. His journey includes brawls with his crewmates, dream visions, a near-death experience in a storm, and, movingly, an encounter with a ghostly slave ship from the Middle Passage that is part of a larger grappling with the legacy of the colonial past. Unlike “A Far Cry from Africa,” “The Schooner *Flight*” offers some measure of resolution: the speaker finds himself satisfied to “give voice to one people’s grief” and remain forever on the poetic journey of discovery. The journey itself may never end, and a more final resolution of complex, messy human life may never come, but his artistic vocation, now fully embraced, sustains him and integrates the multiple facets of his identity into one coherent whole.

Our discussion of Walcott was part of our final unit on contemporary British literature. In this unit, we focused particularly on British literature in a non-English context; our main writers in addition to Walcott included Irish poet Seamus Heaney, Welsh poet Gillian Clarke, and novelist Kazuo Ishiguro, whose family emigrated to England from Japan when the writer was five years old. Issues of identity and imperialism were key components of this unit, after their initial introduction in past units, and so our discussion of Walcott was a culmination of a discussion of colonialism that included Shakespeare, Jonathan Swift, and Olaudah Equiano, and our discussion of the violence that Walcott would address was preceded by a consideration of the trauma experienced by World War I poets. This scaffolding prepared students to think about both violence and race in terms of the more subtle nuances of artistic representation, rather than as a polemic to be argued. This discussion also depended upon a semester-long practice of drawing connections between texts so that earlier works were not forgotten and so that students could perceive the conversations unfolding across time about multiple issues, including religion and gender in addition to race and violence.

The course was discussion-based, but in order to produce strong discussion, students were required to complete a reading journal of 250-500 words for every class session in which they discussed some part of the day’s reading that caught their eye. On a poetry day, they were expected to focus on one poem in particular from the day’s reading and consider either some element of content or style. Journals had to be submitted by 6 a.m., which gave me as the instructor time to read them in advance and incorporate questions or ideas that the students had raised into the lesson plan. This lesson came late in the semester, and the students had become much more confident readers of poetry by this point. As a result, their journals often touched upon elements of style and content that I intended to cover, and rather than lecture from the front of the room, I could ask individual students to explain what they had observed, giving them opportunities to teach their classmates. This practice enables me to maintain the focus and direction of our discussion while giving students the opportunity to learn from one another and respond directly to each other’s ideas, and the advance preparation
means that when students are called upon, they feel ready to speak rather than
caught off guard or put on the spot. Our particular lesson goals were to identify
the hybrid elements of Walcott’s form and content and make connections between
his work and our past discussions of race, power, and violence in other texts. This
would also prepare us for our next class session on representations of the Troubles
in the poetry of Seamus Heaney and issues of power and identity in Ishiguro’s
Never Let Me Go.

Eighteen of the twenty students present that day completed their reading
journals, and they were attentive to a wide range of the features of the works even
prior to discussion. Several found Walcott’s choice of imagery or verbs to be
particularly distinctive in both works. The theme of duality in “Far Cry” was
noted by several, who discussed it and Walcott’s effort to mediate between the
two sides of his heritage. Fewer immediately caught the subtler ways in which
these dualities operated in “The Schooner Flight,” though one student noted that
once he read the poem out loud, the cadences of the Caribbean vernacular became
clear to him and the poem began to make more sense. Another student observed
of “Far Cry” that there are very few end-stopped lines, and that the enjambment
creates a tense, accelerated pace that reflected the agitation of the poetic speaker.

Rather than perceive Walcott as separate from what they had encountered
of the British canon already, students were quick to draw connections and make
comparisons to other authors they had read. One student, responding to “The
Schooner Flight,” wrote that the depiction of life at sea seemed “a far cry from the
depiction of [Jonathan Swift’s] Gulliver in tone and style. Whereas Gullivers
travels [sic] seemed analytical at times, some of this work feels like both a
confession, with references to hiding souls, and Christ Himself, and some form of
regret for his questionable past and abandonment of his lover.” Another connected
Walcott’s ambivalence about the violence of the Uprising to the World War I
poets we had studied, such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, and their
distress at fighting for a cause they did not believe in.

In class, Walcott was introduced to students as the opening of our final
unit on contemporary British literature, which deliberately consisted of authors
who were not, in fact, English: the Caribbean poet Walcott was followed by Irish
poet Seamus Heaney, Welsh poet Gillian Clarke, and lastly, Japanese-British
novelist Kazuo Ishiguro. Thus, Walcott’s otherness from the core of the British
canon was not the exception but the rule in our final unit. Our discussion began
with how students had connected to the material, and several commented on both
the vividness of Walcott’s imagery and the unfamiliarity of his topics as features
that drew them in. These remarks broke the ice to discuss the more somber
material in “A Far Cry from Africa,” and the class admitted, as whole, they were
unaware of the Mau Mau Uprising from their past history courses. One student
had picked up on Walcott’s references to the Holocaust (“What is that [policy] to
the white child hacked in bed? / To savages, expendable as Jews?” [27]) as well
as the Spanish Civil War (“again / A waste of our compassion, as with Spain” [27]), and others admitted they had found the first comparison shocking until they
had read more about the Uprising and particularly the British use of concentration
camps to hold suspected Mau Mau insurgents, not to mention the physical
torments inflicted upon them there. In light of that, a few students admitted surprise that Walcott was not more severe in the depiction of the British in the poem. The violence had crossed a line from the ordinary to the atrocious, in their eyes.

This gave us an opportunity to connect Walcott to past intersections of race and violence in our readings. We linked Walcott’s understanding of violence as something endemic to humanity as a whole, seen in the lines “The violence of beast on beast is read / As natural law, but upright man / Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain” (27) when I drew their attention back to Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* 56, in which the poet suggests that it is the way of nature to casually trample the individual life, contrary to the apparent laws of God. We had discussed this in our Victorian unit, but the return to the idea in the wake of two World Wars had given the students fresh perspective and a renewed sympathy for Walcott’s harsh critique of humanity. Walcott’s reference to World War II and the Spanish Civil War demonstrated, as Tennyson’s own concern did, a broader worry about the corrosive effects of violence and death upon the soul, though Walcott’s critique placed a far heavier burden of responsibility upon humankind’s choice to indulge in a violence that far exceeds “natural law.” Several students caught Walcott’s reference to the Holocaust and the Spanish Civil War, and for them these references were a gateway into a broader concern Walcott demonstrated about violence against vulnerable people that awoke their sympathy for the Mau Mau rebels as well as the murdered settlers.

Walcott also mentions his love of the English language, which we compared to Caliban’s curse in *The Tempest*: “You taught me language; and my profit on’t / Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language!” We considered this passage in relation to the ambiguity of Walcott’s closing questions:

I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both, or give back what they give?
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
How can I turn from Africa and live? (28)

Students quickly grasped the heightened nuance of Walcott’s words compared with Caliban’s rage, and how both had cursed their oppressors and their language while also using that language with remarkable skill and beauty. Walcott’s reluctance to give up the beauty of the English language and its literature demonstrate a far more complex relationship with his colonial predecessors that the students found compelling. While some admitted frustration with the ambivalence of the unanswered questions at the end, others agreed it felt appropriate, that the questions were unanswerable.

This discussion transitioned us into a consideration of how hybridity, or the meeting of “zones of difference” in one person, can make violence a more complicated option. The murder of six-year-old Michael Ruck by Mau Mau rebels
was, the students agreed, appalling, but the brutalities committed upon the Mau Mau disgusted them as well. To prompt discussion about experiences of hybridity, or conflicted and competing identities in their own lives, I mentioned my own family’s blend of West Coast and Southern heritage, and the way in which my mother’s accent comes and goes depending on who she happens to be talking to or how I tried to shed linguistic markers of both identities when I went to college in Michigan. Students shared their own experiences of going back and forth between who they were on campus and who they were at home. Once the ice had been broken, several students volunteered stories they had not written in their journals: one student, whose family had immigrated from Nigeria when she was a child, spoke of how she had taught herself to speak with an American accent to avoid teasing at school, only to be criticized by her relatives back in Nigeria for betraying her heritage; an international student from Mexico described her frustration upon coming to America of not looking Chicana enough to be treated as such, of having to “pass” in a way that was never required of her in Mexico. Both spoke as well of the struggle of choosing sides: the Nigerian-American student described constantly moving from one side to another, depending on the context of the moment, whereas the Mexican student described how others’ disbelief that she was Mexican caused her to hold more tightly to her heritage rather than embrace her ability to “pass” as European. These real-life examples helped destabilize other students’ concepts of race and identity in a way that enhanced our discussion of Walcott and demonstrated the ways in which these issues play out in places that students who are uncomplicatedly white and American might not realize.

We closed our conversation of “A Far Cry from Africa” by considering what choice Walcott’s speaker might face, and how racially-motivated violence threatened him from every side. The students admitted to seeing little hope in the speaker’s available choices; the only mediating path was that of continuing to choose, which, some thought, might only lead to violence against the self at some point. This led us into a brief consideration of “The Schooner Flight,” in which students observed that Walcott’s speaker seemed to have integrated the two sides of his identity: the poem’s language modulated between “proper” English and ceremonial language, such as the speaker’s declaration, “Christ have mercy on all sleeping things!” to the dialect of the island, seen in both vocabulary (“Shabine,” the speaker’s name as well as the term for a person of mixed race) and syntax, particularly in the verbs (“nothing else move,” “I ain’t answer the ass”). The swearing in the poem left them slightly abashed, but when asked if it felt violent or harsh, they conceded it did not: the speaker incorporated profanity into his speech but rarely directed it at anyone. When asked if the poem was nonetheless beautiful, most students agreed it was, citing the imagery and metaphors as well as the cadence produced by Walcott’s irregular rhymes. More lines in this poem are end-stopped with either commas or full stops, which produced a less frenetic pace than “Far Cry.” Students were asked for evidence that this speaker had integrated the various parts of his identity, and several pointed to the following lines:
I’m just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
and either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation… (238)

The idea that the speaker’s mixed heritage did not divide him down the middle, but made him a nation contained in one being, built on past discussions of the man-as-microcosm idea from Early Modern literature. When asked what this speaker would do, if confronted with the same questions as the speaker at the end of “Far Cry,” one student drew our attention to the closing of Section 1:

...Well, when I write
this poem, each phrase go be soaked in salt;
I go draw and knot every line as tight
as ropes in this rigging; in simple speech
my common language go be the wind,
my pages the sails of the schooner Flight.

He argued the speaker would not choose, or rather, that his choice would be like that of Shabine: he would elect to write, to use the speech he had inherited as his way of fighting for some kind of justice.

In the end, we were able to discuss race, violence, identity, and racial language at some length, with sensitive contributions from students that elicited interest and respect from classmates. This discussion prepared students well for the exploration of ethnic violence that we would encounter in Seamus Heaney’s bog poems, which we read for the next class session, and some of the same ideas of hybridity and violence were raised again in that meeting. The success of the discussion depended on several things: the expectation for civil discussion had been established at the start of semester and adhered to throughout our meetings thus far; students had reflected and processed their initial reactions through their reading response journals before coming to class; and appropriate contextual material had been provided to clarify the poetry; and lastly, Walcott was positioned as a writer in continuity with ideas and themes we had been discussing all semester long, with relevance to the writers we had already encountered as well as those we had yet to read. He was an invaluable opening to a unit in which we discussed sin on a national level, whether it was oppression in former colonies, religious violence in Northern Ireland, the oppression of women in the work of Gillian Clarke, or the evacuation of the transcendent in Ishiguro’s fiction. Our closing acknowledged, albeit too briefly, the continued relevance of Walcott’s concern for issues of race and violence, manifested in the Black Lives Matter protests then occurring around the country.

For the discussion to succeed, several pedagogical elements were essential. First, our interest in the texts as poems was clear: Walcott’s hybrid style, loose use of rhyme, and dependence upon enjambment were all formal elements we discussed in relation to the subject matter and reminded students that these were works of art rather than formal arguments to be picked apart or
rebutted. Second, through the use of the daily reading journal, students came to
class prepared for discussion, and the use of the journals in the discussion shifted
some of the work of teaching away from the instructor and onto them, which, over
the course of the semester gave them more of a stake in producing strong
discussion and taught them to respect each other’s insights into the texts we
studied. However, discussion remained focused and structured: when discussing
each poem, we first summarized it as a class and discussed formal elements
before moving into the discussion of content, which helped to remind students
that author and text were always foremost in our discussion, and their insights and
personal stories were to provide deeper understanding of the text and enable us to
see how it applied to other contexts. Finally, our emphasis on charitable and civil
discussion, in which we agreed that our responsibility as readers was to assume
each text had something vital to communicate even if we disagreed, created the
hostpitable classroom environment in which we could discuss sensitive issues and
in which students felt comfortable volunteering personal stories. We benefitted as
well from approaching this text late in the semester and were able to see it as part
of a still-unfolding conversation about these issues; additionally, this meant
students had already mastered writing and discussion skills that were vital to
having a thoughtful conversation. Tackling a text like this too early in the
semester might have produced very different results.

Ultimately, Walcott is a writer of sufficient complexity that even an
excellent hour-long discussion feels like an insufficient treatment. Instructors
could include other material if they wished to broaden the discussion, such as
Walcott’s consideration of race in America in his long poem “Arkansas
Testament,” which would open the discussion to issues closer to home after an
initial discussion of the colonial contexts. The podcast Radiolab has an episode on
the Mau Mau Uprising that also would provide valuable context for students,
though its opening, which focuses on colonial archives, may feel digressive, and
the explicit descriptions of the some of the tortures endured by Mau Mau captives
may prove overwhelming for some students. Certainly the issues raised continue
to remain relevant in light of discussions furthered by American writers such as
Ta-Nehisi Coates’s award-winning Between the World and Me or current issues
of race such as the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. As a result, Walcott’s
thoughtful treatment of the issues of race and violence makes him an invaluable
addition to the literature curriculum of a Christian college or university, and
provides instructors with a fresh way of opening students’ eyes to issues of race to
which they may have become inured or insensitive. After all, Walcott’s most
urgent words on these issues remain words of love and restoration. As he states in
his Nobel lecture:

Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is
stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when
it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its
original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and
Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows
its white scars… Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered
histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent. And this is the exact process of the making of poetry, or what should be called not its "making" but its remaking…. (“The Antilles”)

So too we as educators and students seek to enact a kind of remaking in our classrooms, one that renders our students capable of using their education, as Parker Palmer suggests, not to wound the world further but to heal it (30).

Notes


3 Both of these poems are in *The Collected Poetry of Derek Walcott* (2014); however, an instructor wishing to preview them can find both poems in full on the Poetry Foundation’s website.

4 All page numbers for Walcott’s poetry come from *The Poetry of Derek Walcott: 1948-2013*.

Works Cited


Finding Her Voice: An Analysis of *I Am Malala* and Its Place in the Classroom

Katie Magaña

Malala Yousafzai’s autobiography, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*, demonstrates the painful line between the desire for advancement in society and the lengths to which some will go to keep power dynamics as they are. The title of Yousafzai’s book establishes both the existing social structures and the positions of power within them: as a female child, Malala should hardly be threatening to the armed regime of the Taliban. Nevertheless, something about this girl, Malala, is dangerous and inspires violence. *I Am Malala* gives voice to Yousafzai’s life in Pakistan, her (and her father’s) desire for girls to be educated, and the way that she grappled with the expectations she had (or continues to have) of both the Taliban and the United States troops in the area. The autobiography is unsettling for a number of reasons: a child’s perspective of an occupied land, the shooting of a young girl, and the social knowledge that this young woman can never go home—she can work for her people from afar but has been displaced by her desire to help.

In all likelihood, Malala Yousafzai was given her voice when the Taliban tried to kill her. The violence done to her on that dusty road led down a path to her having a story to tell and a platform from which to tell it. They wanted her silenced but made her known to the world. They wanted her small but made the issues that concerned her big. They wanted her dead on the side of the road but raised her to a life with access to the means to make a difference. The naming of Malala Yousafzai as a Nobel Peace Prize recipient in October 2014 has shone a still brighter light on her story and her message of Pakistani girls’ desire for education.

The issues of peace and violence are inseparable in Yousafzai’s story; through an act of violence done to her she has been granted the ability to fight for peace. Yousafzai’s story would seemingly be the perfect example of God bringing an individual through an incredibly difficult time of life in order to use her mightily. But Malala is Muslim. This article will argue Malala Yousafzai’s story, nevertheless, has a place in the Christian university classroom and suggest ways to address the concerns of violence, peace, and activism through acknowledging and respecting the complexities of the divide between Christianity and Islam and what they can add to a classroom discussion of the autobiography. As a case study, *I Am Malala* provides a unique bridge between social issues and literature for both the literature instructor and students, as well as the opportunity to discuss potential Christian perspectives of this violence in comparison with Islam’s perspective and radical Islam’s practice.
Unpacking Malala’s Story

Steadfast Faith

I know God stopped me from going to the grave. [...] People prayed to God to spare me, and I was spared for a reason – to use my life for helping people. When people talk about the way I was shot and what happened I think it’s the story of Malala, ‘a girl shot by the Taliban’; I don’t feel like it’s a story about me at all. (255)

Yousafzai closes her story with these words. She has charted much Pakistani history, detailed educational issues in her country, revealed the horrors of life under the Taliban, and summarized her recovery after being shot. Yet the idea that she concludes with, which is (presumably) quite important to her as the closing thought she leaves with her readers is that Allah has protected her because he has big plans for her. The faith she has despite what she has lived through is undeniable. Her faith is not a naïve belief that Allah will keep bad things from happening but the tested faith of one who has been brought through greater trials than most will ever experience. Malala Yousafzai trusts that Allah has sustained, and will continue to sustain, her. Malala’s faith is, in fact, one of her core messages for readers.

Statements of faith are particularly numerous near the end of the book, where Yousafzai discusses her near-death experience, but her identity as a devout Muslim girl is evident throughout. Yousafzai states: “I had finished my recitation of the complete Quran, what we call Khatam ul-Quran, much to the delight of Baba, my grandfather the cleric. We recite in Arabic, and most people don’t actually know what the verses mean, but I had also started learning them in translation” before the Taliban invaded Swat (Yousafzai 111). Yousafzai repeatedly mentions prayer. She discusses fasting during Ramadan and her mother feeding others who are in need. Although only in passing, Yousafzai mentions going on Umrah (260-261) and includes a picture of her and her mother praying in Medina. Malala’s faith is evident in her story because it is such a big part of her life.

Aware that much of her readership may not be Muslim or know much about Islam, Yousafzai provides brief overviews of some tenets of Islam that can serve as a basis for discussing the essential beliefs of Muslims: she becomes a teacher of the basic tenets of her faith. Early in the text, Yousafzai explains the five pillars of Islam in the middle of a discussion of the idea of jihad being introduced during the Cold War. In this history she explains:

The clerics of the mosques would often talk about the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in their sermons, condemning the Russians as infidels and urging people to join jihad, saying it was their duty as good Muslims. It was as if under Zia [army chief at the time] jihad had become the sixth pillar of our religion on top of the five we grow up to learn – the belief in one God, namaz or
prayer five times a day, giving zakat or alms, roza – fasting from dawn till sunset during the month of Ramadan – and haj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, which every able-bodied Muslim should do once in their lifetime.' (Yousafzai 26)

The aside in which Yousafzai glosses the five most important pillars of Islam is brief before she continues with her historical overview. Rather than take a didactic tone or dedicate a chapter or even section to explaining her beliefs, Yousafzai places a vital piece of information about her faith in the midst of the historical background of her area as she builds to the terror caused by the Taliban in her homeland. The integration of the religious information into the historical narrative means that the reader learns about the Muslim faith—even a reader who might skim past a section obviously attempting to teach about Islam. The Five Pillars of Islam must be central to any discussion of the Muslim faith and, as such, their inclusion in the book reveals Yousafzai’s desire that her readers know the heart of her beliefs.

There is a tension between the education Malala’s family longs for and the traditions of the religion they practice that readers encounter. Besides Yousafzai’s direct references to her own faith and values, her readers learn that her family values the local traditions and has a legacy of strong religious heritage; but readers also learn of her family’s transgression of social expectations. Devout and respectable, Yousafzai’s family is dedicated to Islam. Malala’s grandfather was an imam and she explains that “[h]is sermons at Friday prayers were so popular that people would come down from the mountains by donkey or foot to hear him” (Yousafzai 22). Her grandfather is respected for his teaching and place in the Muslim community. Yousafzai also recalls, “He sent my father to the government high school to learn English and receive a modern education rather than to a madrasa, even though as an imam people criticized him for this. Baba also gave him a deep love of learning and knowledge as well as a keen awareness of people’s rights, which my father has passed on to me” (Yousafzai 30). Malala’s interest in education comes from the legacy given her by her father and his father. Likewise, her respect for Islam and identification as a Muslim is evident in her family’s dedication to the faith. When accused of running a haram school, “[o]f course there are [Qurans in his room]!” [replies her] father, astonished that his faith would be questioned. “I am a Muslim”” (Yousafzai 78). Throughout the book, Yousafzai depicts her, and her family’s, belief in Islam through both asides in which she is clearly explaining her faith to readers she assumes might not know the basic tenets of Islam and moments when, in the description of a day, she reveals her adherence to Muslim practices to the more informed reader who can pick up on subtitles.

I Am Malala joins a number of other books that have been written to help the West understand foreign issues. Chelsey Sanford describes these books:

Other Muslims, like Malala, have written books for predominantly Western audiences that critique certain aspects of their religion. Some scholars have labeled these spokespeople “good Muslims,”
in reference to President George W. Bush’s troubling call for distinguishing between the “good” and “bad” Muslims, rather than terrorists and civilians. So-called “good Muslims” tend to be women, are portrayed in the media as both elegant, educated members of the upper class and courageous “victims” of Islam daring to raise their voices against its misogynist authority. While they gain credence by speaking from personal experience, their critiques of Islam and their native cultures tend to have several problematic features: reductionist portrayals of Islam; the conflation of Islam with misogyny and the oppression of women; and the refusal to engage with the history and politics of their home countries. (129).

Despite the lengths Yousafzai goes to in order to include details of her faith, it is important to remember that she portrays Islam (hers and that of the Taliban) in the simplistic terms that she understands. Certainly, Malala’s view of Islam is “reductionist” but readers must also remember that she is a child with a child’s understanding. The goal of unpacking her depiction of Islam is, therefore, not to gain a full understanding of the complexities of the faith but to learn her faith as she practices it and see the distinctions that she sees.

The space that Yousafzai dedicates to her Muslim identity serves two purposes: it gives her readers a window into her faith and her values, and it creates a distinction between her faith and that of Muslims who practice violence as part of their self-identification as Muslims. As such, the description that readers encounter is integral to her story and to a reader’s own understanding of the events that unfold. It is through Malala’s eyes that the earthquake is experienced, the banning of education for girls grieved, and the politics examined. She is a peaceful Muslim girl who is confused, frustrated, and victimized by a regime that embraces violence as an acceptable means of gaining, maintaining, and growing their power. In her own words, readers encounter Malala Yousafzai’s Islam and must accept her worldview as a valid representation of a religion that is all too often portrayed as intrinsically violent by Western media. A classroom juxtaposition of Yousafzai’s depiction of her religion and the media’s selected coverage of events tied to the faith of Islam should reveal a disconnect between her practices and representations that privilege the violence of the few over the voices of the majority. Yousafzai’s inclusion of the details of her faith and how she practices it dictates how readers should view her understanding of Islam and any potential connections between the religion and violence.

**Focus on Education (and politics)**

[Ambassador Richard] Holbrooke was a big gruff man with a red face but people said he had helped bring peace to Bosnia. I sat next to him and he asked me how old I was. ‘I am twelve,’ I replied, trying to look as tall as possible. ‘Respected Ambassador, I request you, please help us girls to get an education,’ I said.
He laughed. ‘You already have lots of problems and we are doing lots for you,’ he replied. ‘We have pledged billions of dollars in economic aid; we are working with your government on providing electricity, gas ... but your country faces a lot of problems. (153-154)

Malala’s only focus in the midst of terror, war, and displacement is school. On the one hand, students in the West (male or female) cannot understand the fear of having education taken away. Children are more likely to fake illnesses to skip a day than cry that they cannot take their textbooks away with them. This lack of true understanding of what it would be like to be denied education is taken for granted by many Western reviewers of the book, of all calibers. An anonymous teenaged reviewer on The Guardian’s website ends his or her comments with: “Overall, I am Malala [sic] was extremely interesting and has definitely made me look at the education system in the UK with respect and gratitude” (DayDreamer). Debbie Morrison’s discussion on her blog, Online Learning Insights, begins the “Education’s Value” section by stating simply, “In Western culture it’s unthinkable that women be excluded from education. Malala and her story are symbolic of education freedom and the book delivers a message to the world. Education, considered a right for many is used as a mechanism for oppression in some countries” (Morrison). Even Malala urges her fellow students in England “to regard education as precious” (Meikle). The common, and pervading, assumption seems to be that students with unhindered access to education do not, or perhaps cannot, really understand what their lives would be like if that freedom were no longer there. As such, Malala’s story is one that reveals insight into a situation vastly different from that of the average American university student who was required and then encouraged to pursue an education. American society is becoming more and more saturated with university educated individuals to the point that servers in restaurants and coffee shops are likely just paying rent waiting tables while looking for a job in their fields. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution cites a PayScale study stating the “U.S. labor market is ‘oversaturated’ with college graduates who are underemployed” (Seward); The Atlantic warned in 2012 that “[m]ore than half of America’s recent college graduates are either underemployed or working in a job that doesn’t require a bachelor’s degree,” citing an Associated Press report (Weissmann); and even PBS cautions that “the ranks of under and unemployed college graduates are likely to grow over the next ten years” (Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl). 6 Westerners struggle to empathize with not being allowed to go to school because of an emphasis on education, and higher education, even in the face of unrelenting job markets. On the other hand, the single-mindedness that Malala demonstrates as she seeks school (first for herself and then for others), is intellectually difficult to grasp. Like Ambassador Holbrooke, it is easy to rank things and see electricity as more vital than schools, peace more important than books—especially for a person who has always been able to take access to education for granted.

With the innocence of a child who likes to learn, Malala wants access to school but as she is, in fact, a child she does not understand the full political implications of her request. Yousafzai mentions numerous incidents that show
education and activism as more important to her, and to her father, than safety and security. Yousafzai recounts: “I couldn’t understand what the Taliban were trying to do. ‘They are abusing our religion,’ I said in interviews. ‘How will you accept Islam if I put a gun to your head and say Islam is the true religion? If they want every person in the world to be Muslim why don’t they show themselves to be good Muslims first?’” (Yousafzai 124). As Sanford notes, “I Am Malala lacks a thorough discussion of Pakistan’s historical or political context” (129). Although Yousafzai does relate some basic political background, Sanford suggests that this socio-political history is where “Christina Lamb could have presumably applied her expertise” (130). Readers should not expect to know the whole story after reading the book. There is much that Malala did not know, much that she could not know due to her circumstances, and, as a result, much that the reader cannot learn from her. Just as Malala did not understand the threat she posed to the Taliban, readers may well struggle to make the connection as well. Nevertheless, Malala made herself threatening to the Taliban despite being a little girl in a headscarf clinging to her textbooks.

Her crusade for education was not just a simple request but a serious political issue as well, with real danger attached to it. Yousafzai explores her feelings about the danger her father was in for his outspokenness but gives little space to any fear she may have had for herself. In a few short paragraphs, Yousafzai discloses:

My mother used to tell me to hide my face when I spoke to the media because at my age I should be in purdah and she was afraid for my safety. But she never banned me from doing anything. It was a time of horror and fear. People often said the Taliban might kill my father but not me. ‘Malala is a child,’ they would say, ‘and even the Taliban don’t kill children.’

But my grandmother wasn’t so sure. Whenever my grandmother saw me speaking on television, or leaving the house she would pray, ‘Please God make Malala like Benazir Bhutto but do not give her Benazir’s short life.’ (Yousafzai 136)

Here, Yousafzai reveals the awkwardness of her position at the time. That she should be in purdah means that she was not merely a small child but a young woman with certain cultural and religious expectations on her behavior. Thus, when juxtaposed, Malala’s mother’s concerns regarding purdah and others’ comments about her safety as a child are difficult to reconcile. Given the end of the story, the Taliban clearly did not see Malala as a carefree child but as a young woman breaking social and religious norms with her actions.

Yousafzai’s transition into the political spotlight was accelerated by her shooting and the aftermath, including the opportunities to speak with (and to) world leaders and receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, and her introduction into the center of the discussion about a child’s right to education. Regardless of what a reader thinks of the rationalizations of the Taliban representatives, Malala has found herself in a position to be influential on the global stage. Yousafzai’s book
includes discussion questions; there is an expectation that the contents will be mulled over, discussed, debated. Numerous lesson planning websites, such as *Education World* and *TeachingBooks.net*, list discussion questions and essay topics shared for easy inclusion of the book into high school classrooms. The quality of these suggested plans varies greatly. There are summary style questions (sometimes including misspelled words and questionable punctuation), highly insightful project ideas challenging students to engage with the ideas of activism and find their own ways to engage with the injustices they read about, and everything in between. Most notably, The George Washington University’s The Global Women’s Institute has published an extensive resource guide identifying themes and issues for educators to integrate *I Am Malala* into their classrooms. This type of focus on the book demonstrates an academic climate that accepts the text has educational merit for both the high school student completing a book review or discussion question and the more advanced student unpacking memoir and cultural history.

**Approaching Malala’s Story**

**Writing with a Purpose**

Malala Yousafzai is a self-identified activist. As such, it is vital that the reader of her autobiography remember that she is writing with a purpose: she wants to further her cause. Given the stories Yousafzai recounts of her determination to ask that education for girls be the center of every meeting she has, from what she wishes she could have said to the man who shot her to her conversation with United States President Barack Obama, her book must be placed in this same context. Most of her readers will never meet Yousafzai in person—this book is her written plea for her cause consumed by the average person on buses, in coffee shops, or curled up on sofas at home. This is how she approaches regular people, directly, when her book is opened and her words consumed. This realization should, in a way, explain her choice to start her story from well before her memory. Readers cannot ask her questions. She must provide the backstory to be the context for the events that occurred.

Additionally, Yousafzai must gloss her own story. It is simply not possible for her to relate every experience or leave out details that she could not have known at the time. She must explain, for instance, what happened in the aftermath of the shooting and why her parents did not travel with her. But evident in the book is also the subtle pride of a teenage girl willing to complain about her brothers and shine a less than flattering light on her father but only showing herself as the strong, determined girl she wants the world to see. Malala Yousafzai is an activist, but she is also still only a teenager during both the events of the book and when the book is written. Thus, critical readers must be willing to examine all sides of the presented story.

Another note of caution in approaching Malala Yousafzai’s story involves buying into the mindset that Malala’s story is the same as those of other children in similar circumstances because her story is now accessible. Fauzia Rahman
Katie Magaña details the media coverage of Malala’s life from the initial anonymous web diary through her “transformation into a global icon by mainstream media, social media, celebrities, government, and development agencies” and suggests that this transformation is “problematic and highly deceptive” (164). What Rahman claims must be considered is just what the teenaged author of *I Am Malala* cannot provide: a wider prospective. Addressing the wider issues of a campaign for girls’ education (rather than Yousafzai and/or her book), Rahman states:

In order to improve girls’ education, there is a need first to understand its implications in geopolitics, history, development, and corresponding notions of foreign policy and citizenship in the internet age. Girls’ education, and children’s lives more generally, cannot be separated from the realities of life on the ground. Young people in the region remain the victims of an intractable struggle between the United States, the Pakistani army, and the Taliban. This generation knows all too well the realities, horrors, and struggles of war and conflict.

[...] If we are to continue girls’ education initiatives in the region, and these are much needed, it is crucial to recognize the complex and sensitive issues that shape their communities. Local realities will not improve as youth become more connected [to the internet] but when they receive a real education about the causes of their oppression. (164)

Citing other injured children who received no media coverage and schools where children refused to return to class until pictures of Malala were taken down for fear that they would become targets of the Taliban by undesired association, Rahman notes that there was a “growing disconnect between Malala and the girls of Swat Valley” following the outcry surrounding her shooting (163). In short, the circumstances related to the topics Yousafzai writes about changed in ways that she cannot personally detail when she gained international attention, and specifically Western media attention. To read Yousafzai’s story is not necessarily to understand the situation of Swat Valley without also taking into account the other social forces at work. *I Am Malala* is one book, where thousands could be written.

**Wrestling with Malala’s Questions… and Our Own**

Malala’s main concerns center around the difference between her understanding of Islam and the Taliban’s practices. She does not understand their violence, restriction of education, or new rules. As detailed above, she and her family believe themselves to be good Muslims and see nothing in their lifestyles as counter to the wishes of Allah. This is not merely the difference of ideals between oppressors and oppressed. It is also representative of a struggle within the Muslim faith with both sides believing themselves to be correctly practicing
Islam. Malala wrestles with accepting the Taliban as Muslim; non-Muslims must grapple with understanding both the scared girl who loves to learn and the gun-carrying terrorist as different types of Muslims. Yousafzai quotes her friend Moniba as saying at a school peace march, “We Pashtuns are a religion-loving people. […] Because of the Taliban, the whole world is claiming we are terrorists. This is not the case. We are peace-loving. Our mountains, our trees, our flowers – everything in our valley is about peace” (Yousafzai 117). From the outside (or West) looking in, it is easy to overlook the righteous anger that even these children feel (both Malala and Moniba are quoted as upset that the Taliban is coloring the way the world sees Islam and their homeland). There is, however, something disconcerting and yet comforting about the voices of children speaking out against the violence of the Taliban. The Islam the children know and believe in is not the Islam of the Taliban; the terrorists are terrorists regardless of where they are. The children of Swat Valley have been taught to pray and help the needy, to love peace. These values feel familiar to the Christian reader.

Throughout the text, Yousafzai struggles with Taliban’s violent conception of Islam in contrast to her own. Readers are privy to her confusion over being called a bad Muslim, her father’s outrage that his faith would be doubted, and her family’s fear of repercussions for her father’s outspokenness. Vartan Gregorian’s Islam: A Mosaic, Not a Monolith has a brief section on the Taliban in which he states, “The Taliban’s brand of jihadic Islamism called on Islamists from around the world to create an Islamic state based on the most puritanical and extremist reading of the Qur’an by leaders who had received only an elementary religious education” (79). With an imam for a grandfather and a father who had his daughter learn to interpret the Quran, Malala and her family would recognize the abuse of Islam to the Taliban’s own ends. As tension grew and things became worse, Malala observed changes in her family. She explains, “My mother was always trying to think up plans for what she would do if the Taliban came. She thought of sleeping with a knife under her pillow. I said I could sneak into the toilet and call the police. My brothers and I thought of digging a tunnel. Once again I prayed for a magic wand to make the Taliban disappear” (Yousafzai 126). Yousafzai recounts traumatizing episodes of her life in which the Taliban disrupted the safety of her home in ways that remind us that she is, in fact, a child throughout the story. On the one hand, she is a little girl who wishes for a magic wand and thinks the bad guys are not going to check in the bathroom to be sure they have gathered everyone they have come for. On the other hand, the issue she is concerned about is not a game of hide and seek or even a burglar. The plan Malala is trying to form is what to do if terrorists come to her house looking for her father because of his politics. Readers must deal with this disconnect and the disconcerting effects that result from such adult concerns in a child. The threat of violence that is ostensibly connected to Islam is here the fear of a Muslim child. As such, it is not Islam itself that advocates this violence but a specific misuse of the religion by a radical, and political, subgroup.

Like Malala, readers should struggle with the violence and loss of innocence forced on the children of Swat Valley. Reading Malala’s story brings the issue of war being over there into focus: over there is at home for others.
Those people, too, have homes, families, and children who should be free to play around their homes without fear. They go to work, to school, and on shopping trips. Yousafzai’s life was always different from those of the majority of her readers. Her family, however, has the same needs for safety, food, and shelter that are universal. Thus, although Malala’s confusion with how she could be seen as a threat emanates from the differences between Islam as she practices it and as the Taliban practices it, the desire to be able to follow her dreams and to sleep peacefully at night is not worlds away from what any child, anywhere, would long for. As she says, “One Talib could intimidate a whole village” (Yousafzai 98).

Wrestling with the Taliban’s use of Islam to justify their actions, Malala’s concerns and confusion should inform her reader, and help even (or perhaps especially) those readers unfamiliar with the theology of Islam to examine their own preconceived notions. The conflation of all Muslims for terrorists and all Islam for violence is thoroughly explored in Beverley Milton-Edwards’s *Islam and Violence in the Modern Era*, in which she examines Islam’s history and the various uses of violence including political and religious instances. Milton-Edwards posits:

> In the absence of dialogue and trust and in the presence of a threat, the need to eradicate it through the form of profiling emerges. By trawling for the trouble-makers using technology instead of human contact and communication to weed out the threat from within and without only serves to heighten the sense of so-called division and threat. Such approaches do underscore anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant tendencies and give support to anxieties as they are expressed either in concern at migration or as a result of internalizing external security threats to national assets and interests abroad. (79)

Although published in 2006 and directly referencing the fear of Muslims evident in 1990s policy and media, the same could essentially be said of the 2015/2016 concern of terrorists hiding among Syrian refugees as a safe way to the West. The circumstances may change but the human contact and understanding is still, all too often, absent. Malala’s story has the potential to be human contact of a sort, to break down some barriers and create a space for conversation.

**An Opening for Current Events Discussions**

The average university student is in college to gain the tools to carve out a path for himself or herself in the field of their choice and build the life that they desire. Some will have a specific goal and others just know that a degree is the “next step” but, in either case, there is a starting point of awareness of the value of education. By nature of being in a university classroom, students have already achieved part of the privilege that Malala was fighting for when she was shot. What must be unraveled are the various aspects of Yousafzai’s campaign: the
activism for education, the political ramifications of her rhetoric, and the religious differences. Discussing these issues, in and of itself, is a critical thinking gold mine. Was it religious or political when Malala spoke out against the Taliban? Was it religious or social activism when she argued for access to schools for girls? Questions such as these do not have simple or even definite answers. They can, however, lead to a more complete worldview that takes into account the many sides to an issue.

It is only through exposure to the reality that Islam is not a singular faith, representative of violent people, that Christians can learn to love and seek opportunities to share salvation with their Muslim neighbors. In effect, this is the opposite problem that Malala is faced with while she is safely in England recovering, but struggling to accept what has happened to her. Rehanna, the Muslim chaplain, confesses to her that “[t]oo many people in the Muslim world can’t believe a Muslim can do such a thing […]. My mother for example, would say they can’t be Muslims. Some people call themselves Muslims but their actions aren’t Islamic” (Yousafzai 238). The truth is in the middle. Asghar Ali Engineer, a scholar of Islamic theology, jurisprudence, and related subjects, states bluntly: “Violence is sin. And sin is nothing but selfish behaviour. We have converted this earth into a violent place because of our self-interest. […] Islam did its best to emphasise [sic] justice and peace but a section of people, particularly Muslim rulers, remained obsessed with wealth and power. Hence, the blame for violence lay on the doors of these Muslims—not on Islam” (Engineer 102). There are Muslims who abuse Islam just as there are members of any religion and people who bring shame to their respective groups. Yousafzai notes, “I realised what the Taliban had done was make my campaign global” (Yousafzai 243). While she is speaking specifically of her fight for education, it is also true that, through her book, the distinctions between the different types of Islam have become accessible to a wider audience than would otherwise be likely to try to understand the dynamics of different Muslim thought.

A Christian student reading Malala Yousafzai’s story is faced with the distinctions between the Islam of Malala, Moniba, and their families and that of the man who shot Malala. After Malala’s speech to the United Nations on her sixteenth birthday, she received a letter from a Taliban commander, Adnan Rashid, and she states: “[h]e said the Taliban has attacked me not for my campaign for education but because I tried to ‘malign [their] efforts to establish the Islamic system.’ He said he was writing to me because he was shocked by my shooting and wished he could have warned me beforehand. He wrote that they would forgive me if I came back to Pakistan, wore a burqa and went to a madrasa” (Yousafzai 261-263). Here the difference between Malala’s faith that allows and even encourages her to learn and the Taliban’s desire to censure both her appearance and her access to knowledge is self-evident. The Taliban fears the influence of knowledge on children (recall that most Muslims learn to recite the Quran but do not know what it means). Yousafzai clings to her proclamation that “[e]ducation is our right […]. Just as it is our right to sing and play. Islam has given us this right and says every girl and boy should go to school. The Quran says we should seek knowledge, study hard and learn the mysteries of our world”
It is only through exercising that right to gain knowledge that a Muslim child could come into contact with the Christian worldview and teachings of Jesus as Christ rather than as a prophet of Islam.

Grappling with the complex issues of *I Am Malala* encourages students to question their understanding of the world, of current events, and of the role of education in their own lives in a way that requires an active approach to learning. In an education system sometimes bogged down with standardized tests (from elementary school through subject GRE tests), Malala’s story is one that suggests a human connection to what she writes and forces the reader, or student, to respond in some way to the problems that Yousafzai discusses. As such, it lends itself to the “problem-posing education” that Paulo Freire posits, as an opposite of rote memory (“banking”) education, in the “constant unveiling of reality […] [that] strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality” (68). The book is not going to show students the answers to any problem in society. They are not going to learn history or perfect non-fiction writing. They will, however, be increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge. […] Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings” (Freire 68-69). The complex nature of the issues inherent in *I Am Malala*, from the basic content to more detailed analysis of the missing or confused details of politics and history, means that students can find different points of interest, different initial “problems” posed to them by the book for them to examine.

*I Am Malala* thus serves as a text that can meet a student at his or her own point of interest and starting knowledge of the material, be it Islam itself or events in Pakistan or educational activism. For a student, or class, with little to no background knowledge of the Muslim faith, the book provides basic information necessary to understand that Malala Yousafzai believes she practices the correct form of Islam and that this has made her a target of the Taliban. Unpacking her teachings on Islam from the text is itself a lesson on religious diversity and nuance. As Morrison notes, there are “reviewers [who have] claimed the book was poorly written, disjointed. It’s a valid point. The first half of the book does jump around, sometimes repeating facts. But [she] see[s] this as a sign of authenticity; it’s written in a 14-year old’s voice, from her perspective.” Despite this lack of eloquence, the text still holds great potential for the more advanced reader who can be challenged to attempt to unravel the political and religious ideological knot at the heart of the book (and, in fact, of the Taliban’s war on other Muslims), the interaction between activism and religion within the context of Islam, and/or the gap between the expected place of women in Malala’s world and the freedom her father allows her, for starters. These issues lend themselves to research projects that encourage students to explore the connections between Islam and the violence of the Taliban and to class discussions or debates about the ethics of the media making a child the focus of a global issue. Alternatively, the genre, whether it is called autobiography or memoir, suggests a challenge for students to think creatively about how they would document their lives and what they would be willing to risk their lives for. The issues surrounding *I Am Malala*
are challenging for their subject matter and for the necessity of approaching a situation from another perspective to begin to understand the circumstances that have led to a young woman from Pakistan becoming the face of educational activism on the global stage. The depth of study can easily meet the place of the student and challenge him or her to a deeper understanding of the connections that do, and do not, exist among Islam, activism, education, and the latest news report about terrorism.

Notes

1 Respecting that Malala Yousafzai’s book reaches well beyond her memory and personal experiences, I will distinguish between “Malala” as the child in the narrative and “Yousafzai” as the author of the book who is intentionally writing a specific story. Although still a teenager when the book was written, Yousafzai had been removed from the circumstances of her early life and she composes her narrative with a keen eye to the activism in which she is engaged. The importance of this distinction will become increasingly evident.

2 The Nobel Prize web site provides a good, brief overview of her life and work so far.

3 The question of the appropriateness of using “God” as the English translation for “Allah” is the topic for another sort of article and a different paper. For the purposes of this piece, I will distinguish between the Christian and Muslim understandings of God by using “God” and “Allah”, respectively. My intention is to provide clarity for this discussion rather than comment on translation. I will, however, leave the terminology that Malala uses intact in any quotations.

4 Umrah is defined as “lesser pilgrimage to Mecca which can be made at any time during the year” in the glossary (Yousafzai 269).

5 Sanford’s essay is itself a testament to the potential of I Am Malala to engage undergraduate students in the issues surrounding Yousafzai’s story and its place in the classroom as the essay is published in a collection of undergraduate scholarship by DePaul University.

6 Similar articles can be easily found related to the situation of UK university graduates. See, for instance, Katie Allen’s “UK graduates are wasting degrees in lower-skilled jobs.”

7 The glossary defines “purdah” as “(of women) segregation or seclusion, wearing the veil” (Yousafzai 268).

8 University of Wisconsin Platteville’s Teaching and Learning Center also has a good, though much shorter, PDF entitled “Teaching with I Am Malala.”
Gregorian’s discussion of the Taliban is focused on their activities in Afghanistan. The practices he details, such as the destruction of TVs, forbidding that men shave their beards, and closure of schools for girls is the same as Yousafzai observed.

Milton-Edwards states her intention to discuss the need “to [have] an understanding of how Islam and violence, and political violence in particular, have come to dominate much analysis of the religion across the boundaries of state, community and ethnic group” (10). Her book is, therefore, a great place to start for the political and historical approaches to how to unpack the Western association of Islam with violence in a broader sense than this paper seeks to do as a case study of Malala Yousafzai’s autobiography.

**Works Cited**


Book Reviews


Reviewed by Rachel B. Griffis

Scholars are not the only bibliophiles who write books about books. As literary nonfiction has and continues to draw readers, the publishing industry has thus produced many non-scholarly, autobiographical books that testify to the life-changing act of reading from a variety of writers. Recent titles in this vein include *How to Be a Heroine, or, What I’ve Learned from Reading Too Much* (2014) by playwright Samantha Ellis, *How Literature Saved My Life* (2013) by David Shields, a popular writer and journalist, and *My Reading Life* (2010) by novelist Pat Conroy.

Seasoned journalist, writer at *The American Conservative*, and author of *Crunchy Cons* (2006) and *The Little Way of Ruthie Leming* (2013), Rod Dreher has written his own reading memoir, *How Dante Can Save Your Life: The Life Changing Wisdom of History’s Greatest Poem*. Similar to the books mentioned above, Dreher interprets and narrates events of his life through his reading of Dante Alighieri’s masterpiece. In four parts, this memoir contains an introduction followed by sections inspired by the three books of *The Divine Comedy*. Dreher’s account of his own pilgrimage not only affirms the significance of Dante’s place in the Christian intellectual tradition but provides readers with an example of a contemporary pilgrimage that traces an individual’s journey from the dark wood to the stars.

In Part I, “From the Garden to the Dark Wood,” Dreher, in four chapters, introduces both himself and the medieval poet who saved his life. He provides an overview of medieval thought about the afterlife, a brief explanation of the structure of the *Comedy*, and details about Dante’s theological assumptions, including the concept of disordered love, the habit of sin, and the journey of a person’s will toward total conformity with God’s. Likening Dante’s pilgrimage to the biblical story of the exodus or the prodigal son, Dreher emphasizes that *The Divine Comedy* is primarily about a spiritual journey, not a theological treatise, which justifies his own personal reading of the poem. Thus, as he introduces himself, he tells his readers that he was a middle-aged man who found himself “alone in a dark wood” after the untimely death of his sister to cancer and his subsequent return to his rural hometown in Louisiana. Having idealized his return home, Dreher soon finds that his late sister, along with her surviving husband and daughters, had long resented his departure from his roots—Methodism, small town Southern life, squirrel hunting—for Catholicism, then Eastern Orthodoxy,
big cities in the East, and writing and literature. Dreher’s grief over his late sister’s resentment of him and his subsequent inability to get close to his bereaved nieces is compounded with the strained father-son dynamic that had existed since a younger, sensitive, and bookish version of Dreher bungled a squirrel-killing. Adding to the Southern-style family drama that decimates all of his expectations about his return home, Dreher contracts an autoimmune disease, the Epstein-Barr virus, which often renders him bedridden. In the midst of his grief, disappointment, and physical weakness, Dreher reads the compelling first lines of The Divine Comedy in a Barnes and Noble one day, then the first two cantos, and a week later, he obtains his own copy, thus commencing his journey with Dante.

Part II, “Inferno, or, Why You are Broken,” is the longest section of the book, spanning a total of twelve chapters. In these chapters, Dreher provides greater details about his religious faith, records conversations with his priest and therapist, and he tells his love story, likening his first meeting with his wife to Dante’s initial encounter with Beatrice. As he writes about many painful incidents in his own life, he also documents Dante’s journey through Inferno, extrapolating on how the poet’s vision prompted Dreher’s awareness of sin, particularly his culpability in the familial dynamics that threatened to destroy him. For example, when he reads about the circle of the heretics, he learns to articulate his Southern family’s devotion to ancestry and place in terms of “loving the good wrongly” (120). Similarly, he realizes that his own idealization of, and subsequent disappointment about, his return home stem from his tendency to make an idol of familial relationships.

Part III, “Purgatorio, or How to be Healed,” is the most confession-driven section of the book. Dreher often circles back to stories already discussed, emphasizing his own sin and growth. This section contains nine chapters, with the first three detailing and illustrating the concept of purgation, which he defines as “learn[ing] to love rightly” (186). The remaining chapters are named after six of the sins devoted to the circles of purgation, omitting avarice. Dreher moves through these sins while providing helpful glosses on their definitions and applying them to his own struggles, thus supplying examples to accompany his extended definitions of the sins themselves. For example, he calls sloth “a lack of love” and within this chapter he writes at length about his struggle to discipline his own mind (245).

Part IV, “Paradiso, or, How Things Ought to Be,” contains two chapters and a conclusion, “How to Make Your Own Dante Pilgrimage.” At the onset, Dreher explains the brevity of this section by admitting “the mystical Paradiso [may be] less useful than the other two books” for those “seeking practical life-changing wisdom,” as was his own experience with the final part of The Divine Comedy (270). Therefore, to conclude his journey with the medieval poet, he describes his own gesture of peace extended to his father, and, disappointingly, the subsequent failure of the two men to understand one another. However, given his own pilgrimage with Dante, his priest, and therapist, Dreher learns even from this painful experience, which is that “[l]ove is not a contractual exchange; love is given with no expectation of return. Love does not keep a ledger” (290). These
insights demonstrate how deeply Dreher has internalized the principles of Dante’s poem, thus truly making his journey through *The Divine Comedy* a pilgrimage.

Though primarily focused on Dreher’s dark woods, and not the poet’s, *How Dante Can Save Your Life* nevertheless articulates the theological concepts that undergird Dante’s vision and reinforces the poem’s significant place in the Christian intellectual tradition. What makes these features, and therefore this book, potentially of interest to educators is the seriousness with which it treats Dante’s influence on Western culture and Christianity. This book itself could serve as a guide to *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* for Christian educators invested in Dante, specifically for his spiritual and theological legacy, given that Dreher effectively explains the nature of sin and purgation with relevant examples from his own life that reinforce the poet’s scope and theology. Students might enjoy reading select chapters of this book alongside *The Divine Comedy*, especially chapter 13, “The Great and the Good,” from the *Inferno* section, which connects Dante’s thought on fame and success to certain shortcomings of contemporary American culture, such as narcissism, consumerism, and extreme individualism. Also, the concluding remarks of each chapter, written for Dreher’s fellow pilgrim-readers, may generate writing assignments or classroom activities, such as “How to Quit Being an Idol Worshipper” or “How to Find a Mentor Worth Following” (127; 148).

The book’s flaws are mostly stylistic and organizational. Dreher writes like a journalist, with his short, clear sentences, but he is often flippant with his word choice in a manner that may be distracting for educators and students. With no index, readers may also have trouble finding the helpful resources located in this book, as Dreher’s topics are unorganized, and the content of some chapters scattered. Although the book’s sections follow the three parts of *The Comedy*, which Dreher discusses alongside his own stories, neither the book’s four parts nor the chapter titles indicate the range of topics discussed therein. Finally, discussion of inordinate love for family and tradition appears on multiple occasions; while this topic is indeed integral to Dreher’s own struggles, it nevertheless becomes repetitive. Many of these passages could have been combined and condensed or should have been revised to show how they clearly build upon and extend their previous iterations.

The title of the book itself, *How Dante Can Save Your Life*, nevertheless indicates its great value. “Your” life is also Dreher’s life: in need of saving. Thus, he often uses the friendly second-person or collective first-person in his prose, and the concluding remarks of each chapter are similarly written. “We love the wrong things, or we love the right things in the wrong way,” he confesses, both for himself and his reader (71). Or, in “How to Seek and Find,” he speaks candidly to his readers, asking, “What do you seek? Why do you seek it? Do you expect to find anything, or is the journey itself your real destination?” (169). Dreher’s book, encompassing multiple terrains—medieval Italy, the poet and pilgrim named Dante, the Christian tradition, American culture, Southern families, and his own inner life—expresses the essence of *The Divine Comedy*: life is perilous, and the way to heaven is through hell.
Stylized as an account of a saint’s life, Laurus is a prescient reminder that the past is still with us. Set in fifteenth century Russia, the tale unspools the thread of its eponymous protagonist, a holy fool who goes by many names throughout his life: Arseny, Ustin, Amvrosy, and finally, Laurus. Rooted in the tradition of Russian literature and religious history, especially the works of Dostoevsky, with tendrils reaching out to influences such as Chaucer and Homer, Laurus is nevertheless a very modern novel, albeit one infused with a medieval sensibility.

Eugene Vodolazkin is a philologist and studies medieval history and folklore at the Department of Old Russian Literature at Pushkin House, where he learned under the great scholar Dmitry Likhachev, and Vodolazkin uses all of his knowledge of Russia’s history and literature to his full advantage in molding the world of Laurus after the form of the Middle Ages while using language and style to blur the space between contemporary and ancient times.

As he crafts the narrative around Arseny, tracing his childhood in a small rural village, raised by his grandfather Christofer, a healer and holy man who teaches Arseny both arcane knowledge of plants and herbs as well as science, Vodolazkin laces his prose with modern turns of phrase and slang, while inserting incongruent details that initially strike one as anachronistic, such as tangentially describing future events or people, either as authorial asides or diegetically, through the use of prophetic dreams or visions. In addition to Laurus’ disregard for time, the miraculous is treated as matter-of-fact as well. Vodolazkin endeavors to mold the reader into a medieval mindset, whether through visions of the future, healing properties, or even, in one memorable scene, when several citizens witness two holy fools walking on water with awkward trepidation, and simply comment “apparently they can only walk on water...they have not yet learned to run” (159). In this way, Laurus tears away from perspectives that would categorize these sorts of events as rational or irrational. The concept of irrationality as the modern world understands it is immaterial in medieval Russia and, as the novel may argue, immaterial in today’s society as well.

The translation must have required a herculean effort, and Lisa C. Hayden successfully captures a crisp, modern prose style that dips into Middle English spellings and archaic forms in one phrase just to slip into anachronistic slang the next. This is central not only stylistically, but thematically, for time does not exist within Vodolazkin’s reality. As Ambrogio, a pilgrim friend of Arseny’s, declares, “everything on earth exists outside of time, otherwise how could I know about the future that has not occurred? I think time is given to us by the grace of God so we will not get mixed up, because a person’s consciousness cannot take in all events at once. We are locked up in time because of our weakness” (228). There is only eternity, and we only experience time because we cannot see the universe as God does. And so the language reflects that as surely as the events it portrays. Laurus
flits back and forth in time, in an order that appears simultaneously haphazard yet structured as if the order belongs outside our understanding.

The pace of the narrative is happily married to the novel’s approach to both language and time, content to trudge forward in a semi-linear fashion, and then disrupting the flow with sudden bursts of past and future moments. Events still mark key moments—indeed, the entire novel hinges on Arseny’s lover Ustina dying in childbirth—yet they are not mere moments in history, but keep pace with Arseny throughout his life. After Ustina’s death, the local church Elder speaks to Arseny, and offers comfort: “I should have said that beyond the grave it is already too late to save her life, but you know what, I will not say that. Because there is not already where she is now. And there is no still. And there is no time, though there is God’s eternal mercy, we trust in His mercy” (90). His next words set Arseny on the course of his life, telling him that because Ustina died unmarried and without communion, her soul is helpless, and Arseny is the one who must atone for it: “Love made you and Ustina a united whole, which means a part of Ustina is still here. It is you” (91). The elder’s next comment is a potential key to unlocking one door to the novel’s meaning: “Everything, O Arseny, will now depend on the strength of your love” (91).

Love is not often the first word that comes to mind when thinking of medieval Europe, especially for a modern audience who is taught to look down upon the time period as “backwards” and primitive. Yet in Laurus, the medieval setting is far from seen as a pejorative, and is instead realized as a living, breathing part of human history. It is in fact even a highly humanistic novel. The unabashed belief in humanity as made in the image of God, and the love that flows outward from that fact, is a unifying force within the setting, even as Vodolazkin never shies away from the brutal and violent capacity of people. Consider a moment when Arseny is on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and is mistaken as a Turkish infiltrator and is pursued by an angry mob: “Arseny was surprised at the mistrust of Zara’s residents. Perhaps (he thought) infiltrators truly had tormented them here. Arseny also did not rule out that these people simply felt like hanging someone” (264). Without negating the presence of sin and inclination towards violence in the human heart, Arseny’s first thought is surprise and a summation that the men trying to wrongfully hang him are somehow justified. Because of his decision to love both God and humanity with all his life Arseny continually suffers and sacrifices his own well being. And yet even he does not realize the extent of his love. When at Jerusalem, he asks an elder what the purpose of his trajectory is: “I want only to know the general direction of the journey...the part that concerns me and Ustina” (298). All of Arseny’s actions are born from that first love, from his guilt and love around Ustina. The elder’s response is telling, though, as he simply says, “Is not Christ a general direction?” (298).

It is one of the few mentions of Christ in Laurus, an absence which would seem at odds with the religious elements at play. Yet His presence is revealed through the question above. Vodolazkin is not interested in a didactic novel; he has no desire to preach. Arseny’s faith, and the faith of those around him, is ingrained and fleshed out through the minutiae of life. In his pursuit of Ustina’s
redemption, Arseny was unknowingly moving vertically, towards Christ. This is reaffirmed again later, in the words of yet another church elder (one of the few straightforward sources of knowledge and thematic clarity which Vodolazkin employs), who tells Arseny, “You have dissolved yourself in God. You disrupted the unity of your life, renouncing your name and your every identity. But in the mosaic of your life there is also something that joins all those separate parts: it is an aspiration for Him. They will gather together again in Him” (330).

The novel rarely points towards its theological ideas through philosophic discourse or intellectual musing. Rather, Laurus strives to incarnate its themes. Soaked in sacramental language, Laurus brushes past dualism in its embrace of the union between the spiritual and material world, and is primarily concerned with allowing the reader to realize that union as well. Again, this is not to be realized through an argument, or even through poetic language, but first and foremost through the example of Arseny’s love and devotion. Laurus is a novel about time, language, and love, but the greatest of these is love.

Reviewed by Brian Thomas

Any book that tackles such a topic as heated, heavy, and divisive as that of non-violence would not easily be described as refreshing, but somehow Preston Sprinkle managed to write one that has that effect. Instead of weighing the reader down with the heaviness of the topic at-hand or with the vast amount of material written on the subject, Sprinkle uses a deft, up-tempo style of writing to keep the subject accessible without sacrificing its importance. The result is a book that feels shorter than it is but that also covers the subject more powerfully than expected.

Sprinkle begins his book with an account of both the terror of violence and the beauty of its antithesis. He recounts the civil war that raged in Mozambique two years after its independence in 1975 until 1992. Over that course of time “nearly half of its sixteen million citizens were affected by the war on some level” (190). Such an extended outpouring of violence will leave its mark long after the formal hostilities have ceased. Think of it—an entire generation saw violence mark its end while another was born and raised in the midst of it. In an effort to both remember their past and better their future, the people of Mozambique took scores of the weapons used in that conflict and beat and forged them into a sculpture called the tree of life, “a beacon of hope on a mountain of skulls” (19).

Violence, Sprinkle hopes to demonstrate from the outset, is one of the worst symptoms of brokenness and nonviolence one of the most beautiful demonstrations of redemption.

In an attempt to cut-off some criticism before it begins, Sprinkle provides his working definition of violence fairly early in the book. “For the sake of this book I will use the term violence to refer to: a physical act that is intended to destroy (i.e. injure) the victim by means that overpower the victim’s consent.” (32) For most of the book Sprinkle does a fairly good job of keeping within his own parameters, but towards the end he does stretch the limits by describing hitting and kicking as non-violent. “Perhaps you’re surprised that I’m describing hitting and kicking as non-violent. But not all enforced pain is violent.” (220) While he would not be alone in drawing a clear line between violence meant to kill or seriously-injure and that meant only to bruise or bother, it is a distinction not readily made in his opening salvo. It’s not an error, per se, but it does leave his guard down a bit.

One of the more engaging aspects of Sprinkle’s work is the candid way in which he admits his ongoing struggle with the idea of non-violence and the journey he’s undertaken to reach his current hypothesis on the matter. “I grew up in a Christian home,” Sprinkle recounts, “and like many evangelicals, I was enamored with war” (24). Until 2008 his view of those who advocated pacifism or non-violence was that such a person “must be biblically illiterate or anti-American” (24). He does not shade his past to make it less antithetical to his
current stance on the matter. He fully admits and in some way even boasts of the
journey he’s undertaken over the past several years. Sprinkle also does not hide
the fact that “this book is not intended to be the last word on the subject…(but
part of) the ongoing discussion of how Christians should think about warfare,
violence, and their close cousin, nationalism” (23). In short, he doesn’t pretend to
be an authority on the matter, he is merely speaking to others who contemplate
the same philosophical journey he has undertaken.

Despite its relative brevity, the book takes no shortcuts. Rather than
jumping directly into the fray or addressing the questions many pose to the
pacifist/non-violence crowd, Sprinkle develops his argument systematically. He
begins at the beginning, describing the peace that pervaded Eden before the Fall.
“There is perfect harmony between the Creator and His creation, and there is
perfect harmony among all created things” (39). This was and is God’s ideal for
His creation and although it will never be fully realized this side of the Kingdom,
Christians are called to work towards and represent it. By building his argument
from this point onward, Sprinkle builds his case for non-violence not as a reaction
to the state of things, but as part of a comprehensive, systematic theology.

Because Sprinkle sees non-violence less as a stance and more as a logical
outgrowth of his theological bent, his view stands or falls with a particular reading
of the Bible, particularly those passages relating to Israel’s conquest of Canaan,
David’s reputation as a warrior king, and the bloody apocalypse seen in
Revelation. While the pessimistic reader will see genocide, nationalism, and
merciless vengeance, Sprinkle sees steps in a journey meant to take Israel and the
world “back to Eden” (68).

There are weaknesses to this method of argument. Sprinkle relies on some
less-than-mainstream interpretations of some passages and accounts. For instance,
when discussing Israel’s conquest of Canaan, he exerts quite a bit of effort
attempting to explain how “a wholesale slaughter of all the Canaanites by an
ancient blitzkrieg is not the uniform picture in the Bible” (81). He argues, more
than a little convincingly, that passages calling for or describing the killing of
every living person and thing within the Canaanite cities are hyperbolic.
Hyperbole is not uncommon in Scripture, Sprinkle points out. Passages such as
Jesus’ admonition to put-out an offending eye, to cut-off the offending hand
remind us that “hyperbole is a common rhetorical device in Scripture” (84). While
this is true and while Sprinkle’s argument for such a reading is not without merit,
he does leave himself open to the critique of projecting his view into such
passages rather than reading them in their own light. And because there are
several such troublesome accounts throughout the Old Testament in particular,
the book sometimes reads like a tap-dance around the obvious intents and meanings
of Scriptures.

But challenging the obvious in search of the truth also provides Sprinkle’s
book with a certain quiet strength. Because he drenches his arguments in the
context of his personal journey, it is clear that he did not seek out contrarian
interpretations to suit his existing worldview. Instead, Sprinkle was convinced of
the veracity of this interpretive approach and allowed it to alter his pre-existing
notions and ideas into what they are today. While many will certainly disagree
with his conclusions, few, if any, could seriously contest the honesty and openness in his argumentation.

There is also something refreshing about his desire to weave a solid, cohesive argument for non-violence using the entire witness of Scripture rather than leaning on emotional entreaties or appeals to platitudes. Sprinkle’s advocation of non-violence finds its climax in the cross, where God determined to die rather than to kill, and to be a victim of violence rather than a perpetrator of it: “The nonviolent rhythms of the cross meet the melodies of this world with dissonance” (257). Sprinkle’s argumentation begins at Eden, carries through the Old Testament, and peaks at the moment when God was nailed to a cross in the place of man. Non-violence is not merely a political or philosophical stance for Sprinkle, it is a natural and necessary response to the Cross.

After spending ten chapters and over two hundred pages building a theology of nonviolence, Sprinkle uses the eleventh and twelfth chapter to address “the objections and questions that came up (in the course of writing this book)” (235). He answers the theoretical scenario of there’s an “attacker-at-the-door…kill the killer or let him (it’s always a man, right?) kill your family” (217). As he states, “this question is often asked dismissively, as though the mere presence of the one dilemma will expose the naïveté of the nonviolence position and bypass the need to do any serious biblical thinking” (217). This is why Sprinkle so painstakingly builds his theology before addressing these types of questions, to encourage deep, rational interaction with his thesis, rather than trite dismissal: “I cannot stress enough how important it will be for us to saturate ourselves in the Bible before we address those questions. If you skip to chapters 11 and 12, nothing I say there will make sense. We must come at the…questions after we have first inhabited the world of the Bible” (34).

Approaching the idea of non-violence by thoroughly inhabiting and dwelling in the world of the Bible is essential to Sprinkle’s argument. He has no case if his study of the Bible is incorrect. In this way, his stance is completely and totally Christian. If the Bible is wrong or if he is wrong about it, then his belief in nonviolence, his distaste for militarism, and his appeal to the crucified Christ are all baseless and empty. This is not to say that Christians won’t disagree with him or even take offense at his conclusions. But Sprinkle is not a Christian who happens to advocate non-violence; it is part and parcel to his faith.

And in this lies the books greatest strength. It is unlikely that Sprinkle’s thorough and astute work will convince readers against their predisposition. If they are already obliged to disagree, they will likely dismiss his views as naïve and his arguments as baseless. But because he mines the Bible so thoroughly and presents his case so winsomely, it is very possible that even those who will not be persuaded to his corner might at least be challenged in their pursuit of Christ. And if such is the case, Sprinkle seems to be the type who would find satisfaction in being considered wrong in his conclusion but faithful and commendable in his convictions and love of Christ.
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Call for Papers and Book Reviews

*Intégrité: A Faith and Learning Journal*

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*Intégrité* (pronounced *IN tay gri tay*) is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal on the integration of Christian faith and higher learning. Founded in the fall of 2002 with the Institutional Renewal Grant from the Rhodes Consultation on the Future of the Church-Related College, it is published both online and in print copy. Interested Christian scholars are encouraged to submit academic articles and book reviews for consideration. Manuscripts should be sent as e-mail attachments (Microsoft Word format) to the editor, John J. Han, at hanjn@mobap.edu.

Articles must be 15-25 pages, and book reviews must be 4-8 pages, both double-spaced. Articles should examine historical, theological, philosophical, cultural, and/or pedagogical issues related to faith-learning integration. Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

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Considering that most *Intégrité* readers are Christian scholars and educators not necessarily having expertise on multiple disciplines, articles and book reviews must be written in concise, precise, and easy-to-understand style. Writers are recommended to follow what William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White suggest in *The Elements of Style*: use definite, specific, concrete language; omit needless words; avoid a succession of loose sentences; write in a way that comes naturally; and avoid fancy words.

For citation style, refer to the current edition of *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. Articles should include in-text citations in parentheses, a list of endnotes (if applicable), and an alphabetical listing of works cited at the end of the article. Book reviews need only page numbers in parentheses after direct quotations.