Georgia State University
Digital Archive @ GSU

English Dissertations | Department of English

6-30-2011

The Sermonic Urge: Postsecular Sermons in Contemporary American Fiction

Peter W. Rorabaugh
Georgia State University, prorabaugh@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalarchive.gsu.edu/english_diss

Recommended Citation
Rorabaugh, Peter W., "The Sermonic Urge: Postsecular Sermons in Contemporary American Fiction" (2011). *English Dissertations.* Paper 75.

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at Digital Archive @ GSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Archive @ GSU. For more information, please contact digitalarchive@gsu.edu.

THE SERMONIC URGE: POSTSECULAR SERMONS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

by

PETER W. RORABAUGH

Under the Direction of Christopher Kocela

ABSTRACT

Contemporary American novels over the last forty years have developed a unique orientation toward religious and spiritual rhetoric that can best be understood within the multidisciplinary concept of the postsecular. In the morally-tinged discourse of their characters, several esteemed American novelists (John Updike, Toni Morrison, Louise Erdrich, and Cormac McCarthy) since 1970 have used sermons or sermon-like artifacts to convey postsecular attitudes and motivations. These postsecular sermons express systems of belief that are hybrid, exploratory, and confessional in nature. Through rhetorical analysis of sermons in four contemporary American novels, this dissertation explores the performance of postsecularity in literature and defines the contribution of those tendancies to the field of literary and rhetorical studies.

INDEX WORDS: Postsecular, Postmodern, Christianity, American literature, Sermon, Religious rhetoric, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Louise Erdrich, John Updike, Cormac McCarthy, Kenneth Burke, St. Augustine, Gnosticism

THE SERMONIC URGE: POSTSECULAR SERMONS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

by

PETER W. RORABAUGH

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2011

Copyright by
Peter W. Rorabaugh
2011

THE SERMONIC URGE: POSTSECULAR SERMONS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

by

PETER W. RORABAUGH

Committee Chair: Christopher Kocela

Committee: Marti Singer

Randy Malamud

Paul Schmidt

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

August 2011

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Coni Thomas and my parents, Joan and Win Rorabaugh, for supporting me through the completion of my dissertation. All three were enthusiastically supportive in helping me achieve my goal.

My director, Chris Kocela, and my mentor, Paul Schmidt, provided enormous help by encouraging my ideas for the project and providing comments on copious drafts.

My children – Noah, Eden, and Micah – were extremely patient with the time that I had to spend away from them to complete this work. Their joy and kindness are a constant inspirational to me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements		*v*
	Introduction: Sermonic Demonstration, Postecularity, and Ellison's Preachers	1
1	*A Month of Sundays,* Updike's Apostate Spirituality	45
2	*Beloved,* Morrison's Postsecular Discourse of the Body	85
3	*Tracks*, Erdrich's Exercise of Sermonic Power	109
4	*No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy's Gnostic Postsecularism	149
	Conclusion: Sermons, Confessions, and Revealing the Invisible	178
Works Cited		187

Introduction: Sermonic Demonstration, Postsecularity, and Ellison's Preachers

Cormac McCarthy meditates on boundaries in all of his novels. In *The Crossing* (1994), the second novel in McCarthy's Border Trilogy, McCarthy concentrates on boundaries between Mexico and the United States, between the dead and the living, between victim and criminal, and then demonstrates transgressions of those borders. The characters search for meaning in the wake of these border crossings and struggle to articulate the lessons they have learned in complicated, morally-tinged language that is simultaneously formal and colloquial. At the novel's conclusion, a gypsy tells the main character, Billy Parham, a story about rescuing the remnants of an airplane that crashed decades before and explains the difficulty of extracting it from the mountains. Pondering whether his team has collected the right airplane, the gypsy commences a discourse on the relation of objects to their history:

> He said that [their choice of airplane] was indeed of consequence and that it was in fact the whole burden of their inquiry. From a certain perspective one might even hazard to say that the great trouble with the world was that that which survived was held in hard evidence as to past events. A false authority clung to what persisted, as if those artifacts of the past which had endured had done so by some act of their own will. Yet the witness could not survive the witnessing. In the world that came to be that which

> prevailed could never speak for that which perished but could only parade its own arrogance . . . For the world was made new each day and it was only men's clinging to its vanished husks that could make of that world one husk more. (410-11)

True to McCarthy's fictional style, the content of the speech is dense and the grammar ornate. As with several other moments in the novel, the speaker is a nameless character who appears out of nowhere, interacts with Billy for only a handful of pages, and delivers a speech that carries weighty metaphysical implications. The gypsy's philosophical approach to objectivity and purpose comprises a unique worldview that requires deep contemplation from Billy and from readers of the novel.

The gyspy's secular sermon to Billy and his cohorts benefits from certain rhetorical elements. Though nameless and ephemeral, the gypsy immediately establishes a reliable ethos. He carries the power of an ancient medicine and, upon seeing Billy's dying horse, immediately begins concocting a boiling herbal portion which he uses to save the animal. His interactions with the members of his traveling team are efficient and establish the stability of his leadership within the group. Regarding his interactions with a seeress, he tells Billy: "God will not permit that we shall know what is to come. He is bound to no one that the world unfold just so upon its course" (407), and continues throughout the conversation to communicate knowledge about how God works in the world. The gypsy ultimately revives Billy's horse, provides him assistance in processing the death of his brother, and refuses payment for his services. He delivers privileged

knowledge that has profound spiritual or philosophical connotations; but that knowledge does not derive from any established religious tradition. The gypsy's actions in the novel are like those of an itinerant preacher for his origins are unknown and his speech reveals a new world of possibility to Billy, whose path has reached its lowest point. The gypsy's conversation with Billy is like a sermon in its content, delivery, and rhetorical positioning, and the language of his sermon-like discourse has profound consequences for the narrative.

McCarthy's novels, especially *The Crossing*, are full of such moments – explanations of concrete objects that gesture toward the sacred, but remain distinctly secular in their lack of doctrine or moral obligation. In fact, contrary to the dominant trend in literary theory over the last half-century, many contemporary American authors engage spiritual discourses in their novels. They do so in a manner influenced by the anxieties of language and history suggested by postmodern theory. Sometimes these authors employ the sermon -- a rhetorical pattern well suited to the discourse of the spirit -- or sermon-like artifacts, but to new ends. American literature is full of sermons, both actual and fictional, but contemporary authors use the structure and rhetorical variables of the sermon in a unique way, altered by the postmodern turn away from Truth Claims and stable constructions of history.

1: Postmodern and Postsecular

Sermons in American novels are not new, but a newly expressed "sermonic urge" in American fiction, demonstrated in the novels of a handful of contemporary authors, is a unique feature of some contemporary American literature. The new preachers utilize the sermonic ethos but deliver freshly complex and hybridized rhetorical artifacts that challenge both traditional Christian practice and the secular tendencies of literary theorists. I am not suggesting that, in order to understand these novels, we need to return to religious literary criticism, as some scholars have suggested;[1] instead, I argue for an awareness of the function of sermonlike discourses in contemporary American novels. I will avoid the mistake of offering stock generalizations about the sermons and sermon-like discourses that appear in American novels over the last decade, since each one functions uniquely within its narrative. The fact that American novelists still embrace the sermon and a sermonic ethos in general, however, deserves attention and has received scant scholarship to date.[2] I am

---

[1] Specifically "The Need for a Religious Literary Criticism" by Dennis Taylor and "The Shape of Things to Come: Toward an Eschatology of Literature" by Emily Griesinger argue for an attention to literature from within a specific religious tradition. Taylor writes that "there is a need in our time for religious interpretations that are substantial enough to [compete] with reigning critical discourses" (3). Griesinger argues a similar point about the importance of specifically Christian scholarship, suggesting that Christian scholars "might . . . offer something hopeful to those who have lost faith in the meaninglessness and value of literature" (204).

[2] Dolan Hubbard's *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination* is the only book-length investigation of sermonic discourse across the work of several authors. The chapter "John Updike's Sermons" in Robert Detweiler's

thus making a careful distinction between attending to the features of a novel from a religious perspective and attending to the spiritual or religious features of a novel from a position of academic curiosity. In the novels that I examine here, characters deliver moral speeches and gesture toward an external authority, but the resulting artifact is neither dogmatic nor ironic. Familiar with the anxieties and skepticism of postmodernity, these sermons are postsecular in nature. Postsecularity, as defined by a number of scholars in the last decade,[3] describes a reaction against the thesis of secularism prevalent in the academy and the expression of spiritual or religious impulses and behaviors in the space that has been cleared. J. A. McClure, in *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* has applied this term most recently to the qualities of several foundational postmodern American novelists, but I want to define the postsecular qualities of a more specific discourse on display in contemporary fiction –the postsecular sermon. While J. A. McClure generally observes the depiction of religiously-inflected communities and practices in contemporary novels, I will examine the rhetorical qualities and thematic impact of the postsecular sermonic urge in contemporary American fiction.

One can easily recall the fictional sermons that appear in the canon of American literature from the sermons in Jonathan Edwards and Cotton Mather to Fr. Mapple in *Moby-Dick* or the Rev. Shegog in *The Sound and the Fury*. The

---

Breaking the Fall: Religious Readings of Contemporary Fiction is another notable exception.

[3] Specifically, Jurgen Habermas, *An Awareness of What is Missing; Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (2010); William Connolly, *Why I am Not a Secularist* (2000); and John McClure, *Partial Faiths; Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (2009).

American novel reflects Christian practice because of the enormous influence Christianity exerts over the values and worship practices of Americans. Yet, things have changed over the last fifty years. Our literature still pursues questions of the spirit, but in halting, organic, and personal ways. According to J. A. McClure, American postsecular authors develop an attitude toward religious practice that embraces hybridity and eschews authority. This attitude is amorphous and pluralistic, adapting to the exposure and access to multiple religious systems. The postsecularity that J. A. McClure observes has direct rhetorical impact on sermonic performance in American novels of the last half-century. Rather than expressing a hierarchical, dogmatic authority and a biblical hermeneutic, contemporary postsecular sermons in American novels borrow the ethos of the preacher to express spiritual reflections and metaphysical interpretations with perforated boundaries. Aware of the ideological aftermath of postmodern theory, these sermons resemble the postsecularity defined by J. A. McClure and scholars outside of literary studies. The characters that speak them try “to negotiate the difficult terrain where the spiritual and the secular meet in our time” (J. A. McClure 25).

Concentrating on the sermon in contemporary American novels defines a focused rhetorical object of study. The sermon is a unique construction on its own, textual in its composition, referential in its scriptural citation and oral in its final delivery. Attending to how authors build sermons inside novels reveals uniquely layered examples of intertextuality. A sermon demonstrates both the Christian orator's relationship to texts and to audience because it negotiates or

mediates a space between scripture, theology, Christian practice, and the congregation. The priest or pastor delivering a formal sermon in a novel stands in a uniquely moral, historical, and rhetorical place from which to employ language, Truth Claims, and authority.

Traditional fictional sermons, like the Rev. Shegog sermon in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, use the pulpit to stage a rhetorically charged moment in the narrative. When the leader of a church addresses a congregation with moral, doctrinal, and spiritual authority, his or her language creates a rhetorical situation that is culturally unique. In the United States, where such pains were made at the beginning of the nation's history to separate religious authority from civic authority, the pulpit is rivaled only by the court or the legislators' hall for cultural significance and truth claims. Ideal legal and political discourse strives for the perfection of a communal "truth" that is situational and evolving. The truth proclaimed from the pulpit is completely different -- supernatural, ultimate, and essential. A Christian sermon can be as personal or inviting as a preacher wishes it to be, but that does not change its objective. By definition the Christian sermon must translate for the congregation the intentions of a perfect and unchanging God. The author of any American novel knows that to call a character formally into the pulpit is to display and, in some senses, evaluate the claim of that character's version of ultimate truth.

It is accepted as general fact that scholarly discourse in the second half of the twentieth century sought to discredit and dismiss post-Enlightenment rationality and the Truth Claims of religious systems. John Neary, in *Like and*

Unlike God, underscores "the extent to which the postmodern suspicion of truth claims has undermined religious viewpoints" and claims that "much of the self-consciously postmodern literary academy views religious interests as passé" (1). Neary's observation crystallizes a feeling so widespread in the humanities that understanding its origins takes us to a century before, back to Nietzsche or even Hume. In fact, suspicion about Truth Claims has been an active current in academic thought at least, in the West, since Plato's battles with the sophists over rhetoric and philosophy. In the twentieth century, anxiety over truth-claims coalesced into a bundle of ideologies extending suspicion from a current into a tidal wave. Paul Lakeland defines postmodernity as that which "abandons the idea of ordered progress toward some goal . . . is deeply suspicious of notions of universal reason, and […] rejects all metaphysical or religious foundations, all 'grand theory,' all theoretical systems" (xii). Instead, academic discussion in the West for the last century or more returns to a "secularization thesis," which sees academic progress as an antidote to religious activity. In *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart write that subscribers to the secularization thesis believe that "the spread of scientific knowledge and rising levels of education will bring a universal trend toward an increasingly rational worldview . . . Secularization should have progressed furthest among the most educated and those who emphasize and respect science" (27). For most of the last five decades, across the humanities, Truth Claims and metanarratives are greeted with suspicion and hostility in the postmodern academy.

Religious practice and discussion occurs with a new frequency and in a different light in the twenty-first century, however. After describing their "secularization" thesis, Norris and Inglehart write: "Yet, we do not find any such universal trend" (29). Small pockets of scholars in different disciplines – religious studies, philosophy, literature, communications, theology, and rhetoric – have begun devoting attention to how religious cultures transact with secular ones. To discuss religiosity in the aftermath of postmodernity, Jurgen Habermas, among other theorists, has employed the term "post-secular." In a 2008 lecture, Habermas claims that "global changes and the visible conflicts that flare up in connection with religious issues give us reason to doubt whether the relevance of religion has waned" ("A 'post-secular' society"). According to Habermas, secularity exists, religions exist, and the citizen of a culture where both exist side-by-side "must accept an interpretation of the relation between faith and knowledge that enables them to live together in a self-reflective manner" ("A 'post-secular' society"). In *Why I am Not a Secularist*, political scientist William Connolly investigates the benefits of open discourse between practitioners of religion and the proponents of secular societies. In his own words, his book "explores a possible world of intersecting publics, expressing a variety of religious and metaphysical orientations, interacting on several registers of being. No constituency gets everything it wants in such a world, particularly if it imagines itself – in its purity, neutrality, simplicity, faith, rationality, sanctity, or civilizational necessity – to be the one party to the case that must also be the final judge" (8). Connolly does not wish to flip a binary switch from secular

societies back to religious ones, but rather to imagine a “timely vision of multidimensional pluralism” more appropriate than “the secular problematic” (4). Both Habermas’s and Connolly’s explorations of the postsecular turn participate in a spirited new debate about what happens to secular culture when it re-engages with religious questions and communities.

J. A. McClure writes at length about the postsecular quality of American literature of the late-twentieth century in *Partial Faiths*. Postsecularity, according to J. A. McClure, does not constitute a reversion to the practice of Christianity common in the United States before theory's attack on Truth Claims. Instead, the postsecular era is marked by:

> fundamentalist and pneumatic forms of organized religious practice, 'New Age' experiments in alternative spiritualities, and the turn toward religion in certain philosophical circles, each reflecting a strong but selective disenchanment with secular values and modes of being and a determination to invent alternatives. The novelists whose work I explore share this disenchantment and determination; they seek at once to evaluate the culturally dominant modes of postsecular innovation and to develop their own religiously inflected alternatives to secularism. (7)

The alternatives that J. A. McClure cites, in both the wider culture and in what is commonly called "postmodern American fiction," probe supernatural solutions and religious practices while remaining open-ended. "One does not sense," writes J. A. McClure, "in spite of the dramatic instability of the worlds thus

defined, that either the novelists or their characters are anxious to 'straighten things out'" (4).

My interest in this study lies in a general investigation of literary postsecularity as it applies to specifically defined rhetorical artifacts – sermons and sermon-like discourses – in contemporary American novels. I propose to treat these sermons as a new structural and thematic category, analysis of which will shed light on the postsecular orientation of the novel and of contemporary American literature in general. Viewing fictional sermons as active rhetorical texts will provide a deeper understanding of postsecular expression. The rhetorical theory of Kenneth Burke, particularly his work in *The Rhetoric of Religion*, provides unique analysis of the contact points of theological and secular rhetoric.

Burke was an early contributor to the rhetorical analysis of religious language. His *Rhetoric of Religion*, first published in 1961, describes a boundary-game that language plays through its expressions of divine reality. The project of his study is to analyze how language systems and theological systems interact. Central to this project is a discussion of the ways in which secular words for "naturalistic" objects can be borrowed to describe "supernatural" ideas and then returned to a new secular usage. For instance, the word "grace" in its Latin form was used by the Romans to describe a plethora of socially magnanimous qualities, was transported into Christian usage to describe an aspect of God's relationship to humanity, and was returned later to an "aestheticized" usage in discussion of physical elegance or literary style. Such a transfer is significant to Burke because the "ineffability" of the supernatural must first be expressed in the

language of the natural world, analogically; the resultant "borrowing back" of the word from the realm of theology results in a second reconfiguration of the idea. In justifying the thesis of the book, Burke argues that if we adhere to his "logological" process of attending to words as they move between secular and theological usage, we will benefit twice. First, logological analysis “adds a new dimension needed for analyzing man even in the sheerly secular sense as the 'symbol-using animal’;” second, "we'll arrive at a truer understanding of language, even in its sheerly secular nature, than if we made a short cut that avoided such circuitousness" (10). To pursue his subject further, Burke makes distinct comparisons between secular and supernatural uses of language. In his first analogy, between “words” and “the Word,” Burke explains how words for the supernatural “are necessarily borrowed by analogy from our words for . . . the natural, the socio-political, and the verbal” (15). If the work of a sermon rests upon words about God, understanding what those words reveal about a preacher proves instructive.

Burke's analogies between the arenas of natural and supernatural language usage blends approaches to structuralist theory and theology to form a new lens through which to view the relationship between rhetoric and belief. He takes pains to insist that he is not engaging in the project for theological ends, but linguistic ones. "Whether or not there is a realm of the 'supernatural,' there are words for it" (7), he offers, justifying his project as one that serves humanistic, academic goals rather than theological or religious ones. Burke focuses his attention on St. Augustine's *Confessions*, a spiritual memoir addressing the

author's conflict between his pagan past and Christian vocation. Because Augustine serves as the historical bridge between pagan rhetoric and Christian preaching, and because Burke attends to the effects of language as it returns from the realm of the supernatural, both authors are essential to an analysis of religious rhetoric. From this informed position of rhetorical analysis, I will attend to the postsecular qualities of sermons in late twentieth and early twenty-first century American novels.

Burke and Augustine provide a framework, both ancient and modern, for discussing how religious words are used while Habermas and Connolly attempt to define the relationship between religious and secular strands of culture. The postsecularity that J. A. McClure observes in a general sense in contemporary American novels is manifested with more intensity in the use of sermonic rhetoric in novels of the same period. The sermons in the novels I discuss in this project demonstrate a particularly postsecular plurality and anxiety. In various ways, the authors of these novels practice a repackaged religious or spiritual discourse while remaining aware of the hesitation with which postmodern theory approaches such discussion. Their negotiation with conflicted religious speech finds a variety of expressions. The preacher in one novel builds a useful communal belief system while the remaining three seek new ways to reconcile their own religious confusion with the impulse to seek the divine. While Toni Morrison uses the sermonic moment in *Beloved* to generate a spirituality of the body expressed by Baby Suggs, Cormac McCarthy's use of sermonic rhetoric in *No Country for Old Men* expresses an apocalyptic defeatism for Sheriff Ed Tom

Bell. All of the authors I study develop new rhetorical trajectories out of traditional religious activity. The act of preaching, for characters in late twentieth century and early twenty-first century novels, expresses spiritual realities that are more personal and less hierarchical than those defined by Christianity. Also, these postsecular sermons are confessional in nature. To understand what contemporary fictional sermons have become, a review of the history of the sermon is helpful. Observing how the act of preaching grew out of the pagan discipline of rhetoric, we learn that, as Burke argues, words about God are interestingly relevant to cultural and literary analysis whether God exists or not.

2: From Pagan to Christian – Sermonic Rhetoric

Understanding gestures toward a sermonic ethos in novels requires a rhetorical grounding in the history of the sermon. In a series of lectures published as *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire* in 1991, Averil Cameron addresses Christianity's reliance on rhetoric and language in establishing itself as a religious system: "Out of the framework of Judaism, and living as they did in the Roman Empire and in the context of Greek philosophy, pagan practice, and contemporary social ideas, Christians built themselves a new world" (21). This world was both old and new. It owed as much to new features of textuality and history as it did to ancient models of argumentation and cosmology. Christians in the Roman Empire placed a premium on words. Cicero, Quintilian, Fronto, Ausonius -- all emphasize the need for the orator to nurture his voice, but

Christians in the first and second centuries believed in an even higher purpose for the orator's voice (Cameron 15). For them, "the trained voice of the orator was to be put at the service of the Word of God" (Cameron 15). Immediately then, in Cameron's review of early Christian rhetoric, Christianity is concerned with language as it originates from God and as it is proclaimed by the Christian orator. According to Cameron, the cultures collaborating in the birth of Christianity – Jewish, Greek, and Roman – were each distinctly focused on rhetoric, that is, on language and its ability to persuade, encourage, and chastise others toward belief. Christianity borrowed from each of these traditions.

Cameron emphasizes Christians' reliance on specific expressions of rhetorical power, stating that "Christianity was not just ritual. It placed an extraordinary premium on verbal formation; speech constituted one of its basic metaphors, and it framed itself around written texts" (19). From the speaking of the universe into being in Genesis to the inscribed tablets of the ten commandments in Exodus; from the opening of the Gospel of John naming Jesus as the "Word of God," to the disciples' speaking in tongues on Pentecost in Acts of the Apostles, Cameron is correct in calling speech one of Christianity's central metaphors. Christians forged an attitude toward text and speech that was unique in the ancient world and which Cameron calls the "deep-seated . . . figurality of Christian discourse" (53). In addition to its use of metaphor and allusion, early Christianity was highly "declaratory"—a feature best observed in Christian preaching, which Cameron calls "the hidden iceberg of Christian discourse" (79). The oral medium of preaching facilitated the resolution of several

textual concerns: the relevance of the Old Testament history to modern day Christians, interpretation of the sometimes complicated sayings of Jesus, and the relationship between Jesus and God. Thus the way that the early Christians understood their faith was mediated by sermons delivered by priests and bishops rather than through a direct experience with scriptures (Cameron 79).

George Kennedy also stresses the conjoined nature of interpretation and proclamation in early Christian practice. In *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition From Ancient to Modern Times*, Kennedy writes: "The history of homiletics, and preaching in general, is closely related to the history of hermeneutics, the science and method of exegesis or interpretation of texts. What dialectic is to rhetoric in Aristotelian rhetoric, hermeneutics is to homiletics in Christian rhetoric" (157). Considering the progression of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in the Book of Matthew to the apostle Paul's sermon on the steps of the Athenian Aeropagus in Acts, from Origen's early attempts at theological synthesis in the second century to Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* (*OCD*), Christian preaching grew from a spontaneous spiritual discourse to a formal and routinized rhetorical practice. From its earliest appearances as a modified form of Jewish scriptural exegesis to the liturgical and rhetorical centerpiece of the early Christian Mass, the sermon, by Augustine's time, had become a written and spoken text attempting to satisfy a complex blend of spiritual, hermeneutic, and moral objectives. During that period of time, structures adopted by preachers became more diverse. According to Kennedy, "There were four major forms of preaching in the early Church: the missionary sermon, prophetic preaching, the

homily, and pangyrical sermon” (155-56). The most important one of these was the homily.

Kennedy’s distinction between homily and sermon suggests a complicated historical and theological boundary between these forms of preaching. *Homilia* is a Greek word meaning "coming together, conversation," or informal address, which came to be used to describe the oral interpretation of scripture during Christian worship. In Latin *sermo* also means "conversation" and not a formal sermon (*oratio*). In its most natural form, homily is lacking in artifice and does not aspire to systematic exposition of theology. The speaker simply tells the congregation what they need to know to understand the text and apply it to their lives (Kennedy 156). Yet as the act of preaching developed and preachers purposefully attempted to ornament their speeches, attend to style, and appeal to wealthier and more powerful audiences, the strategies of pagan rhetoric became more useful. Homilies "began to employ more artificial rhetoric" and "ceased to be simple words . . . addressed to simple hearts" (Kennedy 156). In the first centuries of Christian development, the homily marked the location where the preacher's ethos, a scriptural hermeneutics under frequent revision, creative invention, and theology all became intertwined with classical rhetoric. By the third century AD, the Christian scholar and exegete Origen “developed a method of composing a homily, or sermon, that began with the meaning . . . discovered in the text and that employed colloquial, emotional language to move the audience” (Bizzell and Herzberg 432). Origen was already expanding the boundaries of the homily to something more structured and rhetorically aware.

Origen utilized his Hellenistic education to compose a wealth of early church scholarship. He wrote biblical commentaries, documents that established early Christian theology, and polemical responses to heretics and pagans. According to Kennedy, "The most important figure in the development of Christian hermeneutics and the greatest Christian thinker between Paul and Augustine was Origen" (157). In addition to establishing an early interpretive framework for reading the Christian scriptures, Origen composed a number of homilies that supported his interpretive practice, and in this sense, he is one of the first formal preachers of the Christian church. His status as a scholar, interpreter, and preacher highlights the intense connection between “how one sees” and “how one proclaims” that developed in the first centuries of the church.

St. Augustine, the North African scholar of pagan rhetoric turned Christian bishop and apologist, defined how Catholic priests should preach their sermons by importing his familiarity with classical rhetoric into the ecclesiastical consciousness. Augustine builds a case, familiar to anyone who studies rhetoric then or now, that while it is important for a speaker to be eloquent and wise, wisdom trumps eloquence in the final analysis. Paraphrasing Cicero, Augustine writes in *OCD* that "wisdom without eloquence is of small avail to a country, but … eloquence without wisdom is generally a great hindrance, and never a help" (458). His attempts to cement the priority, in a Platonic sense, of truth above style is significant because of the position it defines in a centuries' old rhetorical debate between truth or philosophy and persuasion or rhetoric. Of equal interest, however, is the fact that Augustine spends so much energy on style. Truth, he

writes, cannot "stand unarmed" and "wearisome to listen to" (*OCD* 456-57). The Catholic priest, according to the remainder of Book Four of *OCD*, should be a student of audience disposition, pathos, and diction (among other things) in delivering God's message to the congregation (Augustine 456).

The soft implication here is that truth is not enough. If style is important, then a divine truth requires more than its direct expression through language. Even more specifically, Augustine suggests that plainly stating truth is impossible or worthless. In all of his scholarly preparation as a rhetorician and teacher, Augustine is acutely aware that words, on their own, rarely do the trick. His own spiritual memoir, *Confessions*, admits as much when he asks God whether "any man [can] say enough when he speaks of you?" and later states, "for even those who are the most gifted with speech cannot find words to describe you" (23). If the best priests are those "who are the most gifted with speech," and even they cannot describe God, then something else is necessary – the pagan repository of rhetorical knowledge that Augustine harnesses, with an attitude of caution, in *OCD*.

Bringing such a tradition across the historical and cultural boundary between classical, pagan Rome and medieval, Christian Europe was no small feat. Augustine accomplishes the task carefully, by subtly honoring the Roman rhetorical tradition he spent so much time studying and teaching. Augustine's position, as bishop of Hippo during his time, and as one of the four Doctors of the Church according to current Catholic scholarship, proves his success at transforming centuries' old theories of civic, legal, and dramatic persuasion into

useful strategies for Christian leaders. Such a massive cultural-linguistic importation required modification of classical rhetoric. Cicero's and Quintilian's concentration on the use of rhetoric for the benefit of the state or the reputation and status of the speaker becomes, for Augustine, attention to the use of rhetoric in advancing an interpretation of holy scripture that describes the best way to practice the Christian faith. The first three books of *OCD* instruct the novice priest on how best to interpret scripture (a hermeneutic function), and the fourth and final book advises how to persuade others to accept that interpretation (a rhetorical function). While the incipient theology of Christianity endeavored to distinguish itself from the surrounding pagan cultures and thus from rhetoric, its formal delivery was indebted to the Roman rhetorical tradition once Augustine completed *OCD*, if not before.

Augustine’s cultural and linguistic transformation demonstrates the rhetorical work involved in crossing cultural boundaries and transforming one moral discourse into another. This is the reason Augustine’s work is critical to my study, beyond his formulation of sermonic guidelines. He borrows from one rhetorical tradition to serve the needs of another one, building a discourse both distinct from, and derivative of, the first. The civic concern and national pride championed by Cicero and Quintilian becomes the compassionate agape and scholarly precision of Christian rhetoric. The classical rhetorical arena, wherein a variety of arguments challenged one another upon shifting cosmological foundations, becomes Christian rhetoric, wherein a system of preaching strategies, based on the primacy of scripture, works towards the communication

of a singular social and theological goal – salvation. When Augustine cashes in his currency of antiquity and invests in the development of the newly Christianized Roman empire, he creates a transformed rhetorical item – the sermon – which bears resemblance to classical oratory, but has been tethered to a unified theology that transforms it. Rhetoric has kept its structure, its linguistic algebra, and some of its humanistic goals, but its content has been replaced. We see a related relationship between the way postsecular sermons in American fiction both react against and originate from previous models of religious speech.

As rhetoric came across the boundary from the civic and pagan to the Christian sacred, it did not find its only expression in preaching. In fact, Augustine's book-length arguments against the Christian sects that he deemed heretical were part of a Christian rhetorical tendency already established by the fourth century. Religious historian Elaine Pagels covers the tradition of early Christian polemical writing extensively in her work *The Gnostic Gospels.* Pagels writes: “Only by suppressing Gnosticism did orthodox leaders establish that system of organization which united all believers” (118), and in her documentation of the polemic that grew between orthodox and Gnostic Christians, we learn that suppression often took the form of letter writing. Early Christian writers utilized, knowingly or unknowingly, rhetorical posturing when arguing against each other about the nature of their incipient faith. The Bible's Acts of the Apostles documents early rhetorical in-fighting between Christian sects on the subject of maintaining Greek or Jewish cultural traditions. Early Christians influenced by Gnostic religions in the region argued with those who

supported a more linear and hierarchal structure to Christian communities. Iraneus, an early proponent of Christian orthodoxy, battled textually with Marcion, a second-century Christian leader who was later branded a heretic for his unpopular views of Judaism and biblical canon. Thus the employment of rhetorical strategies was not new to Christianity when Augustine began work on *OCD*.

The act of preaching, however, as Augustine conceived and explained it in *OCD*, is unique. In the fourth century, as Christian practice became normalized, Christian texts became canonized, and Christian "catholic" orthodoxy became politically accepted, the celebration of Mass developed a formal dichotomous structure – divided into the Liturgy of the Word (scripture) and the Liturgy of the Eucharist (communion). The fulcrum point between these two structures, the homily or sermon, required an expository, persuasive address from the priest. Until Augustine completed *OCD* in 427, Christian preaching existed without a guidebook of any sort. Augustine, using his skills as a former professor of Roman rhetoric, sought to prepare young priests for giving homilies through what amounted to a crash course in persuasion that accidentally established the precedent for Christian oratory for centuries to come. Bizzell and Herzberg, in their introduction to Augustine in *The Rhetorical Tradition*, conclude that *OCD* "was widely used to train medieval preachers" and "is still regarded as a major landmark in Christian thinking about . . . preaching" (452).

Kennedy's analysis of *OCD* notes interesting features of Augustine's text which are instructive in a study of the differences and similarities between early

Christian rhetoric and classical rhetoric. The concept of proof, for example, is altered as “proof in Christian rhetoric derives from the authoritative utterances in the sacred texts and from the moral authority of the speaker, not from argumentation” (Kennedy 181). Here, the ground of Christian argument shifts from logic to sacred experience and ethos. In keeping with Greek and Roman approaches to persuasion, however, “matters of style play a greater role [in *OCD*] than does invention in Augustine’s account of Christian rhetoric” (Kennedy 181). Here we return to the earlier observation about the interaction between the sacred and the human, for if God can communicate directly through humans, no style would be required. Instead, Augustine realizes that even priests must work at crafting scriptural interpretation with ornamentation, allusion, and an awareness of audience – the original concern of the pagan rhetoricians. According to Kennedy, even though “it is characteristic of [Augustine] to strip secular institutions and arts of their pagan associations” (181), Augustine does not explicitly separate the act of preaching from rhetoric, its pagan ancestor. Christian rhetoric and, by implication, Christian preaching-- though it seems to stand apart theologically from the activity of the sophists and the rhetoricians-- remains an activity just as dependent on strategy, awareness of audience, and ethos.

In less than four hundred years the roles of the Jewish scriptural exegete, the classical orator, and the elite, literate Christian scholar combined to form, finally under Augustine, the figure of the preacher. At this stage of development, scholars begin to use the word "sermon" as the name for the orally-delivered

speech during the liturgy, indicating a more formal structure and content than the earlier "homily." Homilies were delivered by the earliest Christians, by Jesus himself even, while sermons were delivered by ordained, ecclesiastical authorities centuries later. In fact, today a priest in a Catholic church might be said to have delivered a homily or a sermon, depending on the degree of formality of the liturgy. Protestant communities almost exclusively call their orations sermons. Whether referring to a historical, a structural, or a denominational distinction, the sermonic act has a history deeply rooted in classical rhetoric and the hermeneutical process. It developed out of motives that were dragged across boundaries, from pagan to Christian, from rhetoric to theology, and from a religion of the persecuted to a religion of cultural authority. As Christianity established itself more firmly in Europe throughout the Middle Ages, the role of the preacher implied moral authority and a uniquely powerful ethos. Any author in the English language understands that an oration delivered by a preacher gestures toward the divine; but contemporary authors possess additional, more complicated knowledge. They know that the divinity implied by a sermon has been repudiated by the weight of postmodern discourse, and that to continue to gesture toward the sermonic act is to indicate a new kind of knowledge.

3: Ellison's Sermonic Register

Returning to a discussion of the sermon in the American novel with a renewed sensitivity to postmodern suspicion and postsecular explorations of religious alternatives, what new features mark the sermons utilized in contemporary American fiction? Rather than revealing a process of diminishment or degradation, sermons in American novels since 1950 have undergone a process of postmodern revision. Their antecedent structure remains that of the church sermon, first described by Augustine in the fourth century; their content and rhetorical situation have been, in many ways, transformed. Whereas the traditional literary sermon took exegesis of scripture as its goal, sermons in contemporary American fiction choose more secular, humanistic subjects. The traditional literary sermon was delivered by an individual sanctioned by a religious institution to a church congregation; but sermons in contemporary American fiction originate from quasi-religious or even apostate figures. Readers expect a sermon to be delivered in a church, from a pulpit; postsecular fictional sermons occur in more organic, less hierarchical settings. Traditional literary sermons tend to assert doctrinal truth; more recent fictional sermons challenge Christian doctrine or appropriate it for a revised objective. Rather than asserting doctrine, postsecular sermons, I will argue, appropriate the ethos and/or rhetorical structure of the traditional sermon in order to perform a more psychological and thematic function in the novel. They often express the preacher's desire to heal broken elements of her identity or to confess aberrant behavior. The traditional sermon asserts Truth and delivers it to the

congregation, whereas the postsecular sermon evinces an interior dialogue of disruption and anxiety.

Why then call these textual artifacts sermons at all? Why not use a different term, avoid the connection to Christian rhetorical history and pursue a more broadly defined topic like "morally persuasive speech"? I insist on the idea of the "sermonic urge" primarily because orally delivered speech that orbits a moral and metaphysical nucleus cannot occur in American literature without recalling the sermonic tradition. Political speeches, poetry, and advertising, along with other forms of cultural discourse, frequently borrow a sermonic structure and ethos, whether consciously or not.[4] American literature and history are intricately connected to the history of Christianity. The earliest American literary narratives developed a sermonic tendency that contemporary authors continue to demonstrate, albeit highly selectively. Sermon delivery developed from the classical rhetorical tradition and has been one of the most structurally identifiable elements of Christian practice for thousands of years, regardless of the denomination. Rather than ignore the history, structure, and content of the literary sermon, I propose that we should re-imagine and explore the sermon in its postsecular, contemporary American iteration. As classical rhetoric was borrowed from the pagans and given work in the new Christian milieu, American fictional sermons adopt a new substance and style while utilizing the ancient

---

[4] For proof of this, we need only consider that in the last five years the following items have all been called "sermons" in the mainstream media: the campaign speeches of Barack Obama, the "bi-winning" ranting of actor Charlie Sheen, the political rhetoric of Bono and the rock band U2, the musings on hip-hop by Rev. Run of Run DMC, and the discourse on fate in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.*

structure. As Linda Hutcheon states, in describing one of the qualities of the "cultural activity" of postmodernism, "This is not a nostalgic return; it is a critical revising, an ironic dialogue with the post of both art and society . . . it is always a critical reworking, never a nostalgic 'return'" (4). Rhetorically, Kenneth Burke's *Rhetoric of Religion* purports to arrive at a clearer understanding of language in its secular nature by attending to how it is altered by theological use. Similarly, analysis of how fictional sermons evolve after crossing the skeptical boundary of postmodernism will provide a valuable understanding of various ways in which literature, religious ideology, and rhetorical performance interact in late twentieth and early twenty-first century American studies. Whether these postsecular sermons actually reflect the values of Americans more broadly is a question I leave open for the moment. The main object of my study is to attend closely to the sermonic "urge" of contemporary American authors-- especially their borrowing of sermonic structure in order to develop postsecular expressions of belief.

I begin with an investigation of the sermonic rhetoric in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* for a number of reasons. First, because Ellison's novel serves as a canonical boundary[5] text for scholars studying postmodern literature, *Invisible Man* is helpful in establishing the tension between contemporary and religious

---

[5] According to Rita Keresztesi's essay "Ethnic Modernism" in *A Companion to the Modern American Novel 1900-1950*, "Ellison's novel is a border text, not only politically and linguistically . . . but also aesthetically. If we think of modernism as a period concept then *Invisible Man* is a 'residual' text in the modernist literary production, already carrying the 'emergent' characteristics of a new postmodern era. The invisible man is the modern stranger on his way to a postmodern hyperreality" (347).

forms of rhetoric as performed through sermonic activity. Its status as a late modern or early posmodern novel is helpful in "starting the clock" on a new approach toward, and use of, religious speech in American fiction. Though it was published in 1952, two decades before the first novel that I investigate fully, John Updike's *A Month of Sundays*, *Invisible Man* serves as a literary marker between modernism and postmodernism in terms of periodization and form. I do not argue that the sermons, as I define them, in Ellison's novel are specifically postsecular, as are the texts I study later. Yet Ellison's interest in modifying the structure and content of the Christian sermon--signifying or riffing upon it--seems to me an important starting place for studying the changing nature of the literary sermon in the period of postmodern American literature. Ellison's influence in American literary studies is enormous, as captured by Ronald A.T. Judy in an introduction to a special issue of *Boundary 2* devoted exclusively to Ellison: "It is clear now that Ellison was not only the author of one of the most celebrated English-language North American novels of this century . . . but he was also one of the major American intellectuals of the middle and later twentieth century" (2).

Secondly, the well-established influence of Burke's scholarship on Ellison indicates a network of aesthetic and rhetorical principles between the two authors that is important to my analysis of contemporary sermons. According to Robert Genter's "Toward a Theory of Rhetoric: Ralph Ellison, Kenneth Burke, and the Problem of Modernism," Ellison claimed Burke as his main theoretical influence and said that *Invisible Man* "was neither a form of existential anguish nor modernist practice but a form of pragmatism and a form of Burkean rhetoric"

(Ellison qtd. in Genter 195). Ellison's novel serves as the artistic exploration of a bundle of rhetorical theories, as evidenced by its obsession with spoken performance. Burke's assertion that individuals, though immersed in discourse communities that have socially conditioned everything that they know, have power "through the ability to change rhetorical alignment" (Genter 197), profoundly affected Ellison. It became "the axiomatic principle of Ellison's aesthetic theory" (Genter 197). If *Invisible Man* is the expression of Burke's and Ellison's shared concept of rhetoric, it is a perfect text to utilize in applying Burke's theory to a specific species of rhetorical artifact – the sermon.

Invisible Man is replete with rhetorical activity. The narrator begins his life as a student by making a speech to a racist crowd and inhabits environments dominated by preachers, activists, and storytellers who influence his own speech acts. The novel's attention to oral performances further reveals Ellison's relationship to Burke. In her book *The Rites of Identity: The Religious Naturalism and Cultural Criticism of Kenneth Burke and Ralph Ellison*, Beth Eddy attempts to "spell out the details of their mutual preoccupations with identity, religiosity, and American traditions" (3). Eddy also asserts that Burke was "perhaps *the* major intellectual influence on Ralph Ellison" (3) and that academic studies of both men must be redrawn to better comprehend the intersection of their ideas. Both men are highly interested not only in the language of politics, but also in the religious expression of democratic ideals, a point which Eddy channels toward an awareness of the ideological pragmatism both Burke and Ellison value. Religious expression is less about dogma than it is about identification, a subject to which

Burke and Ellison afforded great significance. Burke writes that his concern is "not about God, but rather about the way we use our words about God on each other" (qtd. in Eddy 2). Eddy finds this position instructive, adding that Burke "finds rhetoric and identity to be inseparable subjects" (2). If those two subjects are inseparable for Burke and, by implication, for Ellison, the study of religious rhetoric becomes an important component in the analysis of one's identity.

According to Eddy, Burke and Ellison make permeable the boundaries between religion and the critique of religion characteristic of academic secularism:

> Burke and Ellison can help us get past the categorical impasse of pious students of religion versus critics of religion . . . Both Burke and Ellison showed how inheritors of any tradition that serves to shape up character can and should act in both pious and impious ways. Morally speaking, they claim that we need to be *both* pious poets and impious critics. They show us how a "both/and" heritage of thinking can ethically serve us better than an "either/or" heritage of thinking. (Eddy 7-8)

By not committing to the application of a specific doctrine, but instead treating the rhetoric and the practice of religion from a sense of detached rhetorical curiosity, Burke's work permits a dialog about the religious impulse that is critical and inclusive. Ellison, in his fiction and his essays, studies cultural scapegoating as civic ritual and "takes writing novels to be a pious act and a meaningful reclamation of the details of human experience" (Eddy 100). However, Burke and

Ellison are “usually read within the disciplinary context of the study of literature and rhetoric,” a fact that Eddy’s book attempts to upend (4). She suggests instead that attention to Ellison’s and Burke’s religious sensitivies yields a more nuanced reading of their work:

> To place either man in so narrow a context [of literature and rhetoric exclusively] doesn’t do what each thinker invites the reader to do. To read them with the breadth of interpretive context that they invite would take a reader into both the history of religious thought as well as the realm of American pragmatism. (Eddy 4)

Eddy argues that the scholarship and art of both authors defies disciplinary boundaries and encourages a richer, multidisciplinary understanding of their work.

In this sense, Eddy’s work sets the stage for the postsecular application of the work of both Burke and Ellison. Resisting what Eddy sees as the academic tendency to pigeonhole both authors, I argue that both are helpful in interpreting the rhetoric of religious moments from a new perspective. As my discussion of Burke offers, words about God reveal insights about language whether that God exists or not. I will argue that in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, the structure used to interpret and explain God – the sermon – reveals more than theology. Instead, it suggests that the sermonic form carries a rhetorical power and momentum that persists even when it is emptied of theological content. The rhetorical situation of the sermon is useful in the hands of the postsecular author, the author who attends to the goals of religious systems while providing a newly postmodern-

inflected content in place of traditional theology. *Invisible Man* provides the clearest paradigm for studying the space between the traditional sermon and the postsecular sermon in the oral performances of Jim Trueblood and Rev. Homer Barbee.

The novel includes an example of a traditional literary sermon, delivered by Rev. Barbee in the university chapel. At a church service organized to celebrate the history of the school's Founder and to collect a rich crop of donations from white patrons, Barbee narrates the history of the Founder's "great humility and undimming vision" (Ellison 120). The sermon draws the narrator deeply into communion with the story as he recalls: "I listened . . . with numbness, my emotions woven into his words as upon a loom" (120). Barbee appeals to the chapel of students, converting them to a congregation of believers through his social and historical gospel. Barbee frequently addresses his audience as "my young friends" to convince them of the good will he holds for them. His description of the Founder sanctifies the man, implicitly mapping his life story onto that of Christ by emphasizing the Founder's struggle from obscurity and poverty, his tireless concern for those around him, and his exhaustion and eventual martyrdom for the cause of racial harmony. Barbee rhetorically marks the organizational and emotional turns in his sermon: "You've heard the bright beginning of the beautiful story . . . but there is a mournful ending, and perhaps in many ways the richer side. The setting of this glorious son of the morning" (123). In the Founder's death, Barbee finds "part of the glorious story . . . not as a death, but as a birth. A great seed which had been planted" (132). He borrows

two biblical metaphors, comparing the Founder, a “son,” to the “sun,” and comparing spiritual rebirth to the growth of a plant seed. Barbee is well-versed in the scriptural rhetoric, but he has not mentioned Christianity overtly once. He has, instead, painted an historical and political portrait of the Founder using the metaphorical and rhetorical pallet of the Bible and the sermonic ethos of the Christian pulpit. The content of the Christian message is missing, or buried, but the structure remains.

Invisible Man presents a psychologically arresting oral discourse that serves as a sermon of another kind even prior to the Barbee scene. Though Trueblood, the impoverished black farmer living on the outskirts of the university, does not espouse Christian doctrine, he performs an act of persuasive speech so profound that it initiates the action of the remainder of the novel. The narrator begins his epic journey into the North, away from stability and home, because of his "mistake" in taking the white university-patron, Mr. Norton, to hear Trueblood's "sermon." Trueblood addresses Norton, a wealthy white trustee of the school, with whom he might never have been able to speak were it not for his sensational story of incest. His narrative seeks empathy and financial restitution for the injustice of Southern racism and the poverty that racism creates. Trueblood has clearly told his story to several audiences and has found it successful in alleviating social and financial pressures on his family as he understands them. He is well known among the African American community as an accomplished storyeller. Trueblood’s hallucinatory and exculpatory discourse

is most certainly a rhetorically-charged act, successfully encouraging his audience toward moral action.

Trueblood begins his discourse with the words “That’s how it started,” and the narrator observes that Trueblood “cleared his throat, his eyes gleaming and his voice taking on a deep, incantory quality, as though he had told the story many, many times” (53). Trueblood utilizes a narrative of his own, not unlike Barbee’s in its nostalgic tone, focused on his relationship with a past lover. Whereas Barbee’s sermon concentrates on the Founder’s abstract ideals and the Christian symbology of his youth, Trueblood’s memory focuses on sensate experience – the appearance of lights on the water, of “juicy melons split wide open” (55), and of “a gal in a red dress . . . she’s plum and juicy and kinda switchin’ her tail” (56). The sensuality of Trueblood’s speech arouses Norton and prepares him for the scene of incest that completes Trueblood’s dream. He likens the sexual experience to “that fellow . . . in Birmingham . . . what locked hisself in his house and shot at them police until they set fire to the house and burned him up. I was lost” (60). Like the criminal in the story, Trueblood “had to fight it on out to the end” and “got a heapa satisfaction,” an uncomfortable admission that Trueblood enjoyed the act. At the close of Trueblood’s tale, Norton is visibly shaken. Trembling, he offers Trueblood a one hundred dollar bill for which Trueblood expresses his thanks. The sermon has served as either personally therapeutic, or as a performance to elicit the donation, or potentially both. We can call Trueblood’s speech to Norton a sermon because it utilizes a moral hinge familiar to sermonic discourse. Though it does not begin by referencing scripture,

it employs some aspects of formal sermonic rhetoric, namely a self-conscious performativity and dramatic organization.

Barbee's and Trueblood's spoken activities may appear incompatible at first, but they share important rhetorical aspects. Both are narratives that try to justify past actions and inspire future ones. Regardless of the personal, intimate nature of Trueblood's discourse, he calls his audience to action, just as Barbee's sermon demands that the students in the chapel re-commit themselves to the Founder's ideals. Between the poles of Rev. Barbee's lionizing discourse on the Founder and Trueblood's surreal exculpatory plea, we can imagine a spectrum of formal rhetorical variables of the sermonic moment that can be deployed while persuading others toward an action, whether religious or not. These variables include the ordained status of the speaker, the setting of the sermon, the social constitution of the congregation, the doctrinal content of the sermon, the relationship between the preacher and his or her audience, and the method of delivery.

To the extent that Ellison, or any author, shifts these sermonic variables away from their traditional setting, the preacher and the sermon become separate from the formal pattern of Christian discourse. Trueblood's sermon takes place on the porch of his humble shack, but his congregation, consisting of Norton and the narrator, listens attentively. Trueblood does not hold ecclesiastic authority, but he certainly knows the rhetorical insistence or "urge" of the sermon better than any religious figure in the novel. Rather than offering an interpretation of God's words or salvific wisdom, Trueblood preaches a gospel of guilt and

voyeurism. Though his family lives in poverty, struggling through the traumatic dysfunction of incest and unwanted pregnancy, Trueblood has learned that white society will reward the oral performance of his social sin for a number of reasons. The local sheriff protects Trueblood from reprisal from the university community in order to maintain the visible example of a racist stereotype. Norton rewards Trueblood with a donation to assuage his own guilt for desiring the same taboo – intercourse with his now-deceased daughter. “The white folks took up for me” (53), Trueblood explains, but he has certainly learned to manipulate their own selfish motives to serve his own. His sermon is both a performance and a rhetorical artifact, allowing him to exert invisible control over systemic white racism. However, this altered artifact still bears resemblance to original sermonic structure and ethos.

Trueblood’s and Barbee’s presentations function as sermons that offer a helpful rhetorical framework for analyzing postsecular sermonic discourse in the fiction of later American authors. The continuum between Trueblood’s sermon and Barbee’s defines the field between two poles: the traditional literary sermon and the postmodern-inflected sermon. Trueblood’s sermon does not simply represent the values of postmodern culture; however, postmodern culture has exerted an influence that fictional subjects cannot resist. The sermons in Ellison’s novel call attention to the distance between a traditional fictional sermon and one which has been modified to fit the rhetorical needs of the preacher.[6]

---

[6] Additionally we could analyze as sermons either the street preacher’s speech during the narrator’s stoned hallucination or several of the narrator’s speeches while participating in the Brotherhood, but the performances of Barbee and

Both Trueblood's and Barbee's rhetorical performances are sermonic, and I will use the field of variables which distinguish or connect them as a tool with which to analyze similar moments in literature. More specifically, I will use the spectrum between Trueblood and Barbee to categorize and discuss similar moments of extended persuasive oratory in other novels. Theological or not, Christian or secular, formal or conversational, Barbee's and Trueblood's sermons reveal a range of rhetorical variables and a broader understanding of the use of sermons in contemporary American fiction. Before proceeding, however, I wish to make one important distinction. Because *Invisible Man* was published in 1952, it cannot be viewed as specifically postsecular in the manner that I have defined that term above. Ellison's sermonic experimentation provides us with a structural framework for the rhetorical analysis of sermons, but the sermons studied in subsequent chapters share the experience of publication within the period known typically as postmodernity. Because postsecularity's reimagined religious language and spiritual experience is a response to (or reaction against) the overt secularizing effects of postmodern theory, *Invisible Man* does not bear the same relationship to the sermonic form as novels studied in later chapters. Ellison's novel is transitional as a postmodern and a postsecular text, but it is neither fully postmodern nor postsecular. It is hyper-aware of the sermon as a useful literary discourse, but it is published too early to demonstrate what I would call postsecular attitudes toward sermons.

Trueblood, appearing so close to each other in the novel, provide the ideal framework for analyzing the variables of sermonic discourse.

In this study I examine the sermonic moment in four contemporary American novels in light of the variables demonstrated between Ellison's secular and religious preachers, Barbee and Trueblood. Novels by John Updike (*A Month of Sundays*), Toni Morrison (*Beloved*), Louise Erdrich (*Tracks*), and Cormac McCarthy (*No Country for Old Men*) experiment with the formal sermonic features of audience, ethos, and moral argument. In analyzing sermonic moments in these novels, I will observe the authors' oscillation between the poles of Christian rhetorical practice and a less formal sermonic presentation in order to evaluate connections between form and content. The authors borrow from the rhetorical force of the Christian sermon so as to lend momentum to postsecular expressions of pluralism, metaphysical uncertainty, and the erasure of traditional religious hierarchies.

4: Chapter Breakdowns

In Chapter Two, I investigate John Updike's *A Month of Sundays*, a novel which presents the first-person account of a Lutheran pastor whose licentiousness has landed him in one of the denomination's "retraction" facilities. The novel presents a theologian wrestling with the most human impulse – his sexuality. Every Sunday during his month-long "retreat," Marshfield feels that he "must preach. But without a Bible . . . without an organist, without a congregation. So be it" *(A Month of Sundays* 52). Marshfield composes a formally structured sermon every week whose audience is uncertain and whose purpose is

sometimes doctrinally blasphemous. By the end of the novel, it becomes apparent that Marshfield may have written the sermonic texts in an effort to seduce Ms. Prynne, his maid and the possible censor of his journal. According to Elisabeth Jay, “in this reading the sermons become an extension of Marshfield’s seduction tools” (349). The text of Marshfield’s first sermon, penned after six days of isolation and relaxation, argues that marriage creates a state of bodily neglect while adultery awakens the senses because it is sent from God.

Tom Marshfield is a perfect subject of study for this project because he embodies all the cultural capital of the preacher; he composes highly structured sermons but without a clear audience to receive them. Marshfield remains in the religious structure – he has not been defrocked. He has a church to which he can return, and he uses the most formal rhetorical language to deliver his sermon. He has been trained in the Augustinian tradition of composing sermons. Yet the deviations from formality do not unmake Marshfield's sermons in their morally persuasive intention. Rather, the novel’s subtraction or transformation of the formal elements of a sermon requires a refocusing of the reader’s analytical lens. Remembering the polarized distance between Ellison's two "preachers," Marshfield’s sermon contains Barbee’s formal structure and Trueblood’s justification of human appetites.

In contradistinction to Marshfield’s scribbled sermons in *Sundays*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* depicts a sermonic moment replete with an actual congregation of believers, but similarly argues that the spirit and the body are close companions rather than adversaries. In Chapter Three I examine how

Morrison's *Beloved* twists the variables of the formal sermon through its portrayal of the open-air performances of Baby Suggs, the grandmother and maternal symbol of slave emancipation in the novel. Suggs serves as an itinerant community preacher, regularly addressing area churches and impromptu meetings. In an episode recalled by Sethe, the novel's key protagonist, Baby Suggs delivers a heartfelt sermon in the clearing of a wooded area behind her property. Baby Suggs, in short, counsels her congregation to embrace its humanity in the form of its bodily organs and appendages. Her homily is corporeal and natural; it connects more to pagan or Gnostic belief than to traditional Christianity. In calling her community members to embrace and protect their bodies rather than concentrating exclusively on their souls, Baby Suggs's sermonic moment is active and emancipatory; it challenges traditional Christianity.

I will argue that Baby Suggs's sermon departs from a traditional Christian interpretation of bodies (i.e., as the Holy Spirit's "temple") by situating the individual rather than God as the body's ultimate master. Baby Suggs's spirituality demands that the individual protect herself from the abuse of the outside world rather than prepare for the indwelling spirit of an external God, for "she [Baby Suggs] told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it" (Morrison, *Beloved* 88). The oration in the Clearing is not scripturally-oriented, though the narrator notes that Baby Suggs "became an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it . . .

[She] carried it to AME's and Baptists, Holinesses and Sanctifieds, the Church of the Redeemer and the Redeemed. Uncalled, unrobed, unanointed, she let her great heart beat in their presence" (Morrison, *Beloved* 87). Regardless of the ways the text "unchurches " Baby Suggs, she not only participates in the Christian communal discourse, but becomes an integral part of the spiritual lives of the African Americans in her rural Ohio town.

In Chapter Four, I analyze Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*. This novel presents a hybridized religious character whose private visions blend Christian evangelization and history and become ominous and self-serving prophetic sermons. The novel is a narrative debate between Pauline Puyat, a half-French, half-Ojibwe nun, and her nemesis in the tribal community, the elder trickster Nanapush. Native American literature and history often contend with the attempts that Christian missionaries and organizations made throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to proselytize tribal communities, and *Tracks* explores these religious boundaries. Pauline, renamed Sister Leopolda upon becoming a nun, practices a self-styled ascetic and penal Catholicism at the Little No Horse reservation. In a starkly visionary moment in the novel, Pauline receives a message from God commanding her to deliver the Gospel to the Ojibwe and to harvest Indian souls for Christ the way whites harvested the plains buffalo. Pauline's ardent account presents an altogether new kind of sermon – one that is eschatological and terrifying in its missionary zeal.

Like Tom Marshfield's experience as a pastor, Pauline's exposure to the church has been formal and vocational; like Baby Suggs, she believes fiercely in

the message she wants to deliver to her community. Different from both of these characters, however, Pauline's religious vision is authoritarian, traditional, and doctrinal. It asserts an enormous barrier between God and his human creation and enforces a rigid, sacrificial devotional practice. Pauline is not an ordained priest, but adopts a sermonic stance in her attempt to explain how God bestowed on her the task of bringing Christianity to the Ojibwe. Her sermon explains her refusal to accept Indian practices and her avoidance of Indian supernatural beliefs. It cements her as the most institutionally Christian figure in the book – more dogmatic than the reservation's priest Fr. Damian, though not as authentically compassionate. Her status as self-proclaimed visionary and reaper of Ojibwe souls overshadows her piety and self-sacrifice. Pauline's rhetoric fails, according to the narrative of *Tracks* and its companion volume *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*; she prompts no dramatic conversions and remains, in the eyes of the other characters, another blight on a tribal community akin to the lumber industry and the U.S. government. The doctrinally-tied language of Pauline's theology may appear to parallel the dogmatic delivery of Homer Barbee's sermon; however, Pauline is more like Ellison's Trueblood in that she offers her meditation on a historical moment as a personal apologia or clarification. Her sermon describes her own visionary ordination and blessing from Christ in order to justify a terrifyingly dogmatic and maniacal attitude toward Christian practice.

Finally, in Chapter Five I will examine Cormac McCarthy's *No Country For Old Men*, in which a Texas sheriff moralizes about his own culture's loss of

tradition and ethical responsibility. Pauline's sermon in *Tracks* claims to speak directly for God, but Sheriff Ed Tom Bell is not exactly sure how to frame the source of his belief. Bell occupies only a minor role in the novel's main plot, which describes violent wrangling over lost drug money. In his recollection of events, Sheriff Bell assigns a demonic quality to Anton Chigurh, an assassin who relentlessly pursues another man through southwestern Texas. Bell portrays Chigurh as a symptom of general moral decay in 1980 in the United States. His musings address the death penalty, the absence of manners, and the burgeoning American drug trade in morally persuasive monologue that evokes sermonic language. Bell quits police work by the end of the novel in quiet capitulation to the rising tide of violent lawlessness that he observes in the area surrounding his county, but he maintains his preacher's stance while abdicating his legal authority.

McCarthy's Bell does not explicitly address an audience of congregants nor does he hold a religious title. His interchapter monologues do not utilize the formal language of theology, though Bell speaks from an overtly Christian, if ambiguously denominational, standpoint. Nevertheless, I will argue that Bell's monologues collectively comprise an extended sermonic moment. He describes a decline in the morality of the citizenry he polices, which serves, potentially, as his congregation. In stark contrast to other McCarthy novels, *No Country's* clear structural boundary between narrative and moralizing demands attention. Sheriff Bell composes a colloquial twentieth century jeremiad, a moral lament whose context and language raise interesting questions about the steep decline in moral

behavior in the United States. His monologues provide the most organic and secular sermonic moments in my study because formal aspects of preaching – the ordained minister, a congregation of believers, theological or scriptural content, and an isolated historical kairos – are absent. Dragged across the boundary, though, between the sacred and the secular, Bell's preaching about declining civic morality exhorts all hearers to avoid the persuasive pull of efficient, violent, mechanistic greed. His judgment is clear, not just against Anton Chigurh and Llewelyn Moss, but against decaying American culture at large, and the language of that judgment follows a rhetorical pattern traceable to Cicero and Augustine. We can apply Burke's dramatistic pentad to understand Bell's function in the novel, and Burke's logological method (from *The Rhetoric of Religion*) to an analysis of Bell's language. Bell occupies a sharp center between the ironic falsity of Ellison's Barbee and Trueblood's calculated self-interest.

Ellison's two preachers provide end points in a continuum between the traditional and the postmodern or post-secular sermon that can be used to measure the sermonic moments in American novels that follow *Invisible Man*. As J. A. McClure has observed, authors and characters still explore spiritual or transcendent goals, they just do not employ traditional religious methods and often do not arrive at a point of spiritual conclusion. Postsecular characters, according to J. A. McClure, enmeshed in crises of faith or understanding, "do not seem particularly uncomfortable there nor particularly impatient to move on to some more fully elaborated form of belief and practice" (4). I will argue that this situation exists for the postmodern preachers we find in the novels presented

here. Though their religious impulses are ephemeral and sometimes contrary to dogma, they constitute the contemporary manifestation of a literary practice that has operated in a unique way throughout American literature.

CHAPTER 1: *A Month of Sundays*, Updike's Apostate Spirituality

> *I must preach. But without a Bible, without a copious and insipid encyclopedia of sermon aids and Aramaic etymologies, without an organist, without a congregation. So be it.*
> (Updike, *A Month of Sundays* 52)

The first novel of John Updike's Rabbit tetralogy, *Rabbit, Run*, details the minor suburban triumphs and monumental domestic tragedies of Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom. Rabbit, after having an affair and separating from his wife, Janice, is reconciled with her through the help of Rev. Jack Eccles, the minister of the Episcopal church to which his in-laws belong. Eccles is a young and devoted pastor, and his liberal theology permits him to forge a friendship with Rabbit, the social outcast, while still serving as something of a religious mentor. After the couple has resumed living together and made amends, Rabbit heads out the door one morning to attend Eccles's church, and experiences a spiritual awakening. He is "happy to go to Eccles's church . . . because he considers himself happy, lucky, blessed, forgiven, and wants to give thanks" (Updike,

Rabbit, Run 201). This complex bundle of personal and theological impressions fuels a collection of spiritual reflections for Rabbit that swings between the poles of the holy and the profane. Because he must, at his new job, persuade customers to buy cars that may not prove to be sound purchases, Rabbit relishes the chance to make spiritual amends. He experiences a new sense of social justice brought on by his religious fervor: "He hates all the people on the street in dirty everyday clothes advertising their belief . . . that death is final . . . Correspondingly he loves the ones dressed for church . . . [who] give substance and respectability to his furtive sensations of the invisible" (202). Rabbit's "head buzzes with joy," and "people who know God rustle and stir about him, upholding him in the dark" (202). Rabbit's energy turns to an appreciation of the woman sitting in front of him in the pew, fusing his spiritual excitement with his overt sexual impulses.

Rabbit's spiritual openness concludes, however, the moment that the church service begins. Though Rabbit enjoys an "uneasy affection" for Eccles, he is critical of Eccles's performance. He "comes down the aisle shuffling," and "behind the altar rail he looks absentminded and grouchy, remote and insubstantial and stiff, like a Japanese doll in his vestments" (202). Rabbit loses his joy and even his desire to seek forgiveness since "there is something disagreeable about the whole Episcopal service . . . he feels too much is made of collecting the money" (203). Though Rabbit "scarcely listens to the sermon at all" (203), it concerns Christ's forty days in the wilderness and conversation with the Devil. Eccles asks:

> Does this story have any relevance to *us*, here, now? . . . Yes. There exists a sense in which *all* Christians must have conversations with the Devil, must learn his ways, must hear his voice. . . . Its larger significance . . . Eccles takes to be this: suffering, deprivation, barrenness, hardship, lack are all an indispensible part of the education, the initiation, as it were, of those who would follow Jesus Christ. (203)

Eccles delivers the sermon "with a squeak in his voice," and "it is an unpleasant and strained performance, contorted somehow" (219). Witnessing the preacher uncomfortable in his own sermonic performance, Rabbit realizes that "he has no taste for the dark, tangled, visceral aspect of Christianity, the *going through* quality of it, the passage *into* death and suffering . . . He lacks the mindful will to walk the straight line of paradox" (203). His friendship with Eccles continues, but Rabbit's path veers farther away from institutional religious practice.

At first glance, Rabbit's turning can be read as a straight critique of Christianity – its admonitions, its tragedy, its somber tone. However, both Eccles and Rabbit struggle unsuccessfully throughout the novel to translate spiritual energy into institutional action. Eccles struggles with the tension between building a relationship with Rabbit and acting with moral authority sufficient to judge his behavior. He is uncomfortable with both. Rabbit, as seen above, ascribes a supernatural source to the joy and confidence that he sometimes

feels, but he does not abide by the social obligations of the Christian community. *Rabbit, Run* presents these tensions, but does not suggest any solution for them.

Updike's *A Month of Sundays*, published fifteen years later, however, does offer a solution, albeit a controversial one, to the tension between divine and human impulses. Rev. Tom Marshfield, the novel's protagonist, is a more complex combination of religious and worldly goals than is Eccles or Rabbit, and he works out a compromise between those goals in the heretical and institutionally challenging sermons he composes. *Rabbit, Run* is not a particularly postmodern or postsecular text, but *Sundays* is structurally and thematically both at once. Marshfield's journal demonstrates a linguistic hyper-awareness and a frenetic sense of playful intertextuality. In his self-consciousness as a writer and a theologian, Marshfield constructs a decidedly metafictional and postmodern narrative. Marshfield's four formal sermons describe a perforated, hybridized, and negotiated version of postsecular Christianity.

In *A Month of Sundays*, Tom Marshfield, a Lutheran minister charged with adultery by his superiors, must spend one month at a rehab facility for erring clergy. As part of his treatment, Marshfield must maintain a daily journal of his thoughts during his month-long stay. His journal entries constitute the thirty-one chapters of the novel, revealing intimate details of Marshfield's marriage, theological musings, and his affairs with women in his parish. The novel, dominated by Marshfield's hyper-linguistic and intertextual voice, energetically and self-consciously describes the pastor's sexual exploits and his resistance to curtailing them. A persistent rhetorical perspective operates throughout the text --

Marshfield's justification for his own activity on psychological and theological grounds. As Marshfield's journal develops, however, we learn that he is also using the journal to seduce Ms. Prynne, who heads the rehab facility and reads the journal entries of its occupants. He is thus spontaneously analyzing, justifying, and performing his sin of concupiscence through the epistolary language of the entries.

Between 1975 and 1988 Updike wrote three novels – *A Month of Sundays*, *S*., and *Roger's Version* – which re-imagine, in contemporary settings, Nathaniel Hawthorne's trio of characters from *The Scarlet Letter.* Marshfield represents Updike's imagined twentieth century literary descendant of Hawthorne's Rev. Dimmesdale – academic, lecherous, and reflective. Marshfield is not overtly apologetic about his sexual transgressions in the novel, in keeping with the shifting American cultural attitudes toward marriage and sexuality in the 1970s. He oscillates between self-effacing autobiographical detail and heretical theological discourse. Critics are sensitive to the highly self-conscious, metafictional qualities of Marshfield's recuperation narrative and memoir, and he is a surprising representation of the clergy in his articulation of alternative views of Christian theology and resistance to orthodox doctrine.

Updike's reconceptualization of Hawthorne's Dimmesdale speaks to Updike's central interest in theology. Scholarly approaches to Updike's writing over five decades reveal numerous assessments of Updike's religious characters. "More than any other contemporary novelist Updike also made clergy significant," writes David E. Anderson in a review of Updike's poetry after his

death in PBS's *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*. According to Robert Detweiler's *Breaking the Fall: Religious Readings of Contemporary Fiction*, Updike's "interest in theological and religious matters has never flagged . . . His narratives are frequently inhabited by clergy and contain a large number of church services and other fictionalized religious discourses" (91). Robert K. Johnson describes how "most critics have seen [Updike's] interest in [contemporary life] as more than sociological and have rightly affirmed the novelist's religious underpinning," and claims that "religious consciousness informs all of his work" (1061). Updike's interest in theology informs his foregrounding of clerical figures in order to pit certain theologies against the world or each other to determine their validity.

Updike's connection to Hawthorne's fiction extends beyond his use of characters toward an engagement with Hawthorne's treatment of religious practice. In his lecture "Hawthorne's Creed," delivered to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1979, Updike asks "What did Hawthorne believe?" and searches in vain for a firm religious doctrine demonstrated in Hawthorne's body of work. Though Hawthorne writes that "religious faith is the most valuable and most sacred of human possessions" and "never can my soul have lost the instinct of its faith" (Hawthorne qtd. in Updike, *Hugging the Shore* 75), Updike attends closely to Hawthorne's religious ambivalence. Updike writes that "neither sermons nor rites enriched his personal life," and he also observes that, "the author of . . . works imbued throughout with religious concerns and religious language, boasted of not being a churchgoer" (73-74). Interacting with many of the religious trends of his day, Hawthorne approached them with

skeptical trepidation though with a magnetic kind of attraction. He was neither a "happy pagan," like Whitman, nor a "post-Christian prophet," like Emerson; he was attracted to Roman Catholicism, Swedenborgianism, and Shakerism, but ultimately remained at a distance from all of these traditions (Updike, "Creed" 75). Regarding Hawthorne's fiction, Updike concludes that: "A very vivid ghost of Christianity stares out at us from his prose, alarming and odd in not being evenly dead, but alive in some limbs and amputate in others, blurred in some aspects and otherwise basilisk-keen" (Updike, "Creed" 76). Hawthorne's interest in theology's spiritual and moral dimensions and his inability to commit to a particular practice make his work fertile ground for Updike's fiction to explore.

Updike's work reveals some of the same spiritual and religious anxieties he sees in Hawthorne's novels, particularly in *The Scarlet Letter.* One key difference is that Updike's work is informed by the advent of literary postmodernism, a collection of cultural attitudes that directs intense suspicion at religious belief. Hawthorne, though ambivalent to religion, wrote within a more religious culture. The conceit of "Hawthorne's Creed" is Updike's attempt to pin down the tenets of Hawthorne's belief, but anyone searching for something similar in Updike's fiction arrives at a matrix of conflicting angles. Updike's fictional pastors provide numerous opportunities for tracing the trajectories of doctrine and heresy. Such interest in the content of Christian theology combined with a willingness to critique Christian practice make Updike's fiction ripe for postsecular analysis. In the introduction to *Partial Faiths*, J. A. McCLure

describes “preterite” spiritualities[7] in postsecular fiction: “Scorning the codes of theological order and exclusivity that characterize ‘high’ religious traditions, they develop modes of thought and practice that are scandalously impure . . . And they seem to work: the characters who embrace them are spiritually regenerated” (20). In Tom Marshfield, Updike delivers the preterite spirit locked in the circumstance of ecclesiastic authority. Marshfield’s diary meanders between social criticism of Christian communities and outright denial of the most holy tenets of Christianity. In a more specific way, his four sermons constitute an academic, textual attack on formal Christianity while carving out a new Christian spirituality that is postsecular in its scorn for theological order and its spiritual regeneration.

1: Sermons in a Vacuum

In his book *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics,* John S. McClure (unrelated to J.A. McClure, the author of *Partial Faiths*) outlines how the literary process of deconstructive reading puts the act of preaching under productive erasure. Historically, John S. McClure argues, preaching the Christian gospel has always been about deconstructing the realm of humanity in order to reveal the ultimate, the good news, God’s ethics of infinity. “*Proclamation itself* is, at its deepest level, ethically deconstructive,” John S. McClure writes; “the four

[7] According to McClure, he borrows the term “preterite” from the work of Pynchon, who establishes spiritual opposition in his work between the preterite and the elect.

fundamental authorities of the Christian faith -- canon, tradition, experience, and reason" (8) must be kept open to renewing interpretation through *proclamation*, his terminology for the sermonic act. John S. McClure's new century guide to postmodern homiletics, published in 2001, contrasts considerably with Augustine's conservative source book for preachers from the sixth century, but both preacher-teachers agree that the authority of scripture, Christian tradition, life experience, and reason are foundation corners for the sermonic platform.

Updike's Marshfield utilizes but amends each of these concepts – canon tradition, experience, and reason – in his acts of sermonic reformation in *A Month of Sundays.* Though he is denied a calendar during his rehabilitation, Marshfield keeps track of the days of the week and sits down each Sunday to compose a sermon. Marshfield's Sunday journal entries are distinct from his writing throughout the week. They are formally sermonic in their structure, for each begins by establishing a passage from scripture on which he begins his interpretive work. Proceeding from the scriptural text (the canon), Marshfield illuminates the passage's ancient context and modern application (tradition and experience). Each of Marshfield's sermons employs logic to justify its interpretation and argue against the opposing position (reason). Marshfield's rhetorical and moral compositions present a problem, though, in that his lessons run contrary to the most universal of Christian teachings. In *Other-Wise Preaching*, John S. McClure imagines profound and challenging approaches for the postmodern preacher who relies on an academic and deconstructive approach. Marshfield, though, operates even beyond John S. McClure's liberal

postmodern homiletic practice. Marshfield's sermons ring heretical rather than doctrinal and appear self-serving rather than profound. They are artifacts of intense sophistry that, in small doses, propose striking truths. Taken together, they emerge as elaborate rhetorical justifications for, and confessions of, his own libidinal history.

When Marshfield begins his first sermon in his recuperative journal, he lashes out against the tradition that has confronted him with the most theological interference. Marriage, as a religious and social institution, constitutes, for Marshfield, an irreconcilable stumbling block for believers whose celebration of their bodies is too confined by monogamy. Rather than support a lifeless and too familiar marital conjugality, Marshfield heaps his praises on adulterers who "arrive at the place of their tryst stripped of all the false uniforms society has assigned them . . . [T]hey possess no credentials but those God has bestowed," (Updike 58). The adulterous couple, according to Marshfield, "tremble[s] in a glory that is unpolluted by the wisdom of this world; they are, truly, children of light" (58). Such heresy comes easy to Marshfield, whose academic training in theology has fashioned a mind astute in finding the justifications for his sexual infidelity.

Yet Marshfield does not completely decry marriage; he insists that it is the precondition for the adulterous beatific state: "Why else, I ask you, did Jesus institute marriage as an eternal hell but to spawn, for each sublimely defiant couple, a galaxy of little paradises?" (59). Instead of living with guilt or anxiety, Marshfield constructs a theology of adultery that announces a secret knowledge

akin to the early Christian Gnostics. Disagree though he may with doctrinal interpretations of the sanctity of marriage, Marshfield must stand upon a principle, even if he must construct it himself. If Jesus can be constructed as the champion of the unfaithful, a savior who demonstrates “His scorn for all the self-protecting contracts that bind men to the earth” (60), then Marshfield can continue functioning as a pastor without amending his behavior. From his first sermon we learn that Marshfield requires the structure of religious doctrine in order to enact his escape from it. The dogmatic and pastoral requirements of his vocation provide a position of material and social comfort that Marshfield needs in order to obtain the full pleasure of his trangressive act.

In the shocking heresy of Marshfield’s first sermon, the reader encounters his grandiloquent and frenetic rhetoric. We imagine the condition of his actual congregation back East, who, though they certainly did not hear this sermon, must have been frequently witness to a theology searching for a center. Though Marshfield can fluidly quote from scripture, as evidenced in the non-sermonic sections of the text, and though he can cite a range of theological scholars, he violates principles at the core of traditional Christian practice. Marshfield concentrates on the physical experience of infidelity, its ecstatic elements. While many forms of religious understanding, both pre-Christian and contemporary, promote “out of body” spiritual experiences, they are rarely Christian practices. Marshfield’s obsession with the “glowing, living filaments of transience, of time itself” (228) that accompany adulterous sexual bliss is unconvincingly spiritual. Instead of providing a recognizably Christian description of the joy of intercourse,

Marshfield's language celebrates the sensual pleasures of infidelity and reveals the source of the pastor's unchecked desires.

On his second Sunday of rehabilitation, Marshfield writes another sermon, a meditation on the miracles of Jesus. After a week of golf, cocktails, and poker, Marshfield pronounces that, "For the text of our sermon, let us take the words of Jesus [to his mother] . . . 'Woman, what have I to do with thee. Mine hour is not yet come'" (122). Biblical characters seeking Jesus' assistance in the pages of the gospels parade through the text: drowning Peter, the hemorrhaging woman, the multitudes fed by the loaves and fishes. According to Marshfield, Jesus is not impressed with these individuals; they are too sensate and pitiful. They lack modesty in their bold requests of the Lord. "In truth we are insatiable of miracles, and He flees us," Marshfield explains of our "vaunted American religiosity" (122). As he goes on to argue, "From the first Thanksgiving, ours has been the piety of the full belly; we pray with our stomachs, while our hands do mischief, and our heads indict the universe" (122-23). The objective of Jesus' gospel miracles is not healing, but providing proof of God's existence. According to Marshfield, Americans have lost sight of the beauty and significance of Jesus' miracles and instead demand more. Americans are haughty believers, desiring to gorge on a menagerie of healings, feedings, and resurrections. Mocking American attitudes toward the miracles, Marshfield asks, "Are we not moved to revolt and overthrow this minute and arbitrary aristocracy of the healed" (124) who were lucky enough to live during Jesus' time in Palestine?

Marshfield's approach here is subtler than in the first sermon, for rather than masking the overt and corporeal sin of adultery, his sermon addresses a more abstract complaint. More than in the first sermon, Marshfield demonstrates his command of contemporary theology by gesturing to an historical hermeneutical discourse from nineteenth century Germany:

> There once thrived, in that pained and systematic land of Germany, a school of Biblical scholarship that sought to reduce all of the Biblical miracles to natural happenings. The Red Sea's parting was an opportune low tide, and the feeding of the five thousand . . . was Jesus shaming the multitude into bringing out box lunches hitherto jealously hoarded . . . . It whispers the magic word 'psychosomatic' -- as if Lazarus merely fancied he was dead, the swine spontaneously decided to go for a swim, and the fig tree withered under hypnosis. (123)

Marshfield refers here to the works of Paul Tillich (b. 1886) and Rudolf Bultmann (b. 1884), both German existentialist biblical scholars, who argued the need to synthesize the worldview of twentieth century science with Christian biblical belief. Tillich "explained that scientific thinking, as well as depth psychology and existentialist ideas, could be incorporated into Protestant religion" (DeBellis 438).

Updike's personal study of theology began in the 1950s and eventually expanded to include the writings of both Tillich and his theological foil, Karl Barth (b. 1886). Barth, a Swiss theologian, renounced the liberal trajectory of Protestantism in the early twentieth century, and developed a starker concept of

God and a more literal approach to Biblical interpretation. In this turn toward theological conservatism, "Barth came to believe that liberal theology had sold out to modern culture and came to stress the gap between true Christianity and the world" (Melton 75). Barth became a "major influence on [Updike] when [he] experienced anxiety on entering marriage while studying at Harvard and . . . he continued to read Barth through the 1970s" (DeBellis 48). In weighing the two theological positions, "Updike preferred Barth's ideas over those of the more socially oriented theologian Paul Tillich . . . because from Barth Updike had learned" to describe the chasm that God had to cross to save the sinfulness of man (DeBellis 49). The theological distance between Tillich and Barth provides the foundation underlying the divide between Marshfield and his assistant minister, Ned Bork.

Marshfield's resistance to Tillich's naturalizing thesis is surprising. Updike once said that he found Tillich a "traitor,"[8] and Marshfield feels Tillich's theories are absurd, so why does Marshfield use them in the sermon? For Marshfield, the supernatural factors in Jesus' miracles are less important than the fickleness of God and the faithlessness of his followers. Whether God parted the Red Sea himself or influenced the tides, whether Jesus actually fed the five thousand or persuaded them to share, miracles no longer occur in modern times. While sitting at his desk in New Mexico, Marshfield imagines his congregation back East, his

---

[8] In a cover-story interview with *Time Magazine* in 1968, Updike said: "I wouldn't want to pose as a religious thinker. I'm more or less a shady type improvising his way from book to book . . . At one time I held very strongly the opinion that Paul Tillich and religious liberals like him were traitors . . . because they were trying to humanize something that was essentially nonhuman" ("Authors: View from the Catacombs").

“docile suburban flock” (106), and asks them to pray for the explosion of the sanctuary to prove that God is listening to them. Surely, he asserts with heavy sarcasm, that he can expect God’s cooperation, for “there must be, in this sea of pinched and scrubbed Sunday faces, a single mustard seed of faith” (128). Excitedly, he prays that his imaginary church will transform into flowers, “its walls and beams and mortar turn to [petals] of peony and magnolia . . . melting walls of perfume and color and allurement, so that each female among you is graced with a sudden orgasm and each man receives a hint . . . that the world is not entirely iron and stone and effort and fear” (128). There is no response, however; “we are damned” (128). Marshfield and his congregation, for all their professed belief, await a passive God invested in neither their worship nor their transgression. The preacher who will pronounce “we are damned” must surely care little for belief, for doctrine, even though Marshfield concludes with an ironic “Amen” (128). The sermon opens with Biblical citation and closes with the refutation of hope, the negation of belief. Marshfield’s second sermon is the most apostate of the four he delivers in the novel. And yet, regardless of his denunciation of Christian dogma, Marshfield adheres rigorously to the structure of homily for delivering his renunciation.

Marshfield’s adherence to the rhetorical and social structure of Christianity and his renunciation of its teleology of salvation provoke critical questions about him. If he believes that American Christians have little faith, that God does not answer their prayers, or that marriage exists only for adultery, why does he remain a Christian? The answer emerges after considering a range of

understandings of “structure” -- institutional, professional, linguistic, and rhetorical -- and Marshfield’s deference to them. He has ostensibly consented to his desert rehabilitation only to retain his job; but he could refuse and find another career. During his “recuperative” month, he continues to preach like a minister, even in the absence of a congregation. Though he could use the pages of his diary to rail *against* the false piety or unrealistic nature of Christian expectations for human beings, building for himself an imagined escape from its confines, he marks his time in the sanatorium with imagined sermons. Finally, Marshfield maintains the structure of sermonic rhetoric -- its precise scriptural citation, its attention to audience, its exegetical aim, its closing invocation -- within these textual artifacts. Whether to maintain economic stability, to avoid searching for another profession, to pass the time with a familiar activity, or to stick with a pattern that works, Marshfield’s resistance to the Christian message conforms to a structure – the sermon – even though its content has been altered. He clings to its patterns and stability even though his core beliefs contradict such reliance. Marshfield’s continued use of a structure seemingly devoid of content or purpose provides the first indication of a postsecular spirituality. It is similar to the concept of “belief in meaninglessness” described by Amy Hungerford in *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion Since 1960*. Hungerford observes in literature and in religious discourse “an attention to practice coupled with an ambivalent attitude toward meaning” (xiv). She calls this “belief for its own sake, or belief without content, or belief where content is the least important aspect of religious thought and practice” (Hungerford xiv). What she means by “content” can be variously

understood as doctrine or dogma, theological articulation, or denominational hierarchy, and such a belief in meaninglessness attends to the nonsemantic aspects of religious language. Similarly, Rev. Marshfield's adherence to Christianity is belief without doctrinal content, a belief in structure. The remaining sermons in *Sundays* lend more insight into Marshfield's structural attachments and his development of a new way to believe.

Marshfield's second sermon ends with a prayer that the church transform into flower petals, perfumed walls, and orgasmic sensations for the congregants. In *A Month of Sunday's* third sermon, Marshfield turns an existentialist corner, from absurdity to freedom, and affirms humanity's ability to survive under the harshest conditions. Citing a line from Deuteronomy about the desert in his proemium, Marshfield encourages his imaginary congregation to "meditate . . . not upon the loathsome Old Testament . . . nor upon those enigmatic brutes such as Moses and David and Samson, upon whom [God's] favor . . . rests; but on the desert, the wilderness" (191). Focusing on man's condition apart from God, Marshfield uses the motif of the desert to describe or explore the rehab center, Biblical geography, American politics, and even the surface of the moon. In fertile locales, Marshfield suggests, God sustains and comforts his flock: "The special world of God within the Bible is an oasis world; the world beyond, the world of the Lord's wider creation, is a desert. Now we dwell within the desert" (191-2). In its dryness, life struggles and finds success without relying on divine assistance. "How ingenious and penetrant is life!" Marshfield proclaims (195), and later he writes: "The lesson speaks for itself. Live. . . . To those who find no faith within

themselves, I say no seed is so dry it does not hold the code of life within it, and that except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" (196). Combining Darwinian fervor with Biblical metaphor and a veiled reference to the spirit, Marshfield constructs for his invisible congregation a humanistic and secular celebration of evolutionary resolve.

Marshfield's sermon probes the desert because "the desert is growing, make no mistake" (192). Marshfield warns that, "According to geologists, there is more desert now than at any era in the earth's billions of years" (192-93), mapping the eventual growth of physical deserts onto the expansion of the American spiritual desert. Marshfield's gaze moves quickly, from the desolation of American urban centers, down its polluted highways, through its poisoned and isolated suburbs. He stacks image upon image, rushing to arrive at his prognosis of the central American spiritual malady. He sees, in the hearts of his congregation back home, "a frightful desert, of infertile apathy, of withering scorn, of -- to use a strange Greek word suddenly commonplace -- *anorexia*, the antithesis of appetite?" (193). At the sermon's hinge though, denoted by a probing "And yet, and yet," Marshfield transforms the desert from a place of desolation into the site of existential liberation. Suddenly the desert is not empty and vacuous, but becomes "the Palm of God's Hand," the Spanish name for Death Valley (194). Within the text of the sermon, a multitude of desert creatures hatch, grow, and sink roots. According to Marshfield, "The seeds of desert plants wait cunningly," and "the desert is carpeted with primroses and poppies and

mallows" after a rare but heavy deluge (195). The spirit of this new view of the desert, Marshfield argues, is captured by "the Joshua tree lifting its arms awkwardly in prayer" (195). Marshfield has built two approaches to the desert within the space of a five page sermon whose final lines proclaim, joyously, "We are found in a desert place. We are in God's palm. We are the apple of His eye. Let us be grateful here, and here rejoice. Amen" (197).

The third sermon marks a shift in audience as well as tone. Addressing the sermon to "my dear brethren, who have deserted the world and been deserted by it," Marshfield speaks to his fellow fallen pastors. The new audience is important because it permits Marshfield to preach to an audience ignorant of his libidinal transgressions, out of only the present moment. He does not confront his past infidelities, but, potentially, the dilemmas of faith that every individual in Ms. Prynne's facility confronts. In his recalling "the parish hearts it was once our vocation, brethren, to safeguard and nurture" (193), Marshfield remembers collectively, with his peers, the obligation he carried as a minister. He is almost nostalgic. However, Marshfield has not lost his penchant for tension between doctrine and lived experience. In noting the tactics individual desert species employ to ensure their survival, the sermon flirts with privileging biological persistence over divine reliance. Though he quotes Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount, Marshfield suggests that creatures are in charge of their own success: "To those upon whom recent events still beat down mercilessly, I say that the coyote waits out the day in the shade" (196). Offering a string of these Darwinian parables, Marshfield fuses a biological worldview to a theological one,

both made compatible in the simultaneous presence and inactivity of God. Marshfield's tone here differs from the angry heresy of the previous chapters because his audience has shifted. In addressing his peers he has come closer to focusing on his own concerns.

Amidst the desolation of the desert, the errant preachers of the sanatorium take a field trip. Marshfield's final sermon, written four days before he returns East to his church, documents an incident that occurs during this trip: "A tall and gracious youth, the very image of a youthful Jesus . . . handed me a pamphlet . . . . [which] predicts the end of the world in eighty days" (244-45). The episode with this "weedy Jesus . . . a third-worlder to his filthy fingernails" (245) serves as the doorway to Marshfield's most profound and insightful sermonic reflections. While he recognizes the irrationality of the youth's argument about the terminus of the world, Marshfield remarks that "we recoil from this gibberish . . . but . . . is not the content of this miserable throwaway . . . the content of our life's call and our heart's deepest pledge?" (245). Given that Marshfield again addresses his fellow rehabilitating ministers through the sermon, he claims here that, beyond the typographical errors and "drugged radicalism," the flyer in the youth's hand promises nothing more than Christianity has promised since the time of Paul, the apostle. Marshfield strips away the conventional and institutional layers of Christianity long enough to illuminate the concepts at its radical core -- the end of the world and the resurrection of the dead.

Marshfield's agreement with the apocalyptic rhetoric of the boy's flyer reveals again his theological conservatism, his Barthian neo-orthodox leanings.

Marshfield's argument is radical in the sense that it attempts to return to the root of Christianity, its early apocalyptic and socially challenging premises. The sermon begins with Paul's letter to the Corinthians, a rhetorical situation which Marshfield makes doubly appropriate: "My Brothers: our text today is taken from that Prince of Preachers, the one born out of due time, Saul of Tarsus who became Paul, his epistle to the Corinthians, the fifteenth chapter: 'We are of all men most miserable'" (243). Marshfield, a preacher, quotes the "Prince of Preachers" in an imaginary sermon to fellow preachers, a meta-sermonic moment to be sure. The context for the citation from Corinthians is helpful in that it imagines the fate of Christians in that event that Christ did not rise from death, as the Christian faith proclaims. If this central Christian event is a fraud, Paul states, then all Christian beliefs are in vain, the faithful are still "in sin," or not prepared properly for heaven. The resurrection of Christ is the evidence that Corinthians' salvation logic requires, and, according to both Paul and Marshfield, its negation makes the practice of Christian faith useless. Modern believers, Marshfield argues, are stretched between two conflicting concepts of the resurrection. Paul's "carnal stipulation" regarding the resurrection of the body, for Christ and for believers, is sharper and more concrete than "that neo-Platonic afterlife of spirits which survives into our age . . . to live as angels in ether" (247-48). The choice between an ethereal spiritual afterlife and a full corporeal resurrection is a difficult one: "One of our profoundest fears, indeed, is that the dead *will* return; the resurrection of the dead is a horror story," while "all those who offer instead some gaseous survival of a personal essence . . . are tempters

and betrayers of the Lord" (Updike, *A Month of Sundays* 248). Though it is terrifying to imagine, believers desire at the core of their "infrangible *ego*" to receive an extension of their bodily earthly life: "Our bodies are us, us; and our craving for immortality is . . . a craving not for transformation into a life beyond imagining but for our *ordinary life* . . . to go on forever" (Updike, *A Month of Sundays* 248). Paul's insistence to the Corinthians that Christ's resurrection and the afterlife of believers *must* be corporeal created anxiety in Christians from the century after Christ's death until Marshfield's own era nearly two thousand years later.

This is why Marshfield's sermon begins with Paul's claim that "we are of all men most miserable" (243), wherein the "we" denotes ministers. Ministers are balanced, he claims, between supporting a theology that is bland and universally palatable and one terrifying enough that it "alone [will propel] them up from their pleasant beds on a Sunday morning" (248). The crisis of belief exponentially increases for the Christian pastor because, though bodily resurrection is critically important to the gospel message, "the resurrection of the body is impossible," and "No man, unless it was Jesus believes. We can only *profess* to believe" (248). Marshfield has again entered the existential realm of absurdity where every believer is a fraud and every pastor is doubly so. The minister's words and leadership act as the bridge between a rational application of faith and an impossibly supernatural belief. Ministers are miserable because of this precarious position:

> We stand, brethren, where we stand in our impossible and often mischievously idle jobs, on a boundary of opposing urgencies where there is often not space enough to set one's feet -- we so stand as steeples stand, as emblems; it is our station to be visible and to provide men with the opportunity to profess the impossible that makes their lives possible. The Catholic church in this at least was right; a priest is more than a man, and though the man disintegrate within his vestments, and become degraded beyond the laxest of his flock, the priest can continue to perform his functions, as a scarecrow performs his. (249)

Marshfield's "opposing urgencies" can be expressed a number of ways in this sermon--between the doctrine of bodily resurrection and belief in a more ethereal afterlife, between the needs of the believer and the doubts of the minister, and between the demands of a youthful revolutionary and the security of a comfortable suburban pastor. Another of these urgencies exists throughout the text of Marshfield's sermons as well. He desires to safeguard his vocation and livelihood as a minister while continuing to celebrate and document his sensate human desires. Marshfield's final sermon demonstrates, as do all of previous sermons, the tension between the confines of dogma and carnal independence.

2: Marshfield's Postsecular Escape

John Updike is a geographer of the conflicted religious consciousness. He is at once participant, insider, and critic of a faith that profoundly influences his fiction. According to Harold Bloom, Updike is "perhaps the most considerable stylist among the writers of fiction in his American generation," but he is also "one of a group of contemporary novelists who are somewhat victimized aesthetically by their conventional religious yearnings" (1). Readers of Updike's fiction are often unsure of what to do with his construction of religious subjects who are undisciplined, unprincipled, and, at times uncommitted to the God they profess to follow. It is too simplistic to suggest that Updike's religious figures are caricatures intended as part of a pure critique of religious belief or practice, not to mention that such focused critique would fail to explain the frequency of such characters in his novels. Ralph C. Wood expresses the complications involved in approaching Updike's fiction, claiming that the "overt theological concern" in Updike's work is "self-evident," while also noting that "what his sprightly comedy has to do with his religious seriousness is far from clear" (178). Updike himself calls attention to these tensions. In an interview with Jan Nunly in 1993, he offered that, "I have never been an unbeliever . . . Somehow it struck me quite early that the church, whatever its faults, was speaking to the real issues, and that without the church I didn't feel anybody would speak to the real issues -- that is, the issues of being human, being alive. I've remained loyal to the church" (259). Yet, in an interview with Katherine Stephen, Updike agreed that he "must

have a certain amount of hostility, too, toward organized religion . . . I notice when I write about it that it comes out kind of acid" (188).

Critics have also observed, though often cautiously, the influence of postmodern literary techniques on Updike's writing. He is an author of a kind of late twentieth century psychological realism that eschews both the naturalism emblematic of early American fiction and the aestheticised complication of modernism. While Updike's critical preoccupation with suburban culture is similar to the postmodern attentions of DeLillo or Pynchon, most of his fiction pursues meaning too earnestly to be categorized as postmodern. Updike's work certainly engages postmodern themes, however. Stephen Webb, in "Writing as a Reader of Karl Barth: What Kind of Religious Writer is John Updike Not?," describes postmodern fiction as "obsessed with the problems inherent in language and writing; such fiction, then, is not confident about the referential or descriptive power of language," and claims that "[one of] Updike's most deliberately postmodern novels [is] *A Month of Sundays*" (146). At the same time, Webb wishes to separate Updike from most postmodern writing: "Many postmodern writers push language in playful and ironic directions in order to challenge the notion of what is real. Updike, by contrast, wagers that the most supple and delicate of technical linguistic innovations are necessary . . . as a way of honoring the world as it is" (146). *A Month of Sundays* demonstrates the self-referential qualities of postmodern fiction in its constant citation of the ideas that propel it forward and its incessant rhetorical digressions and witty double meanings. John N. Duvall observes this quality of the novel in calling it Updike's "foray into

metafiction" (167): "Much of the pleasure of the text resides in its metafictionality. . . . Marshfield insistently calls attention to his production of the written word" (165). Published in 1975, the novel belongs to the decade in which American literary postmodernism became most pronounced and distinct.

Critics' reluctance to paint Updike's novels as clearly postmodern is comparable to the critical confusion about how to evaluate Updike's depiction of Christianity. Moreover, the tensions are related. Updike's focus on Christianity works against postmodern suspicion of truth-claims and authority, while at the same time the celebratory carnality of Updike's religious figures prevents reading him as a conventional "religious novelist." Updike's engagement with postmodern techniques and Christian theology is most productively examined through his use of the sermonic form in *Sundays*, because Marshfield is Updike's most self-consciously postmodern and vocationally Christian character. In her essay "Who Are You Gentle Reader?: John Updike – *A Month of Sundays*," Elisabeth Jay asserts that "the four sermons which Marshfield feels compelled to compose . . . raise the first and most obvious interpretive problem" (348). Jay asks how Updike's novel can be read as anything other than misogynistic, but her attention to the sermons underscores the interpretive tension each one creates. Detweiler also finds Updike's sermons valuable because they seem "to reveal his own ambivalence about religion in contemporary American life but also [reflect] secularized Americans' uncertain and conflicting attitudes toward religion" (*Breaking the Fall* 93). Updike engages the Christian sermon in complicated ways – not completely ironically, as a postmodernist might, nor genuinely, as an

overtly Christian author might. The curious and suspicious space between these two positions is best articulated as the location of postsecular engagement.

Ambivalence, uncertainty, and conflict characterize Marshfield's sermons just as they characterize J. A. McClure's definition of postsecularity at work in a segment of late-twentieth century American fiction. Postsecular narratives "strand those who experience them in the ideologically mixed and confusing middle zones of the conventional conversion narrative" (J. A. McClure 4). Marshfield, perched at his desk in the desert rehabilitation center penning sermons without a congregation, is, in many ways, stranded; he is separated from his vocation, congregation, and livelihood, potentially perched on the edge of divorce, and chastised by his superiors. And yet, to echo the turn in Marshfield's fourth sermon, Marshfield is not terribly bothered; he views his sojourn in the desert in restorative, recreational terms. According to J. A. McClure, "the postsecular characters deposited in these zones do not seem particularly uncomfortable there nor particularly impatient to move on to some more fully elaborated form of belief and practice" (4). Correspondingly, Marshfield is not in a hurry to leave the desert, at least until he accomplishes one more goal of sexual conquest.

In defining the postsecular qualities of contemporary American fiction, J. A. McClure describes several diagnostic features:

> The stories [a postsecular novel] tells trace the turn of secular-minded characters back toward the religious; because its ontological signature is a religiously inflected disruption of secular constructions of the real; and because its ideological signature is

> the rearticulation of a dramatically 'weakened' religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects. (3)

On one level, Updike's novel about an errant pastor-narrator might seem a poor fit with J. A. McClure's definition of the postsecular novel, for Marshfield is not a "secular-minded character" who becomes religious. He is, in fact, an existential Christian pastor whose inability to remain faithful to his wife has created, for him, a crisis of vocation. J. A. McClure observes, however, that "not all postsecular texts are alike" and "while postsecular texts do share certain features, they are stylistically and thematically diverse" (3). Finally, postsecular novels "produce new, weakened and hybridized, idioms of belief" (4). Marshfield presents a new way to understand the postsecular, because though Marshfield begins and ends *Sundays* inside of the same religious tradition, his approach to that tradition has undergone a complicated and sophisticated development over the course of the novel, demonstrated through the sermons he delivers from his desk.

J. A. McClure attends closely to supernatural occurrences and religiously-inflected settings in the narratives he studies in *Partial Faiths*[9]. He attends to conversion stories and the development of spiritual communities that bear the open-ended qualities of postsecularity as he has defined it. Updike's religiously-tinged uncertainty offers another dimension to the concept of the postsecular in fiction. Marshfield's theology shares the "weakened and hybridized" qualities that McClure describes. He expresses them not in religious practice, however, but

---

[9] One of the chapters in *Partial Faiths* explores Michael Ondaatje's use of monastic communities, another, the secular "vocations" present in Don DeLillo's fiction, and a third the enchantments present in novels by Toni Morrison.

within the structures of Christian oratory – specifically the sermon. Marshfield's sermons construct a linguistic and rhetorical postsecular theology that shares the qualities of the narratives on which J. A. McClure's study focuses. Updike's theology, as a whole, models the "productive weakening" (12) that J. A. McClure calls a hallmark of postsecular fiction. In his illumination of the theology discernible in Updike's fiction, Ralph C. Wood claims that "Updike rejects the trite notion that God is dead or nonexistent. For him . . . God has hidden himself, absconded, exited the human realm" (192). God's exit from Updike's fictional universe corresponds to another of J. A. McClure's features of postsecularity: "Scriptural traditions tend either to be selectively cited, interrogated, and affirmed or to be brought into vertiginous relation with one another" (5). Though the origins of belief in Updike's novels are Christian, their ultimate orientation toward God has become uncertain, hedged: [God's] absence is not a synonym for unreality. It is the mark of a God whose presence is felt more negatively than positively, who hovers over the world like a cloud or shadow, at once sheltering and menacing. As if he were a fugitive animal, this God is detected not by sight so much as by scent and footprint" (Wood 193). Marshfield's fourth sermon utilizes the same metaphor. In referring to the concept of Christ's bodily resurrection, Marshfield describes it as "those scraps of barbaric doctrine, preserved in the creed like iguanodon footprints in limestone" (Updike, *A Month of Sundays* 248). Owing to both Updike's and Marshfield's favorable reading of Barth, Christ's broken body *must* be the one raised. However, Marshfield's daily life does not seem concerned with the moral or theological implications of Christ's resurrected

body. His reluctance to fully commit himself to marital fidelity might only reveal a lazy spirituality, but his sermonic construction of a new belief indicates Marshfield's postsecular negotiation.

Marshfield's desert retreat is intended by his ecclesiastical superiors to bring an end to his carnal wanderings. This goal is not realized, however. After referring casually to the authoritarian Ms. Prynne who runs "the motel," Marshfield's journal reveals his flirtatious interest in her. At the start of the third week of his journal, the day following his third sermon, Marshfield realizes that he has an audience: "There seems to be a capital 'N,' in a pedestrian school hand -- can the word be 'Nice'? Ideal Reader, can it be you?" (198). The only reader can be Ms. Prynne, who also serves as the facility's housekeeper and event planner. "Ms. Prynne," Marshfield offers the next day, "on behalf of all us boys of this peculiar Boys' Town, I want to thank you for the tour yesterday of the dinosaur-bone quarry" (212). His conversational tone changes in the final days of the journal. Ms. Prynne pens, "Yes -- at last, a sermon that could be preached" at the close of his fourth sermon, prompting Marshfield to gush excitedly the next day, "You spoke. You exist" (251-52). Ms. Prynne's communication shocks and excites him on a religious level. Marshfield marvels over Ms. Prynne's existence using a biblical referent.[10] Marshfield articulates his desire to sleep with Ms. Prynne, waiting for her assent in his final days of desert "therapy." He pleads, cajoles, and finally insults Ms. Prynne for rebuffing his advances, but on his last

---

[10] In the same way that Ms. Prynne's speech proves her existence to Marshfield, Genesis recounts how God's speaking ("Let there be light") announces his existence and John's gospel describes Jesus proving God's existence by acting as God's "Word".

day in the sanatorium, she visits him. Their concluding copulation, narrated moments after it occurs in Marshfield's last, hurried, journal entry, presents a range of thematic suggestions for critics. In light of his fling with Ms. Prynne, argues Elizabeth Jay, readers have to reconsider the content of the four sermons: "In this reading the sermons become an extension of Marshfield's seduction tools" (349).

Critics lament the direction that the novel takes in these final pages wherein Marshfield seems to be back to the activities that required his rehabilitation.[11] Nevertheless the observation that Marshfield writes the sermons as seduction tools does not change the fact that the theology of his sermons undergoes spiritual maturation over the course of his stay at the desert facility. His sermons take a rhetorical stance which can best be described as postsecular, even if Marshfield's postecularity has to be expressed in different language from the aspects of postsecular fiction described by J. A. McClure. To understand this, we have to look more closely at their theological roots.

One of Updike's earliest short stories, "The Lifeguard," depicts a seminary student who muses about two kinds of saving acts – being saved from drowning and damnation. Some of Detweiler's comments on the story are helpful, for "The

---

[11] Gary Waller finds Updike too binary in his presentation of the debate between the spirit and the flesh: "We may . . . take up any other position – but to do so is to refuse the terms in which Updike has set up his debate. Essentially it is to put down his novel and wish he had written . . . a different one" (Waller 278). James Schiff recognizes that the sex at the end of *Sundays* "still poses problems" and is "frustrating to many readers" (95). In the most contemporary critical readings of the novel, Elizabeth Jay writes "I instinctively want to repudiate" the novel's conclusion for "its revelatory climax imagined in terms of a silent woman's compliant attentiveness" (350).

Lifeguard" constitutes the text of an imagined sermon that the young man writes during summer when he is performing both jobs. "'Lifeguard' is a homily . . . and it has the traditional sermon format: an introduction, a "text," exposition, illustrations, and final exhortation" (Detweiler, *Breaking the Fall* 96). In the story, the unnamed narrator uses the form of the sermon to practice his delivery, but the sermon also exposes much about his approach to faith and some of the inconsistencies inherent in his private opinions about a Christian doctrine he is supposed to support. In his book length study of Updike, Detweiler observes that, though the sermonic structure exists, its content is in conflict with the implications of that structure. It is both a sermon and "a sermon parody and, withal, a confession -- an exposé by one formally inside yet privately outside the edifice of the theological endeavor" (Detweiler, *John Updike* 69). The narrator admits to lusts he experiences while sitting atop the lifeguard stand "like God," surveying humanity and waiting for someone to save. Despite his intentions to join the clergy, "the irony of the story is that, despite the young student's insight, he does not see at all" *(John Updike* 69*).* Detweiler ponders the conflict between structure and content in the story: "The formal sermon structure is a vehicle, in this instance, that destroys the very substance of its text. The student preaches on the affinity of spirit and flesh; but his discourse is, in more ways than one, all flesh. It is a model of design, but it has no vitality" (*John Updike* 69). Detweiler's evaluation of the sermon as having "no vitality" is significant. One of Detweiler's objectives in *Breaking the Fall* is to encourage a new kind of "religious reading." The lack of sermonic vitality in "The Lifeguard," while interesting to Detweiler,

marks its departure from Christian practice and, thus, reveals its flaws. Detweiler writes before the use of the term postsecular, but some of his observations are related to its use. Whereas the content of the sermon in “The Lifeguard” is interesting both to Detweiler and from a postsecular perspective, its lack of vitality finally bothers Detweiler even as it constitutes evidence of negotiation from a postsecular standpoint.

Detweiler's observation about the sermon in "The Lifeguard" illustrates an important opening for the postsecular qualities of sermons in contemporary American fiction. While Updike's young narrator in "The Lifeguard" writes a sermon that is doctrinally conflicted, it is structurally sound. Use of that design is not new; the American literary canon is full of sermonic artifacts, from those found in Jonathan Edwards to Mark Twain to William Faulkner. However, Updike's sermons demonstrate a conscious reformatting of sermonic purpose. In *Sundays*, even more than in "The Lifeguard," sermons appeal to the ethos that a formal religious discourse carries, one that is composed by an educated and skilled preacher. Marshfield's sermons might be, according to Detweiler, the epitome of design without vitality, but this is a judgment of their content presupposing a particular relationship to formal Christian doctrine. Viewing the sermons from a postsecular perspective, another reading opens up. In the wake of postmodern suspicion, postsecular belief practices embrace a porous spiritual space where ambiguity, uncertainty, and competing authorities co-exist with dogmas, principles, and rituals. Thus within the framework of traditional Christianity, Marshfield’s character is either that of a lecherous fraud or an ironic

caricature of hypocrisy; but from a postsecular standpoint, his sermons present a hybrid and negotiated theology. From the fragments of Barth that Marshfield studied, from his suburban pastoral experience, from the Bible, and from his own barely restrained sexual identity, Marshfield constructs sermonic artifacts that are aware of postmodern suspicion yet unable to relinquish their attraction to the realm of spirit. His descriptions of sex, especially with Ms. Prynne on his last day at the desert facility, often include spiritual language intertwined with fleshy graphic descriptions.[12]

Another important aspect of Marshfield's sermons, and the postsecular sermonic impulse in general, relates to content. In Chapter One I described how traditional sermonic language is hierarchical and authoritative. According to the Christian model, the preacher retains a privileged insight that the congregation is encouraged to apply to their lives; that insight carries behind it the weight of the Christian tradition and the collected doctrines ascribed by the particular denomination. Marshfield's scriptural interpretations, however, are without precedent or doctrine. They originate in his personal experiences and represent attempts to justify or legitimate those experiences. Though his language may become imperative at times, the sermons are not meant to serve as commandments. They comprise exaggerated interpretations of the scriptures, divergent from any but the most contemporary and liberal theological

---

[12] Marshfield describes Ms. Prynne's nipples as evoking "a cupola upon a dome." She is "tranquil" upon her back; their intercourse is also "tranquil." The final passage refers to "a knock of doom," to prayer, and to "ascent in several stages," while also describing the concrete erotic details of a "slippery edge" and the "alarmingly liquid passage to [Ms. Prynne's] womb" (271).

approaches, and their content is merely suggestive. On the surface, Marshfield is simply inventing and performing constructions of faith that will allow him to continue to satisfy his lusty desires, to maintain his existential doubt, and to keep his job.

Another layer deeper, Marshfield's sermons are confessional. The pages of his journal read like an ecclesiastical erotic memoir in which he confesses the most extreme transgressions of his marriage vows and his pastoral responsibilities. Marshfield uses the four sermons that punctuate the details of that journal to broadcast his transgressions. While never asking for forgiveness throughout the entire novel, Marshfield expresses an implied but deep desire to confess his failings. He may no longer believe in a transcendent dimension where holiness is rewarded, but, perhaps on a purely psychological level, he needs to unpack the burden of his secrets and display them on the page. In the first sermon he extols adultery; subtly he admits his own infidelity. In the second sermon he proves God does not answer prayers; he confesses his own crisis of faith. In sermon three Marshfield praises the toughness of the desert environment; he worries about his own physical and spiritual vulnerability. In the final sermon he concentrates on the most terrifying aspects of apocalypse and death, acknowledging that he is not prepared for the eschatological conclusion of the faith. Marshfield's sermons are motivated by a desire to admit or expose personal vulnerabilities instead of proclaiming a message insisting on conformity.

In considering the novel as an extended confession, we must therefore return to both Augustine and Ellison. Though he was the author of the definitive

medieval text on preaching, Augustine is more famous for his *Confessions*, the conversion narrative of his youth composed for use in evangelizing pagans. Remarkable for its genuine depiction of resistance to Christianity and the arguments most convincing to Augustine in becoming a Christian, *Confessions* exposes an ordained Christian bishop as sinful and thus vulnerable. Though Marshfield does not seem to carry the same kind of evangelistic certainty, his sermons similarly reveal Marshfield's vulnerability and rhetorical awareness. They also call to mind Trueblood's apologia for incest in *Invisible Man*. Trueblood does not overtly attempt to justify his behavior in his sermon to Norton, but he frames it within the context of poverty that plays to both Norton's white liberalism and the town's white racism. Trueblood confesses his social sin, but we realize that, in doing so, he learns to manipulate two audiences, representing both ends of the white power spectrum. Marshfield attempts something similar. He constructs theological arguments to justify his affairs and his theological doubts, namely to convince himself that he is not a failure – even though he clearly worries that he is. At the same time, when he learns that he has a second audience, Ms. Prynne, his confessions become more theologically sound, more "Christian," in an attempt to sleep with her. Marshfield, like Augustine and Trueblood, finds rhetorical value in confession and vulnerability, and, whether consciously or unconsciously, he performs both. Such psychological and pragmatic uses of the sermon become a pattern for the postsecular preachers I will study in subsequent chapters. Rather than delivering an authoritative truth from a position of power, their sermonic discourse is horizontal. It attempts to

build empathy in their audience. It is also confessional, consciously or unconsciously representing the need to vocalize and heal a psychological injury.

Reading Marshfield's sermons from the perspective of postsecularity is markedly different from what Detweiler calls religious reading. A religious reading of a text "would be one in which a reader understands herself as part of a community engaged in simultaneously recognizing, criticizing and reshaping the myths and rituals it lives by" (*Breaking the Fall* 38). Communities factor importantly for Detweiler, for religious readings also "seek to regain the group-celebratory nature of story enactment by transferring it to the reading experience . . . . Thus a religious reading is one that celebrates the text for the individual reader *and* for groups" (*Breaking the Fall* 38-39). Sketching a brief history of sociology and narratology, Detweiler involves Clifford Geertz, Mikhail Bahktin, and Stanley Fish in his explanation of reading fiction as an act that, in light of how societies have developed in the West since the 1700s, can capture and engage communities in finding their own spiritual enlightenment.

Postsecular reading, as a political, sociological, or literary approach, works differently from the religious reading that Detweiler describes. Religious reading would seek to streamline or "fix" the moments of community-oriented reading "in language and gesture adapted from liturgy," functioning "as a contemporary approximation of the old storytelling cultures" (Detweiler, *Breaking the Fall* 61). The postsecular influence pulls characters and narrative not toward shared linguistic or liturgical moments, but toward communities of exception and exploration. J. A. McClure describes the invention of neomonasticism in the

fiction of Thomas Pynchon and Michael Ondaatje and the drama of Tony Kushner. In Kushner's afterward to *Angels in America*, J. A. McClure sees all of the "key tropes" of postsecularity: "the darkening world; the retreat into local communities of refuge; the discovery, in these soulful communities, of new, spiritually inflected sources of hope; the patient dedication to reflection and self-fashioning; and the dream of larger social possibilities on the horizon" (24). A postsecular approach does not "merely attend to pluralism as a given state of affairs" but strives "for pluralization as a goal," as described in the writing of political theorist William E. Connolly (Connolly et al. 4). According to J.A. McClure, "postsecular themes developed in contemporary theory and literature renounce . . . two salient features of traditional religiosity" – the idea of "transcendental authority" and the concept of the believer as a reflection of that authority (16). A postsecular orientation suggests instead "that the extraordinary does not speak in the totalizing language of dogmatic theology; that its promptings are partial, or plural, or only imperfectly decipherable to human ears" (J.A. McClure 16). Postsecularity, then, avoids dogma, embraces plurality, and seeks to engage religiously-inflected subjects in the search "for belief in real but limited sources of spiritual support" (J.A. McClure 17) – sources which often set those subjects upon a path of individual enlightenment as distinct from participation in a traditional religious community.

Detweiler's analysis of Updike's fiction is far from dogmatically Christian, but it does not embrace the uncertainties inherent in a postsecular reading. In particular, Detweiler observes that Updike's sermons "reflect the uncertainty,

confusion, and cynicism of a culture that has had to . . . simply confess that life has become too complicated to be managed" (*Breaking the Fall* 104). Marshfield describes his own time period as "Inbetweentimes" in *A Month of Sundays*, and, for Detweiler, Marshfield's "sermons do summarize, in concentrated form, the traits and effects of this faithless interlude" (*Breaking the Fall* 104). Detweiler critiques the sermons because of their introduction of, but failure to resolve, the ancient religious tension between the body and the spirit: "Especially the stress on sex and religion in the homilies, in terms of the desire to get body and spirit together, reflects the wish simultaneously to eroticize and spiritualize the arid technology that surrounds and pervades contemporary life" (*Breaking the Fall* 104). Read from a postsecular perspective, Marshfield rebels against a religious and social structure that he finds oppressive and impossible to satisfy while simultaneously struggling to locate a place of spiritual comfort and lead other like-minded souls there. His first two sermons, directed to his former congregation, are caustic and bleak, while the last two inspire a cautious hope because they address a new congregation made up of his fellow convalescing pastors and Ms. Prynne. Marshfield's desert retreat is an attempt by his superiors to reinstall an institutional compliance and purity in the minister, but it backfires in giving him time to plumb the history of his own desire and to fuse it to a new spirituality of the body that Marshfield and Ms. Prynne consummate at the last possible moment.

This is not to say that Marshfield is a sympathetic character. His verbal playfulness and carefully revealed vulnerabilities delineate an intellect too familiar

with manufacturing good will, too skillfully rhetorical. From a traditional Christian perspective, Marshfield is unmoored from virtue and content to pursue anything his carnal imagination desires. In fact, though, his chief sin, beyond desire, is the violation of marital monogamy. He does not trick any of his lovers into bed, and he certainly does not coerce them. His struggles with lust are as ancient as the introduction of any religious code or creed. Marshfield is not a noble character, and, even separated from the critique of his own formal religious tradition, his actions are selfish. His sermons, however, portray a different vision. Analyzing the sermons as postsecular approaches to belief is helpful because they chart, intellectually and psychologically, a faith disillusioned by institutions and desire and imagine a method of retaining a spiritual perspective beyond those disappointments. Marshfield is not a textbook example of a postsecular character, but his sermons embody an application of postsecularity. At the close of the novel, rather than abandoning his faith and resigning himself to a life of reluctant ecclesiastical servitude, he remains open to the visitation of God as much as the visitation of Ms. Prynne: “Last night . . . I went out under the dome of desert stars and was afraid, not afraid, afraid to be born again” (269). At the end of Marshfield’s final sermon, he reminds his ministerial peers to realize “we have not accidentally fallen, we have been placed” (251). His meaning is twofold. He refuses to accept the accidental “fall” into existence that strict scientific atheism requires; he asserts divine purpose to life. Marshfield also suggests that ministers’ collective fall from moral righteousness has not been accidental. Following the developing theology of his sermons, he believes that the desert

experience, the evaporation of hope, and the aridity of doubt can be the tools of spiritual awakening. Regardless of his final tryst with Ms. Prynne, Marshfield's sermonic artifacts constitute a postsecular spirituality full of vulnerability, vitality, and paradox.

Chapter 2: *Beloved*, Morrison's Postsecular Discourse of the Body

> *Accepting no title of honor before her name, but allowing a small caress after it, she became an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it . . . Uncalled, unrobed, unannointed, she let her great heart beat in their presence.*
> (Morrison, *Beloved* 102)

In Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, while Rev. Richard Misner struggles with the frustration of being an outsider in Ruby, he imagines the history of the civil rights movement from the perspective of the "ordinary folk" who "formed the spine on which the televised ones stood" (212). He reasons that the black community in Ruby is too proud and too unaware of history outside its borders. Patricia Best defends Ruby, offering "This is their home; mine too. Home is not a little thing" (212), but Rev. Misner is not convinced. He knows that Ruby needs a deeper vision. To counter the view of the idyllic Ruby, he describes his preferred "true home" as anterior to history and separate from material luxury. He wants Pat to conceive, with him, the history of Ruby's ancestors before America and before slavery, before religion and before language: "Can't you imagine what it must feel like to have a true home? I don't mean heaven. I mean a real earthly home" (213), he implores. Pat coyly observes, "You preaching, Reverend," thereby

shifting the rhetorical variables of the conversation, transforming an impassioned conversation between two adults inclined toward romance into a metaphor for church authority and a sermonic ethos. With three words she fashions Richard into “Rev. Misner”; she builds him a pulpit and becomes the ambivalent congregation. But he resists: “No, I’m talking to you, Pat. I’m talking to you” (213).

The juxtaposition of these two interpretations – Reverend as preacher and Richard as friend – helps to clarify the sandbox space of the postsecular literary sermon. Richard is a preacher, but he is not preaching. He utilizes persuasive oration, but for a subjective purpose -- to persuade Pat and to help himself understand the town better. He acknowledges God, while at the same time eschewing heaven and elevating the “earthly home.” He arrives, in his moment of frustration and idealistic longing, at a uniquely postsecular and sermonic moment. Morrison understands the power of sermons in her fiction, and often utilizes them to build a syncretic spirituality aware of, but separate from, traditional theology.

In his study of sermons and African American literature, Dolan Hubbard devotes a chapter to Morrison’s *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*. Dolan explains that “Morrison plays off the sermon as an *ideology*, in contrast to the sermon as *practice*, that emotionally arouses the people with words that are disconnected from their present reality” (124). According to Hubbard, Morrison uses the sermon, in *Beloved* specifically, to subvert the institution of engendered power in the African American spiritual community. In doing so, she situates herself within

a tradition of African American writers whose literary sermons both borrow from a collective rhetorical and spiritual memory and invent new orientations toward belief through their sermonic ethos. In his introduction to the study, Hubbard observes that, “In contrast to the ‘free’ dominant culture, black expression begins and ends with the body. The fight for control of the body is rooted in the political” (2). Forced to suffer economic and social slavery and to accept the white culture’s religion, the black community adopted an expression of Christianity to fit its own ancient spiritual yearnings and its political and social oppression: “As a direct result of their exclusion from full participation in American society, African Americans attempted to define themselves and their history through speech acts” (4). The black sermon “enables the preacher and the people to articulate the self” and “challenge the dominant culture’s ordering of reality (history)” (5). More than serving as a teacher of doctrine or an interpreter of sacred texts, the African American preacher “stands between racism and injustice, and between racism and poverty. He stands between the people and God; his sermon moves people to act more justly in the world as it moves them closer to God” (17).

In Hubbard’s depiction, the African American preacher becomes the leader of a hybridized faith, a combination of both earthly and spiritual motivations and, more importantly, he emerges as the community’s oral articulation of that motivation. Hubbard recognizes the critical fusion, in African American Christian expression, of politics and spirit, a foundational concept in the field of African American Studies over the past five decades. Stephen Hum, in his study of free blacks in Philadelphia in the late eighteenth century, identifies the

same blending of the political with the spiritual. Hum attends to "how the plain, emotionally transparent language of private piety drawn from the evangelical tradition came to be adopted as a public, political idiom" (239). What Hum calls the "evangelical-political hybrid" – a blend of objectives that defined the religious practice of eighteenth century African Americans – "sought to articulate a vision of social order within the free black community" (239). Hubbard trains his research on African American literary expression through the narrow lens of sermons that appear in novels. He devotes chapters to Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison[13] before he addresses Toni Morrison, but his work on Morrison is the most useful to an investigation of the postsecular qualities of late twentieth century fictional sermons.

The postsecular literary sermon adopts some of the structural and rhetorical variables of the traditional literary sermon and adapts others, modifying the overall effect of a fictional oral performance for a new purpose. The purpose of the postsecular sermon, though, is multiform, and, as with the proliferation of the uses of the adjective "postmodern," no clear umbrella term applies. If we consider, however, the structural and thematic qualities of traditional sermons and pair them with postsecular variables, a field of possibilities opens. Traditional sermons are delivered from a pulpit by an ordained minister, while postsecular sermons might be delivered in a more private setting by a less formally

---

[13] Hubbard's book is the only academic treatment of sermons in contemporary American novels. American literary studies is ripe with analysis of the sermon, but rarely of the sermons appearing in novels – especially of sermons in twentieth century novels. This open field of rhetorical and literary study suggests that contemporary scholars are unsure how to approach the idea of the sermon in the aftermath of postmodern skepticism.

accredited spiritual leader. Traditional sermons are attended by a congregation of believers in a defined faith while the audience of a postsecular sermon might be just a collection of individuals or only an audience imagined by the speaker. The traditional sermon attempts to explain or defend a specifically theological doctrine or pattern of moral behavior. Postsecular sermonic acts may argue for a certain spiritual or cosmological worldview, but it is rarely one that belongs to an established religious tradition. Postsecular sermons operate on the margins of doctrine and provide alternatives to systemic and institutional religious approaches. The ethos of the traditional sermon is authoritarian and assumes a hierarchical relationship between the congregants and the preacher. Postsecular sermons as expressed in contemporary American novels, under the inflection of a postmodern sense of the suspicion or outright renunciation of Truth Claims, are diffuse, decentralized, and local. The insights of the postsecular preacher are often more personal than universal, more vulnerable than authoritarian.

Yet, these generalizations never apply *en masse* to a particular postsecular sermonic artifact. The structural and rhetorical variables of the postsecular sermon shift because postsecularity, defined as the particular observable interaction between spiritual or religious motivation and the contemporary sphere of postmodern ideas, is not fixed. It does not, as do traditional religions, have a dogma or a creed. Instead, postsecular sermons communicate an individual, but also collectively mappable, textual blending of two seemingly incompatible motivations. J. A. McClure defines the postsecular approach broadly in *Partial Faiths:*

> Not all postsecular texts are alike . . . they are stylistically and thematically diverse. In certain texts . . . the turn to the religious is little more than a cautious probing . . . But in other cases . . . conversions and ontological openings alike are dramatic: people are born again, the dead are brought back to life, gods walk the Earth, and windows open in the walls of the secular world. Finally, the substantial affirmations of the extraordinary developed in different works are drawn . . . from a range of religious discourses and produce new, weakened and hybridized, idioms of belief. (4)

The opening of windows in the "walls of the secular world" is a common practice in the novels of Toni Morrison. Often the oral articulation of opening borrows from the form of the traditional Christian sermon and becomes a rhetorical expression of the hybridized belief of the postsecular fictional subject.

1: Sermon in The Clearing

Morrison's *Beloved* depends on the oral tradition.[14] Sethe tells her story to Baby Suggs, Denver, and finally Paul D. Denver narrates Sethe's history to Beloved, and eventually, the entire black community in Cincinnati that comes to

---

[14] Several scholars note the primacy of oral communication in *Beloved*. Justine Talley writes that in *Beloved* "the concept that the written word is somehow more stable, more reliable . . . than oral transmission is . . . in many senses undermined" (36). Cheryl Hall observes "Morrison's awareness of the way tales circulate in an oral culture," (92) in her essay "Beyond the 'Literary Habit': Oral Tradition and Jazz in *Beloved*." Morrison herself said, in an interview in 1983 with Kay Bonetti, that in writing *Beloved* she "wanted the sound to be something I felt was spoken and more oral and less print" (Morrison qtd. in Hall 89).

Sethe's aid. According to Cheryl Hall, in oral cultures like the slavery community and the post-Emancipation communities in which Sethe finds herself, "the knowledge transmitted is not static . . . It is enriched and modified with every telling, and by each different storyteller. Tales are told over and over again, as often as they are called for by the listeners, or as often as the (actual or ceremonial) need for their telling occurs" (92). Hall analyzes the events and motifs that spur several tellings -- trees, births, escapes -- in an attempt to explain the value of multiple orally-transmitted versions. Addressing the story of Sethe's rape at the hands of Schoolteacher's nephews, Hall notes, "For Sethe and for Morrison . . . the story is significant of that which must not be forgotten about slavery, and Morrison's coining of the word 'rememory' only underlines both the function and the repeated nature of the story" (93).

Oral acts serve as reminders throughout *Beloved,* appearing distinct from stories. Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, preaches sermons to the black community across the Ohio River from where she was formerly enslaved. In the time between the purchase of Baby Suggs's freedom by her son Halle and Sethe's flight from Sweet Home several years later, Baby Suggs earns a unique and respected status within the African American community. She provides assistance to runaway slaves and serves as an elder of sorts. Having "nothing left to make a living with but her heart" (87), Baby Suggs begins a spiritual ministry that she practices throughout the community. She assumes no title "before her name, but allowing a small caress after it," (103) she becomes Baby Suggs, holy, to the black community in and around Cleveland. Working as an

itinerant preacher, Baby Suggs, holy, opens her “great big heart” and carries her message “to the AME’s and Baptists, Holinesses and Sanctifieds, the Church of Redeemer and the Redeemed” (102). Throughout the winter months, and especially during warmer weather, her congregants come to hear her outdoors: “Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great hear to the Clearing -- a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of the path known only to deer” (102). Though the novel provides a detailed account of only one of Baby Suggs’s meetings in the Clearing, the narrator explains that similar meetings occurred “in the heat of every Saturday afternoon” (102) when the weather permitted.

Baby Suggs’s meetings reproduce many variables of the traditional sermon, primarily owing to her skill as a soulful orator. Though she holds no title, she is known throughout the community as authentically spiritual, with a gift for public speaking. She is welcomed into churches across denominational lines, seemingly for the power of her sermonic delivery. As a former slave and participant in the continued liberation struggles of black people, Baby Suggs demonstrates an authenticity valued by the community. She is an active community builder, despite her age. She has endured the loss of every one of her children to the machine of institutionalized slavery, but she counsels those just out of slavery’s shadow about how to fashion new lives. She exerts control over her own environment, and she takes enjoyment in the work she does. She is a role model for the community, inspiring others through her ability to emerge

from the nightmare of slavery with purpose and joy, and she funnels her energy back to the community itself. When she sits in The Clearing with her head bowed, the people await her among the trees because she carries an authoritative ethos of spiritual power. She does not need to earn her position through study or formal education because she lives her life as an example of that spiritual power. She is fully a preacher, and her audience comes prepared to hear a sermon: “They knew she was ready when she put her stick down” (103).

The members of Baby Suggs’s congregation constitute another traditional sermonic element. Men, women, and children gather to hear her speak on a regular basis, and the crowd follows her active, dramatic instructions. She issues plain commands -- “Let the children come . . . Let your mothers hear you laugh” (103) -- and the congregants follow them. The dancing, laughing, and crying that precede Baby Suggs’s speech prepare the congregation for her words by putting them in a state of communal celebration and sorrow. Even though Baby Suggs commands the men to dance and the women to weep, “it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping from breath” (103). These instructions serve several rhetorical purposes, and prove that Baby Suggs, whether formally ordained or not, is an intuitively gifted spiritual leader. The guided activity in the Clearing that precedes her sermon forms a call-and-response strategy aimed at building a community ready to engage in a collective discourse. Recalling Baby Suggs’s preliminary instructions, Cynthia Dobbs observes that, “This prologue privileges

communal feeling, sound, and movement over the words of any individual" (565). Thus Baby Suggs encourages her congregation to become a community by requiring that its members participate in collective, emotional, observable behaviors. Additionally, this activity prepares her congregation for the text of her sermon -- the subject of which is the body. The men, women, and children use their physical bodies in the prelude to accentuate the sacredness of the concept of body, as Baby Suggs's sermon imparts. Finally, rather than preaching from a line of scripture, Baby Suggs uses the body in the place of a scriptural text in a traditional sermon, for it is the concrete text which her sermon interprets. The sermon that begins with an invocation to use the body results in a theology of bodily freedom and resistance:

> "Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty . . . This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved . . . and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize." (103-04)

Baby Suggs's sermon is infused with culturally specific and classical rhetorical elements. She lives her life immersed in the African American community, so she is no stranger to its language, its distinct syntax patterns and cadence. She does not attempt to formalize her language, but instead uses the colloquial diction of her community, its lexicons of "yonder," "private parts," and the ever present "they" to represent the white power structure. While at the same time remaining linguistically authentic, she practices a rhetorically stylized repetition of key ideas and corporeal imagery that transforms her message from soulfully abstract to painfully concrete. The repeated instruction to love one's body, down to its specific organs, rests on a critical enthymatic reality. Because "they," the oppressive structure of white power, terrorize, mutilate, and otherwise control black people, black people are obligated to reverse the power of that hatred by loving themselves. Baby Suggs does not define "they" in her sermon because she does not need to; her congregation in the Clearing is made up of the broken victims of slavery. The syntax of the sermon, its metonymic substitution of body parts for personhood, and its underlying opposition to white power expressed enthymatically, comprises a richly structured oral address. Baby Suggs's sermon displays imagery and emotion, and her passionate ethos confers an authenticity confirmed by the congregation's emotional response.

Baby Suggs preaches from deep within her own pain, from her awareness of her lost children and of the constant threat of white violence against the black community. She seeks to create, with her words, a space in which that oppression will be resolved, though it cannot be forgotten. For Dolan Hubbard,

the Clearing is “a place where members of the fragmented community can imagine freedom,” but it is also a temple where “the community can begin to enforce its acceptable forms of behavior, clarify its social relationships, and revitalize its sense of social responsibility” (141). Indeed, the Clearing is Baby Suggs’s temple, and the rock from which she delivers her address is her pulpit. Her words make a church out of the forest; her sermon “brings into visibility preacher and community” in a way that allows that community to identify its wounds and begin to heal (Hubbard 141). When she pulls herself up from her seat on the rock in the middle of her discourse to dance “with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say,” her community responds with a song in four-part harmony.

Two other moments in the novel forge connections between Baby Suggs’s sermon in the Clearing and memories of intense power for Sethe. When Sethe remembers her mother and the surrounding community on the plantation where she spent her youth, she recalls ritualistic dance like what happens in the Clearing: “Sometimes they danced the antelope. The men as well as the ma’ams, one of whom was certainly her own. They shifted shapes and became something other. Some unchained, demanding other whose feet knew her pulse better than she did” (37). Sethe’s recollection of the slave community’s dance rituals originates in Denver’s birth, for she characterizes Denver’s movements in the womb as those of an antelope: “She waited for the little antelope to protest, and why she thought of an antelope Sethe could not imagine since she had never seen one. She guessed it must have been an invention held on to from

before Sweet Home, when she was very young" (37). Denver's birth in the woods, at the hands of Amy Denver, is a near-death experience for Sethe, and her memory of the antelope dance, she worries, will be one of her last thoughts. The antelope-dance memory also connects, poignantly, to Sethe's mother, who is remembered only one other time in the novel.

As Sethe begins to answer one of Beloved's questions, she recalls scenes from her childhood. Sethe's mother, though Sethe was rarely permitted time with her, revealed a brand under her breast to Sethe: "I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark" (72). A flood of emotional images surges behind this memory, and Sethe moves to fold laundry "because she was remembering what she had forgotten she knew" (73) -- that her mother was hanged and Sethe picked through corpses trying to find her. Immediately behind this memory is the story, told by Sethe's guardian Nan, of Sethe's mother's experience of the middle passage from Africa. Nan and Sethe's mother were "taken up many times by the crew" and Sethe's mother "threw them all away" except for Sethe (74). As a young girl, Sethe does not grasp the knowledge that she is the only child her mother allowed to live; as "a grown-up woman Sethe was angry, but not certain at what" (74). The realization is as stark for Sethe as for the reader: Sethe's mother killed her own children, just as Sethe murdered Beloved when the family was threatened with re-enslavement. What concludes this deeply painful moment of rememory for Sethe is "a mighty wish for Baby Suggs" that "broke over her like surf" (74). Sethe's return to Baby Suggs after

remembering the search for her mother's corpse grounds Philip Page's claim that "circles and circle metaphors dominate" *Beloved*, and that "an examination of these explicit and implicit circles reveals the subtle relationships between the novel's content and its form" (32).

Recall that, for Hubbard, Morrison's use of the sermon is more about ideology than practice, and that a Morrison sermon "emotionally arouses the people with words that are disconnected from their present reality" (124). This arousal, both of the community gathered in the Clearing and of Sethe's most intimate and painful memories of birth and death, proves the power that Baby Suggs demonstrates over language in the sermonic form. She is a believable source of wisdom for the people of Cincinnati because her brokenness as a former slave has been made whole by her life as a freewoman. As Hubbard writes, "She depends on personal experience and charisma rather than training as the basis for her ministry . . . Much of Baby Suggs's appeal stems from her authentic, direct religion as well as from her grounding in a rich humanistic tradition" (139). Her language transforms a reality of tragedy into an existential and individual reality of promise. Less than a month after her sermon in the Clearing, however, Baby Suggs quits her preaching as a result of Sethe's traumatic act of infanticide. She spends years poised between "the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead" (4) in which she does not practice her art. Her death and its posthumous effect on the community require further examination of the sermon in the Clearing through the lens of postsecularity.

2: Temple of the "Unchurched"

To view Baby Suggs as a traditional preacher is to ignore several features of her discourse. She is, in fact, "uncalled, unrobed, unannointed," and, even though the novel calls her a preacher, she is an "unchurched" one (Morrison, *Beloved* 102). The itinerant nature of her ministry means that no church wholly welcomes her; instead, each simply permits her occasional visits. She derives her power as a minister solely from the response of her congregation, without the apparatus normally accompanying most traditionally sermonic acts. Because her own preaching-space is out of doors, she requires no building. She does not collect donations, nor espouse any traditional creed. She is a woman, and as a preacher she encroaches on territory reserved for men in nineteenth century Christian churches in the U.S. More importantly, from the perspective of dogma, she does not point her congregation of believers toward an external deity of any kind. Arguably, she does not even preach any version of transcendence. She does not quote Jesus, compare her people's struggle to Job, or refer to the Trinity. The text of her sermon could be more easily compared, like that of Rev. Barbee in *Invisible Man*, to a lecture on the history of slavery and a salve for its painful effects. Were it not for the setting, the believers who gather, the diction and cadence of her speech, the story of her ministry, could we even call what Baby Suggs delivers in the Clearing a sermon at all?

As demonstrated throughout this study, when we separate an oral discourse from its rhetorical and physical context, we subtract something of its

essential nature in the process. In consideration of that context -- her language, the congregation, the effect of her words -- Baby Suggs does deliver a sermon in the Clearing, and analyzing the rhetorical variables and the content of that sermon reveals a new understanding of how preaching operates in a literary work. But viewing the sermon as a postsecular artifact requires that we investigate its orientation to religious practice.

Baby Suggs eliminates, in her preaching, the dependence on God that constitutes a primary feature of Christian belief. After the ritual activity of dancing, crying, and laughing which opens the meeting in the Clearing, Baby Suggs adopts the ethos of Christian preaching, but delivers a message of intense subjectivity and personal will: “She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine” (103). Grace, in a Christian context, is the gift that God gives believers, permitting their salvation. Baby Suggs suggests to her congregation that grace originates in imagination rather than in the divine. Interestingly, “grace” is also analyzed by rhetorician Kenneth Burke in *The Rhetoric of Religion.* In his exploration of “logology,” or the study of words and their relationships to attitudes about transcendence, Burke uses “grace” to show how definitions of words behave when they move from secular to religious and back to secular usage:

> Consider the word “grace,” for instance. Originally, in its Latin form, it had such purely secular meanings as: favor, esteem, friendship, partiality, service, obligation, thanks, recompense, purpose . . . The pagan Roman could also say “thank God” (*dis gratia*) -- and

> doubtless such early usage contributed to the term's later availability for specifically theological doctrine. But in any case, once the word was translated from the realm of social relationships into the supernaturally tinged realm of relationships between "God" and man, the etymological conditions were set for a reverse process whereby the *theological* term could in effect be *aestheticized* in a literary style, or in a purely secular behavior for a hostess. (7)

Burke's attempts, in *The Rhetoric of Religion*, to explain how "words about things" and "words about God" bear a linguistic and psychological resemblance provide numerous avenues into an understanding of postsecularity. In light of Baby Suggs's sermon, Burke's etylomogical understanding of "grace" proves especially helpful, since Baby Suggs does not refer to an external transcendent reality to which her congregation must appeal. Instead, she builds an understanding of holiness that is individual, subjective, and human.

Only by resisting the corporeal compliance that slavery demands can the former slave congregation gain confidence, agency, and emotional healing. Thus Baby Suggs subtracts God from the equation of grace, seemingly because God's grace has not prevented slavery or erased its ills. She creates, with all of the power her sermonic ethos can conjure, a new spiritual belief that situates salvation within the scope of individual imagination. Baby Suggs avoids speaking of heaven, as does Rev. Misner in *Paradise*, because it is more pressing to channel her syncretic belief toward the concrete, earthly moment. J. A. McClure,

in his analysis of *Beloved,* interestingly links both the Clearing and the plantation of Sweet Home together, for he observes excessive openness in each location. Referring to the early years of Sweet Home, before Schoolteacher arrived, J. A. McClure claims that, “Each place is the product of a well-intentioned and necessary project of opening -- racial opening at Sweet Home, the opening of wounded hearts at the ‘wide-open place’ called the ‘Clearing’, and the opening of the present to the past, the human world to the world of spirits” (119). Such an opening proves destructive, however, as ideals give way to an illusion “blinding those caught up in the project to real dangers and sponsoring terrible setbacks” (120). Baby Suggs’s spirituality is too open, too trusting, and perhaps too proud to protect the community from the petty jealousies that result in the novel’s traumatic central event -- Sethe’s murder of her child.

I disagree with the causality J. A. McClure assigns to the novel’s central act of infanticide. Baby Suggs’s sermon and the “openness” it promotes is not responsible for Sethe’s act of desperation. While the community avoids warning the family about the arrival of the slave hunters out of jealousy for the banquet that Baby Suggs hosts, the bodily horror that Sethe endures as a slave, and specifically her resistance to the tyranny of Schoolteacher, both provoke the death of the child Beloved. After Beloved’s murder, Baby Suggs renounces her ministry, entering into a spiritual state of catatonia wherein she cannot live her life nor leave it: “Baby Suggs, holy, believed she had lied. There was no grace -- imaginary or real -- and no sunlit dance in a Clearing could change that . . . her great big old heart began to collapse” (105). Desiring only colors to contemplate

in her final days, Baby Suggs becomes a shell of her former ministerial self. Whether or not Baby Suggs feels responsible for the community's betrayal or Beloved's death, it is true that she retreats from her life as a preacher and leader.

We must recall, however, a brief conversation between Sethe and her daughter. Denver remarks that Sethe's memory of Sweet Home "must mean that nothing ever dies" (44). Sethe agrees, replying bluntly that "Nothing ever does" (44). Sethe refers here to the ghost that haunts 124 Bluestone Road: but Beloved's return in bodily form proves Sethe even more correct. Beloved's incarnation as the embodiment of Sethe's guilt, as the spectral terror of slavery, and as a barrier between Denver and Sethe proves as alive as anything in the novel. In her banishment, though, the soul of Baby Suggs and the message of her preaching also returns. When a community of women gather around Sethe's house to expel the ghost, they represent a spiritual pluralism: "Some brought what they could and what they believed would work . . . Others brought their Christian faith -- as shield and sword" (303). The women recall playing in the yard as girls during the banquet that preceded the tragedy, and in that memory "Baby Suggs laughed and skipped among them, urging more" (304). Some of the women kneel, Ella stands and stares, but when they begin singing, "for Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words" (308). Sethe is "baptized in its wash," a Christian image, even though the women do not represent a unified system of beliefs, Christian or otherwise. They share only the desire to

ameliorate the suffering of a community member, to call Sethe back to her own mind and body. The women whose actions drive out Beloved and restore balance to Sethe's home act out of the memory of Baby Suggs. They have internalized her goal of communal protection, and, through their action, she becomes present. The women follow her spiritual command, given years before in the Clearing, and reenact her corporeal and communal celebration.

Thus the insights of Baby Suggs's naturalistic sermons in the Clearing return to the community in an hour of great need. Though Baby Suggs's spirituality is not built upon traditional religious hierarchies or creeds, her knowledge and rituals prove to be useful tools for battling ghosts, evil, and memory. Again, Hubbard observes that the sermons in Morrison's fiction are concerned with ideology (124) – the construction of theological concepts – more than they are with emotive responses that ignore reality. The women who arrive at 124 Bluestone Road to help Denver and Sethe do not bring any complicated ritual process to enact, and their actions do not demonstrate uniformity. Some stare, some kneel. Some mouth the words of a prayer ("Hear me. Do it, Maker, do it. Yes"), but eventually their chief weapons for fighting ghosts become their own raised voices. At one point Morrison describes their noise as a "holler" (305); by the time Sethe notices it, the women are making "music" (307). They only way that the women can describe it is as a "sound." They "step back to the beginning," to a time before language to make music that each of them understands: "they all knew what that sound sounded like" (305). Morrison alludes to several things here -- a Genesis-like beginning of the world

(exchanging "sound" for "light"), the sound that all mothers hear when their babies are born, or the possibility that they are remembering how Baby Suggs's spiritual meetings in the Clearing began. They take a step "back to the beginning" of the sermons that Baby Suggs regularly delivered, remembering the sound of laughing and crying, but without words. The women's heterodox informal ritual in front of Sethe's house is "unchurched" and "uncalled" just like Baby Suggs, but it is essential in order to restore community.

The redemptive, communal action at the close of the novel recalls the postsecular looseness of Baby Suggs's sermons. Yet most of the rhetorical and postsecular elements of Baby Suggs's sermons challenge social structures. They indicate improvisation on the theme of Christianity or religious idealism in general.[15] Even as an "unchurched" minister in the Clearing, Baby Suggs challenges the engendered male minister and the institutionalization of religion. In Hubbard's view, "Morrison presents Baby Suggs as a preacher in exile in response to those black men who perpetuate against black women the exclusive practices they condemn in white men . . . [She] not only appropriates this male-centered discourse, but she also executes a subtle but perceptive role reversal" (139). She does not privilege or prioritize denominations, buildings, or differing

---

[15] Lars Eckstein, in his essay "A Love Supreme: Jazzthetic Strategies in Toni Morrison's *Beloved,*" discusses blending in terms of music and cultural-religious practices: "While jazz resists any clear-cut definition, it seems safe to say that it first came into being in the contact zones of the Americas, and developed from certain eighteenth and nineteenth century forerunners. These precursors certainly are the communal drumming and storytelling sessions in the slave quarters (evoked in Beloved), the Afro-Christian traditions of sermonizing and singing (Baby Suggs) and the manifestations of work songs, field hollers, and other blues (Paul D)" (275-76).

doctrines with her ministry, and she serves a role mostly filled by men without seeking validation from their institutions:

> Baby Suggs, modeled on women drawn to the life of itinerant evangelism, such as Sojourner Truth and Jarena Lee, stands as Morrison's tribute to those stellar figures who midwifed the black community along the pathway from slavery to freedom . . . She epitomizes those individuals who held the fragmented community together in the face of adversity. She depends on personal experience and charisma rather than training as the basis for her ministry. (Hubbard 139)

Baby Suggs even resists the names used by the male-dominated sermonic institution for its activities. She owns "[h]er authority in the pulpit, her dance in the Clearing, her powerful Call," while at the same time insisting that, "she didn't deliver sermons or preach -- insisting she was too ignorant for that -- she *called* and the hearing heard" (208).

Baby Suggs ignores gender boundaries, makes denominational divisions porous, claims her own neutral space in the forest, and leads a spiritual community without formal training. Her only creed is that the black community learn to love itself in revolution against the social and physical violence of slavery and racism. In distinct contradiction to the established Christian creed, her sermon "did not tell them to clean up their lives or go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure" (103). Baby Suggs's sermon and its accompanying spiritual

principles demonstrate the postsecular qualities of decentered authority, for she places the people in charge of imagining their own grace, loving their own bodies, and sustaining their community in times of celebration and sorrow.

In his conclusion to *Partial Faiths*, J. A. McClure describes a dichotomous method of understanding spiritual and religious practice:

> The eminent sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow distinguishes between two common forms of religious life, dwelling and seeking . . . Wuthnow argues that this traditional 'spirituality of dwelling,' once the dominant form of life in the West . . . is becoming less and less viable as postmodern mobility and its inevitable displacements become the norm. In its place, he suggests, postmodernity produces growing numbers of religiously indifferent people, religiously unhoused spiritual seekers. (192-93)

Earlier in the book J. A. McClure describes the spirituality that Baby Suggs practices an "experience of ecstatic enclosure" that "costs [Baby Suggs and Sethe] dearly" (119). Considering her position as postsecular preacher, Baby Suggs can instead be understood as an "unhoused spiritual seeker." She neither dwells within the Christian institution, nor seeks its approval, and the spiritual approach that she orally constructs dissolves the boundary between "holy" and "human." She confers upon self-confidence, self-preservation, and self-love a sacred quality that makes her sermonic act postsecular and, in considering the novel's conclusion, redemptive.

At the end of her life, Baby Suggs consoles herself in the contemplation of color. Sethe's act of infanticide causes the collapse of "her faith, her love, her imagination and her great big old heart" (105). As much of the horrors of slavery as she experiences, Baby Suggs is struck faithless by Beloved's murder. But Baby Suggs's sermonic work returns to Sethe's aid, both in healing her rift with the community and in helping to banish Beloved's hungry ghost. When Sethe heads to the Clearing with Beloved and Denver, "she wished for Baby Suggs's fingers molding her nape, reshaping it, saying 'Lay em down, Sethe . . . Sword and shield. Don't study war no more . . . ' and under the pressing fingers and the quiet instructive voice, she would" (101). At the novel's conclusion Baby Suggs's theology, personified in Denver, returns to Sethe with the same message – a message both spiritual and concrete, both meaningful and without authority. The probing quest in Morrison's fiction to locate the spiritual outside of the religious is manifest in Baby Suggs's postsecular sermon of corporeal freedom.

Chapter 3: *Tracks*, Erdrich's Exercise of Sermonic Power

> *"Then maybe I won't come back," I told him. I wanted to be like my grandfather, pure Canadian. That was because even as a child I saw that to hang back was to perish. I saw through the eyes of the world outside us.*
>
> (Erdrich, *Tracks* 14)

Louise Erdrich's fiction trains a postmodern lens on the impact of Anglo dominance on the Ojibwe[16] tribal culture of North Dakota and Canada. She is a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians, and in addition to exploring Ojibwe history and myth, her writing explores the difficulty in representing the past with a unified or stable history. Erdrich was criticized early in her career by Leslie Marmon Silko, a novelist of Pueblo descent, for being more concerned with a postmodern academic style than with confronting the political injustice perpetrated on native people in the Americas.[17] However,

---

[16] Erdrich and scholarship about her novels shift between using the terms "Ojibwe" (originating in Canada) "Chippewa" (originating in the U.S.), and "Anishinaabeg," (originating in the tribal culture itself) to refer to the same tribal group.

[17] Silko's review of Erdrich's second novel *The Beet Queen*, entitled "Here's an Odd Artifact for the Fairy-Tale Shelf," has been cited often in scholarly analysis of Erdrich's fiction. Silko calls Erdrich's writing "an outgrowth of academic, post-modern, so-called experimental influences" and asks, "Can this stylish post-modern prose refer itself to any world beyond" its own linguistic preoccupations (179)? Silko's issues with Erdrich's fiction articulate a significant critique of

Erdrich's struggle to construct authentic narratives about Ojibwe culture has been a constant negotiation between alternate histories of the Ojibwe people and the development of postmodern anxieties about the inscription of history. Five of her novels -- *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen*, *The Bingo Palace*, *Tracks*, and *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* -- narrate collectively the history of the fictional Little No Horse Reservation in North Dakota. According to Nancy J. Peterson's assessment of Erdrich's fiction, avoiding the postmodern anxiety about history would be impossible for Erdrich's fiction considering its subject matter. The history of native people in the Americas has been, for centuries, a process under constant political revision, and Erdrich's attempt to access that history mandates a kind of narrative historiography in which a story is first told and then analyzed for its constitutive agendas. Peterson writes that "Erdrich's difficulty in fleshing out this historical saga is symptomatic of a crisis: the impossibility of writing traditional history in a postmodern, postrepresentational era. It seems epistemologically naive today to believe in the existence of a past to which a historian or novelist has unmediated access" (982). Whether Erdrich focuses more on aesthetic or political objectives, her fiction provides copious opportunities to explore postsecular attitudes toward religious or spiritual rhetoric and the sermonic urge.

In *Last Report*, her final novel to date in the North Dakota cycle, the tribal elder explains to a priest how the mythical Nanabozho "converted" the wolves of the reservation. After learning that the newly arrived French trappers will pay

---

postmodern fiction – that it ignores politics and history in an effort to "set language free" (179).

money for animal hides, Nanabozho gathers the wolves together. Adopting the style of a preacher, Nanabozho delivers a sermon ripe with irony:

> I have taken the Jesus road, my friends, and I wish to preach to you all! . . . My brothers . . . these things I am going to tell you are good, and you should accept them indeed! If you take on this religion, no one can kill you. It's true. But if you do not believe along with me, you will surely die. Now look what I have for you!"
>
> Nanabozho displayed the poisoned lumps of fat.
>
> "If anyone eats of this, long will he live!" declared Nanabozho.
>
> Then the wolves all threw themselves forward, hoping to live long, and Nanabozho dispensed the fat . . . And then Nanabozho held up his hand and blessed all the wolves, saying, "Long may you live!" And as he said this and blessed them, the wolves leaped in the air and howled, and turned twice in agony, and fell back to earth dead.
>
> That's the way Nanabozho gave religious instruction to the wolves. After he saved their souls, he skinned them all and the foxes too, and as he walked to the French traders carrying the skins, he laughed and laughed. Truly, he said, I have converted them -- to money. (84-85)

Erdrich presents a number of genres and rhetorical objectives here. The story of Nanabozho is, on its surface, a folktale constructed to explain a

significant cultural shift in the Ojibwe community. Nanabozho's decision to participate in the French trader's capitalist economy mandates that he view the wolves of the reservation as raw materials rather than as more cooperative entities in a natural cycle. An Ojibwe listener might wonder, if Nanabozho lacks warm clothing, why does he not capture merely a handful of wolves in order to make his own clothing rather than harvest every wolf and fox in the region for currency? Thus the folktale can also serve as a critique of the collusion between the Ojibwe and the proprietary and destructive nature of the encroaching white culture. Nanabozho improves his own situation, but initiates an economic trend that makes the Ojibwe enemies of the environment to which they are intimately tied. In telling this story to Fr. Damien, the character Nanapush is also offering a thinly disguised critique of Catholic liturgical practices, in which something to eat is offered as the ticket to eternal life, but results only in death. It is a warning that the Ojibwe who follow Catholic practice should view the faith critically as a tool of dominant white control. Finally, Nanabozho's adoption, in his conversion of the wolves, of the Christian sermon raises interesting questions about how Christianity and sermonic discourse function in a novel deeply concerned with the anxieties of postmodernity.

Clearly, Nanabozho's use of Christian rhetoric is sinister in that its aim is to kill the gullible and personified wolves. In calling the wolves "my brothers" and in referring to his new walk on "the Jesus road," Nanabozho borrows the religious authority of a priestly ethos that effectively convinces the wolves to trust him. He further threatens the wolves, claiming that if they do not follow the rules of his

newly introduced religious universe, they will perish. He entices them with the rhetoric of authority and kindness, and he exploits them in an act analogous to the genocide of white American expansionism. However, another layer exists to Nanabozho's sermon – one that suggests a new reality springing up in the Ojibwe community. Nanabozho has created a new religious reality with his language. He has not simply exploited the wolves for their hides, but has blended the Ojibwe reality of speaking to animals and spirits with the Catholic practice of offering holy food for salvation. Nanabozho has constructed a makeshift syncretic religious rhetoric that blends the animistic spirit world of the Ojibwe with the salvation and expansion rhetoric of Catholicism. Regardless of the fact that his actions serve selfish desires, Nanabozho participates in a functional kind of postsecular sermonic construction, different in application from the ones I have studied in the fiction of Updike and Morrison. Nanabozho has deployed sermonic rhetoric for his own purposes and, in so doing, created a new religious reality with real consequences inside the narrative. Within the context of my discussion here, he operates closest to Jim Trueblood in *Invisible Man*, utilizing the variables of the sermonic ethos for economic security.

Erdrich's novel *Tracks*, written and published over a decade before *Last Report,* covers some of that novel's history, but from a different perspective. Whereas *Last Report* concentrates on the religious and personal history of one character, *Tracks* is told by two competing narrators with more direct stakes in the outcome of the story. Nanapush narrates the odd numbered chapters; Pauline Puyat, a half-Ojibwe girl who becomes the stern Sister Leopolda at the

novel's end, narrates the even numbered chapters. Nanapush delivers his chapters orally to Lulu, his adopted granddaughter, in order to persuade her to honor her Ojibwe heritage. Pauline's chapters document her spiritual maturation with a more deliberate manner, attending to linear history more than Nanapush's account. Instead of expressing the comfort associated with family discourse, her narrative carries a judicial quality to it, as if she is submitting evidence. According to Sheila Hassell Hughes's article, "Tongue-Tied: Rhetoric and Relation in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*," Pauline's chapters are "more clearly textured, self-authored and linear" than those of Nanapush (98). Also in contrast to Nanapush,

> There is no identifiable audience for [Pauline's] story . . . and wherever dialogical voices enter her text, she struggles to control and judge them. There is a purpose for her narrative, but it's never clearly declared. Rather we get the feeling that we are being told a morality tale, in which she is the hero and exemplar. . . . Pauline's chapters read something like a spiritual autobiography. . . . Her narrative is also addressed to everyone and no one, to God and self, inscribed as a record of an individual pilgrimage. (Hughes 98)

To sharpen Hughes's point, I will argue that Pauline's audience is first and foremost the self, inasmuch as charting the path of her religious syncretism performs the self's legitimacy and strengthens it against any cosmological challenges. In a more focused way, the prophetic sermons that Pauline delivers

during key moments of conversion and struggle concretize a postsecular religious understanding that is hybrid, mystical, and frighteningly self-serving.

Erdrich's fiction documents the exertion of Anglo dominance over the Ojibwe and the negotiations that that dominance requires. In the Little No Horse novels Erdrich depicts the social and ethnic splintering that occurs within Ojibwe community as a result of the economic and political oppression of the American government. This splintering is evident in the characters at the margins of Ojibwe society. All of Erdrich's novels include these characters, usually of mixed-blood descent, who have been denied access to the inner core of Ojibwe traditions. These social lines are drawn by a variety of factors, but primarily by blood or religion. Though acknowledging the fact that white ancestry benefited individual Ojibwe in relations with the U.S. government throughout the beginning of the twentieth century, Erdrich's novels frequently introduce characters who are marginalized from Ojibwe culture if they cannot claim pure blood ancestry in the tribe. These "mixed-blood" characters, usually offspring of American fathers and native mothers, live in social limbo as their loyalties are often suspect. The practice of Catholicism does not exclude one from authentic community in Erdrich's Ojibwe circles, but reliance on it to the exclusion of native religious culture does.

Tracks, documenting the period from 1912 to 1924 on the Little No Horse reservation, establishes Pauline's marginalized status. Born Pauline Puyat to "mixed-bloods, skinners in the clan for which the name was lost" (14), she stands in cultural opposition to members of the reservation seeking to preserve their

Ojibwe heritage, and she serves as one of the two narrative voices of the novel. Pauline, though part of her ancestry is certainly Ojibwe, adopts for herself an identity that is as white as possible, seeking to erase all personal connections to the native culture: “I wanted to be like my grandfather, pure Canadian. That was because even as a child I saw that to hang back was to perish” (14). As a young teenager, she asks her father’s permission to leave the reservation for work in Argus. According to Pauline, “I was made for better” (14), and she adheres to this narrative of ethnic and cultural supremacy throughout the novel. Pauline gravitates toward cultural behaviors that will identify her with the white community, and avoids practices that are central to Ojibwe culture, like beading or the preparation of animal skins. Her most extreme departure from the native culture is her decision to become a nun in the convent on the reservation.

The central narrative paradigm of *Tracks* is its reliance on two narrators who represent conflicting ends of the reservation’s cultural spectrum. Nanapush, the elderly trickster, represents the resistance expressed within the reservation to white expansion and exploitation. In numerous ways, Nanapush subtly resists and redirects white oppression. He practices the traditional Anishinaabe religion while also navigating a careful social path through the Catholic community. He relies on literacy skills taught to him by Jesuit priests in an effort to win his granddaughter’s release from the Indian boarding school. Nanapush ridicules white culture while mining it for any valuable skills or insights. In stark contrast, Pauline Puyat embraces white expansionism, economic dominance, and religious authority over the Indian community. She understands from a young

age that adhering to Ojibwe customs and refusing to accommodate white cultural goals is tantamount to embracing extinction. Perhaps because Pauline loses her immediate family as a teenager, relying on the hospitality of extended family and strangers into her adulthood, she has direct experience with extinction, and sees white identification as her conduit to achieving power and agency. She eventually becomes a novice in the reservation convent, preferring to submit to a Catholic religious vocation rather than to submit to a husband who may prove violent or a poor provider.

In her essay "Identity, Politics, Syncretism, Catholicism, and Anishinabe Religion in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*," Susan Stanford Friedman suggests two ways of viewing conflict in the novel – via identity politics or through religious syncretism. If the novel is seen as a competition between two narrative structures, "Nanapush wins hands down" (Friedman 116). He "has the mental flexibility of the sane; [Pauline], the rigidity of the mad . . . Pauline hasn't a funny bone in her body; and where Nanapush can make fun of himself as well as others . . . Pauline is megalomanic" (Friedman 109). Yet, the novel, for Friedman, is arguably a treatise on syncretic discourse as much as identity politics. Both Nanapush and Pauline combine elements of their "enemy's" discourse in solving problems. Though she purports to renounce her Ojibwe heritage, Pauline employs a native love potion to inhabit the body of Sophie in a fit of sexual jealously. Though Nanapush's resistance to Anglo dominance is constant, he has to utilize his Anglo education in order to see his granddaughter Lulu returned home from the Anglo boarding school. According to Friedman, "Both are

storytellers and deeply religious -- he as a tribal elder and she as a nun. Both assume the possibility of direct communion with the spirits, whether for protection or harm. Both rely on vision and dreams" (124). In Friedman's final analysis, interpretations of the novel in terms of identity politics or syncretism are both valuable: "Both are essential to the particular kind of politics Erdrich articulates. The narrative of historical suffering and oppression is 'real.' The narrative of spiritual and cultural syncretism is also 'real,' although within a different ontological framework" (127). As the two readings are essential to the novel, so are the two narrators. Neither presents an objective reality upon which the other can be measured. Both characters narrate long and complicated histories through a string of carefully recalled individual vignettes. Considering her identification with Catholicism and her vocation as a nun, however, Pauline's language is guided by several aspects of formal Christian theology. At several significant moments in the text, her discourse shifts into postsecular sermonic rhetoric.

1: Pauline, Lost and Found

Pauline Puyat's decision to become a nun concludes a long period of uncertainty and powerlessness in her life. As a girl, she loses her family to the tuberculosis epidemic that runs rampant on the Little No Horse reservation and is soon after traumatized by the catastrophic tornado that hits the butcher shop in Argus where she works as a teenager for her relatives. She returns to the

reservation under the care of the French-Canadian trapping family, the Morrisseys, but is soon frustrated by her outsider status within the family and in the community at large. Her first sense of personal worth and identity comes when Bernadette Morrissey teaches her how to tend the dying, how to “make death welcome” (69). In attending the dying and preparing their bodies for burial, Pauline gains a unique and solitary status on the reservation which brings her closer to her later vocation as a nun: “I became devious and holy, dangerously meek and mild . . . entered each house where death was about to come” (69). Pauline enjoys the social power that tending the dying affords her. Even though she is empowered by her new status as an otherwordly and ominous figure in the village, she is thwarted in her quest for a husband. Her attempt to seduce Eli Kashpaw or separate him from his lover Fleur proves unsuccessful. When Pauline becomes pregnant by Napoleon Morrissey, Bernadette chastises her. Pauline fails in her attempts to gain acceptance or attention on the reservation. Her arrival at the convent, after a scandalous pregnancy and an attempted abortion, marks a conscious change in her relationship with the community around her. The convent offers Pauline the opportunity of gaining new social power.

The skills that Pauline developed before arriving at the convent become assets upon her arrival. Before she left her immediate family, Pauline recalls that her father “scorned me when I would not bead” (14). In Argus, Pauline “swept the floors in a butcher shop, and cared for [her] cousin Russell” (14). She “was fifteen, alone, and so poor-looking I was invisible to most customers and to the

men in the shop. Until they needed me, I blended into the stained brown walls" (14-15). Later, after fabricating a story of abuse at the hands of her aunt and uncle in Argus, she moves to the Morrissey house where she becomes little more than servant and a concubine for Napoleon. Moving from household to household, Pauline learns to tolerate subservience, social invisibility, and manual labor. At the convent, however, Pauline's familiarity with poverty and humiliation translates into a new social and spiritual currency among the nuns:

> At the convent, I arose before the rest of them each morning. In that cold dark hour, the air stiff as iron, I made the fire, broke the crusts of ice off the buckets of water, then set them boiling for laundry, for the breakfast soup, for washing, for all else that would take place once we'd finished morning prayer. (136)

Pauline becomes a tireless servant at the convent with an exceptionally high tolerance for discomfort, and, in her acceptance of such impressive servitude, she is blessed with a new visibility that gives her power.

As a young teenager on the reservation Pauline renounced the Ojibwe culture by moving to Argus. At the convent five years later Pauline receives confirmation that erasing her Ojibwe past will benefit her and give her purpose. According to Pauline, Jesus begins to visit her in the middle of the night, bearing divine instructions. The visions strengthen Pauline's confidence in her religious training and increase her status within the convent. At the same time, however, Pauline's divine visitations raise doubts in the reader's mind. If Pauline, as a young teenager, refused to speak her own language and wished to escape the

Ojibwe culture because she was "made for better" (14), the visions of Jesus that Pauline recounts to the convent community appear too close to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Regardless of their veracity, Pauline's visions consolidate spiritual and cultural power and justify the spiritual warfare in which she participates for the remainder of the novel. Her articulation of these visions comprises the first of a collection of sermons. Unlike informal homilies that seek to interpret a scriptural text for believers, Pauline's sermons are prophetic and bellicose. They bear more resemblance to the Old Testament prophesies of Amos or the New Testament vision of Revelation. The style in which Pauline relates her three visions resembles prophetic Christian rhetoric employed to assert a specifically Anglo agenda.

Pauline's visions, similar to those of early Christian and medieval saints,[18] are preceded and, perhaps, invited by a period of intense ascetic self-denial: "My pallet, which I rolled small each morning and hid, was cold even though I slept with my back against the firebox. All winter, my blood never thawed. My stomach never filled. My hands were chafed and raw . . . I would kneel hour upon hour" (136). Pauline implores the Lord to "'Accept this' . . . when night after night the cold gripped me in tight claws and I shook so hard I could not sleep" (136-37). Her voluntary suffering and saintly ethos established, Pauline's language shifts to the rhetoric of prophecy and sermon:

---

[18] Susan Stanford Friedman explains how Pauline "models herself upon the early Christian martyrs and medieval Catholic saints, whose suffering recapitulates the anguish of the crucifixion" (120). Friedman provides a thorough comparison of Pauline's spirituality to ancient and medieval Catholic practices, specifically to saints Catherine, Cecilia, and Perpetua. Friedman observes, "The parallels between these saints and Pauline after her conversion are striking" (121).

I grew in knowledge. Skins were stripped from my eyes. Every day I saw more clearly and I marveled at what He showed me . . . One night of deepest cold He sat in the moonlight, on the stove, and looked down at me and smiled in the spill of His radiance and explained. He said that I was not whom I had supposed. I was an orphan and my parents had died in grace, and also, despite my deceptive features, I was not one speck Indian but wholly white. He Himself had dark hair although His eyes were blue as bottleglass, so I believed. I wept. When He came off the stove, his breath was warm against my cheeks. He pressed the tears away and told me I was chosen to serve.

Other things. I was forgiven my daughter. I should forget her. He had an important plan for me, for which I must prepare, that I should find out the habits and hiding places of His enemy. It was only very slowly that this idea was revealed. Over time, as winter cut down more people and I was called from the convent to house after house where I prepared the newly dead, the details of His great need were given. I should not turn my back on Indians. I should go out among them, be still, and listen. There was a devil in the land, a shadow in the water, an apparition that filled their sight. There was no room for Him to dwell in so much as a crevice of their minds. (137)

Pauline's language mirrors a sermonic method that combined various strands of biblical rhetoric in the early Christian sermon. In his study *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition*, George A. Kennedy follows the thread of rhetorical activity through the Jewish and Hellenistic traditions to arrive at an accounting for early Christian rhetoric. Old Testament scripture, Kennedy observes, is replete with formal rhetorical acts of prophecy, as evidenced in the covenant speech in the book of Ezekiel.[19] "Old Testament prophecy was to be very important for Christian rhetoric," Kennedy explains (142). Rhetorical studies divide Old Testament prophecy into divisions of disaster and salvation. Jewish prophetic speech either explained a vision of impending doom or offered believers spiritual encouragement to return to an awareness of God. By the advent of Christianity, Kennedy identifies the analogous functions of persuasion and proclamation in early Christian sermons. Persuasion followed a logical path while proclamation depended more on elements of pathos intrinsic to a warning. Additionally, Christian prophetic sermons were influenced by Greek forms, "in particular the diatribe, or moral exhortation, of the Stoic and Cynic philosophers, and later by the methods of Neoplatonic philosophy" (Kennedy 144). The moral exhortation shares with prophecy a rhetorical force that is not explicit but merely implied, relying on enthymemes – unstated but communally agreed upon premises .

---

[19] According to Kennedy, "speeches in the Old Testament often contain calls for judgment of the past, narrative of action in the future, and praise or blame" and are either "covenant speeches" or prophecy (140). The book of Ezekiel combines both, showing "how a covenant speech can be adapted to the circumstances of prophecy" (140). In Pauline's case, God's covenant to her *is* the prophecy her visions reveal – that she has been chosen to Christianize the Ojibwe.

Kennedy lists four major categories of preaching in the early Christian church -- the missionary sermon, prophetic preaching, the homily, and the pangyrical sermon. Prophecy was the least formally structured of the four, and it held the strongest connection to the Jewish roots of Christianity. According to Kennedy, Christian prophecy was “a continuation of the Jewish tradition . . . characterized by inspiration . . . and might be practiced by anyone and in any kind of setting” (155). Prophetic preaching, because it relied on visions granted only to the speaker, was the sermonic genre least concerned with form or social hierarchy:

> There is no clear outline or structure, but the various quotations and themes are strung together to make an exhortation to the Christian life, more moral than theological in emphasis. The greatness of salvation imposes duties on human beings, in the author’s view, which they dare not refuse for fear of punishment. Unity is given chiefly by the repeated call to repentance, which becomes more insistent as the end of the work approaches. It is this tone that justifies calling the work an example of the prophecy sermon. (155-56)

Homilies were informal and conversational, but prophetic preaching was even less structured. In observing Paul’s speech to the Athenians in the book of Acts, Kennedy observes that sections of the formal address “reject the whole of classical philosophy and rhetoric . . .[I]n place of the worldly philosopher there exists a higher philosophy, only dimly apprehended by human beings” (151).

Within the early Christian community, Paul's speech in Acts became a model of Christian oratory. It had a profound impact on future Christian leaders' attitude toward the use of rhetoric in preaching. According to Kennedy, "The view of St. Augustine and many other Christian exegetes was that God had deliberately concealed that wisdom to keep it from those who were indifferent to it, but would allow those who sought the truth to find a road to understanding" (151). The truth proclaimed by Christians, and by extension demonstrated from the pulpit, developed in the early years of the faith as wisdom obscured and discernible only to the dedicated believer. It was the view that there was a "wisdom in the Scriptures, deliberately obscure, which human beings can, in part, come to understand with God's help" (Kennedy 155). To put it more succinctly, to engage in prophecy or prophetic preaching is to channel an authority higher than human understanding, thus legitimizing statements that seem unreasonable by human standards.

More connections bind Pauline and Paul, Christianity's first celebrated missionary. Both are born to pagan cultures, and both change their names in their conversion (Saul of Tarsus to Paul; Pauline to Sr. Leopolda). Paul views himself as the missionary to the Gentiles, while Pauline views herself as the missionary to the Ojibwe. Though neither brags of oratorical skill nor strives for rhetorical eloquence, both make use of language to advance their interpretations of divine intentions to their communities. Though Paul is best known, from the perspective of the biblical canon, for his epistles, his appearance in Acts is more sermonic. Kennedy calls Paul's address to the Athenians "the most famous of all

missionary sermons" in the entire New Testament (149). Pauline's visionary reflections and didactic actions in the community indicate her commitment to evangelization. In addition, the linguistic similarity between the names of Paul and Pauline offers another layer of comparison. Christians use the adjective "Pauline" to describe or connect a theological concept to Paul's history. Pauline then is literally "Pauline" in her similarity to the ancient Jewish preacher who Christianized the Middle East. Her connection to Paul ties her to a tradition of prophecy, public address, and evangelism.

Like early and medieval Christians before her, Pauline denies bodily comforts and devotes herself to physical labor to prepare herself for God's message in the convent. Pauline's visions reveal realities that are not obvious to her convent sisters but have a significantly positive impact on her status within the community. For example, the fact that God has forgiven Pauline her sexual transgressions with Napoleon and the abandonment of her daughter Marie opens a salvific future to her, one in which her past sins will neither prevent her from achieving heaven nor cast suspicion on her future visions. This would not be possible outside of a divine revelation. Jesus' spiritual erasure of her Indian heritage also removes an important obstacle, for soon after the visions begin, the superior of Pauline's order pronounces that native girls will not be permitted to become nuns. Pauline quickly visits the Superior to reveal the vision, reporting that, "Superior said she was delighted that the hindrance was removed, since it was plain to see that I abided in His mystical body" (138).

Of course, Pauline's visions also concretize her own selfish desires for identity and power. Since her teenage years, she eschewed the Anishinaabeg ways and desired full communion with white culture. In the vision, Jesus reveals that Pauline's ancestry is actually white and Christian; Pauline's parents "died in grace," Jesus explains (137). Instead of erasing Pauline's extant Indian heritage, he reveals another reality, a secret one that was always the case. In keeping with Kennedy's description of prophetic sermonic action, Pauline's vision permits access to an obscured truth through the passion of her seeking. Yet, at the same time, she achieves a purely selfish goal in clearing an obstacle on her path towards becoming a nun. Similarly, Pauline's vision confirms her earliest suspicions that Ojibwe culture is backward and spiritually flawed. God's plan for Pauline – that she should "find out the habits and hiding places of His enemy" – provides the theological justification that Pauline herself has always assumed to be true. Using stark demonic imagery to characterize the *manitous* of Ojibwe culture,[20] Pauline's prophetic sermon establishes a clear and righteous binary in which the Ojbwe culture is demonic and can only be saved by the infusion of Christian theology. In light of the prophecy, Pauline becomes a suffering servant on a mission to correct the spiritually fraudulent Anishinaabeg of Little No Horse. In the revelation by Jesus of her true white ancestry, Pauline has been cleared for advancement as a nun. Pauline's Superior says that "she had never known a novice so serious and devoted, or so humble," and Pauline reflects that "I swelled

[20] In Ojibwe culture, *manitous* serve as spirit protectors or representatives for members of the tribe and usually take the form of an animal. More specifically in *Tracks*, Pauline battles the lake monster Misshepishu that serves as Fleur Pillager's *manitou*.

on that and smiled" (138). Such swelling proves the selfish value of Pauline's humility; she acts meek to gain power and respect.

After her first vision, Pauline reflects on her new vocation as ordained savior of the Ojibwe; she does not view the community with respect or empathy, however, but with distance: "'The Indians' I said now, 'them.' Never *neenawind* or us" (138). She realizes that Fleur Pillager, Nanapush's adopted daughter who adheres to Ojibwe religious practices as ardently as Pauline's practice of Catholicism, is the "one who closed the door or swung it open" between the Ojibwe and their terrifying lake spirit (139). Fleur is Pauline's opponent in her attempted spiritual conquest over the Ojibwe, and Pauline must take over her spiritual function between Christianity and the Ojibwe: "There would have to come a turning, a gathering, another door. And it would be Pauline who opened it," she pronounces (139). In agreement with Pauline's own reflection and following on the heels of her first prophetic sermon, she receives an even more apocalyptic revelation:

> One night I saw.
>
> They were moving. It was as old Nanapush had said when we sat around the stove. As a young man, he had guided the buffalo expedition for whites. He said the animals understood what was happening, how they were dwindling. He said that when the smoke cleared and the hulks lay scattered everywhere . . . they lost their minds . . . . They tried suicide. They tried to do away with their young. They knew they were going, saw their end . . . .

> I saw the same. I saw the people I had wrapped, the influenza and consumption dead whose hands I had folded. They traveled, lame and bent, with chests darkened from the blood they coughed out of their lungs, filing forward and gathering, taking a different road. A new road. I saw them dragging one another in slings and litters. I saw their unborn children hanging limp or strapped to their backs, or pushed along in front hoping to get the best place when the great shining doors, beaten of air and gold, swung open on soundless oiled fretwork to admit them all.
>
> Christ was there, of course, dressed in glowing white.
>
> "What shall I do now?" I asked. "I've brought You so many souls!"
>
> And He said to me, gently:
>
> "Fetch more." (140)

Ironically, Pauline's prophecy is built upon one of Nanapush's memories of the buffalo extinction. The juxtaposition of the two images, those of animal slaughter and migration of pagan souls, reveals that the prophecy does not bestow a loving missionary mien upon Pauline. Rather, as an extension of her communal responsibility to tend the sick and dying, Pauline's divine vision suggests a more sinister role. Pauline's divinely-inspired vocation is to serve as overseer of Indian extinction, or at least the extinction of native spiritual practices. She does not lead healthy ripe souls to God, but rather ushers into the afterlife the battered and oppressed detritus created by starvation and poverty. In

Pauline's vision of the Ojibwe migration to heaven, the Anishinaabeg are defeated souls dragging themselves dispossessed to a foreign resting place, abandoned by their pagan religion. They continue to suffer from the ailments that plagued them in life. Yet, Pauline does not critically evaluate the prophecy. She appears subservient to the great colonizing Christ and his commandment to "fetch more" souls from the dwindling ranks of the Ojibwe. She is Christ's hound, returning obediently for more souls.

Pauline's new identity, granted in this vision, as the spiritual reaper of the Ojibwe people, is more foreboding than the one granted in her first vision, but both prophecies are connected. Rather than adopting the attitude of a loving, patient missionary, Pauline appears in both visions as the purifier or harvester of Anishinaabeg souls for Christ, delivering them to him dead or alive. Through the phrase "One night I saw," Pauline marks the commencement of a separate genre, distinct from the surrounding narrative – that of the divine vision. Like the words, "One night of deepest cold He sat in the moonlight . . . and looked down at me" (137), with which her first vision begins, Pauline builds a textual boundary around the privileged insight she gains, separating it from the history she recounts. She understands her visions as prophecy while she views the majority of her text as history. In her narrative she communicates and manages the truth of the past, while in her visions Jesus pronounces the truth about the future. Also, both prophecy sections conclude with Christ's mandates, first to rout out the devil in the minds of the Ojibwe and then to oversee a migration of their souls to Christ. In both visions, Pauline becomes separate from the Anishinaabeg, a

nearly objective observer of their plight. In both instances the textual shift to prophetic vision also denotes the beginning of a postsecular sermon.

At the close of *Tracks*, Pauline experiences a final vision that completes her divine cycle of Ojibwe prophecies. After nursing a brutally self-inflicted wound and meeting the Anishinaabeg lake spirit, Misshepeshu, in spiritual warfare, Pauline awaits the confirmation of her final vows as a sister of the Sacred Heart Convent. In her period of recovery she "learned a great deal from keeping my eyes closed . . . and from listening to my sister's idle talk" (204) – specifically, that Napoleon is dead, Fleur has been blamed, and the logging company has finally been successful in securing rights to Fleur's land. Pauline has learned even more than this, however, for she delivers another prophecy:

> I see farther, anticipate more than I've heard. The land will be sold and divided. Fleur's cabin will tumble into the ground and be covered by leaves. The place will be haunted I suppose, but no one will have ears sharp enough to hear the Pillagers' low voices, or the vision clear to see their still shadows. The trembling old fools with their conjuring tricks will die off and the young, like Lulu and Nector, return from the government schools blinded and deafened.
>
> I am assigned to teach arithmetic at St. Catherine's school in Argus . . . . I do not like children very well . . . Through perseverance, I will overcome my instinct. I will add their souls to those I have numbered. For Christ's purpose is not for us to fathom.

> His love is a hook sunk deep into our flesh, a question mark that pulls with every breath. (204-05)

After the trials she has endured during her year long novitiate period, Pauline has become a harsher, less emotional believer. This vision, however, serves as the completion of the first visitation by Christ she experienced when she joined the convent. In both spiritual and economic terms, Pauline prophesies the evaporation of the Ojibwe culture, its final capitulation to the relentless siege of the American government. Because Fleur represents, for Pauline, the most essential qualities of the Anishinaabeg, the forfeiture of her land to the machine of American capitalism signifies the victory of white culture. Pauline foretells the return of young Ojibwe children “blinded and deafened” from the government schools – schools administered by the federal government’s Bureau of Indian Affairs, proving her support of the ethnic cleansing of the Indian population through education. Her final comparison of Christ’s love to a hook in the flesh is a paradoxical metaphor that provides insight into Pauline’s concept of the purifying nature of pain. Pauline’s God demands suffering from humans and only reduces that suffering to the degree that believers welcome it. Her spirituality is masochistic, a megalomaniacal test of endurance that ignores the traditional Christian precepts of compassion, generosity, and forgiveness. From her experience as a marginalized subject, Pauline has internalized a colonial spirituality designed to turn the native against her own culture.

The language of Pauline’s prophetic visions is distinctly different from the language of her personal narrative throughout the novel, perhaps because its

intended audience is different. Pauline is a quietly scheming, bitter, and libidinous teenager, but she does not find the language that grants her access to power until she joins the convent community. Freshly awash in the rhetoric of the Bible, Catholic theology, and evangelization, her language takes on a different tone. Her visions of Christ at night play an active role in building her status in the community, and Pauline quickly becomes skilled in their use. When the Superior of the convent asks Pauline what Christ tells her during these visits, Pauline says, “He doesn’t stay long though, Mother. He says it is much too cold” (138). Promptly, the Superior orders that more firewood be burned at night to keep the room warm. Pauline learns that visions carry authority and that authority can be leveraged for self-motivated means. Receiving a visitation from Christ signifies to the Catholic community of nuns that Pauline is privileged, selected in some way. By her own account, she takes on an almost priestess-like role. In her own words, “I knew there never was a martyr like me” (192), and the suffering that Pauline endures suggests a righteousness that she feels compelled to share. Though she does not deliver her sermons to a congregation in a church building, her sermonic discourse conveys power within the cloistered community by increasing her status and lending legitimacy to her visions. Her rhetorical awareness of the audience for her prophecies is acute; she uses prophetic sermonic rhetoric to imbue her visions with spiritual and social power.

Kennedy describes the change that occurred when classical rhetoric was transformed by the early Christians: “In its purest and most fundamental form, the basic modes of proof of Judeo-Christian rhetoric are grace, authority, and logos,

the divine message that can be understood by human beings. These partially correspond respectively to the pathos, ethos, and logos of Aristotelian rhetoric" (140). Pauline understands the priorities assigned to grace, authority, and God's words within the convent and reproduces them in her prophetic accounts, but she connects elements of the Christian rhetorical system in complicated ways. While recounting the physical hardships of her first weeks in the convent, Pauline explains "they were no punishment to me" (136). Abiding by the standard Catholic practice of enduring suffering for God's glory, Pauline asks the Lord to "Accept this . . . This too. This. And this" (137). She recounts that "He did. I grew in knowledge" (137). Pauline's behavior befits the history of Catholic saints. To Nanapush she explains why she voluntarily embraces the discomfort of a hairshirt: "Suffering is a gift to God! I have given away everything I owned. All that I have left is my body's comfort and pleasure, and I give that last pearl to Him now" (144). Perhaps Pauline seeks to follow the precept of Augustine, who writes in his treatise to preachers, *OCD*, "the life of the speaker has a greater force to make him persuasive than the grandeur of his eloquence, however great that may be" (482). Pauline courts suffering, expecting that it will concretely establish the authority of her proclamation.

Pauline proclaims the message that she receives from God primarily because she is convinced of the authenticity of her revelation. She serves as the first congregation for her own sermons because they are sermons designed, primarily, to spur her into action. In this regard her sermons differ from the traditional variety which seek, as Augustine writes, "to teach what is right and to

correct what is wrong, and in the function of this discourse, to conciliate the hostile, to arouse the careless, and to inform those ignorant of the matter in hand, what they ought to expect" (*OCD* 458). By contrast, Pauline's sermons communicate with urgent necessity her own spiritual significance. She textually records her visions in order to continue the act of persuading herself of their polemical truth. In erasing her Ojibwe ancestry, in absolving her own culpability in the deaths in Argus, in forgetting the ties to her own daughter, and in countless other spiritual transgressions, Pauline the preacher must persuade Pauline the outcast that she has a role to play, that she has a holy purpose. "No one can doubt that Pauline . . . is mad" (73), argues Bonnie Winsbro in *Supernatural Forces; Belief, Difference, and Power in Contemporary Works by Ethnic Women*. Her madness comes from a sense of victory; leaving poverty and homelessness behind, she has found "a place in the world, a proven identity, a worthy mission" in her status as visionary of the convent (Winsbro 74). Pauline must deliver her harsh, prophetic sermons in order to silence the voices of guilt and inadequacy. Inasmuch as they inspire a unified method and concretize her status at the Convent, the sermons are successful in pragmatic terms. In the context of Pauline's psychology, the sermons demonstrate an unconsciously confessional attitude and a system of hybridized beliefs.

2: Postsecular power and hybridity

Mapping the postsecular features of Pauline's sermons in *Tracks* is complicated by the fact that Pauline defines herself in Catholic institutional terms. She resists, on the surface of her language, anything other than the most rigidly orthodox application of the faith. Yet by understanding the postsecular features of Erdrich's work as a whole, we can see how Pauline's fanaticism is actually a postsecular hybrid faith, demonstrated through her prophecies.

J. A. McClure devotes a chapter in *Partial Faiths* to the contemporary fictions of Native American authors and focuses particularly on Erdrich. Native American authors, he asserts, demonstrate a unique orientation to the idea of postsecularity because Native American engagement with Anglo Christianity has always occurred within the context of domination and resistance. According to J. A. McClure, Erdrich stands in a sub-category of her own, distinct from other Native American novelists like Leslie Marmon Silko and N. Scott Momaday, in whose work he observes open resistance to Christian religious expression. To complicate matters further, in J. A. McClure's analysis, *Tracks* presents a historical frame different from most of Erdrich's other books. *Tracks* concentrates on an historical period seemingly immune to postsecular influence because it documents a clash of firm religious ideologies rather than the waning of religion in the shadow of postmodernity. Using Pauline Puyat's prophetic sermons as postsecular artifacts thus presents problems because she does not appear in any way influenced by secularity. On the surface she appears to extract herself from

one religiously inflected culture – the Ojibwe – and to transplant herself into another – Anglo-American Catholicism – by the force of sheer will. Despite this seeming transposition, however, closer analysis of Pauline's sermons in *Tracks* provides a unique view of how sermonic discourse works within the time period described by postsecularity, and results in a useful application of the elements of postsecular discourse.

Though J. A. McClure finds common postsecular tendencies in the novels of Silko, Momaday, and Erdrich, he observes that Native American fiction is vulnerable to a host of critical stereotypes: "Native Americans have long figured [in the Euro-American imagination] as the Other to the secularizing, mechanizing West. They are assumed to be at once more spiritual and more 'organically' related to the Earth" (132). Tied to a Romantic naturalism that mythologizes the now-extinct American frontier, a surface understanding of Native American spirituality serves as a cliched palliative for the liberal white guilt of manifest destiny and genocide. As well, "many spiritually homeless Americans, alienated both from secular values and from the dominant religious institutions, continue to turn to Native Americans for inspiration and instruction" (J. A. McClure 132). J. A. McClure isolates Momaday, Silko, and Erdrich as Native American authors whose writing is "structured around the narrative of postsecular turning that shows up everywhere in contemporary fiction," but "at the same time, these Native American novels demonstrate that colonial experiences of secularization and return are distinct in many ways from related metropolitan experiences and that the religious life of Native Americans is unique" (133). Where, in the fiction of

other contemporary Americans novelists such as DeLillo, Pynchon, or Morrison, the secularization of the subject is taken for granted, the Indian subject stands apart: “American culture, [Native American] novels show, simultaneously estranges Indian subjects from their own deeply religious cultures and refuses to grant them full citizenship in the modern, secular West. It strands them, in other words, in a condition of intimate estrangement from Native and secular cultures alike” (J. A. McClure 134).

J. A. McClure distinguishes between the postsecular approaches of Momaday and Silko and that of Erdrich:

> Louise Erdrich is less ready than Momaday or Silko to imagine that Native Americans can find their way back out of the modern milieu into profound relation with the nonhuman natural world and the spirits . . . Taken together, then, the return narratives of Momaday, Silko, and Erdrich can help us trace out a debate between two forms of literary postsecularism, one that issues powerful, impressively unsentimental proposals for a revisionary return to sacred tradition and another that attempts to imagine modes of religious recovery more compatible, to one degree or another, with dominant contemporary ways of life. (137)

Erdrich’s novels clearly demonstrate the latter. They delineate a divide between white and Ojibwe cultures that is less extreme than that depicted in Silko or Momaday because, on the confines of the reservation, nearly every character is forced to accommodate a religious or ethnic culture that is not her own. In *Tracks*

specifically, the Morrissey family is the most Anglicized group on the reservation, but by living among the Ojibwe, each Morrissey has accepted or assimilated a part of the native culture. Bernadette applies her compassionate practice of tending the souls of the dying to the native community; Napoleon and Clarence trap and trade with the Ojibwe; and Bernadette's daughter Sophie escapes to the Pillager land to seek Fleur's forgiveness. Father Damien, of German descent and originally from Wisconsin, merges with his flock on the reservation in nearly every way, creating a Catholic-Anishinaabe blend of mysticism. Nanapush uses the skills he learned in Jesuit schools to fight for the return of his adopted granddaughter. Erdrich's *Tracks* does not describe white economic and cultural dominance with much detail. Instead, that oppressive force is felt always at the margin, exerting its influence on the characters but is not explicitly visible until the logging company arrives at the novel's conclusion. Erdrich's fiction insists on "the ubiquity of mixture and modernity, and on apparently endless comings and goings . . . Erdrich provides an alternative vision of Native American preterite spirituality and its chances for resistance, recovery, and survival" (J. A. McClure 152). In *Tracks*, the onslaught of government papers, rescinded land allotments, and disease epidemics have driven all of the characters in the novel, the full-blooded Ojibwe as well as the starving white religious community and the Morrissey farming clan, to the brink of a disaster that nearly consumes them all. According to J. A. McClure, "A further consequence of the historical catastrophe, Erdrich suggests in *Tracks*, has been a loss of faith in the benignant powers of the sacred world and perhaps a weakening of these powers themselves" (153).

Amidst all of these conditions of material and spiritual deprivation, Pauline Puyat stands apart. Pauline's condition in *Tracks* certainly confirms J. A. McClure's estrangement thesis, but she has not lost faith in the old gods so much as forged a stronger faith in a new one. Pauline's foil is Fleur Pillager, whose spiritual connection with the native gods of the Anishanaabeg Pauline covets and seeks to reproduce in her practice of Catholicism. In her essay "Catholic Nuns and Ojibwa Shamans: Pauline and Fleur in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*," Michelle R. Hessler measures the effects of the two religious practitioners: "Fleur upholds the traditions of her ancestors and attempts to save their land from the rapid advance of white civilization, whereas Pauline enters a cloister, denies her Native American heritage, and brings death and destruction to the reservation" (40). Hessler does not recognize Pauline's Catholic identity as authentic: "Her lack of concern over the deceased persons' souls in the afterworld indicates that she does not hold true Catholic beliefs either . . . Pauline does not adopt mainstream Catholicism, but rather invents her own version" (41), in which her skills in tending the dead gain her a special cultural currency.

Pauline has constructed a hybrid faith primarily accessible through her prophetic sermons--one that allows her to transform her eccentric defense mechanisms into status symbols. Pauline's habitual self-mortification, a practice common in the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages, is another improvisation of religiosity: "One should not conclude that Pauline's self-torture arises from the nun's influence because they, like Nanapush, are shocked by her masochistic methods" (Hessler 42). We might be able to understand Pauline's self-imposed

poverty and mortification as a return to medieval Catholicism were it not for the visions that those deprivations invite. In the erasure of Pauline's Ojibwe heritage or the mandate that she harvest souls like buffalo, Pauline's prophetic sermons remind us of a carefully crafted practice of self-fulfillment which draws on both Catholic and Ojibwe traditions. Pauline's Jesus is a savior who pushes her into battle with Ojibwe culture as its equal, not as the believer in "the one true God." Her practice of harsh asceticism is less a Christian practice and more the practice of a syncretistic holy warrior.

Pauline's syncretic faith becomes more pronounced as the novel progresses, eventually moving her to compete with Nanapush's ritual healing ceremony for Fleur and with Misshepeshu, the Anishinaabeg lake spirit who serves as Fleur's spirit representative. Yet to engage with these traditions is to afford them credence, to view them as competing belief systems. Pauline retains belief in the Anishinaabeg rituals and cosmology, but tries through her simultaneously medieval and postsecular brand of Catholicism to defeat them. In short, Pauline cannot battle the lake monster if she does not believe in the lake monster. Hessler writes:

> On the surface, Pauline subscribes to standard Catholic practices, but in reality she has distorted them to create her own sadomasochistic version. Even though she professes to be Catholic, she is less generous and kind than the "heathen" Fleur . . . Thus, Erdrich states that the praiseworthy characters are those

> who uphold their family's traditions despite the encroachment of white civilization. (44-45)

Pauline's religious practice then, if not the Catholicism she so ardently professes, falls into a more complicated category. The language of her visionary sermons communicates this complication, describing a spiritual dualism incompatible with orthodox Catholicism. She refers in her final prophetic sermon to the "haunting" of the Pillager land and to the souls of the children she will add "to those I have numbered" (204-05), revealing both her belief in the Anashinaabeg spirits and her own power to collect the souls of Ojibwe children. Unconsciously, Pauline both asserts and practices aspects of Ojibwe religion, whether as a silent believer or combatant.

Edrich's approach to postsecularity is less sure of the possibility of a native return, according to J. A. McClure. She demonstrates, he argues, ambivalence about the religious conflict of Native American experience with white culture: "Two paths, in particular command her attention: the path of selective accommodation to Euro-American ways and that of refusal, resistance, and preservation of the dream of return" (154). The two representatives of these paths in *Tracks* are Pauline and Nanapush, but interestingly, both characters engage the behaviors of the other when it suits their needs. Nanapush certainly resists white culture. He avoids providing white culture with either a tribal or an anglicized name: "'I have the use of the white man's name,' I told the Captain who delivered the ration payout for our first treaty, 'but I won't sign your paper with that name either'" (33). He also selectively accommodates Euro-American

ways in accepting help and encouragement from Fr. Damien. When Fr. Damien arrives bearing the bad news that Fleur's land is falling behind in payment of taxes, Nanapush's first retort is, "I was taught by the Jesuits . . . I know about the law. I know that 'trust' means they can't tax our parcels" (174). White literacy is at least somewhat helpful to Nanapush in fighting white expansion.

Pauline similarly adheres to Anishanaabeg knowledge as a teenager, even though she wants to rid herself of her native ancestry. In order to shame Fleur, Pauline visits the Ojibwe shaman Moses Pillager in order to acquire a love potion that will enable her to inhabit the body of Sophie Morrissey, a girl she hopes to use to tempt Fleur's lover, Eli. After murdering Napoleon, Pauline recalls: "I threw myself into the ditches. I rolled in dead leaves, in moss, in defecation of animals. I plastered myself with dry leaves and feathers of a torn bird" (203). In her moment of passionate revenge and righteousness, she seeks one last time to merge her spirit with the Earth, with the natural world that she has eschewed for months in the convent. Friedman marks the similarities between Nanapush and Pauline: "Once on the track of their similarities, the parallels between Nanapush and Pauline pop up all over . . . Both are storytellers and deeply religious . . . Both assume the possibility of direct communication with spirits . . . Both rely on vision and dreams to provide central guidance" (124). While both represent the two paths that J. A. McClure ascribes to Erdrich's characters, the line between their objectives sometimes blurs. Readers have the most direct access to Nanapush's belief system because he is transparent in

explaining it to Lulu. To understand the roots of Pauline's spiritual hybridity we must rely on her visionary sermons that illuminate the purpose of her actions.

Pauline constructs a syncretic spirituality that she explains to herself through her sermonic performance of divine visions. Choosing from the most extreme and powerful rhetorical qualities of Christian discourse while engaging the spirit world structure of the Anishinaabeg, Pauline becomes a religious amalgam. Erdrich endows Pauline with a postsecular, homeless faith, one in which Pauline remains anxious and estranged even as a nun. Prophetic visions recollected in private within the sermonic form sustain Pauline's new understanding of spirit and attempt, in unhealthy psychological ways, to confess their author's weaknesses and drive for power. As Friedman suggests, *Tracks* condemns the mechanistic attempts of white culture to erase the Ojibwe, but attending to the novel's syncretic religious accommodation reveals a reluctance to characterize oppositions in binary terms. Friedman observes: "Indeed, a syncretist framework based in the mixing of traditions suggests instead a displacement of the Fanonian binary of good and evil . . . Instead of this agonistic model, a syncretist reading suggests that Nanapush and Pauline exist in perpetual interplay as positive and negative manifestations of similar forces" (126). Friedman asserts that, in considering a Fanonian reading of the novel which presents Pauline as the self-hating colonized subject and a syncretic reading which explores the cultural blending that individuals engage in to survive oppression, "both [readings] are essential to the particular kind of politics Erdrich articulates . . . The two readings cannot be peacefully reconciled. But the

particular political syncretism of *Tracks* does, I believe, ask us to acknowledge the viability of both discourses" (127). Similarly, Pauline's prophetic sermons, replete with brutal colonial power and righteous pronouncements, are not comforting representations of religious discourse. They are, however, postsecular examples of religious rhetoric, aiming for a sermonic ethos and functioning to achieve a certain spiritual reality -- that of confession.

We can apply the register of postsecular sermonic variables from the introductory chapter to Pauline's prophetic preaching. Unlike either Updike's Rev. Marshfield or Morrison's Baby Suggs, Pauline locates herself within a specific and traditional religious community. As a Catholic, she professes to subordinate her own will to the institutional practices of the Catholic Church, whereas Marshfield and Baby Suggs both demonstrate reservations about such firm identification. Pauline, however, is neither a formally trained preacher, like Marshfield, nor does she have a congregation for whom to proclaim, like Baby Suggs. Like Marshfield, she proclaims to herself through writing, or perhaps more accurately, as I have suggested above, one aspect of her personality preaches to another in written form. Unlike Marshfield or Baby Suggs, Pauline extracts herself from one spiritual tradition and trains herself in another. This activity results, inadvertently for Pauline, in the construction of a hybridized faith. Her prophetic objective to eradicate Ojibwe spiritual practices legitimizes that system by engaging with it so aggressively. From a spiritual perspective, Pauline's battle with Misshepeshu in the conclusion of *Tracks* exposes her as a competitor to the lake monster — as an equal rather than a non-believer. In light of the

physical struggle that occurs, perhaps, only in Pauline's mind, we must view her sermonic confrontations with Ojibwe culture as partially pagan in nature. Pauline's belief situates Ojibwe spiritual entities on the same plane as Christian ones. In the agonistic pairing of these spiritual systems, we see Pauline's syncretic combination of both faiths. The spirit world of the Ojibwe continues to exist for Pauline even as she applies the rigid structure of Catholic monasticism to combat it. In this sense, Pauline's faith is postsecular because it defines pluralistic assent to both Ojibwe and Catholic spiritual systems; it is a hybrid creation.

In another sense, Pauline's sermonic discourse demonstrates postsecular qualities similar to those of Marshfield and Baby Suggs. Ultimately, Pauline's prophetic sermons also bear similarity to Trueblood's sermon in *Invisible Man*. All four of her sermons show traces of intense psychological pain and guilt and seek, through their sermonic presentation, to confess that guilt. Or at least to soothe it. Sadly, Pauline is not self-aware enough to understand that her prophetic assertions confess a selfish desire for power and anger at her denial of Ojibwe identity. Pauline maintains a connection to Ojibwe beliefs and practices despite the fact that, as she professes, a complete conversion to Catholicism should result in a lack of belief in Misshepeshu, Fleur's ethereal powers, and Nanapush's tribal magic. Instead, like a spurned child, Pauline aligns herself against her offender in order to battle against it. Viewed in this light, her prophetic sermons are subtly confessional rather than didactic. Rather than revealing insight about a Catholic God, they reveal their author's internal struggle and

desire for power. Pauline's sermonic discourse, like that of Marshfield, Baby Suggs, and Trueblood, is postsecular and horizontal in its presentation of the preacher's desire to explain or understand himself or herself. Although she professes to participate in a rigid application of Catholic theology, Pauline's prophetic sermons eschew the authoritative, vertical dogmas of traditional sermonic rhetoric.[21]

Most academic treatments of Erdrich's novel label Pauline an unsympathetic character and describe her religious practice as a postcolonial comment on white dominance. By viewing Pauline's prophetic visions as sermons, however, we can ascribe to them an even more personal motive beyond the projection of a spiritual reality. Recall that Trueblood, in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, delivers an oral address to the white patron Mr. Norton that is highly elaborate, imaginative, and derived from vision. His address becomes a sermon in the postsecular sense because it borrows the ethos of religious authority, it expresses privileged knowledge that transforms the perspective of its congregation, and it delivers a discourse on morality, albeit quite a nontraditional one. Trueblood's sermon accomplishes many goals, but its central functions are to rescue his status in the community and to confess his transgressions. Pauline's three prophetic sermons -- in which her native past is

[21] As with several of the sermons studied here, Pauline's faith shares similarities with some versions of ancient Gnostic expressions of Christianity in that it values individual visions and recognizes the status of women (or at least Pauline herself) as equal to men in the work of the Church.

erased, her mandate to harvest Anishinaabeg souls is pronounced, and the looming collapse of the native culture is depicted -- are delivered to an internal congregation that is similarly broken and disgraced.

CHAPTER 4: *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy's Gnostic Postsecularism

> *Somebody at breakfast the other mornin . . . asked me if I believed in Satan . . . I guess as a boy I did. Come the middle years my belief I reckon had waned somewhat. Now I'm startin to lean back the other way. He explains a lot of things that otherwise dont have no explanation. Or not to me they dont.*
> (McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* 218)

As Sheriff Ed Tom Bell reflects on his life in law enforcement in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*, he generates frequent spiritual, confessional, and theological maxims. Bell is a recognizably McCarthy-esque character in his simple talk about weighty matters. Through the course of the novel, Bell attempts to reconcile his understanding of good and evil, civil law, personal responsibility, and the drug trade, but he finds the exercise futile. After trying to deal with the merciless violence of hitman Anton Chigurh, Bell resigns his post as sheriff with a feeling of bitter defeat. Following Chigurh and his prey Llewellyn Moss across south-west Texas, collecting forensic data, and counting bodies, Bell convinces himself that Chigurh represents an evil that the United States has brought upon itself and that lawmen like Bell cannot forestall. He does not know how to confront it judicially or spiritually. Viewed together, the italicized

sections – narrated by Bell – that begin each chapter of *No Country*, comprise a postsecular literary sermon about the erosion of American values by an encroaching evil. The sermon depends on Bell's view of history – specifically, the history of the last crime he investigates as sheriff.

According to Hayden White, history is not our objective picture of the past, but instead what results from the narration of events. To White, narrative is not just one code of transmitting history, but a "metacode." White writes in "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" that "Official wisdom [of historians] has it that however objective a historian might be in reporting his events . . . his account remains something less than a proper history when he has failed to give to reality the form of a story" (10). Within the field of historiography, history proper is a more advanced way of recording a timeline of events than are the annals or the chronicle because history chooses, out of social, political, or ideological motives, a beginning and end point for the historical narration. How the historian frames her story, how she begins and ends it, marks her motive, and so do other preferences over the outcomes of wars, behavior of the climate, or economic situation of the history's human subjects. The details included, selected over others, add narrative weight to a history and, simultaneously, indicate motive and a moralizing impulse. White's essay concludes with a list of rhetorical questions central to his thesis:

> Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see "the end" in every

> beginning? Or does it present itself more . . . as mere sequence without beginning or end or as sequences of beginnings that only terminate and never conclude? . . . Is the fiction of such a world, a world capable of speaking itself and of displaying itself as a form of story, necessary for the establishment of that moral authority without which the notion of a specifically social reality would be unthinkable? . . . Could we ever narrativize *without* moralizing? (27)

White suggests that to compose history is to organize and privilege events and that this activity is impossible without a conscious or unconscious moral direction. Historians may become anxious about recognizing a moral direction to their work, given the presumed academic and objective nature of representing the past. Preachers, however, would not share that anxiety in acknowledging the moral trajectory of a sermon. The sermon, in an attempt to sway a congregation toward a particular biblical or doctrinal insight, does not resist organizing the elements of any narrative it might employ in order to make that narrative more morally persuasive. Thus a history employing narrative, as all modern histories must, according to White, will attempt to conceal its moralizing while a sermon, free to utilize narrative history, will make its moralizing clear. The late twentieth century and early twenty-first century novels of Cormac McCarthy explore a complicated moral landscape utilizing a variety of sermonic discourses and post-secular preachers. *No Country* in particular focuses on a narrative history that the narrator needs to be true and the sermonic discourse that evolves within it.

1: The Rhetoric of Retreat

The novels of Cormac McCarthy meditate frequently on the confluence of history, narrative, and moral. Taken together, they suggest that events, as humans experience them, carry no significance until the moment they are narrated. "The task of the narrator is not an easy one," explains an old hermit in *The Crossing*: "He sets forth categories into which the listener will wish to fit the narrative as he hears it. But he understands that the narrative is itself in fact no category but is rather the category of all categories for there is nothing which falls outside its purview. All is telling" (155). McCarthy's concept of narrative as the "category of all categories" is analogous to White's claim that "narrative is a metacode, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of shared reality can be transmitted" (6). These observations shed particularly valuable light on any view of moralizing narrative in McCarthy's fiction and specifically on an understanding of a collection of his characters as preachers, ordained or not. Sheriff Bell and his moralizing discourse in *No Country* represents the most developed example of the sermonic impulse in McCarthy's fiction.

Lydia Cooper recognizes McCarthy's awareness of the boundary explored by White between history and historiography. For McCarthy, this line must become the boundary between documenting events and moralizing about them: "McCarthy seems to be conscious of the fine line between a narrative voice that suggests interpretations and a narrative voice that instructs readers to produce certain interpretations" (Cooper 39-40). McCarthy draws this distinction clearly by

splicing together two discourses in the novel. Each chapter of *No Country* begins with several pages of italicized text in which Sheriff Bell shifts between anecdotes, moral philosophy, and an account of his involvement chasing the criminals in the novel; the remainder of each chapter, following Bell's discourse, consists of a third-person narrative detailing the capture of stolen drug money by Llewelyn Bell and his subsequent flight from the hired assassin Anton Chigurh. The bifurcated structure of each chapter is indicated by dramatic differences in language, tone, and diction. Bell's sections resemble a kind of confession, while the narrative sections, which comprise the bulk of the novel, read like a combination of western-noir and crime story genres. Both Cooper and Jay Ellis have examined the complex structure of *No Country*. Ellis suggests that the novel is actually comprised of two books: a "Young Man book" and an "Old Man book" (*No Place* 242-43). Cooper appreciates Ellis's reading, but complains that it "does little to reveal the novel's unity" (41). Instead, Cooper suggests that the multiple genres and "flattened" language in *No Country* evoke "the rigid and proscribed patterns of the oldest form of story-telling, a form of narrative that possesses a moral exigency" (44).

A new and equally complex approach to the novel emerges when we view *No Country* as part of McCarthy's demonstration of a postsecular sermonic impulse that occurs in several of his novels. Cooper definitely hints at morality in her framing of *No Country* as folktale, but when we view Sheriff Bell as post-secular preacher, we must attend to new qualities of his metaphysical, personal, and confessional reflection. I suggest that Bell functions as a post-secular

preacher, and his diction, rhetoric, theology, and subjectivity can be placed between the poles of the traditional Christian sermon and the revised, open-ended, post-secular sermon of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century – between the poles of Barbee and Trueblood.

If we are to view Bell's discourse from a sermonic perspective, we first have to collect the fragments. *No Country* is comprised of thirteen chapters designated by Roman numerals, each of which begins, as noted above, with italicized text in Bell's voice. Sometimes these sections relate directly to the narrative action that precedes or follows them, but often they do not. Bell discusses his involvement in chasing Moss and Chigurh, but he also discusses a variety of other things. Taken together, these pieces appear disparate, but are unified around the concept of moral decay. Bell's musings have the quality of a jeremiad because they lament the current state of American history, social deterioration, and religious indifference. At their root, these sections meditate on evil, specifically the evil personified by Chigurh in the narrative sections of the novel. They derive from Christian eschatology, but their tone is bleaker because they reference no ultimate redemption or purpose. They depict the “end times” stripped of the reward of salvation.

The novel opens with a clear example of Bell's post-secular sermonic narratives: "I sent one boy to the gas chamber at Huntsville. One and only one" (3), Bell explains to a seemingly specific audience. He goes on to recall the crime of the nineteen-year-old, Bell's visits with the inmate in prison, and the boy's hardened perspective on being executed. The boy explains that the murder he

committed was the result of "plannin to kill someone for about as long as he could remember" (3) and he admits to Bell that he knows he is going to Hell. Such unrepentantly evil characters are scattered throughout McCarthy's novels, and they often are met with only a confused resistance or indifference. Bell is unique in McCarthy's fiction because his sermons provide access to Bell's thoughts – his beliefs and motives. Most characters in McCarthy's novels only act; very little internal dialog occurs. Bell has a sturdy collection of hypotheses about the nature of evil, albeit without many ideas about how to counter it. He recalls, "I thought I'd never seen a person like that it got me wonderin if maybe he was some new kind" (3). Later in the novel, we understand that following behind Anton Chigurh convinces Bell that a new kind of person is loose in the world. Bell, however, introduces the idea of this "new kind" of person in talking about the boy he sent to death row, revealing his own resignation to the new forces of evil.

In another moral story Bell narrates, a couple in California is caught for murdering senior citizens: "They would rent out rooms to old people and then kill em and bury em in the yard and cash their social security checks" (124). Teenage killers, green-haired punks, and ruthless criminals who wield shotguns at police officers all feature prominently in Bell's narrative discourse, but every story is concluded either with earnest lament or bitter sarcasm. Regarding the homicidal room renters, Bell states: "You cant make up such a thing as that. I dare you to even try . . . . There aint a whole lot else you can do about it" (124). He concludes another story with: "People anymore you talk about right and

wrong they're liable to smile at you. But I never had a lot of doubts about things like that. In my thoughts about things like that. I hope I never do" (158-59). Bell's stories always end with similar rhetorical punctuation, which endows each story with an obvious moral trajectory The substance of Bell's parables can usually be summed up with this maxim: humanity is more corrupt, violent, and morally decentered than it ever has been before. While this enthymatic foundation is too dark for orthodox Christianity, it establishes Bell's discourse within a moralizing and sermonic framework.

Recall that the four divisions of early Christian sermons were the homily, the pangyrical sermon, missionary sermon, and prophetic preaching (Kennedy 156). Bell's sermon, elaborated over the course of *No Country*, is prophetic in nature because it purports to understand the extent of American decline in sharper terms than those who are not privy to Bell’s experiences as a police officer. Prophecy, while often oriented toward future events, can also be strictly focused on the present, and on perceiving the present from the perspective of the divine. Bell, whose name suggests a calling or warning, engages in a prophetic style of preaching through his warnings about "where this is goin," "the second comin of Christ," and "any time you quit hearin Sir and Mam the end is pretty much in sight" (4, 159, 304). In the style of a jeremiad calling the community back to more righteous behavior, Bell's sermon achieves the quality of prophecy in its forecasting of the complete disintegration of American culture, signaled by the "true and living prophet of destruction" (4).

In a second sense, Bell's sermon throughout the book achieves qualities of homily. Kennedy calls homily "the most important" category of early Christian preaching, since it is built loosely around practical application. According to Kennedy, "In its most natural form, homily is lacking in artifice and does not aspire to systematic exposition of theology" (156). Bell's Southwest Texas dialect, rhetorical asides, and humorous details indicate the informal, colloquial delivery of a present-day homily. A homily pursues engagement with its audience by ignoring the typical hierarchy of ecclesiastical authority. Bell's homily avoids systematic theology while asserting metaphysical principles as certain realities. For Bell, Hell exists and evil people are sent there, but not by a God who is easy to understand, to follow, or to please. Bell does not even seem particularly engaged in currying God's favor, but rather addresses him in laymen's terms. As a result, Bell's narratives reflect qualities of a folk sermon.

Bell's "folksy" technique mirrors a shift that occurred in American pulpits as early as the nineteenth century. In his study of the rise of narrative in American sermons during that period, David S. Reynolds observes:

> We have become so accustomed to pulpit entertainment and storytelling in the twentieth century that we are apt to forget that the homiletic style of most of our colonial forefathers was quite different, and that only during the nineteenth century did secular narratives become widely and repeatedly used by American preachers . . . [A]fter 1800 intellectual doctrine gave way to a

> simpler affectionalism that appeared variously in evangelical religion, in liberal sentimentalism, and mass revivalism. (480)

According to Reynolds, American sermons gravitated toward narrative because of "theological change and innovation in rhetorical theory" (481). The Protestant churchgoers Reynolds focuses on were dramatically affected by the events of the American Revolution and needed a revitalized way to understand the relevance of the scripture to their lives. Puritan theology no longer held sway in matters of Christian theology, and yet "a new preaching style was built on the ruins of Puritan homiletics" (481). Reynolds observes that, according to eighteenth century Scottish clergyman George Campbell, "'the preacher labours under a very great disadvantage' as a result of his primarily doctrinal function; yet [Campbell] declared that sermons 'bear a pretty close analogy to the pleadings of the advocate, and the orations of the senator'" (483). Campbell's comments remind us of the classical connection between homiletics and rhetoric.

Aristotle's *On Rhetoric* (4th cent. BCE) divided the practice of persuasive orations into three spheres--the judicial, political, and epideictic (the praise or blame of famous men or gods, usually performed at a ceremony). Campbell's reflection from the eighteenth century suggests what Harry Caplan's 1933 article, "Classical Rhetoric and the Mediaeval Theory of Preaching," makes explicit: "The widest field for rhetoric in the Middle Ages was in preaching, the dissuasion from vice, and the persuasion to virtue" (77). Preaching is an offshoot of the epideitic branch of rhetoric, which Aristotle endows with significant moral qualities: "Let us speak of virtue and vice and honorable and shameful; for these are the points of

reference for one praising or blaming" (79). Persuading an audience to act in accordance with or to avoid the behaviors of the "characters" in a rhetorical performance serves as the prototypical objective of the sermon, as Campbell's analogy above proves. Aristotle's description of epideictic rhetoric is shared by Campbell in the eighteenth century and by Caplan and Reynolds in the twentieth century. The praise or blame of a character's deeds, the sermonic delivery of a preacher, and the use of narrative for rhetorical purposes are closely bound, complementary activities.

In the waning of a Puritan formalist approach to homiletics, American preachers had to reconsider their congregation -- from a rhetorical sense, their audience -- and do what Augustine had advised the first Catholic priests to do: "If his hearers need information, the matter under discussion must be made clear by giving the history of the question" (*OCD* 485). Coming full circle, the folksy, casual sermonic narrative of McCarthy's conservative Sheriff Bell follows a story-telling pulpit tradition, establishing its relationship to classical rhetoric, medieval homiletics, and twentieth century American religious studies. Bell’s regional, working-class dialect and his frequently intervening anecdotes establish an earthy authenticity. The qualities of his language also make his italicized speeches invisibly sermonic. They appear to be simply the ramblings of a character with a colorful past until they are examined collectively. Together they comprise a dramatic story of a war of spiritual proportions. Yet shifting gears from rhetorical form to rhetorical theory, Bell's collected fragments in *No Country* also prove sermonic in another sense.

Sheriff Bell’s attitude toward American culture shares a conservative and reactionary quality with the writing of Richard Weaver, a scholar of rhetoric at the University of Chicago during the 1940s and 1950s. Weaver belonged to the academic “New Conservative” movement, influenced by the New Critics and Southern Agrarian principles of Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, and John Crowe Ransom, under whom Weaver studied. Weaver’s life and research bear comparison to Sheriff Bell’s sermonic language. In Weaver’s essay "Language is Sermonic," he asserts that, "We are all of us preachers in private or public capacities. We have no sooner uttered words than we have given impulse to other people to look at the world, or some small part of it, in our way" (1360). Similar to Hayden White's concept of history, Weaver’s essay suggests a theory of linguistics concentrated on the moralizing impulse. In opposition to the positivistic and empirically-obsessed academic culture around him, Weaver asserts that, "if there is anything that is going to keep on defying positivistic correlation, it is this subjectively born, intimate, and value-laden vehicle which we call language" (1359). He expresses contempt for the "scientistic" endeavors of the academy, "a term which denotes the application of scientific assumptions to subjects which are not wholly comprised of naturalistic phenomena" (1351), and he seeks to refocus the priority system of academic thought with a concentration on the discipline of rhetoric. Rhetoric is practical, realistic, and productive, and "should be considered the most humanistic of the humanities" (1353). Weaver's language offers a scholarly justification for Bell's use of moralistic language in *No Country*.

It's not hard to imagine that Weaver the scholar and Bell the fictional sheriff would find each other compatible souls. Weaver, like Bell, investigates what he sees as a decline in the values of his culture. Rhetoric has suffered a beating in the academy, according to Weaver, because a proper understanding of it requires an accounting of less empirical human qualities, in particular purpose, virtue, and morality. In this context, Bell's layman's lamentation that "there aint nothin short of the second comin of Christ that can slow this train" (McCarthy, *No Country* 159) sounds like accidental paraphrase of Weaver's statement that, "our age has witnessed the decline of a number of subjects that once enjoyed prestige and general esteem" (1351). Weaver's project to save rhetoric and, by implication, a more humanistic worldview, is motivated by his perception that academic culture has lost its bearings: "Positivism and relativism may have rendered a certain service as devil's advocates . . . yet their position in net form is untenable" (1360). This is because they ignore "emotionality . . . aesthetic satisfaction, and . . . a yearning to be in relation with something infinite" (1352). This sentiment is certainly more historically precise and articulate than that of Bell, but the language of both demonstrates a similar conservative malaise about the state of the modern world.

Considering Bell's musings in light of Weaver's work raises two distinct but parallel observations. By the terms of Weaver's argument, Bell's language must be sermonic because all authoritative language already is. Weaver writes, "The fact that leadership is a human necessity is proof that rhetoric as the attempt through language to make one's point of view prevail grows out of the nature of

man" (1358-59). This seeming truism lends depth to an understanding of Bell's relationship to power and language. Bell is a sheriff; as such, his authority as an enforcer of the law is doubled by the fact that he governs other officers. Weaver's wedding of social and civil authority through the offices of rhetoric helps explain why Bell's colloquial and imprecise language can still be considered sermonic even though it does not come from a preacher or espouse religious doctrine.

Secondly, Bell and Weaver view themselves as members of a moral minority, characterized in part by their ability to stand witness to the crumbling of civilization. As caricatures, they come off as old men complaining about "kids these days," but understood more rhetorically, they both resort to the structure of the Christian sermon as a system that helps express their frustration. While Bell struggles to name and understand the rising tide of violence and greed caused by the drug trade, Weaver combats the rise of academic relativism. In other words, the environments of Weaver and Bell determine their structure; they resort to using language to stave off the erosion of a set of essentialist beliefs. Weaver's essay displays a reflexive quality because in the process of discussing the topic of rhetoric generally, it reveals its own adversarial orientation toward the current state of academic discourse. Weaver proves his own thesis about the moralizing nature of language by engaging in just that activity – preaching – to make his point. Weaver's conservative essentialism mirrors and provides academic depth to Bell's sermon. Weaver argues what he calls a "primary truth," that "man is not nor ever can be . . . a depersonalized thinking machine. His feeling is the activity in him most closely related to what used to be called his

soul" (1360). Weaver's embattled tone resonates with Bell's anxieties about the soulless violent criminals he incarcerates, and, on the strength of Weaver's arguments about rhetoric, we can pronounce Bell a preacher, whether or not Bell is conscious of the fact. In addition, Weaver's connecting of language to an overarching sermonic purpose reveals more distinctly the conservative orientation of Bell's narrative and its relationship to Christian rhetoric.

2: Moral resistance and Gnostic despair

The pattern and tone of Bell's discourse, combined with his appeal to theology, justify an interpretation of his narrative as sermonic. Bell is fighting a losing battle and employs the weary rhetoric of generational anxiety and decline. As a Christian, a lawman, and a World War II veteran with a blue-collar work ethic, Bell identifies with and ennobles the struggles of his forebears. He declaims what he perceives as a steadily eroding set of virtues. He sees the world around him in conflict with his moralizing framework, and he perceives that the practice of moral behavior is waning: "Young people anymore they seem to have a hard time growin up," he muses, though "I don't know why" (158). The rapid moral decline of his country and, specifically, his region of southwest Texas, are truths he cannot avoid: "I know as certain as death that there aint nothin short of the second comin of Christ that can slow this train" (158). Some of his judgments betray a stubborn Luddite ring: "I dont know that law enforcement benefits all that much from new technology" (62). The bulk of his observations,

however, derive from principles that provide Bell with a sense of moral consistency. These principles radiate from an undefined version of Protestant Christianity that informs Bell's judgments but prevents him from reaching religious closure.

Bell's understanding of Christianity is simple and generic. It evokes a dualistic belief in God and Satan that is stripped of the doctrine commonly associated with denominational belief. Bell cannot "recall that I ever give the good Lord all that much cause to smile on me. But he did" (91). Bell’s humility, which originates in part from his perceived failure in war, in law enforcement, and in marriage grounds his adherence to a Christian framework of sin and righteousness. Bell's understanding of God, Heaven, and Hell enables him to see opportunities for both punishment and forgiveness in the details of his life.

Bell colors the concrete realities around him with metaphysical shades ranging from superlative purity (as in the case of his wife) to absolute depravity (as in case of Anton Chigurh). His language often calls attention to these metaphysical and moral extremities: "A crooked peace officer is a damnable abomination" (216), he claims after revealing that some of his colleagues have found ways to benefit financially from the drug trade. Later he hypothesizes that, "If you were Satan and you were settin around tryin to think up somethin that would just bring the human race to its knees what you would probably come up with is narcotics" (218). These reflections permit Bell to align the enemies of his profession, his own enemies, with Christian embodiments of pure evil. Additionally, Bell connects police work to the work of God: "You think about a job

where you have pretty much the same authority as God and there is no requirements put upon you and you are charged with preservin nonexistent laws and you tell me if that's peculiar or not" (64). When Bell attends the state execution of the nineteen-year-old he sent to prison, "people just got up and filed out. Like out of church or something" (64). Even though Bell does not particularly care for the death penalty owing to its procedural glitches, he states: "I cant say as I would rule it out altogether" (64). Thus according to Bell, the objectives of police departments and correctional facilities are similar to God's project in that both satisfy a mandate to enforce rules and even to take life. Drug-runners and bad cops are motivated by evil and condemned.

As a result of his experiences policing his county, Bell's purpose in life and his faith in humanity have been shaken. He claims that, "The world I've seen has not made me a spiritual person" (303). Bell has witnessed an excessive amount of evil, and the pervasive power of that evil seems to have convinced him of the futility of fighting against it. After refusing to run for another term as sheriff, Bell reflects on the feelings involved in his decision: "It was defeat. It was being beaten" (306). Civil and criminal laws succeed in their objective to protect and govern society ninety percent of the time, according to Bell; however, the majority of Bell's sermonic discourse is propelled by the anguish and violence that those lawless ten percent unleash on the world. His belief in law enforcement has been shaken by numerous smugglers and violent thugs, but especially by the actions of Anton Chigurh. Bell states, "I always thought I could at least someway put things right and I guess I just dont feel that way no more" (296).

Though Bell's understanding of Christianity permits knowledge of good and evil, it falls short in supplying a comforting eschatological conclusion or redemption to human agency. Though he professes his observations about evil in the world with acuity, Bell's open-ended spirituality does not hint at salvation. The spiritual uncertainty with which McCarthy closes the novel opens onto the realm of the postsecular: "The partial conversions of postsecular fiction do not deliver those who experience them from worldliness into well-ordered systems of religious belief. Instead, they tend to strand those who experience them in the ideologically mixed and confusing middle zones of the conventional conversion narrative," (J. A. McClure 4). Like many of the sermonic forms I have examined in previous chapters, Bell's sermonic language in *No Country* reads like an apology or a confessional; at the same time, considering his resignation from police work, Bell's discourse in the novel also signifies a potential conversion of sorts, from traditional Christian theology to the liminal space of postsecularity. In this light, J. A. McClure's description of contemporary postsecular American fiction provides insight into the character of Sheriff Bell. According to J. A. McClure, "Postsecular narratives affirm the urgent need for the turn toward the religious even as they reject (in most instances) the familiar dream of full return to an authoritative faith" (6). Bell's complaints about, and judgments of, contemporary America expose his turn toward the religious in that he couches his pronouncements in religious language. But Bell's theology focuses much more on the presence of evil; in the excesses of that evil, Bell is denied J. A. McClure's "familiar dream." The lawlessness of the area and the bloodthirsty greed of the criminals is a tide that,

according to Bell, will not ebb: "There is another view of the world out there and other eyes to see it and that's where this is goin . . . . Somewhere out there is a true and living prophet of destruction and I dont want to confront him" (McCarthy 4). Bell recalls his response when someone asks him if he believes in Satan: "I had to think about that . . . . [Satan] explains a lot of things that otherwise dont have any explanation. Or not to me they dont" (218). In conversation with a prosecuting attorney, Bell introduces the term *mammon* – a biblical word signifying avarice and greed – and asks the prosecutor if he understands the concept. The prosecutor replies, “I cant say as I do. I know it's in the bible. Is it the devil?" Bell retorts, "I dont know. I'm goin to look it up. I got a feelin I ought to know who it is . . . . In any case I feel I need to familiarize myself with his habits" (298-99). Bell proceeds quickly from ignorance of the term to curiosity about it, finally endowing the concept of “mammon” with a human identity, probably shaped by his knowledge of Chigurh. Focused as it is on a world replete with growing evil, Bell's theology does not mention salvation, the after-life, or any other benefit traditionally promised by Christianity to its believers.

The resignation and pessimism of Bell's discourse provides the key to understanding his reflections as a new kind of sermon. According to theologian David Ray Griffin, a postmodern approach to the problem of evil is different from earlier medieval or modern arguments which were "undermined by the problem of evil" (25) in the twentieth century. In *God and Religion in the Postmodern World* Griffin describes a theological postmodern worldview:

> The postmodern God created our present world not by calling it into existence out of absolute nothingness, but by bringing order out of a choatic realm of energetic events. This God neither controls all things nor interrupts the natural processes here and there. God does not coerce, but persuades. God does not create unilaterally, but inspires the creatures to create themselves by instilling new feelings of importance in them. (25)

Griffin's hypothesis of a postmodern creator is illuminating to Bell's sermon. Bell finds himself stuck between traditional beliefs and postmodern experience and, though the worldview he constructs does not offer him spiritual comfort, it is compatible with contemporary theoretical and theological attempts to reconcile belief with experience. Bell does not abandon his understanding of right and wrong, he simply refuses to participate in guarding, for others, the boundary between them. Where he fails, in his own eyes, as a lawman, he succeeds in his vocalization of postmodern theological anxiety.

Discussion of postsecularity is a recent academic development, but the theology underlying Bell's worldview, (a worldview also represented in other McCarthy novels), reflects ancient theological tensions in Christianity. Several McCarthy scholars have noted the tendency toward Gnosticism in his novels. Certainly Gnosticism is more polymorphous and less doctrinally centered than orthodox Christianity, but it existed in various forms before Christianity and influenced several sects of early Christian-Gnostic blends in the first, second,

and third centuries after Christ. In *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, Steven Frye describes Gnosticism as having

> emerged from a metaphysical conception that asserts that human souls are trapped in a material world dominated by archons, lesser gods of malevolence and brutality that created man in order to trap and contain elements of divine substance . . . . Release and apprehension of the divine Good . . . are achieved only through *gnosis*, which is direct experience or knowledge of God. (83)

McCarthy's implied reference to Gnostic symbology is well documented, but nowhere more clearly elaborated than in Leo Daugherty's analysis of McCarthy's nineteenth century borderland epic, *Blood Meridian*. This novel concludes with an epilogue, an archaic folktale with no obvious bearing on the the previous narrative. It depicts a nameless figure digging holes and igniting fires within the holes. Behind him, a collection of wanderers shuffle across the landscape, crossing the holes the man has left. The single paragraph of text confounds readers, for it offers no easy answers as to its purpose. The nameless figures performing mechanical, ritual activity seem to ensure that the passage is allegorical, but in reference to what? Daugherty interprets *Blood Meridian's* epilogue as a parable of the "good god" of Gnostic belief who hides divine sparks of truth in the ground for humanity to find. Daughterty observes that while “most thoughtful people have looked at the world they lived in and asked How did evil get into it, the Gnostics have looked at the world and asked, How did *good* get into it” (162). The digging man in *Blood Meridian*'s epilogue satisfies a

Gnostic reading of the novel also compatible with other McCarthy novels, namely, that evil comprises much more of our present reality than good, and that what good can be found is hidden.[22]

The cosmology of Bell's sermonic discourse also bears resemblance to these Gnostic theologies in that it does not focus on the centrality of a salvific god. Instead, Bell describes a world of dualistic control, one in which evil may eventually triumph. Transcendence, a process required to surmount spiritual obstacles common to Christian and non-Christian theologies, does not clearly factor into Bell's understanding. He recognizes traditional concepts of good and evil, and even, at one point, Christ, but Bell's language trembles with disturbance over the beating that conservative social values have received at the hands of the base, the violent, and the greedy. Bell, in true Gnostic fashion, has tried to follow a generous and compassionate path in the completion of his duties as sheriff: "If I've tried to cultivate anything, it's been that. I think we are all of us ill prepared for what is to come . . . And whatever comes my guess is that it will have small power to sustain us" (295). In making this claim, Bell seems to represent the Gnosticism, described by Elaine Pagels, that competed for supporters with orthodox Christianity in the first and second century after Christ. According to Pagels, the Gnostics of the early Christian period advised

---

[22] Discussions of the digging man and his buried spark also bear direct relevance two other scenes in McCarthy's fiction. At the end of *No Country for Old Men,* Sheriff Bell recounts a dream of his father carrying a fire horn into the mist. In McCarthy's most recent novel, *The Road*, the father and son often discuss "the fire" that they carry, in reference to their own goodness or humanity. Much more can be made of McCarthy's use of fire and the Gnostic influences throughout his work, but they belong to another project.

> that each person practice self-examination and look for such potential sources of evil as envy, lust, anger, in his or her own intentions, words, and acts . . . This suggests that [Gnostic] Valentinian Christians indeed may have rejected the bishop's commands, ignored community regulations, and followed their inner guidance, insisting that moral acts are essentially private matters that every person . . . must deal with independently. (*Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* 72)

Sheriff Bell does not mention attending a church, and he does not subscribe to the Christian narrative of conversion. He faces down evil in a private way; sometimes he ignores regulations and keeps his own council. Whether by questioning the supremacy of God or by assigning a superlatively powerful roll to evil in the world, Bell's sermon expresses theological anxiety, an anxiety shared by both postmodern theological worldviews and early Gnostic theology. Traces of J. A. McClure's description of contemporary postsecular fiction, Griffin's description of postmodern Christian theology, and the Gnostic worldview at the birth of Christianity reside in Bell's discourse. Each concept suggests anxious perforations or uncertainties in the stable presentation of traditional Christianity. Whether by reminding us of the non-orthodox versions of early Christianity, or by refracting contemporary academic treatment of religious ideas, Bell's dogmatic uncertainty does not renounce or directly challenge traditional Christian practice. Instead, Bell drags theology and rhetoric across major ideological boundaries -- between pagan and Christian, between traditional Christianity and postmodern

academic skepticism -- to form a new, albeit pessimistic, worldview. Such hybridization lends a postsecular quality to the language of characters in contemporary American fiction when they try to articulate belief. As Weaver asserts, all language is sermonic, and the words of these characters – whether in the fiction of Updike, Morrison, Erdrich, or McCarthy – is probingly so. But the sermons, in light of postsecular plurality and ambivalence, are much more personal, less emphatic than the content or purpose of the traditional sermon which seeks to promote a defined theological reality. They suggest an absent, or at least a reluctant, sphere of theological influence. McCarthy's fiction, and specifically his presentation of Bell, provides a clear demonstration of a new theological hybridity wrapped in the language of the Christian sermon.

Jay Ellis agrees, in *No Place for Home*, that Sheriff Bell's psychology is an embattled one and that Bell remains committed to entrenched ideas that leave him dissatisfied. Ellis defines Bell as strongly conservative, reactionary, and a "grumpy old man"; Bell's discourse is a jeremiad and a confessional lament. In this light, Ellis questions the construction of Bell's monologues. After attending to typographical and genre related matters, Ellis asks "What is the deeper nature of Bell's italicized monologues?" (243) and proceeds to draw deeper textual parallels between the figure of Bell and the figure of God in the Bible's book of Jeremiah. "Bell is a model for the god in McCarthy's philosophy; a slightly doddering figure old before his time . . . ultimately worried that . . . his people have lost their way -- they have forgotten to listen to him" (245). Bell represents a figure of ultimate authority who has abdicated his throne.

I suggest, in contrast, that Bell's postsecular sermon in *No Country* requires a new reading of the text. In light of McCarthy's shift in style, from the highly esoteric and philosophical language in the bulk of his novels to the simple and cinematic development in *No Country*, Bell's sermon in the novel indicates something more complicated happening under the suface. Bell's sermonic sections suggest that the "young man book", as Ellis calls it (the story of Llewelyn Moss's flight from Anton Chigurh) represents Bell's attempts to imagine, justify, and understand a story which challenges his faith but with which he has no direct experience. In fact, Moss and Chigurh are static characters; they experience no meaningful transformation or epiphany. They act archetypally, like chess pieces in Bell's imagined spiritual conflict between good and evil, pieces which he himself has fashioned out of the simple, conservative, and starkly defined theology to which he adheres throughout his sermonic fragments.

Every scholar and book reviewer who addresses *No Country* recognizes its numerous stylistic and thematic differences from McCarthy's previous work. Steven Frye acknowledges that "some may consider the simplicity in style that characterizes [*No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*] as a concession to the mass market" (153), even though he disagrees with this characterization of the novel. Ellis admits that, "in one reading, this novel simply seemed a failure, a tossed-off screenplay barely redacted into a novel" (*No Place* 226). He recalls his concern, at the time, that McCarthy's skills as an author were waning. "But then I reread it," Ellis states, adding that "everything about this book seems one way, but then does not" (236). Lydia Cooper's impression of the novel is more

objective, but still recognizes "the striking difference between McCarthy's typically dense prose style and the prose style in *No Country for Old Men"* (42). These three scholars, who have authored the three most thorough academic treatments of the novel to date, all find McCarthy's experimentation with form and genre in *No Country* valuable in their analysis. Because so much of the novel operates in the negative space between expectation and delivery, between McCarthy's other works and this one, structural issues have become the first place to look for a deeper significance behind *No Country* than that of a mere crime story.

Because of the stylistic and content differences between Bell's sections and the crime story, the framework connecting the two might be easily lost. It is clear that Bell, the sermonizing sheriff, is also the sheriff involved in chasing Moss and Chigurh across the desert, but Bell's italicized sections never directly address the crime story itself. What becomes clear with more attention is the complete lack of direct experience that Bell acquires in relation to the chase. He talks to Moss once on the phone; he meets with his wife. He arrives at crime scenes after the fact, counts shell casings, and participates in the early forensics. He sees Moss's body. However, he never sees Chigurh or receives any actionable information about him. The police cannot release a description of Chigurh or connect him to any previous crimes whatsoever. Chigurh assumes a phantom-like presence in the text, and Bell's unrelated sermons portray a man whose vision of the world may require his fabrication of such a figure in order to maintain any order or understanding of the world.

Both Cooper and Ellis attend to the exaggerated or supernatural qualities of Chigurh in the novel, attributing different implications to his construction. In conjunction with Cooper's thesis that *No Country* utilizes major characteristics of the folktale, her reading of Chigurh suggests that he is like a figure from a folktale. Parallel to the trickster gods of Native American cultural folk stories, she sees Chigurh as shape-shifter or a ghost, as indeed Bell sometimes describes him. Chigurh escapes seemingly impossible scrapes with death, exhibits superhuman prowess, and speaks in metaphysical abstractions. He follows a narrative pattern and is “an instrument of an archaic type of Anglo-Saxon ‘fate’ or an arbitrary wreaker-of-havoc like Native American tricksters” (Cooper 49). Ellis defines Chigurh's construction as a function of McCarthy's use and collapse of genre. "He is himself a fetish of a villain, boiled down to a few villainish characteristics,” but "what seems a weakness in the novel here, however, proves necessary to the way it works" (“Fetish and Collapse” 137). For Ellis, because "we no longer see devils or angels in our time," (137) Chigurh is not presented in demonic terms so much as in the static villain caricature of crime stories or film noir. Because McCarthy wants to call such genre features into focus (with the "young man book") only to collapse them (in the "old man book"), Ellis interprets Chigurh's qualities as a necessary textual decision.

In contrast to these two interpretations, if we focus on the rhetoric of Bell's italicized sermonic interludes, we are encouraged to view the man-hunt narrative as the psychologically reconstructed result of a retreating conservative thinker. Bell's tendency toward moralizing about every detailed narrative he develops in

his sermons suggests a speaker who has ceased objectively evaluating his environment. Instead, he shapes the world he sees to match the principles he has been at such pains to learn throughout his life as a soldier, a lawman, and a believer. Additionally, Bell has limited direct experience with Moss and none with Chigurh; he has not seen any of the events recounted in the man-hunt narrative, only their aftermath. Thus, in using the man-hunt as the exculpatory justification of his retirement, Bell has a significant amount of his own ideology riding on how the story is told. We can see the man-hunt narrative as a result of the way that Bell *must* see the man-hunt in order to complete his sermonic objective, as explanation and excuse for a retreat from the evil of the world and an alignment with ancient ancestral communal priorities.

Bell's sermonic rhetoric does not just impact the plot of *No Country* -- it generates the plot. Bell's italicized sections begin every chapter, and by the end of the novel Moss and Chigurh have been eclipsed by Bell. Different from a dream or a fantasy, the narrative of the story has become Bell's version of the truth. He must view Chigurh as a merciless killer and Moss as a noble but bungled thief when in fact, there is not much evidence within Bell's experience to make these predictions. Attending to the postsecularity of Bell’s sermon illuminates that his goal is to retreat from the extremity of evil, if not with honor, then at least with explanation. Bell's resignation from law enforcement is an intensely personal one, but it is offered to his audience as a warning against continued moral decay. His sermon is an admonition against greed and violence,

and his abandonment of the role of authority serves as a consequence of that depravity.

Conclusion: Sermons, Confessions, and Revealing the Invisible

It is a Western and postmodern response to see the language that religion employs as malleable and opportunistic, mainly because language is one of the central preoccupations in postmodern thought. In the face of extreme postmodern suspicion of Truth Claims and stable history, the sermonic act is opportunistic and every preacher is a huckster. Postsecular studies in a variety of fields certainly derive from such postmodern suspicions, but they take a more nuanced approach to the practice of religion. Rather than accepting religious claims and practices or discounting them, a postsecular thinker approaches the field of religion as a biologist might approach a mutated colony or an astronomer an exploded galaxy. He pursues the form that religious or spiritual practices take after postmodernism's failed attempt to force them into extinction.

What all of this means to contemporary fiction is multiform, but one advantage of the new academic engagement with religious and spiritual language is the cross-disciplinarity it encourages between literature and rhetoric. Novels employ, as Bakhtin writes, "the internal stratification of language . . . its social heteroglossia and the variety of individual voices in it" making of those elements "authentic novelistic prose" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 264*)*. In the blended and shifting voices of the novels studied here, multiple strata appear, some with more intentionally rhetorical goals than others. Of course, we can see the fiction of any author as her own form of rhetoric, but within the system of the novel, even one character can adopt a variety of voices, some consciously

persuasive and others not. For example, the narrative portion of *No Country for Old Men* that tells the story of Llewellyn Moss and Anton Chigurh is the most removed and objective voice in any novel in this study. However, that voice is bookended throughout by the anecdotal musings of Sheriff Bell, whose vested interest in justifying his resignation generates and controls that narrative objectivity. Bell's rhetorical goals require, I have argued, a new way to understand the novel as a whole – an insight with both literary and rhetorical consequences. Similarly, the multivocality of *Beloved* produces voices both consciously rhetorical and personal. Every character has a motive and varying degrees of rhetorical awareness: Sethe's discourse on "rememory" is personal but also a method of instructing her daughter; Paul D.'s language persuades Sethe, by the end of the novel, to rely on her own goodness. Only Baby Suggs, however, addresses a crowd with a specific and formal rhetorical goal in mind. Rhetoric can operate beneath the surface throughout any novel, but it operates in a unique way within contemporary American novels that express a religious or spiritual dimension.

A common quality of the sermons in these novels is their confessional nature. Traditional Christian sermons and the practice of Christian confession are activities that require a figure of authority and an audience willing to submit to that authority. Throughout this project I have called the traditional sermonic moment vertical for two reasons: it is usually performed from above its audience – a pulpit or stage – and it assumes that the doctrinal and moral status of the preacher is higher (more informed and also closer to God) than the congregation.

Postsecular sermons, we have seen, disrupt this orientation in that the preacher speaks or writes from a common position and the discourse either seeks empathy or turns inward. This rhetorical movement is horizontal in that it ignores the hierarchy. In each of the postsecular sermonic moments in this study, the sermon exposes or is motivated by the vulnerabilities – the anxieties, guilt, anger, or desperation – of the preacher. In this sense, each postsecular sermonic artifact is confessional.

In *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Michel Foucault defines confession as a "ritual . . . where articulation alone . . . produces, in the person who articulates it, intrinsic modifications: it makes him innocent, it redeems him, purifies him, promises him salvation" (82-83). In the postsecular environment of some contemporary American fiction, religious authority deteriorates, and characters must orient themselves anew to ideas like divinity, sin, guilt, and salvation. Each of the characters in this project comes from a religious background, but has been disturbed from a place of spiritual comfort, or at least stasis. Rev. Marshfield is discovered as an adulterer; Baby Suggs struggles to overcome the fury of slavery; Pauline abandons her child; and Sheriff Bell retreats from the violence of the drug war. Each character desires overtly or implicitly to heal wounds or to escape guilt. Just as in Foucault's definition of confession, these characters desire redemption, innocence, and purity. The problem in a postsecular landscape is understanding the source of such redemption. Purity is more difficult to define when the model of purity is absent or variable. In a traditional Christian environment, these characters might crave a

confession or, in a psychotherapeutic sense, a therapy session. Instead, their desire to confess is framed like a sermon because they do not recognize another human authority. They assume both the role of confessor and preacher in a rhetorical performance and investigation of their own uncertainties.

I have purposely stretched the definition of sermon to include any form of address, spoken or written, which works toward a moral conclusion and maintains some or all of the the observable rhetorical variables of the traditional sermon. Or, we might say, they gesture toward those variables, but out of structural habit. The preacher desires a sermonic ethos, but delivers an altered message to an altered audience. Postsecular sermons have an intended congregation, but it is harder to define than the congregation of a traditional sermon. In the case of Baby Suggs's sermon in *Beloved*, the congregation shares the experience of slavery and racism but not a collection of theological principles. Out of that shared experience, Baby Suggs preaches a theology of the body that unites, at least in the Clearing, a community of different denominational beliefs. In the cases of Marshfield, Pauline, and Bell, the postsecular preacher crafts his or her sermon to an imagined congregation. Their sermonic acts revise Christian concepts for new uses – whether to gain status or justify behaviors. However, they appeal to an ultimate reality – Marshfield and Pauline to a new Christ and Bell to a flagging sense of moral awareness – and they elaborate on the "truths" they feel they have learned from that source.

In current academic media discussion of the postsecular has not resulted yet in a unified set of principles. Habermas, a sociologist, uses the concept as a

hopeful solution, in global politics, to the fundamentalism practiced by both religious extremists and ardent secularists. J. A. McClure celebrates what he sees as the energetic regeneration of religious approaches in fiction and theory. He defends the return to "religiously inflected beliefs and practices" in the practice of "postsixties literature" as consistent and progressive ("Do They Believe in Magic" 129). Connolly sees in postsecularity the expression of a pluralism he feels will most benefit democratic societies. Gregor McLennan, in a recent article titled "The Postsecular Turn," hypothesizes that the concept of the postsecular is actually a new packaging of the secular thesis, an academic way to maintain the priorities of secular society while engaging, artificially, with the goals of religious institutions. "It is more appropriate," McLennan writes, "to regard postsecular reflexive enquiries as *intra*-secularist rather than *anti*-secularist" (4). What is sure is that academic conversation about postsecularity is growing. In a recent posting to the Social Science Research Council's blog *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion and the Public Sphere,* John D. Boy provides a snapshot of the term's contemporary usage:

> For over a decade now, the concept [of postsecularity] has been appearing at an ever increasing rate in academic debates in a number of different areas . . . A few months ago, I tried to get as comprehensive an overview as possible and found that the concept has been used in cultural and literary studies, theology, philosophy, sociological theory and the sociology of religion, political theory, postcolonial thought, feminist thought, and even in urban studies.

> Reflecting the challenging reality of interdisciplinary work, some of the recurring themes in discussions of the postsecular are exploration, mapping, positionings, going "beyond" something, or being "between" two things.

Boy's attempt to frame the term met with resistance from Vincent Pecora, who asserts in "The Post-Secular: A Different Account" that Boy's definition does not provide theorists anything new or useful. Pecora suggests an alternate understanding of the term, derivative of Heideggerian philosophy. We know from decades of theory that academic wrangling over a term like "postmodern" only made that concept more significant, even if it did not lend to the term a consistent usage.

Political scientists and philosophers can argue over whether the postsecular behaviors exist or whether those goals are worth pursuing. The beauty of the situation for literary scholars is that the postsecular describes an artifact that we can already observe. While it is the purview of departments of sociology or public policy to test the efficacy of "postsecular approaches" to contemporary affairs, literary scholars have the text. The novels of Morrison and McCarthy, for instance, re-fashion religious and spiritual worldviews that contain within them anxieties about previous religious practices. A thematic preoccupation with religious rituals and spiritual beliefs is undeniable in their novels, and those preoccupations exist in contradiction to extreme versions of the secularization thesis in academia. Thus, whether the real-world solutions provided by a postsecular approach are feasible or politically helpful is not a

question for literary scholarship. Instead, studying the structure and content of sermons in contemporary American novels yields valuable insights on the particular orientation of literature toward the secular or the transcendent. A postsecular literary awareness is helpful in its ability to see past the bias of the secular thesis. Theologian Charles Taylor imagines such a future for the application of the "post-secular" in *A Secular Age*. He uses the term to designate "a time in which the hegemony of the mainstream master narrative of secularization will be more and more challenged" as opposed to making a return to traditional religious practices (534).

Sermons are unique texts in which to study the development of postsecular tendencies because, traditionally, they have demonstrated a particular structure and content. In contemporary novels that content represents a new postsecular inflection, but the structure remains. My approach to the unique rhetorical situation of the sermon can be usefully explained with a thought project.

Imagine that an invisible table exists in a room. We can gather all of the empirical data about the table that we desire – its dimensions, texture, flexibility. We can describe the table with words, but in doing so, we are only going to stir the curiosity of others until we show the table to them. Indeed, showing the table will be an impossibility, but we could lead someone to an experience with the table. However, after a few of these interactions, we might decide that the best thing to do in order to prove the table's visible existence is to throw a sheet over it. Suddenly, its dimensionality will be revealed. Others will be able to understand

it as a table because its visible nature will compare to other tables that they have seen.

Further, imagine that someone begins writing on the cloth. She might begin with its dimensions, or a note or two about its other physical properties in order that others may know about them without directly experiencing them (i.e., lifting up the cloth and running and touching its surface). This may be another way to convey useful information about the table, second to the visible revelation of its shape. Now, when people view the table, they can “know” its dimensions and more of its qualities through language. The tablecloth will provide the structure of this form of communication, for it will dictate the boundaries of the display space, the amount of words that will fit; and the words on the cloth will provide the content.

Finally, we can imagine that, over time, the decoration of the cloth might get more elaborate. The tablecloth may be given a pattern. The words on the tablecloth might have less to do with the table than with other things an author may want to communicate. Different sides of the tablecloth might be given different rhetorical functions – certain information on the top, other information on the left side, etc. The display space could retain the intention of communicating information about the table, but those words could ascribe new qualities to the table that, perhaps, do not exist. Or the situation could be altered simply by replacing the invisible table with a traditional one, for viewers may still believe, because of the language or designs on the tablecloth, that the table beneath the cloth is, in fact, invisible.

The metaphor of the invisible table becomes more applicable if the table represents some invisible reality – God, for instance. The language on the tablecloth conveys information or opinion about that invisible reality. It can affect a scientific, empirical quality; it can communicate some moral message relevant to the God it attempts to reveal; or it can veer toward an artistic representation. The language on the cloth can endeavor to tell the "truth," as perceived by the author, or it can be full of willful manipulations. The message on the cloth is not far removed from the field of advertising, and all of the economic and political baggage drawn behind it, but for two distinct differences. The tablecloth and its message are more like the sermon because they conform to a certain (rhetorical) shape and because they capture in language the existence of something unseen. Traditionally, we know a sermon when we hear one, whether originating from the pulpit on Sunday or delivered by a parent to a curfew-breaking teenager, and we know that it gestures toward some unseen dimension of divinity or morality. We have become used to the idea that political speeches are different from sermons, but often these operate in similar ways in the United States. They use an ancient collection of rhetorical strategies to prompt agreement with an ideal or moral cause. Contemporary American fiction continues to find the sermon useful. In extension of the metaphor, it continues to reveal the dimensions of an invisible table with a cloth. Instead of the traditional decorations or descriptions, it has inscribed new patterns and experiences that can best be described as postsecular.

Works Cited

Anderson, David E. “On Easter and Updike.” *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly.* 7 Apr 2009. Web. 20 Feb. 2011.

Aristotle. *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*. Trans. George Kennedy. New York: Oxford UP, 2007. Print.

Augustine. *Confessions*. Trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1992. Print.

---. “On Christian Doctrine (De Doctrina Christiana).” *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*. 2nd ed. Ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001. 456-85. Print.

“Authors: View from the Catacombs.” *Time* 26 Apr 1968. Web. 17 May 2011.

Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhaĭlovich. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981. Print.

Bizzell, Patricia, and Bruce Herzberg. *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*. 2nd ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001. Print.

Bloom, Harold. *John Updike: Modern Critical Views*. New York: Chelsea House, 1988. Print.

Boy, John D. “What We Talk About When We Talk About the Postsecular.” *Imminent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere* 15 Mar 2011. Web. 1 April 2011.

Burke, Kenneth. *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1970. Print.

---. *A Grammar of Motives*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1969. Print.

Cameron, Averil. *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1991. Print.

Caplan, Harry. "Classical Rhetoric and the Mediaeval Theory of Preaching." *Classical Philology* 28.2 (1933): 73-96. Print.

Connolly, William E. *Why I Am Not a Secularist.* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999. Print.

Connolly, William E., and Samuel A. Chambers and Terrell Carver. *William E. Connolly: Democracy, Pluralism and Political Theory*. London: Routledge, 2008. Print.

Cooper, Lydia R. "'He's a Psychopathic Killer, but So What?': Folklore and Morality in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*." *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature* 45.1 (2009): 37-59. Print.

Daugherty, Leo. "Gravers False and True: Blood Meridian as Gnostic Tragedy." *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*. Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 1999. 159-74. Print.

DeBellis, J. *The John Updike Encyclopedia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000. Print.

Detweiler, Robert. *Breaking the Fall: Religious Readings of Contemporary Fiction*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989. Print.

---. *John Updike*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972. Print.

Dobbs, Cynthia. “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: Bodies Returned, Modernism Revisited.” *African American Review* 32.4 (1998): 563-78. Web. 18 Dec 2010.

Duvall, John N. “Conclusion: U(pdike) & P(ostmodernism).” *The Cambridge Companion to John Updike*. Ed. Stacey Michele Olster. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2006. 162-76. Print.

Eckstein, Lars. “A Love Supreme: Jazzthetic Strategies in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.” *African American Review* 40.2 (2006): 271-83. Print.

Eddy, Beth. *The Rites of Identity: The Religious Naturalism and Cultural Criticism of Kenneth Burke and Ralph Ellison*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2003. Print.

Ellis, Jay. “Fetish and Collapse in *No Country for Old Men*.” *Cormac McCarthy*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House P, 2002. 133-70. Print.

---. *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage International, 1995. Print.

Erdrich, Louise. *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse: A Novel*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2009. Print.

---. *Tracks: A Novel.* New York: Henry Holt, 1988. Print.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978. Print.

Friedman, Susan Stanford. “Identity Politics, Syncretism, Catholicism, and Anishinabe Religion in Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*.” *Religion & Literature* 26.1 (1994): 107-33. Print.

Frye, Steven. *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*. Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 2009. Print.

Genter, Robert. “Toward a Theory of Rhetoric: Ralph Ellison, Kenneth Burke, and the Problem of Modernism.” *Twentieth Century Literature* 48.2 (2002): 191-214. Print.

Griesinger, Emily. “The Shape of Things to Come: Toward an Eschatology of Literature.” *Christianity and Literature* 53.2 (2004): 203-31. Print.

Griffin, David Ray. *God and Religion in the Postmodern World: Essays in Postmodern Theology*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1989. Print.

Habermas, Jürgen. *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010. Print.

---. *“*A ‘Post-Secular’ Society – What Does That Mean?” *Reset Dialogues on Civilizations.* Foundation Reset, 16 Sept. 2008. Web. 10 Dec. 2010

Hall, Cheryl. “Beyond the ‘Literary Habit’: Oral Tradition and Jazz in *Beloved*.” *Melus* 19.1 (1994): 89-95. Web. 18 Dec 2010.

Hessler, Michelle R. “Catholic Nuns and Ojibwa Shamans: Pauline and Fleur in Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*.” *Wicazo Sa Review* 11.1 (1995): 40-45. Web. 23 Dec 2010.

Hubbard, Dolan. *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1996. Print.

Hughes, Sheila Hassell. “Tongue-Tied: Rhetoric and Relation in Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*.” *Melus* 25.3/4 (2000): 87-116. Print.

Hum, Stephen. “’When We Were No People, Then We Were a People’: Evangelical Language and the Free Blacks of Philadelphia in the Early Republic.” *A Mighty Baptism: Race, Gender, and the Creation of American Protestantism.* Ed. Susan Juster and Lisa McFarlane. New York: Cornell UP. 235-58. Print.

Hungerford, Amy. *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion Since 1960*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2010. Print.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988. Print.

Jay, Elisabeth. “‘Who Are You Gentle Reader?’: John Updike -- *A Month of Sundays* (1975).” *Literature & Theology: An International Journal of Religion, Theory, and Culture* 19.4 (2005): 346-54. Print.

Johnson, Robert K. “John Updike’s Theological World.” *Christian Century* 94 (1977): 1061-66. Print.

Judy, Ronald A.T. “Ralph Ellison: The Next Fifty Years.” *Boundary 2* 30.2 (2003): 1-4. Print.

Kennedy, George A. *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times.* Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1999. Print.

Keresztesi, Rita. “Ethnic Modernism.” *A Companion to the Modern American Novel 1900-1950*. Ed. John T. Matthews. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. 324-52. Print.

Lakeland, Paul. *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age*. Minneapolis: Fortress P, 1997. Print.

McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian, or, The Evening Redness in the West*. New York: Vintage, 1992. Print.

---. *No Country for Old Men*. New York: Knopf, 2005. Print.

---. *The Crossing*. New York: Vintage, 1995. Print.

McClure, John A. *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison.* Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 2007. Print.

McClure, John S. *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice P, 2001. Print.

McLennan, Gregor. “The Postsecular Turn.” *Theory, Culture & Society*. 27.4 (2010): 3-20. Print.

Melton, J. Gordon. *Encyclopedia of Protestantism.* New York: Facts on File, 2005. Print.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved: A Novel*. New York: Vintage, 2004. Print.

---. *Paradise*. New York: Knopf, 1998. Print.

Neary, John. *Like and Unlike God: Religious Imaginations in Modern and Contemporary Fiction.* Atlanta, GA: Scholars P, 1999. Print.

Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2004. Print.

Nunly, Jan. “Thoughts of Faith Still Infuse Updike’s Novels.” *Conversations with John Updike*. Ed. John Updike & James Plath. Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 1994. 248-59. Print.

Page, Philip. *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1995. Print.

Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Random House, 1979. Print.

---. *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*. New York: Random House, 1988. Print.

Pecora, Vincent. “The Post-Secular: A Different Account.” *Imminent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere* 22 Mar 2011. Web. 1 April 2011.

Peterson, Nancy J. “History, Postmodernism, and Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*.” *PMLA* 109.5 (1994): 982-94. Web. 22 Dec 2010.

Reynolds, David S. “From Doctrine to Narrative: The Rise of Pulpit Storytelling in America.” *American Quarterly* 32.5 (1980): 479-98. Print.

Schiff, James A. *John Updike Revisited*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998. Print.

Silko, Leslie M. “Here’s an Odd Artifact for the Fairy Tale Shelf.” *Studies in American Indian Literature.* 10.4 (1986): 174-84.

Stephen, Katherine. “John Updike Still Finds Things to Say About Life, Sex, and Religion.” *Conversations with John Updike*. Ed. John Updike & James Plath. Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 1994. 186-91. Print.

Tally, Justine. *Toni Morrison’s* Beloved*: Origins*. New York: Routledge, 2009. Print.

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2007. Print.

Taylor, Dennis. "The Need for a Religious Literary Criticism." *Seeing into the Life of Things: Essays on Literature and Religious Experience*. Ed. John L. Mahoney. New York: Fordham UP, 1998. 3-30. Print.

Updike, John. *A Month of Sundays*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1991. Print.

---. "Hawthorne's Creed." *Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism*. Hopewell, NJ: Ecco P, 1994. 73-80. Print.

---. *Rabbit, Run*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1996. Print.

Waller, Gary. "Stylus Dei or the Open-Endedness of Debate?: Success and Failure in *A Month of Sundays*." *Critical Essays on John Updike*. Ed. William R. Macnaughton. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982. 269-80. Print.

Weaver, Richard. "Language Is Sermonic." *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*. Ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001. 1351-60. Print.

Webb, Stephen. "Writing as a Reader of Karl Barth: What Kind of Religious Writer Is John Updike Not?" *John Updike and Religion: The Sense of the Sacred and the Motions of Grace*. Ed. James Yerkes. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999. 145-61. Print.

White, Hayden. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 (1980): 5-27. Print.

Winsbro, Bonnie C. *Supernatural Forces: Belief, Difference, and Power in Contemporary Works by Ethnic Women*. Amhurst, MA: U of Massachusetts P, 1993. Print.

Wood, Ralph C. *Literature and Theology.* Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2008. Print.