ABSTRACT

Being the Body: Feasting, Fasting, and Disordered Eating in the Life of the Church

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According to Christian tradition, inappropriate eating is the occasion of humankind's fall from communion with God and one another, even as salvation from that inevitable isolation and death is effected through a Eucharistic feast in which God offers God's very Self to satisfy human hunger, reuniting human beings to Himself and to each other. Thus it is that, in an almost primordial way, eating affects both damnation and salvation. The Christian tradition has acknowledged this phenomenon by parallel emphases on the need to penitently refrain from food as well as the need to joyously partake of food. The Church Year dramatically embodies this paradox in the form of alternating feasts and fasts. Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear it Away* and Isak Dinesen's "Babette's Feast" vividly illustrate the theological significance of feasting and fasting, both of which presuppose and expound a sacramental affirmation of the body as well as the inherent goodness of food and eating. A proper Christian understanding of feasting and fasting, therefore, especially in tandem with feminist criticism, offers a radical way of witness to a culture in which food is so problematic, weight preoccupation so commonplace, and eating disorders so prevalent.

Being the Body: Feasting, Fasting, and Disordered Eating in the Life of the Church

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

As her wedding day approaches, Marion, the heroine in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, becomes increasingly stifled and manipulated in her relationship with her would-be husband.[1] Atwood parallels that loss of autonomy with Marion's growing inability to eat and illustrates it with the novel's final image of a woman-shaped cake, which Marion offers to her fiancé to symbolize how he has attempted to consume her.[2] At a time in which the prevalence of eating disorders and weight preoccupation persists unabated, Atwood's novel proves particularly poignant, its heroine's relationship with food being one to which many women in contemporary Western society can unfortunately relate. Like many of Atwood's novels, *The Edible Woman* is highly charged politically and is in fact paradigmatic of feminist analyses of the historical and cultural influences contributing to the onset and prevalence of disordered eating. For decades feminists have been drawing critically needed attention to eating disorders as "crystallizations" of much that is wrong with our culture and as its "metaphors," pointing to anorexia in particular as illustrating, but also protesting against,

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[1]Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969).

[2]Emma Parker, "You Are What You Eat: The Politics of Eating in the Novels of Margaret Atwood," *Twentieth Century Literature*, Fall 1995. According to Parker "consumption embodies coded expressions of power" such that Marion's "non-eating is a physical expression of her powerlessness and, at the same time, a protest against that powerlessness." 349, 350.

the injustices perpetrated against women throughout history.[3] Eating disorders and weight preoccupation continue, however, to afflict millions of women, and most of them, like Marion, experience not only the suffering of the disorder itself, but also the stigma placed upon them by a society that has no ability to respond to sickness of any sort except as a threat to its vision of a universe progressively controlled by human reason and thus rid of pain and suffering.

In *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering*, Stanley Hauerwas argues this precise point. He demonstrates that, correlative to post-Enlightenment theodicies, which presume God can be known apart from a worshipping and story-telling community and which are conceived ahistorically, modern medicine "attempts to save our profoundest hopes that sickness should and can be eliminated" and "requires that we interpret all illness as pointless . . . an absurdity in a history formed by the commitment to overcome all evils that we can potentially control."[4] Although Hauerwas is criticizing contemporary attitudes toward physical illness, particularly terminal disease in children, I believe his evaluation of the ideology underwriting modern medicine applies equally to the "medicine" traditionally employed to diagnose and treat mental illnesses such as anorexia. As Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* demonstrates, mental illness, overwhelmingly associated with so-called feminine irrationality, has historically, and especially within the

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[3]See Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), which contains an essay entitled, "Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture," and see Susie Orbach, *Hunger Strike: The Anorectic's Struggle as a Metaphor for Our Age* (New York: Norton Press, 1988).

[4]Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Company, 1990), 63.

medical profession, been understood as a pointless and bizarre anomaly needing to be eliminated or at least domesticated by rational means.[5] In her essay "Whose Body is This?" Susan Bordo illustrates this perspective specifically with regard to eating disorders. She criticizes the clinical literature on the subject in that "the task of description, classification, and elaboration of 'pathology' has driven virtually all research."[6] She upbraids the medical model for the treatment of eating disorders for similarly focusing on *individual* pathology—that is, on biological abnormalities, "developmental issues, family problems, and perceptual and/or cognitive 'dysfunction'"— and overlooking the "role played by the construction of gender and other social factors."[7] The result of this is the creation of a "normative/pathological duality," wherein the pathological woman is such as a result of a multidimensional but essentially *individual* defect, her "bizarre" experience and behavior being made entirely discontinuous with that of "normal" women and conceptualized in isolation from any *social* significations.[8]

Many Christian communities, infiltrated as they so frequently are by Enlightenment assumptions, have offered little alternative to such attitudes toward mental illnesses, conceiving them as absurd and socially discordant not only in medical and psychological terms, but in spiritual terms as well. Thus, synonymous with the dominant medical language regarding eating disorders, which, according to Bordo, describes them

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[5]Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago Press, 1987).

[6]Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 49.

[7]Ibid, 45.

[8]Ibid, 45-69.

as bizarre, isolated and incongruous with their social setting, the Church frequently speaks of the mentally ill as a dreadful threat to faith (for being incompatible with its claims about a loving and a just God) or, more appallingly, as an indication of the sufferer's sin or lack of faith.[9] Blithely ignoring the Church's primary aim to absorb its members' suffering and situate it in the context of its ongoing narrative, both theoretical and practical theodicies frequently employ the language of Job's friends in relation to illness, seeking only to *explain* the "problem of suffering" so as to prove that God exists and that God is morally perfect and all-powerful. Consequently, rather than having their relationship to food and eating probed for its communicative significance in the context of their ongoing narratives and the overarching social or cultural narratives from which they form their identities, Christians afflicted with eating disorders have more frequently been dismissed as irrational creatures whose behavior is wholly meaningless, childish, or even sinful.[10]

In reaction to this situation, the work of Showalter, Bordo, and other feminist critics proves extraordinarily valuable, for it argues that eating disorders, far from being mere individual pathologies, are deeply rooted in and consistent with broad social

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[9]Perhaps the most explicit example of this perspective among Christians is found in the variously dubbed Faith Movement, for in this movement it is actually doctrinal. For an overview and critique of this movement see D.R. McConnell, *In a Different Gospel: A Historical and Biblical Analysis of the Faith Movement* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988). Especially pertinent are his chapters "The Doctrine of Faith: Faith in God Versus Faith in Self," 134-147 and "The Doctrine of Healing: Sickness, Symptoms, and Satan," 148-169. Also see Kenneth Hagin, *Having Faith in Your Faith* (Tulsa, OK: K. Hagin Publishers, 1980). Hagin is one of the most significant spokespersons and fathers of the Faith Movement.

[10]Consider, for example, the attitude (or one might simply say ignorance) of the not-surprisingly male Religion Ph.D. student who, casually broaching the topic of my paper, asked dubiously, "So, in the case of anorexia, is there really anything going on other than plain vanity?"

realities and participate decisively in the ongoing narratives of persons in relation to their communities. They suggest, for example, that the behavior of an anorexic woman is a significant, although not always conscious, form of communication or protest, a bodily representation of what many women's voices would shout had they not been silenced by an oppressive patriarchal society. In response to Joan Brumberg's, "Anorexia Nervosa Is a Disease, Not a Protest," Bordo articulates this point, claiming in contrast to Brumberg's either/or construct that the anorexic woman can be "both 'helpless and desperate' *and* locked in a struggle that has some meaning, trying to find some honor on the ruinous terms of her culture and therefore communicating an excruciating message about the gender politics that regulate our lives."[11] Thus, like Hauerwas, who argues that illness should not be regarded as a battlefield on which human beings demonstrate their rational control over nature but rather attributed meaning and purpose within an overarching social and political narrative, so these critics insist that eating disorders must be "read" within the context of gender politics, which, they contend, is supremely formative for women's identities. In addition to reinstating the notion of narrative purpose in the understanding of eating disorders, these feminist analyses are also valuable because they reclaim a largely overlooked and essentially Christian truth by recognizing the unparalleled significance of eating as an act that shapes the identity of both individuals and communities while also reflecting their orientation to one another and to the world.

While the bulk of this essay will elaborate on that truth, analyzing food and eating in theological terms and through the lenses of the Church, I will begin, however, with a brief outline of some of the most prominent feminist arguments regarding disordered

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[11]Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 65. See also, Joan Brumberg, "Anorexia Nervosa Is a Disease, Not a Protest," *Newsday*, 12 February 1985, 2.

eating, setting them up as partners in dialogue with the Christian tradition and as a sociological context within which to make the Church's language relevant. Although the feminist arguments improve our understanding and treatment of eating disorders—indeed I will employ them throughout as a supplement to my theological approach—I believe they are limited by making a gender struggle the primary if not the only overarching narrative in which eating disorders communicate or mean anything significant. While giving them their rightful voice, I will also propose, therefore, that there are women whose gendered identity is mitigated by their identity as a member of Christ's Body,[12] the Church, women who, though undeniably shaped by the immediate culture in which they live, are also formed by a culture and a story that transcends times and places. Thus, even as gender issues are carefully considered and acknowledged as having significant weight, such women's particular sufferings, whether physical or mental, should also be understood in the context of the Christian narrative and cared for by a worshiping and story-telling community. To do so requires an application of theological reflection on food, eating and embodiment to what I've argued are currently impoverished dialogues about and treatment of eating disorders as they occur among believers. Such reflection, as I broach it in the third chapter of this paper, will focus on the significance of feasting and fasting in the context of the Christian metanarrative, particularly the ways in which the Church has understood and subsequently applied to its evolving life the stories of

[12]See Galatians 3:28, "there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." However, one's identity as a gendered being and one's identity as a Christian cannot be neatly disentwined, for just as the Christianity mitigates the genderedness, so gender mitigates how one will *be* a member of the Church and how one understands his or her place in it.

humankind's fall from communion with God and Christ's institution of a way back to God in the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist, both of which, curiously, involve eating.

Hauerwas has argued, as well as demonstrated in his own work, that "the best way to learn the significance of stories is by having our attention drawn to stories through a story."[13] The Danish story-teller Isak Dinesen accomplished just this, as many of her stories overtly point to the redemptive value of narrative. She clearly understood the importance of the story as a context within which individuals discover their true selves, that is, their selves in community. She communicates this most explicitly in "The Cardinal's First Tale." Here Cardinal Salviati, a recurring figure in one of her series of stories, describes human history as the "divine art" and "the true story," one which,

> according to its essence and plan, moves and places [its characters] and goes on . . . the story will provide [the burnt offering] It provides for the hero . . . . The story will provide for the heroine . . . . The story does not slacken its speed to occupy itself with the mien or bearing of its characters, but goes on. It makes the one faithful partisan of its old mad hero cry out in awe: "Is this the promised end?"—goes on, and in a while calmly informs us: "This is the promised end."[14]

Though this "divine art" may seem "a hard and cruel game," Salviati contends, and its characters a little frightening, "there is salvation in nothing else in the universe."[15] Even what he describes as the new trend in human stories provides no substitute. "For the sake of the individual characters of the story, and in order to keep close to them and not be afraid," these "will be ready to sacrifice the story itself," and when stories are thus no

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[13]Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 13. In this book, Hauerwas employs the novel, *Watership Down* to demonstrate the possibility of stories powerfully claiming and forming a radical community.

[14]Isak Dinesen, "The Cardinal's First Tale," *Last Tales* (New York: Random House, 1957), 3-26.

[15]Ibid, 25-26.

more "it will be, at the best, a poor time, a sad time."[16] One will then be "disrobed of her story or her epos and, all naked, turned into an individual."[17] In this state, Salviati implies, there is no true knowledge of self "for within our whole universe the story only," which clothes the individual in a community, "has authority to answer that cry of heart of its characters, that one cry of heart of each of them: 'Who am I?'"[18]

Following Dinesen's and Hauerwas's examples, I will purposefully employ fiction in order to demonstrate the significance of the Christian narrative as a context within which to understand eating and its disorders and therefore form a meaningful identity for those who suffer from them. I will analyze Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear it Away* and Isak Dinesen's "Babette's Feast" as illustrations of and pointers to the theological significance of feasting and fasting and discuss how these concepts, taken together, can inform current discourse about eating disorders. Admittedly, the sources I employ illustratively in this paper are profoundly different in terms of literary genre and quality. Flannery O'Connor was convinced that if the meaning of her stories could be extracted she should not have written them at all, or in other words, that a story driven by an overt thesis is reducible to that thesis and therefore senseless as fiction. Accordingly, any meaning one might perceive in an O'Connor story is so fully embodied in that story—in the sights and sounds and other sensory details she describes—that the story is indispensable.[19] Isak Dinesen's fiction, by contrast, and in the well-worn terminology of

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[16]Ibid, 25.

[17]Ibid, 25.

[18]Ibid, 26.

[19]Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 75-76.

literary critics, often "tells" more than it "shows." Many of her stories are in fact very like fables or fairytales in their predictable irony, their dramatic polarities, and their characters' flatness and often overt moralizing. These qualities are conducive to my project, however, for providing clear, univocal illustrations of the theological concepts that are my primary subjects. Further complicating my mixed use of genre is my heavy reliance on the person of St. Catherine of Siena, for her life story, though historically verifiable, is conveyed to us most extensively in a hagiography, a text whose genre is entirely different from fiction or biography in their contemporary realizations. Hagiography is not interested in the precise facts of a person's life but in painting a picture of that person, "enlarged and simplified," so that his or her character epitomizes saintliness, providing a lesson in holiness to all.[20] I employ the example of St. Catherine, then, as it is conveyed to us in Raymond of Capua's hagiography, less as a historical figure than as a character whose life and experience prove rich with symbols and illustrations of the theological truths I wish to convey.

I admit at the outset, therefore, that the sources I use are in a literary sense incomparable, being a collection of qualitatively different fiction and a hagiography. However, each text complements the others and provides compelling illustrations of theological claims concerning the problem of embodiment. After exploring these texts, I will finally suggest some practical ways in which the Church, in tandem with feminist analyses, can offer a radical way of witness to those suffering from anorexia and related illnesses. Throughout, feasting and fasting will be my key words and alternating themes

[20]See Regis Boyer, "An Attempt to Define the Typology of Medieval Hagiography," in *Hagiography and Medieval Literature: A Symposium*, ed. Hans Bekker Nielsen and others (Odense, Denmark: Odense University Press, 1981), 27-36 for a summary of the purpose and nature of medieval hagiography.

as I highlight the significance of the Church Year, which, in its condensed reenactment of the history of God's people, provides the definitive Story in which the sick no less than the healthy find their true *telos* and thus their ultimate healing.

CHAPTER TWO

The Undoing of Flesh

Flesh is heretic.
My body is a witch.
I am burning it.

. . .

I am starved and curveless.
I am skin and bone.
She has learned her lesson.

. . .

Only a little more,
only a few more days
sinless, foodless.

. . .

Caged so
I will grow
angular and holy

past pain
keeping his heart
such company

as will make me forget
in a small space
the fall

into forked dark,
into python needs
heaving to hips and breasts
and lips and heat
and sweat and fat and greed.

Eavan Boland, "Anorexic"

Eavan Boland's poem, with its speaker's overt association of eating and the female body with *sin* in the unambiguously Christian sense, is a quintessential feminist reading of eating disordered women's behavior and levels a devastating charge against the Church. Its various articulations taken together, however, the feminist perspective on eating disorders is more nuanced than Boland's appropriately unequivocal (for agonized) speaker insists.[1] The question raising perhaps the most gradient of emphases within their discourse is whether these afflictions stem from and simply reinforce a history of disdain for the body and its appetites, or whether instead they demonstrate, as the poet Louise Glück insists, "not the soul's superiority to but its dependence on flesh" for its insistence on having its realities embodied.[2] I contend, gathering from a variety of feminist writers on the topic, that neither of these poles alone makes sufficiently intelligible the thought patterns and behaviors of eating disordered women, proposing instead that their best defining characteristic and also the heart of their suffering is the painful coexistence of and tension between the two—namely between a conventional disdain for feminine bodily vulnerability and an unconventional awareness of her self as body such that it is

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[1]For an analysis of this poem see Leslie Heywood, *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 49-55. Here Heywood compares the poem to the words of an actual patient: "My soul seemed to grow as my body waned; I felt like one of those early Christian saints who starved themselves in the desert sun. I felt invulnerable, clean and hard as the bones etched into my silhouette." 50.

[2]Louise Glück, *Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry* (Hopewell, N.J.: Ecco Press, 1994):10-11. In this portion of her autobiographical essay, Glück is referring specifically to anorexia. She notes: "its intent is not self-destructive, though its outcome so often is. Its intent is to construct, in the only way possible when the means are so limited, a plausible self […] anorexia constructs a physical sign." 10-11.

paradoxically affirmed, its language being intimately her own and intransigently defended.

The underlying constant in feminist arguments concerning the cause and meaning of disordered eating revolves around the variously nuanced soul/body dualism persistent throughout Western history and culture and still surviving today, in which construction the body is figured in an overwhelmingly negative way. Thus Bordo argues:

> what remains the constant element throughout historical variation is the construction of body as something apart from the true self (whether conceived as soul, mind, spirit, will, creativity, freedom…) and as undermining the best efforts of that self. That which is not-body is the highest, the best, the noblest, the closest to God; that which is body is the albatross, the heavy drag on realization.[3]

According to this argument, women have consistently been associated with the body, which is always the negative half of the dualism. Bordo notes, furthermore, that woman has typically been "cast in the role of the body" such that the cost to individual women is obvious: if "the body is the negative term, and if woman *is* the body, then women *are* that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death."[4] Anorexia, many feminists thus argue, is a result and reflection of this misogynistic tradition, as the women who suffer from the affliction strive to assert their mind or will over the bodies they've been conditioned to perceive as the site of all forms of vices: deception, seduction, mutability and irrationality to name a few of the most pernicious. Leslie Heywood, for example, writes, "Anorexics enact with their bodies the process that Western logic inscribes: they physically demonstrate its subtext, the horror of the female

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[3]Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 5.

[4]Ibid, 5.

flesh that is often the unconscious of discourse," and they "are 'Cartesian' in the sense of experiencing (male) mind and (female) body as entirely distinct, with the mind set up as the 'dictator' of the deceitful flesh."[5] Consequently, feminists also frequently speak of anorexia in terms of a desire to "become male," borrowing from the terminology frequently employed in the early centuries of the Christian tradition to describe a woman of extraordinary courage or strength.[6] They point to the anorexic's literal loss of her "female" body, that is, her breasts, hips, and menstrual cycles, as evidence of her unconscious striving for masculinity or at least androgyny. This results in a "freezing of the female form in a state of adolescent immaturity and powerlessness."[7]

One obvious reason why woman has been associated with body and nature and thus with the negative half of the historical dualism is the cycles according to which her body and thus her life are often unpredictably conformed—menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause. This would explain, according to feminists, the anorexic's desire to "freeze" the female form. The bleeding accompanying women's cycles has typically been perceived as especially problematic for reflecting disorder, fluxuation, uncontrollable nature, and pollution as opposed to the stability, control and purity sought by the "autonomous western man of reason."[8] Tina Beattie notes that the bleeding female body "brings us close to nature, close to the cycles and patterns of our bodily

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[5]Heywood, *Dedication to Hunger*, 4, 19.

[6]See Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 53-77.

[7]Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 84. See Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 155 for examples of actual anorexics speaking in these terms.

[8]Tina Beattie, *Woman*, New Century Theology Series (New York: Continuum Press, 2003), 121.

selves that reminds us that we are earthlings, creatures who share the animality of the natural world," and she contrasts this to the glorified "masculine" blood of "conscious martyrdom willingly chosen . . . shed not naturally but deliberately and purposefully, for some higher ideal."[9] She thus argues, in the context of religious sacrifice, where "controlled shedding of sacrificial blood" has its rightful place, the natural "out of control" bleeding woman is "out of place" and "creates symbolic confusion," especially if she were to serve as a priest. As a consequence of such "symbolic confusion," menstrual women throughout history have frequently been excluded from the ritual life of communities, including Christian ones.[10]

In addition to noting the fluidity and ambiguity of the female body as symbolically opposed to the western ideals of mindful and willful control over nature and thus as the anorexic's enemy, many feminists also argue that the fertile, sexual, and especially the pregnant female body is a threat to ever-glorified individuality and autonomy. Paraphrasing the ideas of the French feminist theorist Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Powell writes, "Unlike male subjectivity that privileges oneness or unity, the visible, and the specularisable (according to the model of the phallus), woman privileges multiplicity, ambiguity, fluidity, and touch (according to the model of the two lips)."[11] Irigaray in fact writes, "her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus,

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[9]Ibid, 120.

[10]For extensive examples and analyses of this see Kristin De Troyer, Judith A. Herbert, Judith Ann Johnson and Anne-Marie Korte, eds., *Wholly Woman, Holy Blood: A Feminist Critique of Purity and Impurity* (New York: Trinity Press International, 2003).

[11]Elizabeth Powell, "In Search of Bodily Perspective," *Being Feminist, Being Christian: Essays from Academia*, Eds, Allyson Jule and Bettina Tate Pedersen (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 81-109, 89.

within herself, she is already two—but not divisible into one(s)—that caress each other."[12] Not only anatomically does the woman figure as "multiplicity" and "reciprocity," but also, and most strikingly, in her potential or realized pregnancy, wherein she literally contains two people, or in other words, is occupied by another. The multiplicity and reciprocity represented in pregnancy continues into motherhood, and those characteristics of motherhood are clearly incompatible with the cultural ideal of autonomy and individuality. As Linda Beail aptly puts it:

> Personhood, or subjectivity, is understood in terms of a unified, self-interested rational actor; motherhood, beginning with the blurred boundaries contained in the pregnant body, is neither wholly singular nor allowing room to consider only oneself. Thus motherhood and subjectivity are inherently at odds with one another in our current cultural conceptualizations—as the title of one essay so aptly puts it, "Are Mothers Persons?"[13]

Beail proceeds to call for a removal of the "false, forced choice between personhood/subjectivity/political agency and being a mother" and the creation of a new "conceptualization of subjectivity that, particularly in light of postmodern critiques of modern individualism, is perhaps more useful and realistic."[14]

As yet, however, modern individualism—the notion of personhood as a "unified, self-interested rational actor"—persists, and, according to feminists, contributes to the anorexic's plight, for she rightly fears the violation of her subjectivity that modern conceptions of womanhood entail. Commenting at length on Hegel's theory in which

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[12]Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 24.

[13]Linda Beail, "Blessed Mother or Material Mom: Which Madonna Am I?" *Being Feminist, Being Christian: Essays from Academia*, Eds. Allyson Jule and Bettina Tate Pedersen (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 59-80, 65-66. See also Susan Bordo, "Are Mothers Persons?" in *Unbearable Weight*, 71-97.

[14]Ibid, 66.

"love is associated with the feminine, the body, and the family—which must be subordinated to and transcended by the imperatives of the masculine, the mind, and the state," Leslie Heywood in fact writes,

> Since the family is affiliated with nature, the attainment of universality and self-consciousness that is Hegel's goal for the individual, defined as male, is only possible outside of the family. As I will show, the fact that individuality and maleness continue to be linked is a key component of anorexia.[15]

Indeed, many anorexics express a fear of womanhood on account of the loss of subjectivity the "ingestion" of something other than self entails according to a culture that has taught them to conceive a "true" self as inviolate and independent. Thus Maud Ellmann, employing the free associations of an actual anorexic patient who "sees food and impregnation as identical," both being a rape of sorts, writes,

> "A man is what he is," whereas a woman always runs the risk of being more than what she is, or two-in-one. If this patient wants to be a man it is because she thinks "he does not receive and he does not give," and therefore that he can escape exchange and its concomitant dismemberment. Only by rejecting any "flow," or influence, from others, be it the "bottle" or the "child," can she preserve her body whole, her self inviolate.[16]

The anorexic's choice to reject food as a way to keep her self inviolate is no arbitrary symbol, for there is in fact nothing that so universally demonstrates human beings' interdependence as eating. As Ellmann notes,

> Food […] is originally vested in the other, and traces of that otherness remain in every mouthful . . . . From the beginning one eats for the other, from the other, with the other: and for this reason eating comes to represent the prototype of all transactions with the other, and food the prototype of every object of exchange. No one is

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[15]Heywood, 22.

[16]Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 44. Ellmann cites other examples of anorexics who conflate food and impregnation and the "self-divided, two-in-one[ness]" that they entail.

> "completely weaned," Michel Serres has argued: we all carry "a pump or a sucker, whether visible or invisible," an umbilical attachment to the other.[17]

Leon Kass similarly remarks, "eating is not a pure and self-contained activity of the agent, like running or swimming or flying; the word *eating* is also, and always, a transitive verb as well. To be eating is necessarily to be eating *something*—something *other* and *in the world*."[18]

For Kass, however, this assimilating of something *other* into ourselves in a mutually giving and taking process—which, though here it relates to eating applies equally to mutuality and interdependence in a social sense (as Kass's whole study reveals)—is a positive reality of human existence and is in fact essential for the maintenance of a truly integrated self: "the organism is never the same materially, yet it persists as the same being, and indeed precisely by means of exchanging its materials."[19] To refuse such an exchange between inside and out is essentially to submit to the "impending negation of death."[20] Thus Kass, like Patrice DiQuinzo, would call for an understanding of human subjectivity other than that conceived by modern individualism, which is essentially a "disembodied subjectivity" for viewing the body as a mere instrument for the assertion of "rational, independent self-determination and action"[21] DiQuinzo posits instead what she calls a "maternal embodied subjectivity." Paraphrasing

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[17]Ibid, 53.

[18]Leon Kass, *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 25.

[19]Ibid, 41.

[20]Ibid, 41.

[21]Patrice DiQuinzo, *The Impossibility of Motherhood: Feminism, Individualism, and the Problem of Mothering* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 7.

DiQuinzo's theorizing on this notion of embodied subjectivity, Beail writes that it "might include taking seriously the ways that the mind and the body mutually constitute one another, rather than seeing them as opposites in competition . . . understanding subjectivity as partial, fragmented, and sometimes contradictory; and recognizing the ways that subjectivity is continually being redefined and renegotiated within a set of reciprocal social relationships."[22] In this conception of subjectivity, DiQuinzo argues, the potentially or actually pregnant woman and the mother, far from being incompatible with true personhood, are in fact embodiments of the "paradigmatically human," and as a direct result of "metabolism . . ., the continual exchange of stuff between inside and out," they maintain "wholeness and identity within."[23] This would remove the debilitating "false, forced choice" commonly offered to women between being a "person" and being a mother and commonly perceived among anorexics as being an integrated self and being a fully *female* body.

Some studies of anorexia, in conjunction with explaining it as a fear of flesh and femininity, also explore the relationship between gender, self-starvation and art, particularly modern literature and literary criticism. Leslie Heywood, for example, describes the striking parallels between her experience as both an eating disordered athlete and an English student. She writes,

> I traded in the under-10-percent-body-fat coach for other "coaches" in books who could promise me no body at all. Books were clean. Pure. Hard. Masculine . . . . The very logic I had applied to my body for so many years was articulated in the premises of literary theory, of criticism, in the ways we were expected to write.[24]

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[22]Beail, 66.

[23]DiQuinzo, 245; Kass, 41.

[24]Heywood, 6.

It is not "theory per se" that Heywood subsequently criticizes, but what she calls the "anorexic aesthetic" in high modernist literature and critical discourse, which privileges "the figurative over the literal, the theoretical over the empirical, even though these are intricately related, rather than opposed."[25] According to Heywood, the "'construct your body' ethos of contemporary culture" is complicit with such literary ideals for enacting the same hierarchy on our bodies. She contends, for example, that

> Like the precedence given to figurative speech over common vernacular, [the] ideal body is more "artistic," more worked upon, than the "raw material" of the body that doesn't work out. In giving privilege to that figure by constantly working against the real body to transcend it, to change it, to overcome it by shaping it into the figurative ideal, we literally inscribe the methodology of modernist critical thinking into our flesh.[26]

Louise Glück, herself a former anorexic, illustrates this inscription vividly in an excerpt from her poem, "Dedication to Hunger," in which she recalls

> lying in bed at night
> touching the soft, digressive breasts,
> touching, at fifteen,
> the interfering flesh
> that I would sacrifice
> until the limbs were free
> of blossom and subterfuge: I felt
> what I feel now, aligning these words—
> it is the same need to perfect,[27]

Commenting on Glück's "need to perfect" "whether the text was her body or her poetry," Heywood argues that there is an "essential connection between the [high modern artist's] standards [for] 'good art' and the mind-set of the anorexic," for both demand "a rejection

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[25]Ibid, 9.

[26]Ibid, 11.

[27]Louise Glück, "Dedication to Hunger," *Descending Figure* (New York: Ecco Press, 1980), 32.

and will to eliminate the feminine, a will to transcendence, and to shape the 'base material' into a 'higher,' masculine form." She thus suggests that it is in modernism more so than in "dominant media images and beauty ideals" that we "find truth claims" that nourish anorexia. Indeed, it would be naïve to attribute anorexia merely to pop culture, especially as it occurs among educated women and women who are artists themselves.

Maud Ellmann, more than merely drawing parallels between the ideals exalted among artists and anorexics, explores what she calls a "vampiric relationship of words to flesh" among Romantic and modern writers as typified in the myth of the starving artist. According to Ellmann, this image of one being "eaten by one's own creation, sapped by writing, bled by words" is not only illustrated in a number of writers themselves, poets being "particularly susceptible," but also "typifies the literature of self-starvation."[28] She analyzes, for example, such works as Yeats's play, *The King's Threshold*, Kafka's "The Hunger Artist," and Samuel Robinson's *Clarissa*, demonstrating through them that "language and the body are locked in a struggle of attrition, in which the word is ultimately bound to triumph while the flesh is doomed to be undone."[29] According to Yeats especially, she shows, this relationship between words and flesh is represented "in terms of an economy of sacrifice," the "immolation of the body" being "rewarded by the gift of words," the creation and perfection of the work of art demanding the decreation of the body.[30] Seanchan, the legendary poet in *The King's Threshold*, for example, fasts in

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[28]Ellmann, 22, 25.

[29]Ibid, 27.

[30]Ibid, 27.

order to "vindicate the sanctity and precedence of poetry."[31] For Yeats, Ellmann contends, "the poets must be thin, because they sacrifice their flesh for words, ravaged by the body-sapping discipline of metaphor."[32] She demonstrates that, for Yeats, dearth is in fact the source of poetic vision; for he confesses that "the passions, when . . . they cannot find fulfillment, become vision" and "when I understand that I have nothing, I shall find the dark grow luminous, the void fruitful."[33]

According to Ellmann, however, to interpret the modern vampiric relationship between words and flesh in terms of an "economy of sacrifice," wherein the body's diminution may be upheld, "is to banalize its darker logic."[34] She contends that the current "struggle of attrition" between language and the body masks a pervasive nihilism:

> For writing voids the mind of words just as starving voids the body of flesh, and both express the yearning for an unimaginable destitution. We do not starve to write, but *write to starve*: and we starve in order to affirm the supremacy of lack, and to extend the ravenous dominion of the night.[35]

She asserts, furthermore, that *both* askesis and excess, figured in the starving body and the glutted book, "provide lessons in revulsion that teach us to recoil from the grand fiasco of creation."[36] In her study, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, Catherine Pickstock similarly implicates a degenerate written language, as it took precedence over oral (doxological/liturgical) language in the early-modern period

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[31]Ibid, 59.

[32]Ibid, 61-62.

[33]W.B. Yeats, "Per Amica Silentia Lunae," *Mythologies* (New York: Collier, 1969), 341, 337.

[34]Ellmann, 27.

[35]Ibid, 27.

[36]Ibid, 113.

and became permeated by the "spatializing assumptions" of the "sinister" modern "project of *mathēsis*," as being ultimately discarnate, nihilistic, and necrophiliac.[37] Language has become, she contends, "the very opposite of liturgy," and for evacuating the body and substituting "undying space" for time "amounts to the claim that meaning is indeterminate and abyssal."[38] The nihilism that Pickstock perceives at the heart of written language from the early-modern period and into postermodernism, Ellmann sees paralleled in the "rhetoric of [bodily] self-improvement in America." According to Ellmann such rhetoric, which always involves a sculpting *away* of the flesh, "conceals an underlying drive to self-destruction, just as its narcissism masks a deeper nihilism."[39] The anorexic, however, according to this construction, refuses to mask the nihilism that her culture's "construct your body" ethos and its literary precedent unwittingly reveal and ultimately fuel. Her fate, according to Ellmann, "is to embody the abyss that food and words are both concocted to conceal, the lack at the foundation of the vital order. She hungers to debunk the myth that any food could fill this void, or any metaphor assuage its desolation."[40]

That brings us to the notion also common among feminist critics that women who suffer from eating disorders, in addition to fearing the body as opposed to the mind or will, are also paradoxically affirming the body by employing it in an unconscious protest,

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[37]Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998). Pickstock defines mathēsis as a "mapping [of] all knowledge onto a manipulable grid," the instrument for which "is writing of the kind which Derrida most celebrates."xii-xv.

[38]Ibid, xv.

[39]Ellmann, 10.

[40]Ibid, 53-54.

using it as a language to communicate realities otherwise inexpressible. Florence Nightingale, interpreting the behavior of "fasting girls," whose cases were often celebrated as miraculous in her time, in fact implied that the language of a woman's body is the only one people will heed. She wrote, "To have no food for our heads, no food for our hearts, no food for our activity, is that nothing? If we have no food for the body, how we do cry out, how all the world hears of it . . . . One would think we had no heads or hearts, by the indifference of the public towards them. Our bodies are the only things of any consequence."[41] According to Showalter, Nightingale interprets the fasting girls' behavior as "a form of female cultural protest," which can be applied to anorexic girls as well: "When only the body was regarded as important, anorexic girls paraded physical starvation as a way of drawing attention to the starvation of their mental and moral faculties."[42] In other words, these girls employ their bodies, which are the only things noticeable, in order to illustrate and thus protest against their condition. Susie Orbach, who, for comparing anorexia with the hunger strikes of suffragettes, is perhaps most associated with the "protest" view of eating disorders. She thus most overtly implies that the body, far from being solely the enemy of an anorexic, is also exonerated for being the necessary site for her struggle and the instrument with which she expresses her self. Orbach writes,

> The individual woman's problem—for which anorexia has been the solution—is that despite a socialization process designed to suppress her needs, she has continued to feel her own needs and desires intensely . . . . Whenever a woman's spirit has been threatened, she has taken the control of her body as an avenue of self-expression. The anorectic refusal of food is only the latest in a series of woman's attempts at self-

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[41]Florence Nightingale, *Cassandra*, Ed. Myra Stark (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1979), 41.

[42]Showalter, 128.

> assertion . . . . If woman's body is the site of her protest, then equally the body is the ground on which the attempt for control is fought.[43]

Several critics have attacked Orbach's position, insisting that the anorexic's behavior is clearly an acquiescence to the cultural standards for women and therefore inconceivable as a form of resistance. According to Heywood, for example, the anorexic "accepts the pejorative definition of the feminine and attempts to excise it, to distance herself from it—precisely the opposite of the suffragettes who struggled to empower women."[44] Others, however, by pointing to the extremity of the anorexic's supposed acquiescence, successfully defend her status as a "hunger striker." According to Elizabeth Grosz, for example, anorexia can be understood as a form of mimicry in the sense that Luce Irigaray employs it. According to Irigaray, speaking of women's journey towards equality,

> There is, in an initial phase, perhaps only one "path," the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of *mimicry*. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it . . . . To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it.[45]

One way such mimicry works, according to Elizabeth Powell's analysis of Irigaray, is by "placing positive value on a feminine trait to such an extent as to render it exorbitant—a kind of defiance through excess."[46] Thus Grosz argues that, in the case of anorexia, women "comply to such a degree that the end result is the opposite of compliance: it

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[43]Susie Orbach, *Hunger Strike*, 19.

[44]Heywood, 228.

[45]Irigaray, 76.

[46]Powell, 99.

unsettles the system by throwing back to it what it cannot accept about its own operations."[47] As Powell notes, however, the anorexic's mimicry is destructive, a form of protest which Irigaray's mimicry in fact seeks to transform. Irigaray "does not merely abandon the feminine as coded in patriarchy and mimicked in women's bodies, but instead uses it as a tool for undoing its patriarchal coding."[48] This is impossible for the anorexic, because, as noted previously, she is not *only* a protestor, employing her body in a paradoxically affirmative way as an expression of her self's plight, but is simultaneously inculcated by her culture's persistent disdain for the feminine and the flesh. Her suffering, then, I would argue, results from the tension between her awareness of herself as body, indeed her desperate need to be such, and her need to be other than body to avoid the pejorative type of womanhood flesh overwhelmingly signifies in our culture.

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[47] Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), 135.

[48] Powell, 99.

CHAPTER THREE

Word Made Flesh

Christ has been done to death
in the cold reaches of northern Europe
a thousand thousand times.
Suddenly bread
and cheese appear on a plate
beside a gleaming pewter beaker of beer.

Now tell me that the Holy Ghost
does not reside in the play of light
on cutlery!

A woman makes lace,
with a moist-eyed spaniel lying
at her small shapely feet.
Even the maid with the chamber pot
is here; the naughty, red-cheeked girl…

And the merchant's wife, still
in her yellow dressing gown
at noon, dips her quill into India ink
with an air of cautious pleasure.

Jane Kenyon, "Dutch Interiors"

Pointing to the language and ideas of some of its prominent spokesmen as well as to its actual practice in various times and places, most feminists rightly implicate the Church for being complicit with the misogyny of its surrounding culture or, given its superlative power and influence at certain times in history, its own inherent disdain for the feminine and the flesh. The number of Christian texts that can be cited to establish the Church's guilt is indeed shameful. Identifying all women with Eve, Tertullian in fact blamed womanliness in general, mankind being too "valiant," for humans' sin and death

and even for Christ's being "done to death." He both queried and answered with vehemence:

> do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. *You* are the devil's gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: *you* are the first deserter of the divine law: *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* destroyed so easily God's image, man.[1]

Tertullian subsequently urges women to debase their appearance, their physicality being implicated as the source of their failure and the site of their guilt. Though such appalling texts regarding women's and the body's wickedness abound, I argue, nevertheless, that just as the eating disordered individual's thoughts and behavior demonstrate not necessarily a wholly positive or negative attitude toward the body but rather a paradoxical and painful tension between the two, so the Church has maneuvered precariously between two emphases—sometimes leaning more toward a sacramental approbation of the flesh while at other times exhibiting an intense distrust of the body and its potential snares. G.K. Chesterton in fact defended the Church's unity within seeming contradiction by comparing it to a "man behind madly rushing horses" or a "reeling but erect" "heavenly chariot" propelled through history.[2] Not despite, but rather on account of, its compensatory doctrinal veering to the right and to the left has the Church maintained an orthodox course toward its eschatological destination. Thus, the Church's discourse about and subsequent treatment of the body in relation to the soul has been a teetering affair that nevertheless maintains an intelligible although paradoxical balance.

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[1]Tertullian, "On the Apparel of Women," trans. S. Thelwall, *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), Vol. 4:14-15.

[2]G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Double Day, 2001), 102-103.

This paradox is perhaps most clearly illustrated in the Church's understanding of the significance of food and eating as it emphasizes both the need to penitently refrain from eating as the well as the need to joyously partake of food—the need, in other words, to remain faithful to the Christian narrative in which eating figures as the occasion for damnation as well as the source of salvation. The alternating feasts and fasts of the Church Year dramatically illustrate this struggle to keep the two food themes in tension. Fasting therefore persists as a necessary discipline in the Christian faith, and it has been theorized upon and practiced in both constructive and destructive forms, the latter often providing occasions for the perpetuation of women's subjugation and de-personalization. Though duly mourning the fact that the Church has enabled and enacted much damage with its frequent over-emphasis on ascetic fasting, disdain for the body, and the univocal association of flesh with woman, I will argue that at its core the Christian faith has the sources with which to radically undo such misogynistic and body-denying impulses. Though these sources, particularly the doctrines of the Incarnation, the Resurrection and the Sacraments, have obviously been mined extensively, I believe their full depth is still hidden and many of their implications are not adequately discerned. Among these implications, I number an increased emphasis on the practice of communal feasting in its literal and extravagant sense as well as a celebration of the "feminine" in the universe, in humanity, and in the Trinity itself.

Fasting is certainly not unique to the Christian tradition, for it has been practiced throughout history and in almost every religion for one purpose or another. In Christianity, however, its use is particularly evocative considering the symbolic function of food in the Church's formative and authoritative scriptures. The original sin in this

narrative involves eating, and fasting among Christians thus especially vividly embodies mourning and repentance for sin. As Veronica Grimm contends, however, prolonged or extensive fasting was not a prominent feature of the Church's practice in its beginnings and even into its second and third centuries.[3] It is mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles in relation to the ceremony of the "laying on of hands" and later in the works of such as Justin Martyr and Tertullian as part of a convert's long preparation for baptism. In general, however, Paul's epistles, the Acts, and the writings of the early church theologians, rarely indicate that food or eating in itself was cause for anxiety. Eating was overwhelmingly portrayed, rather, as an occasion for building and celebrating community. So also, the development and continued practice of ecclesiastical fasts, which mark "the rhythms of the week and the year for the entire community," do not imply that food and eating are inherently dangerous.[4] Rather, such fasting signifies communal repentance and is a way, along with feasting and all the liturgical rhythms, for the community to visibly and as a unified Body live out the story of its faith.

This is to be contrasted, however, with the understanding of fasting that developed within a number of Christian communities in the late fourth and early fifth centuries in which avoidance of food was "a feat of endurance and discipline that distinguished the elite and heroic few."[5] It rigorously advocated along with extreme asceticism in general, and, closely linked with a fear of lust and sexuality, it was

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[3]Veronica E. Grimm, *From Feasting to Fasting, the Evolution of a Sin: Attitudes to Food in Late Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1996).

[4]Teresa M. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 1.

[5]Ibid, 1.

especially enjoined on women. The supposed connection between food and sexual desire was a "well-worn Hellenistic commonplace," and Christian thinkers zealously upheld the notion.[6] Food, especially meat and wine, was believed to heat and moisten the body and contribute directly to heightened sexual appetite. For woman, commonly considered the more carnal of the sexes for her identification with Eve who was so easily tempted and in turn tempting,[7] this connection was especially dangerous. Thus, as a Pseudo-Athanasian sermon put it so bluntly, it was considered "fitting for women to fast always."[8] There were two reasons for this—that women might eradicate their own physical desires as well as keep men from temptation by ridding themselves of their feminine beauty. Thus women were responsible not only for their own actions but indirectly for men's as well. For example, Basil of Ancyra insisted, with regard to any virgin, that she must labor towards "destroying the pleasure of the female in herself, and cutting off the habit of the male towards the [female]."[9] She accomplishes this, he argues, by making "[herself] look

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[6]Grimm, 166.

[7]This notion that woman was more carnal, passionate, and insatiable than man has been commonplace throughout much of the Church's history, its perhaps most notorious expression being found in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a fifteenth century treatise on finding and identifying witches. Of women its authors state, "as regards intellect, or the understanding of spiritual things, they seem to be of a different nature from men . . . she is more carnal than a man, as is clear from her many carnal abominations . . . she is an imperfect animal, she always deceives . . . just as in the first defect in their intelligence they are more prone to abjure the faith; so through their second defect of inordinate affections and passions they search for, brood over, and inflict various vengeances, either by witchcraft, or by some other means . . . . All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable." Heinrich Kraemer and Jacob Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Montague Summers (New York: Dover, 1971), 44-47.

[8]Quoted in Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*, 223. From Pseudo-Athanasius. *Sermo exhortatorius*. PG 28.1107D-1114A. 2.

[9]Quoted in Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh*, 236. From Basil of Ancyra. *De vera virginitates integritate*. PG 30.669-809. 3.

masculine and her voice hard, and in her walk and generally in every movement of her body constrain[ing] the enticements of pleasure."[10]

What better way to make this transformation, many argued, than by refraining from food. Though he was certainly not alone, Jerome is perhaps the most notorious in his insistence that women avoid eating so as to destroy their tempting feminine bodies. So important an issue was this for him that he even declared, "No [woman] could give me pleasure but one whom I never saw eating food," and furthermore, "She should not take her food in public; for she may see there dishes that she will crave . . . let her meals always leave her hungry."[11] In Jerome's case, these were not only theoretical ideals, as the experience of Blaesilla, the oldest daughter of Paula, his patroness, strikingly reveals. After being tragically widowed at the age of twenty, Blaesilla suffered a sickness during which she could eat very little. When she recovered she had a conversion of sorts after which she embraced, with Jerome's urging and instruction, a life of vigorous fasting and penitence. Less than four months later she was dead. In Jerome's letter of condolence to Paula, in which he seeks to defend himself against accusations that he was to blame for the girl's death from fasting, Jerome in fact wrote with satisfaction and approval that, while still living, "Her steps tottered with weakness, her face was pale and quivering, her slender neck scarcely upheld her head."[12]

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[10]Ibid, 16-18.

[11]Quoted in Grimm, 169. Jerome, *Letters*, Ed. I. Hilberg. CSEL 54-56, 1910. 45:3, 107:8, 10, 11.

[12]Quoted in Grimm, 171. Ibid, 38:4, 39:1. See Grimm's whole chapter entitled "Jerome and Ascetic Propaganda" for a detailed analysis of Jerome's attitude toward food, 157-179.

There are innumerable examples, in addition to Jerome's, demonstrating that fasting of certain forms has been a means to demean and subjugate women and by consequence to devalue nature and the body with which they are associated. As the next chapter will seek to demonstrate, however, when fasting is divorced from its often gendered significations and Body-denying forms,[13] it has been and can be a radical form of witness, an appropriate embodiment of spiritual realities and therefore an ironically body-affirming practice. It must ultimately lead, however, if it is truly informed by the central Christian claims regarding the Incarnation, the resurrection of the body, and the Sacraments, to the *breaking* of fasts—to a subversive feast that accepts and celebrates the body and its pleasures as inseparable from the spirit and its joys. For in the claims of Christianity this subversion is already at work despite the many failings of the Church's fallen human constituents.

For example, in the Incarnation, in the fully divine residing as one with the fully human, we see a remarkable inversion of the relationship between words and flesh mourned by many feminist critics in which "the flesh is doomed to be undone."[14] For in Christ's Incarnation the Word is said to *become* flesh such that the distinction between the two is broken down. In the three-in-oneness of the Trinity we have an image that challenges the modern construction of subjectivity or personhood as individuality and self-interested autonomy as, for example, in Patrice DiQuinzo's evocation of a "maternal

[13]By Body-denying fasting I here mean not only fasting fueled by a disdain for physical bodily-ness, but also fasting undertaken in isolation from community, as a highly individualized discipline and endeavor for personal gain.

[14]Ellmann, 27.

embodied subjectivity."[15] The Eucharist also makes false the forced choice between being a complete, integrated person and being radically dependent on and determined by relationships and communities, for it is a reciprocal eating and being eaten, a metabolic exchange in which human beings are joined intimately with one another and with Christ to form one Body. Additionally, as Catherine Pickstock brilliantly demonstrates, the event of the Eucharist, as "an example of the coincidence of sign and body, death and life . . . allows us to ground a view of language which does not evacuate the body, and does not give way to necrophilia."[16] This, according to her as well as to Leslie Heywood and Maud Ellmann, is what modern and postmodern concepts of language are unable to accomplish, and it is for this reason that they inevitably fuel an anorexic aesthetic. Linguistically speaking one might add as well, as an example of the fruitfulness of Christian doctrine, that, in contrast to what Heywood decries as the privileging of figurative over literal in modern critical discourse, the Church, in its traditional way of reading its sacred scriptures, provides an example of holding together and perceiving at once the literal and the spiritual meanings, or "senses," of narrative.[17] So it is that in the Church there are doctrines ripe with possibilities for work yoked with feminists' convictions, for both press towards an undoing of the historic spirit/body dualism and its suppression of femininity. In the following chapters, in my analyses of *The Violent Bear*

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[15]DiQuinzo, 7.

[16]Pickstock, xv. See also Pickstock's last chapter in *After Writing*, entitled "The Resurrection of the Sign," which involves a detailed explication of transubstantiation in the Eucharist, positing it as "the condition of possibility for all human meaning."

[17]Amy Astell argues that this approach the Church takes to scripture interpretation is directly linked to its knowledge that physical and spiritual realities are intimately connected and able to mutually affect one another. Astell, *Eating Beauty: The Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 4.

it Away and "Babette's Feast," I will employ Christian theology in just this way, pointing to the vision these stories construct of a God-infused material universe. In such a world women may venture, stopping not merely with "an air of cautious pleasure" but proceeding, in full communion with men, into a joyous acceptance of sensual pleasure as an extravagant, unearned gift.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mortal Hunger

Why would you wound me, why would you want me
desolate in the end, unless you wanted me so starved for hope
I would refuse to see that finally
nothing was left to me, and would believe instead
in the end you were left to me.

Louise Glück, "Vespers"

As we have seen from a brief discussion of some of the functions of fasting in the Church, there is much ambiguity as to how and to what extent physicality should be approved as an avenue for spiritual truth and growth or distrusted as a source of temptation and delusion. It is clear, however, that there is a place for fasting in the Christian life, and even extreme fasting, fasting such as Catherine of Siena's, which one might not hesitate to contribute to illness as she did herself, has been a form of witness at various times in the Church's history. Even such fasting, I have argued, is not unequivocally a rejection of the body, for it is at the same time an approbation of it for making vivid and concrete some reality otherwise incommunicable or indiscernible. Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear it Away* provides a stunning illustration of this possibility. The deep wounding inedia imposes on the human spirit, O'Connor shows, can be ultimately redemptive for disclosing the emptiness at the core of the isolated self and the true object of that self's hunger.

Commenting on *The Violent Bear it Away*, Flannery O'Connor wrote, "the title is the best thing about the book."[1] For many readers, however, the title and its implications are perhaps the most perplexing aspects of this strange narrative. Knowing that its source is the Gospel of Matthew proves little help in solving the problem, as the verse itself is ambiguous and open to differing interpretations. It is essential, therefore, in beginning any study of *The Violent Bear it Away*, to examine O'Connor's own words concerning the verse's meaning, thereby enabling one to interpret the title, and subsequently the novel, more accurately. O'Connor left significant clues concerning the identity of her characters in relation to the title, writing in a letter, "The violent are not natural. St. Thomas's gloss on this verse is that the violent Christ is here talking about represent those ascetics who strain against mere nature. St. Augustine concurs."[2] Further, she stated, "this is the violence of love, of giving more than the law demands, of an asceticism like John the Baptist's."[3] O'Connor clearly subscribed, then, to a tradition interpreting the violence of Matthew 11:12 as violence against the sin-infected self, which among mystics and prophets throughout the history of the Church often took the form of extreme bodily mortification and physical pain. The Capuchin movement of the sixteenth century, a stringent reforming branch of the Franciscan order, summarized this tradition aptly in their *Constitutions of 1536* when they asserted that disciples of Christ "[do] constant violence to their own passions and evil inclinations, because as our Savior

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[1]Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 382.

[2]Ibid, 343.

[3]Ibid, 382.

says: 'the Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent, that is, those who do violence to themselves, bear it away.'"[4]

In O'Connor's *The Violent Bear it Away*, Mason and Francis Tarwater experience God's calling and his persistent purifying grace, in the form of physical pain, as violence against their autonomous wills. Most frequently, this pain is described in terms of hunger and burning, which, significantly, are recurring images among Christian mystics for describing their encounters with God.[5] Emphasizing both that O'Connor associated "the violent" with asceticism and intended this novel to be "a very minor hymn to the Eucharist," I will focus in this chapter on Francis Tarwater's hunger, suggesting a parallel between him and St. Catherine of Siena, a mystic and doctor of the Church whose asceticism was predominantly food-oriented and who was also radically devoted to the Eucharist. St. Catherine of Siena, whom O'Connor referred to in several of her writings, described her encounters with God in metaphors of hunger and devouring, not just as symbols but as lived realities. Her body was literally starved, and she literally fed on Christ in the Eucharist. It is she I will employ predominantly as a historical prototype for understanding the fantastic characters in *The Violent Bear it Away*. Both she and Tarwater, I suggest, provide examples of how disordered eating has been and can be employed redemptively in the context of the Christian narrative, the ravaging of the body being an enactment of one's hunger for union with God, a manifestation of the

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[4]*The Capuchin Constitutions of 1536*, In John C. Olin, ed., *The Catholic Reformation: Savonarola to Ignatius Loyola* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), 152-181.

[5]See, for example, Maureen Flynn, "The Spiritual Uses of Pain in Spanish Mysticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 2 (1996): 257-278.

necessarily violent subjection of one's will to God's, and proof that one will finally be satiated only by devouring God as flesh, the Bread of Life.

Of St. Catherine of Siena, Flannery O'Connor wrote, "I am repelled and attracted by her too," a response typical not only of those who encounter the saint today, but also of her contemporaries in the mid-fourteenth century.[6] During her lifetime no less than today, she attracted both admiration and derision, among other of her eccentricities, for her refusal or inability to eat. Catherine began fasting as a child, from about age sixteen ate only bread and raw vegetables, and from age twenty-three subsisted only on cold water and bits of food (mostly herbs) that she chewed and then spit out.[7] At thirty-three she gave up water for an entire month and died later in the year, emaciated and wracked with stomach pains. Raymond of Capua, the saint's confessor and friend, wrote in his biography of Catherine that:

> The taking of food became to her not merely unnecessary but actually impossible, except to the accompaniment of great bodily suffering. If food was ever forced down her throat, intense pain followed, no digestion took place, and all that had been violently forced down was violently forced back again.[8]

Catherine herself stated that she could not eat. Clearly, hunger to the point of starvation, whether it was voluntary or involuntary, was a persistent and painful reality in Catherine's life.

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[6]O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 133.

[7]The details of Catherine's inedia are carefully documented in Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 22-53. Her condition is well-summarized in Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Spiritual Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1987), 165-180.

[8]Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, Trans. Conleth Kearns (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1980), Pt. 2, Ch. 5.

Though many contemporary scholars analyze Catherine solely through the lenses of modern psychology, it is more appropriate, taking this saint and doctor of the Church on her own terms, to understand her physical experience also, and perhaps primarily, in terms of her faith, physical and spiritual realities being intimately and inextricably linked. O'Connor clearly concurred. In a review of Raymond of Capua's biography, she wrote:

> What emerges most profoundly is that all the saint's actions were conformed to a Reality of which the ordinary man is not aware. If the reader can once realize the strength and power of Catherine's vision, the scourgings and other self-punishments become understandable. Conversely, it is only from these penances that the vision can be surmised and vouched for. Altogether this is not a book to give anyone faith, but one which only faith can make understandable.[9]

Furthermore, in one of O'Connor's letters she claimed that St. Catherine "was apparently what she believed so entirely that it colored even the comical things—such as the incident of her eating the lettuce leaf after one of her long fasts and then vomiting it up with the remark, 'Here comes this miserable sinner up for justice.'"[10] In approaching St. Catherine of Siena's life and writings as O'Connor did—with a recognition that she "was what she believed," that her spirituality was truly sacramental—one must understand the ravaging of Catherine's body as an enactment of spiritual realities.

The striking imagery in St. Catherine's writing indicates that her physical hunger, though naturalistically a combination perhaps of some physical and/or psychological maladies, was above all the embodiment of an immaterial hunger—a hunger for union with other people and ultimately with God. She wrote in *The Dialogue*, "Because [the soul] is hungry she feasts on that charity for her neighbors which she so hungers and

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[9]Flannery O'Connor, *The Presence of Grace and Other Book Reviews*, Ed. Leo J. Zuber and Carter W. Martin, (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1983), 111-112.

[10]O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 133.

longs for, for her neighbors are indeed a food that, when she feeds on it, never satisfies her. She remains insatiably and continually hungry."[11] According to Catherine, then, there is a parallel between how human beings love their neighbors and how they hunger for and consume food. Simone Weil, a twentieth century French mystic and philosopher, clearly echoed Catherine in this regard and thus proves helpful in elucidating the medieval mystic's language. In Weil's terms, human beings crave union with the beauty they see, and eating, which is an actual incorporation of one substance into the substance of another, constitutes the most intimate form of union. The tragedy, however, is that in so doing, the substance that is consumed is simultaneously destroyed. The "great trouble in human life," for Weil, "is that looking and eating are two different operations."[12] Applying her philosophy of eating and looking to human relationships, Weil claimed, "We love as cannibals . . . . Beloved beings . . . provide us with comfort, energy, a stimulant. They have the same effect on us as a good meal after an exhausting day of work. We love them, then, as food. It's an anthropophagic love."[13] St. Catherine, no less than Weil, recognized the great danger of such anthropophagic relationships. For example, in *The Dialogue* Catherine wrote, "You use [your tongue] to destroy your neighbors by feeding on their flesh ."[14]

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[11]Catherine of Siena, St, *The Dialogue*, Trans. Suzanne Noffke, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 192.

[12]Simone Weil, "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," *The Simone Weil Reader*, Trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 2001), 475.

[13]Simone Weil, *La Connaissance surnaturelle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950). Translated from the French and quoted in Alex Irwin, "Devoured by God: Cannibalism, Mysticism and Ethics in Simone Weil," *Cross Currents* 51, no. 2 (2001): 257-272.

[14]St. Catherine, *The Dialogue,* 300.

In Weil's terms, then, Catherine conceived earthly human relationships as cannibalistic, and human desire for others to be as driving and persistent as physical hunger. Weil and Catherine both—however much they differed in their conviction that human relationships are inescapably cannibalistic and therefore potentially destructive—believed that this economy of devouring could be redeemed to the extent that one's hunger was directed primarily toward God. For example, Catherine proceeded, in the passage quoted above, to assert that the soul's hunger for her neighbors is "like a pledge . . . a beginning of the certainty" that God gives the soul, "and because of it she expects to receive the full payment."[15] The "full payment," according to Catherine, that which the soul hungrily expects, is union with God. She wrote in one of her many letters, "Our desire is not completely satisfied until we reach this union with the divine Being. As long as we are travelers in this life we have only desire and hunger: desire to follow the right path, and hunger to reach our final destination."[16]

Like St. Catherine of Siena, Francis Tarwater in *The Violent Bear it Away* experiences a ravaging hunger that refused to be satisfied by ordinary food. Like her, he is plagued with an "inability" to eat, implying that his hunger, though a physical reality, in fact denotes a hunger for something immaterial. In light of St. Catherine of Siena's teaching, it seems appropriate to argue that his was a hunger for union with God parodied by destructive cannibalistic relationships with other human beings. Already, in the first chapter of the novel, O'Connor introduced hunger for "the bread of life" as a major theme in Francis' recollections of his great-uncle Mason Tarwater. Mason had stressed

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[15]Ibid, 192.

[16]St. Catherine, *The Letters of St. Catherine of Siena,* Vol. 1, Trans. Suzanne Noffke (New York: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1988), 76.

repeatedly to the boy, in true Protestant literalist language, that "Jesus is the bread of life," that "as soon as he died, he would hasten to the banks of the lake of Galilee to eat the loaves and fishes that the Lord had multiplied."[17] Francis, however, felt no such desire, in fact harboring "the certain, undeniable knowledge that he was not hungry for the bread of life."[18] This perceived lack of hunger, one might infer, was due to the fact that Francis had difficulty feeling or believing anything that was not presented to him in concrete, material form. This is made evident throughout the novel as he heeds the voice of "the stranger," denying that he is called to be a prophet because he "ain't even heard the sound of natural thunder," because there was no "unmistakable sign, clear and suitable—water bursting forth from a rock, for instance, fire sweeping down at his command."[19] For Francis, then, the only way to perceive hunger was to know it in his own body, as a necessarily painful physical reality, which it becomes.

From the very beginning, Francis' physical appearance is described as that of a starving person. When Buford found him drunk on the day of his great-uncle's death, "his cheekbones protruded, narrow and thin like the arms of a cross, and the hollows under them had an ancient look."[20] Furthermore, when he arrived at his uncle Rayber's house in the city, Rayber noted that Tarwater's face was "white, drawn by some unfathomable hunger and pride," and Tarwater himself, when he arrived in the city,

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[17]Flannery O'Connor, *The Violent Bear it Away, Three by Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Signet Classic, 1983), 135.

[18]Ibid, 135.

[19]Ibid, 147, 220.

[20]Ibid, 151.

became "conscious of the strangeness in his stomach, a peculiar hunger."[21] Rayber took him to exotic restaurants, but "the city food only weakened him," and he "had always left the restaurants hungry, conscious of an intrusion in his works."[22] As the novel progresses, Tarwater's inedia becomes increasingly troublesome and painful. While at first he could eat a little, being in Rayber's terms "a finicky eater, pushing the food around on his plate before he ate it and putting each forkful in his mouth as if he suspected it was poisoned," eventually his stomach rejected all food.[23] When he stuffed himself with beer and barbeque sandwiches near the end, he subsequently threw up in the lake, and when the truck-driver offered him a sandwich he said, "when I come to eat I ain't hungry," even though he had just exclaimed that he *is* hungry.[24] Unable to eat the sandwich, Tarwater's face looked "violently hungry and disappointed."[25] Finally, thirst is added to Tarwater's hunger, and both sensations "combined in a pain that shot up and down him and across from shoulder to shoulder."[26]

Francis Tarwater, like Catherine of Siena, experienced a physical hunger that refused to be satisfied by physical food because its object was more than material. There are also hints that Francis, both as one eating and as one eaten, experienced the insufficient, and in his case terrible results of cannibalistic hunger among humans. For example, O'Connor presents his relationship with Rayber as one in which the two

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[21]Ibid, 184, 219.

[22]Ibid, 219.

[23]Ibid, 194.

[24]Ibid, 249.

[25]Ibid, 254.

[26]Ibid, 255.

destructively feed on one another, interacting always as though in competition in their attempts to prove their freedom from Mason Tarwater's influence. O'Connor writes, "something in the boy's very look drained [Rayber], something in his very look, something starved in it, seemed to feed on him. With Tarwater's eyes on him, he felt subjected to a pressure that killed his energy before he had a chance to exert it."[27] Though Rayber felt that Tarwater was devouring his energy, his own understanding of what constituted positive love, as opposed to the overwhelming irrational love he feared, was similarly predatory, and it was with this sort of love that he preyed on Tarwater. Rayber the utilitarian accepts the value of love only insofar as it is useful, and accordingly believes that one should only love that which love might transform and improve according to modern scientific notions of progress and enlightenment. Tarwater, then, like his great-uncle before him, was subjected to Rayber's ravenous attempts to fix people, to reduce them to specimens for a schoolteacher magazine as the product of mere impulses, needs and responses. Ultimately, however, Tarwater experiences the full violence of cannibalism at the hands of his rapist, the stranger in the lavender shirt. Weil wrote, "we love someone, that is to say, we love to drink his blood," and the stranger illustrates this notion vividly in its perverse form.[28] After brutally violating Tarwater "his delicate skin had acquired a faint pink tint as if he had refreshed himself on blood."[29]

Tarwater, like St. Catherine of Siena, experienced his hunger for immaterial Being in the form of painful physical hunger. For Catherine, the starving body was also

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[27]Ibid, 193.

[28]Weil, *Connaissance,* 250. Quoted in translation in Alex Irwin, *Devoured by God*.

[29]O'Connor, *The Violent Bear it Away,* 261.

indicative of the violent subjection of her entire self to God. Catherine in fact referred to God's "hunger to have souls as his food," and wrote, "You burn and consume our soul in the fire of divine charity, eating up anything that is alien to [Your] will."[30] Furthermore, she described the "Lamb slain on the cross" as one "feeding on . . . our salvation," saying, "look at me . . . I am like one crazed and transformed by my hunger for you."[31] According to Catherine, the process of being devoured by God, of having oneself conformed to his will, was anything but gentle and painless. She wrote, "your selfish will must in everything be slain, drowned, subjected to my will," and she spoke of "the knife that kills and cuts off all selfish love to its foundation in self-will."[32] For Catherine, the climax of this subjection of self-will was the "mystical death" she experienced at the age of twenty-three, in which she experienced four days of ecstatic union with God and her body seemed lifeless to those who observed.[33]

Simone Weil also spoke of a death of the soul in which there is nothing human beings can call "their own will, their person, their I."[34] Echoing Catherine, she described this death in terms of being eaten by God. At the center of the labyrinth of affliction, according to Weil, one finds God "waiting to eat him . . . . Later, he will go out again, but he will be changed, he will have become different, after being eaten and digested by God."[35] This is a transformation, in Weil's terms, from the condition of a normal human

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[30]St. Catherine, *Letters*, 126, 263.

[31]Ibid, 125, 83.

[32]St. Catherine, *The Dialogue*, 43.

[33]Suzanne Noffke, "Introduction," *The Dialogue*, 4.

[34]Simone Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," *The Simone Weil Reader*, 458.

[35]Weil, "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," 474.

being "into that of a half-crushed worm writhing on the ground."[36] Catherine described this transformation similarly, writing in one of her prayers,

> You are the master who breaks and refashions;
> you smash this vessel
> and put it back together again
> . . .
> As often as it pleases your goodness,
> drag me out of this body
> and send me back again,
> each time with greater suffering than before.[37]

Clearly echoing Catherine's emphasis on the violence and agony involved in the process of one's will becoming one with God's, Weil wrote, in "The Love of God and Affliction," "Extreme affliction . . . is the nail . . . The man whose soul remains oriented towards God while a nail is driven through it finds himself nailed to the very center of the universe . . . which is God."[38] For Weil, as for Catherine, this pain is not merely psychological, because it is only in "the attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain" that affliction, which is the "uprooting of life" and the "destruction of personality," can be made "irresistibly present to the soul."[39] Further elaborating on the violence with which God devours self-will, Weil stated that affliction imposes itself on a person against her will and that she must consent to it.[40] "A creature cannot but obey," she wrote, and one's only choice is "to desire obedience or not to desire it."[41] At some point, St.

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[36]Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 462.

[37]St. Catherine, *The Prayers of St. Catherine of Siena*, Ed. Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 225.

[38]Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 452.

[39]Ibid, 440, 460.

[40]Ibid, 462.

[41]Ibid, 448.

Catherine clearly consented to a devouring God, her wasted body being an enactment of the willing annihilation of her autonomous self. Indeed, obedience was one of the virtues Catherine most emphasized. She called obedience a "glorious virtue," the virtue that "unlocks heaven," because in obedience the soul demonstrates that "within her will she is dead."[42] Unlike Weil, who tends somewhat morbidly to glorify suffering and death of self-will as an end in itself, then, St. Catherine perceives it more redemptively, as leading ultimately to the joys of resurrected *life*. For her Weil's "worm writing on the ground" is to be transformed into a butterfly.

Like St. Catherine, Francis Tarwater experienced God's call to obedience and death of self-will as a violent, devouring force, and the course of the novel bought him from fierce resistance to inevitable capitulation. According to O'Connor, in fact, "the whole action of the novel is Tarwater's selfish will against all that the little lake (the baptismal font) and the bread stand for."[43] Tarwater's selfish will was, indeed, resistant. In the person of his great-uncle he had already witnessed the violence of God's grace and calling. Mason Tarwater schooled the boy in the "evils that befall prophets," naming as fiercest among them those cleansings and devourings that come from the Lord and "burn the prophet clean.[44] He himself had "learned by fire," and the "finger of fire," the destruction he had prophesied against the city, "had fallen in his own brain and his own

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[42]St. Catherine, *The Dialogue*, 353-55. Chapters 154-165 of *The Dialogue* are in fact devoted to the subject of obedience and constitute one of the major divisions according to Guiliana Cavallini, who "first dug beneath the discrepancies to reestablish the original structure" of the work. Noffke, "Introduction," 15.

[43]O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 387.

[44]O'Connor, *The Violent Bear it Away*, 126.

body. His blood had been burned dry and not the blood of the world."[45] Furthermore, he is said to have "thrashed out his peace with the Lord," and Francis recalled him declaring, "even the mercy of the Lord burns" and claiming that he had been "torn by the Lord's eye."[46] Indeed, his apparent alcoholism, though perhaps his means of escaping the "finger of fire," might also be seen as a parallel to Francis' hunger, that is, a scourge that denied him of selfish autonomy and thrust him at God's mercy. It is not surprising, considering what he had witnessed of his great-uncle, that Francis attempted to escape such a fate, especially since, from the beginning, he was intoxicated by the notion of autonomous freedom. He could "smell his freedom, pine-scented, coming out of the woods," but then would feel a "slow warm rising resentment that his freedom had to be connected with Jesus and that Jesus had to be the Lord."[47] The rest of the novel, then, consists of two colliding forces: Tarwater's attempts to assert his autonomy, proving that he can will and act independently of God and contrary to his calling, and the corresponding force on God's part to consume Tarwater's will and unite it with his own, a violence which is effected in Tarwater's body no less than his soul.

The imagery throughout the novel seems to imply that Tarwater's inability to eat is not only an indication of his hunger for God but also of his being devoured by God. Demonstrating this most clearly are O'Connor's descriptions of his hunger as something with a will of its own, something that has imposed itself upon his body and that eventually consumes him from inside and out. For example, in describing Tarwater's

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[45]Ibid, 126.

[46]Ibid, 127, 134.

[47]Ibid, 135.

binge and purge episode, she wrote that the food appeared to be "pushed back . . . by the hunger it had intruded upon" and that after he vomited "a ravenous emptiness raged in his stomach as if it had reestablished its rightful tenure."[48] Tarwater explained to the truck-driver, similarly, "it's like being empty is a thing in my stomach and it don't allow nothing else to come down in there," even as his thirst is described as "a rough hand clench[ing] in his throat."[49] Additionally, when Tarwater returned to Powderhead and looked out over the freshly plowed cornfields, "his hunger constricted him anew. It appeared to be outside him, surrounding him."[50] By so personifying Tarwater's hunger, O'Connor clearly implied what Rayber accurately perceived, namely that the boy "can't eat because something is eating [him]."[51] Tarwater's response, his insistence that worms are the culprit, proves telling, the image of parasites highlighting again the fact that he is literally being eaten. His hunger, O'Connor wrote, was "like an insistent silent force inside him, a silence akin to the silence outside, as if the trap left him barely an inch to move in, barely an inch to keep himself inviolate."[52]

Indeed, Tarwater cannot keep himself inviolate. Demonstrating this most dramatically, of course, is his encounter with the man in the lavender shirt. O'Connor asserted explicitly that this stranger was meant to signify the devil, and in her stories the devil is frequently "the unwilling instrument of grace" as he "accomplishes a good deal

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[48]Ibid, 225-26.

[49]Ibid, 249, 258.

[50]Ibid, 265.

[51]Ibid, 237.

[52]Ibid, 219.

of groundwork that seems to be necessary before grace is effective."[53] In *The Violent Bear it Away* this certainly proves to be the case, Tarwater's vampiric rapist being the agent through which the ultimate annihilation of his self-will and autonomous control was physically effected. In "Flannery O'Connor's Conversation with Simone Weil: *The Violent Bear it Away* as a Study in Affliction," Jane Detweiler argues that the violence of Tarwater's hunger is a representation of what Weil terms affliction—an "uprooting of life" and a "destruction of personality"—and thus drawing a parallel between that violation and the stranger's violation of Tarwater's body.[54] Indeed, being fed upon by the stranger demonstrates to Tarwater that he "cannot but obey."[55] By desiring to disobey, by refusing to have his self-will devoured by God, Tarwater does not retain freedom of will and action, but is rather devoured by the devil.

As it turns out, there is not, as the stranger's voice argued in the beginning of the novel, a choice between "Jesus or you," but only a choice between "Jesus or the devil."[56] O'Connor wrote, "it is the violation in the woods that brings home to Tarwater the real nature of his rejection [of God]," which, paradoxically, is not freedom of the will, but ultimately bondage of the will to evil, as St. Augustine emphasized repeatedly. Weil clearly understood this concept, although replacing the Augustinian notion of evil as a privation of good with what she referred to as blind or mechanical necessity. She wrote,

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[53]Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 117.

[54]Jane Detweiler, "Flannery O'Connor's Conversation with Simone Weil: *The Violent Bear it Away* as a Study in Affliction," *Kentucky Philological Review* 6 (1991): 4-8.

[55]Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 448.

[56]O'Connor, *The Violent Bear it Away,* 146.

"If a man does not desire [to obey God], he obeys all the same, perpetually, in as much as he is still subject to mechanical necessity."[57] For Weil, as for O'Connor and St. Catherine of Siena, one's self is never entirely one's own; one can desire to obey or disobey, to reject God or accept him, but if one's will is not devoured by and conformed to God's it will be devoured and utterly destroyed by others. In his essay "Devoured by God: Cannibalism, Mysticism, and Ethics in Simone Weil," Alec Irwin argues, following Weil, that a cannibalistic economy is inescapable. Though it can be terrible and destructive, however, it is also redeemable to the extent that one enters into the process willingly, "investing it with a sacrificial character," being devoured by God and devouring God in order to subsequently nourish others.[58]

As demonstrated, St. Catherine of Siena and Tarwater both experienced the painful process of being devoured by God, the ravaging of their bodies effecting the conformation of their wills to his. Of critical importance to Catherine, however, what nourished and sustained her in her hunger, was the Eucharist, by which she fed on Christ, God in flesh. Her Eucharistic piety proves helpful in understanding Tarwater's hunger. St. Catherine's devotion to the Eucharist was perhaps the most defining characteristic of her mysticism and theology. As Raymond of Capua reported,

> The habit of receiving communion practically every day struck root in her and became part of her life . . . . Her longing for more and more frequent communion was so intense that when she could not receive it her very body felt the deprivation, and her forces seemed to droop.[59]

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[57]Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 448.

[58]Alec Irwin, "Devouring God: Cannibalism, Mysticism, and Ethics in Simone Weil," 4.

[59]Raymond of Capua, Pt. 2, Ch. 5.

In fact, because Catherine traveled frequently in service to the Holy See, mediating between Pope Gregory XI and his antagonists, she received a papal bull granting her "the privilege of the portable altar and authorization to receive Communion whenever she pleased."[60] Furthermore, she is said to have been obsessed with Christ's blood. In fact, in 1969 Pope Paul VI asked in a sermon on her feast day, "who spoke as much of the Blood of Christ as Catherine?"[61] Bynum notes that the majority of Catherine's letters begin with greetings in the precious or sacred blood and that whereas Christ's blood is traditionally referred to as something that cleans or washes human beings, in Catherine's imagery blood usually "feeds" or "is eaten."[62] Clearly, for Catherine, the Eucharist was an indispensable part of her spirituality as well as her physical life.

In order to understand St. Catherine's intense desire for the Eucharist, it is important to recognize what its elements signified to her and how she understood its effects. In her writings she expressed thoroughly orthodox Catholic doctrine with the imagery and immediacy of a mystic. For example, in *The Dialogue*, which consists of a dialogue between a soul and God, she described, from God's perspective, a mystical experience during Mass in which the soul comprehends the transformation that occurs upon the words of consecration:

> At the words of consecration I revealed myself to you. You saw a ray of light coming from my breast . . . . Within this light came a dove, and dove and light were as one and hovered over the host by the power of the words of consecration

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[60]Ibid, Pt. 2, Ch. 12.

[61]Cited in Pope John Paul II's lecture on St. Catherine's feast day, April 29 1980, (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1980). Translated in Susan F. Parson, "St. Catherine of Siena's Theology of Eucharist," *Heythrop Journal* 44.4 (2003): 456-468.

[62]Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 177.

> . . . there you saw and tasted the depths of the Trinity, wholly God, wholly human, hidden and veiled under that whiteness. Neither the light nor the presence of the Word, whom in spirit you saw in this whiteness, took away the whiteness of the bread.[63]

She stated furthermore that the whole divine Being whom humans receive under the "whiteness of the bread" is entrusted to "[God's] ministers in the mystic body of holy Church, so that you might have life when they give you [Christ's] body as food and his blood as drink."[64] Catherine clearly placed herself in continuity with the majority of thirteenth and fourteenth century theologians who developed and upheld the doctrine of transubstantiation, distinguishing between the elements' substances and accidents.[65] Though the accidents of the bread and wine remain, that is their sensible appearances, their substance is transformed by divine power into the substance of Christ's body and blood.

In desiring the Eucharist, therefore, Catherine desired, quite literally, to consume Christ's flesh and blood. In fact, much of the imagery she employed to describe her mystical experiences involved drinking blood and being washed in blood. For example, relating one of her visions, she said,

> [Christ] showed me his most sacred side from afar and I cried from the intensity of my longing to put my mouth to the sacred wound . . . . He came up to me, clasped my soul in his arms, and put my mouth to where his most sacred wound was, that is to say the wound in his side. Then with its great longing my soul entered right into that wound and found such sweetness and such knowledge of the divinity there that if you

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[63]St. Catherine, *The Dialogue*, 210.

[64]Ibid, 207.

[65]Edward J. Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology,* Ed. Robert J. Daly (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 143-49. The term transubstantiation was first employed in the middle of the twelfth century and eventually received papal approval at the Fourth Lateran council in 1215. See Kilmartin, 143-45 for a summary of its development in the thirteenth century.

> could ever appreciate it you would marvel that my heart did not break, and wonder how ever I managed to go on living in the body in such an excess of ardor and love.[66]

Catherine experienced the literal, physical meaning of such visions—she "was what she believed"—so entirely that blood is said to have flowed from her mouth in her Eucharistic ecstasies.[67] Furthermore, when she found herself repulsed by the wounds of a diseased woman, she reportedly drank a bowl of the woman's pus, which supposedly preceded both a vision of Jesus inviting her to drink the blood flowing from his side and, according to the anonymous *Miracoli*, a vision of mystical marriage with Christ.[68] In *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, Geoffrey Galt Harpham employs this incident as an example of the theological dimensions of parody, which is "especially visible in those forms of religious devotion that stress intimate contact between the fallen replica [human made in God's image and likeness] and the 'perfect original.'"[69] For the mystic, according to Harpham, the human and divine Christ serves as a metaphor "enabling one to speak of the unity of body and soul, death and eternal life, God and man," and mystic faith "passes through the parodic to this metaphor, through the grotesque to the sublime."[70] For Catherine, then, consuming the bowl of pus was equivalent and identical to consuming Christ's body, which was in turn equivalent and identical to being wholly united with the divine Being. In Harpham's terms, she saw "the

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[66]Raymond of Capua, Pt. 2, Ch. 6.

[67]Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. 171.

[68]Ibid, 166; Raymond of Capua, Pt. 2, Ch. 4.

[69]Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 125.

[70]Ibid, 126.

far and the near, the concrete and the abstract, the sacred and the unclean, on the same plane."[71]

Catherine desired such a union, a union of her human self with God who was the object of her hunger, and she recognized that having Christ's substance literally incorporated into her body effected this union and a subsequent capitulation of her will to his. Again from God's perspective, she wrote,

> When [the soul] receives this sacrament she lives in me and I in her. Just as the fish is in the sea and the sea is in the fish, so am I in the soul and the soul is in me, the sea of peace. Grace lives in such a soul because, having received this bread of life in grace, she lives in grace. When this appearance of bread has been consumed, I leave behind the imprint of my grace, just as a seal that is pressed into warm wax leaves its imprint when it is lifted off.[72]

According to Catherine, this union with God accomplished through Christ's body and blood also effectively imparted grace, providing "food for your salvation and for strength and nourishment in this life where you are pilgrim travelers."[73] Similarly, she stated that the Son's body "was opened up to give you himself as food" as a sign of "[God's] honor and your salvation," and she frequently described Christ as "food and table and servant."[74] So powerful and complete was the nourishment provided in the Eucharist for Catherine's whole being, her body and spirit being one, she could say, "when I cannot receive the Sacrament, it satisfies me to be nearby and to see it; indeed, even to see a priest who has touched the Sacrament consoles me greatly, so that I lose all memory of

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[71]Ibid, 126.

[72]St. Catherine, *The Dialogue*. 211.

[73]Ibid, 212.

[74]Ibid, 177; St. Catherine, *Letters*, 124.

food."[75] However, Catherine believed that as "pilgrim travelers" in this life, the reward of everlasting life in perfect consummation with God, which is pledged in the Eucharist, is thus received only imperfectly. Only after death does one receive "the full payment." Acording to Catherine, this eternal blessedness consists in

> Life everlasting, where they will have life without death, satiety without boredom, and hunger without pain. For their hunger will be anything but painful, because they will possess what they long for. And their satiety will be anything but boring, because I will be their flawless life-giving food.[76]

What Catherine of Siena described with immense joy as "full payment" and "flawless life-giving food" is precisely the kind of reward Francis Tarwater feared and the food throughout the novel that he hungered for and yet tried to reject. OConnor herself stated that "there are two main symbols in the book—water and the bread that Christ is . . . . This book is a very minor hymn to the Eucharist."[77] From the beginning, Francis was averse to the thought that he might have to live his life "torn by hunger like the old man, the bottom split out of his stomach so that nothing would heal it or fill it but the bread of life," which he would not receive in full until after death. Furthermore, he was sickened by the "hideous vision" of "sitting forever with his great-uncle on a green bank, full and sick, staring at a broken fish and a multiplied loaf."[78] Only when physical hunger began to rack his body did Tarwater begin to recognize that he was indeed intended to feed on "the bread of life." Simultaneously, he was confronted with the reality of his calling, and the two became inextricably linked in his mind. For example,

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[75]Raymond of Capua, Pt. 2, Ch. 6.

[76]Ibid, 192.

[77]O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 387.

[78]O'Connor, *The Violent Bear it Away*, 160.

when he saw Bishop for the first time and looked into the eyes of the idiot child he was destined to baptize, Tarwater saw "his own stricken image of himself, trudging into the distance in the bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus, until at last he received his reward, a broken fish, a multiplied loaf."[79] Tarwater realized that if he obeyed the call to baptize the child he would become like his great-uncle, who had stressed that servants of the Lord Jesus could expect to be "beaten and tied up . . . spit on and snickered at . . . struck down in [their] pride."[80] In short, servants of the Lord could expect to live "deep in Jesus' misery," to become like Jesus, who himself bled and stank and was deemed mad.[81] Furthermore, Tarwater recognized that if he followed such a path his only "reward in the end" would be "the Lord Jesus himself, the bread of life," a reward he found highly unappealing and unsatisfactory.[82]

Like Catherine of Siena, who understood that to consume God in the Eucharist ultimately effects union with him and capitulation to his will, Tarwater comprehended the inherent equivalence of eating he Bread of Life and obedience. He repeatedly asserted, therefore, that he was not hungry for the bread of life, his rejection of it signifying and being identical to his disobedience with regard to his calling to baptize Bishop. After he drowned Bishop and inadvertently baptized him, he continued to protest, "I can act. And I ain't hungry," again emphasizing—if only negatively—that to act obediently and to hunger for the bread of life were one and the same. Tarwater feared he may have baptized the child and attempted to deny his hunger as though in an attempt to prove the

[79]Ibid, 177.

[80]Ibid, 134.

[81]Ibid, 151.

[82]Ibid, 160.

pureness of the murderous intent behind his actions. I ain't hungry for the bread of life," he declared to the truck-driver, "I'm hungry for something to eat here and now," and after drinking the stranger's whiskey he cried, "It's better than the Bread of Life!"[83]

Though Tarwater continued to reject his calling and his hunger for the "Bread of Life," it is evident to the reader that the Eucharist and "all it stands for" is in fact the object of his hunger. When Tarwater was wandering through the streets at night, Rayber witnessed him stop in front of a shop where his "face was strangely lit from the window he was standing before."[84] It looked to Rayber "like the face of someone starving who sees a meal he can't reach laid out before him," and he thought, "at last something he *wants*."[85] Rayber was perplexed and disappointed, however, when he came to the window himself and saw it was only an old loaf of bread that so captivated Tarwater's attention and concentrated his hunger. For Tarwater, this loaf of bread, which, having all the accidents of bread, was no doubt crusty and stale, signified the Bread of Life, the Body of Christ. As with Catherine of Siena who, in Harpham's terms, passed "through the grotesque to the sublime," Tarwater, perhaps subconsciously, saw "the concrete and the abstract, the sacred and the unclean, on the same plane," particularly as his stomach perhaps audibly growled.[86] Such a union of spirit and matter, such an "intimacy of creation," was precisely what Tarwater had feared when, at Powderhead, he was

> afraid that if he let his eye rest for an instant longer than was needed to place something—a spade, a hoe, the mule's hind quarters before his plow, the red furrow

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[83]Ibid, 249, 260.

[84]Ibid, 197.

[85]Ibid, 197.

[86]Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, 126.

> under him—that the thing would suddenly stand before him, strange and terrifying, demanding that he name it and name it justly and be judged for the name he gave it.[87]

Here at the store window, his gaze captivated, the crusty bread "stands before him, strange and terrifying," demanding that Tarwater name it. This is precisely what he could not do. The loaf in the window was the Bread of Life he craved, but he could not give it its name or admit his hunger because that would require the capitulation of his will, and as yet he was not prepared to obey.

Not until Tarwater's body and will were violated by God's devouring hunger and by his rapist's foul desire could he come to acknowledge the true object of his hunger, for these opposing violations caused him to realize that he would inevitably be consumed by another, if not by God in a way that hurt but also healed, then by something or someone who would destroy him and leave him still hungry. Conversely, only by recognizing the object of his hunger could Tarwater fully submit to his calling, uniting his will to God's, because, as noted, eating the bread of life and conforming the will were inseparable. The turning point for Tarwater, then, is marked in the novel by two distinct but equivalent incidents. The first is when, upon coming to the cross marking his great-uncle's grave, his "hands opened stiffly as if he were dropping something he had been clutching all his life."[88] In Weil's terms, Tarwater's affliction had thrown him at the foot of the cross, where he was compelled to obey, to surrender the autonomous self he had clung to so tightly. Secondly, Tarwater saw a vision in which he clearly acknowledged the object of his hunger:

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[87]O'Connor, *The Violent Bear it Away*, 136.

[88]Ibid, 266.

> Everywhere, he saw dim figures seated on the slope and as he gazed he saw that from a single basket the throng was being fed . . . the boy too leaned forward, aware at last of the object of his hunger, aware that it was the same as the old man's and that nothing on earth would fill him. His hunger was so great that he could have eaten all the loaves and fishes after they were multiplied.[89]

Tarwater's enthusiasm, at last, resembled that of St. Catherine of Siena, who craved the Eucharist more and more, craved it such that she was no longer hungry for anything on earth. Both Tarwater and Catherine realized, however, that their hunger would not be filled to satiety with the Bread of Life until they attained to eternal life beyond this world. They knew they would continue to hunger and suffer on earth, in their bodies no less than their souls, so great was their sacramental vision. Having recognized his hunger and relinquished his will, Francis Tarwater was in fact called to "wander in the world" with his insatiable hunger and his fiery visions, warning the children of God of "the terrible speed of mercy," and the novel ends with him setting out with "his face set towards the dark city."[90] The question, then, is what awaits Tarwater in the city; what is the nature of his prophetic mission? The life and writings of St. Catherine are again helpful in understanding the conclusion to O'Connor's novel.

Having been devoured by God and devouring him in the Eucharist, her will thus united with his, St. Catherine was compelled to identify with and conform to the image and likeness of Christ, whom she described as simultaneously eating and being eaten by humanity, as giving himself to humanity both in suffering and service. Indeed, none is perhaps more characterized by her sacrificial service to others than St. Catherine, for she

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[89]Ibid, 266.

[90]Ibid, 266-67.

remarkably coupled action with contemplation.[91] During a time when the Church was suffering violent discord and schism and Europe was recurrently ravaged by the Black Death, St. Catherine, with intense and almost frenetic energy, nursed and cared for those afflicted by the plague and famine and devoted herself to the cause of unity and reform within the Church. In her dealings with civil and ecclesiastical authorities, in fact, hers was a prophetic voice, in desperate tones urging people to put an end to their warfare and rightly reform the Church. She even traveled to Avignon, in France, where Pope Gregory XI resided at the time, and impressed upon him the importance of his returning to Rome to attend to the Church's needs.

Consistent with the hunger and devouring images that characterize her theology, St. Catherine communicated the significance of service to one's neighbor and to the Church as a sacrificing of one's actual flesh and blood to provide nourishment for others. As Christ fed her in the Eucharist, his bodily suffering imparting grace and propitiation for her sin, so she believed her suffering, fused with Christ's, could effect others' health. In fact, she wrote that the service human beings owe God, that is to love him gratuitously as he loved them, must be done unto their neighbors because they are incapable of so rendering it to God. "Thus it will be evident," she wrote, "that you have [God] within your soul by grace, when with tender loving desire you are looking out for [God's] honor and the salvation of your neighbors, by bearing fruit for them in many holy prayers."[92]

For Catherine, however, it was not enough to bear fruit for her neighbors through holy prayers alone. So radically did she identify with Christ, recognizing his Body in

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[91]Suzanne Noffke, "Catherine of Siena, Justly Doctor of the Church?" *Theology Today* 60, no. 1 (2003): 49-63.

[92]St. Catherine, *The Dialogue*, 36.

hers and hers in his through the grace of the Eucharist, that she desired to suffer for the sins of her neighbors, offering to bear their punishment for the ultimate nourishment of their souls. In the beginning of *The Dialogue*, the soul beseeches God, asking that God punish her for the sins of her neighbors. Responding to this request, God states that the soul will indeed bear her neighbors' burdens through her suffering. He declares, "The sufferings you endure will, through the power of charity, suffice to win both atonement and reward for you and for others," and, likewise, "offer me the vessel of your actual sufferings, however I may send them to you . . . this vessel of yours must be filled with the loving affection and true patience with which you carry all the burden of your neighbors' guilt even while you hate and reject the sin."[93] Clearly, Catherine understood the suffering of one whose will has been with God's as a participation in the work of Christ's suffering.

As one for whom physical and spiritual realities were so inextricably linked, St. Catherine's desire to nourish others required the giving of physical as well as spiritual food, and her suffering for the sake of others consisted of physical no less than psychological or spiritual pain. It is not surprising, therefore, given her own emaciated body, that much of her service to others involved providing food in a time when famine was commonplace. For example, she often gave away large quantities of food, even as she also prepared food for the poor and sick whom she served. Furthermore, several sources record miraculous feedings and food multiplications at her hands.[94] Raymond of Capua recalled the people's response to Catherine's miraculous provisions, highlighting

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[93]Ibid, 30, 46.

[94]Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 170-71.

her contrasting refusal to accept nourishment for herself: "The whole city was in commotion. Everybody . . . flocked to catch sight of her. 'What a woman!' they said. 'One who drinks no wine herself, but can by a miracle fill with wine an empty cask.'"[95] Clearly, Catherine understood her own physical hunger as somehow effective for the nourishment of others, and not only for their physical nourishment. In fact, months before her death Catherine began a one-month fast from water, "offering her suffering as expiation for the crisis of the Church in Italy."[96] The Church was schismatic at the time, with two men claiming the title of pope.[97] As one who had devoted much of her time and effort to restoring unity and peace within the Church, Catherine was understandably distressed by this situation, and as she had most of her life, she believed her physical suffering, similar to Christ's and fused with his, was in some way effective in establishing peace and health for the Church. Just as Christ's broken Body, mystically present in bread and wine, served to nourish her and effect her salvation, so she believed her broken body, united with his, could serve his Church. Such radical identification with Christ's suffering was made perhaps most dramatically evident for Catherine when, in 1375, she received the stigmata of Christ's passion.[98]

The insights of Simone Weil are again helpful in understanding Catherine of Siena's notion that her physical suffering could be offered up as nourishment for the physical and spiritual needs of others. Like St. Catherine, Weil died in part due to her

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[95]Raymond of Capua, Pt. 2, Ch. 16.

[96]Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 169.

[97]Giuliana Cavallini, *Catherine of Siena* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1998), xxvi.

[98]Ibid, xxi.

life-long self-imposed food austerities, and she frequently fasted in solidarity with others who were suffering food deprivation. For example, as a young child she refused to eat sugar because the French soldiers fighting the Germans had none, and in the months before her death, when a diet heavy in calories was prescribed to fight her tuberculosis, she refused to eat more than her French countrymen, who were surviving on meager rations under German occupation.[99] Weil's writings elucidate the meaning of her behavior and, perhaps, St. Catherine's as well. In words that echo St. Catherine's she wrote, after making an inventory of her positive attributes, "May all these things be torn from me, devoured by God, and given to eat to afflicted people whose bodies and souls lack all kinds of food . . . . Father, bring about this transformation now, in the name of Christ."[100]

Weil described selfless service for others as an offering of oneself as food, and clearly, as with Catherine, her language was not mere metaphor. In fact, her writing indicates that, like Catherine, she understood suffering, particularly physical labor associated with the production of food, in terms of sacramental transformation, whereby one's flesh is transformed into bread and fed to the destitute. For example, she wrote, "If the work of tilling the soil makes me get thinner, my flesh really turns into grain. If this grain serves for the communion host, my flesh becomes the flesh of Christ," and, in a related passage," We should ask that we be transported into Christ and Christ into us. Ask that god make our flesh into the flesh of Christ so we will be edible for all the

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[99]Robert Coles, *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1987), 24.

[100]Weil, *Connaissance*, 205.

afflicted."[101] Applying Weil's language to St. Catherine's life and labor, one might understand the sacrifice of her body for the nourishment of her neighbors and the Church in terms of a sacramental transformation comparable to and dependent on the transformation occurring in the Eucharist. Having physically consumed the literal Body and Blood of Christ and thereby united with him bodily, and her will having been made one with his, she understood the brokenness of her own body to function like his, as nourishment for the physical and spiritual hunger of others. A crucial difference between St. Catherine and Simone Weil must be noted at this point, however, for Weil to the end refused to actually partake of the Eucharist. It was as though she desired solely to be eaten and had not the humility to eat as well, to receive the gift and sacrifice of another. Thus, arguably, Weil's extreme emphasis on her own extreme and painful self-sacrifice, without being coupled with a belief that she too must accept self-sacrificial help and nourishment from others, paradoxically indicates intense pride.

In light of both St. Catherine and Simone Weil (Weil's ideas being highly instructive despite her underlying attitude or motive), the conclusion of *The Violent Bear it Away* proves rich with possibility, and the nature and function of the prophetic vocation, as it was described throughout the novel, becomes more understandable. O'Connor in fact wrote, "I am not through with prophets . . . I think the next one will be about how the children of God finish off Tarwater in the city."[102] It is clear, therefore, that Tarwater's fate, like St. Catherine's, will involve martyrdom, a painful sacrifice of his person to and for the "children of God," or, in other words, an offering of himself as

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[101]Ibid, 228.

[102]O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 373.

food for their consumption.[103] By noting that Tarwater set out from Powderhead with "his face set towards the dark city," language clearly echoing Scripture, where Christ is said to have set his face like flint towards Jerusalem and his death, O'Connor indicated that Tarwater's future suffering would be in some way comparable to or an identification with Christ's. There is no doubt that his suffering, like his great-uncle's, will be acute, persistent, and felt both physically and spiritually. O'Connor contended, "prophecy . . . is certainly the most terrible vocation. My prophet will be inarticulate and burnt by his own visions. He'll have to explode somewhere."[104] There is hope, however, that the violence Tarwater will suffer and the violence his uncle previously suffered will, being fused with Christ's, effect good for the other "children of God." Finally though, their entire selves having been violently consumed by God as well as sacrificed for others, they will attain to their own ultimate good, eating their fill of the Bread of Life on the banks of Galilee, or, in St. Catherine's terms, having "life without death, satiety without boredom, and hunger without pain . . . because they will possess what they long for," Christ being their "flawless life-giving food."[105] In the story, however, as in the real lives of people who suffer from inedia of various forms, that feast is only realized as a very present absence, any approximation to complete communion with God being a measly crumb compared to the fullness of the eternal banquet. So it is that *The Violent Bear it Away* provides an example of how eating disorders might figure in the Church's narrative; they make

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[103]Anthony Di Renzo, *American Gargoyles: Flannery O'Connor and the Medieval Grotesque* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 121.

[104]O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 373.

[105]St. Catherine, *The Dialogue*, 192.

vividly present, while many attempt to mask it, the emptiness and the absence that human beings will inevitably suffer until they feed in eternity on the “Bread of Life.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Eternal Banquet

And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

George Herbert, "Love (3)"

Simone Weil's staunch asceticism, particularly in relation to food, is one of the most notable in the twentieth century. Curiously though, George Herbert's poem "Love (3)" was one of her favorites, and her encounter with it was the occasion for the mystical experience in which "Christ himself came down and took possession" of her.[1] A similar juxtaposition of intense literal hunger with a remarkable ability to perceive and appreciate the spiritual dimensions of feasting exists in the case of Isak Dinesen who, while in the last stages of syphilis and near death from an inability to eat, wrote "Babette's Feast," one of the most delightful stories exalting food and feasting.[2] Presumably more so than Weil, Dinesen appreciated not only the metaphorical significance of eating, that is, "eating" in a spiritual or relational sense, but also the real pleasure and overall benefit of eating in its most literal sense, "for she'd been trained in the culinary arts in Paris" and

[1]Weil, "Spiritual Autobiography," *The Simone Weil Reader*, 15-16. Weil recited this poem often at the "culminating point" of the violent headaches, which plagued her throughout her life.

[2]Mary Elizabeth Poddles, "Babette's Feast: Feasting with the Lutherans," *Antioch Review* 50, no. 3, 1992), 551-567.

"was justly famous for her lavish, gourmet dinner parties."[3] The story is about a pietist Lutheran sect in an isolated Norwegian village to whose quarreling members a French Catholic refugee and servant extends grace and healing in the offering of a gourmet French meal. In this chapter I will employ "Babette's Feast" as an illustration of Eucharistic feasting both in its literal sense, as part of the Church's liturgy, but also as its effects are experienced quite mundanely insofar as a community eats together festively in the right spirit. I will thereby highlight a sacramental understanding of reality in contrast to Western history's perennial dichotomy between body and spirit. I will contend, however, that communal feasting and celebration presupposes and in fact acquires its sacred nature from the presence of sacrifice or death in its midst, as evidenced most clearly of course in the Eucharist, in the partaking of Christ's broken Body and shed Blood. The juxtaposition in the story of self-denial on the one hand and the acceptance of extravagant gifts on the other, demonstrates that each complements and in fact depends upon the other. Finally, I will argue that thankful extravagance, no less than penitential restraint requires and enables virtues essential to Christians' lives in communion with God and one another. Like personal fasting, communal feasting involves a surrender of one's selfish will and a recognition that God satisfies all manner of human hunger through tangible means, but also in a final surrender of the self in witness to the need of the whole community to be fed.

Robert Langbaum, showing Dinesen as belonging in the same tradition as her fellow Dane Søren Kierkegaard, has argued that "Babette's Feast" concerns the contrast

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[3]Ron Hansen, "Babette's Feast," *A Stay Against Confusion* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 2001), 143-162, 145.

"between the ethical and the esthetic life" and demonstrates the inadequacies of both.[4] He thus posits Babette's "magical art" as "the third force in the story, the mystical, that resolves the antithesis of the sensuous-esthetic and ethical."[5] The founder of the small Lutheran community, identified merely as "the Dean," has passed away by the time of the events of the story, and his appropriately named daughters, Martine and Philippa, succeed him.[6] The Dean's "spirit was with them," however, and the force of his life and words prove essential to the story, particularly in his frequently recalled words: "Mercy and truth, dear brethren, have met together . . . . Righteousness and Bliss have kissed one another."[7] As a result of Babette's presence and her culinary art a number of such virtues, though in tension throughout the story, do in fact meet together in the life of the community, thus fulfilling its founder's vision.

In Langbaum's terms, Martine, Philippa and their community clearly represent the ethical life, their spirituality being one of strict dos and don'ts, but theirs is also an other-worldy spirituality, one that "Renounced the pleasures of this world, for the world and all that it held to them was but a kind of illusion, and the true reality was the New Jerusalem toward which they were longing."[8] Anticipating Babette's extravagant feast, which was to occur on the late Dean's birthday, one of the "Brethren" even declared, "On the day of

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[4]Robert Langbaum, *Isak Dinesen's Art: The Gayety of Vision* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 247-255.

[5]Ibid, 249.

[6]Dinesen in fact indicates that the Dean's two daughters are named after Martin Luther and his successor Philip Melanchton.

[7]Isak Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," *Anecdotes of Destiny and Ehrengard* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 21, 23-24.

[8]Ibid, 21.

our master we will cleanse our tongues of all taste and purify them of all delight or disgust of the senses, keeping and preserving them for the higher things of praise and thanksgiving." For the two sisters, such other-worldliness takes its most dramatic form in their rejection of earthly love and marriage, for they believed these were "were trivial matters," having been "brought up to an ideal of heavenly love; they were all filled with it and did not let themselves be touched by the flames of this world."[9] The sisters are also in the habit of self-denial where food and drink are concerned. When Babette first comes to Martine and Philippa seeking refuge, they fear French luxury and extravagance, explaining to their new servant and cook that "luxurious fare was sinful."[10] They teach the expressionless culinary artist how to cook plain split cod and ale-and-bread-soup, and she complies with their wishes, explaining that she used to cook for an old priest who was a saint and thus apparently knows how to cook simply. Upon hearing this, the sisters "resolved to surpass the French priest in asceticism."[11]

Consistent with their analyses of eating disorders, feminist readings of "Babette's Feast" draw connections between the community's, and especially the sisters' asceticism and "the 'monopoly of power/knowledge' . . . which the Dean represents."[12] The Dean was clearly a figure of enormous influence and authority, for he is described not only as the founder of the sect but also as a prophet, and his memory and words are still held in

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[9]Ibid, 23.

[10]Ibid, 32.

[11]Ibid, 32.

[12]Maire Mullins, "Home, Community, and the Gift that Gives in Isak Dinesen's *Babette's Feast*," *Women's Studies* 23, no. 3 (July 1994): 217-229. Here Mullins is borrowing the words of Teresa de Lauretis, "Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness," *Feminist Studies* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 115-150.

the highest regard. His authority is most concretely demonstrated in the obedience he expected of his daughters and their potential suitors in the community. He even stated to his congregation that "to him in his calling his daughters were his right and left hand. Who would want to bereave him of them?"[13] Maire Mullins notes,

> It is not just his daughters who must acquiesce to the Dean's wish, but the congregation as well. Their wishes must not take precedence over his need, and thus the sisters as well as the community become complicit in the Dean's appropriation . . . . Martine and Philippa, whose very names reflect their father's discourse, understand this very well.[14]

Mullins thus concludes that Martine and Philippa represent what Teresa de Lauretis terms the "non-being of woman . . . the paradox of a being that is at once captive and absent in discourse . . . whose existence and specificity are simultaneously asserted and denied, negated and controlled."[15] Their self-denials, like those of the anorexic, are therefore conceived as the product of the "monopoly of power/knowledge" to which they have acquiesced.

Yet Mullins' interpretation of the sisters' and the community's condition may be a bit overstated considering the generally affectionate and gently satirical light in which Dinesen portrays their piety and demonstrates their admirable traits. She emphasizes, for example, their devotion to caring for the poor and destitute in their village and their willingness to open their home to a stranger in need. Their contention that luxurious food is sinful appears to indicate not that they believe certain foods are inherently evil, but that in abstaining themselves they can more readily fulfill their vocation of feeding others.

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[13]Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," 22.

[14]Maire Mullins, 219.

[15]Ibid, 219; Teresa de Lauretis, 115.

They explain to Babette that "their own food must be as plain as possible," for "it was the soup pails and baskets for their poor that signified." Furthermore, Dinesen notes that they "spent their time and small income in works of charity."[16] The community the Dean established is clearly laudable on many accounts, for despite the fact that they renounce worldly pleasures for those to come, they attempt to provide these same pleasures for others and accomplish much tangible good in their community.

As Sara Stambaugh has demonstrated in *The Witch and the Goddess in the Stories of Isak Dinesen: A Feminist Reading*, however, one of Dinesen's central concerns was the "the situation of women, particularly the restrictions they faced in the past and, in spite of steps forward, continue to face in the twentieth century." "Dinesen's female characters confront an astonishing array of restrictions," Stambaugh adds, "apparently reflecting the resentment Dinesen voiced in a 1927 letter to her brother Thomas against a system that 'allowed practically all my abilities to lie fallow and passed me on to charity or prostitution in some shape or other.'"[17] It is not inconceivable, therefore, that for Dinesen there is something deadening in the order established and monopolized by the Dean, although the Dean himself is portrayed as having been generally wise and well intended. Indeed, as the story indicates, his authoritative "legacy, consisting of strict religious tenets and the denial of 'pleasure,'" has not been successful in binding this community together in love."[18] By the time Babette arrives in the village, the community had in fact fallen on difficult times. The size of his congregation was waning, and the

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[16]Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," 32, 22.

[17]Sara Stambaugh, *The Witch and the Goddess in the Stories of Isak Dinesen: A Feminist Reading* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), 2.

[18]Maire Mullins, 218.

remaining members were "somewhat querulous and quarrelsome, so that sad little schisms would arise in the congregation." The members revive old grudges and quarrel among themselves about trivial matters. One Brother, for example, harbors resentment against another because he cheated him on a deal forty-five years previously.[19]

Thus, though the congregation and the sisters speak the language and perform the actions of self-denial, otherworldliness, and ethical fervor, they ironically become concerned and preoccupied in their hearts with the very worldly trivialities they sought to renounce. Ann Gossman notes, "In all of the congregation, even the sisters, a good deal of ethical blindness is evident, as none of them can perceive the egotism that underlies their charity."[20] This is made most evident by the sisters' initial unwillingness to receive Babette's offer to cook and pay for the feast, and their subsequent discomfort with the prospect, indicating that, for their own part, the notion of a gift freely given, apart from any merit or subsequent debt, was a foreign one. The congregation is clearly in need of a transformation, an interruption and displacement of the "monopoly of power/knowledge," a "challenge to the existing order," and "a different way of knowing" and being in community which is initiated by a gift.[21]

If Martine and Philippa and their puritanical community represent an ethical and otherworldly way of life together with its shortcomings, General Loewenheilm and Achille Papin, two outsiders whom each takes an interest in one of the sisters, represent

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[19]Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," 34-35.

[20]Ann Gossman, "Sacramental Imagery in Two Stories by Isak Dinesen," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 4, no. 3, Studies of Recent British and Continental Literature (Autumn 1963): 319-326.

[21] Mullins, 219-221.

the "sensuous-esthetic" life, and, one might initially presume, could pose a "challenge to the existing order" and a happy alternative to the congregation's stale asceticism. In the life-stories and characters of these two prestigious and worldly-wise men, however, Dinesen illustrates the limitations of sensual revelry and worldly success, its incompatibility with the sisters' way of life, and the inability of either to complement the other unless both are disrupted and transformed by a third and revolutionary force.

According to Langbaum, General Lorens Loewenheilm, the first visitor and Martine's suitor, especially represents the "sensuous-esthetic" life, Achille Papin being slightly more complex to the extent that he, like Babette, is an artist and is therefore an aid to her mystical synthesis of the aesthetic and the ethical. Lorens is indeed portrayed as a lover of life, and he pursues all that it offers sensually, esthetically, and eventually and more responsibly, in terms of relational and vocational success. When he first arrives in Berlevaag, the small Norwegian village in which the congregation resides, he in fact gets in trouble because of his irresponsible way of life and excessive revelry. He is said to have "led a gay life in his garrison town" and had therefore run into debt.[22] His angry father thus sent him to stay with his aunt who lived near Berlevaag in order to "meditate and to better his ways."[23] Meditation seems an unlikely occupation for Lorens, however, for up until this time in his life he "had not been aware of any particular spiritual gift in his own nature," thus indicating that for him, as for Martine and Philippa, there was a rift between body and spirit, and that for him the former was more real to his

[22]Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," 23.

[23]Ibid, 23.

consciousness.[24] Indeed, he is shown to have a heightened awareness of sensory beauty and to be moved by it easily. Seeing Martine for the first time, he is struck by her physical beauty, believing that he has had a vision of the sort that is legendary in his family but that has as yet eluded him, a "sudden, mighty vision of a higher and purer life . . . with a gentle, golden-haired angel to guide him."[25] In other words, Lorens has his first premonition of a synthesis of physical and spiritual realities, and thus incited he gains admission to the Dean's house.

Lorens' vision fails to materialize, however, as he dotes upon Martine and seeks inspiration in hers and her community's company. Like Tarwater, who resented the fact that he "ain't even heard the sound of natural thunder" and demanded that God provide an "unmistakable sign, clear and suitable—water bursting forth from a rock, for instance, fire sweeping down at his command," so Lorens has difficulty perceiving spiritual and abstract realities apart from clear physical manifestations.[26] Thus, when the Dean declares that "Righteousness and Bliss have kissed one another" in a highly metaphorical sense, Lorens can only think of kissing in the literal, physical sense, that is, he and Martine kissing one another.[27] Furthermore, in contrast to the exalted speech that

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[24]Ibid, 23.

[25]Ibid, 23. The Loewenhielm family legend is as follows: "long ago a gentleman of the name had married a Huldre, a female mountain spirit of Norway, who is so fair that the air round her shines and quivers. Since then, from time to time, members of the family had been second-sighted."

[26]O'Connor, *The Violent Bear it Away*, 147, 220.

[27]Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," 24.

Babette's wine inspires later in the story, he "finds no inspiration in the glass of water before him."[28]

Apparently Lorens is accustomed to finding inspiration of one sort or another in food and drink and other such sensory delights, so that the blandness of the Dean's home and the meal he provides only empty Lorens of words. In fact, as he continues to visit, he "seemed to himself to grow smaller and smaller and more insignificant and contemptible."[29] Thus, according to Langbaum, though Lorens was "obsessed by the cold, glittering purity of his vision," he was "so unable to reconcile with it his senses and feelings, that he went away without expressing his love."[30] Furthermore, it appears that he is unable to suffer the discipline of humility required of him in the congregation's and Martine's company. He can't suffer the feeling of smallness that their presence causes, consequently turning resentful, and, upon returning to the garrison town, angry that he "had let himself be defeated and frustrated by a set of long-faced sectarians, in the bare-floored rooms of an old Dean's house."[31] Thus Lorens decides to forget his experience in Berlevaag and his brush with spirituality, or "second-sight" and "with the greatest effort . . . concentrate on his career, and . . . cut a brilliant figure in a brilliant world."[32]

When Lorens returns to Berlevaag years later, however, having experienced all the pleasures of the world—success, prestige, wealth, marriage to a beautiful and rich woman, the richness of culture, and the most delectable libations and cuisine—he finds

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[28]Ibid, 23.

[29]Ibid, 24.

[30]Langbaum, *Isak Dinesen's Art*, 248.

[31]Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," 24.

[32]Ibid, 25.

himself "not perfectly happy."[33] In fact, he finds himself "worrying about his immortal soul," and commenting on the vanity of all his decorations and his victories, which somehow now seem to him a defeat. For might the world be "not a moral, but a mystic, concern?" he wonders. Yet he had continually fled from the "dreams and fancies" and the "gift of second-sight" that throughout his life seemed to haunt him and threaten him with madness. His was not an indulgence in the senses that transcended the self and its containment in the body, which requires a renunciation of autonomy and a loss of control, for such, in the world's eyes *is* madness. Ironically very similar to the self-aggrandizing, will-powerful ascetic, Lorens' worldly success and pleasure-seeking are based on self-mastery and individualism. Thus for Lorens, as for the little congregation, the dichotomized life, though not without its obvious virtues— in Lorens' case, perseverance, hard work, loyalty, an appropriate joy in and appreciation of the beauty of the sensory world—clearly leaves a void. So, in his latter years, upon returning to Berlevaag and reflecting on his former stay there, he finds himself longing for the "second-sight" that failed to materialize in the Dean's ascetic home.

Considering the relationship between Martine and Lorens from Martine's perspective, the initial collision of the two ways of life was similarly fruitless. Though Martine clearly returned Lorens' affection, she was unable to renounce her world for his. Again quoting de Lauretis, Maire Mullins notes, "'Physically, emotionally, linguistically, epistemologically,' it would be impossible for the sisters to leave their father, 'for another place that is unknown and risky, that is not only emotionally but conceptually other.'"[34]

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[33]Ibid, 45.

[34]Maire Mullins, 219; Teresa de Lauretis, 138.

Neither Lorens nor Martine was able to reconcile his or her way of knowing and being in relationship with the other's way. Furthermore, even if Martine were able to forsake her life with her father to be with Lorens, her lifestyle, though outwardly different, would remain fundamentally unchanged. Mullins contends: "Lorens does not present a challenge to the existing order, for even if Martine were to leave with Lorens, he would not offer her a life any different from what she has known; Martine would simply exchange the Dean's form of "power/knowledge" for Lorens', represented by the military."[35] Just as in *The Violent Bear it Away*, Tarwater learns that one's choice is not between "Jesus and you," but between submission to Jesus or submission to someone or something else, so in this story, the question is not whether one should be submissive but to whom and with what motive and purpose. Granted, the Dean's wishes are not to be equated with God's, but for Martine, having been brought up religiously, had come to understand her vocation as being one of ministry in her community, and there is no indication that she is unfulfilled in that calling. To reject it, then, simply for the sake of asserting her autonomy and demonstrating her freedom from her father, would not only go against her vocational convictions, but would lead only to another, more treacherous form of submission, that is, bondage to the whims of the world as they crowd in upon hers and Lorens' supposedly free wills. As noted above, however, even the congregation's seemingly virtuous self-denial ironically becomes an assertion of self-will. So, though Lorens and Martine, as representative of two ways of life, each have virtues that presumably could transform and complement one another, they are unable to

[35]Ibid, 220.

do so as underlying each is an entrenched dichotomy of body and spirit, of asceticism and indulgence, along with an insistence on self-mastery in their respective extremes.

According to Mullins, Achille Papin, the second visitor and Philippa's suitor, poses the greater challenge to the Dean's "monopoly of power/knowledge," and Langbaum, similarly, implies that the famous opera singer is somehow catalytic in the ultimate transformation that occurs in the community. Not only is Achille the one who sends Babette to the sisters and with his letter convinces them to employ her in their home, but he also prepares the way for her coming during his visit years earlier. At this time he "introduces the third force in the story," a force that is somehow related to the fact that he, like Babette, is Catholic and is an eminent artist.[36] Like Lorens, though, Achille is also a worldly man, one who has moved in all the upper circles of society and enjoyed all the pleasures the world has to offer—fame, success, wealth, indulgence in great art and beauty—and to that degree he is poles apart from Philippa and her community. After singing for a week at the Royal Opera of Stockholm, where he had "carried away his audience there as everywhere, he decided to spend some time visiting what he'd heard was the "grandiose scenery" of the Norwegian coast.[37] Here he fell into a deep melancholy, however, reflecting on his smallness in the "sublime surroundings" as an old man at the end of his career. Like Lorens, he looked back on all his life accomplishments and felt them to be insignificant.[38] Having nothing to do one Sunday, however, he found his way to church. There he heard Philippa sing, and like Lorens he

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[36]Langbaum, *Isak Dinesen's Art*, 249.

[37]Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," 26.

[38]Ibid, 26.

had a mighty vision, a revelation once again of the miraculous and spiritual qualities of music. For him these are paired however, with the fame and success its creators attain: "Almighty God," he though, "Thy power is without end, and Thy mercy reacheth unto the clouds! And here is a prima donna of the opera who will lay Paris at her feet."[39]

The Dean grants Achille permission to give Philippa voice lessons, and as the lessons proceed Achille's expectations grow. Unlike Lorens, he experiences some materialization of his vision of the synthesis of sense and spirit in the Dean's home. In fact, an incident occurs, which, according to Langbaum, is the precise moment that the third, mystical force is introduced into the story. During one of their lessons, Achille and Philippa sing Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, and he is romantically transported into pure bliss:

> [Achille] had never in his life sung as now. In the duet of the second act—which is called seduction duet—he was swept off his feet by the heavenly music and the heavenly voices. As the last melting note died away he seized Philippa's hands, drew her toward him and kissed her solemnly, as a bridegroom might kiss his bride before the altar. Then he let her go. For the moment was too sublime for further word or movement; Mozart himself was looking down on the two.[40]

In this scene, for the first time, we encounter sensory beauty of the sort that draws one out of oneself, into a place of self-forgetfulness and transcendence wherein human beings are united even across distances of time and place. Langbaum explains that there was an "impersonality" about Achille's kiss such that he "did not in his rapture distinguish his own from Don Giovanni's emotion."[41] So "impersonal," and transcendent was the incident, in fact, that subsequently Achille does not even remember the kiss. He cries, "I have lost my life for a kiss, and I have no remembrance at all of the kiss! Don Giovanni

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[39]Ibid, 26.

[40]Ibid, 28.

[41]Langbaum, *Isak Dinesen's Art*, 249.

kissed Zerlina, and Achille Papin pays for it! Such is the fate of the artist!"[42] Here we find introduced a theme that Babette will demonstrate to its fullest, namely that the "personality" of the artist is sacrificed in the communal realization of his or her art. After the incident of the kiss, Philippa requests that the lessons be discontinued. Though Achille, in Mullins' analysis, is a greater threat to the "existing order" of the community, he represents too closely the life of worldly pomp as it is represented in the art society, and Philippa "lacks the capacity to resist the ways of thinking" that preclude the spiritual legitimacy of the arts. Like her sister, she is unable to reconcile her ascetic upbringing and her vocation in her community with Achille's way of life.[43] Martine, however, observing her sister after Achille's departure, "felt that the matter was deeper than it looked, and indeed, Philippa had been "surprised and frightened by something in her own nature."[44] By engaging her in art, Achille had planted something new in Philippa's consciousness, a vision of a new way of knowing and being. It's as if he sent Babette to tend this vision into fullness in the community with the highly understated commendation: "Babette can cook."[45]

Babette had in fact been the chef at the Café Anglais in Paris, and she was known all over the city as "the greatest culinary genius of the age."[46] Having lost her husband and son and all her possessions in the war, however, and having been convicted as a

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[42]Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," 28.

[43]Mullins, 221.

[44]Dinesen, "Babette's Feast." 28.

[45]Ibid, 30.

[46]Ibid, 50.

Petroleuse, she is forced to flee Paris.[47] Achille sends her to the two sisters in Berlevaag with a letter in which he explains Babette's situation and requests that the sisters harbor the refugee. Martine and Philippa agree to take the Frenchwoman into their home despite their suspicions of her difference. Indeed, throughout the story Dinesen highlights how radically different Babette is from the sisters and how awfully strange in their eyes, even going so far as to imply that she is from another plane of existence entirely. Upon her arrival she is described as massive, dark and wild-eyed, and later the congregation are said to view her as "a dark Martha in the house of their two fair Marys."[48] Physically, Babette was clearly imposing, and the greatness of her work was similarly impressive, but by contrast she is variously described as expressionless and speechless, not even learning to speak the language of her new home. According to Sara Stambaugh, Babette's strangeness has a witchlike quality, and indeed such imagery is frequent and overt.[49] For example, her work in and around her mistresses home is described as miraculous in its quality and extent. She had "magnetic qualities," Dinesen's narrator writes, and "under her eyes things moved, noiselessly, into their proper places," thus "conjuring away" many of the sisters' troubles and cares.[50] Furthermore, she "miraculously reduced" the housekeeping costs, and "the soup-pails and baskets," with which the sisters fed the poor and sick "acquired a new, mysterious power to stimulate

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[47]Petroleuse refers to women who set fire to houses with kerosene. It is never made clear in the story whether Babette was or was not actually guilty of this crime. Dinesen, 160.

[48]Ibid, 29, 33.

[49]Stambaugh, *The Witch and the Goddess in the Stories of Isak Dinesen*, 47, 80.

[50]Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," 31, 32.

and strengthen."[51] Stambaugh notes that witches frequently figure in Dinesen's stories and that they are usually portrayed as "admirable women who . . . practice white magic" such as that attributed to Babette. For the sisters, however, there is something frightening in Babette's uncanny nature. They would find her in the kitchen in the conventional witch's pose, studying a "heavy black book" and sitting "immovable on the three-legged kitchen chair . . . as enigmatical and fatal as a Pythia upon her tripod."[52]

Especially as Babette begins to make preparations for her feast, the sisters feel as though a witch is among them. To them she was "like the bottled demon of the fairy tale," who had "swelled and grown to such dimensions" that, like Lorens in their presence long ago, they "felt small before her."[53] When Martine sees the turtle brought in for the stew, she fears she is lending her father's house to a "witches' sabbath," and that Babette and her red-haired helper boy are "like some witch and her familiar spirit" who have "taken possession" of the kitchen. Furthermore, noting that there are thirteen people at the feast, Stambaugh points out that this is the number of a witches' coven.[54] In addition to using dense witch imagery, especially in the sisters perception of Babette, Dinesen also pictures Babette as functioning in various, namely in that of host, artist, saint, and priest in a feast that is at once a party, a work of art, and a Eucharistic offering.

When Babette receives news of winning the lottery, she asks the sisters if she may prepare a French meal for the forthcoming celebration of their father's birthday, thus

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[51]Ibid, 32.

[52]Ibid, 33; Stambaugh, 81.

[53]Ibid, 39

[54]Stambaugh, 81.

asking for one last chance to "do [her] utmost" as an artist.[55] By insisting on paying for the meal from her own earnings, however, she effectively becomes the occasion's host as well. Thus do the sisters give "themselves into their cook's hands," surrendering the "nature and range" of their party to her handiwork. In *The Life of the Party: Festive Vision in Modern Fiction*, Christopher Ames in fact draws insightful parallels between a party and the novel genre, parallels that apply also to forms of art other than the novel. Relying on Mikhail Bakhtin's extensive analysis of the carnivalization of the novel, Ames contends that the party "epitomizes the openness of the novel genre" and "as a festive mingling of different voices, elements, and characters—becomes a symbol for the novelistic enterprise itself."[56] His study, then, explores "how parties function symbolically, structurally, and thematically within individual works to make up a writer's distinctive festive vision."[57] I will argue that the party in "Babette's Feast" functions similarly to the ways parties function, according to Ames, in novels such as *Mrs. Dalloway*, especially as they closely parallel the artist's work.

According to Ames there is something essentially sacred about festivity as it "introduces individuals to forces greater than themselves," is clearly delimited from ordinary life by its exaggerated, extreme behavior and its inversion of normal roles and rules, and is overall an articulation of "human responses to life and death," a celebration of life correlated with a "ritual encounter with death." This is clearly true of Babette's "party," as it is not a mere gathering of people to eat, but is unambiguously a ritual

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[55]Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," 59.

[56]Christopher Ames, *The Life of the Party: Festive Vision in Modern Fiction* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1991), 19, 29.

[57]Ibid, 19.

banquet, with Babette presiding as a Christ-like saint and priest over the Eucharist. There are an overwhelming number of details with which Dinesen represents the feast as a commemoration of the Lord's Supper. For example, the dinner is served to twelve people and memorializes the founder of a religious sect. Furthermore, as Ervin Beck notes, the feast is set on a Sunday in the Advent season, and the often-quoted Bible verse, Psalm 85:10, which speaks of mercy and truth having met together, "is a traditional reading during Advent, since it prophesies the way the Incarnation will reconcile the rival claims of justice and mercy and of the old and new dispensations."[58] Some have argued that even the kinds of food Babette prepares are ritually symbolic. The profusion of wine is of course apt, along with the references to the Wedding of Cana, but the *cailles en sarcophage* also, the main dish of quails in pastry, can be seen as a reference to God's feeding the Israelites in the desert, which is traditionally understood as a foreshadowing of the Eucharist, as well to the three days Christ remained in the tomb after his death.[59] Finally, Beck links Babette to the Eucharist by explicating her very name. Babette, he notes, is the diminutive form of Barbara, and her last name, Hersant, can be translated as "herself a saint."[60] He thus argues that Babette is intentionally associated with Saint Barbara, whose feast day, like that of Babette's, is early in the Advent season, and who is the only woman who, in most iconic representation, is pictured carrying the Eucharistic

[58]Ervin Beck, "Dinesen's Babette's Feast," *Explicator* 56, no. 4 (Summer 1998).

[59]Poddles, 551-567.

[60]Beck, 1.

elements.[61] In fact, Saint Barbara is considered a "protectress of those in danger of dying without the sacraments"[62]

Babette also appears to be associated with Saint Barbara by the fact that she, like the saint, is clearly presented as a martyr, a self-sacrificial victim of the sort that, in Ames' analysis, gives the party and the work of art its sacred and life-affirming nature. Indeed, Babette is not only financially drained after the feast, but she is also wasted of physical vitality, as though she fed the others of her very flesh, and has thus figuratively died in the act of festive and artistic creation. When Martine and Philippa enter the kitchen after the feast, they find Babette sitting "on the chopping block," surrounded by "black and greasy pots and pans" and completely "white and . . . deadly exhausted."[63] According to Beck, the image of Babette on the chopping block in fact "alludes to Saint Barbara's death by having her head cut off," and when Philippa hugs Babette and feels "the cook's body like a marble monument against her own," it is because, "metaphorically, Babette has already become a marble saint's statue."[64] Here we clearly have what Ames terms "the death encounter," which "animates celebrations of all kinds" and which in literature "appears symbolically in parties with remarkable consistency." This death, according to Ames, occurs on both a metaphorical and a literal sense. In one sense, it is the "death" of the party's host, which corresponds to the "death" of the novelist. In other words, just as, in the carnivalized novel, the novelist surrenders authorial intent to multi-vocality and to the interpretive community, so the host must

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[61]Ibid, 1.

[62] Ibid, 1.

[63]Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," 56.

[64]Beck, 1.

surrender his or her control to the "festive mingling of different voices, elements, and characters" that come together and take on a life of their own at the party. This clearly occurs at Babette's feast, for though, by initiating a new way of knowing and being, she is in effect taking the place of the Dean in the community, the place she inhabits "is not one of appropriation, domination, or power."[65] On the contrary, Babette is behind the scenes in the kitchen during the course of the feast, trusting the community rightly to receive and interpret the significance of her art, which she relinquishes to them as a gift.

There is also a more literal sense in which Babette is figured as subjecting herself to death in a Christ-like offering of her own flesh for the life and vitality of others. According to Ames, such deaths, in addition to the more metaphorical sacrifices of the host and the novelist, are essential to the life of the party in modern fiction. He explains, for example, how in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Septimus Warren Smith's death "becomes a ritual sacrifice incorporated into the heart of the party, invigorating the community he had threatened . . . he becomes the *pharmakos* or sacrificial victim. Quite explicitly, his death contributes to [Clarissa's] heightened sense of vitality"[66] Although Clarissa was initially shocked and disturbed by the presence of death at her party, she begins to acknowledge that, "as an offering to life, the party cannot wholly exclude the darkness against which it is constructed. An offering requires a sacrifice." In other words, one might say, the Easter feast cannot exclude the darkness that is Good Friday; the Eucharistic feast cannot exclude the sacrifice of Body and Blood and a mutual

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[65]Mullins, 224.

[66]Ames, 104.

cannibalism of the sort described in the previous chapter in the words of Simone Weil and Catherine of Siena.

As representative of the Eucharist, "Babette's Feast" also contains connotations of cannibalism that are consistent with the theme's treatment in other Dinesen stories, demonstrating that communal feasting and celebration does in fact presuppose and acquire its sacred nature from the presence of sacrifice or death in its midst. The idea of cannibalism is introduced in "Babette's Feast" most blatantly in Philippa's recollection, after realizing the extent of Babette's sacrifice, of the story of a missionary in Africa who saved an old chief's wife and inadvertently consumed the chief's grandchild who was offered in gratitude.[67] Furthermore, according to Susan Hardy Aiken in *Isak Dinesen and the Engendering of Narrative*, the cailles en sarcophage represents "woman's own body that is offered up, in displaced form, through her Eucharistic culinary corpus."[68] At the dinner's end, then, Babette is "emptied out . . . in effect consumed by her own artistic production," but also by the communicants at the feast to the extent that her production was offered to them and for their manifold benefit. In another of Dinesen's stories, "Echoes," there is a similar theme, and its treatment of cannibalism helps illumine "Babette's Feast."

In "Echoes" there are two people who are figured as consumers of human flesh or blood. One is the diva Pellegrina who has lost her voice, a woman who, like Babette, was an artist and who is also portrayed as a witch. In the story she encounters a young boy, Emanuele, whom she believes inherited her voice, and she takes him as her pupil,

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[67]Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," 57.

[68]Susan Hardy Aiken, *Isak Dinesen and the Engendering of Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 254.

thereby regaining her voice vicariously. The relationship between the two is clearly portrayed as cannibalistic, the love between them seeming consumptive at times in its intensity, as Pellegrina at one point even states, "I have got my talons in him."[69] Furthermore, wanting to train the boy in the stoicism she deemed necessary in the artist, Pelligrina pricked his fingers and put the bloody handkerchief to her lips. After observing her putting his blood to her lips, the boy refuses to continue his lessons, however, reacting violently against Pellegrina's apprenticeship: "I know who you are. You are a witch. You are a vampire . . . . You want my blood, all the blood that is in me . . . you want the soul of me . . . Once I thought that I should die if I were to leave you. Now I know that I should die if I went back to you."[70] The relationship between Pelligrina and Emanuel clearly illustrates Simone Weil's analysis of human relationships, namely that "Beloved beings provide us with comfort, energy, a stimulant . . . . We love them, then, as food. It's an anthropophagic love." For Weil, however, this cannibalistic economy was redeemable to the extent that one entered into it willingly, "investing it with a sacrificial nature." This is precisely what Emanuele was unable to do, as he could not surrender his autonomy nor understand the mutuality of the relationship. Pellegrina reflects:

> [Emanuele] saw me sucking his blood from my handkerchief, and he ran away before me in fear of his life. But it is difficult to tell, in a mingling of blood like ours, who gives and who receives. You ought to have known, Emanuele, that I should not have brought the drops of your blood to my mouth if it had not been that I was longing to give all my own blood to you.[71]

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[69]Isak Dinesen, "Echoes," *Last Tales* (New York: Random House, 1957), 172.

[70]Ibid, 185.

[71]Dinesen, "Echoes," 188.

Whereas the anthropophagic love between Pellegrina and Emanuele failed for Emanuele's refusal to submit to a mutual giving and taking of self, the second example of cannibalism in "Echoes" illustrates the redemptive potential of such a relationship.

Niccolo, an old seafarer who is first person Pellegrina meets when she arrives in the village where Emanuele lives, had lived alone in the mountains for sixty-five years, away from his beloved sea. In their conversation, Pellegrina discovers that as a young sailor Niccolo had experienced a shipwreck and had survived by eating the right hand of the ship's saintly chaplain, who died on the raft beside him. Having all his life been guilt-stricken by this fact, Niccolo remains afraid of what the townspeople will think of him, for, he insists, "One can take many liberties with God which one cannot take with men," that is, God allows Himself to be eaten, but human beings forbid it amongst themselves.[72] Both Pellegrina and Niccolo are in fact "liable to condemnation as eaters of human flesh and blood," yet there is clearly a difference between the two, for what Pellegrina consumes she does against the other's wishes, as a predator, whereas Niccolo consumes what is laid before him as an undeserved gift, and one that therefore, like the Body and Blood of Christ, proves beneficial to its recipient.[73] Pellegrina in fact assures him that the saintly chaplain's hand, the very hand that Niccolo ate, would, in the time of resurrection, lift him into heaven. Thus, as Simone Weil argued, if one in saintliness offers oneself willingly into the economy of eating and being eaten, one actually becomes Christ-like in his or her ability to nourish others in his or her flesh. This is the case with Babette, whom in the sacrificial giving of herself for the community, becomes a Christ-

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[72]Ibid, 190.

[73]Gossman, 321.

figure at the Eucharistic banquet, enabling the congregation to eat without condemnation, in such a way that it is transformed and initiated into extraordinary new ways of knowing and being in community.

The effects of Babette's feast on those who join together to partake clearly parallel those attributed to the Eucharist, but at once they also demonstrate that communal feasting in its ordinary human sense (for after all, Babette doesn't serve a *sip* of wine and a wafer), like personal fasting facilitates and enables the development of virtues essential to the Christian life. Most overtly, of course, the feast parallels the Eucharist in its sacramental melding of spiritual and physical realities, of the abstract and the concrete, or, in Langbaum's terms, its synthesis of the ethical and the sensuous-esthetic ways of life. To those present, grace is extended, spiritual truths are revealed, and wholeness is realized through the very food and drink of which they partake and by the physical act of eating. Highlighting the significance of the physical aspects of the feast, of course, in addition to its sheer quantity, is the fact that it is composed of food and wine of the very highest quality. It matters, in other words, whether one drinks "the crass gin of the country" or "the noblest wine of the world," for to distinguish among the bounty of creation is to acknowledge its goodness and recognize God's goodness in and through it.

Not only are body and spirit both engaged at the feast, for the food and wine are also agents whereby spiritual benefits are conferred, but the feasters are no longer even able to distinguish between the two; the dichotomy is broken down entirely. Reading Dinesen's work chronologically, one is already prepared for such a dramatic synthesis in the person of Cardinal Salviati, who figures centrally in the first seven stories of *Last*

Tales. The Cardinal tells a story of a priest who was born with an identical twin brother to a man and woman as incompatible as two might be. One of the twins was named after St. Athanasius according to his father's wishes, and he was destined for the Church, while the other, by his mother's insistence, was named Dionysio and was meant to be a great artist. In a fire shortly after their birth, one of the twins died, and though for the head-strong father's sake the living boy was raised as Atanasio, no one knew for sure which twin he was. In fact, the mother continued to view him as "the child-prophet of earthly beauty and delight," and as he grew he came to embody both his father's and his mother's ideals such that "the hand of a child out of the elements of an anomalous family life produced a reconciling synthesis."[74] Of this man who is variously priest and artist, who his friend described as being "two incompatible personalities" in "one single magnificently harmonious form," Cardinal Salviati explained: "Speak not of incompatibility. Verily I tell you: you may meet one of the two [twins or personalities], speak to him and listen to him, confide in him and be comforted by him, and at the hour of parting be unable to decide with which of them you have spent the day."[75]

No less does Babette figure both as priest and artist, making entirely indistinguishable the pleasures of the body and joys of the soul. Indeed, it was said of Babette, when she cooked at the Café Anglais, that she turned a dinner there "into a love affair of the noble and romantic category in which one no longer distinguishes between bodily and spiritual appetite," and the feast she prepares in a more humble setting is

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[74]Dinesen, "The Cardinal's First Tale," 19.

[75]Ibid, 20.

clearly no different.[76] A transformation takes place at the feast, and there is a muddled understanding of whether it affects the partakers through their bodies or through their spirits, indicating that the two are indeed one; the distinction between worldly and otherworldly is overturned. The General, the man of the world, "cannot trust his senses," and "gasps and sputters like a yokel," while the congregation, having no thought of food or drink on their minds, "conduct themselves like consummate men of the world." They eat the gourmet fare "as if they had been doing so every day for thirty years," perceiving their growing intoxication as spiritual exaltation even as they experience physical transformations—old people receiving "the gift of tongues," "ears that for years had been almost deaf" being opened.[77] It appears, then, as Mullins contends, that "the process Babette sets in motion is ultimately dislocative and open" rather than, as Langbaum describes it, a neat thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, for categories are completely broken down and space opened for communal reinterpretation of how to be in community.

Another significant way in which Babette's feast symbolizes the Eucharistic banquet and like the Incarnation is dislocative and interruptive is the way it transcends time and place. According to Mullins, "Babette transforms exile because her Parisian feast mixes place (Norway/Paris: Paris/Norway) and disrupts time."[78] Each of the persons coming to the feast in fact is or considers him or her self to be in exile of one sort or another. Babette is obviously a literal exile, having been forced to flee from her home country. The members of the Dean's congregation, however, also experience life as

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[76]Dinesen, "Babette's Feast." 50-51.

[77]Ibid, 50; Langbaum, 251.

[78]Mullins, 226.

though in exile. Theirs is an exile from what they conceive as their heavenly, spiritual abode, and this is made particularly evident by the hymn they sing on the doorstep as they arrive for the feast: "Jerusalem, my happy home / name ever dear to me . . . ."[79] In his insightful commentary on exile, Edward Said describes the nature of exile in terms that also accurately describe the characteristics of the Dean's congregation:

> Clutching difference like a weapon to be used with stiffened will, the exile insists on his or her right to refuse to belong . . . . Willfulness, exaggeration, overstatement: these are characteristic styles of being an exile, methods for compelling the world to accept your vision . . . . At this extreme the exile can make a fetish of exile, a practice that distances him or her from all connections and commitments. To live as if everything around you were temporary and perhaps trivial is to fall prey to petulant cynicism and as well as to querulous lovelessness.[80]

During the course of the feast, however, space is collapsed, and those gathered "see the universe as it really is," that is, as a unified whole, and they perceive the world as a place in which the Kingdom of Heaven is already at hand and transformative.[81] Indeed, at the feast the members of the congregation believe they have been given "one hour of the millennium," for in that hour the Dean's dining room in fact *was* Jerusalem, their happy home.[82] Thus, they experience exile in a new way, Babette's feast having made the positive potentialities of exile into a reality. Said describes this more positive exilic state tellingly:

> For an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally. There is a unique pleasure in this sort of apprehension, especially if the exile is conscious of

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[79]Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," 43.

[80]Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 183.

[81]Ibid, 54.

[82]Ibid, 54.

> other contrapuntal juxtapositions that diminish orthodox judgment and elevate appreciative sympathy.[83]

In addition to collapsing space, Babette's feast disrupts and confuses the feasters' consciousness of time, enabling them to experience the past, the present, and the future "contrapuntally." Mullins writes:

> This gift, to use Derrida's word, is *aneconomic*; that is, it is outside the circle, and 'tears time apart.' Babette leaps backward to her Parisian days. The Dean's followers also leap backward, touching in memory the impulses of their founder. The feast brings both into the present moment, a blending and transforming moment which levers the community into new ways of knowing.[84]

The feast does, indeed, bring the past "into the present moment" and transforms it. In fact, the feasters begin to feel as though they are in a "celestial second childhood." Furthermore, much of their dinner conversation is a remembrance and rehearsal of their past and especially of their experiences with the Dean. It is as in the Jewish and Christian traditions, in which to remember the works of God in and among their communities is to bring God's authority and power and grace to bear on the present and to hope in His ability to bring His former promises to fulfillment. Not only does the present reach back and encompass the past, then, but it is simultaneously claimed and transformed by a future hope, which they actually glimpse and taste in the present, for indeed, "Time itself had merged into eternity."[85] Emphasizing the historic nature of the Church and its engagement of time in the process of transcending it, Henri de Lubac wrote:

> The Word of God submitted himself to this essential law: he came to deliver us from time, but by means of time . . . . This is the law of the Incarnation . . . . Following Christ's example, every Christian must acquiesce in that state of engagement in time

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[83]Said, 186.

[84]Mullins, 226.

[85]Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," 53.

> which gives him part and lot in all history, so that his connection with eternity is not unrelated to a past that he knows is immense and a future the length of which is hidden from him.[86]

The ritual of the Eucharist is a concrete way in which the Church makes a connection with eternity that simultaneously engages time, for as often as one partakes of it he or she recalls a particular moment in history, that is, Christ's sacrifice of Body and Blood, and appropriates it for the present moment, thereby also uniting his or her self with all others who throughout history have likewise partaken of the Feast and making void the distance between them. Babette's feast clearly parallels this aspect of the Eucharist, bringing here and there, past and future into a unified, eternal present.

Being thrust into a radically new way of knowing and experiencing reality, that is, in a way that transcends time and place and collapses distinctions between body and spirit, the feasters begin to realize their own selves transformed, this too in a way previously unknown. It is the sort of transformation, or sanctification rather, that De Lubac describes in *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*:

> Christ the Redeemer does not offer salvation merely to each one; he effects it, he is himself the salvation of the whole, and for each one salvation consists in a personal ratification of his original "belonging" to Christ, so that he be not cast out, cut off from this whole . . . the perfection of each individual must be measured at its maturity against the fullness of the Whole.[87]

Whereas they used to perceive their progress towards saintliness in terms of improving themselves morally by their own diligent efforts, they now realize beatification as a process of communal reunification and the grateful acceptance of extravagant grace, both of which involve a surrender of selfhood conceived in terms of autonomy and merit.

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[86]Henri De Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 144-45.

[87]Henri de Lubac, 39, 47.

Indeed, as the evening progresses those present seem to grow increasingly less self-conscious, less a company of individual feasters than a communal whole. Those who hold grudges or nurse old wounds regain the humility to relinquish them, and those ordinarily deathly serious for being so self-critical acquire the outward-looking posture necessary to joke and laugh. According to Ames, employing *Mrs. Dalloway* as a brilliant illustration, such a loss of self-awareness is in fact the essence of a successful party: "The creation of a communal spirit involves a certain loss of identity." Clarissa Dalloway senses that her party has truly begun, for example, when Ralph Lyons beats back an interfering curtain and goes on talking, a gesture which, by its inadvertence, "represents a loss of self-consciousness; Ralph acts without thinking, breaking the hold of deliberate action upon the stiff, lifeless party."[88] Even Clarissa, Ames contends,

> "had quite forgotten what she looked like." This is clearly the antithesis of her feeling moments before that Peter "made her see herself." The loss of identity brings with it a loss of self-consciousness that is, in part, a move toward a more authentic being: "Every time she gave a party she had this feeling of being something not herself, and that everyone was unreal in one way; much more real in another."[89]

Babette's feast, then, is clearly a successful party, for there is just such a loss of identity and self-consciousness, an "absorption of the individual into the party" such that the gathered community takes on a unified life of its own. This is most evident in the childlike attitude of abandon, of playful indulgence and extravagance, with which the attendants leave the party:

> The guests from the yellow house wavered on their feet, staggered, sat down abruptly or fell forward on their knees and hands and were covered with snow, as if they had indeed had their sins washed white as wool, and in this regained innocent attire were

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[88]Ames, 95.

[89]Ames, 95-96. Quotes from Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1925), 55, 259.

> gamboling like little lambs. It was, to each of them, blissful to have become as a small child; it was also a blessed joke to watch old Brothers and Sisters, who had been taking themselves so seriously, in this kind of celestial second childhood. They stumbled and got up, walked on or stood still, bodily as well as spiritually hand in hand, at moments performing the great chain of a beatified *lanciers*.[90]

The lanciers imagery is particularly apt as in such a dance many individuals' movements come together to create a beautiful, synchronized whole. Tellingly, theirs is a *beatified* lanciers, that is, the synchronization is the congregation's sanctification. Of course, one might attribute the whole situation merely to the group's growing intoxication, but as the whole story compels one to conclude, it makes no difference whether they are literally drunk or not, whether their exalted state has a natural or spiritual cause; it only matters that in this particular moment they are one and as one forgiven, whole and happy for having thankfully received the gift of a feast. It is as St. Cyprian said regarding the Eucharist:

> How strong is Christian unanimity . . . . For when the Lord calls his body the bread which is made up of many grains joined together, he means by that the union of all Christian people, which he contained within himself. And when he calls his blood the wine which is made into one drink of many grapes, he again means that the flock which we form is made up of individuals who have regained their unity.[91]

Ironically, it is through an unintentional and physically indulgent celebration that the Dean's congregation achieves such non-self-reflective sanctity in unity, rather than through their previous ascetical disciplines and intentional self-denials.

One of Dinesen's favorite structural devices, which she calls a "da capo," is "the echo or formal repetition," and its function in "Babette's Feast" is particularly compelling as it ties the story together thematically. In "Echoes," the story dealing most thematically

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[90]Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," 55.

[91]Quoted in De Lubac, 90-91. St. Cyprian, *Epistles*. 69, c.5, n.2 (p.242) and *Epist*. 63, c.13 (p.208)

overtly with the "da capo" principle, one can piece together a clear idea of its meaning for Dinesen and thus its significance in "Babette's Feast." Pellegrina, the heroine in "Echoes," while discussing the resurrection of the body with Niccolo, who is concerned about having eaten another's, states "I can tell you that the Lord likes a jest, and that a *da capo*—which means: taking the same thing over again—is a favorite jest of his."[92] As the story progresses, the term "da capo" in fact becomes synonymous with resurrection.[93] When Pellegrina later meets Emanuele, the boy she believes has inherited her voice, she interprets the uncanny situation in such terms: "The voice of Pellegrina should be heard again by the world, in that heavenly *da capo* which is also called resurrection."[94] Pellegrina in fact lost her voice during an opera-house fire, an accident which, she surmises, occurred at the same time of Emanuele's birth. She thus conjectures, "Was . . . that fire in reality kindled by my own hand? And was the flaming death of the old Phoenix and the radiant birth of the young bird but one and the same thing? . . . . Would she herself . . . on the first night of Emanuele's appearance, be hidden away in the gallery

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[92]Dinesen, "Echoes," 160.

[93]Given Dinesen's emphasis on stories as contexts that give naked individuals the clothing of community, or in other words, their true identity, as "The Cardinal's First Tale" demonstrates, her recurring use of the "da capo" or resurrection theme is perhaps inevitable. Catherine Pickstock makes the remarkable argument that "there is only story because of the resurrection." She contends, "Resurrection is the process at work in non-identical repetition by which that which is repeated is not unmediably different, but analogously the same. This redemptive return is what allows a person to tell a story, since for there to be a story, there must be "analogous" subjects and objects, persisting as same-yet-different." So "every story is by definition a resurrection story, and it is thus that we can read the Gospel stories as narrating the story which sets out the transcendental condition for every story." 266.

[94]Dinesen, "Echoes," 170.

. . . the corpse in the grave witnessing its own resurrection?"[95] The "da capo," then, the "taking the same thing over again," is intimately linked with sacrifice, the resurrection so glorious because of the tragedy of the death it follows. Significantly, the "da capo," the phrase that repeats itself and rightly concludes "Echoes" relates to Christ's offering his flesh as food and his death for humanity's resurrection. After Emanuele refused a mutual death as the path to resurrection, Pellegrina sits in church observing a woman "munching a little with the consummation of the Host," and she repeats Niccolo's words to herself: "One can take many liberties with God which one cannot take with men."

In Pellegrina's case, tragically, liberties were not allowed among human beings, Emanuele being unable to conceive surrender of self as anything other than as surrender to a predator. In "Babette's Feast," however, we have an example of human beings dying in one sense only to be raised to life in another, receiving extravagantly for having renounced, and thus playing their part in a true "resurrection story" complete with multiple "da capos"[96] The members of the Dean's congregation, having renounced all notions of finding heaven on earth, that is, of obtaining anything of spiritual worth in worldly pleasure, find such pleasure showered upon them. While eating the most extraordinary food in the world and growing intoxicated on the world's "noblest wine," they ironically think "It was . . . when man has not only altogether forgotten but has firmly renounced all ideas of food and drink that he eats and drinks in the right spirit," and, recalling the Dean's words, that "the only things which we may take with us from

[95]Ibid, 170.

[96]Pickstock, 266.

our life on earth are those which we have given away!"[97] Indeed, after devoting their whole lives to the renunciation of worldly pleasure in its meanest sense, they are particularly receptive to it when it is granted to them at its noblest, that is, as a taste of heaven. According to Langbaum, in fact, they experience a "beatific orgy," and "since the old people have been waiting for it all their lives, they are not surprised."[98] The General, on the other hand, receiving what he deemed permanently lost, is extraordinarily surprised, and his dinner-table speech proves one of two culminating points of the story's "da capo" theme while also aptly containing its structural "da capo," that is, a repetition of the Dean's previously quoted words:

> We tremble before making our choice in life, and after having made it again tremble in fear of having chosen wrong. But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude . . . . See! That which we have chosen is given us, and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us. Ay, that which we have rejected is poured upon us abundantly. For mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and bliss have kissed one another.[99]

Many years previously, the General had in fact renounced the possibility of realizing his "mighty vision of a higher and purer life," for he could not reconcile his sensuality with Martine's disembodied spirituality, and at that time he stated bitterly that "in this world there are things which are impossible."[100] During the course of the feast, however, he is surprised to realize that he and Martine have been together in spirit every day of their lives, that their seemingly contradictory ways of life, that is, the ethical and

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[97]Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," 50, 51.

[98]Langbaum, 253.

[99]Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," 52.

[100]Ibid, 24.

the sensuous-esthetic, do in fact coincide and thus "in this world anything is possible."[101] He, like the others at the feast, gains his life for having lost it.

Babette is the only person who, for having surrendered of her self, does not initially appear to have gained anything from her own feast, and Martine and Philippa in fact pity her when they remember her at the evening's end. She corrects them, however, when they express their pity, scolding her for having given so much for their sakes: "'For your sake?' she replied. 'No. For my own . . . . I am a great artist! . . . . Through all the world there goes one long cry from the heart of the artist: Give me leave to do my utmost!'"[102] The meal was given, therefore, "not out of a desire to restore or replenish or return, but out of a desire to create."[103] It in fact constitutes the resurrection of a long dormant art, and for involving sacrifice it makes "nonclosure," or resurrection, a possibility in the lives of the sisters and their community.[104] Dinesen even leaves the story beautifully open-ended, with Babette's own resurrection finally foreseen. Philippa exclaims, repeating Achille's words to her many years ago, "Yet this is not the end! I feel, Babette, that this is not the end. In Paradise you will be the great artist that God

[101]Ibid, 54.

[102]Ibid, 57-59.

[103]Mullins, 226.

[104]Mullins, 227.

meant you to be! . . . . Ah, how you will enchant the angels!"[105] Taken together in their structural and thematic use of the "da capo," "Echoes" and "Babette's Feast" imply that resurrection, that "heavenly da capo" can be realized in time to the extent that one allows him or her self to "fall into the ground and die." Life at its most extravagant presupposes death and sacrifice, life at its fullest is life revived from death's ashes, and life in full freedom is life in communal, mutually giving and taking relationship—these are the truths realized in the subversive life and world affirming revelry of "Babette's Feast." Thus Dinesen's story provides an image of hope for those suffering from eating disorders—hope that even in this broken world and to our insatiated selves there is nourishment God provides for our pilgrimage to God, nourishment which we are invited to joyfully accept for our healing even now.

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[105] Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," 59.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

So in contrast to *The Violent Bear it Away*, which conveys full communion with God as a present absence, "Babette's Feast" portrays such communion as almost *completely* present in the everyday rituals of life such that there is little to anticipate in eternity. A degree of absence and presence must be held in tension, however, just as the "sick" and the "healthy" in this earthly life together should form one Body. In light of these two stories, then, and in light of the Christian Story which the two literary narratives reflect, I conclude with some suggestions of how the Church might make room for women who are still suffering from eating disorders as well as for those who have recovered. By this I mean not only caring for and helping them, but also respecting their dignity as members of the Body by allowing their experiences to speak to and enrich the Whole. As noted in my introduction, this is nearly impossible given the limited current conceptions of what eating disorders mean and how, if at all, they relate to extreme religious fasting practices in the history of the Church.

On the one hand there are many who, like Joan Brumberg, set up a stark contrast between women who starve themselves today and those who did so in a religious context in the past. The former, in this construct, are conceived variously as being merely vain, appearance-oriented individuals who are obsessed with bodily perfection, or else as people attempting to disembody their selves, being products of a patriarchal and repressive culture in which, post-Descartes, body and spirit are dichotomized. Religious

women's starvation in the past, however, is portrayed almost respectably. For they were steeped in a sacramental understanding of reality and their bodies actually reflected and effected spiritual realities:

> In the earlier era, control of appetite was linked to piety and belief; through fasting, the medieval ascetic strove for perfection in the eyes of God. In the modern period, female control of appetite is embedded in patterns of class, gender, and family relations established in the nineteenth century; the modern anorectic strives for perfection in terms of society's ideal of physical, rather than spiritual, beauty.[1]

Such an explanation is problematic, however, in that it implies both an impossibility of continuity among members of the Church throughout time and, most offensively, a contention that women who struggle with eating today are influenced by nothing other than pop culture and perhaps a smattering of modern psychology and philosophy, incapable of being claimed by and thus understanding themselves in the context of any greater narrative.

Equally problematic, however, is the perspective of Rudolph Bell in *Holy Anorexia*, which analyzes the life and actions of one like St. Catherine of Siena through modern psychological lenses and perceives little difference between her and the modern anorexic. Thereby conceiving both as pathological cases, he goes to the absurd extreme of saying that St. Catherine, whose life was devoted both to the service of the poor and sick and to the reformation of the Church, was, in the end, simply diseased and grossly vain. Though Bell's analysis may seem to uphold a helpful sense of continuity between the experience of the medieval ascetic and the modern anorexic, it in fact does so inappropriately by failing to recognize the particularities of time periods and social milieus, collapsing them all under the reductionistic gaze of modern psychology. In this

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[1]Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 46.

sense Brumberg makes a good point when she states that "although Catherine of Siena and Karen Carpenter do have something in common—the use of food as a symbolic language—it is as inappropriate to call the former an anorectic as it is to cast the latter as a saint."[2] For to call someone an anorexic today is to apply a label that makes virtually no sense apart from the very specific diagnostic criteria that has developed since its identification as a clinical syndrome in the 1873.

The Christian tradition, in unique contrast to both of the positions above, asserts a belief in unity among its members, and thus continuity between all times and places within human history, while at once insisting on the importance of the most minute particularities of each. Thus, a Christian woman struggling with an eating disorder may in fact have more in common with Catherine of Siena than Karen Carpenter, and anorexia and sainthood may not be mutually exclusive as some would imply or even contend. It is for this reason that I hesitate even to use such a reductionistic and stigmatizing label as anorexia. While not denying that anorexia is a terrible illness and therefore an evil that one must never glamorize or morbidly desire for herself or for others, I suggest that those who suffer from this malady, along with their communities, having been converted by, situated within, and endowed with the symbolic provisions of the ongoing narrative of God in relationship with His people, may nevertheless employ its "language" redemptively. For example, St. Catherine of Siena admitted that her "inability" to eat was in fact an illness, and, submitting to her superiors in the Church, she appears not to have been unwilling for her illness to be healed. However, converted as her entire person so radically was—body, mind, and soul—into Christ's Body, she could not but perceive

[2]Brumberg, *Fasting Girls,* 46.

every aspect of her experience, including her acute bodily psychological suffering, as part of the Church's Story and as a means for illustrating that Story to those around her. Hence, her *Dialogue*, which consists of an extended conversation between God and the human soul, is fraught with the imagery of intense hunger, feeding and devouring: language which, given the famine and plague so familiar to the people of her time, must have been particularly compelling. By her willingness to be sick in the presence of others—that is, her ability to communicate spiritual and relational significance in and through her symptoms—was a radical form of witness.

From those suffering with food related illnesses today as well there are many ways the Church can learn and grow and strengthen its witness to the surrounding culture. It can only do so, however, by incorporating these people as full contributing members, listening to what they have to say and paying attention to what they have to show in and through their struggles. Among other things this might mean acknowledging, along with feminist critics, that there is something deeply skewed in a culture (and in a Church uncritically mimicking it) that still, through its "tyranny of slenderness" keeps many women, despite monumental advances in their opportunities in the past hundred years, weak, ashamed, inhibited, and controlled.[3] Thus Bordo contends that "to acknowledge that a deep and embodied understanding of what culture demands

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[3]Chernin, *The Obsession: Reflections of the Tyranny of Slenderness* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1981). See Naomi Wolf, "Hunger," *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), 179-217. Also see Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 1992). These argue that our culture's obsession with thinness, which became such a force at the same time that women were finally gaining ground in society, has been part of a "backlash" against such promise for women and a means for maintaining the power relations between the sexes.

might be the source of the anorectic's suffering is to suppose that the patient might have as much to teach the 'experts' as the other way around."[4]

It must be noted, at this point, however, that "the vocabulary and syntax of the body, like those of all languages, are "culturally given" and so "the anorectic cannot simply decide to make slenderness mean whatever she wishes it to."[5] Indeed, the "vocabulary" and "syntax" of Catherine of Siena's emaciation acquired its theological and redemptive signification from the community in which she was immersed. Today, this cultural givenness of the language of the body means, alas, that any form of self-starvation will almost inevitably be given the reductionistic label of "anorexia" and thereby lose its capacity to demonstrate, as it did for St. Catherine, a dramatic surrender of self-will to and for the "other." Though Bordo rightly notes that the meaning of thinness in our culture is not "univocal or fixed or clear," being on the contrary "*overdetermined*, freighted with multiple significances," thinness and especially anorexia do very often signify a heroic assertion of self-mastery.[6] Pointing to the case of the anorexic model, Aimee Lui, who was envied and became "'a local celebrity' for her remarkable ability to lose weight," Kim Chernin can thus argue, "if our will were sufficient to accomplish our desire, many of us would begin to look like our anorexic sisters. The anorexic girl has become our present cultural heroine."[7] Likewise, but

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[4]Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 65.

[5]Ibid, 67.

[6]Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 67.

[7]Chernin, 46-47.

alluding to some of her wasted body's other significations, Ellmann calls the anorexic "the enigmatic icon of our times, half heroine, half horror."[8]

Hence my conclusion that to a culture that wants to either castigate or celebrate anorexia, the Church has the potential to offer a radical way of witness both within its walls and to the wider secular culture through an appropriate understanding of feasting and fasting. On the one hand, Christian communities must not minimalize or stigmatize the extraordinarily varied experiences of those who struggle with eating disorders, but rather acknowledge the profound and inscrutable depth of meaning inscribed on and communicated through their bodies. Such a reintegration of the marginalized "sick" might also involve recognizing that, considering how the discipline of fasting has often been taught and practiced in Christianity, there is not a black and white distinction between anorexics today and glorified fasting saints of the past. While thus affirming the anorexic as a person whose struggle is significant and contributes powerfully to its ongoing Story, the Church must also, given the nihilistic connotations and implications such disorders inevitably carry in our culture (whether these truly represent the position of the given individual or not), work out the full implications of its most central doctrines. So it will be that, in tandem with feminist critics, the Church can celebrate and emphasize the subversive life and body affirming activity of feasting. For in the Christian Story feasting with others at a common table, consuming undeserved but graciously and *extravagantly* given nourishment and pleasure—and thus literally the breaking of a fast—is the ultimate image of reestablished communion with God and with

[8]Maud Ellmann, 2.

others, which is the surrender of our autonomous selves and thus the means of our salvation.

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