ABSTRACT

Manifestations of Transcendence in
Twentieth-Century American Fiction:
F. Scott Fitzgerald, Carson McCullers,
J.D. Salinger, and Cormac McCarthy

O. Alan Noble, Ph.D.

Mentor: Luke Ferretter, Ph.D.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the secularization of American society poses a unique problem for fiction writers. As a number of scholars in various fields have established, humans desire and are oriented towards the transcendent, but in an increasingly secular world, the transcendent ceases to be conceivable as a reality irreducible to the material universe and instrumental reason. In response to this tension, American authors of the twentieth century sought alternative visions of transcendence which would not betray or challenge immanent materialism. Looking at the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Carson McCullers, J.D. Salinger, and Cormac McCarthy, this study traces various manifestations of transcendence in literature during this period. The thesis of the study is that a desire for the transcendent is a major preoccupation of twentieth-century American fiction, as authors tried to conceive of the otherworldly in immanent, materialist imagery and language, and that by tracing these manifestations of transcendence we gain a richer understanding of the texts, the literary period, and the social milieu out of which they arise.

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by

O. Alan Noble, B.A., M.A.

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____
Dianna M. Vitanza, Ph.D., Chairperson

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Approved by the Dissertation Committee

____
Luke Ferretter, Ph.D., Chairperson

____
Philip Jenkins, Ph.D.

____
Richard R. Russell, Ph.D.

____
Phillip J. Donnelly, Ph.D.

____
Sarah K. Ford, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School

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____
J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

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CHAPTER ONE

Transcendence in the Twentieth Century

A basic aspect of our lived experience is the awareness of and desire for the transcendent. The sense of the transcendent that I am evoking here involves an irreducibly higher or other reality, felt and experienced through finite reality so as to provide orientation to a life. This orientation serves, or can serve, as the basis for individual and social existential justification, the validation of aesthetic and moral claims, a reconciliation of death and suffering with life and love, and the scaffolding of hope. It is a transcendence over sheer materiality, temporality, mortality, suffering, over an undifferentiated and indifferent being in the world. Moreover, this desire appears to be the rule across cultures and times. It is perhaps simply what people do when they seek to make sense of and significance for their lives. While we might think of "transcendence" as a concept under the purview of "theology" exclusively, as we shall see, many scholars across various disciplines see this concept as crossing theology proper and seeping into fields like psychology, sociology, and philosophy. William Johnson writes:

> The search for transcendence is not simply another one of those intellectual endeavors to resolve problems that no one is posing or to answer questions that no one is asking. The search is one which is prompted by the individual search for a deeper and more profound meaning of life itself and for a sensitizing and intensification of human experience. The impulse to move from the ordinary dimension of life to the extraordinary is not one invented by the theologian but is one which appears to spring up from the deepest levels of consciousness itself. (Johnson 1)

Or again, according to Mircea Eliade, telling the story of the Achilpa tribe in Australia which simply died off when they lost the sense of divinity in the world:

> Life is not possible without an opening toward the transcendent; in other words, human beings cannot live in chaos. Once contact with the transcendent is lost, existence in the world ceases to be possible—and the Achilpa let themselves die. (34)

For these scholars, the desire for the incomparably higher other is basic to our experience as humans, to our identity: "The core of our human identity is nothing more or less than the fitful apprehension of the radically inexplicable presence, facticity and perceptible substantiality of the created" (Steiner 201). This radical inexplicability is the irreducibility of the transcendent, and it is a presence, rather than a mere negation of presence. Others describe this desire as a sort of universal obligation toward the other:

> We seem to be summoned to a higher standard of being, to a sense of responsibility for being in relation to others that transcends any obligation that another individual or culture may lay upon us. Yet this responsibility would seem to extend to the past and, to the extent that I inherit from others and look beyond the present, to future generations of persons and things. This call may be mediated through our relations with others and through our particular histories and cultures. Yet none of these seems to be able to fully account for them. The otherness of this calling seems to be written into the texture of our way of being in the world and to link us with world humanity. (Long 10)

Note how Long describes this embodied, irreducible force which forms our desires. Building off of Long's ideas, I believe that we feel an intense obligation toward all others which cannot be explained or reduced to the moral ideals of our culture; the call remains always other; and yet, it is also embodied in the world, in the "texture of our way of being in the world" (Long 10). A number of prominent theorists have explored transcendence as a basic human phenomenon, although they have differing explanations for the phenomenon and use different terms to describe it.

Perhaps the most comprehensive study of the transcendent in this sense is Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*. In his three-volume study, Bloch uses a multitude of prototypical human experiences to demonstrate the various ways a hope for some transcendent good manifests in our lives. Bloch sees daydreams, travel to foreign lands, fairytales, romance, and other such flights of fancy as manifestations of a basic desire, an orientation toward the "Not-Yet-Come." This desire and orientation he terms "hope." Although Bloch uses the term "hope" rather than the "transcendent," his work addresses the same phenomenon as I wish to address: it is deep desire for a transcendent object which serves to orient us and give our lives meaning. For Bloch, hope arises from the Not-Yet-Conscious, a deep, and perhaps unconscious desire for some unimaginable, utopian future. What is particularly important for my purposes is that Bloch sees this hope as an essential human experience: "Expectation, hope, intention towards possibility that has still not become: this is not only a basic feature of human consciousness, but, concretely corrected and grasped, a basic determination within objective reality as a whole" (7). As a Marxist philosopher, this hope must paradoxically be a kind of transcendent immanence for Bloch: "[T]he utopian function is also the only transcendent one which has remained, and the only one which deserves to remain: one which is transcendent without transcendence" (146). As with many other important thinkers of the early twentieth century to our own time, true transcendence is no longer a viable option. And yet, the transcendent phenomenon as a phenomenon cannot be denied. This leads Bloch to the awkward position of both affirming and denying the reality of transcendence; he calls for a "transcendent without transcendence." As we shall see later, this tension is precisely what I intend to explore in twentieth-century American fiction.

Another scholarly look at the deep desire for transcendence rooted in our consciousness appears in Ernest Becker's popular work, *The Denial of Death*. Becker explores what he identifies as the fundamental, paradoxical tension of life: that we are mortal, anal, embodied, and finite and yet also immortal, beautiful, spiritual creatures. Rudolf Otto identifies a similar aspect of the transcendent in the concept he calls "creature-consciousness": "It is the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures" (10). Both scholars are observing that an important aspect of the experience of the transcendent is a feeling of our utter creatureliness. We long for a transcendent source of justification which can explain our ugliness and our beauty, which can reconcile the horror and wonder of existence: "Man's tragic destiny: he must desperately justify himself as an object of primary value in the universe; he must stand out, be a hero, make the biggest possible contribution to world life, show that he *counts* more than anything or anyone else" (Becker 4). Notice that this is our "destiny"; it is inescapable. We must seek after some sort of existential justification. What is more, this search will be "desperate," because the stakes are so high, yet it is also tragic, since the object of our desire is always out of reach. We can only be justified by a transcendent act: the "biggest possible contribution." And our justification looks like obtaining a value greater than "anything or anyone else"; in short, we must become gods.

Much later, Luc Ferry will make a similar argument in *Man-Made God*: *The Meaning of Life*. Ferry claims that despite the widespread rejection of religion in the twentieth century, modern people have retained a desire for transcendent justification: "We continue, without even being aware of it, to posit values higher than mere existence,

values for which, at the very least, it is worth risking our lives" (Ferry 137). For Ferry, the divine in some sense is essential to human flourishing. Either we believe in a divine, or we become the divine; it is simply what humans do.

In two of his magisterial works, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has made the case that the transcendent is not only essential to human flourishing, but that it orients our morality. After describing various passionate occupations for the modern person, Taylor writes in *Sources of the Self*, "I am suggesting that we see all these diverse aspirations [experience, politics, ordinary life, expression] as forms of a craving which is ineradicable from human life. We have to be rightly placed in relation to the good" (*Sources of the Self* 44). Taylor sees the transcendent as taking the form of "hypergoods," "goods which not only are incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, decided about" (63). Again, we see the transcendent object as something which is not merely highly valued, but infinitely, "incomparably" valued. Taylor also uses the concept of epiphanies to describe the role of transcendence in life. He argues that a major concern of art is the manifestation of epiphanies: "A work of art as the locus of a manifestation which brings us into the presence of something which is otherwise inaccessible, and which is of the highest moral or spiritual significance; a manifestation, moreover, which also defines or completes something, even as it reveals" (419). For example, Taylor notes that the Romantic era was marked by literature which contained "Epiphanies of being," to show "some greater spiritual reality or significance shinning through" (419). This is contrasted with "framing epiphanies" which one finds in the twentieth century—epiphanies which no longer express any reality, although they still acknowledge the phenomenon of

epiphany which people experience, particularly in the work of art. Both of these strategies of transcendence reflect a basic human craving for "hypergoods," although only epiphanies of being assume that there is a higher reality revealed through epiphanies.

Finally, in his recent work, *A Secular Age*, Taylor describes a desire for "fullness" as an essential human experience:

> We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be. This is perhaps a place of power: we often experience this as deeply moving, as inspiring. Perhaps this sense of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off; we have the powerful intuition of what fullness would be, were we to be in that condition, e.g., of peace or wholeness; or able to act on that level, of integrity or generosity or abandonment or self-forgetfulness. But sometimes there will be moments of experienced fullness, of joy and fulfillment, where we feel ourselves there. (5)

Taylor's description of "fullness" resembles Bloch's hope for the Not-Yet-Come. There is an innate desire for an ideal future which cannot be fully articulated, but is felt by all people at some point. And we may even taste the fullness in fleeting moments. How we envision this fullness will determine our morality, our sense of purpose, our conception of beauty, and how we reconcile our hoped-for-future with finitude and suffering. The experience of fullness orients our lives, but Taylor warns that, "the sense of orientation also has its negative slope; where we experience above all a distance, an absence, an exile, a seemingly irremediable incapacity ever to reach this place; an absence of power; a confusion, or worse, the condition often described in the tradition as melancholy, ennui" (6). As we shall discover, it is precisely this negative slope, the sense of an absence of fullness or the inability to reach it, which many twentieth century authors struggle against in their effort to discover a new, secular fullness in their literature.

Through differing terminology and in differing fields, each of these thinkers has made the case or assumed that basic to human life is an experience of the transcendent. This phenomenon is not a lingering immaturity from humanity's primitive epoch; Bloch, Becker, and Ferry are atheists, and the latter two do not treat this desire for an orienting transcendence as positive or beneficial to humanity; it is simply a fact about life. Based on this recognition by multiple scholars in multiple disciples of the transcendent as a phenomenon, we can begin to identify certain characteristics which define it. Let us describe transcendence by its qualities and its functions.

A Definition of the Transcendent

What I will be looking at in this study is how a belief in and hope for an embodied, transcendent reality (1) which is irreducible to material existence (2), is the cause of and a response to deeply-felt tensions in existence (3), and grants existential justification (4), hope for the future (5), meaning to existence (6), and value to phenomena (7) manifest at a time in which it is commonly believed that transcendence is an illusion, albeit an essential one.

(1) The alternatives to "embodied, transcendent reality" are embodied, immanent reality and disembodied, transcendent reality. The former becomes the basic vision of existence in modernity. It is the view that all of life can be described, reduced, accounted for, and communicated as a matrix of nearly incomprehensible materialities: quarks, protons, atoms, cells, chemical compounds, organisms, neural processes, etc. The latter view rises to popularity concurrent with the former in deism. It posits that there is some transcendent reality, but that it is so utterly Other that it never touches upon this world. In contrast, what we will be looking at in this study is how a belief in a transcendent

reality which does touch upon this world appears in modern American fiction. The transcendent's presence in the world is important. Sometimes it appears as the revelation of the true nature of reality, as in Eliade (21). Other scholars stress the embodiedness of the transcendent, such as Rudolf Otto, who speaks of the numinous state of mind which arises in the presence of a numinous "object" (25). The embodiment or incarnation of the transcendent can take varying forms in these novels, but it is always an object, person, or sense experience which is irreducible to its material reality.

A word should be said here about coherence and logic of transcendence in material, immanent reality. Marlène Zarader has shown the tremendous difficulty of arguing that a truly transcendent Other can appear and be experienced by a subjective, finite being in her article, "Phenomenality and Transcendence." She considers how this is a problem for Jean-Luc Marion, Heidegger, and Levinas. If the transcendent is to remain Other, uncontaminated by the subject, then it cannot be experienced by the subject. If it can be experienced by the subject, it immediately ceases to be truly Other. For the sake of this study, I will treat embodied, transcendent reality as a phenomenon that people believe that they experience and hope for. Whether or not this experience is valid or this hope is misplaced is for others to sort out. My question is what do the characters in American fiction desire, not what should they desire. And, as we shall see, they overwhelmingly desire a transcendent reality which can be experienced in some embodied form.

(2) Irreducibility is the defining feature of the transcendent. It describes the gratuity, surplus, alterity, and incommunicability of the transcendent. It describes its resistance to empirical inquiry, totalization, or comprehension. Although the

transcendent can be experienced in some embodied form, it cannot be reduced to it. The meaning, value, and being of an embodiment of transcendence always exceeds the limits of the material. In Eugene T. Long's essay, "Quest for Transcendence," he notes how irreducibility is essential to transcendence:

> I will explore briefly several dimensions of human experience which seem to suggest a wider range of being than can be accounted for in the categories of finite being. I call these transcendent dimensions of human experience. By transcendent dimensions of experience, I mean experiences of 'ultimacy' which seem to bring one up against the limits of what can be accounted for in ordinary terms and point beyond these limits to a transcendent or wider range of being. (7)

These experiences cannot be accounted for, cannot be limited or outlined. It is in this sense that the transcendent is often characterized as "infinite." Otto makes a similar claim about the holy: "The truly 'mysterious' object is beyond our apprehension and comprehension, not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently 'wholly other', whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own" (28). The transcendent is always in surplus to what we know or experience, so that as far as we may go in plumbing its depths, there is ever more, forever.

Here we can begin to see the distinction between the "transcendent" and what Ernst Bloch calls the "transcendent without transcendence" (146). While the former is irreducible, the latter gives the appearance of irreducibility but is ultimately material. Immanent transcendence refers to a reality or experience of a reality that appears to defy its material being. Typically this means the radical multiplication of finite events or phenomena. One could think of the sand on the seashore in this manner. The grains of sand are so numerous, so overwhelming in number that they evoke the infinite. There is

an interesting connection here to non-immanentist transcendence. We often use visions of the exceedingly great as a symbol for the irreducibility of transcendence. A poet might use an image of sand on the seashore to conjure up a sense of the infinite of transcendence, using a symbol to represent a thing that she believes truly exists. But in immanent transcendence, the artist uses the image of greatness to express the sense, the power of transcendence while denying that that image reflects some higher reality. It is thus quite possible to have two authors use the same image to evoke the transcendent while intending quite divergent conceptions of it.

(3) Our lives are marked by deep tensions, ones which point to the need for some transcendent source to reconcile them and grant our lives meaning and justification. Ernest Becker argues that there are two profoundly impacting facts about existence that confront a person and force her to seek some justification. First, existence overwhelms us with its gratuitous being. Here, Becker echoes Heidegger somewhat. Being, in all its forms and depths and complexities and beauties, confounds us, overcomes us, draws us near and demands that we explain our participation in such majesty, as Long notes: "This experience of our being towards death and the nothingness of our being seems closely related to the experience often identified as the experience of the mysteriousness of universe, the experience of the contingency of all that is, the wonder that anything at all should be" (Long 8). Second, the radical contingency of existence, our fragility, our deformity, our inevitable and unimaginable suffering call out for a telos that can explain life. Together, these two realities create the fundamental tension of our lives. Becker calls this "existential paradox the condition of *individuality within finitude*. Man has a symbolic identity that brings him sharply out of nature . . . This immense expansion, this

dexterity, this ethereality, this self-consciousness gives to man literally the status of a small god in nature . . . Yet, at the same time . . . man is a worm and food for worms. This is the paradox: he is out of nature and hopelessly in it" (26). Again, this sense of creatureliness is what Otto terms our "creature-consciousness" (10). What we find articulated by many of these thinkers is the idea that two of the most fundamental and powerful facts about our being is its brute, finite, materiality and its irreducibility, grandeur, and meaning. And it is through a reconciliation, a narrative about this tension, that we can find our justification within the transcendent.

(4) The most significant effect of the transcendent is its ability to grant a person existential justification. As we have seen Becker claim, "Man's tragic destiny: he must desperately justify himself as an object of primary value in the universe; he must stand out, be a hero, make the biggest possible contribution to world life, show that he *counts* more than anything or anyone else" (4). What drives this desire for heroics is the "terror of death," which is the very thing evoked in our creature-consciousness, our finitude; and so a resolution to our finitude, to our tension, becomes a method of reaching towards our justification (11).

Rudolf Otto views justification differently. Thinking strictly in religious terms, Otto shows how a profound desire for "atonement" "springs directly from the idea of numinous value or worth and numinous disvalue or unworth" (54). When we experience the numinous we are overwhelmed with our own unworthiness and its infinite worth; thus, we desire some covering so that we may "transcend this sundering unworthiness" (55). Our unworthiness stems from our "creature-consciousness" in the presence of the numinous: "It is the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own

nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures" (10). This unworthiness, then, is infinite in depth, so that we are, in regard to value, no-thing. The act of atonement must come in the form of a transcendent source, something which lifts us out of our nothingness into being. And so while Otto's focus is upon the way in which the numinous creates in us a profound need for atonement, we can observe that within his model only a transcendent source could grant atonement—only the transcendent can justify the life of a creature despite its wretchedness.

A transcendent hope can fulfill both of these desires for justification. Transcendence provides a ground for the exceeding goodness and the unutterable horror of Being. It can be a source of the goodness of existence that confronts us and defies materialist explanation, and it can deny finitude and evil the final word. In overcoming all boundaries and weaknesses, the transcendent can validate and confirm the goodness of being in the face of finitude.

(5) Part of the orienting function of a transcendent good can be that it grants direction to the individual. It presents an image, a shadow of an ideal future which calls to the individual. Ernst Bloch's Not-Yet-Come is an example of this aspect of the transcendent. There is in the human heart an inexorable longing for an unimaginable future of fulfillment, a vision, essentially, of the good life. Being unrestrained by material reality, contingency, and probability, the transcendent grants the person a vision of the telos which they ought to pursue, and this vision is ultimately a hope in future marked by goodness.

(6) By giving existential justification and an orientation towards a future of hope to a person, the transcendent also becomes a hermeneutic for life. This truth is perhaps

alluded to by Otto's description of the holy as "a category of interpretation and valuation peculiar to the sphere of religion" (5). Rather than absurd, chaotic, inexplicable, or materially determined, the transcendent reveals life to be meaningful—filled with signs and symbols and signals of some higher significance, reflecting the goodness of the transcendent. The individual's actions can be seen as relating allegorically or directly with some un-contingent, irreducible, and un-tarnishable meaning grounded in a higher reality.

(7) Finally, these various functions work to orient our values. A vision of the good life, justification of existence, and meaning for experiences bestows values upon phenomenon, allowing us to discern what is good—as it relates to the good life—the beautiful—as it relates to the good life and the justification of existence—and the true—as it relates to the justification of existence and the meaning of our experiences.

Specifically, the transcendent grants us orientation through its founding of reality. Through the transcendent we find a ground to being that can orient our lives:

> When the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany [which Eliade defines as a manifestation of the sacred], there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse. The manifestations of the sacred ontologically founds the world. In the homogeneous and infinite expanse, in which no point of reference is possible and hence no orientation can be established, the hierophany reveals an absolute fixed point, a center. (Eliade 21)

As he states later, "*If the world is to be lived in*, it must be *founded*—and no world can come to birth in the chaos of the homogeneity and relativity of profane space" (emphasis original 22). Eliade believes that a hierophany involves a breaking with the homogeneity of space, with its univocality. And this break entails a challenge to materialism. There is an overplus in the fabric of things. He then argues that the hierophany "founds" the

world. This does not necessarily entail foundationalism, but rather it stresses the idea that the experience of the transcendent orients us. It presents us with a vision of the world, an ability to locate ourselves and all else. This fits perfectly with what Charles Taylor writes about the transcendent and orientation in *A Secular Age*:

> These experiences [of the transcendent other] . . . Help us to situate a place of fullness, to which we orient ourselves morally or spiritually. They can orient us because they offer some sense of what they are of: the presence of God, or the voice of nature, or the force which flows through everything, or the alignment in us of desire and the drive to form. (*A Secular Age* 6)

Whether through experiences of otherness or from disruptions of ordinary, undifferentiated space and time, the transcendent grounds us, and that grounding orients us.

What the Transcendent is Not

In addition to these qualities, we can define the transcendent by determining its relationship to a few well-known, related concepts: the sublime, the numinous, the supernatural, and epiphany. The transcendent differs from and overlaps with each of these ideas in critical ways such that this project would be impossible without making some distinctions.

The sublime shares with the transcendence a sense of being overwhelmed before an irreducible, incomprehensible vision. Particularly for Kant, the sublime is an experience that reveals the limits of the mind, specifically the rational, empirical mind. The sublime resists explanation. The pleasure from the sublime comes from the mind's ability to experience this weakness and awe. We can say then that the sublime is an experience of the transcendent, a momentary awareness of it. However, the sublime is

not identical to the transcendent. First, the sublime is an experience caused by an overwhelming vision, whereas the transcendent is not an experience but a thing that can be experienced, and is not a visual object, but may be alluded to or embodied in physical objects. In short, the sublime is an aesthetic experience which may be a "signal of transcendence," but is not that transcendence or transcendent being itself. Just as with the manifestations of the transcendent which we will explore in this project, the sublime may be an allusion to a higher reality which is reflected in the nature of the world, or it may merely represent an awareness of our finitude. In other words, the sublime—as a particular approach to the transcendent—may be immanent or transcendent, secular and materialist or religious and supernaturalist. The best way to conceive of the sublime is as an aesthetic experience of the transcendent defined variously, including immanently.

Similarly, the numinous is a particular kind of experience of the transcendent variously defined. Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* argues that the numinous involves an experience of fear and trembling before and fascination with a wholly other, Being. There are a number of key differences between Otto's numen and the subject of this study. One is that for Otto, the numinous is "a category of interpretation and valuation peculiar to *the sphere of religion*" (emphasis added 5). More specifically, this is how Otto defines "the holy," and he conceives of "the numinous" as the holy without its moral and rational aspects. The numinous stands for "this 'extra' in the meaning of 'holy' above and beyond the meaning of goodness" (6). It refers to both an object with the quality of being numinous, and thus is a value, but also the psychological experience of the numinous. In addition, he claims that while the transcendent is a useful term to describe the way in which "holiness" is "not originally a *moral* category at all," it does not capture

the full sense of the numinous because it exclusively refers to an "ontological attribute and not an attribute of *value*" (emphasis original 52). And so, according to Otto, the transcendent can "abash us, but cannot inspire us with *respect*" (52). Once we speak of an ontologically transcendent Being which also demands our respect, it seems that Otto would have us use the term "numinous." For my project, whether or not "transcendent" can convey this sense of worthiness, incomparable value, awe before the august or if it is necessary to use "numen" to denote this is irrelevant. What is important is that the phenomenon which Otto describes is observable in whole or in part in what other scholars have described as the transcendent.

The supernatural refers to a plane of being that is not identical to material reality. In that the supernatural transcends the natural world conceived of as immanent, material reality which can be empirically verified in all its forms and reduced to physics of some kind, it may describe a transcendent existence. The danger here is the that the supernatural is commonly used to describe mystical, spiritual, magical, other-worldly, or occult entities like ghosts, demons, or angels. However, while these otherworldly beings may be said to transcend the natural world in that they do not belong to it, they are reducible within some system of thought. In addition, they do not function as the transcendent does. They do not grant existential justification, hope for the future, meaning to existence, or value to phenomenons. If we use the term "supernatural" to describe the transcendent, then we must be careful to clarify our usage. For while the "spirit realm" may involve the transcendent, it may also be merely an extension or exaggeration of the physical, natural world.

Whereas the sublime and numinous involve an experiential reaction to a vision, epiphany describes a sudden and overwhelming moment of clarity of thought, an understanding of the world as a unity. Epiphany relates to the transcendent in that the moment of insight is irreducible to rational cognition. The understanding of life that is granted could not be gained through a careful process of contemplation, nor could it be proven or supported by any careful study of the world. An epiphany may describe the cognitive experience of the transcendent which allows the person insight into the meaning of existence, the value of phenomena, the hope for the good life, and the justification of their existence.

In his seminal work, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James uses the term "mystical" to describe a religious epiphany. He characterizes the mystical experience with qualities: ineffable, noetic, transiency, and passivity. For James, who is concerned primarily with the psychology of religious experiences, what matters is the subject's reaction to and experience of the transcendent; thus, he uses "ineffable" to describe the experience, where I have used irreducible, because for him what is important is that the subject is unable to articulate his or her experience. Since my focus is upon how these experiences appear in literature, their irreducibility—which necessarily includes their ineffableness—is more useful. Where James describes the "noetic" quality of the transcendent, I have focused on the way we are oriented by the transcendent. Certainly, this orientation can involve some dissemination of knowledge, but not necessarily so. As James works strictly with the "religious" experience, the "mystical" naturally entails a sense of spiritual knowledge. The mystical experience also shares the quality of "transiency" with the epiphany, and as we shall discover, in modern literature if

the transcendent can be experienced at all, often it can only be experienced in flashes; however, in other cases the transcendent is felt and known and experienced over years, such as in Gatsby's idealization of Daisy. The mystical, then, is less inclusive than the phenomenon I am describing. Similarly, the "passivity" which James describes is accurate for certain moments of the ecstatic epiphany, but otherwise does not define the transcendent.

It will be my contention that living as they do after the great disenchantment of the world, American fiction writers of the twentieth century explore the limits of transcendence in their works as a way of working out the tension between a craving for transcendence and a social imaginary where it is no longer tenable. More specifically, since, as Taylor and Ernest Becker, and Luc Ferry have argued, this need for transcendence is in many ways at the center of modern existence, the tension between transcendence and immanence will also be at the center of many of their works. Part of what it means to write fiction in the twentieth century is to posit some account of the higher good which orients and justifies the characters:

> Modern literature in the West has indeed shown extensive concern for transcendence and mystery. Very often, this concern has been a response to the crisis in public religious institutions and symbols – the social elements that bear the burden of man's transcendent needs. Thus the decline of the Catholic religion and skepticism toward traditional belief have set the stage for much of literature; and literature has in turn them plied the question 'what is left to believe in, now that the convictions of Judaism and Christianity have been undermined?' (Mallard 89)

Since, as Taylor argues, our hypergoods, which are truly transcendent goods, orient our lives and give us meaning and significance, the moments of transcendence in these novels will often be defining moments for the characters, moments when they gain profound, orienting insight, or when they perceive that their struggles have been in some way

ultimately validated through some infinitely higher point of reference. By identifying these moments of transcendence and exploring just how the transcendent is defined and manifested in these works, we will achieve a fuller understanding of the texts and a greater appreciation for how secularization affected the social imaginary of the twentieth century. What we shall discover is that the primary conflict of twentieth century American fiction is between modern commitment to secularism and a basic human desire for the transcendent.

The Receding of Transcendence

Among scholars and historical philosophers there is much debate about precisely when the shift from a predominately religious world and a secular one took place in the West, but there is little debate that such a shift occurred and that by the early twentieth century in the United States, the modern person's being-in-the-world was profane: "The main feature of this new context is that it puts an end to the naïve acknowledgement of the transcendent, or of goals or claims which go beyond human flourishing" (Taylor, *A Secular Age* 21). This shift dramatically defined the deepest crises of modernity: "How are human beings to draw from within themselves, without any reference to a radical beyond more imposing than themselves, the stuff of any modern grandeur? This, I believe, is the crucial question at the end of our century" (Ferry 121). There are plenty of fine studies of this shift, most notably *A Secular Age*, so I would like to draw our attention to the major effects of the rise of secularism.

The essence of what it means to live in a secular world is to live without the transcendent, as Taylor argued (21). It is still possible to believe in some transcendent end, but it is no longer a basic social belief—it is no longer an essential part of our social

imaginary. Our culture lacks the plausibility structure to support the widespread belief in an enchanted world. We can break this down further into three main categories.

First, Taylor argues that people ceased to look towards transcendent goals: "A way of putting our present condition is to say that many people are happy living goals which are purely immanent; they live in a way that takes no account of the transcendent" (143). By "goals" we may include any aspect of our orientation in the world: our morality, our desires, and our values. Thus, in the secular age we are oriented by the immanent world. Here, Eliade appears to disagree with Taylor, since he writes that, "No *true* orientation is now possible [under the profane world which is homogeneous], for the fixed point no longer enjoys a unique ontological status; it appears and disappears in accordance with the needs of the day" (emphasis original 23). There is a restlessness about modern life, a dis-ease which stems from a inability to identify and live according to a fixed point of orientation in the profane world. This is not to say that the modern person experiences no orientation. We are always already oriented towards some ends. What Eliade gets at here is that without a fixed center, those ends become entirely private, subjective, and pragmatic. In that sense, we lack a "true orientation."

With secularism, the transcendent is no longer a given aspect of reality but a personal belief. It is not that people no longer searched for the transcendent, or at least the orientation to life which it could provide, but rather whereas in the past the transcendent was located outside of the individual in times and places and people and experiences which were shared, the modern secular person looked inward toward the infinite of inner depths: "[W]e have moved from a world in which the place of fullness was understood as unproblematically outside of or 'beyond' human life, to a conflicted

age in which this construal is challenged by others which place it (in a wide range of different ways) 'within' human life" (Taylor, *A Secular Age* 15). In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor argues that in the Enlightenment, "we go inward, but not necessarily to find God; we go to discover or impart some order, or some meaning or some justification, to our lives" (177). And importantly, this inwardness is in some ways transcendent: "The inescapable feeling of depth comes from the realization that whatever we bring up, there is always more down there. Depth lies in there being always, inescapably, something beyond our articulative power" (*The Sources of the Self* 390). For example, prior to the Enlightenment, and still operating in some places and times since, western cultures congregated around sacred places to commune with the transcendent: cathedrals, shrines, places of pilgrimages. Even the home becomes a sacred place once it is blessed by a priest—a vessel of the transcendent. Eliade speaks of the way religious people would found their world upon sacred spaces (22). These spaces were not private; the church was the shared sacred space. Likewise, festivals were sacred times for communities. The festival is a sacred time because it does not occur in mechanical time. During the festival, all present enter into an eternally present event (Eliade 88). By the end of the Enlightenment, the world has been flattened, the high places have been brought down and personalized, internalized. People ceased to think of themselves as living in a God-haunted world, where His presence could be felt and experienced everywhere. Instead, if there was a God, He was distant, separate from the empirically reducible material world in which we now live. Thus, the religious man becomes the privately religious man, and the self, which once was formed and defined horizontally in relation to our neighbors, and vertically in relation to God, and temporally in relation to His redemptive history,

now was forced to look inward for an original source, and expressing that source comes to be a primary means of knowing ourself, something Taylor titles "expressivism."

Second, secularization brings about the immanentization of time: "Modern 'secularization' can be seen from one angle as the rejection of higher times, and the positing of time as purely profane" (Taylor, *A Secular Age* 195). Time comes to be seen as a linear, mechanical progression of moments. Here Taylor draws upon the work of scholars like Eliade who also emphasize the centrality of "high times" or "sacred times" prior to the dominance of secularization:

> Now in earlier ages, the understanding was that this profane time existed in relation to . . . higher times. Pre-modern understandings of time seem to have been always multidimensional. Time was transcended and held in place by eternity; whether that of Greek philosophy, or that of the Biblical God. In either case, eternity was not just endless profane time, but an ascent into the unchanging, or a kind of gathering of time into a unity. (Taylor, *A Secular Age* 195)

With secularization time ceases to have this eternal quality. Taylor is in agreement with Eliade on this, but the latter would add that even for the "non-religious man," the thoroughly secular person, time cannot be strictly mechanical and linear: "Now, what it is possible to observe in respect to a non-religious man is that he too experiences a certain discontinuity and heterogeneity of time" (70-71). At the most basic level, no one lives in heterogeneous time. It is simply not possible to. However, Eliade clarifies this statement quite a bit:

> [I]n comparison with religious man, there is an essential difference. The latter experiences intervals of time that are 'sacred,' that have no part in the temporal duration that precedes and follows them, that have a wholly different structure and origin, for they are of a primordial time, sanctified by the gods and capable of being made present by the festival. This transhuman quality of liturgical time is inaccessible to a nonreligious man. This is as much as to say that, for him, time can present neither break nor mystery; for him, time constitutes man's deepest existential dimension . . .

> nonreligious man knows that they ["temporal rhythms"] always represent a human experience, in which there is no room for any divine presence. (71)

For the non-religious man, temporal rhythms fold humanity back onto itself. When faced with a discontinuity, the non-religious man may embrace it, but he will frame it from within human experience. The tremendous joy one might feel at a festival is valid, but it is reducible to sense experience, so it can always be accounted for and oriented by ordinary time. We can resolve the apparent contradiction in Eliade's claims that the non-religious person experiences discontinuities of time and that "for him, time can present neither break nor mystery" by seeing this as a difference between an experience of heterogeneous time and a cognitive rejection of the possibility of such time. The nonreligious person may believe that there "is no room for any divine presence," but it does not necessarily follow that he or she will act, experience, or feel no divine presence. Likewise, cognitively they might have no room for a true break in time or the mysterious, but it does not follow that they do not experience a break or the mysterious. Here I have in mind Bloch's "transcendent without transcendence": the nonreligious person may experience a great rupture in time which breaks from ordinary time and is mysterious, but which they cognitively reject or reduce to a material explanation.

Third, Taylor argues that the natural world is reduced to pure materiality: "it eventually became possible to see the immediate surroundings of our lives as existing on this 'natural' plane, however much we might believe that they indicated something beyond" (*A Secular Age* 143). The natural world is disenchanted, and people by and large develop an "active instrumental stance towards the world," so that the operation of the physical world and our actions in it can and should be entirely and systematically accounted for (*A Secular Age* 99). This shift has a dramatic effect upon the way we

interpret the world. According to Taylor, "in the enchanted world, charged things can impose meanings, and bring about physical outcomes proportionate to their meanings. Let me call these two respectively influence and causal power" (35). The meanings of phenomena could not be reduced down to their physical/material reality. A religious relic's meaning had power in the world; it could affect change. In contrast, after the rise of secularism, the meanings and significances of things were no longer thought to be ontologically a part of the thing itself; their relationship was merely causal: "Things don't really have this meaning; it just feels this way, which is the result of a causal action utterly unrelated to the meanings of things" (37). As we shall see, however, novelists do not write like this. In the world of the twentieth century novel, the deep meaning in things cannot reasonably be reduced to an emotion brought about by accidental causal actions. Phenomena *mean* irreducibly, and concerning the most essential aspects of our lives.

What comes After Secularization?

Although secularization comes to dominate our social imaginary, that is not to say that most people are comfortable with the disenchantment of the world. This is evident in the fact that the secularization process was never complete and that secularization was accompanied by a tremendous sense of loss. Despite the force of this cosmic metaphysical shift in our understanding of being, it was not univocal:

> It must be added at once that such a profane existence is never found in the pure state. To whatever degree that he may have desacralized the world, the man who has made his choice in favor of a profane life never succeeds in completely doing away with religious behavior. . . . [I]t will appear that even the most desacralized existence still preserves traces of a religious valorization of the world. (Eliade 23)

This project is a study in the ways in which writers "never succeed . . . In completely doing away with religious behavior." Even where the transcendent has been largely banished, there is a deep sense of loss, as Taylor writes, "There is a generalized sense in our culture that with the eclipse of the transcendent, something may have been lost" (*A Secular Age* 307). This is the dilemma of modernity at its most fundamental, psychological level. It may manifest in many forms, but this tremendous sense of loss shapes much of the ideologies and hopes of the modern person.

Taylor refines this "generalized sense" of loss much more precisely later in his book, calling it the "malaise of immanence":

> I have distinguished three forms which the malaise of immanence may take: (1) the sense of the fragility of meaning, the search for an over-arching significance; (2) the felt flatness of our attempts to solemnize the crucial moments of passage in our lives; and (3) the utter flatness, emptiness of the ordinary. (*A Secular Age* 309)

Taylor articulates the negative response to the loss of transcendence, and as we shall see and as Taylor himself recognizes, not all people experience the loss as a malaise. For many or even most modern people, there will be a felt tension between the malaise of immanence and their idealization of a purely immanent transcendence.

Taylor goes on to explain that there are many different responses to the sense of loss that we must be careful to parse:

> [P]eople react very differently to this; some endorse this idea of loss, and seek to define what it is. Others want to downplay it, and paint it as an optional reaction, something we are in for only as long as we allow ourselves to wallow in nostalgia. Still others again, while standing as firmly on the side of disenchantment as the critics of nostalgia, nevertheless accept that this sense of loss is inevitable; it is the price we pay for modernity and rationality, but we must courageously accept this bargain, and lucidly opt for what we have inevitably become. . . . But wherever people stand on this issue, everyone understands, or feels they understand what is being talked about here. This is a sense which, at least

> in its optative form, seems available to everyone, whatever interpretation they end up putting on it. (*A Secular Age* 307)

We all feel this loss, but our responses to it will vary dramatically. Taylor demonstrates that we should not look for melancholic, morose people who long for the golden times of the past, before the disenchantment of the world as evidence of this sense of loss; rather, this loss can be co-opted and turned into a Dionysian revelry at the prospect of limitless freedom, or a stoic commitment to facing the loss as a part of the human experience; or the transcendent may be reformed into some new, immanent idol: the utopian classless society, human beneficence, power, the authentic self, love.

Finally, Taylor describes two standard ways the modern person seeks after a transcendent experience. First, he or she will try to elevate ordinary life through more efficient living: "This is the basis for that sanctification of ordinary life which I want to claim has had tremendous formative effect our civilization, spilling beyond the original religious variant into a myriad secular forms. It has two facets: it promotes ordinary life, as a site for the highest forms of Christian life; and it also has an anti-elitist thrust" (*A Secular Age* 179). Secularism flattens the world so that there are no more festivals or cathedrals, there are no more monks or divinely appointed kings. We are all priests and we are all destined by a sovereign God. Taylor argues that after the Reformation, many people begin to understand their righteousness according to how well they can perfect every moment of their lives: "If one claims that all Christians must be 100% Christian, that one can be so in any location, then one must claim that ordinary life, the life that the vast majority cannot help leading, the life of production and the family, work and sex, is as hollowed as any other" (*A Secular Age* 179). The result is piety, etiquette, productivity, efficiency: the ideal ordinary life. By pursuing a life of discipline, one can

perhaps justify his or her existence. Thus, the ordinary becomes transcendent by means of perfection. The second method of pursuing the transcendent for the secular person, according to Taylor, is to transcend the ordinary world. If the ordinary is all that is, we have two options: an infinite of multiplication (which can be or is not truly infinite at all but gives the sense of it) or a transcendence of the ordinary. The latter appears in figures who strive to go beyond the ordinary, to be something greater than human. Taylor refers to this as the Heroic. Our two primary options are to transcendent through perfected ordinary living, or to transcend the ordinary world through great, heroic acts.

There have been a number of responses to the rise of secularism and the particular needs it creates for us. For Ernst Bloch, we must turn our gaze towards the Not-Yet-Come, since by doing so we are made aware of how our current world falls short of that goal and we are motivated to make changes to bring it to pass. Ernest Becker rejects the possibility of moving backwards towards religion, but is unsure where we will find the courage and guidance to move forward. Humanity requires a new "creative myth" to account for its creatureliness and its majesty without an appeal to the transcendent, but while the problem is clear to Becker, the solution is not (278). Primitive religion, psychotherapy, and a religion of science are all ultimately rejected by Becker as insufficient and even harmful ways of addressing the human condition. He concludes that, "The most that any one of us can seem to do is to fashion something—an object or ourselves—and drop it into the confusion, make an offering of it, so to speak, to the life force" (285). However, as Becker knew quite well, unless the "life force" is a transcendent force, it is merely another myth that can do nothing to transcend the human condition (277).

Luc Ferry shares Becker's concerns about the dangers to society of the loss of the transcendent. Both scholars observe that in modern romance the partner often is asked to bear the weight of godhood, to become the source of justification and orientation for the partner. Becker asks, "what is it that we want when we elevate the love partner to the position of God? We want redemption—nothing less. We want to be rid of our faults, of our feeling of nothingness. We want to be justified, to know that our creation has not been in vain" (167). Likewise, Ferry claims that, "henceforth it will be secular love that gives the most significance to the individual existence. It is what will best incarnate the 'personal structure of meaning'" (81). This, of course, leads only to tragedy, since, as Becker notes, it is impossible for a romantic partner to fulfill such a need: "How can a human being be a god-like 'everything' to another? No human relationship can bear the burden of godhood, and the attempt has to take its toll in some way on both parties" (166). But unlike Becker, Ferry identifies a way forward for humanity: "beneficent humanism" grounded in a "horizontal transcendence" and the "sacralization of the human" (69). Although we have rejected "vertical transcendence" wherein we are willing to sacrifice ourselves for something which transcends us, Ferry believes that in modernity we are still willing to sacrifice ourselves for other human beings (70). This is for Ferry, "a transcendence inscribed in the immanence of human subjectivity, in the space of a humanism of man made god" (130). This work is infinite, or at least gives a sense of the infinite, as there are always more people to help, and always more ways to help them: an infinite of breadth and depth, but not height.

Taylor's work on secularization is primarily descriptive, not prescriptive, but he is very helpful in identifying and comprehending how modern people have sought the

transcendent in a secular age. The first such method he titles, "subtler languages." Through ever subtler language in poetry and prose we try to approach the unapproachable, we gesture towards the unsearchable, the deep ontic things of life. In our poetry we use symbols and images to lead readers to the experience of the transcendent, but crucially, these visions of the otherworldly are free from all ontological commitments—to use an image from Melville, there is nothing discernible behind the pasteboard mask. During the Romantic period, Taylor argues that a shift happens with art, so that subtler languages took an "absolute turn" (*A Secular Age* 356). The language itself and the experience it provides becomes the absolute thing revealed: we no longer assume there is an ontic depth which allusive poetry or prose reveals in flashes: "This leaves a residual mystery: why are we so moved? But this mystery is now replaced within us. It is the mystery of anthropological depth" (356). One response to the malaise of immanence is to imbue the immanent with the specter of transcendence, to reinterpret the powerfully moving language of poetry and prose to refer not to some transcendent being, but to the mysterious experience of being moved by the transcendent. Subtler languages "trades on resonances of the cosmic in us" (356). This idea of "subtler languages" is a transcendence of form—an allusion to the transcendent captured in the very form of the work. Similarly, in *The Sources of the Self*, Taylor describes "framing epiphanies" as one of the primary themes for modern artists. Previously artists would create works which portrayed something to be an expression of some "unambiguously good moral source," what he calls an "epiphany of being"; modern artists (and Taylor includes writers and poets here) only provide the space or frame for the experience of an epiphany (479). They no longer try to express or allude to some deeper reality. It is a "framing epiphany"

because all that remains is the space for an epiphany to occur; the presence no longer remains.

We may group and refer to a number of these conceptions of transcendence as "immanent strategies of transcendence," since they all take a similar posture toward the transcendent. Taylor's "framing epiphanies" and "subtler languages," Bloch's "transcendent without transcendence," Ferry's "transcendence inscribed in the immanence of human subjectivity"—each of these denote an appearance of the transcendent without its being. Otto speaks of something similar in the way we understand the mysterious quality of the numinous:

> These terms 'supernatural' and 'transcendent' give the appearance of positive attributes, and, as applied to the mysterious, they appear to divest the mysterium of its originally negative meaning and to turn it into an affirmation. On the side of conceptual thought this is nothing more than appearance, for it is obvious that the two terms in question are merely negative and exclusive attributes with reference to 'nature' and the world or cosmos respectively. But on the side of the feeling-content it is otherwise; that is in very truth positive in the highest degree, though here too, as before, it cannot be rendered explicit in conceptual terms. It is through this positive feeling-content that the concepts of the 'transcendent' and 'supernatural' become forthwith designations for a unique 'wholly other' reality and quality, something of whose special character we can feel, without being able to give it clear conceptual expression. (30)

The transcendent then is the "wholly other" rendered positively. By trading on the positive connotations of the transcendent, the "wholly other" does not terrify us to death. Something similar happens in many works of modern fiction when characters in the secular world who accept as a matter of fact that "transcendence" is impossible continue to employ the dead language of transcendence in order to create the "feeling-content" of the transcendent.

The consensus among these scholars is that the rise of secularism after the Enlightenment leads to a flattening, a democratizing, a disenchanting of the world. This disenchantment left secular cultures with a tremendous need to address the deep desire for the transcendent in the modern person. Specifically, societies needed to rethink evil, beauty, sacred time, and death. More generally, we might say that secular societies needed to account for the felt and experienced tension between finitude and infinitude, between our sense of creatureliness and grandeur, between our lived experience of aimlessness and our innate orientation towards good, right aims: "The whole culture experiences cross pressures, between the draw of the narratives of closed immanence on the one side, and the sense of their inadequacy on the other, strengthened by encounter with existing milieux of religious practice, or just by some intimations of the transcendent" (Taylor, *A Secular Age* 595). In the secular age, these tensions become compounded, and we begin to ask how we might reconcile what empirical science tells us of our biological existence with our existential awareness of our worth, meaning, and purpose in excess of all biological explanation. In the modern world, the transcendent comes to be defined as much by tension as it does by irreducibility:

> I am using the term transcendence to refer to ways of coping with these massive discontinuities of the modern life world. It emerges from 'the metaphysical limitation of human existence – birth, aging, intersubjectivity, death.' I see transcendence as a necessary part of the everyday life world, not in opposition to it. Transcendence is viewed as penetrating the mundane in such a way that the naïve attitude of daily life is forced to the edges of its limits. (Payne qtd. in Brewer 11)

The secular age places us into a social imaginary in which all of life is flattened, leaving only the mundane, the finite, the earthly. Yet at the same time, we recognize the inadequacy of such an imaginary to explain the felt significance of our lives.

This question is at the heart of the twentieth century American novel and short story: what may we do to explain our irreducible grandeur or our experience of irreducible wonder? These scholars have offered various answers: people explain it as the irreducible utopian communist future, they cling to whatever explanation does them least harm, they turn it toward beneficent humanism, they trace its shadows in the forms of their art or in the subtle allusions of their language, they meticulously order their lives so that they transcend their material condition, or they elevate themselves above the mundane by a feat of heroism. It is my contention that this theoretical framework can be used to interpret much of the literature of the twentieth century. American fiction writers use many of these strategies of transcendence in their works in order to explain their great need. As a basic aspect of our lived human experience, American authors have little choice in a secular world but to evoke and offer an explanation for what is so crucial to us and is least justified in our society.

Methodology

What is necessary for this study is a very detailed look at manifestations of transcendence as they occur and function in twentieth century American fiction, so that we can understand how modern authors responded to the demands of secularism. In addition, a close reading of several works by the same author allows us to see how this theme is central to the work of the fiction writer, rather than a secondary concern. The desire for and experience of the transcendent appears in multiple works of multiple authors in this period because it reflects a basic human desire manifested in a cultural climate where such a desire could no longer be grounded in a belief in a universe created and ordered by God without significant cognitive dissonance. I will focus on a few

authors as it will allow me to trace this theme through several of their major works in the detail necessary to elucidate how the transcendent has such a significant impact on these narratives.

Fitzgerald, McCullers, Salinger, and McCarthy were chosen for this study because they span nearly the entire twentieth century, because they serve as a reasonable measure of intellectual and popular attitudes towards the transcendent, and most importantly because the transcendent plays such a central role in their works. Fitzgerald allows us to see the relationship between World War One and the disillusionment which followed it and conceptions of transcendence. Carson McCullers offers a vision of how we might negotiate between our finitude and our grandeur, specifically focusing on the way modernity alienates us from ourselves and one another. Writing in the middle of the century, Salinger gives us an urban, domestic setting, a very different conception of transcendence which owes much to eastern philosophy and religion. His characters do not wrestle with the great loss of confidence in a Judeo-Christian meta-narrative, or the disenchantment of the world; rather, they have grown up in an already-denuded world. They have a desire for some transcendence which they cannot quite name. Closing out the century, McCarthy's texts posit a transcendence that radically differs from those found in the previous works because he offers a vision of transcendence that is more than merely a kind of "framing epiphany" or "transcendent without transcendence."

Transcendence is at the heart of the twentieth century American novel, and the particular ways it manifests can reveal a great deal about the texts and their concerns. It shapes our fears and our desires; it is an essential part of modern lived existence, and as such, it becomes a central concern for novelists. The novel in a post-disenchantment

world cannot help but address both a desire for the transcendent and various efforts to appease it. Part of what it means to write fiction in the twentieth century is to posit some account of the higher good which orients and justifies characters. Since, as Taylor argues, our hypergoods, which are truly transcendent goods, orient our lives and give us meaning and significance, the moments of transcendence in these novels will often be defining moments for the characters, moments when they gain profound, orienting insight, or when they perceive that their struggles have been in some way ultimately validated through some infinite point of reference. Therefore, in the major works of twentieth century American fiction we should be able to identify objects and strategies of transcendence. These manifestations of transcendence should offer a way of dealing with the basic tension. They may or may not be successful. They may or may not be "true" transcendence, but they ought to be at the center of the text.

Many scholars have noted the unique role which the arts and specifically literature plays in revealing or gesturing towards the transcendent. For example, in his book *Real Presences*, George Steiner claims that:

> [B]eyond the strength of any other act of witness, literature and the arts tell of the obstinacies of the impenetrable, of the absolutely alien which we come up against in the labyrinth of intimacy. They tell of the Minotaur at the heart of love, of kinship, of uttermost confiding. It is the poet, the composer, the painter, it is the religious thinker and metaphysician when they give to their findings the persuasion of form, who instruct us that we are monads haunted in communion. They tell us of the irreducible weight of otherness, of enclosed nests, the texture and phenomenality of the material world. Only art can go some way towards making accessible, towards waking into some measure of communicability, the sheer and human otherness of matter. (140)

Note Steiner's use of irreducibility to describe the heavy alienness of existence and that it is an embodied otherness. It is at once both human and, in its sheer "otherness of matter"

irreducible to humanity. Whether or not the novelist is better able to communicate the transcendent than a scientist or sociologist, as Steiner claims, is unimportant. What matters is that the novelist should be concerned with attempting to make the "sheer and human otherness of matter" present. Likewise, Bloch claims that great art is oriented toward the Not-Yet-Come: "Every great work of art thus still remains, except for its manifest character, impelled towards the latency of the other side, i.e. towards the contents of a future which had not yet appeared in its own time, if not towards the contents of an as yet unknown final state" (Bloch 127). The essence of great art is this ability to manifest a shadowed vision of the transcendent, higher good. Thus, we can see that literature is not only a ripe place for us to explore manifestations of transcendence in the twentieth century, but perhaps a particularly well-suited place.

With this tension between the desire for the transcendent and the cultural dominance of secularism in mind, this dissertation will seek to answer a number of questions about how novelists in the twentieth century navigated these tensions. In light of the unique opportunity literature provides for us to study the transcendent, I shall try to explore what this looks like in our fiction.

One major line of questioning will study the various strategies of transcendence and their cultural precedents found in these novels. What is the nature of the transcendent in the novel? Is it a "transcendent without transcendence" or a transcendence of presence—a transcendent wholly reducible to the immanent or one which alludes to a transcendent being? How do the characters believe they can face, achieve, or commune with the transcendent? And finally, is this quest successful? When it is reasonable and profitable, I will make readers aware of potential historical,

philosophical, and theological precedents that may have inspired or helped to shape a particular manifestation of the transcendent. Through answering this question we should have some indication of how these authors approach transcendence in a distinctly American way.

The second broad question I will attempt to answer is how an understanding of the way the transcendent manifests in twentieth century might aid our interpretation of the texts. In many ways the novels of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are responses to the problems that arise with modernity, and as the receding of the supernatural from the material world largely defines modernity, studying how novelists reconcile this disenchantment of the world with a desire for the transcendent will be informative. Specifically, it might help us to discern the various responses to modernity and how they relate to one another. In this way we might have a greater grasp upon the nuances of literary reactions to modernity.

Finally, this study will explore the place of a search for and experience of the transcendent in twentieth-century America by looking at its presence in a particular sphere of culture. What I believe we will find is that this phenomenon is not a uniquely "religious" problem. Authors and characters of various worldviews are driven and oriented by the transcendent. In addition, it appears to be an indelible part of our modern existence. Authors cannot not attempt to account for the transcendent in their worlds. Regardless of whether they believe that a higher reality is myth, it must be presented in some form, even if it is only as a form. Perhaps most interestingly, given the central role these manifestations of the transcendent play in the narratives, the case could be made

that the tension between the transcendent and a disenchanted vision of the world is the central concern of novels in the twentieth century.

Organization

The following study will proceed by a close and careful examination of how the transcendent manifests as an orienting, irreducible source in the major novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Carson McCullers, J.D. Salinger, and Cormac McCarthy. With each author I will note a shift in the way they envision the incomparably higher, our hope for experiencing or achieving it, and our strategy of doing so.

In Fitzgerald we will see a young author struggling with the weight of the Lost Generation whose characters place the weight of divine glory upon their romantic partners, leading them to a string of tragedies. As he moves from *This Side of Paradise*, to *The Great Gatsby*, and then *Tender is the Night*, we can witness the transcendent growing dimmer. McCullers' characters are deeply and explicitly troubled by the malaise of immanence. Her characters struggle to cross what appears to be the infinite gulf between beings, a gulf that leaves us alienated from one another and ourselves. In music, gestures of love, and chess people are able to catch hints at transcendence, but only hints. Salinger's characters tend to be motivated by a desire to find a pure (non-phony) ground to their identity and a way of performing in the world which is not ultimately reduced to egotism. They seek to transcend the distance between love and squalor and selflessness and ego. Finally, in Cormac McCarthy's novels we find worlds haunted with the indelibility of transcendence, even in the face of material facts which appear to deny such a reality. It is precisely through his unflinching look into the face of nihilism that McCarthy is able elucidate the beauty and otherworldliness of the transcendent. Of these

authors, McCarthy is the one who most compellingly moves beyond framing epiphanies toward epiphanies of being—giving us a world irrevocably marked by wonder, even in its horror.

What we will discover in all of these works is the intense desire for existential justification and orientation from a transcendent source. The object of that desire, the form it takes, and the nature of its being shifts dramatically between authors and works, but what remains is an acknowledgement that the otherworldly cannot be left behind, even when it has receded from the intellectual world.

CHAPTER TWO

"Boats against the current": F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Tragedy of Wonder

Over the course of his three major novels—*This Side of Paradise, The Great Gatsby,* and *Tender is the Night*—we can trace a shift in Fitzgerald's vision of the transcendent, from the view, in the former two novels, that our desire for the transcendent is inevitable, good, beautiful, irreducible, and tragic; to the belief that it is inevitable, destructive, and reducible to psychological explanation. For Fitzgerald, the transcendent is mapped to a rich dimension of human love. In each text, characters are powerfully drawn toward existential justification through romantic love. These romantic relationships are occasionally framed in language of acting and cinematography. Building on the work of Milton R. Stern and Ronald Berman, we will see how the image of the glamorous, Hollywood film actress becomes the model for existential validation through romance for some of Fitzgerald's characters. Their beauty, cultural significance, youth, charm, wealth, and elevation above the ordinary world makes them models of the good life and transcendent objects in an otherwise disenchanted world. The exotic and transcendent power of female characters such as Daisy Buchanan, Nicole Diver, and Rosemary Hoyt comes in large part from the way they conjure up the ideal of the film actress. These novels share a similar cultural framing: a disillusionment concerning traditional metanarratives following World War I (Fussell 49; Lehan 32, 38; Lockridge 4; Kuehl 11). For Fitzgerald's characters, the quest for romantic love becomes their primary

strategy of transcendence. However, there is a strong tragic quality to this strategy, as each desire betrays its subject, revealing the hopelessness and absurdity of a quest for justification in a fundamentally material and immanent world. So it is that all of Fitzgerald's major characters find themselves "in pursuit of an elusive dream which . . . continues somehow to evade them"—a point Susan Resneck Parr has echoed (Miller 20; Parr 60). This is the "disenchantment" and "disillusion" that G.C. Millard and Lehan see as so central to Fitzgerald's novels (Millard 20, Lehan "F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Romantic Tradition" 212). And yet, the moving and profound way in which Fitzgerald depicts these quests suggests that there might be some dignity or beauty in facing up to hopelessness and pursuing wonder anyway. Critics have long noted the themes of the search for wonder and the conflict between that wonder and material existence within Fitzgerald's works (Lehan "F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Romantic Tradition" 190, Aldridge 32-42, Fussell 44, Gunn 172). This chapter will build on previous scholarship by tracing the way Fitzgerald's depiction of transcendence changes from *This Side of Paradise* to *The Great Gatsby,* and *Tender is the Night*. What we will discover is that Fitzgerald is acutely aware of the centrality of transcendence to human experience and the particular role which fame and romantic love plays in pursuing transcendence in the twentieth century, but that he becomes increasingly disillusioned about the goodness of that pursuit.

This Side of Paradise *and the Allure of Sensual Materialism*

Fitzgerald's first novel differs from his later works in its quality, but shares with them the central theme of existential justification through the attainment of perfect romantic love. *This Side of Paradise* reads like a series of attempts at finding eternal justification in romantic experiences, all of which fall dramatically short. To understand

this series of affairs, it is important to note how Rupert Brooke's poem "Tiare Tahiti" inspires Amory's quest for transcendence through romantic materialism. Like the persona in Brooke's poem, Amory cannot take "comfort" in the other side of Paradise. The church, Christianity, and the Paradise they offer lack the appeal and weight which they carried for previous generations. Instead, Amory follows the advice of Brooke's persona and seeks after physical, sensual experiences of beauty that can transcend the material world. For Amory, the image of Hollywood romance and glamour is tied up with this idea of romantic love. Hollywood ideals of love and beauty become mapped onto the women he pursues. These relationships utterly define his young adult life, and yet they are consistently unfulfilling. In each of his romantic relationships, the ugly face of weakness, death, and decay confronts him. None of the women are capable of bearing the weight of transcendence which Amory places upon them, as Ferry and Becker predicted. The result of this tension between ecstatic beauty and ugliness ultimately drives Amory to a kind of resigned disappointment. Although his quest is repeatedly revealed to be hopeless, it also has a tragic quality, and in that tragedy, significance. The call of transcendence lures Amory on to the next romance, even though he is destined for more disappointment, but over time this Sisyphean drama becomes the thing itself—the source of personal meaning and value.

This Side of Paradise is deeply shaped by a tension between the poverty of ephemeral, immanent existence, and the incomparably higher goodness of beauty. Critics have sought to understand the relationship between the pervading sense of "evil" that dominates the novel and Amory's desire for ecstatic romantic love. The standard critical reading of evil in *This Side of Paradise* posits that Amory's sense of morality is primarily

shaped by his Catholic upbringing, "the pile on pile of inherent tradition" (106) and his "Puritan conscience" (17), which haunt him through his various romances. His failure to find romantic happiness stems from, in this view, his hyper-awareness of "sin." While it is important to view Amory's morality as shaped by the Church, evil also resonates on an aesthetic, romantic level that goes beyond the moral teachings of the Church. In the scenes where evil is most prominently manifested, Amory identifies it with the weakness of beauty and the crudeness of sex. The female body, the image of transcendent beauty, repeatedly confounds him with its materiality, and so moral evil comes from the materiality of the world.

In addressing the problem of evil in *This Side of Paradise*, critics have argued for the influence of Catholic, Puritan, and contemporary morality. Joan Allen posits that, "Fitzgerald's Catholic consciousness" is revealed most in the story by "Amory's profound sense of evil and especially his association of evil with sexuality and feminine beauty which had descended to him from Augustine through ages of repressive Church teaching" (73). For Allen, Amory's conception of evil is almost completely informed by this Catholic tradition. This reading also leaves no room for a positive philosophy of beauty and sex; Amory is split between the foundational Church and the youthful rebellion of the carnival. As a result, Allen never adequately engages the influence of Rupert Brooke or other romantic poets and thinkers upon Amory's worldview. In "The Devil and F. Scott Fitzgerald," Stephen Tanner slightly modifies Allen's reading of evil by suggesting that Amory's "American Puritan heritage" (70) and the "context of the moral world of 1920" (71) are also contributing forces to his morality. It is Tanner's contention that the novel is centered on the problem of evil (73) and "the diminishing sense of evil during the

beginning years of the twentieth century" (77). Thus, for Tanner the novel is essentially an account of Amory's moral decay combined with his growing awareness of evil in the world. Although Tanner makes several useful observations about the centrality of evil in the novel, he does little to help readers understand the source and definition of evil for Amory. Deviating most from the Catholic reading of *This Side of Paradise* is John Aldridge in his 1951 essay, "Fitzgerald: The Horror and the Vision of Paradise." Aldridge admits that there are "obvious sexual overtones to these visions [of evil]" in the narrative, but suggests that the "deeper disturbances" come from the idea that Paradise itself is not sacred: "For the beautiful there is always damnation; for every tenderness there is always the black horror of night; for all the bright young men there is sadness; and even Paradise has another side" (81). Aldridge rightly alludes to the multilayered character of evil for Amory, but since he only briefly treats the concept of evil in *This Side of Paradise* as he traces the theme throughout Fitzgerald's work, Aldridge fails to offer a compelling definition of "Paradise" in the novel or demonstrate precisely how it evokes a sense of horror in Amory. However, I argue that evil in the novel is best explained as an experience of disgust and horror over the failure of romantic love to provide Amory existential justification--the failure of romantic love to transcendent material reality.

To interpret the problem of evil in *This Side of Paradise*, it is necessary that we understand Amory's hope in existential, transcendent fulfillment through sensual materialism. This hope is informed largely by Rupert Brooke and Oscar Wilde, and can be seen in Brooke's poem "Tiare Tahiti," which gives *This Side of Paradise* its title, a preface, and the concept of earthly Paradise. The first fifty-six lines of the poem discuss

a Platonic and vaguely Christian conception of Paradise where imperfect "lovers" are replaced by an impersonal, yet perfect, "Love" (line 26). The "wise" (5) tell us that after death comes "immortality" (6) and a glorious world "hard for us to understand" (8). Impersonal and immaterial, the description of this Paradise is unappealing and inconceivable, particularly for a progressive thinker at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The Platonic Paradise is contrasted in the last twenty lines of the poem, which express the persona's desire to delight in the earthly and finite love on this side of Paradise. The persona describes the sensual beauty of this world, focusing on physical and material images: "hair," "scents," "lagoon," "hand in human hand," "the flowered way," "sand," "the water's soft caress" (58-67). While the contrast between the material and the transcendent is made through these lines, it is important to note that there is a real sense of purity or the sacred in the description of the material. There is not even a hint that this side of Paradise contains anything ugly, corrupt, weak, or selfish. We are confined to the physical (as opposed to the perfect Forms of true Paradise), but the physical is ultimately fulfilling to the persona. At the poem's conclusion, the persona denounces the conception of Paradise espoused by the "wise," "Well this side of Paradise!. . . / There's little comfort in the wise" (76-77). The quality of life in a Platonic Paradise is so unappealing and its existence is so unlikely that it offers little comfort for those who listen to the "wise." This modern skepticism concerning faith and the superiority of the transcendent is a main theme of the novel, as is evident from the fact that these two lines from the poem comprise the novel's preface. The persona is not merely making a negative statement about the world (the world of faith is both untenable

and undesirable), but also a positive statement: while we cannot take comfort from the wise, we can take comfort in the experiences we can have on earth. In this way, beauty and physical love take on the teleological significance previously ascribed to faith. Existential meaning can be obtained on this side of Paradise through the beautiful and the romantic.

In addition to the title and preface of the novel, Brooke appears in *This Side of Paradise* as one of the primary influences upon Amory's young mind, particularly in his view of women. After he becomes disillusioned about love, Amory reflects back to the hope he placed on physical beauty and sensuality throughout the narrative: "Women—of whom he had expected so much; whose beauty he had hoped to transmute into modes of art; whose unfathomable instincts, marvelously incoherent and inarticulate, he had thought to perpetuate in terms of experience—had become merely consecrations to their own posterity" (242). Amory's vision of transmuting the beauty of women into art suggests the kind of transcendent significance he hopes to find in these women. The beauty of a single woman takes on a universal and objective significance for him. It is also notable that he had hoped to perpetuate the indefinable and incommunicable aspects of women into experience. This union of the transcendent and the material in experience reflects what Walter Raubicheck describes as "sacramental vision" in *This Side of Paradise*, the idea that "meaning in life can only result from a sacramental vision, from moments of transcendence that come from a proper use of things of this world" (64).[1] Raubicheck believes that these "moments of ecstatic transcendence" in the novel are actually "revelatory moments of the presence of God" (55), but this reading leaves little room for Amory's rejection of the Christian faith—"There was no God in his heart, he

knew" (Fitzgerald 260). Rather than understand this sacramental vision as an articulation of Amory's latent Catholicism, it should be understood in light of the materialist Paradise we find in Brooke, which is more in keeping with Amory's religious skepticism. Like Brooke's persona, Amory hopes that through beauty and sensuality, this side of Paradise can offer a person meaning and significance to rival the Paradise of the "wise."

In Amory's various romances, we can identify a desire to live out the vision of beauty and sensuality articulated in Brooke's poem. The first romance of Amory's youth, with Myra St. Claire, appears to be more of a social challenge for the young boy than a desire for existential fulfillment, yet it is notable that when he kisses her, we are told that, "he tasted his lips curiously, as if he had munched some new fruit. Then their lips brushed like young wild flowers in the wind" (13). The imagery of fruit and wild flowers resonates powerfully with the materialist love Brooke describes in his poem[2] and points to his conflicted nature. The fruit evokes Eve's sin, reflecting what Allen calls his "puritan conscience" (74), but also alludes to the beauty of the Garden of Eden, the original Paradise. There is something wholly other about her lips, like some unimagined fruit. The fruit recalls the exotic imagery of "Tiare Tahiti"; it is an image of the earthly as a kind of sensual paradise. Although it is clear that sexual conquest is Amory's initial motive in pursuing Myra, he comes to identify sex with something more: an earthly Paradise.

In his relationship with Isabelle, this idealized view of love is repeated. We are told that their first kiss is profoundly significant, at least for an instant: "'Isabelle!' he cried, half involuntarily, and held out his arms. As in the story-books, she ran into them, and on that half-minute, as their lips first touched, rested the high point of vanity, the

crest of his young egotism" (82). This description foreshadows Amory's disillusionment (it only lasts a half-minute) and reveals the superficiality of his emotion ("vanity" and "young egotism"), but Amory does feel some kind of validation through experience. This section is, in fact, called "Crescendo!" And the reference to "story-books" demonstrates the way Amory has co-opted romantic narratives to interpret his life to be meaningful.

While there are elements of this idealized vision of love in nearly all of Amory's romances, his relationship to Eleanor is the clearest example of the influence of Brooke. Eleanor, who describes herself as "a romantic little materialist" (210) and quite openly challenges God's existence (219), is the personification of Amory's hope in sensual materialism. During this love affair, Amory desperately tries to revel in the ecstasy of the physical world and ultimately fails. Eleanor sees through Amory's hope in sensual materialism, and challenges him to genuinely adopt it as a belief (212). When Amory asks her why he should be a materialist, she replies, "Because you look a good deal like the pictures of Rupert Brooke" (212). Eleanor's questionable reasoning might at first appear to be another aspect of her strange imagination, but there is some truth to the connection between Brooke and Amory, as the narrator explains: "To some extent Amory tried to play Rupert Brooke as long as he knew Eleanor. What he said, his attitude toward life, toward her, toward himself, were all reflexes of the dead Englishman's literary moods" (212). The hope that a person can imbue transcendent significance into the physical act of love starts with Amory's first kiss with Myra, but the difference with his relationship to Eleanor is that he now has abandoned any idealization of love as a spiritual union and relies instead on the hope that earthy beauty, wonder, and experience might be enough to fulfill him as a human: "Their chance was to make everything fine

and finished and rich and imaginative; they must bend tiny golden tentacles from his imagination to hers, that would take the place of the great, deep love that was never so near, yet never so much of a dream" (213). It is not that they sought a "fine" relationship, but "to make everything fine." Somehow, through the power of pure romantic love, all life's inconsistencies and failures can be reconciled. This fineness is complete in its space ("every*thing*") and time, as it is "finished." The image of this connection is a golden arch from Amory's imagination to Eleanor's. This connection, which crosses the infinite distance between the Other, not only completely uniting two finite beings, but uniting them with the ideal. Moreover, it replaces that deep sense of longing for the transcendent that has driven Amory. As we shall see, however, whenever Amory seeks to engage these experiences, to enact his transcendent vision of the world, he is horrified to find them to be mundane, and it is precisely this horror that leads him to connect physical beauty with evil.

One of Amory's greatest experiences of disillusionment comes as he is confronted with the grotesque nature of beauty and sex: while it appears to be pure and lovely, it is nearly always weak and crude—physical. In this way, Amory equates beauty with evil. From the first kiss Amory has with Myra, he is faced with the horror of physical love:

> [S]udden revulsion seized Amory, disgusted, loathing for the whole incident. He desired frantically to be away, never to see Myra again, never to kiss any one; he became conscious of his face and hers, of their clinging hands, and he wanted to creep out of his body and hide somewhere safe out of sight, up in the corner of his mind. (13)

In this passage there is certainly an element of Amory's "Puritan conscience" at work (17). As Allen has pointed out, Amory seems to be disgusted by his own sexuality here (74). However, if we understand that Amory's hope is to find some kind of existential,

transcendent fulfillment through the beauty and mystery of women, this passage also reflects the young boy's horror at the recognition of female physicality, the realization that his affairs with women will always necessarily fall short of an experience of the numinous. The female body comes to symbolize sin and evil for Amory to the extent that he places the weight of godhead upon the female body, an impossible weight, as Becker and Ferry have shown us. Amory is not merely disgusted with his sexuality, he desires to flee to a "corner of his mind," a place unconfined by the limits of the material world, a place where a romantic vision of beauty cannot be tainted by physicality.

Amory also experiences this revulsion towards sex with the chorus girls during "The Devil" section. Amory follows Sloane and two chorus girls up to their apartment, "in order to keep an eye on Sloane" (102). Once in the apartment, Axia sits next to Amory and lays her hair on his shoulder, overtly coming on to him. After being pressured by the rest of the group, he finally breaks down and accepts a drink from Phoebe. Immediately after taking this drink, he sees the Devil standing across from him, which frightens him so much that he flees the flat (103). As he roams the streets of Broadway with Sloane the next day, Amory feels sick because of "the babel of noise and the painted faces" (107). He calls the street "filthy" and informs Sloane that if he doesn't see the filth, then he's filthy too (107). What bothers him most about Broadway and his experience in the flat is the crude physicality of sex, the "painted faces," the "babel," and the drunkenness. Elsewhere in the novel (most notably with Rosalind and Eleanor), Amory seems to have no moral objection to sexual promiscuity, but in this passage the very idea that he might be drawn into a sexual encounter invokes the Devil. This seems to suggest that part of the "evil" of this episode is found in its coarseness, not in the

sexual act as such. Had sex been approached as the romantic source of transcendent justification which Amory views it to be, the Devil would not have appeared. Rather than Brooke's Paradise where people delight in their bodies as the fullest expression of their existence—a delight that is its own kind of Paradise—Sloane and the chorus girls partake in a "Dionysian" revelry, a purely physical act unhindered by any sense of higher goods. The night after he first sees the Devil, Amory tries to regain his sanity by reading Brooke: "'Wells is sane,' he thought, 'and if he won't do I'll read Rupert Brooke'" (109). The use of Brooke to exorcise the Devil haunting Amory's conscience is remarkable. That Amory thinks he can find comfort in Brooke's poetry implies something about the nature of evil personified by this Devil. Specifically, it again suggests that it is actually the crudeness of sex that is evil for Amory, not sex itself. In this way, the romantic, sensual materialism of Brooke offers Amory a comforting alternative vision where sex is purely beautiful and can justify a being's existence much in the same way that the Paradise of old used to for many people.

Amory's other physical relationships all seem to reveal the inability of physical beauty to fulfill that sense of the irreducibly good which Amory seeks in romantic love. Directly after the romantic, "story-book" kiss that Isabelle and Amory share, the narrative resumes with a cry of pain from Isabelle:

> "Ouch! Let me go!"
> He dropped his arms to his sides.
> "What's the matter?"
> "Your shirt stud--it hurt me—look!" She was looking down at her neck, where a little blue spot about the size of a pea marred its pallor. (83)

Far from a "story-book" romance, the young couple's kiss is stopped short by the imposition of a shirt stud. The trivial nature of this interruption reflects what Amory

comes to identify as the grotesque nature of physical beauty and love: while it appears as if such beauty transcends the gross materiality of the world, it in fact remains tethered to the same banal forces that mar much of life. Amory does not immediately identify this incident as a challenge to his hope in sensuality—he is more frustrated that the "consummation of romance" (84) fails to materialize—; however, the next morning he concludes that whatever romantic failure might have occurred in his relationship with Isabelle, it was due primarily to the fact that he had placed his hope in the wrong girl: "she had been nothing except what he had read into her" (87). This language reflects his penchant for adolescent dramatics, but it also speaks to the deep psychological significance of romance for the boy. Aside from what he had "read into her," she was no-thing. In a sense, her being was justified by his love for her, and so when he leaves her, she lacks presence in the world. Amory's interpretation of Isabelle as a no-thing is also a revelation of his own existential crisis. Just as her being was dependent upon the justification of another in an act of love, so he searches for just such an existence-validating relationship.

While the conclusion that Isabelle was really no-thing buoys Amory's idealism for the moment by deferring its fruition, he soon finds that no girl's beauty and affection can offer him the transcendent fulfillment that he desires. Rosalind's physical beauty is tainted by her desire for the "pretty things and cheerfulness" (180) that only wealth can provide. Clara's beauty, both physical and spiritual, is kept from Amory by her "two children" (133), signs of her previous sexual experiences and reminders of the natural effect of intercourse. Eleanor's romantic materialism is shattered when she has an emotional breakdown, attempts to ride a horse over a cliff, and confesses, "[I have] a

crazy streak . . . twice before I've done things like that. When I was eleven mother went—went mad—stark raving crazy" (220). Eleanor's materialism leads to insanity, suggesting that not only does physical beauty and sexuality fail to fulfill a romantic ideal, sensual materialism is a kind of mental disorder. After the transcendent possibility of each of these physical encounters does not come to fruition, Amory concludes that beauty and evil are linked.

At the conclusion of *This Side of Paradise*, we are told Amory has decided that evil, beauty, and sexuality are related. The narrator explains:

> The problem of evil had solidified for Amory into the problem of sex. He was beginning to identify evil with the strong phallic worship in Brooke and the early Wells. Inseparably linked with evil was beauty. . . . Amory knew that every time he had reached toward it longingly it had leered out at him with the grotesque face of evil. Beauty of great art, beauty of all joy, most of all the beauty of women. After all, it had too many associations with license and indulgence. Weak things were often beautiful, weak things were never good. (258)

Brooke had been a great source of inspiration for his romantic vision of the world, but the poet's "strong phallic worship," likely referring to the emphasis the poet placed upon sex, is now identified with evil. Whatever hope Amory had held that he might find meaning in life through a transcendent vision of sex has been so defiled by his personal experiences that the very act of sex comes to symbolize evil. This idea is clarified as the narrator tells us that beauty is also "inseparably linked with evil." Every attempt Amory made to reach towards beauty revealed the grotesque face of evil; it attracts him with its allusion to the ideal good and repels him with its materiality. The narrator then states that it is the weakness of beauty that identifies it with evil, since, "weak things were never good." The beauty of women is too weak to be a vessel of transcendence. A kiss may underwhelm, shirt studs may get in the way, money may taint the natural experience, or

the simple dirtiness of sex may prevent what ought to be an irreducibly wonderful experience from meaning anything at all. In this sense, the grotesqueness of beauty and evil is that underlying anything beautiful is gross weakness, its material reality.

After Amory's final state of disillusion, he remarks that it had been the goal of all great thinkers, priests, and poets to establish the meaningfulness of existence: "each had tried to express the glory of life and the tremendous significance of man" (243). Through a transcendent vision of beauty and sex, Amory desires to experience this glory and significance, but at each step he is confronted with the brutal, immanent materiality of this side of Paradise. This hope, although ultimately shown to be misplaced, is not a hedonistic nihilism or youthful abandonment of the previous generation's values; rather, it is a positive philosophy which seeks to provide meaning and value for the individual. The problem of this idealism, much like the problem with the Church according to Amory, is that it fails to live up to its promise. While there are certainly moments when Amory feels a sense of delight in his romances, particularly with Rosalind, they are each shown to lack the purity of beauty described in Brooke's "Tiare Tahiti." Unable to "transmute" the beauty of these women into something tangible, significance that transcends the particular, Amory is repeatedly struck by the horror of weakness. Physical pain, money, children, the crudeness of sex, and insanity all reveal the inherent weakness of beauty and sex. Beauty is grotesque precisely because it appears to be pure, and perhaps even a vessel of transcendence, yet is always coupled to a corrupting influence, a weakness. As a result of this grotesque view of beauty, Amory comes to identify beauty and sex with evil, and the quest for transcendence in immanence appears tragically hopeless.

The Great Gatsby: *the Unmaking of Wonder*

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald re-envisions Amory's quest for transcendent love and in so doing draws together all the great American objects of transcendent desire. Rather than an underlying theme, wonder—the capacity we have for experiencing the numinous, the transcendent, or otherworldly—comes to the forefront of this novel. Critics have already written extensively about the sense of "wonder" and transcendence which dominates this novel, although they have tended to frame Gatsby's quest for wonder primarily as an American phenomenon (Lehan *The Great Gatsby* 12; Bewley 40, 53; Gunn 172, Stern 84). Robert Sklar and Millard are two notable exceptions, as they see Gatsby's longing as a fundamentally universal desire (224; 36). John Kuehl has written that Gatsby "pursues the ideal, the illusion of something beautiful and wonderful, something akin to the eternal in transcending the drab facts of life," but does not explore the implications of his desire for the irreducibly higher as such (4). My contribution will be to show how this "wonder" is best understood as a desire for the transcendent embodied in a romantic relationship, which, as we have already seen, is a popular strategy for transcendence in the modern era according to Ferry and Becker. Gatsby's life is oriented toward a particular vision of hypergoods, a vision which defines his morals, his hopes, and his being. As Nick Carraway reminds us, Gatsby's desires are honorable, to some extent, although they end quite horridly. *The Great Gatsby* is a tale of disillusionment in which the illusion is no less wonderful for its being an illusion.

The novel opens with a description of the main characters' intense capacities for hope. Nick assures us that it is his habit to reserve judgement of people, and explains that "Reserving judgements is a matter of infinite hope" (6). Strictly speaking, reserving

judgement of the Other involves hoping all things for and of them, but this hope cannot be properly understood as "infinite" unless the judgement is infinitely deferred. Nick next describes Gatsby's "heightened sensibility to the promises of life": "it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again" (7). Nick ascribes to Gatsby a kind of transcendent hope: it is an "extraordinary gift for hope," it goes beyond the ordinary and mundane. And of course this is precisely what we come to see in Gatsby's character. His hopes, which so completely define him and his values, exist *extraordinarius,* "outside the order" of both an Enlightenment model of a closed, material universe and the well-ordered society in which he resides. The hope which Nick and Gatsby display evokes Ersnt Bloch's hope in the Not-Yet-Come. Hope is always deferred, always stretching out before us, even as we continue to move toward it. As we shall discover, this hope, much like Bloch's, is a thoroughly secular one. It retains the shape of religious hope, but interjects a secular content.

At the heart of Fitzgerald's masterpiece is the moment when Gatsby decides to kiss Daisy for the first time. In a passage that resonates with the temptation of Christ in the wilderness, Gatsby is presented with a choice of the kind of life he can pursue. And like Christ, Gatsby chooses incarnation:

> [T]here were no trees and the sidewalk was white with moonlight. They stopped here and turned toward each other. Now it was a cool night with that mysterious excitement in it which comes at the two changes of the year. The quiet lights in the houses were humming out into the darkness and there was a stir and bustle among the stars. Out of the corner of his eye Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalk really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees—he could climb to it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder. (117)

Gatsby interprets his walk with Daisy in romantic terms, echoing the language of the British Romantics: moonlight, mystery hidden in nature, humming of light into darkness, "a stir and bustle among the stars." But this romanticism is nothing more than a lesser allusion towards the ineffable otherness of transcendence. Notice that the universe seems conspired to anoint and celebrate this couple. On one hand, such an imagination is the height of egotism; yet, it is also the very conception of individual existential justification promulgated by Hollywood. The film camera centers the eyes of the entire universe (the audience) upon a single scene, such that the world of the film is designed, part and whole, to express the narrative of the characters.

The second half of this passage takes a peculiar turn, shifting from romantic imagery to the biblical. Out of the corner of Gatsby's eye, he perceives an optical illusion: the blocks of the sidewalk rising upwards over the tops of the trees. The use of "ladder" alludes to Jacob's ladder to heaven, yet, interestingly enough, Fitzgerald obscures the obvious reference to heaven here, replacing Paradise with "a secret place above the trees." Rather than the Tree of Life, Gatsby can be nourished by the "pap of life" from among the trees. Even the choice of the word "pap" is notable here, as it so easily resembles "pulp," the fruit of the Tree of Life and is explicitly feminine. Like Amory, Gatsby conceives of the transcendent as a female body. These allusions provide a comparison between the reader's expectations, between their vision of the transcendent mapped primarily in western Judeo-Christian imagery, and the disenchanted world of the twentieth century. Paradise becomes merely a secret, elevated place above the trees. Gatsby feels though that this place can provide him with life, but note that life comes from the "incomparable milk of wonder." That it is "incomparable" reminds us that it is

the essence of transcendence for Gatsby. After all, Taylor describes hypergoods as precisely those goods which are "incomparably higher" than any other goods or values. What provides Gatsby's life with existential justification is the transcendent presence of wonder, not the wonderful (an object), but wonder (an experience).

Nick's narrative of Gatsby's walk with Daisy richly portrays his vision of transcendence mapped to a secular social imaginary. In this moment, Gatsby must choose between seeking the ever-more of wonder alone or the bodily finitude of the wonderful with Daisy. He chooses the latter, but notice that the former fits Taylor's description of a framing epiphany. Wonder, the pap, the secret place, all of these are contentless; they merely provide the framing for an experience of transcendence. What calls him onward above the material world is not the immaterial or even the immaterial within the material, but merely the experience of wonder, the possibility of otherness, but it is a possibility which can only be brought to fruition if Gatsby abandons the material world and all the people in it. Ultimately, Gatsby denies this amorphous wonder and chooses the transcendent incarnated in Daisy, which leads to his tragic death.

Once he makes this decision for incarnation over against the Platonic transcendent, Gatsby still experiences a moment of transcendence, albeit a restrained one:

> His heart beat faster and faster as Daisy's white face came up to his own. He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God. So he waited, listening for a moment longer to the tuning fork that had been struck upon a star. Then he kissed her. At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete. (117)

The image of a mind which can romp "like the mind of God" evokes the infinite creative power of God, but this is also an Edenic image. Before the kiss, Gatsby has not tasted

from the fruit of Daisy's lips, has not tested the wonder of the world, and therefore has a prelapsarian mind. Gatsby's pause is a futile attempt to soak up the remaining vitality of a hope for transcendence before forcing it to materialize and collapse. It ends quite self-consciously when he kisses her.

This final line creates a disruptive subtext for the passage: once Gatsby kisses Daisy he can no longer imagine the world as God can, yet the Incarnation involves precisely the mind of God becoming material. To immanentize is to limit the mind of God, to rob it of its defining characteristic—otherness—according to Gatsby. But Christ's incarnation defies this logic by being immanent without loss of transcendence. Even as we learn how Gatsby's desire for existential validation through an experience of the incomparably higher fails short, the reader is reminded that the context of this quest has always been the disenchantment of the Christian west in the twentieth century. It is notable then that the thoroughly secular transcendence that Gatsby envisions is remarkably distinct from the Christian vision in this particular way. There is a recognition that the transcendent *ought* to also be immanent, but a simultaneous resignation that it *cannot* be. His quest for wonder, then, is tragically fated for failure precisely because it takes the form of a Christian vision of the transcendent as also immanent, yet rejects possibility of such a Being in a secular world.

To understand the full weight of this kiss, we must note how Fitzgerald characterizes Daisy Buchanan as a transcendent figure. In her, the transcendent takes the form of an idealized romantic relationship with a woman who symbolizes youth, beauty, the upper class, wealth, and immateriality:

> He found her excitingly desirable. He went to her house, at first with other officers from Camp Taylor, then alone. It amazed him—he had never

> been in such a beautiful house before. But what gave it an air of breathless intensity was that Daisy lived there—it was as casual a thing to her as his tent out at camp was to him. There was a ripe mystery about it, a hint of bedrooms, of gay and radiant activities taking place through its corridors and of romances that were not musty and laid away already in lavender but fresh and breathing and redolent of this year's shining motor cars and of dances whose flowers were scarcely withered. It excited him too that many men had already loved Daisy—it increased her value in his eyes. He felt their presence all about the house, pervading the air with the shades and echoes of still vibrant emotions. (155-6)

Nick tells us that Gatsby "found her excitingly desirable" and then proceeds to tell us how and why. It is notable that the first reason Nick gives for Gatsby's feeling is Daisy's house. It is beautiful and contains mystery, "radiant activities," romances, and a hint of "this year's shining motor cars." The transcendent, the romantic, and wealth become conflated in Gatsby's emotions. The house represents Daisy, and the house evokes a sense of the transcendent, of the irreducible, mapped to conceptions of wealth in the early twentieth century. His desire for her involves a desire for the world of the upper classes, a world in which motor cars are not merely accessible, but the latest motor car in the most pristine condition. It is the enchantment of the ever-new product, here personified in the traditional American signifier of class, the car. Wealth is a sign of Daisy's wonder, and in her home all kinds of possibilities exist. These possibilities exist because her home is foreign to Gatsby, and so he is allowed to wonder. But it is also the wealth that the house symbolizes which overwhelms him with possibility. He refers to the house as "beautiful," but surely this is meant as an aesthetic articulation of an essentially economic quality. It was more beautiful than any house he had ever seen because it was decorated and cared for as only the rich can do. Nick tells us that for Gatsby the house was also reminiscent "of dances whose flowers were scarcely withered." The flowers, as another

example of the Edenic imagery which Fitzgerald often uses, alludes to Paradise. Gatsby comes to feel that he is just outside the Paradise of Daisy's world.

One of the chief characteristics of the transcendent is the way in which it orients us, and so it is true with Gatsby. When he first invites Daisy to his home, Nick describes how this transcendent object of desire becomes the determiner of value and worth in his life:

> He hadn't once ceased looking at Daisy and I think he revalued everything in his house according to the measure of response it drew from her well-loved eyes. Sometimes, too, he stared around at his possessions in a dazed way as though in her actual and astounding presence none of it was any longer real. Once he nearly toppled down a flight of stairs. (97)

One of the chief characteristics of an encounter with the transcendent is a sense that reality itself has to be reevaluated in some way. For some subjects, the realness of reality is revealed in the light of the transcendent who shows being as it is. In other cases, reality loses its realness in comparison to the transcendent. In the presence of Daisy, all of the signs of Gatsby's greatness lose value and being. True being, the reality beyond the illusion of wonder created by his wealth is lain bare by Daisy's incomparably higher goodness. Elsewhere in the novel, Nick tells us that Gatsby recognized this same artificiality of the world as a child, when he would fall asleep dreaming about wonders: "they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing" (105). For Gatsby, material reality must be an artifice. The foundation of being is upon "fairy wings"—the fantastic, wonderful, and beautiful, all of which Daisy comes to personify. As a transcendent ideal of female beauty, Daisy becomes Gatsby's hypergood which orients how he values his possessions.

In many ways, *The Great Gatsby* is the story of hope infinitely deferred, or at least deferred to death. Repeatedly Gatsby, much like Amory before him, faces the raw materiality of existence in utter and abject defiance of all wonder and hope for wonder and manages yet to cling to hope, despite the cost. After five years of dreaming about Daisy's love, when Gatsby finally obtains her, Nick worries that Gatsby's world grows not richer, but more impoverished. When Gatsby tells Daisy that she has a green light that "burns all night at the end of [her] dock," Nick considers the implications of the statement:

> Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one. (98)

One can either live in an enchanted world at a distance from enchanted objects, or approach them and live in a mundane world. The choice is between a rich world of symbolic order and one of causal order. In Gatsby's fantasy, the green light's powers extended beyond providing illumination at the end of a dock. The light conferred some immediacy of Daisy's being to Gatsby. In this way, Gatsby's quest is for a world in which physics cannot have the final say; thus, his meeting with Daisy is very bitter sweet. While he manages to be with his transcendent ideal, it comes at the cost of a world built on enchantment.

Nick speculates about failure of Gatsby's dream, but it is not until Myrtle Wilson's death that Fitzgerald reveals the stark contrast between the transcendent ideal and the hopeless finitude of the immanent and material world. In a novel filled with romantic scenes, the stark, unromantic, material banality of Myrtle's death shocks the reader,

bearing witness against the entirety of Gatsby's dream, and functions in dialogical opposition to Daisy:

> The other car, the one going toward New York, came to rest a hundred yards beyond, and its driver hurried back to where Myrtle Wilson, her life violently extinguished, knelt in the road and mingled her thick, dark blood with the dirt.
>
> Michaelis and this man reached her first but when they had torn open her shirtwaist still damp with perspiration they saw that her left breast was swinging loose like a flap and there was no need to listen for the heart beneath. The mouth was wide open and ripped at the corners as though she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long. (144-5)

There is much about this scene that gestures towards the romantic—a way of narrativizing tragedy so as to elevate it as a transcendent experience. As a scene of dramatic irony, the reader is led to see a pattern and significance behind the accident which is irreducible to the action: the scorned adulteress flees her mundane marriage and husband, runs into the street, only to be struck dead by the cuckolded wife driving a car. There is of course the car here as a symbol of freedom and excess and power—an image which Fitzgerald's readers would have recognized. In fact, the first we learn of the accident is Nick's mention of how the newspaper's described the vehicle as the "death car." An agent of death, a symbol of the deadly excesses of the wealthy, the "death car" sets the reader's expectations to see this coming death as romantic and tragic, and initially it is.

When the driver first meets Myrtle's body, the imagery is lovely. Her life was "violently extinguished," like a candle abruptly put out. The driver kneels beside her body in a gesture of spiritual reverence. And by kneeling he "mingles her thick, dark blood with the dust." Her blood becomes a synecdoche for her dead body, and its thickness and darkness suggests the vibrancy of her life and the tragedy of her death. The

blood poetically mingles (a verb which evokes a non-violent mixing, a passive combination) with the dust, as if to echo the biblical image of Job, returning to dust whence he came.

In the very next paragraph the imagery changes from romanticism to realism. Gentle verbs ("extinguished" and "mingles") are replaced with violent ones: "torn," "ripped," "choked." Myrtle is denuded by her husband and a stranger—the closest we come to the nude female body in Fitzgerald's novel. Yet the bare breasts of Myrtle are grotesque: "her left breast was swinging loose like a flap." The car not only kills her, but also deforms her femininity and, in Gatsby and Nick's world, all the romantic wonder it entails. In a grotesque and playful image, we learn that the breast was "swinging loose like a flap," a rather fitting description of the gay, carefree party lifestyle, the lifestyle of "flap[pers]" captured in the text. This is precisely the power of the image: its grotesqueness, its pettiness. Fitzgerald peels away the deceptive veneer of clothing, and then even the sexualized female body, to reveal its abject banality. This is the polar image of the enchanted experience of kissing Daisy for the first time. It is the anti-green light: a symbol, red with blood, of gross physicality and violence of sex and love and romance. Just as troubling is the image of Myrtle's opened mouth: "The mouth was wide open and ripped at the corners as though she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long." It is fitting that the cause of death appears to be choking on her own ebullient passion for romantic existence. More than that, her face is frozen in a grotesque smile, as if her effort to find happiness was so great that it grew unnatural, stretching her body to bloody extremes.

It is readily apparent that Myrtle's grotesque death symbolizes the destructive qualities of the American Dream, particularly among the lower classes, but what interests me is the nature of this dream and its antithesis in the image of Myrtle's body. While Gatsby's dream might manifest in a uniquely American style, its basis is a drive to justify his existence through some incomparably higher reference. The horror of Myrtle's death is that it cannot be co-opted into Gatsby or Nick's romantic narrative; it stands out, irreducible. It resists the platonic romance of Gatsby's vision. It is, as it were, being stripped naked and laid before us. The ugliness and horrors of existence are only hinted at before this point, hidden in the past or behind a character's deceptions, but in this image the pageantry and drama of being are removed and we find a ground to existence that defies narratives of wonder.

How does this image reveal something of Fitzgerald's struggle to evoke the transcendent in a modern, secular age? It demonstrates the eradicable concern for mortality. For all its beauty and wonder, Gatsby's vision is still quite bound to material reality. But the brute finality of this image does not negate the power and goodness of Gatsby's dream, for Nick at least. This is, perhaps, the most remarkable aspect of Fitzgerald's work; although he could have written a novel of disillusionment, he doesn't. Myrtle's death is not the final word, but neither is it negated. It is certainly the case that Myrtle's death exposes what we might call the phoniness and futility of the romantic ideal that she and Gatsby and others seek after, but strangely, Nick does not lead us to believe that this desire is mistaken or false. It is a desire that is just as true and meaningful as the brute factuality of Myrtle's death.

After Myrtle's death and the fallout that proceeds it, Nick wonders if Gatsby has finally fallen from his quest for transcendence:

> I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn't believe it would come and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass. A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about . . . Like that ashen, fantastic figure gliding toward him through the amorphous trees. (169)

At first Nick merely voices the conclusions that most careful readers will have drawn. Gatsby's fall was hubristic: his arrogant pride in the belief that he could relive the past led him to a tragic fall. Nick's description of Gatsby's fall is evocative; it attempts to capture the ineffable, sensual, experiential reality of such a fall. Nick focuses on the way the material world affects Gatsby now. He is alienated from the universe which had once made sense. The sky is "unfamiliar"—the same sky which once served as sign and symbol of the infinite possibility of love and beauty. Leaves become "frightening." The rose loses its beauty and becomes a grotesque thing, precisely because it continues to instill in him a sense of romantic wonder as an object of beauty. Now, however, that beauty is revealed to be an illusion and the thorns take on a richer reality to him. What repulses him about the rose is that it is not the image of transcendence that it ought to be. The thorn is always there to remind him of its cruelty and corruption. Gatsby is in effect exiled from Paradise. Before this, he had not truly tasted of the fruit, but now he has, and he gains the knowledge of good and evil and the reality of the world's corruption. The result of Gatsby's fall is the curse God gives to Adam: Gatsby is cursed with the thorns of

the ground. The thorn is a sign of Gatsby's expulsion from a transcendent world, or more accurately, his expulsion from a vision of the possibility of transcendence.

In the novel's conclusion we see the consequence of this tension between a profound sense of the transcendent and the lived experience of immanent materialism. The narrator concludes that the human condition is essentially Sisyphean; we are destined to endlessly search for the transcendent and to endlessly be thrown back on the immanent. Nick describes how the first Dutch sailors must have seen the New World, comparing it to Gatsby's similar vision of the transcendent:

> A fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder. (189)

The image of the "fresh, green breast" calls to mind the Edenic and nursing imagery which Fitzgerald has used throughout the novel to evoke Paradise—unspoiled, prelapsarian, greatness. Nick tells us that this was the "last time in history" man faced "something commensurate to his capacity for wonder"; yet, the naked American continent was not the final encounter with the transcendent—the final sighting of a vanishing god: "From Nature that awed the Dutch sailors, early Americans drew their feeling for the spiritual, for the transcendental" (Kuehl 7). Rather, for Nick, the continent was the last material instance of something which could offer the space for wonder. In other words, America was the last great sublime object, one which was vast and impossible and irreducible enough to house all the wonder of the human heart. This is not to say that the continent was itself transcendent; it was finite and material just as any

other phenomenon in existence. Yet, it gave the impression of irreducibility, the experience of wonder like no other thing. Even here Nick warns us that it was fleeting: "a transitory enchanted moment." Together—the transitoriness and abrupt ending—reinforce the fact that this is not an experience of the transcendent, but rather the greatest illusion of transcendence in human history. In other words, the difference between those Dutch sailors and Gatsby is that the object of wonder was grander for the former, but regardless, the end is the same, either way: the moment of wonder ends, and the sailors and Gatsby are left facing a disenchanted world. This, however, does not prevent us from reaching towards the transcendent in some other form of wonder.

For Nick, we are all destined to endlessly stretch out towards some transcendent source of goodness or beauty which can grant us meaning and significance, but it will endlessly elude us: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And one fine morning—. . . . So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (189). Somewhere far in the recesses of time we know there to be a Golden Age which we all seek to find again; thus, we are pushed back into the past "ceaselessly." Gatsby's hope is for "the orgastic future," one which bears some similarity to Ernst Bloch's Not-Yet-Come. It is a future of promise, a future which is always before us, always out of reach, yet not entirely other from this world. It is "orgastic" in that it is living, vital, powerful, which doubtlessly is a part of its elusiveness. This is not the concrete material utopia of some forms of Marxism, but rather Bloch's irreducible future—the one from which all our dreams of the Good Life stem. Nick suggests that even though we seek in desperation for this orgastic,

unknowable future of hope, we are pushed back upon our selves, our experience, and our past as the only source of the possible in our lives. And so the future takes on the shape and being of the past. For Gatsby this looks like a future with Daisy formed in the image of a long dormant, exaggerated, mythical past. The thing that eludes us in the past is no more than the enchanted memory of our own past.

The transcendent is infinitely deferred in *The Great Gatsby*, but as this deferral is infinite, it is also tragic. The unending quest for ascendent transcendence becomes itself a kind of horizontal transcendence, in that it requires us to endlessly sift through the ordinary world in search of some object of irreducibly higher good which can justify us. As Giles Gunn has written, "It is the poetry of beating on [against the current] that counts!" (182). Yes, the greatest physical symbol of irreducible wonder no longer exists; the American continent has been reduced to parcels of land and people and resources, plundered. And like that vision of wonder, Daisy fails as an object, as her material finitude denature and disenchant Gatsby's vision of her. But despite his pessimism that such transactions will never accomplish anything, Nick paints his hero's actions in a grand way. Gatsby story is not merely the story of how one man's hubristic quest for the transcendent leads to loss; Nick's story itself is that transcendence. Gatsby is irreducible. Daisy's beauty and fame is, likewise. The parties, the people, the experience of love, all these things fill the reader with wonder. What this means is that while Nick offers us a critique of Gatsby's quest, he never manages to distance himself from them and their goals entirely. It seems as if Nick were saying that such a re-enchanting of the world is inevitable, albeit passing.

The Banality of Transcendence in Tender is the Night

Rosemary and the Divers, like Gatsby and Amory, seek moments of ecstatic transcendence and justification in love affairs which are characterized by youth and beauty, but this is not the same enchanted love that we find in the earlier novels. Aldridge argues that there is "no dream" for the characters in this novel, unlike Fitzgerald's previous works, but I do not think that is quite accurate (37). Doherty disagrees with Aldridge on this point (Doherty "*Tender Is the Night* and the 'Ode to a Nightingale'" 158). Milton R. Stern claims that the dream is present in the novel, but "the dream occupies only a small part at the beginning of the story" (85). In *Tender is the Night*, Fitzgerald's characters are just as destined to search for existential justification through love as his earlier characters, but there is no longer anything noble or beautiful about this fate. Nicole's idolization of Dick is not so much driven by a desire for meaning or something True and Beautiful as it is by her neurosis caused by her incestuous relationship with her father. Likewise, Dick's interest in Rosemary and relationship with Nicole, his former patient, borders on the predatory and incestuous (Callahan 123). He appears driven to become their father figure, to be needed and helpful and in control. Although Rosemary and the Divers have ecstatic experiences which orient their lives and their desires, there is no sense of tragic loss when these moments end in disappointment. Particularly in *The Great Gatsby*, we get the sense that there is a beauty and goodness to the quest for wonderment. It is the "goodness" of the quest that makes its hopelessness tragic, rather than merely foolish. For all the suffering he causes, and despite the futility of his efforts, Gatsby's desire is a basic human one, and there is something admirable about his vision. This is not so with Dick, Nicole, and

Rosemary. Their motives for seeking existential justification are suspect, their experience of transcendence is fleeting and perhaps reducible to the disordered workings of the subconscious, and there is nothing noble about their fate. Between the publication of *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*, Fitzgerald experiences two serious tragedies which likely led to the retreat of optimism in his writing, one communal and the other personal: the Great Depression and Zelda Fitzgerald's mental breakdown. In 1930, Zelda has a series of serious mental breakdowns, leading to her hospitalization in various European clinics. It would be presumptuous to conclude definitively what led Fitzgerald to this shift in his view of the transcendent, but it is worth noting that after *The Great Gatsby* is released, his own life of celebrity grew increasingly dark. Whatever the motivation, what we shall see is that Fitzgerald still portrays a desire for transcendence as central to modern life, but the pursuit of the transcendent loses its romantic hopelessness and appears to be merely mundane.

Dick and Rosemary

Tied up with Rosemary's youth (Fitzgerald 4) and "magic" (3) is her status as a Hollywood star. In fact, I argue that these former qualities come from her film work. She remains eternally young and otherworldly because she is captured on screen. There is a kind of cult of Hollywood which appears in the novel and establishes Rosemary as a demigod, at once human and otherworldly. One of the first reactions a character has to Rosemary is a recognition of her star status: "You're Rosemary Hoyt and I recognized you in Sorrento and asked the hotel clerk and we all think you're perfectly marvellous and we want to know why you're not back in America making another marvellous moving picture" (7). Rosemary's identity is largely defined by her role in *Daddy's Girl*, a film

that takes on particular significance for Dick as he positions himself as a father/lover figure in her life. She stands out in society unlike any other character because of this popular role, but she also stands out in a way that other characters cannot. Dick's brilliance as a psychologist, Nicole's wealth and beauty, Tommy's adventurous lifestyle—all of these are notable and sources of admiration in the novel, but Rosemary is a part of something larger: stardom.[3]

A motion picture offers viewers the teleological meaning which became shockingly absent in a disenchanted world. As Frank Kermode demonstrates in *The Sense of an Ending*, part of the function of fictions is to create order and meaning out of successive time: "Men, like poets, rush 'into the middest,' *in medias res*, when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The End they imagine will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations" (7). In the twentieth century, Hollywood films become the dominant fictions that provide these "concords with origins and ends." As Stern says, in speaking of the centrality of Hollywood to the experience of being in the world in *Tender is the Night*, "the whole world is at the movies and in the movies" (117). Hollywood films were the nationally shared narratives which ordered modern life and imbued otherwise mundane events with transcendent significance. A romantic film, as a narrative, presents an ending which interprets the preceding scenes, giving them meaning and a trajectory. Every character's being is significant beyond the moment in which they appear on the screen. Within the narrative of a film, romantic love may take on transcendent importance, as it becomes the center of the universe in the film. Literally every other moment, object, and subject owes

its purpose and existence to telling this story of love. Unlike in the real, secularized world, where tragedy and romance cease to make sense as ways of meaningfully interpreting existence, in film, love truly does justify a character's existence. The Hollywood "star" adds an additional layer of transcendence, because the star transcends even the particular transcendent roles which he or she plays. And this transcendence arises specifically in the context of secularization: "In a world recently vacated by spiritual meaning, the screen star offered a new figure radiating light, an illuminated image before which the public could bow" (Brown 115). Braudy takes this idea farther, claiming that Hollywood stardom justifies a star's existence:

> Through the movies, the spiritual self-sufficiency that had previously been dependent on the relationship with God becomes a more internal possibility of each person in himself or herself, where emotion and matter, spiritual transcendence ('the star') and material success ('the celebrity') mix-the final product of an eighteenth-century belief in the possibility of individuals and nations to become self-made through the exercise of will. (554)

The movie star lives a life of stories of significance. In that way, the actor lives, for a time at least, as a symbol of the malleable, irreducible, disembodied individual subject, who validates her life through the taking on of roles of significance. The actor becomes the avatar of avatars—the one through whom the viewer partakes in stories of meaning and the one through whom many stories are manifested. In this way, Hollywood stars are models of secular, immanent transcendence for the twentieth century.

When we first meet Rosemary, she has just begun her life as an avatar, having only completed one movie, but already she is known as an actress, and her value and significance is publicly tied to her youth and beauty. Early in the novel, a character tells her, "We wanted to warn you about getting burned the first day, . . . because *your* skin is

important" (emphasis original 7). Rosemary's skin is important precisely because it is not exclusively her own skin and it is not merely skin. As an actress, her beauty is critical to her success, but as an avatar of the good life embodied in film, her skin is important because it is the audience's skin as well. Paradoxically, the vast importance of her skin comes from its very lack of materiality. If it were merely physical skin which could be reduced to its singular material existence, it would not be important. Her skin as it appears on the screen is an avatar for the audience, a symbol of the possibility of transcendence. What we have in Rosemary at the beginning of the novel is a figure of idealization. She is not a transcendent being, but through her work and the cultural significance it garners her, she is metonymically transcendent. But for her, it is the Divers and their enchanted powers which appear to be otherworldly.

From early on, the Divers, much like Rosemary, are described as magical and unearthly. For the young Rosemary, the Divers have about them a spirit of infinite possibility. Dick especially captures her interest, as he symbolizes a kind of transcendent personality. Much like Daisy to Gatsby, or Gatsby to Nick, Dick's personality hints at a rich, beautiful, life-affirming irreducibility: "He seemed kind and charming—his voice promised that he would take care of her, and that a little later he would open up whole new worlds for her, unroll an endless succession of magnificent possibilities" (16). The voice alludes to Dick's magical vitality, as it did for Daisy before him, but unlike the monetary jingle of Daisy's voice, Dick's is first of all fatherly, "he would take care of her." Thus, from early in the novel, Rosemary's romantic attraction to Dick is evidently dysfunctional. She sees in him an attractive potential lover, but also father figure, a semi-

divine who has the power to "open up whole new worlds" and "magnificent possibilities," and yet can promise to care for her.

During the dinner party scene early in the novel, the Divers' charm reaches its height, and for a fleeting moment, Rosemary experiences a spiritual awareness of the significance of the Divers. The setting itself is enchanted, evoking the exotic and magical mood of the party, but at the center of it are the Divers, and what appears to elevate them above the earth is their mystical ability to gaze upon each person, welcomingly:

> Rosemary . . . had a conviction of homecoming, of a return from the derisive and salacious improvisations of the frontier. There were fireflies riding on the dark air and a dog baying on some low and far-away ledge of the cliff. The table seemed to have risen a little toward the sky like a mechanical dancing platform, giving the people around it a sense of being alone with each other in the dark universe, nourished by its only food, warmed by its only lights. . . . Just for a moment they seemed to speak to every one at the table, singly and together, assuring them of their friendliness, their affection. . . . Then abruptly the table broke up—the moment when the guests had been daringly lifted above conviviality into the rarer atmosphere of sentiment, was over before it could be irreverently breathed, before they had half realized it was there. (34)

Aside from the atmospheric imagery here (fireflies, dark air, etc), this passage is notable for the way each individual is described in relation to the whole and to the experience of being with the Divers. The micro-community unites against "the dark universe," which is in truth the deepest fear of the secular world. That the universe is dark, uninhabitable, indifferent, hostile, and trivial draws the party only closer, with the magnificent Dick as their protector: "For the moment, at least, Dick makes the world 'safe' for this lost generation, gives the party a seeming wholeness and security which the real world lacks" (Grenberg 220). Mizener describes this as Dick's ability to "make a small group of people feel they are alone with each other in the dark universe, in some magically protected place where they can be their best selves" ("Tender Is the Night" 167).

Fitzgerald's language of the "dark universe" evokes the twentieth century fear that above all else, and beneath all else, what is the truth of being is its alien nothingness. The Divers' table is an oasis in this sense. It is a shelter from the nihilism of modern life. In this union, they can stave off hopelessness together. It is a self-sufficient community, containing food and light against the dark.

As with many of Fitzgerald's characters, Dick has been forced by the events of the early twentieth century and the loss of the old verities to refigure the purpose of his life. Mizener claims that Dick "is in a state of terrible spiritual ennui that is without visible cause and yet makes men like him . . . Feel quite literally that *all* the uses of the world are weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable" ("Tender Is the Night" emphasis original 165). Tellingly, Dick concludes that while he does not know what would be worth dying for anymore, he does know that he would like to be loved:

> The truth was that for some months he had been going through that partitioning of the things of youth wherein it is decided whether or not to die for what one no longer believes. . . . he used to think that he wanted to be good, he wanted to be kind, he wanted to be brave and wise, but it was all pretty difficult. He wanted to be loved, too, if he could fit it in. (133)

While it is not altogether clear what these things are which he "no longer believes" from this passage, the historical context and other places in the novel suggest that this is a reference to the common losses of the twentieth century. Kuehl describes these values when he notes that after the war, "the old values--economic, political, religious, and sexual--disappeared [for Dick]. He feels himself in 'the broken universe of the war's ending,' in a society that has forsaken its former traditions and been unable to replace them" (11). Dick lists a series of virtues which he "used to" aspire towards, but the past tense and the comment that they were "all pretty difficult" suggests that he no longer saw

virtuous living as a viable, or at least sufficient justification for living and dying. The remaining ideal is not a virtue but an end to be received; he desires to be loved. We are not told that this is a goal he "used to" desire, nor are we told that it would be too difficult. His only concern is whether or not he can "fit it in." What we find, however, is that each of the previous virtues along with his desire to be "a good psychologist—maybe to be the greatest one that ever lived" become subservient to the goal of being loved, a goal which takes on a transcendent importance in his relationships with Rosemary and Nicole (132).

When Dick and Rosemary meet later, after Dick has begun to feel the pressure of a failing career and marriage, he sees in Rosemary a chance to be admired again. Meanwhile, for Rosemary, Dick still captivates her imagination as the ideal lover. Dick is quick to tell her how often he's thought of her: "'I've seen you here and there in pictures,' said Dick. 'Once I had *Daddy's Girl* run off just for myself!'" (209). Dick signals to Rosemary that her screen image, the image of the immaculate starlet playing the eternal role of avatar, of ideal beauty, this film image of her has haunted his thoughts. Much earlier in the novel he refers to Rosemary as "Miss Television," showing that for all his coolness and apparent indifference towards her fame, he is fascinated by her stardom (104). The conflation of Rosemary with her on-screen characters reflects his desire for a lover who is irreducible to her temporal, physical presence. As a film star, Rosemary will always exist outside of her aging body in a Platonic form.

Both Rosemary and Dick see each other as in some way otherworldly, reinforcing the way in which they place their hope in a divine romantic partner. Dick perceives this elevated love in Rosemary's appearance. For example, in her smile, "Rosemary smiled at

Dick—that smile as if they two together had managed to get rid of all the trouble in the world and were now at peace in their own heaven . . ." (210), and in her face, "Her face had changed with his looking up at it; there was the eternal moonlight in it" (211), Dick perceives intimations of the transcendent. He imagines them in Paradise together, above the corruption and tumult of the earth. And in her face he sees "eternal moonlight," as if there were an ever receding mysterious, romantic light, calling him onward toward her. Likewise, the narrator tells us that Rosemary elevated Dick to a super-human level: "For three years Dick had been the ideal by which Rosemary measured other men and inevitably his stature had increased to heroic size. She did not want him to be like other men, yet here were the same exigent demands, as if he wanted to take some of herself away, carry it off in his pocket" (211). Like Daisy in the mind of Gatsby, Dick grows in Rosemary's mind until it was inevitable that he should disappoint her. For Dick, Rosemary's sexual purity is caught up in her elusive beauty and otherness. She represents not only the golden girl, the young starlet, but the pure, young, and beautiful. His questions about her virginity and her openness about her sex life work to undermine the Platonic ideal they have about each other. Already it is becoming evident that this storybook romance is too mundane to even be tragic.

When Dick and Rosemary finally do consummate their relationship, it happens with none of the grandeur or illusory fantasies which define so much of *Tender is the Night* and Fitzgerald's work in general. The style of this section owes more to Hemingway than Fitzgerald's more poetic antecedents: "Afterward they drove back to the hotel, all flushed and happy, in a sort of exalted quiet. She wanted to be taken and she was, and what had begun with a childish infatuation on a beach was accomplished at last"

(213). Fitzgerald combines a high regard for the romantic vision of life with an acceptance of life's triviality. This passage captures these two opposing qualities well, for in it there are hints at the transcendent ("a sort of exalted quiet"), yet it is rather factual: she wanted to be taken, so he took her. Even before the culmination of the romance, then, we see the cracks beginning to appear, the subtle awareness that each had built an affair with the other to be a transcendent good to be obtained and each saw that good collapse.

From early in the novel there are indications that there will be a conflict between the platonic Dick she imagines and the actual one. For example, in a line which echoes Gatsby's famous decision to wed his unutterable vision to Daisy's perishable breath, we read that Rosemary "laid her lips to the beautiful cold image she had created" when she kisses Dick (105). The magical Dick Diver who can fill someone's entire world with his all-knowing gaze is a "beautiful cold image" which "she had created." There is even some reason to believe that she understands how artificial their relationship is: "Rosemary stood up and leaned down and said her most sincere thing to him: 'Oh, we're such *actors*—you and I'" (105). They are actors because they are playing roles for one another, but they are also actors in that they are mimicking the passion and intentionality of a Hollywood film. In other words, they are "such *actors*" because films are the universal cultural reference point to narratives of meaning and significance, and by emulating the spirit of acting they may tap into those ontologically-empowered moments. If their affair is a part of a larger narrative arc with a definite end, then each moment becomes imbued with significance and value. However, it is also the case that such acting is always only acting. The most sincere thing Rosemary can say to Dick is that

they are both acting. In this way, their relationship is a framing epiphany: the epiphanic power of their love rests not upon the ground of some deeper reality, but on the experience of the space they make through their acting. Their acting creates a frame through which they feel they might experience the transcendent, but in truth all they experience is the frame of acting.

The illusion of fantastic romance quickly dissolves after they spend the night together. When Dick wakes the next morning, he feels a "vague dissatisfaction" and realizes that his affection for Rosemary "was less an infatuation than a romantic memory" (213). Soon after he concludes that "he was not in love with her, nor she with him" (216-7). What finally finishes their affair is the call Rosemary receives from Nicotera, a fellow actor and love interest. Dick learns that she and Nicotera are in a relationship and his jealousy drives him to mock the younger man. Rosemary leaves, crying, and says, "It's such a shame. Why did you come here? Why couldn't we just have the memory anyhow? I feel as if I'd quarrelled with Mother" (219). Much like Gatsby learned, too late, Rosemary recognizes that any consummation of a dream will inevitably disappoint us. If they kept their love as a memory, disembodied and embryonic, the memory would always hint at some irreducible, possible world out there to experience. Notably, Rosemary admits that arguing with Dick feels like arguing with her mother; this implies Dick's role as an absent father for Rosemary, an incestual theme which Robert Stanton has considered at length. Fitzgerald shows that dysfunction is inseparable from romantic love and the longing for an ideal mate. Even here where it results in a consummation, it is motivated by neurosis and fails to fulfill the partner's basic need for validation.

Dick and Nicole

Much like Rosemary's relationship with Dick, Nicole is attracted to the paternal, the omniscient and omnipotent Dick, and he longs for her beauty and weakness. The first thing that attracted Dick to Nicole was the combination of her stunning beauty and broken mind: "when I see a beautiful shell like that I can't help feeling a regret about what's inside it" (120). As we have already seen, Dick is driven by a desire to be loved, specifically as a father figure—this is what he has in place of the old beliefs which used to give meaning and direction to life. So, the vulnerable and beautiful Nicole Warren is the ideal woman for him. His colleague calls Nicole's infatuation "a transference of the most fortuitous kind" (120). We then learn that Nicole's father had raped her when she was younger, leading to her psychological collapse and the fear that every man was sexually assaulting her. This "fortuitous" "transference" is the romantic love she felt for her father transferred to Dick. In their correspondence, Dick demonstrates a male, non-sexually abusive, non-professional interest in her as a person. She is able to share her thoughts and feelings with him without fear of sexual abuse. As a purely supportive, non-threatening, male friend and confidant, Dick wins her love. And as an older doctor, Dick becomes the controlling, protective, paternal lover in her life, particularly after he joins the clinic and spends more time with her. The result of this is that Nicole comes to see Dick as a kind of ideal father/lover. In this way, Dick becomes her world, a concept which both he and she allude to in the novel.[4] Nicole perceives Dick as a transcendent romantic partner in three primary ways: his attention and affection grant existential justification to her life, bringing her out of a psychological collapse; he is the totality of her world; and he is the ideal father/lover.

Although a large part of Dick's attraction to Nicole is her deep need of him, her beauty plays no small role. Her appearance has a peculiar effect upon Dick: "The impression of her youth and beauty grew on Dick until it welled up inside him in a compact paroxysm of emotion. She smiled, a moving childish smile that was like all the lost youth in the world" (134). Part of Dick's attraction to Nicole stems from her youth and beauty, but as symbols of ideal youth and beauty, which is part of the weight of divinity which he puts on her. Dick comes to believe that "nothing had ever felt so young as her lips" (156). It is not merely that she appears young, or is young, it is that she is a metonym for youth itself; her lips are the ideal of youth. As a metonym for youth, Nicole represents the hope of eternal life, the hope of an ageless body:

> Her face . . . had a promise Dick had never seen before: the high cheek-bones, the faintly wan quality, cool rather than feverish, was reminiscent of the frame of a promising colt—a creature whose life did not promise to be only a projection of youth upon a grayer screen, but instead, a true growing; the face would be handsome in middle life; it would be handsome in old age: the essential structure and the economy were there. (141)

In her face Dick sees a unique hope for an ever beautiful body. This age-defying beauty is a kind of transcendence over the material world and the forces of entropy. And so, it is not a coincidence then that when they kiss, he feels his life itself existentially justified by her: "he was thankful to have an existence at all, if only as a reflection in her wet eyes" (155). As an object of transcendent value and worth, Nicole's attention and affection are capable of setting Dick apart from the world, of lifting him above toil, death, and decay. Her gaze upon Dick is momentous enough to justify his existence.

Unlike in *The Great Gatsby*, where Gatsby and Nick are suddenly faced with the failure of Gatsby's dream of Daisy, Dick and Nicole's idealistic love dies a slow and

mundane death. This is fitting with the theme of the banality of human tragedy in the novel. Just as Dick and Rosemary's affair is treated factually and with hardly any commentary, so the meeting between Tommy, Dick, and Nicole is rather uneventful. They meet, agree that the marriage is over, and Dick promises to talk over the details of a divorce with Nicole. Of course, no relationship could possibly bear the weight that Dick and Nicole put on each other; as we have seen before, the transcendent is too great a thing to demand of a lover. But it is the dysfunctional, neurotic motives and framing of this relationship that ultimately end it, over time, as Nicole requires less of Dick's paternalistic oversight to function and he has fewer opportunities to be her savior.

Nicole and Tommy

Nicole's love affair with Tommy is striking in the way it mimics the experience of transcendent romantic love which is so common in Fitzgerald. We are tempted to read Nicole's affair as liberating and inherently positive, since she does mature out of her neurotic incest complex with her attraction to Dick. She becomes her own person and is able to finally move beyond the world Dick has given her. She no longer owes her being to Dick. And yet, the language she uses to describe the significance of this affair implies that the situation is not nearly as wholly good as we are wont to believe. At the very least, in fleeting moments, Nicole comes to see this relationship as ultimately existence-affirming. The narrator describes the reappearance of Tommy as a magic moment:

> [T]hey saw ahead of them figures that seemed to dance in the half light of the circular stern. This was an illusion made by the enchantment of the music, the unfamiliar lighting, and the surrounding presence of water. . . . one, detaching and identifying himself, brought from Nicole a rare little cry of delight. (269)

Tommy emerges from this fantastic vision and draws from Nicole an expression of delight, a reaction to both his presence and his otherworldly appearance. Like Dick had been to her before, Tommy appears to transcend the mundane world of men and love. Specifically, Nicole sees Tommy as a romantic Hollywood adventure heartthrob:

> His handsome face was so dark as to have lost the pleasantness of deep tan, without attaining the blue beauty of Negroes—it was just worn leather. The foreignness of his depigmentation by unknown suns, his nourishment by strange soils, his tongue awkward with the curl of many dialects, his reactions attuned to odd alarms—these things fascinated and rested Nicole—in the moment of meeting she lay on his bosom, spiritually, going out and out. . . . Then self-preservation reasserted itself and retiring to her own world she spoke lightly.
>
> 'You look just like all the adventurers in the movies—but why do you have to stay away so long?.' (269)

Until Nicole speaks, it seems that she is attracted to Tommy's exotic otherness, and this is certainly a part of her attraction. But her comment frames the exotic through the lens of Hollywood. The strangeness, the foreignness, the roughness which delights her are taken from the romantic adventures of Hollywood. Yet again, the Hollywood actor is seen as the ideal romantic lover. Tommy represents the image of a vision of immanent transcendence—he looks like film actors who exist on another plane in which lives and romances have definite endings and purposes.

The romantic attention that Tommy pays to Nicole recalls the effect Dick's letters had on her years previous: it validates her existence. When she overhears Dick and Tommy passive-aggressively fight over her, she experiences a deep sense of personal satisfaction: "[S]he was happy; she did not want anything to happen, but only for the situation to remain in suspension as the two men tossed her from one mind to another; she had not existed for a long time, even as a ball" (276). Her existence is predicated upon the romantic gaze of her suitors, and I would argue, precisely because both of these

men represent (or at least did represent, in the case of Dick) an otherworldly lover. Note, however, that her existential justification through these two men is fundamentally dysfunctional; it comes at the expense of her objectification as a "ball." She would rather experience the feeling of acceptance and desire from these mythical, patriarchal men, even if it meant the loss of her agency and subjectivity, even if the acceptance was exclusively manifested between hostile men, instead of *toward* her, than to cease existing. The prognosis for the human quest for wonder is grim.

While she awaits Tommy, we receive a glimpse into how she perceives herself as desirable. Nicole considers her beauty: "She looked microscopically at the lines of her flanks, wondering how soon the fine, slim edifice would begin to sink squat and earthward" (290). As with Rosemary, what makes Nicole beautiful is her youthful appearance, but note that her fear is not merely old age or flabby skin, but the steady march toward the grave. The final fear for Nicole is "to sink squat and earthward." This rich imagery captures her concern for her physical appearance, but also the end for which it is a metonym: death. Conversely, to be beautiful is to move skyward, to transcend the earth, death, and decay. In short, Nicole desires to appear transcendent, and as we learn, this desire for youth stems directly from the vision of beauty presented by Hollywood movies: "[S]he was enough ridden by the current youth worship, the moving pictures with their myriad faces of girl-children, blandly represented as carrying on the work and wisdom of the world, to feel a jealousy of youth" (291). The narrator unrestrainedly mocks this obsession with "girl-children," yet acknowledges that Nicole is "ridden" by it. Once more, a character desires to transcend the mundane, physical world and looks to Hollywood images of romance and beauty as ideals.

The future for Nicole and Tommy is, for the most part, left open by Fitzgerald, but we have good reason to suspect that it ultimately suffers the same miseries which finally curse all romantic love when it is rendered as the absolute good. It is worth noting that Tommy displays many of the same patriarchal tendencies as Dick once did. When they meet in the cafe to discuss the divorce, Tommy dominates the conversation and positions himself as Nicole's advocate. Later, when Nicole sees Dick for the last time, on the beach which was once theirs together, she announces to Tommy that she is going to go to him, but Tommy stops her: "'No, you're not,' said Tommy, pulling her down firmly. 'Let well enough alone'" (314). Nicole matures by recognizing her dependence upon Dick and taking steps towards independence. But that independence manifests fundamentally as yet another controlling relationship. Fitzgerald implies that at the core of every desire for existential justification through romantic love, one finds deep, perhaps unavoidable, psychological trauma motivating us.

Before we learn that Dick's life trailed off into oblivion somewhere in a small, north eastern town, we receive one last image of Dick striving hopelessly for satisfaction. As he sits on the beach with Mary, trying to avoid the sight of Nicole and Tommy, she accuses him of failing to be the source of joy which he used to be: "All people want is to have a good time and if you make them unhappy you cut yourself off from nourishment" (313). To which he replies, "Have I been nourished?" Dick certainly received something in return for the happiness and wonder he gave people; he received their admiration, and more importantly, he received Rosemary's admiration. The great lie is that this admiration and affection was nourishment, that it sated his deep longing for existential justification. Most unsettlingly, Fitzgerald has shown us that this admiration never was

any kind of nourishment at all, but more properly a neurosis, a desire to transcend his position and circumstances, his finitude and body by becoming all things to all people, by caring for others and winning their approval. With Nicole and Rosemary, the two women whom he oriented himself and his worth, his ability and desire to be their ideal spouse utterly depended on his functioning as a father figure. The quest for the transcendent, romantic lover who will grant existential justification is replaced with a neurotic desire to play a contrived role in order to experience a fleeting moment of delusional fulfillment. And, what is worse is that even though Dick is a beaten and hopeless man, his neurosis still overcomes him:

> His eyes, for the moment clear as a child's, asked her sympathy and stealing over him he felt the old necessity of convincing her that he was the last man in the world and she was the last woman.
> . . . Then he would not have to look at those two other figures, a man and a woman, black and white and metallic against the sky. . . . (313)

While it is possible to read this line about Dick and Mary being the last people on earth as a sign that he is desperate for any kind of romantic relationship, I think this line should be read with his old motives and habits in mind, since this is "the old necessity," after all. Recall that part of Dick's attraction is the way he makes people feel uniquely significant, as we saw in the dinner party scene at the beginning of the novel. The desire is to become the totalizing Other for Mary—as he became the ideal for Rosemary and the world for Nicole—and for her to believe he felt the same about her. If he could convince her that he is figuratively the last man on earth, and that he sees her as the same, then Nicole and Tommy and the utter failure that was his love can be forgotten. *Tender is the Night* concludes uneventfully with the image of Dick fading away, still deeply controlled by his neurotic desire for transcendent, life-affirming romantic love. And what fades

with him is the image of the charmed, American man with all his vitality and the hope that he might overcome contingency and immanence to justify his being in the world:

> In the unconditional defeat of Dick Diver, Fitzgerald creates his vision of the gorgeousness and the vulnerability of the archetypal American in all his tragic stature. For Fitzgerald that archetypal American is the essence of millennial expectation. He is the distillation of enormous imaginative ability, energy, and infinite hope. (Stern 84)

At the center of Fitzgerald's novel we find the quest for wonder, but this wonder is proven to be an artificial sheen, and the quest to be a destructive game for neurotics.

Conclusion

Transcendence orients Fitzgerald's characters, their morals, their desires, their visions, and their actions. What is characteristic and significant for Fitzgerald is this idea that the place where we might find the validation and justification and fulfillment of a transcendent object is within a romantic relationship with a worthy object. However, from the beginning, and increasingly as his career went on, Fitzgerald's characters showed that the attainment of such an object is hopeless, and that we are ultimately doomed to endlessly strive towards this thing which does not exist and if it did we could not obtain. There is a phoniness about this, a hopelessness, but it is also a kind of existential bravery. What makes, for example, Gatsby's story so compelling is not that he has a fantasy and learns that it does not fit with reality. If that were all *The Great Gatsby* was, it would not be such a moving text. No, what is fascinating is that Fitzgerald captures this transcendent phenomenon, this experience that is in a sense true even as it is unsure. Thus, there is a kind of heroism in Gatsby's search for Daisy. It is an act of bravery to face the material world and seek out imperishable goodness, even though such a quest is hopeless, but knowing that it must be done because it is the best and truest

action of the human spirit. In Fitzgerald's earlier novels, the experience of the transcendent is something real, something central to human experience, something that orients and fills us, but also something which is ultimately tragic and futile. There does not appear to be any alternatives, however. By the time he reaches *Tender is the Night*, even the tragedy has left. We are creatures who eternally long for an eternal good to feed our need for meaningfulness, but there is nothing noble or beautiful in either this longing or the attempt to fulfill it. As William E. Doherty notes concerning the transcendent in *Tender Is the Night*: "the super-dream is an internal corruption, a damaging, self-begotten beauty" (159). Our longing for the irreducibly good is simply a part of our psychological condition.

CHAPTER THREE

Periscopes and Mute Listeners: Transcendent Communion in Carson McCullers's Fiction

If Flannery O'Connor, McCullers's Southern gothic contemporary, is the master at capturing the spiritual tradition of the American South, Carson McCullers is the master at outlining its absence. O'Connor famously described the American South as "Christ-haunted" (44). In her stories, Christ's presence haunts the characters, driving them to strange and radical actions, and often to an awareness of the grace of God. Christ haunts McCullers's stories as well, but quite differently. As Jan Whitt has written, McCullers was "Haunted by a Christ who remained entombed" (26). McCullers's fiction is haunted by an absent Christ figure, and so her alienated characters seek after some transcendent source of goodness which can justify and orient them. McDowell stresses that, "The validity of a search for truth through religion is never emphasized in any of McCullers's work. But the human being locked in his solitariness seeks always more than can be found" (McDowell 36). We will see that her characters do seek "always more," which alludes to the irreducibility of the transcendent, but this quest never takes the traditionally religious route and always remains unfulfilled. Hershon has claimed that the transcendent which her characters pursue is particularly Jewish: "The transcendence that most interests McCullers involves a survival of soul effected by progressing from a materialist outlook to a spiritual state of mind via more ethereal forms of communication, principally music" (52). It certainly is the case that music and ideal communication are the main ways that she conceptualizes the transcendent, but it is important to add that her

characters always remain tethered to the material world. Hers is a transcendence in immanence, not from immanence. About her own work, McCullers wrote:

> Spiritual isolation is the basis of most of my themes. My first book was concerned with this, almost entirely, and of all my books since, in one way or another. Love, and especially love of a person who is incapable of returning or receiving it, is at the heart of my selection of grotesque figures to write about — people whose physical incapacity is a symbol of their spiritual incapacity to love or receive love — their spiritual isolation. (*The Mortgaged Heart* 280)

The basic problem with existence for her characters is their ultimate alienation from one another, their inability to cross the infinite distance of difference in giving or receiving love, leaving them with a spiritual isolation. As desperate, wretched, and pathetic as the haunting presence of Christ makes O'Connor's characters, His haunting absence has a much more profound effect upon McCullers's characters.

This effect typically manifests as a deep emptiness, an alienation from themselves and fellow humans, and an ardent longing for some transcendent source of goodness that can fill that emptiness. Ultimately, her characters seek in vain for the otherworldly. Her stories are tragic. We are hopelessly disconnected from one another, unable to cross the infinite space between beings, yet we are compelled to believe that Being can be found nowhere else, or if so, only fleetingly. Cook has argued that the loneliness McCullers depicts stems from "a basic perversion in the relationship between all human beings and the world they live in. The two are simply not compatible" (Cook 27). I suspect the two are incompatible because humanity longs for something always irreducibly greater than the material world and other people. There is a beauty to this tragedy, however:

> Mrs. McCullers' affirmation is that a Creator has formed an incomplete humanity, one that can only trust that there is sense in creation. Some good, rather than total good, is the meaning available for man.

> Radiance, nevertheless, exists in the world and cannot be denied. (Hamilton 216)

McCullers's characters are fated to endlessly seek after existential justification through transcendent experiences and relationships—ones that transcend the infinite distance between us all and the frailty of existence—only to be rebuffed at every turn. In this way, her stories recall the tragic myth of Sisyphus, and yet like all good myths, there is a beauty here as well. The beauty lies not with the human condition, but with our shared narrative and commitment to the impossible, and with the acknowledgement of that condition. The ardor and sincerity with which we pursue the transcendent is beautiful and good, even as it is hopeless. Carson McCullers places a desire for transcendence at the heart of her characters' motivations and psychological drives in a way that produces empathy for their tragic condition.

I will treat McCullers's use of the transcendent in three of her works. I will begin with the short story "Untitled Piece," in which the protagonist reflects on a series of moments in his life when he desperately sought to find some transcendent ground to his being. In many ways, McCullers continues to write this same basic story of an awkward adolescent who longs to transcend the self, particularly through an act of communion or communication with other people. "Untitled Piece" is the first of these stories. Mick's narrative in her first novel and *The Member of the Wedding* are the remaining two stories in this vein. In each narrative, McCullers follows an adolescent's conflicted quest for existential validation and orientation through some transcendent source, only to be repeatedly disappointed when confronted with the gross materiality and immanence of being. In her conclusions, however, the protagonists manage to achieve some kind of hope for a life of fullness, as though transcendence were possible. An essential theme in

all of these stories is the struggle to cross the barrier of childhood into a fully realized sexual being despite the world's efforts to confine us according to gender norms. There are a number of good studies which have explored this theme, Sarah Gleeson-White's *Strange Bodies* being one of the more recent. While there particular ways in which McCullers's characters' longings for transcendence are important, my focus will be upon demonstrating that they are longings for transcendence and considering how these characters go about pursuing it. Part of the distinction between these stories is the shape the transcendent hope takes and McCullers's conclusion about the goodness of her protagonists's futures. As her career progresses, McCullers becomes increasingly pessimistic about the possibility of attaining the transcendent and finding it fulfilling.

Ascent as a Strategy of Transcendence in "Untitled Piece"

Written a few years before McCullers began work on what would be her breakout novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, "Untitled Piece" comprises the first third of what we might call her trilogy of adolescent romances. In it McCullers very intently develops Andrew's crisis of identity, connecting otherwise disparate memories from his youth to reveal a young man obsessed with transcending his individual subjectivity to achieve some meaningful vision of the totality of existence. The story ends optimistically, implying that Andrew will be able to justify himself and find order in the world by establishing his place within his family; however, because this epiphany of hope comes through Andrew's drunkenness and lacks clear explanation, it is more than ambiguous.

"Untitled Piece" begins when Andrew steps off a bus on his way back home to Georgia. He drinks a few beers to build up the courage to continue his journey and tries to identify why he is so reluctant to return. Andrew realizes that the emotion he feels

about returning home is similar to a formative experience he shared with his sisters and their black caretaker in his childhood. He and Sara, the older of his two sisters, had read about gliders in school, and decided they could build their own. Despite the protests of their guardian, Vitalis, the two manage to build something resembling a glider and try to launch it from a swing. What is remarkable about this memory for Andrew is the almost spiritual significance with which he and his sister imbued the flight:

> They all felt that there was something wild about the day. It was like they were shut off from all other people in the world and nothing mattered except the four of them planning and working out in the quiet, sun-baked yard. It was as though they had never wanted anything except this glider and its flight from the earth up toward the hot blue sky. (*Collected Stories* 82)

It is not merely that the children became absorbed by their play, it is that this absorption alludes to another reality. It functions as what Peter Berger calls a "signal of transcendence." In *A Rumor of Angels*, Berger argues that there are several prototypical human gestures which appear to allude to some transcendent reality. One of those gestures is "play," which Berger notes exists in a separate time (58). The otherness of play time, its break with the interminable march of mechanical time, reflects "sacred time," as understood by Eliade. This is a high time, a time wherein we exist eternally, touching upon some plane of existence which is always there. Their hope that the glider will fly takes on a totalizing significance, so that "nothing [else] mattered," and in comparison they "never wanted anything." Flight becomes for them a transcendence over the world; a successful flight would mean that as a family they had achieved some good which carried them over the totality of existence, giving them perspective and orientation.

Andrew and Sara both try and fail to get the glider to fly, but they don't give up: "And the queer thing was that they both knew that this second trial would be just like the

first and that their glider would not fly. In a part of them they knew this but there was something that would not let them think about it — the wanting and the excitement that would not let them be quiet or stop to reason" (84). McCullers seems to suggest that our longing for transcendence is only matched by our inability to attain it. And so we ignore the latter, defy reason, and press on. When the glider is finally destroyed in one last flight attempt, Andrew is utterly crushed: "Everything was over and he felt dead and empty inside" (85). The glider did not fail, "everything" failed, "everything was over," hopeless; all other values lose their meaning once the glider fails, because flight had become his hypergood. If the glider flew, if it had transcended the earth and his life, then that life would have had meaning, content, an interpretation for the ceaseless march of time in his life. Instead, his insides are uninterpretable because they lack content and he cannot be named or narrated because he is empty. This is the existential crisis of a secular failure to transcend the world.

Mirroring a scene which appears in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, Andrew next strives to transcend by standing on the roof of an unfinished house and calling out:

> Standing there alone on the roof he always felt he had to shout out — but he did not know what it was he wanted to say. It seemed like if he could put this thing into words he would no longer be a boy with big rough bare feet and hands that hung down clumsy from the outgrown sleeves of his lumberjack. He would be a great man, a kind of God, and what he called out would make things that bothered him and all other people plain and simple. His voice would be great and like music and men and women would come out of their houses and listen to him and because they knew that what he said was true they would all be like one person and would understand everything in the world. But no matter how big this feeling was, he could never put any of it into words. He would balance there choked and ready to burst and if his voice had not been squeaky and changing he would have tried to yell out the music of one of their Wagner records. He could do nothing . . . . and then he would climb down feeling empty and shamed and more lonesome than anybody else in the world. (91)

Every part of this scene portrays the Andrew's desire to transcend his physical presence, which chains him to a body which he is ashamed of and keeps him from being united with anyone else in the world. Like the flying in the glider, climbing to the top of the house represents moving above the mundane world to rightly see and know all that is. If he could shout he would no longer be defined by a mortal, isolated, finite, corrupt body. Note that he does not say that he would no longer have "big rough bare feet and hands that hung down clumsy," it says, "he would no longer be" that kind of boy. What he desires is to know and have others know him as he believes himself to be ontologically. This shout would make him God. He has a tremendous longing to make this shout, and he feels a great familiarity with the spirit of the shout, but he cannot speak it. McCullers artfully captures the contemporary existential crisis. Humans are profoundly shaped by a deep longing for transcendence and yet are incapable of attaining it. Leaving us, like him, "empty and shamed and more lonesome than anybody else in the world."

Later, Andrew befriends a quiet Jew named Harry Minowitz who works as a jeweler with his father. Harry teaches Andrew how to play chess and often has the younger boy over to his house for long conversations into the night. During one of these meetings, Andrew shares some of his deepest anxieties:

> Don't you ever hate being yourself? I mean like the times when you wake up suddenly and say I am I and you feel smothered. It's like everything you do and think about is at loose ends and nothing fits together. There ought to be a time when you see everything like you're looking through a periscope. A kind of a — colossal periscope where nothing is left out and everything in the world fits in with every other thing. And no matter what happens after that it won't — won't stick out like a sore thumb and make you lose your balance. That's one reason I like chess because it's sort of that way. And music — I mean good music. Most jazz and theme songs in the movies are like something a kid like Mick would draw on a piece of tablet paper — maybe a sort of shaky like all erased and messy. But the other music is sometimes like a great fine design and for a minute it makes

> you that way too. But about that sort of periscope — there's really no such thing. And maybe that's what everybody wants and they just don't know it. They try one thing after another but that want is never really gone. Never. (95)

In many ways, the rest of McCullers's fiction will be devoted to exploring this dilemma. Andrew seems to suggest that the fundamental challenge for all people is a profound desire to make sense of the absurdity of life. We sense that there ought to be order, meaning, and direction to existence, yet our experience defies this sense, daily. Andrew desires to understand the totality of being. He identifies glimpses of this transcendence, specifically in systems or events that reduce the world to a graspable whole or gesture towards the irreducible nature of being. The central image is the colossal periscope which can see over all of being to reveal the true nature of all that is. It should remind the reader, as it does Andrew, of his childhood attempt to fly into the "hot blue sky" in the glider, or the feeling of standing on the rooftop, surveying his world. A periscope is an all-seeing-eye. Through it, people can know where they are in relation to all else, they could know where they are moving and what they are moving towards. He cites chess as another example of something that can give one a feeling of orientation, because chess is comprehensible; a person can know it in totality. Classical music is similar to chess, but much, much grander. Good music involves the order and structure and logic of chess, but unlike chess it can dramatically allude to the transcendent wonder of being. Music has "a great and fine design," and when we participate in it, it justifies our being, it locates us within the grand design of existence, "for a minute." Good music draws us into its majestic design in intimations of the numinous, the ever greater transcendent.

Andrew suggests that this desire for a transcendent vision of existence is basic to human life. Everyone wants to gain a transcendent perspective on what is, but this desire

is misguided. What's remarkable is that Andrew claims that at the core of the human condition are two contradictory facts: we naturally desire transcendence, and yet transcendence is impossible. The human condition is such that the very thing we desire most is always out of reach. In addition, as this desire can never be fulfilled, we continually try to satisfy it with different things. The glider, chess, yelling from a rooftop, music, every deeply felt experience was at root a desperate attempt to satisfy a longing for transcendence.

One day, in a fit of depression and loneliness, Andrew wanders to Vitalis's home, and the two find themselves making love. Part of Andrew's feelings of alienation stem from deep confusion over his own sexuality and body; thus, his sexual experience with Vitalis is an attempt at making a true, powerful human connection, one which overcomes his feelings of isolation. But afterward, he is left feeling only more depressed and alone: "Harry's chessmen, those precise and shrunken little dolls, neat problems in geometry, music that spun itself out immense and symmetrical. He was lost lost and it seemed to him that the end had surely come. He wanted to put his hands on all that had happened to him in his life, to grasp it to him and shape it whole" (102). Andrew's deepest desire is to order his being, to discover deep down that his life has followed a logic, a logical design of beauty, like in music. Instead, he finds himself lost, unsure who he is and who he ought to be.

One of the aesthetic weaknesses of "Untitled Piece" is its ending, which implies that Andrew experiences an epiphany, but McCullers fails to describe or provide adequate explanation of it. After spending three years in New York, Andrew is on his way back to Georgia, but his reminiscing at the bus terminal suggests that he is not

actually ready to return because he is so confused about his identity and his relationship to his family. McCullers's conclusion complicates this reading:

> When he had first sat down at the table everything had seemed for the first time so clear. And now he was more lost than ever. But somehow it didn't matter. He felt strong. . . . He was drunk and there was power in him to shape things. He thought of all of them at home whom he had loved. And it would not be himself but through all of them that he would find this pattern. (103)

On the one hand, Andrew experiences a kind of epiphany. He suddenly gains the "power in him to shape things" and he feels "strong." He comes to believe that he can find a pattern that can grant his life meaning and direction and purpose. Yet, he only finds this courage through drunkenness, which elicits the question: is this courage or hubris? If his power to shape things comes directly from inebriation, what will remain after he sobers up? McCullers fails to explain why he feels this sudden strength and how he has changed from the beginning of the narrative.

Andrew believes that through his familial relationships he will discover the pattern of life. This is remarkable because the entire short story archives how he has repeatedly sought for transcendence with or through his family to no avail. Let me suggest that McCullers is conflicted here. In all of her stories, we are left with the fact that humans desire the transcendent, which they can never attain or experience; however, through human relationships, we can strive together toward the transcendent, and even though this effort is doomed, it is still noble and worthwhile. Thus, McCullers's ending suggests that Andrew has experienced an epiphany and will finally understand his place in the world, yet his past experiences counsel against this hope. Together, the tension between McCullers's hope and the experiences Andrew has faced imply that we are all damned by the infinite gulf which separates us, but we are also all joined by this common

damnation. If nothing else, we can huddle together, backs to the storm, weathering the forces of alienation and finitude in defiance.

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter: Expressions of Self as Transcendence

Carson McCullers's novel suggests that the basic problem for the modern person is a failure to truly communicate anything to anyone. Her world is one dominated by monads. At the center of the novel is a deaf mute named John Singer, who becomes a kind of god for the other characters: Biff Brannon, Mick Kelly, Jake Blount, and Dr. Benedict Copeland. They each live alone, and their greatest longing is to transcend this condition, to break through the infinite space between beings and know and be known. In Singer they see a being with whom they can communicate perfectly. In her outline for the novel, entitled "The Mute," McCullers clearly sets out these major themes:

> This is the theme of man's revolt against his own inner isolation and his urge to express himself as fully as possible. Surrounding this general idea there are several counter themes and some of these may be stated briefly as follows: (1) There is a deep need in man to express himself by creating some unifying principle or God. A personal God created by a man is a reflection of himself and in substance this God is most often inferior to his creator. (2) In a disorganized society these individual Gods or principles are likely to be chimerical and fantastic. (*Illumination* 163)

McCullers lists three other themes—self expression, innate human cooperation, and natural heroism—but the first two are the most formative of the text and most relevant for our purposes. The idea that humans must worship some god and that all man-made gods in the modern world are "chimerical" constitutes the fundamental tension of twentieth century literature, as we have already seen. In her essay, "Loneliness . . . An American Malady," McCullers argues that an experience of loneliness is basic to the American experience, and that this loneliness is "essentially" "a quest for identity" (*The Mortgaged*

Heart 265), that we find our identity in belonging to "something larger and more powerful" (265), and that the source of this identity is always inside "each separate heart" (267). Readers familiar with McCullers's work will recognize the preoccupation with identity, particularly gender and sexual identity, and while many critics have rightly focused on this theme, it is notable that McCullers's subject is not reducible to sexual and gender identity. McCullers quite intentionally speaks of a generic quest grounded in "something larger and more powerful." As we shall see, this quest is a distinctly modern conception of transcendence—it is transcendence by turning inward to the infinite depths of the self. By the end of the text, efforts to transcend finitude are shown to be futile and destructive. The text suggests that our defining characteristic is our isolation, and our defining desire is to be in communion, and our inevitable end is to be broken over the tragedy of utter otherness, and this is the reality which McCullers's five main characters realize over the course of the novel. While each of the characters depicts the desire for an existentially justifying relationship of pure communication, Mick's narrative reveals this most clearly, so it is her story which I will focus upon.

For each of her main characters, the quest for existential justification through the transcendent evolves from their secularism; however, the novel contains a good deal of Christian imagery and ideas. The inclusion of this imagery points to the failure of Christianity for the characters, as Lubbers claims:

> The meaning which the book finally adds up to is this: Christ's gospel is dead for the protagonists. The substituted truths they embrace are private truths, not comprehensive enough to include others. The most acceptable truth is Biff's . . . It is Christ's message of love in a secular form which Brannon has arrived at by constantly attempting to solve the riddle of Singer's life, the hard path toward unrequited human sympathy in an exacting world heading into darkness. (Lubbers 193-4)

In one way or another, each of the main characters articulates a rejection of the Christian faith, making secularization an important theme of the novel. Horace Taylor describes the secularization as a loss of "communal spirituality": "These people are spiritually dead for the most part, having lost almost completely the bond of communal spirituality with their fellow men. . . . They are the hollow men of a society that is spiritually dead" (Taylor 159). While he is right that there has been a discernible loss of spirituality, Taylor goes too far in describing the characters as "spiritually dead." We might say that they are dead to traditional understandings of spirituality--the Christian Church, for example--, but Mick's ecstatic experience of symphonies are nothing if not spiritual. All of the characters posit some secular replacement for Christianity, a transcendence in immanence, but as Lubbers observes, the only compelling alternative is Biff's secular humanism, although even there I would push back and argue that his is not much better than the ideals the others seek after. We are told that Biff gave up "church and religion" (31). And in a conversation between Portia and Mick early in the novel we learn that Doctor Copeland, Portia's father, and Mick both have rejected a belief in God. Portia says that she feels bad for her father, who is worried and miserable: "He done lost God and turned his back to religion. All his troubles come down just to that" (49). Copeland's "troubles" do come down to a rejection of a belief in God, because in its place he erects a hope in the human spirit and the possibility of transcending our material condition through equality and justice in a utopian society. But the success of this hope, he feels, rests almost entirely upon himself. If humanity, and particularly the black race, is to be saved, it will be through a revolutionary change which he must initiate.

Likewise, Portia accurately describes Mick's existential crisis as one connected to her lack of belief in God:

> But you haven't never loved God nor even nair person. You hard and tough as cowhide. But just the same I knows you. This afternoon you going to roam all over the place without never being satisfied. You going to work yourself up with excitement. Your heart going to beat hard enough to kill you because you don't love and don't have peace. And then someday you going to bust loose and be ruined. Won't nothing help you then. (51)

In Andrew Leander's language, Mick spends her life passionately searching for some colossal periscope, trying one thing after another until she will finally "bust loose and be ruined." During this search, Mick's heart beats "hard enough to kill," alluding to the existential significance of the act: it is a matter of life and death. Although Portia's analysis of Mick is focused on "this afternoon," it is equally applicable to the novel as a whole. A profound restlessness caused by her yearning for something commensurate to her sense of the potential beauty of the world motivates Mick. Portia gives Mick two options for a fulfilled life: the love of God or the love of other people. Mick has ruled out the former, but unbeknownst to Portia, she still sees the latter as a viable and worthy path. Portia incorrectly believes that Mick does not love anybody: "What would Portia say if she knew that always there had been one person after another? And every time it was like some part of her would burst in a hundred pieces" (52). This gets to the center of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*: the problem is not a failure to love, but an endlessly disappointed failure to attain love. Looking to Luc Ferry and Ernest Becker's analysis, we can say that Mick and other characters have shifted a longing for the irreducible of divine love for a love in the finite that defers infinitely. What is notable is that Portia is

not only wrong about Mick not loving anyone, she is also wrong to believe that such love alone would sustain and validate the young girl.

The theme of the inability for finite human love to justify us despite our hopes takes shape through John Singer, who stands as an infinitely malleable silent deity for the other four main characters. His representation of divinity comes from his ability to listen attentively and endlessly, becoming a repository of the characters's transcendent hope: "Singer is not so much a modern Christ as he is the embodiment of the community's need to find acceptance and confirmation of their visions and hopes" (Cook 38). Singer's willingness to listen becomes the image of transcendent human communion in the novel, the ideal which the other characters seek after. Using Mick as an example, we see that McCullers's main characters view Singer as the closest thing to God in a secular world:

> She whispered some words out loud: 'Lord forgiveth me, for I knoweth not what I do.' Why did she think of that? Everybody in the past few years knew there wasn't any real God. When she thought of what she used to imagine was God she could only see Mister Singer with a long, white sheet around him. God was silent--maybe that was why she was reminded. She said the words again, just as she would speak them to Mister Singer: 'Lord forgiveth me, for I knoweth not what I do. (120)

Later in the novel, after Mick loses her virginity to her neighbor, she comes home desperate to talk to Singer, to confess to him and receive some kind of absolution and consolation. Mick ponders why she wants to talk to Singer about her experience: "Had ever he felt a terrible afraidness like this one? No. He had never done anything wrong. He had never done wrong and his heart was quiet in the night-time. Yet at the same time he would understand" (313). Because of his apparent moral perfection, Mick turns him for moral orientation. Singer has taken on a divine status for Mick; he becomes a Christ-figure in that he is perfect and all knowing.

This image of Singer as a perfect listener is an illusion, and a weak one at that. Singer cannot understand their hearts' desires. Often he cannot even understand their words. And when they come to him for advice, he can do little or nothing. They appear to him as strange figures. For all their open sharing, Singer feels alien from them. They know nothing of him, and he knows little of them. This tragic illusion comes to the forefront when Singer commits suicide and the spell of his infinitely understanding face of compassion and solidarity dissolves. His suicide reveals himself to be finite, but it also means that their relationship was a fraud. If Singer truly knew their hearts, he would have understood how greatly they needed him, particularly since they all were about to face their worst crises.

The reader is privy to just how hopeless it is to view Singer as an ideal listener. Like his distant companions, Singer desires to know and be known, and his former roommate Spiros Antonapoulos becomes his divine listener. As Singer is a mute who gives the illusion of perfect openness and sympathy to those who visit him, so Antonapoulos does for him, but only because of his stupidity. Antonapoulos is both mute and mentally incompetent. Unlike Singer who can use sign language, Antonapoulos cannot sign, read, or write. More importantly, he is utterly uninterested in trying to learn. Singer knows this, and yet he takes profound solace from telling his partner about his deepest thoughts. The Greek is a sign of the possibility of human communion for Singer, and this possibility of crossing the infinite distance of difference and otherness and communicating truly grants Singer existential justification. He orients his life around Antonapoulos, writing him letters which he knows he cannot read, spending his money to please his friend when he visits him semi-yearly in the mental asylum. When Singer

learns that his friend has died, he shoots himself in the heart. Antonapoulos represented a hope for true, meaningful human communion, so when that ideal is destroyed, Singer can no longer function. Biff, Jake, Mick, and Copeland place their existential hope in Singer's ability to hear and know them truly, which he can feign only as long as he feels that Antonapoulos is able to hear and know him truly. Their relationship with Singer is an illusion of communion built upon an illusion of communion, and when the latter is exposed for a fraud, there is nothing left: "The muteness [of Antonapoulos and Singer] . . . engenders mystery, but behind the mystery lies misunderstanding--or nothing" (Durham 498). In the language of our study, the transcendent communion which Antonapoulos and Singer offer is a transcendence without the transcendent, a form epiphany that gives the appearance of some irreducibly higher truth, but lacks the content or substance.

Each of Singer's four visitors has an unspeakable longing for intimate, pure, open human communion. They envision the shape of this communion differently, and thus seek it in unique ways, but each desires it. Oliver Evans has argued that the central allegory of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is the desire to transcend the self. This allegory "concerns the struggle of individuals to free themselves from the cells of their beings—to achieve communication with other individuals similarly imprisoned and to identify themselves in some way with something bigger than themselves and outside themselves" (Evans 43). A utopian classless society is the transcendent hope which Doctor Copeland and Jake seek. Both men feel that if they could communicate truly to their neighbor, they could help bring about a utopian future where racial injustice, oppression, and suffering are nonexistent. Their identity, values, and purpose is shaped by a hope in a future which transcends the corruption and evil of the present world, and yet this hope is continually

proven to be inadequate. Likewise, Mick's hope is placed in an ideal of pure communication, which she finds in music.

Mick

Mick longs for a pure and ordered form of beauty which can communicate her heart. In music she finds what she feels to be transcendent beauty. As we have seen before, the transcendent is often described as an experience of timeslessness, and this is the way Mick experiences music: "This music did not take a long time or a short time. It did not have anything to do with time going by at all" (118). Music momentarily lifts Mick outside of time. She also feels that a symphony can carry with it the totality of existence, and thus is irreducible to linguistic articulation or her comprehension: "The whole world was this symphony, and there was not enough of her to listen" (118-9). The symphony can account for all the diversity and complexity of being and shape it into a beautiful, orderly whole. Mick's fascination with music is more than an intense hobby; listening to classical music fills her with a sense of deep existential fulfillment.

When she hears Mozart, she experiences a moment of transcendence which lifts her above the tumult of mundane life to some plane of infinite complexity and beauty. Most notably, this transcendent music is tied in her mind to the image of God:

> How did it come? For a minute the opening balanced from one side to the other. Like a walk or march. Like God strutting in the night. The outside of her was suddenly froze and that first part of the music was hot inside her heart. She could not even hear what sounded after, but she sat there waiting and froze, with her fists tight. After a while the music came again, harder and loud. It didn't have anything to do with God. This was her, Mick Kelly, walking in the daytime and by herself at night. In the hot sun and in the dark with all the plans and feelings. This music was her—the real plain her. (118)

The movement of this passage closely follows the experience of many modern people. In the face of a transcendent being or experience, Mick's first thought is to God, to the standard cultural frame of reference for the transcendent. But she quickly realizes that she cannot explain the elevated power of music in reference to some deity, and so she changes her mind, "It didn't have anything to do with God." This change probably stems from a realization that God no longer makes sense to Mick. When she reconsiders, she realizes that what appeared to sound like God strutting, was actually herself. Charles Taylor's account of secularization is helpful in understanding why the music first sounds like God strutting and then sounds like Mick Kelly walking.

As Taylor explains, part of the experience of secularization is the move from a transcendent source outside of and beyond ourselves, to a transcendent of inner depths: "We now conceive of ourselves as having inner depths. We might even say that the depths which were previously located in the cosmos, the enchanted world, are now more readily placed within" (*A Secular Age* 540). The music signifies the depths of Mick's being—it justifies her being. This infinitely elevated music symbolizes her being-in-the-world. The movement and complexity and depth and beauty of Mozart comes to be an image of Mick's experience of life, and by experiencing his music as an epiphany, Mick is able to transfer those properties to her own existence. In this way, listening to Mozart is more than an experience of an awareness of the transcendent, but an acknowledgement of her identification with it. When she listens to music, what Mick discovers is not some truth beyond or above her, she discovers the "real plain her." Here is another mark of the secular shift: being becomes grounded not in external truths, but in internal, subjective ones, and the highest truth is to know oneself. Under the layers of emotions and

experiences and doubts and self-deceptions and psychological trauma exists the "real plain her," pure, original, and ineffable—her being irreducible to language. In this way, Mick sees music as true communication—a way of expressing herself that transcends the finitude of herself and others; however, the world continually acts to undermine the possibility of transcendent expression via music.

In multiple ways, great music fails to achieve the level of significance and value which Mick Kelly ascribes to it. The difficulty with music as an epiphanic experience of the transcendent is that it ends. Mick tells us that music "did not have anything to do with time going by at all," but we know this to be an illusion, since music is most centrally a temporal art form (118). No matter how much the music fills her mind it is always out of reach. Music becomes for Mick a window into a universe of beauty and meaning and order, but only a window. Mick is unable to listen to the music as often as she would like, since the radio station often does not play good music. When she does get to hear music, she finds her finitude always preventing her from properly listening: "She could not listen good enough to hear it all" (118). Part of this incomprehensibility stems from the vast complexity of the music, but this irreducibility also becomes a source of frustration for Mick. We get the sense that Mick believes that she could reach some level of enlightenment if she could only hear all of the music at once. She tries to carry the symphonies around with her, but her memory is always necessarily incomplete and she is unable to remember everything, which again frustrates her and keeps her from experiencing and feeling the music as she would like to. To replicate the epiphanic power of listening to great composers, Mick tries repeatedly to learn to write and play music, but is always restrained by her material condition. Poverty prevents her from

learning musical theory and how to play the piano, and her own inadequacies prevent her from successfully making a violin, which symbolized to her the possibility of going beyond her mundane life through musical creation (46-7). Finally, in her job at Woolworth Mick finds that the music has left her. Fatigue keeps her from carrying the music, writing her symphonies, or learning music (353). At every turn, this experience which grants her such existential validation, is thwarted by the material world. The necessity of labor reveals to the reader that Mick's hope in the beauty of music is an illusion. Adulthood means an end to her quest to commune with others through the pure form of music. This labor is a sign of finitude. It is gross materiality which drives her to surrender her inside world for a dead-end job. Her sister's illness, the bills from Baby's accident, their hunger, all these basic physical needs finally trump whatever vision of beauty she projects on music, crowding out the beautiful with the biologically necessary.

In her concluding section, Mick ponders the tremendous significance of the inside space. While Mick meditates in the New York Café about the possibility of still saving for a piano, the narrator describes Mick's thoughts:

> Maybe she would get a chance [to save for a piano] soon. Else what the hell good had it all been--the way she felt about music and the plans she had made in the inside room? It had to be some good if anything made sense. And it was too and it was too and it was too and it was too. It was some good.
> All right!
> O.K.!
> Some good. (354)

Her existential justification rests upon the possibility of communicating through the transcendent medium of music: "Mick is trying to persuade herself, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, that life has some meaning, that it 'makes sense'" (Evans 46). This musical act is one of Taylor's hypergoods; it orients and interprets her life. If her

experience creating music was not "some good," if it did not have a proper and commensurate end, if it was merely another experience among others, then all of life would cease to make sense. The transcendent which she aspires to must be attainable, and the quest for it must be truly good, or else she loses all orientation.

The last we hear from Mick is her unsubstantiated assertion that her music and plans were good, because they were. She comes to this conclusion not by citing evidence or identifying the goodness of her inside room. Instead, Mick adopts a mantra: "it was too and it was too and it was too." Her music was some good because she knows it was, it just was. She has a deep sense, one which she is incapable of articulating or rationalizing, that these experiences were more than subjectively moving, more than biologically and psychologically satisfying; they were good in some absolute sense. McDowell wants us to interpret this conclusion as positive: "If Singer's death unnerves her and she is bitter about giving up her piano lessons and school, this anger in itself reinforces the rebelliousness which will enable her to defy the fatality that overcomes her" (McDowell 40). McCullers seems to confirm this reading of Mick's feature in her outline of the novel: "She is defeated by society on all the main issues before she can even begin, but still there is something in her and in those like her that cannot and will not ever be destroyed" (*Illumination* 168). The difficulty in this interpretation is that it accepts Mick's words on face value, as if we should believe that she defies her situation in the future merely because she concludes that her music does matter. Other than her fiat hope, what reason do we have to believe that she overcomes? The text does suggest that some part of Mick cannot be stopped, but that part is most likely her commitment to searching for the transcendent endlessly. Evans has argued that it is this Sisyphean

search for their beloved which gives McCullers's characters their nobility and makes them interesting to us (48). They may not be able to attain the transcendent love that they desire, but the ardent way they seek it is admirable, Evans believes. In this quest a person joins with all other people in the search for transcendence, and thus shares something basic and important with all of humanity. Of course, the reader may choose to interpret the conclusion optimistically in the way Evans lays out; it is possible for us to see the characters's futile goals as meaningful even in their futility, but I do not believe that the text gives us good reason to interpret it in this way. In the end, Mick adopts an irrational hope in the goodness of her existence. Mick feels that there is some transcendent good to be experienced in music, one which justifies her life and grants her meaning and purpose, but it appears to be contentless; it is purely subjective (to Mick's experience) and finite (despite the appearance of transcendence) and corrupted by our physical world with its physical laws of limitation and its material demands. We are left wondering if music would be much like Andrew Leander's glider, even if the material conditions allowed her to write a symphony, it would not grant her the transcendent significance she wishes for. It would, instead be an illusion of and allusion to the transcendent. And yet, for Mick it seems to be more than subjective, finite, and mundane.

Biff

The final word of the novel is given to Biff. He comes to terms with the disasters which have befallen each of Singer's friends. In the last pages Biff experiences what might be the one moment of transcendence in the novel, but it is one which leaves him deeply confused:

> Biff stood transfixed, lost in his meditations. Then suddenly he felt a quickening in him. His heart turned and he leaned his back against the counter for support. For in a swift radiance of illumination he saw a glimpse of human struggle and of valor. Of the endless fluid passage of humanity through endless time. And of those who labor and of those who--one word--love. His soul expanded. But for a moment only. For in him he felt a warning, a shaft of terror. Between the two worlds he was suspended. He saw that he was looking at his own face in the counter glass before him. Sweat glistened on his temples and his face was contorted. One eye was opened wider than the other. The left eye delved narrowly into the past while the right gazed wide and affrighted into a future of blackness, error, and ruin. And he was suspended between radiance and darkness. Between bitter irony and faith. (358-9)

The passage opens with overtly religious imagery: transfixion, meditation, a quickening, and "a swift radiance of illumination." This language evokes a sense of the transcendent, particularly the latter phrase. Biff experiences an epiphany which gives him a deeper understanding of the world. But note that this illumination is a kind of "radiance." Biff does not come to a cognitive knowledge of "human struggle and of valor." The epiphany is irreducible to the awareness which he experiences, it radiates, extends, transcends the details. It is also important that what he sees is infinite: "the endless fluid passage of humanity through endless time." The passage is endless, and through endless time, but it is also "fluid," implying that this passage cannot even be reduced to particular instances of humanity. Biff feels his soul expand, which indicates a depth of communion and existential validation that is unparalleled in the novel. This epiphany is a powerful and important moment in the progression of the text, as the reader has been left with little-to-no hope for the characters' futures and little guidance for what we are to make of this. It is a shockingly transcendent moment, but it is also in tension with the immanent.

In this epiphany, Biff only glimpses "human struggle," denoting the brevity, the transience of this vision. Even within the vision, Biff describes a humanity defined by

"labor and . . . love." The epiphany lifts Biff above his finitude to an elevated plane which gives him an objective vision of the human condition, but the latter is not itself pure and ideal. The fundamental conflict between struggle and valor, between labor and love, is never reconciled or resolved or explained away in the transcendent. Even in the purest expression of transcendence in the novel there is no escaping the taint of corruption and suffering. The best Biff can experience is a deeper appreciation of the human condition, and even that lasts "for a moment only." The epiphany is cut short by "a warning, a shaft of terror" that he will fail to attain this radiance and will instead descend into darkness. Part of the terror here is that his suspension between the "two worlds" of "radiance and darkness" is outside of his control. He does not suspend himself; he awakens to find himself suspended. And whereas the radiance of his epiphany might expand his soul and contextualize his place in the world, the other world destroys everything. Opposite of the radiance is "a future of blackness, error and ruin. . . . darkness [and] bitter irony" (33). McCullers's opposition of these two possibilities insightfully captures the two major stylistic responses to the loss of transcendence in a secular world. At center is humanity's struggle toward meaning, purpose, and justice in a violent and banally horrible world. One interpretation of this state is as a tragedy, a view we saw in Fitzgerald. We are destined to search endlessly for some transcendent good, but through this struggle, our valor and love justifies us. Against this worldview, Biff sees the alternative interpretation: all our struggle and labor, and even our love and valor are works of bitter irony; they only feign purpose and meaning. Ultimately all our efforts and beauty end in ruin and error and nothingness—blackness. Biff's suspension is then a powerful image of the modern secular dilemma. What remains true is that if a

transcendence without the transcendent is our only possibility, then what becomes transcendent is the experience of endlessly trying and failing to attain transcendence. And this experience can be interpreted either optimistically as the triumph of the human will in the face of hopelessness, or pessimistically as the absurd, futile, foolishness of the human heart, chasing after ghosts of meaning. What is important here is that the basic facts about being do not change with either position. It is not that our being is fundamentally justified through courage in the face of suffering, or that it is infinitely unjustified in the blackness of negation. Recall that as a framing epiphany, the revelation speaks nothing about the actual being of the transcendent, only about the surface which alludes to the possibility of the Other. In contrast, an epiphany of being speaks to the reality of being itself. If all that remains are framing epiphanies, then either of Biff's worlds are valid interpretations.

Looking into the past, represented by his left eye's focus, Biff sees some greatness in the progression of humanity, but in his large right eye all he sees is a future of ruin and darkness. And yet the passage of the novel is an image of apparent hope: "And when at last he was inside again he composed himself soberly to await the morning sun" (359). Gaining composure and soberly awaiting the coming day suggests that he is confident that he can face the future. Biff chooses to courageously face the day, undeterred by his destiny and under no illusions about his materiality. Biff stands as a brave human freak, what we all are in truth. In her early outline of the novel, McCullers claims that the conclusion will be an optimistic one:

> [T]he reader is not left with a sense of futility. The book reflects the past and also indicates the future. . . . Because of the essence of these people, there is the feeling that no matter how many times their efforts are wasted

> and their personal ideals are shown to be false, they will someday be united and they will come into their own. (*Illumination* 183)

This claim must be read in context of a substantial revision process which altered the novel in meaningful ways, so that it is possible to read this statement as a position which McCullers later retracted. Regardless, with her conclusion McCullers implies that despite our utter inability to transcend the distance between one another in communion, despite our weakness and finitude, we may choose to love and hope by facing the unknowable future.

The Member of the Wedding: *Isolation and the Impossibility of Membership*

Where the central problem in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is the infinite distance between individuals in their acts of communication, in *The Member of the Wedding* it is an ontological distance which separates all people and causes great harm. Twelve-year-old Frankie Addams experiences an existential crisis brought on by the wedding of her brother. Two opposing realities cause this crisis in her. First, she desperately wants to belong to a group, to be a member. Frankie longs to know that her presence is justified and acknowledged as a part of a larger group, something bigger and greater than herself. Frankie hopes to transcend herself and ground her being in some greater being: "The book centers on Frankie Addams' determination to attain an identity that transcends the self" (McDowell 19). She senses that this universal, which takes the form of the communion of all people, is the natural, right order of things. And yet, she also feels inherently and totally distant from all others. This is the second reality which confronts her: membership, true membership—the uniting of spirits—is impossible. Darren Millar describes this tension in the short novel: "True, her characters almost invariably suffer,

and the worlds they inhabit are dim. But they are also frequently dreamers whose most consistent trait is the capacity to project themselves into some anticipated and variously imagined state of incipient togetherness" (Millar 88). They suffer and have little hope, and yet they are known for their hope. We are all merely "caught" in our identities, unable to transcend them. The ending of McCullers's novel depicts the popular, modern, Sisyphean image of the futile quest for existential validation through an endless series of transcendent visions of the ideal future.

Within a few sentences of the novel's opening, we learn that the chief fact about Frankie is her alienation: "She belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world. Frankie had become an unjoined person who hung around in doorways, and she was afraid" (*Collected Stories* 257). McCullers's choice of "member" to describe this relationship is important to note. The Latin origin of member, *membrum*, refers not to inclusion or incorporation, but bodily limbs. For Frankie to fail to be a member is to fail to have a real, physical relationship with the world. To be a member means to have a place and a function, to have a purpose and a trajectory, both of which Frankie so desperately lacks, much like Mick in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. Membership, then, fits with Taylor's idea of hypergoods. Membership is the kind of irreducibly higher ideal that orients and defines all other goods in one's life: morals, values, goals, etc. Throughout the story Frankie's fantasies consistently involve some hyperbolic, paradisal, ideal. While we might ascribe her hyperbole to her adolescent imagination, this would be a mistake, as her language reveals something more primordial about her heart and or motives: she desires that which is irreducible, a pure, transcendent way of being in the world which will give her membership.

Membership

The main image of transcendent being in the novel is Frankie's brother and his bride. When she envisions the wedding, her brother appears as an absent angel:

> She saw a silent church, a strange snow slanting down against the colored windows. The groom in this wedding was her brother, and there was a brightness where his face should be. The bride was there in a long white train, and the bride also was faceless. There was something about this wedding that gave Frankie a feeling she could not name. (258)

Her brother and his bride have a kind of halo surrounding them, making them almost-saints, but, unsettlingly, their halos envelope their entire faces, so that they actually appear "faceless." There could be many psychological explanations for this daydream, but given the basic theme of the text, it seems fair to interpret their facelessness as a sign of their irreducibility and absolute otherness. The former is surely meant to be a positive attribute; her brother and his bride are mythical people, whose beings cannot be reduced to their physical features; thus, the only way to depict them is through negation—an absence of faces. Shortly after this description, she tells Berenice that "They were the two prettiest people I ever saw" (258), which is rather ironic considering that she cannot actually recall their faces. Emptied of their bodily reality, they come to symbolize a transcendence over death and decay, finitude and physicality. Their identities become tied to some primordial light—energy without materiality. More than seeing them as an ideal couple, Frankie perceives them to be transcendent.

Another way the concept of "membership" appears is in Frankie's realization that Jarvis and Janice are her "we." Standing out in the "darkening town," contemplating how the ideal couple was so many hundred miles away in Winter Hill, Frankie suddenly believes that she has discovered where she is a member:

> They are the we of me. Yesterday, and all the twelve years of her life, she had only been Frankie. She was an I person who had to walk around and do things by herself. All other people had a we to claim, all others except her. When Berenice said we, she meant Honey and Big Mama, her lodge, or her church. The we of her father was the store. All the members of clubs have a we to belong to and to talk about. The soldiers in the army can say we, and even the criminals on chain-gangs. But the old Frankie had had no we to claim, unless it would be the terrible summer we of her and John Henry and Berenice—and that was the last we in the world she wanted. . . . There was her brother and the bride, and it was as though when first she saw them something she had known inside of her: They are the we of me. And that was why it made her feel so queer, for them to be away in Winter Hill while she was left all by herself; the hull of the old Frankie left there in the town alone. (emphasis original 291)

At this point Frankie believes she has discovered the basic source of her anxiety and fear and something about the nature of being. Everyone has some "we" which circumscribes and defines them. Besides her brother and his wife, her other option for a community is Berenice and John Henry, which she dismisses out of hand, implying that not all ties are equal. Some groups grant the individual the recognition and value which they deserve, and others do not. One immediate result of this epiphany is that she can more easily interpret her "queer" feeling. She sees that the feeling came because they had left her alone, while spiritually, ontologically she was with them in Winter Hill. Only the "hull" of Frankie remained. Real, vibrant being, can only occur when she is taken in with Jarvis and Janice. "The *we* of *me*" involves a transcendence over both the subject and the objects. The lines between "I" and "us" blur and are ultimately inseparable; through her membership in her brother's wedding, Frankie hopes to be unity with all of humanity:

> Though she is unconsciously seeking a love-object, it is not to a particular person that Frankie wishes to be joined; it is to something not only outside herself but also bigger than herself and more inclusive. She does not wish to be joined to a person but to that which joins all people — to the we of people. For this, a wedding is of course exactly the right symbol. And what she has fallen in love with is an idea, the idea of the wedding. (Evans 107)

Evans is right to observe that Frankie desires a relationship which is unbound by the material world, but I think he is wrong to dislocate this desire from the particular people whom she loves. Her being is found in the ontological and material communion with her brother and sister-in-law, a communion which connects her to all of humanity, provides her existential justification, forms a hypergood which orients her values, motivates her actions, and defines her.

Incompletion and Dread

The motif of incompletion expresses Frankie's feeling of ontological absence, the source of her dread. The general idea is that everyone is fundamentally incomplete, and Frankie's hope is that through membership (being) in the right "we," she can be completed, and thus experience being *fully*. One place this motif appears is with uncompleted songs or musical scales. First, Frankie hears a horn playing a blues/jazz song, a tune which captures the sense of "that long season of trouble" which she was experiencing that summer (293). The horn expressed something true about reality, a rare feat in McCullers's worlds. But much to Frankie's frustration, the horn stops suddenly: "Just at the time when the tune should be laid, the music finished, the horn broke off. All of a sudden the horn stopped playing. For a moment Frankie could not take it in, she felt so lost" (293). She tells John Henry, who was listening with her, that the horn will start again and finish the melody, but:

> [T]he music did not come again. The tune was left broken, unfinished. And the drawn tightness she could no longer stand. She felt she must do something wild and sudden that never had been done before. She hit herself on the head with her fist, but that did not help any at all. (293)

This music which was able to express her deeply troubled emotions betrayed her, just as her own voice continues to. But more than that, the music represents the incompleteness of being itself. As an expressive and meaningful tune, it carried weight in the world, and by finishing, it could provide a comprehensive narrative, a conclusion which would cause the listener to reinterpret the previous notes and their relationship, as all endings do. And so this sudden stop represents the failure of identifying and articulating a united vision of experience. The incompletion leaves Frankie with her existential tension, and the tightness returns.

Another way her feeling of existential dread manifests is through violence and fantasies about self-harm and destruction. She bangs her head on the kitchen table out of fear and nerves (285), threatens Berenice with a knife, and threatens to cut out her tongue (285). When Berenice asks her what she will do if Jarvis and Janice do not take her with them, Frankie states, "I will shoot myself in the side of the head with a pistol," and she nearly does (323). Another time, after wandering through the town with a sense of alienation from her community and her self, she returns home and tells Berenice, "I just wish I could tear down this whole town" (276). The gravity of her alienation is such that it seems more appropriate that her world should end rather than continue on in discontinuity. Earlier she tells Berenice, "I don't know what to do. I just wish I would die" (273). An experience of "tightness" at the thought of her brother and his bride is what precipitates this expression. When she first saw her brother and his bride she had a similar experience: "Together they made in her this feeling that she could not name. But it was like the feelings of the spring, only more sudden and more sharp. There was the same tightness and in the same queer way she was afraid" (278). The "tightness" is

telling because it suggests that what drives her to thoughts of suicide or violence is not depression, but a kind of cognitive dissonance, an internal conflict which freezes her thoughts and constricts her throat. In the context of the remainder of the novel, I believe this tension is best understood as an instinctive and powerful desire to transcend herself to find ontological grounding. The sight of her brother forces her to recognize both her deep existential desire for communion and the infinite distance which separates her from that ideal, resulting in a tension at the core of her being.

Frankie becomes a Member

At the end of "Part One," Frankie achieves a fleeting sense of peace when she decides that she finally understands herself. Importantly, the kinds of things that Frankie says she learns are those defined by hypergoods:

> At last she knew just who she was and understood where she was going. She loved her brother and the bride and she was a member of the wedding. The three of them would go into the world and they would always be together. And finally, after the scared spring and the crazy summer, she was no more afraid. (295)

Being a member of the wedding orients her; it grounds her individual being in something greater than herself and it directs her in life. It provides her with ontological and teleological definition. Note also that when she visualizes this union, it is a transcendent one: "they would *always* be together" (emphasis mine). Frankie does not simply desire a loving family or a sympathetic community; she desires to belong in a transcendent union. Once she concludes that Jarvis and Janice comprise this union with her, her fear dissipates.

As long as Frankie can entertain the notion that she is a member of the wedding, her worldview changes. This union forms her hypergood, by which all other goods are

valued and ordered: her self-esteem, her purpose in life, and how she interprets her world. At the start of "Part Two," the once crushing, mundane, and alien town, appears enchanted and related to her:

> Because of the wedding, F. Jasmine felt connected with all she saw, and it was as a sudden member that on this Saturday she went around the town. She walked the streets entitled as a queen and mingled everywhere. It was the day when, from the beginning, the world seemed no longer separate from herself and when all at once she felt included. Therefore, many things began to happen—nothing that came about surprised F. Jasmine and, until the last at least, all was natural in a magic way. (296)

Once F. Jasmine knows her place in the world, she is free to venture out into it without fear. Where before the town was a dark, haunting place, filled with hostile, alien voices, now it is safe and intimately related to her. That she walks "the streets entitled as a queen" suggests how greatly she feels her membership in the wedding elevates her identity. So long as she belongs, then she can venture out into the endless diversity and Otherness of the world without fear of losing herself. First, it places her *in* the world, whereas before she felt the world always existed beyond and separate from her. In this sense, membership means that F. Jasmine is not distinct from the Other that is the world. She transcends the distance between herself and the other so that the self/other distinction breaks down. When an "old colored man" drives past her on the street, their eyes meet in "a new unnamable connection, as though they were known to each other" (301). As with her other transcendent experiences, F. Jasmine feels that it is "impossible to explain [this connection] in words" (301). Second, it establishes her individual being among beings. Membership places her so that she knows what defines her and her trajectory in life. However, it is the last line in this passage which is the most telling for my study: "all was natural, in a magical way" (296). The epiphany that she is a member of the wedding is

entirely "natural"; it appeals to no truly transcendent, non-material, or supernatural reality. Yet, the style of this natural experience, its tone and aesthetics, was simply "magical." This is the modern secular tension; F. Jasmine has precluded the possibility of any supra-natural basis to her being, and yet she cannot help but conceive of the ground to her being in transcendent language. F. Jasmine decides to explore the town in "Part Two" as a way to say goodbye to it and its inhabitants, but her other motive is to reveal to the world "her true self" (306). McCullers tells us that "of all these facts and feelings [about the morning] the strongest of all was the need to be known for her true self and recognized" (307). It is not enough that she knows that she belongs in the wedding; it is essential that she be able to express that fact. Others must acknowledge and validate her identity for it to have weight and baring in the world. The obsession with "true self" is yet another common concern in the secular twentieth century. If we can no longer find our hope outside of ourselves in some transcendently good source, then we must turn inward and seek a primordial, pure source of good within ourselves; thus, F. Jasmine is excited when she feels that she has found her true, authentic self. As Charles Taylor has argued in *A Secular Age*, "expressive individualism" is one of the hallmarks of modern secularism. F. Jasmine finds herself by expressing herself, and yet it fails to fulfill her. She is never able to express enough of herself, accurately enough to justify her existence, and so when she returns home from her journey of self-expression through the town, fears of alienation and caught-ness still haunt her.

Caught Identities and the Endless Quest for Love

During a long conversation in the kitchen, Berenice and F. Jasmine strive vainly to get at the core of the latter's feelings of alienation. They discuss the strangeness of individuality, and F. Jasmine says:

> Doesn't it strike you as strange that I am I, and you are you? I am F. Jasmine Addams. And you are Berenice Sadie Brown. And we can look at each other, and touch each other, and stay together year in and year out in the same room. Yet always I am I, and you are you. And I can't ever be anything else but me, and you can't ever be anything else but you. (353)

The two decide to refer to this fact as being "caught." Berenice explains: "[W]e all caught. And we try in one way or another to widen ourself free. . . . We go around trying one thing or another, but we caught anyhow" (357-8). The prison of the subjective, static self haunts Berenice and F. Jasmine. They feel deeply that they must transcend their subjectivity and become something greater. Also, they desire to transcend the gender and sexual identities imposed upon them by society so that they can be free to be their true selves. But this image of being caught does not primarily refer to a gender or sexual caughtness, Berenice speaks of the desire to "widen ourself free" as a basic human drive. If we can go beyond ourselves in some way, then we are truly free. According to Berenice, this situation continues so that we look for expansion—transcendence—in one thing after another: an endless series of failed attempts to go beyond. Berenice concludes that, "no matter what we do we still caught" (357). It is this caughtness that F. Jasmine hopes to escape by finding a ground to her being within a community outside of herself: the wedding party.

When F. Jasmine finally convinces Berenice that she truly intends to run off with her brother and his bride, Berenice criticizes her plan, providing an insightful analysis of

the young girl's motives which has wider implications for the possibility of attaining peace and justification through the modern secular sources of transcendence: "You see something unheard of at Winter Hill tomorrow, and you right in the center. You think you going to march down the center of the aisle right in between your brother and the bride. You think you going to break into that wedding, and Jesus knows what else" (347). The phrase "something unheard of" has a double meaning. Berenice refers to how marrying one's brother and his bride is unnatural; there is no cultural precedence for such a marriage, so it is "unheard of." But more than that, F. Jasmine finds the unutterable in the imagined world of Winter Hill. What she hopes for there is irreducible to language at all. Berenice perceives the deep flaw in this plan: the pure, unheard of Other cannot remain so. Once F. Jasmine falls in love with the Other, she will never be satisfied. Berenice warns her that she will inevitably pursue an endless array of "unheard of things":

> If you start out falling in love with some unheard-of thing like that, what is going to happen to you? If you can take a mania like this it won't be the last time and of that you can be sure. So what will become of you? Will you be trying to break into weddings the rest of your days? And what kind of life would that be? (347)

Berenice believes that the younger girl is doomed to search for what can never be obtained, yet she has a similar experience herself. Berenice's "mania" is her endless quest to find her first husband, Ludie, who died young. Thus, perhaps "mania" is not abnormal at all. McCullers's conclusion suggests that Berenice's prediction is correct and F. Jasmine's future will take her from one empty hope to another.

Frances has Her Membership Revoked

After Jarvis and Janice refuse to take Frances with them on their honeymoon, her world collapses and the illusion of an existential orientation and justification founded upon inclusion in a non-alien group, a group which would experience and accomplish things that would allow her to transcend the mundane and the sameness of modern living to become a celebrity and a member of the world, this illusion drives her to utter hopelessness. She wants "the whole world to die," (376) she feels that "there was, from first to last, the sense of something terribly gone wrong" (378), and for a moment she puts her father's pistol to her head, considering suicide (384). Perhaps the most revealing reaction to the wedding tragedy comes when she is caught by a policeman after trying to run away from home:

> The world was now so far away that Frances could no longer think of it. She did not see the earth as in the old days, cracked and loose and turning a thousand miles an hour; the earth was enormous and still and flat. Between herself and all the places there was a space like an enormous canyon she could not hope to bridge or cross. (387)

The hope of being a member of the wedding kept her alienation at bay. The world was not necessarily foreign and hostile and utterly Other to Frances if she could be a member in the wedding. Once she is rejected from the wedding, thrown back on herself as an isolated, caught individual, then the infinite distance between herself and the universe overwhelms her and appears as uncrossable. If the novel ended here, the conclusion would be evident: humans are destined to seek after some source of existential affirmation in order to widen themselves beyond their isolated subjectivity, and yet any attempt to establish communion with others which transcends the caught-ness of

individual being is an illusion. However, McCullers complicates this narrative with her strangely and uneasily bright ending.

Critics are split over how to interpret McCullers's ending. She goes from Frances having a deep existential crisis to entertaining her classmate Mary Littlejohn, talking to her about Michelangelo and poetry. Just as suddenly and unexpectedly we learn that John Henry died an agonizing death from meningitis and Berenice has given up her what limited freedom she had to seek happiness with more fulfilling lovers, ones who make her shiver, settling to marry TT. Frances continues to hope in existential fulfillment by belonging to a group, experiencing fantastic things, and becoming famous. For example, she tells Berenice, "I consider it the greatest honor of my existence that Mary has picked me out to be her one most intimate friend. Me! Of all people!" (390). We should note the painful irony in this statement and anticipate the inevitable disappointment when Mary rejects Frances, or moves, or reveals herself to be less than worthy of being "the greatest honor of [Frances's] existence." Frances still believes that if she can simply be affirmed and joined with someone significant enough, then her existence will be granted meaning and value. As Millar argues, and Evans agrees (123), McCullers's conclusion suggests that Frances has not actually grown or matured through her experience:

> By the end of the novel, the devastated dream of the wedding is replaced by another, equally heady with the buzz of anticipation, and it does not matter because Frankie's utopia is not significantly dependent on the realization of some future state of being. Hers is a utopia without content, a relation to potential whose primary function is to volatilize rather than reify the conditions of the present. (Millar 90)

Notably, Millar identifies the transcendent justification that Frankie seeks for as a utopia, which, as we saw with Ernst Bloch, is a Marxist conception of the transcendent as immanent, but more importantly, Millar argues that this is a contentless utopia, or what I

have been describing as the framing epiphany or the transcendent without transcendence. Millar wants us to interpret this as a fundamentally positive version of utopia because a contentless utopia is one which is not foreclosed; it is infinitely open to change and difference. Unlike Berenice's utopian fantasies which include the supernatural raising of Ludie from the dead, Frances's fantasies take place in community with other people and are materially achievable, if unimaginable (Millar 94-5). Although Millar does not cite Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*, we can read the obvious influence. The future is open to transcendent possibility, so long as that transcendence is truly circumscribed by the possible within the material world, which raises the question of whether we are actually speaking of the transcendent when we refer to social progression: "The utopia of Carson McCullers does not reach beyond the structures of the present but, in involving itself in them directly, seeks out new and materially viable opportunities for social improvisation and renewal" (Millar 104). Millar argues that because Frankie's utopia is contentless then it is infinitely malleable, and thus best suited to help bring about a utopian future. This is an unjustifiably charitable reading of Frankie's hopes, as it perceives other-centered, real social progression in her explicitly self-centered, fantastic visions of fame and togetherness. That is not to imply that Millar believes that Frankie's personal future is hopeful; instead, he argues that she represents and contributes to a social potential for change: "Reading McCullers is an exercise in recognizing this potential that surpasses the tragic isolation of her characters" (102). Her particular future may be hopeless, but her posture toward the world and the future represents what is necessary for true social change. Whether or not Millar is justified in his optimistic reading of McCullers's conclusion, he is right to note that Frankie's utopia is contentless and that unattainable.

The Sisyphean quality of McCullers's conclusion is stressed in the concluding paragraph, which leaves Frances's words hanging: "I am simply mad about—" (392). The reader can fill in an endless number of ideals which we might imagine Frances vainly seeking after in her lifetime, always ultimately desiring the same thing: some transcendent source of goodness which can bridge the gap between the self and the world, orienting the individual within the material world without reducing or absorbing the individual within the world. Mary Littlejohn's friendship will end, as will her love of poetry and great art. There will always be something new, so that what defines her identity is the passionate intensity with which she momentarily desires. In this way, Frances will perpetually be "simply mad about—."

Conclusion

Like the works of Fitzgerald, the best of Carson McCullers's writing captures the intense modern desire for some transcendent good and our tragic inability to move beyond ourselves to discover such a hypergood. Her characters are locked in the Sisyphean struggle for existential justification, finding solace and meaning in the fact of their tragic condition or an irrational hope for a better future or in a temporary illusion that they have already attained such a transcendent validation. She conveys the sense of wonder and love that drives people to desperate measures and shows that wonder to be fleeting, illusory, and harmful. Like many other modern authors, McCullers refuses to appeal to the transcendent in her works, except as the transcendent without transcendence, despite the fact that the desire for the transcendent is perhaps the defining motive for her characters. For McCullers, the malaise of modernity is experienced as an isolation from all other beings and disorientation of our place in the world. And so, what

marks her characters's strategies of transcendence is the validation of the individual by going beyond in an act of communion or communication with other humans or a comprehension of the entirety of existence. The human person is caught in their subjectivity with a powerful awareness of a yearning to go beyond that subjectivity, so it is our fate to endless seek after futile ways to transcend. In these attempts, we experience things that are truly good (an honest talk with another human) or truly beautiful (a symphony) or worthy of fighting for (racial equality), but only briefly, and always partially. These experiences are signals of the characters's beliefs in and desire for a hypergood which is irreducible to their experiences and subjectivity, yet there is little in McCullers's work to suggest that these signals are accurate reflections of a greater reality, rather than a delusion.

Over McCullers's career we may trace a shift in her depiction of the transcendent which follows a path of disillusionment set by F. Scott Fitzgerald. At first the quest for transcendence is validated as a good and beautiful act, albeit futile. We may, it seems, find deep solace in our shared inability to go beyond ourselves. Yet, over time the tragic even loses its power to justify us through our sense of injustice, and what remains is pathetic illusion of meaning. Between *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding*, McCullers accepts the alternative reading of the Myth of Sisyphus; the former novel views our Sisyphean struggle toward transcendent meaning as beautiful and good even in its futility—an interpretation we see enacted in *The Great Gatsby*—while the latter depicts this struggle as fundamentally hideous. What remains true is that we are oriented towards a way of being in the world which is irreducible to the experience of subjective, individual beings. Communion with humanity, contingent upon our ability to

speak truly of ourselves and order our world, never ceases to be the orienting hypergood in her fiction; but much like the vision of romantic love as neurosis in *Tender is the Night*, Frances's pursuit of validation through membership in *The Member of the Wedding* is finally shown to be a kind of psychological illness. In more than a few ways Fitzgerald and McCullers' movement makes sense in a secularizing world. If the transcendent reality we long for can be reducible to immanence, then perhaps this longing has an entirely material, biological root as well. It is no great shift from believing that the object of our desire is a myth to concluding that the desire itself is the manifestation of some mental error. This raises the question, how might a modern author portray transcendence without devolving into resigned hopelessness?

CHAPTER FOUR

The Infinite Tension between Love and Squalor in J.D. Salinger

J.D. Salinger's characters have one of two major existential problems: how can we reconcile the beauty and love of our world with its squalor and what sure ground can there be for an individual to act truly and rightly. In Salinger's most celebrated work, *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield struggles to find some resolution to the tension between love and squalor, or "niceness" and "phoniness." After this novel, Salinger publishes a number of short stories, some of which explicitly deal with transcendence. Notable among these stories are "De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period" and "Teddy." In these stories, the characters experience and articulate a particular vision of the transcendent. In the former, Salinger depicts the problems with using art to transcend the ordinary life. In the latter, transcendence is an entirely otherworldly experience which ignores the brutal realities of the physical world. Salinger's next book, *Franny and Zooey*, which were originally published as short stories, deals with Franny's desperate attempt to find a ground to her being, some internal essence that would allow her to move and work with confidence in a world of phonies. For each of these characters the central crisis is how to reconcile the incredibly banal squalor of life with its irreducible love, beauty, and goodness. The greatest sin for Salinger's characters is egoism, which many of them discover is central to all the arts and all the ways we seek greatness in life. This creates a conflict: if they pursue greatness in order to live lives of purpose and meaning, they will inflate their ego, making them phony and selfish, but if they do not pursue

greatness, then they are denying their natural passions, making them yet another kind of phony. Salinger's characters deal with this problem differently. Holden accepts the ineffable and irreducible power of goodness, de Daumier-Smith embraces the sacredness of ordinary living, Teddy transcends the physical world with both its love and squalor, and Franny learns that only by accepting an infinite obligation to an infinite number of people can we find our purpose and meaning in life. Although there are significant differences between the strategies and visions of transcendence in these stories, Salinger's characters are driven by a felt absence, an essential tension in the nature of things between love and squalor, which must be addressed.

The Catcher in the Rye: *Transcending the Distance between Love and Squalor*

There is a consensus among critics that the central conflict in *The Catcher in the Rye* is the challenge Holden faces reckoning with the ugliness of life, as it is expressed as phoniness, death, adulthood, poverty, sickness, loneliness, commercialism, and sexual promiscuity (Faulkner qtd. in *Holden Caulfield* 13, Lundquist 114, Parker 257, Wakefield 81). A number of readers have claimed that Holden is desperately searching for a utopian ideal, a transcendent good, a God (Kinnick 30, Baumbach 69, Burrows 84, Pinsker 87). Salinger, or at least "Buddy" the author, even implies as much in "Seymour: An Introduction" (112). Many of the differences between scholarly interpretations of the novel involve either a focus on a particular aspect of life's squalor—for example, sexual promiscuity, or economic inequality—or a claim about the nature and relative success of Holden's epiphany at the novel's conclusion (Glasser 102, Baumbach 71, Lundquist 123, Ohmann and Ohmann 119-137). I will add to this discussion in two primary ways. First, I will briefly show how the tension Holden experiences between squalor and niceness is

an infinite gap and follows two of the four dilemmas of transcendence for the modern person according to Charles Taylor: the problem of evil and suffering, and the beauty and goodness of ordinary life. Second, I will look at the epiphany he experiences at the end of the novel. I will argue that what finally lifts Holden out of his resignation that modern life is hopelessly phony and corrupt is the beauty of the image of his sister Phoebe riding the carousel. Many critics have seen this as the pivotal scene in the text, but they have interpreted Phoebe's beauty as a sign of Holden's epiphany rather than the epiphany itself, as I will argue (Glasser 102, Lundquist 122, Pinkser 94). Hamilton's reading of the carousel scene is a notable exception, as he claims that as Holden watches Phoebe, he "discovers that the 'nice' world is still accessible and powerful" (24). Part of my intention will be to expand on this point by treating this niceness as a transcendent ideal. Holden learns that it is impossible to extricate one's self from the phoniness of the world without losing its beauty. Holden responds to a genuine phenomenon of beauty and goodness, although he knows it is fleeting, and he appears to be content with knowing that despite the horribleness of existence, that beauty is.

Squalor

The ugliness and the beauty of life are revealed to be infinite points in the novel. One example of this is the appearance of "Fuck you" written on public walls. When he visits his sister's school, he sees two such signs, which angers him, violently:

> [A]ll of a sudden I thought I was going to puke again. Only, I didn't. I sat down for a second, and then I felt better. But while I was sitting down, I saw something that drove me crazy. Somebody'd written 'Fuck you' on the wall. It drove me damn near crazy. I thought how Phoebe and all the other little kids would see it, and how they'd wonder what the hell it meant, and then finally some dirty kid would tell them — all cockeyed,

> naturally — what it meant, and how they'd all think about it and maybe even worry about it for a couple of days. (260)

His sickness (again, nausea is related to a sense of existential dread, as in Sartre's *Nausea*), fear, and anger stem from the thought of innocent children being forced to lose their innocence by corrupt and evil adults. It is not that he thinks that children are faultless, but he does believe that whatever goodness and niceness there is in the world is more likely to be found among children who have not been corrupted by adults. Holden's reaction fits with his famous proclamation to Phoebe that he would really like to be a "catcher in the rye," and reveals both his understanding of the fundamental problem of life and what he thinks the solution might look like. He tells Phoebe that he would like to spend his life catching kids from flying over a "crazy cliff" while they play innocently in a field of rye (225). Figuratively, then, he longs to end the evil and suffering in the world that lead to a loss of innocence. Insofar as the cliff represents a certain death, Holden would be a guardian, preventing the Innocent from falling to the effects of finitude, which is the natural consequence of a material world. In a similar way, he fleetingly considers erasing the profanity on the wall, but finally realizes that it is hopeless: "If you had a million years to do it in, you couldn't rub out even half the 'Fuck you' signs in the world. It's impossible" (262). He longs to do the impossible and catch every kid and erase every "Fuck you" sign, but the squalor of the world unending. No amount of effort could turn the tide. At its most basic, Holden longs to transcend the gross materiality of existence.

Love

Salinger incorporates images of goodness, beauty, and love (niceness) which have transcendent resonance because what they signify is irreducible to their materiality.

Thus, ineradicable corruption and irreducible niceness are held in tension with an infinite gap between them. Only a transcendence which can reckon these truths can make sense of the modern world. Before the conclusion, there are a number of moments, ideas, and images of "niceness" that represent the possibility of goodness. Holden identifies niceness with the pure and simple. The way Jane Gallagher would keep all her kings on the back row when she played chess with Holden is one such signal of transcendence: "[W]hen she'd get a king, she wouldn't move it. She'd just leave it in the back row. She'd get them all lined up in the back row. Then she'd never use them. She just liked the way they looked when they were all in the back row" (41). Jane's strategy strikes Holden as beautiful precisely because it is not a strategy to win. It is inexplicable and gratuitous and foolish, if the goal is to win. Jane rejects the prescribed rules of the game and the value system that comes with them. Instead, she takes aesthetic pleasure out of the simple image of a complete back row. If we accept the conceit that Buddy wrote *The Catcher in the Rye*, we should conclude that this is a sacred act. Similarly, both Holden and his deceased brother Allie thought the kettle drummer in the orchestra was rather sacred because his task was so simple. There was nothing egoistic or showy about it (178-9). But such acts are never enough to overcome the anxiety and alienation caused by phoniness and evil in the world. These moments of beauty are fleeting and subject to corruption. Throughout the novel, readers are confronted with two, apparently irreconcilable realities: the phoniness and niceness of being. In the final major image of the text, Holden finds a way to transcend this tension.

Love and Squalor

As with *Franny and Zooey*, the moment of epiphany in *The Cather in the Rye* occurs right at the novel's end. Most critics have dealt with the carrousel scene in some way, but they nearly all view the image of Phoebe as a reflection of the internal resolution which Holden achieves, rather than the cause of that internal resolution. A close reading of the passage suggests that it is Holden's experience of watching his sister which evokes an epiphany:

> All the parents and mothers and everybody went over and stood right under the roof of the carrousel, so they wouldn't get soaked to the skin or anything, but I stuck around on the bench for quite a while. I got pretty soaking wet, especially my neck and my pants. My hunting hat really gave me quite a lot of protection, in a way, but I got soaked anyway. I didn't care, though. I felt so damn happy all of a sudden, the way old Phoebe kept going around and around. I was damn near bawling, I felt so damn happy, if you want to know the truth. I don't know why. It was just that she looked so damn *nice*, the way she kept going around and around, in her blue coat and all. God, I wish you could've been there. (275)

Right before this scene, a number of important events occur which precipitate Holden's epiphany. Holden watches Phoebe riding the carrousel, reaching out for the golden rings, like the other kids. His first impulse is to be worried that she might fall and hurt herself, but he finally decides that, "The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them" (273-274). This is undoubtably an important moment in Holden's development, but scholars have placed too much emphasis on this conclusion. Holden recognizes that children must be allowed to experience tragedy and evil because it is important to their maturity; he cannot prevent Phoebe from experiencing things which might lead to her death, physical or spiritual. In coming to this conclusion, Holden

accepts the inevitability of suffering and evil—he ceases to scrape off the "Fuck you" signs, but something more happens before Holden has his epiphany.

As I previously noted, some critics have argued that Holden's epiphany arises from the symbolic significance of Phoebe riding the carrousel, or his decision to go home with her, or that the epiphany is a result from some cognitive change in him (Glasser 102, Lundquist 122, Miller 142, Pinkser 94); however, Holden claims that something else evokes his experience: "I felt so damn happy, if you want to know the truth. I don't know why. It was just that she looked so damn *nice*, the way she kept going around and around, in her blue coat and all. God, I wish you could've been there" (275). Although Holden tells us that he doesn't "know why" he felt so happy, he proceeds to tell us: "she looked so damn *nice*." It is, then, the vision of Phoebe and her "niceness" that transforms Holden. The ambiguity of "nice" is important. We go wrong if we interpret it to merely refer to her moral innocence. The image of Phoebe is an image of goodness in the world which stands in stark relief against the horrors of existence. There is something simplistic about the image; we only receive three details: it is Phoebe, she is going around and around, and she is wearing a blue coat. The temptation is to combine and analyze these three descriptions in such a way as to build some reasonable explanation for Holden's reaction. Thus, critics have commented on the significance of the carrousel going around and around or the meaning of the blue coat; but in this case, the image cannot be reduced to the sum of its physical characteristics or the subject's psychological state. It is irreducibly a sign and experience of "nice"ness, goodness of being—the kind of perception which grounds and justifies existence in its surpassing richness. Importantly, Holden gives up his description and finally suggests that the reader needed

to be there to understand the image. Holden can express the basic appearance of the image and his reaction to it, but the causal relationship between the two remains a mystery. More specifically, all Holden can do is express the incommunicability of his experience. The being of this experience cannot be communicated, only witnessed, so Holden says that he wishes we could be there.

What is remarkable about Phoebe on the carrousel for Holden is that it appears to be an undeniably "nice" thing in the world. Holden identifies many nice things during his adventure: the nuns, a good movie, playfully flirting, an old teacher; however, he always portrays these signs of niceness tragically. The nuns are pathetic. The movies are mostly corny. Alienation ruins flirting and sex. And the old teacher might be a pedophile. These are all signs of or gestures towards the reality of goodness, beauty, and general fulfillment, but they dramatically fall short. Phoebe on the carrousel remains, however. And it is important that we understand that Phoebe does not represent some uncorrupted element of beauty in the world—remember that Holden has just acknowledged that she will continue to strive after the gold ring, even though she might fall. The presence of rain here is crucial as well. Holden refuses to get out of the rain, despite how wet he gets. The crumminess of the world does not cease when Phoebe rides the carrousel—that is what we must see here. Suffering remains an ominous presence in the form of the temptation to reach for a golden ring and the falling rain; and yet, for once this corruption does nothing to limit the niceness of something in the world. Rather than experiencing a deep sense of disappointment and frustration at how the world has corrupted this good thing, Holden is content. He is able to think niceness without negating it with corruption.

What can we say about the transcendent in *The Catcher in the Rye* then? First, it appears in tension with the immanent materialism of ordinary, ugly life—people clipping toenails for example. Second, it is primarily an aesthetic experience or reality. It is a goodness observed and felt deeply. Third, it remains material. There is no sense in which any of Holden's various moments of experiencing the transcendent involve anything other than elevated immanent materialism. It is of course a material experience that profoundly affects him, which gestures towards and fills a desire for the transcendent good, but it is experienced aesthetically; experienced sincerely, without demands, existence has a way of filling us with goodness. True moments—moments of sincerity which peel back all the layers of phoniness and cruelty—reveal a goodness that cannot negate that phoniness or corruption, but neither can it be negated by them. Phoebe going around on the carrousel is simply good, even though it is raining, and the carrousel will stop, and Phoebe will grow old, and she may reach for the ring and fall. The implication here is not the ontological goodness of creation, but rather the messiness of it. Fourth, because it is an immanent transcendence, it is fleeting. And although its ephemerality does not mean that the goodness is not real, it may be better to say that these moments are gestures towards a reality that is never quite within our grasp. The famous closing lines of the novel make this point more clearly.

The Catcher in the Rye is as much about the nature of autobiography or confessional literature as it is a coming of age tale in the mid-twentieth century. Holden begins with a very self-aware statement about not wanting to give any of that "David Copperfield crap." He concludes with a warning about the power of personal narrative: "Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody" (277). This is

a remarkable phrase which suggests that every moment of existence is imbued with significance that justifies existence. It shows the interconnectedness of reality: it is impossible to ever speak about anything that would not draw our attention to a basic and powerful absence. As soon as we try to communicate anything about our past, we are overcome with an awareness of the absence of others. Even if those people are crummy phonies, there is something beautiful and good about them, something which we may only recognize and feel the need for after they are gone. For Salinger, or at least Holden we may only find transcendence through acknowledging the goodness of others, even though they are ugly. If Holden can make a meaningful connection with these people, then his place in the world matters. And they all truly matter to his being. The difficulty is that we may only see the goodness of others in hindsight, when it is too late, or in fleeting moments, like watching Phoebe on the carrousel. Note too that an aesthetic experience makes Holden aware of the transcendent goodness of the past. Observing reality, watching the world or the carrousel turn can strike us unexpectedly. When this happens, reality does not cease to be corrupt and painful, but the goodness of it, a goodness that cannot be reduced to its materiality, can appear. Holden's artistic narration of his adventure is a concerted look at people in the past, just as his observation of Phoebe reveals to him something profound and unaccountable and lovely. In both cases the experience of the transcendent is unexpected. Holden did not set out to give an account of the beauty and goodness of people, but that is precisely what he did. Neither did he set out to face the beauty of Phoebe on the carrousel, but that is what happened. It is not just that he did not intend for these to be epiphanies that makes their appearance surprising. It is also that they run counter to so much of what his narrative prepares us

for. Indeed, many readers cannot tolerate Holden Caulfield because he appears to make everything and everyone awful; while I do not think that complaint is justified, I do believe that this impulse is reasonable. The reasonableness of this expectation is exactly what makes his embrace of all these characters at the conclusion so startling. We have been trained to see everyone as crummy—and I believe, if we are honest, that Holden makes a compelling case for the general phoniness of people—yet, in the end Holden warns us that their existence in his life was so ontologically good (not necessarily morally good, or pragmatically good, or socially good), that their absence is a deep loss. In the same way, Phoebe circling on the carrousel is beautiful and good despite all our reasons for being cynical and suspicious.

The Elevation of Ego in Art Versus the Elevation of the Mundane in "De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period"

In his 1963 article, John Russell quite persuasively argues that Salinger is preoccupied with the question of how the artist can create without resorting to pure egotism. Russell outlines three stages that many of his characters move through in addressing this question: "The first of these is the artist's recognition that his ego is reprehensible and that his urge to compete and discriminate leaves his love for all things flawed. Retreating from himself next, he denies his art, for the sake of cultivating a non-possessive love" (Russell 80). In the third stage, the artist learns to use his ego as "a motivator" to drive his or her work for the sake of others, thus redeeming art and ego for good. Russell, quite rightly I think, argues that we see Franny and Zooey move to the third stage, but others, like de Daumier-Smith manage only to get through the first two. It is only in his later works that Salinger presents a way to redeem ego. That is not to say

that de Daumier-Smith is unconcerned with the transcendent. The basic plot of "De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period" can be usefully interpreted with the language of hypergoods and transcendence of this study. De Daumier first believes that his life will have existential justification, meaning, and purpose if he transcends the ordinary world by becoming an accomplished and noted artist. Over the course of the story, he comes to realize that heroic living depends on egotism, and he abandons this strategy of transcendence and instead adopts the view that the ordinary life is sacred. We will briefly see how de Daumier's actions can be explained using language of transcendence, but my focus will be upon the epiphany which occurs near the end of the text. While de Daumier is motivated by hypergoods throughout the short story, it is only in this scene that we have the transcendent manifested. Moreover, it is the most explicitly epiphanic scene in Salinger's work, and as such, it gives us particular insight it to how transcendence may appear in the modern world.

In the beginning of the short story, the protagonist decides to take up the fictional persona of Jean de Daumier-Smith, an accomplished painter and personal friend of Pablo Picasso. With this alias, he secures a job teaching at a correspondence school for art in Canada. Everything about his facade suggests an effort to make himself significant in the world. He overdresses, tells over-the-top lies, and in general wants to feel that this position will make him important. In the language of this study, de Daumier-Smith sees the genius artist as the hypergood. By attaining such a position, one is elevated above the ordinary world. To his disappointment, the students he is given are generally terrible, and so in dissolution, he realizes that he has not attained a level of prestige by teaching at the art school. His only consolation is an incredibly talented nun, Sister Irma. He urges

her to devote herself to her art and offers to come visit her. He tries to persuade Sister Irma to adopt his own hypergood, but when he receives a reply to his letter, he reads that she has been removed from the course. This frustrates him deeply, as he views this as his own failure. He then experiences an epiphany and comes to understand that one cannot attain transcendence through the egotistical work of creation. Being a nun is enough make life meaningful and purposeful. And so, he concludes, "Everybody is a nun" (164). De Daumier-Smith moves from a belief in transcendence through a heroic life to transcendence through perfected, ordinary living, from the sacredness of the elevated artist to the sacredness of mundane habits. In his experiences in front of the orthopedic appliance shop window we can see more concretely how the tension between squalor and splendor, how the transcendent asserts itself in the modern, secular world.

The first time de Daumier-Smith looks in the orthopedic appliance store window he has a non-mystical epiphany of his own hopelessness. This occurs after he has written to the nun, encouraging her to take up art as a high calling but before he has received her reply: "The thought was forced on me that no matter how coolly or sensibly or gracefully I might one day learn to live my life, I would always at best be a visitor in a garden of enamel urinals and bedpans, with a sightless, wooden dummy-deity standing by in a marked-down rupture truss" (157). His last greatest hope for meaning was in heroic living, living "coolly" or "sensibly" or "gracefully," of setting himself apart from the ordinary world, transcending it through greatness, but he now sees that such a hope was misguided. The window reveals to him the futility of seeking to gain a sense of significance by posing as a great art instructor. The garden image evokes the biblical Garden of Eden and more generally the world—the garden of man. Unlike the biblical

garden, perhaps the supreme symbol of the natural world untainted in any way, the orthopedic appliance store window is a mock garden. It is made up of urinals and bedpans, which suggests that what is basically true (what is "natural") in the world is not beauty, but our excrement, and as Becker argues, "anality" comes to symbolize our mortality (31). Of course, Salinger depicts the gross material world in terms of phoniness: the urinals and bedpans are enamel, which connotes the artificiality and sterility of the garden. But it is also important that this garden is a storefront window. Commercialism is culture (it is the garden that society cultivates), and the garden in which he is born into. Significantly, God cannot see the phony, sterile world he presides over. It is a wooden god, without a voice or agency in the world, like the idols which God condemns in the Old Testament. He is merely an image of a god who either never existed or has fled. The "marked down truss" stresses the decaying, weak, physicality of the material world. All that covers god is a hernia truss that has been marked down—a device for holding together a broken body which has itself begun to decay and thus required a mark down. In my estimation, the modifier "marked down" is what gives this description the perfect Salinger touch of pathos, pushing the image of the non-god into the absurd. Similarly, it is the fact that de Daumier-Smith will always ever be a *visitor* in this pathetic and debased world that makes the image as a whole. The world he inhabits is wretched, but even there he cannot find his being; he will remain an alien. This scene beautifully captures the contemporary world in which Salinger's characters are born. The world is principally defined by phoniness, advertisements, and ugly and decaying physicality. It is presided over by a false image of a god who is also constrained by gross

materiality. And no amount of sincerity or ardent-heartedness or beautiful works of art can peel back this artifice to reveal a truer world or give presence to our being.

It is with this image of orthopedic appliance store window as the artificial, commercial, sterile, and foreign garden/world that we can properly frame the mystical epiphany which de Daumier-Smith has shortly thereafter. The narrator builds up this scene much like Buddy Glass prefaces the "Zooey" section of *Franny and Zooey*, by conceding that what follows contains a description of the transcendent and asking the reader to endure this mysticism with openness:

> Something extremely out of the way happened to me . . . . A statement, I'm aware, that has all the unpleasant earmarks of a build-up but quite the contrary is true. I'm about to touch on an extraordinary experience, one that still strikes me as having been quite transcendent, and I'd like, if possible, to avoid seeming to pass it off as a case, or even a borderline case, of genuine mysticism (To do otherwise, I feel, would be tantamount to implying or stating that the difference in spiritual *sorties* between St. Francis and the average, highstrung, Sunday leper-kisser is only a vertical one.) (163)

The passage begins with the narrator's loss for words. The "thing" cannot be named, and neither can its spatial relationship with normality. The ineffability of this "thing" reflects its irreducibility to language. Similarly, "Extremely out of the way" tries to capture the sense of transcendence. The phrase "Extraordinary experience" is key here because it is precisely the ordinary world that he desires to overcome. Ordinariness, the flattening of the universe with the disenchantment of the world, living life exclusively in an undifferentiated, immanent, material world is transcended. But note the tension here: de Daumier-Smith calls this experience "transcendent," but denies that it was a case of "genuine mysticism." Perhaps this is another example of the transcendent without transcendence. In particular, he is concerned with not giving the impression that his

experience was of the same kind as those experienced by real religious mystics, like St. Francis of Assisi. He notes that there is more than a vertical difference between their experiences, since at the most basic level his experience lacked the relation to God or spiritual realm above him that would have defined St. Francis's experience. This experience took place in a disenchanted world in which "transcendence" looks quite different. Interestingly, de Daumier-Smith claims that it was also different horizontally, implying perhaps that his epiphany did not even properly transcend or differentiate itself from other events and experiences in life. In any case, St. Francis' spiritual experience was "genuine" and de Daumier-Smith's was not, although it was still spiritual in that it was extraordinary and it oriented his desires and values.

After de Daumier-Smith hedges sufficiently, he describes his mystical-non-mystical epiphany, and what we find is a curious and ambiguous mix of the horribly mundane and the suddenly transcendent:

> I was startled to see a live person in the shopcase, a hefty girl of about thirty, in a green, yellow, and lavender chiffon dress. She was changing the truss on the wooden dummy. As I came up to the show window, she had evidently just taken off the old truss; it was under her left arm . . . and she was lacing up the new one on the dummy. I stood watching her, fascinated, till suddenly she sensed, then saw, that she was being watched. . . . She blushed, she dropped the removed truss, she stepped back on a stack of irrigation basins—and her feet went out from under her. . . . She immediately got to her feet without looking at me. Her face still flushed, she pushed her hair back with one hand, and resumed lacing up the truss on the dummy. It was just then that I had my Experience. Suddenly (and I say this, I believe, with all due self-consciousness), the sun came up and sped toward the bridge of my nose at the rate of ninety-three million miles a second. Blinded and very frightened—I had to put my hand on the glass to keep my balance. The thing lasted for no more than a few seconds. When I got my sight back, the girl had gone from the window, leaving behind her a shimmering field of exquisite, twice-blessed, enamel flowers. (163-4)

The girl he sees working is an emblematic mixture of the unearthly (alluding to the transcendent) and the brutally material. The only thing we know about her figure is that it is "hefty," and she is significantly older than him at thirty. Yet, she belongs in a garden: her dress is flowery colors and is made of chiffon, giving it airy feel, transparent, light, lively. When she notices him watching, she is embarrassed to be lacing up the truss onto the dummy's crotch. First there is the obvious sexual aspect of her position. She doubtlessly would have had her head near the crotch. Second, there is the medical aspect of the image; it is not just sexual, but repulsive. It calls to mind a hernia—hardly a sexy image. There is a gross physicality to this scene that is only furthered when the clerk steps on irrigation basins. These urinals and bedpans suggest not only bodily waste but also infirmary. Then she falls on her butt, completing the de-romanticizing of the female image. Russell argues persuasively that the girl's dedication to her work, the way she immediately returns to her task, despite her embarrassment, makes her a "nun" and helps to create de Daumier-Smith's epiphany (79). When the "Experience" finally does happen, it resembles St. Paul's Damascus Road conversion: a sudden, blinding light which utterly alters his understanding of the world. The light comes from the reflection of the urinals and bedpans, which are "twice-blessed" flowers. In this pathetic, ugly, embarrassing, and base scene, the sacredness of ordinary, self-less, unheroic living is revealed to the narrator.

De Daumier-Smith's experience is spiritual, but it is not mystical. It is "quite transcendent," but it is perhaps not actually transcendent. He comes to accept that ordinary life is sacred through an extraordinary experience of the ordinary. There are moments in this thoroughly material world when something spiritual seems to happen.

And while we cannot say that this is caused by or a reflection of some greater transcendent truth, we can still be fulfilled by these experiences. Such moments can justify and orient our lives, as they do for the narrator, because they affirm ordinary life as sacred. The narrator leaves his teaching position, goes home, and watches girls. This is a perfectly mundane, almost animalistic response by him, but that is because he has come to believe that such ordinariness is holy. The sacred cannot be discovered in higher living, especially because to rise above the everyday world requires a great deal of artificiality. If one is to become a high priest of art, it requires phoniness. But if we realize it, we are all nuns, doing petty, habitual acts of service to our neighbors and God.

The narrator begins the story with a deep need to establish his presence in the world, which he believes can be best accomplished through transcending the ordinary life of twentieth century Americans. He attempts to achieve a fulfilling life by posing as a great artist and instructor, and he urges Sister Irma to find greatness in her artistry as well, but he finally rejects this strategy of transcendence as inherently phony and egoistic. Instead, he learns to see ordinary life as sacred. This epiphany comes to him through an experience that takes the form of transcendence yet is notably immanent. It is, in fact, through the very brute materiality of the scene he witnesses that he learns that ordinary living is sacred. All that remains is the question of whether or not the sudden flash of light, the sun which speeds up to his nose, is truly a divine act, or merely the setting sun striking the shiny enamel. I suspect that we can no more answer this question with certainty than we can say whether the nun's sacred acts of service are sacred because they honor a living God or because they are earnest. Readers may choose to interpret this epiphany as entirely immanent and explainable. In fact, the protagonist invites this

reading with his dismissal of the term "mystical," yet, does not he also invite a truly transcendent reading with his use of the term "transcendent" and his claim that "everybody is a nun"? This is a progression from the previous authors we have considered. Where others portrayed a clearly materialist transcendence, Salinger's is ambiguously materialist.

"Teddy": Transcendence without Immanence

In this story, written two years before "Franny," Teddy, a ten-year-old, incredibly advanced, spiritual mystic has a lengthy conversation about his spiritual beliefs, transcendence, and his spiritual abilities with an inquisitive Bob Nicholson. In this dialogue and the preceding scenes between Teddy and his family, we learn that the material world and emotions (including love) are an irrelevant illusion. The transcendent is all there truly is. What we find Teddy advocating and portraying is a meticulous care for the material, cultural, ephemeral aspects of the world, but not for their own sake. What matters is how we be-in-matter, not the matter itself.

One of the first things we learn about Teddy is that he looks disheveled, which suggests his indifference to the physical world:

> He was wearing extremely dirty, white ankle-sneakers, no socks, seersucker shorts that were both too long for him and at least a size too large in the seat, an overly laundered T shirt that had a hole the size of a dime in the right shoulder, and an incongruously handsome, black alligator belt. He needed a haircut—especially at the nape of the neck—in the worst way. (167)

The pervading sense is that Teddy, for all his brilliance and spiritual wisdom, is utterly unconcerned with his physical being. And yet, there are curious images of what seem to be deep concerns about aspects of the physical world, and Salinger goes out of his way to

establish how punctilious he is. Teddy is concerned with being at the right place at the right time, with proper social etiquette, and with faithfully writing in his journal. And for all his disregard for his wardrobe, Teddy wears an "incongruously handsome, black alligator belt." Teddy lacks the childlike whimsy that would easily explain such a belt. As such, his belt is an unexplained, sacred act. It is a mundane act that is set apart, to sacralize the world. In that sense, I believe it is parallel to his treatment of his father's ashtray:

> He stooped, and stood up with his father's pillow under his left arm and the glass ashtray that belonged on the night table in his right hand. Switching the ashtray over to his left hand, he went up to the night table and, with the edge of his right hand, swept his father's cigarette stubs and ashes into the ashtray. Then, before putting the ashtray back where it belonged, he used the under side of his forearm to wipe off the filmy wake of ashes from the glass top of the table. He wiped off his forearm on his seersucker shorts. Then he placed the ashtray on the glass top, with a world of care, *as if he believed an ashtray should be dead-centered on the surface of a night table or not placed at all*. (emphasis added, 173)

I quoted this description in its entirety to capture the way Salinger mimics with his prose the meticulousness with which Teddy goes about cleaning up after his father. Every movement is described as if it were significant, and yet what could be more trivial than cleaning up your father's cigarette buds? Teddy wipes off the glass table with his arm, and then wipes his arm on his shorts. The act of cleaning off the table implies a high regard for cleanliness, yet the way he cleans suggests otherwise. Similarly, he places the ashtray with intense focus and determination—an act which suggests that the ashtray is holy—but it is just an ashtray. In the physical world there are pockets of the sacred for Teddy. There are places, moments, acts which he takes on with spiritual single-mindedness, and in so doing, he makes holy what appears to be mundane. The alligator belt and the perfectly placed ashtray are sacred not because of what they are, but how he

interacts with them. Teddy believes that the ashtray should be placed perfectly or not at all. Either an act is done religiously, or it should be met with indifference, but the normal social standards for evaluating the significance of an act are mostly irrelevant for Teddy.

One reason that Teddy's values are so irreconcilable with the rest of society is that he rejects all valuation based upon emotions. In his talk with Nicholson, he expresses his disinterest in emotions. He accuses Nicholson of being a poet, because "[P]oets are always taking the weather so personally. They're always sticking their emotions in things that have no emotions" (185). Later, he tells Nicholson that he doesn't "see what [emotions are] *good* for" (186 emphasis original). Emotions, like so many other physical sensations, are deceptive, a distraction from the truth of being. This puts him in conflict with his parents' values: "My mother and father don't think a person's human unless he thinks a lot of things are very sad or very annoying or very—very un*just*, sort of" (186). Notice the implication of his transcendence over the physical world and all valuations that take it primarily into account: any recognition of corruption, finitude, evil, or mortality from a position of critique is rejected as irrational. There is no room left to call for justice. For Teddy, a recognition of and rebellion against finitude is *not* constitutive of our humanity. On the contrary, we are most at one with the truth of being when we deny the significance of such things. This belief is echoed when he tells Nicholson about the way his parents love him and his sister: "They don't seem able to love us unless they can keep changing us a little bit" (187). Teddy has a journal entry that echoes this sentiment: "I think it's very tasteless of Professor Walton to criticize my parents. He wants people to be a certain way" (181). Teddy's point is not that our love should be unconditional, but that we have no reason or ground to demand or ask that the world be

different from the way it is. Teddy, "*accepts* humanity . . . knowing that things are what they are and that living and dying are neither good nor evil" (Gwynn and Blotner 41). We can call this transcendence a transcendence of negation, in that it only rises to the level of the transcendent by rejecting the weightiness of the physical world.

Teddy's denial of the reality and meaningfulness of suffering and finitude helps to explain some of the more controversial and unsettling aspects of the story. For instance, Teddy leaves his parents' cabin knowing that there would be a good chance that he would never see them again, but when his mother asks for another kiss goodbye, he denies her: "'Not right now,' Teddy said absently. 'I'm tired'" (174). What is troubling about this line is that Teddy knows that it very well could be the only "right now" he has to kiss his mother, yet he responds "absently," as if her request did not even rise to the level of conscious concern for him. This callousness carries over to his conversation with Nicholson, when he admits that if he were to die that day, there would be no real reason for his family to mourn. And of course this is what makes the story's conclusion so controversial and disturbing: he willingly walks to his death, is even obsessed with being punctual to his death, with no concern for its ramifications.

Throughout this study we have traced the finite/transcendent, mortal/immortal, anal/spiritual binaries as points of tension where the desire for transcendence often manifests. As Becker notes, the astounding thing about being human is our tremendous insignificance ("man is a worm and food for worms") and our self-consciousness which makes us small gods (26). In Salinger's language, our lives are marked by love and squalor, niceness and phoniness. But what happens when one half of that binary is

negated entirely, as we find in "Teddy"? We find the stark reality of mortality reasserting itself in defiance of Teddy's transcendence of negation.

"Teddy" is filled with examples of the transcendent, yet in the end, the nature of this transcendence is drawn into question by the irrepressibility of materiality. Teddy explicitly tells Nicholson that he "could get out of the finite dimensions fairly often when [he] was four" and talks at length about how this transcendence has shown him that all things have no end; they go on infinitely (189). He also predicts his own death and the deaths of several doctors who studied him, displaying a prescience that comes from his enlightened state. Most notably, the implication at the end of the story is that he transcends the material world, reincarnating in a new body or becoming one with God, just as he predicted would happen. Yet, this unity is only possible by denying the reality and weightiness of finitude. Teddy's radical philosophy indicts itself, as the final lines of the story echo in the reader's head, conjuring up images of the broken skull of a ten-year-old boy and his screaming sister whose life will forever be defined by that moment—the sense of his body falling forward, the sight of his broken head spilling out, and the sound of her voice echoing for eternity as the story ends. For all Teddy's protestations that emotions and death are nothing, his sister's voice testifies against him, and the reader is left contemplating all the effects of the boy's death.

Whether or not Salinger means for us to interpret Teddy's death as a witness against his spirituality is irrelevant. What matters is that he portrays a particular vision of the transcendent, a vision which acts as a hypergood, orienting Teddy's values and purpose and meaning in life and death. As Kranidas states, "In Teddy's terms, death, even the death of a genius, is no tragedy. In the same way, our concern for the ambiguity

at the end of the story is misplaced. There ought to be no worry over the death of Teddy, whose very message was transcendence" (91). And yet those values are strongly critiqued in the very act which should cement his spirituality as real—his fulfilled prediction of his death--because the description of his death rightly evokes our worry. Salinger is finally unable to elevate his characters' experience above the brutal weightiness and meaning of a physical world where suffering, evil, and decay are realities.

It is helpful to compare Teddy's death with Seymour's, as many critics have done. Teddy's death is a kind of retelling of Seymour's suicide, a retelling that purifies the elder Glass child, making him a saint, and so it is particularly notable that Teddy's philosophy treats suffering and evil as natural, but illusory, aspects of life, that on the whole we cannot and should not try to change. For Seymour's suicide comes not from a place of deep spirituality, not from a feeling of overwhelming joy, but hopelessness.[5] Seymour haunts the Glass family and all American, post-secular society families, because he stands as a stark symbol of the incommensurability of suffering and grandeur. No amount of detachment from the physical world can unmake that world, which is what Teddy discovers, or would have discovered, if he were not dead. Finitude matters. Mortality matters. Matter matters. A transcendence which cannot orient our lives in such a way as to place proper value upon suffering, which cannot answer the why and therefore of suffering, which cannot make suffering meaningful is of little use.

Franny and Zooey

In *Franny and Zooey,* Salinger wrestles with the difficulty of finding a ground to individual being, and therefore a justified self, in a world that is dominated by duplicitous

actors, affectations, and hyper-self-awareness—an entertainment and celebrity culture. Confronted with a culture which promotes and idealizes deception and phoniness over sincerity, Franny seeks a basic, pure essence of her self by turning inward. The central conflict of this novel is how to be in a fallen world with other people while living towards an ideal, and this conflict manifests physically in Franny's mental breakdown. The characters do not doubt that beauty and goodness exist, but they struggle with how to reconcile them with an existence that perpetually falls short of those standards. As Ranchan describes Franny's situation, "the realization that the phenomenal is pervaded with ego and that one's own consciousness is pervaded . . . makes one long for a deeper reality, for a source which is free from the residue of pain and suffering that one has in one's experience with the world. It makes one long for what is called God in spirituality" (68). Part of the challenge for Franny is how to love others despite their failings. Franny's first response is to turn inward. She hopes that by finding some pure ground of being within herself, by seeing the face of God, she can begin to act lovingly and passionately in the world. As Blotner and Gwynn argue, citing the noted popularizer of Zen Buddhism in America, Daisetz Suzuki, "What Seymour, Zooey, and Franny Glass seem to want to do is 'to come in touch with the inner workings' of their being" (43). In the end, Zooey teaches her that the face of God, and the sense of existential justification and orientation which the transcendent provides, can only be found outside the self, in the divinity of each person outside us.

Franny's sickness stems from two unbearable facts about her world. First, everyone around her, with the possible exception of her dead oldest brother and maybe Buddy, is an egotistical phony; they adopt postures and façades and affectations with

little or no regard to the true or the good or the beautiful, in order to achieve some greatness which they feel will allow them to transcend the mundane world, making them somebody significant. The greatness they desire is irrelevant to truth, goodness, or beauty. It is greatness for the sake of ego, but it is also an irreducibly higher greatness. It is important to contextualize this strategy of transcendence which Franny so detests. We have seen it before, in *The Great Gatsby*, for example. Gatsby believed that by achieving a grandeur he would attain something life-justifying. And, of course, Gatsby is one of the phoniest characters in American fiction (it is worth noting that Buddy tells us that *The Great Gatsby* was his *Huckleberry Finn*, suggesting that this particular strategy of transcendence was familiar to him). We saw it again in *Tender is the Night* and the idea of the transcendent Hollywood starlet. Most helpfully for our project, we may look at Charles Taylor's description of the "heroic life" as a way of achieving fullness (what I have been referring as a sense of existential justification) (*A Secular Age*, 600-1). Taylor argues that one of the two common strategies of transcendence in the secular age is the desire to transcend the ordinary world. By acting in some grand and famous way, we feel our lives to have meaning, value, and purpose; we feel our lives to be irreducible to a material and historical account. Whether it is an English graduate student, a "section man," or a college professor, or a poet-in-residence, or an actor, to Franny, they all desperately seek to achieve some greatness and respect. What Franny objects to, then, is a particular, popular strategy of transcendence in modern American culture.

The first notable discussion of those who seek redemption through heroism occurs during a meal between Franny and her boyfriend, Lane. After Lane talks at length about the high praise he received for an English paper, Franny breaks down and cruelly tears

into "section men," whom she compares to Lane. The key elements in her description of a section man are the affectation of his clothes, his condescending treatment of a brilliant author, and his posture of mastery over an author whom he actually only studied briefly (14-15). Section men are desperate to achieve a level of superiority that sets them apart from the crowd, regardless of if this superiority is real or feigned. She goes on to announce that she would like to drop English because she is "just so sick of pedants and conceited little tearer-downers" (17). College, she concludes, is "the most incredible farce" (17). Everyone seems to be determined to get ahead and be acknowledged for their greatness, regardless of whether or not what they have achieved is truly great. Franny is also bothered by the way people use or feign beauty in order to gain prestige. She complains that the poets in residence at Lane's school are phonies because they never leave anything truly beautiful when they are done writing (19). Pretensions and positions and forms of poetry are not enough to be a poet, if they lack the real thing.

It is not just section men, professors, and poets who disgust Franny. She tells Lane that egoistic inauthenticity is ubiquitous: "It's everybody, I mean. Everything everybody does is so—I don't know—not wrong, or even mean, or even stupid necessarily. But just so tiny and meaningless and—sad-making. And the worst part is, if you go bohemian or something crazy like that, you're conforming just as much as everybody else, only in a different way" (26). It is a pettiness that Franny finds so disturbing. The main reason all human effort in the modern world is pathetically inadequate for Franny is that it aspires to impossible heights. Just as romantic love is incapable of bearing the weight of divinity in Fitzgerald's works, so heroism—the transcending of ordinary life through an extraordinary act or status—proves unable to

bear the burden of existential justification. If a section man hopes to achieve a sense of fullness and validation through feigning expertise in literature and tearing down great authors, his actions are pathetic and meaningless in comparison to his elevated goal. Franny's next sentence hints at another reason behind this absence of meaning: there appears to be no way to make yourself stand out and mean something existentially justifying without falling into just another kind of phoniness: conformity. For the modern person, one major path to justification is through an achievement of greatness in which one transcends the ordinary world, grounding our identity in some uniqueness, but if our identities appear as one form or another of conformity, they cannot be truly unique.

Later she tells Lane that she can't stand people who want to "get somewhere, do something distinguished and all, be somebody interesting. It's disgusting—it is, it is" (29-30). Even if one could pursue some measure of greatness and beauty without lapsing into phoniness, the very desire to achieve something great is impure. Franny is certainly drawing on certain Eastern religious conceptions of detachment and the extinguishing of all passions, but there is more at play in her disgust. Behind the desire to be interesting or distinguished—we might even say "meaningful"—is the belief that desiring to stand out and live an existentially justified life fundamentally requires selfishness. The very idea that one may justify one's self by transcending above the mundane world is egotistical and the results are "tiny and meaningless—and sad making."

Franny and Zooey reject this strategy of transcendence because it is necessarily selfish, because it is false to the nature of the world and the individual (it is "phony"), and because it fails to provide the "fullness" it promises. The heroic life is always about glorifying the individual, even if the heroism takes the form of self-sacrifice. Like so

many other strategies of transcendence in the secular age, heroism involves a turn inward. The transcendent, and the orientation and justification it produces, shifts from some outside source to a transcendent outworking of individual greatness. Their religious training by Buddy and Seymour, which they are very conflicted over, has taught Franny and Zooey that egotism is immoral, and therefore the heroic life is untenable. The question for Franny is whether or not one may do heroic things without resorting to egotism.

Charles Taylor addresses Franny and Zooey's objection to the phoniness of heroism briefly when discussing the heroic life: "The charge might be (and often is) that the 'high' [the sense of fullness from living a heroic life] here consists largely of a self-dramatization; we play a drama to ourselves in which we are lonely heroes; it is all a great show" (*A Secular Age* 601). Rhetoric, aesthetics, style, or form without substance, without a grounding in the truth, cannot be beautiful or good. Taylor's use of "drama" to describe these artificial delusions of grandeur fits well with the acting theme in Franny and Zooey. The main characters are actors by profession or training, but nearly everyone else is also "putting on an act" of some kind. For Franny and Zooey, the problem with the "great show" is that it is not great and it is only a show.

Most fundamentally, Franny and Zooey reject the heroic life as a strategy of transcendence because they do not believe it can fulfill what it promises. For Franny, the transcendent appears as a pure, ego-less, desireless state of being within the self's inner depths. She believes that the Jesus Prayer will allow her to extinguish herself and see God deep inside her heart. Franny tells Lane that the goal of the prayer is to "see God," although she does not know who God is, and the nature of this idealized experience

suggests that even if she were to "see God," the mystical experience would be void of any tangible, material, substantive being (39). The experience, Franny tells Lane, would take place in "some absolutely nonphysical part of the heart" (39). Unlike the phoniness in herself and others which drives her to a breakdown, the Jesus Prayer is a sincere and pure act; by becoming automatic and harmonized with her body while disembodied, the prayer becomes a transcendent good. And if she can achieve this automatic state of prayer, then Franny will be purified and understand what it is that she needs to do and how to do it. The prayer, then, is a response to the fake world because it is true, good, beautiful, and non-egotistical. More importantly, by seeing God deep in her nonphysical heart, Franny would live in a state of constant relationship with the transcendent. This is what Luc Ferry describes as the transcending of the self: "the only transcendence that remains is that of oneself over oneself, that of an authentic ego over an inauthentic one" (63). If Franny can separate herself entirely from the world and her desires, perhaps she might discover some square of "authentic ego" that is thoroughly Other and may justify her existence. She will eventually come to see God, but rather than some nameless, mystical, nonphysical deity deep in her own heart, she will come to see him outside of herself in every person.

The second reason that Franny is disgusted by the egotistical phoniness around her is that she is incapable of personally and professionally avoiding it. No matter how hard she tries to be pure, sincere, earnest, and selfless, it is unavoidable, and this, more than her annoyance at other phonies, is what primarily drives her breakdown. The very process of critiquing phoniness in others entails superiority and ego, which she cannot stand. And as Zooey forces her to admit, even the Jesus Prayer becomes commodified

into a work guaranteed to produce a "transcendent" experience, into "some kind of treasure" (148). If Franny desires to see God through her Jesus Prayer, then she has turned the prayer into a machine for spiritual production. What is more, it is incapable of granting Franny the fullness she desires, because the pure, unadulterated self is inaccessible or perhaps illusionary. Time and time again, Franny shows herself to be incapable of achieving the kind of purely sincere, beautiful, and egoless goals she desires. It seems that the more she says the prayer, the sicker she becomes. Rather than ground her in some basic and irreducible identity—established by seeing the face of God—the prayer reveals the egoistic inauthenticity in her being. In sum, on the one hand there is the heroic strategy of transcendence which is shown to be tragic and pathetic, but on the other hand, a turn towards a transcendence of inner depths proves that the essential self is an illusion as well. This explains Franny's illness. She is profoundly aware of the vacuity of heroism, yet all her attempts at fullness through a pure center of authentic being is just as illusory.

Salinger uses acting as an apt metaphor for the modern propensity to view fame, or heroism in Taylor's language, as a strategy of transcendence. The same essential faults that Franny and Zooey (at least before the narrative takes place) find in actors and acting Franny finds in nearly everyone. She may quit drama because she cannot stand all the pretentious phonies, but the rest of the world is not much better. We can see the way Salinger uses acting as a commentary on the human condition in the passage where Zooey reads a screenplay in the bathtub. In the scene, an overly dramatic female love interest expresses her romantic sorrow in overwrought language. Her lover, to be played by Zooey, calls her out for her duplicity: "You adorable, childish, self-dramatizing—"

(71). This scene is rich with irony, since the play itself is self-dramatizing, and Franny and Zooey feel that a great sin of the modern American is self-dramatization. For example, Franny complains about a professor she has who, she suspects, musses up his hair in the bathroom before coming to class to play a certain part as an absent-minded, quirky, genius (128). In a secular world, we take on roles which we hope may give us the teleological significance of a character in a drama, a meaning and significance situated within a distinct, linear narrative, one with clear authorial intent. The screenplay shows the layers of artificiality and acting in the world. The actors portray characters who are self-consciously acting. Zooey laughs at the ridiculous dialogue, but the reader gets the sense that his own dialogue in the story is often artificial, and the novel ends when Zooey "acts" like Buddy on the phone. The significance of acting as a metaphor for the human condition and as Franny and Zooey's occupation is that it implies that we are all, necessarily, hopelessly actors. Try as we might, we cannot seem to act purely, to summon up some essential honest reality.

To summarize, Franny's crisis stems from her frustration over the way so many people around her seek fulfillment by transcending the mundane world with egotism and phoniness. Franny believes that a superior alternative is to turn inward to a transcendence of self through the Jesus Prayer. But her frustration is only compounded as she discovers that the prayer is merely another style of egotism and as she fails to reveal God within herself. If transcendence of the ordinary life is immoral and inadequate and transcendence of the self through a turn inward is incapable of fulfilling a person, what is the alternative?

The climax of the story occurs when Zooey pretends to be Buddy and calls Franny to help talk her through her crisis. Buddy describes the way Franny walked into her parents's bedroom to answer the phone: "The handpiece lay detached from its catch, waiting for Franny. It looked almost as dependent as a human being for some acknowledgement of its existence. To get to it, to redeem it, Franny had to shuffle across the floor" (187). The waiting phone symbolizes Franny, who waits with longing for some acknowledgement commensurate with her existence. Note especially the parenthetical comment in the final sentence, "to redeem it." To acknowledge the handpiece's existence, to pick it up, is to *redeem* it, to enact its purpose, value, and meaning. The phone was made for just this purpose, and so when someone uses it properly, it is valued, it has a meaning, and its existence is redeemed from triviality. Using Franny's language, we may say that fulfilling its role means that the phone is no longer "so tiny and meaningless and—sad-making." Likewise, Franny watches the phone, waiting for it, and Buddy behind it, to acknowledge her, to redeem her, somehow. She desires to know how to be an actor—both as an occupation and as a lifestyle, since there are really no alternatives—how to fulfill her purpose without falling into egotism and inauthenticity.

When Zooey calls Franny pretending to be Buddy, he shows her that the petty, egotistical, corrupt, vain world and all its people are inescapable, but there are still moments of sacredness and goodness and beauty. Zooey redefines the "religious life" in secular, or at least non-mystical terms:

> [I]f it's the religious life you want, you ought to know right now that you're missing out on every single goddam religious action that's going on around this house. You don't even have sense enough to drink when somebody

> brings you a cup of consecrated chicken soup—which is the only kind of chicken soup Bessie ever brings to anybody around this madhouse. (196)

In contrast to the explicitly religious ritual Franny has been practicing and is obsessed with, Zooey sees the sacred in the everyday and the finite and broken. Bessie brings her daughter soup out of love and concern, and it is in this sense sacred, even though the mother is also selfish and ignorant. She fails to properly understand her children and their problems in life, and yet she feels qualified to solve them. Using Salinger's language, Bessie's sacred act is an example of love and squalor, sincerity and phoniness, selfless service and ego. Zooey's admonition, then, is for Franny to see the beauty and goodness in imperfection, rather than detaching herself from the world and judging it as a failure.

The abrupt ending of *Franny and Zooey* hinges entirely on relocating the transcendent outside of the self—as inner depths or personal greatness. Zooey's wisdom to Franny is that there is no way to love her neighbor by looking inward, and there is no way to attain the transcendent by obsessively searching for it within. In Ranchan's Vedantic reading of the conclusion, he argues that Franny learns to be free from egotism and to "infuse holiness into the world so that [her] action becomes an offering, a sacrifice" (92-93). Franny desires to see the face of God by conjuring him up within her deepest heart, but Zooey's story of Seymour's Fat Lady suggests that she had always seen the face of God, if she would simply choose to see it. This radical incarnational theology circumvents the problem of evil and finitude by making every person Christ not by their merit. By all accounts, the Fat Lady Seymour had them imagine as kids was pathetic, ugly, and sickly, but they understood that they had a duty towards her, to excel even if she could never know how they shined their shoes for her. Regardless of the

unworthiness of the individual, he or she always deserves the best duty we can offer, because he or she is Christ himself. Notably, this is an entirely horizontal transcendence. Franny has an irreducible obligation to do everything excellently and in love. It is irreducible because there is always another "Fat Lady" for her to serve, but her obligation toward each person is also irreducible precisely because they are a Christ and are worthy of infinite honor.

As long as she looked toward herself for the Christ-consciousness, she was incapable of seeing Christ in others. All she could perceive were people who acted deceptively for their own self-interest. What sickens her about the Jesus Prayer is that, as Zooey points out to her, it is merely another way to store up treasure on earth, just another way to get ahead, to achieve something great enough to validate her existence. If she can only see God within the depths of her heart, then she will have a sure ground to her being, she will know her place in the world and she will no longer pursue her ego. But this is an illusion. Franny learns that to look inward for a ground of being is to miss Christ in others. If we look outward, toward acting on the divinity of all humans, we do not fall into sickness (nausea), but peace (sleep). This epiphany offers a transcendent object in two ways. First, if everyone is Seymour's Fat Lady there is an infinite—for all intents and purposes—obligation to others, because there is no practical end of people to love. But it is also transcendent in depth, since Christ's divinity makes him infinitely Other. Thus, Franny learns that her being cannot be founded upon infinite depths of the self, but on an infinite obligation toward an eternally receding horizon of people.[6]

The divinity of Christ is central to this epiphany. Only if Christ is conceived of as divine, as opposed to only "a supreme *adept*" as Zooey puts it, can this be more than

another form of the transcendent without transcendence. If Christ is merely a wise teacher and prophet, then our duty to each person is as finite as their being. The result of this would be Luc Ferry's "beneficent humanism," wherein we find transcendent significance in recognizing and acting upon our duty towards every individual human. Recall that this "beneficent humanism" is grounded in a "horizontal transcendence" and the "sacralization of the human" (69). The "sacred" here does not refer to the divine or some aspect of it, but merely the elevated and set-apart, thus this is only a "horizontal transcendence" rather than horizontal and vertical. As we have discussed, Ferry's horizontal transcendence is not properly transcendent at all, although it takes the form and language of it. The Christ that Zooey advocates is more than a man who can be reduced to material/historical reality, however. When he is concerned that Franny is saying the Jesus Prayer to some imagined, mollified version of Christ, he chastises her, arguing that she must pray to the real Jesus, one who was quite radical: "Jesus realized there *is* no separation from God" (170). We should interpret this statement in light of his later revelation that "everyone" is Seymour's Fat Lady. Both statements seem to come from a particular interpretation of Matthew 25:40, as Alsen has argued (227). In this interpretation, Christ teaches that everyone, even the "least of these," is actually a part of the divine Being. This strays from the traditional reading in which Christ teaches that actions done to the weak and oppressed are treated and viewed by Christ as actions done to him. This has led Hamilton to describe the use of Christ in this story as a "spiritual vision," emptied of Christian orthodoxy (40). The question for us is how this emptying of orthodoxy affects the way the transcendent quality of divinity is understood.

One major result from Zooey's theology is that the transcendent becomes identified entirely with the finite. Evil, corruption, decay, cancer, and selfishness do not become resolved, undone, or overcome by the goodness and beauty of Being, accomplished through the redemptive self-giving sacrifice of Christ, as they would in orthodox Christianity. Instead, finitude and evil are shown to be a proper part of divinity. This, doubtlessly, is due in part to the influence of Vedantic thought on Salinger's work, as we saw in "Teddy." In both *Franny and Zooey* and "Teddy," transcendence involves a recognition that finitude must be accepted rather than redeemed. Kenneth Hamilton touches on this when he describes Zooey's "secret" at the conclusion: "It is not the secret purpose of God sending his Son to become flesh. Rather, it is a divine illumination possessing any soul spiritually mature enough to be conscious of the divinity within all things" (Hamilton 40). Incarnation does not merely entail the unity of the transcendent and immanent, but the acknowledgment that the immanent as it is, is corrupt. If, however, divinity is "within all things," "things" lose significance as "things" needing redemption. Ranchan observes that Zooey's teachings "help Franny resolve her confusion and really get started with her path, which will be that of detached action in the context of right knowledge with love as the base" (74-5). The key here is "detached action," because the purpose of action is not improve the world so that it is good, but to enjoy it as it is already good. In this way, Salinger's characters are able to experience the transcendent while also fully accepting the immanent as good.

As a vision of the transcendent, Zooey's parable of the Fat Lady is not altogether incompatible with secularism. It is, after all, a disenchanted world in which enchantment is refounded in the mundane. This is one reason Buddy tells us that the story is not really

a mystical religious story, but a complex love story, because the moral we are left with can be reduced to an obligation to love one's neighbor. The symbol of Christ as a transcendent deity is important, but Salinger is ambiguous about whether or not any Being resides or need reside on the other side of that symbol. The "mystical" can be completely accounted for by deep, selfless human love; there is no need to appeal to any source outside the material world, although the language of divinity and its semiotic force still functions to evoke the transcendent. Indeed, the difference between Salinger's transcendence here and Ferry's beneficent humanism is that with Salinger, we are to *really* believe that humans are sacred, even though all signs point to Salinger's sacred and Ferry's "sacred" being identical in actuality. What is the difference between a pantheism which obligates us to love our neighbor and a beneficent humanism which does? It is not clear that there is a discernible difference between either position.

Franny and Zooey offers a vision of the transcendent of possible presence or substance. The hypergood of the novel is our infinite obligation to a near-infinite number of people. Although the novel ends abruptly, we have good reason to believe that Franny now has the orientation and hope to return to her work as an actor. But as with "Teddy" before it, *Franny and Zooey* does not offer the language or agency to speak against injustice or evil, only the language to speak of goodness and divinity in all. More troubling is the nature of this divinity in us all. Zooey appeals to a sign of divinity in Christ, but ultimately, the transcendent does not reside in the divinity of all people, but in our transcendent obligation toward all people. And if this is so, we must wonder if this obligation requires the presence of divinity, or merely its semantic weight. Without attempting the quixotic mission of psychoanalyzing Salinger's readers, I'd like to suggest

that part of the charm and beauty of Salinger for mid-twentieth century readers was that his works were transcendent without being (really) mystical. The semantic weight of divinity is evoked for thoroughly secular purposes rendered in sacred language. In the end, it matters less whether "divinity" is a proper thing or not; what matters is whether or not we act as if it is.

Conclusion

Salinger's characters are born into a disenchanted world where the old verities no longer hold a place of societal weight. Where Fitzgerald's characters, and even to some extent McCullers's characters, understand something of what they have lost and what it will mean to replace it, Salinger's know and have adopted socially accepted strategies of transcendence before they know what those strategies have replaced. Kaufman claims that the pieces in *Nine Stories*, and we might add the rest of Salinger's work, "dramatize the difficulties of being 'born in an American body,'" (Kaufman 131). The basic challenge for Holden, de Daumier-Smith, Teddy, and Franny is the same: how can one make sense of the endless squalor and finitude of life when it is punctuated by a deep abiding sense or experience of the goodness (or niceness) of being? His characters seek to answer this question through the popular strategies of transcendence of their culture: transcendence through perfect, ordinary living and transcendence through heroic, extra-ordinary living. The former is usually labelled phony and thought to be trivial. The latter is also phony and egotistical. As Russell has noted, Salinger's characters tend to move through two or three stages: recognition of the pernicious role of ego in acting and art (heroic living), rejection of these passions because of their egoism (perfected ordinary

living, which entails seeing ordinary life as sacred), and finally a re-acceptance of ego as a way to selflessly serve our neighbor (heroic living, done right).

However, Salinger never seems to arrive at a satisfactory place to resolve these differing stages and their competing accounts of the hypergood. Holden accepts that there are fleeting moments of the sacred embedded in ordinary life which can give us hope and validation. De Daumier-Smith comes to a similar conclusion, with his ordinary life-affirming claim that "everybody is a nun." But with Teddy, we find the reintroduction of the ego as a positive and essential aspect of the transcendent. With proper dedication, one can make "real spiritual progress" and transcend the world and its squalor and the illusion of evil and death. What complicates this is that the story itself works against a positive reading of a transcendence which makes the material immaterial. Franny reaches the purest epiphany, concluding that heroic living, when it is done for the infinitely other, is also a form of selfless, perfected ordinary life, wherein every act is a sacrifice for the sacred other.

What is particularly challenging with Salinger is deciding how to interpret the transcendent which does appear. The closest image of actual transcendence in these stories is de Daumier-Smith's conversion experience, but even this can be easily explained as the reflection of the setting sun. With most characters, it is never clear if the "sacred" or "god" corresponds to a transcendent being or the merely the idea of transcendence. This is particularly challenging in *Franny and Zooey*, when we are assured that everyone is Seymour's Fat Lady, and Seymour's Fat Lady is Jesus. Is this Jesus a truly transcendent deity, or does he simply a representation of the idea of transcendence? In "Teddy" and *Franny and Zooey*, Salinger moves to an explicitly

religious, if not formally and doctrinally religious, vision of the transcendent, in which what ultimately fulfills and justifies each person existentially is their awareness of the sacred divinity of everything. It is interesting, however, to note how dramatically distinct the spiritual language of "Teddy" and *Franny and Zooey* are. In "Teddy," the transcendent is framed explicitly in Buddhist and Hindu language. But in *Franny and Zooey*, despite the presence of many world religions, it is Christ, and Zooey would have us note that it is the *historical* Christ described in the four gospels, who embodies the transcendent. The implication of this is that for Salinger, transcendence of the material, finite, squalid world is the true religion. Dressed in eastern religious imagery or western, it makes no matter. What does matter is that we surrender ourselves to the mystical and counter-cultural pull of the transcendent, which defies the phony and corrupt strategies of transcendence which they learn from their culture, subverting their power and value systems, so that leaving kings in the back row and willfully going to your own death are virtues, even when they appear like foolishness.

CHAPTER FIVE

Nihilism and Ineradicable Transcendence in Cormac McCarthy

Interpretations of Cormac McCarthy's fiction have spanned from claims that his novels are brutally nihilistic (Bell, Shaviro) to profoundly, albeit disquietly, spiritual (Daugherty, Arnold). Whatever their interpretation of his novels, most readers acknowledge the sense of profound depths—depths which either transcend ordinary reality, or strongly evoke a sense of irreducible realities—in the style, themes, and images of McCarthy's fiction (Bell 128, Hungerford 86, Lincoln 19). In interviews he has confessed to believing that "literature" ought to be defined by works that deal in questions of life and death, works which are preoccupied with ultimate matters (McCarthy "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction"). All of his novels have this quality, and the best of them hone our focus upon primal questions about the nature of evil, death, life, and human fullness of existence. Images of deep time, such as the creation of the universe, or deep space, revealing the vastness of the universe, also feature prominently in his novels. His style is marked by a high register, vatic speeches, and archaic language. Cooper has claimed that "[t]he debate at the heart of McCarthy's moral universe is fairly simple: either there is some transcendent 'spiritual truth' that is apprehended through religious symbols, or there is none, in which case all symbols and forms are 'emptied' and all color is leached from the universe" (*No More Heroes* 153). In these ways, Cormac McCarthy's fiction might be the most transcendence-haunted in contemporary American fiction; thus, it is appropriate that I turn to his corpus for my

final chapter on the manifestation of transcendence in twentieth0-century American fiction. I will focus on two of McCarthy's more well-known and critically acclaimed works: *Blood Meridian* and *The Road*. These novels offer quite differing accounts of the transcendent, although in both cases the central conflict involves a transcendent object. In contrast to Fitzgerald, McCullers and most of Salinger's works, McCarthy's fiction affirms a transcendence with presence, as opposed to the transcendent of "framing epiphanies," and which is irreducible to the material, immanent world, as opposed to the common modern affinity towards the "transcendent without transcendence." Although its nature and character are allusive and only adumbrated, the transcendent appears in McCarthy's fiction as an observable and experiential, if not entirely empirical, reality. The transcendent does not hold the place it once did, prior to the Enlightenment and the rise of secularization, yet McCarthy's characters experience and trust in hints of transcendence which have dramatic effects upon their lives.

When most readers finish *Blood Meridian* they are haunted by two parts of the novel: the Satan-like judge Holden and the silent, enigmatic kid protagonist. These elements represent the two major visions of transcendence presented in the novel. The judge articulates a proto-Nietzschean, materialist belief in existential justification through the will-to-power over all being.[7] He takes Nietzsche's claim that men must become gods to be worthy of killing God, and Ferry's thesis that the only valid replacement for the divine transcendent is the deification of man, and argues powerfully throughout that in a strictly material world, men (and it is valid to use only the masculine pronoun here, since women lack almost all agency in this world of the will to power) validate their existence only by asserting their wills over all of reality and pitting their lives against others' in

combat. Steven Frye describes this philosophy as a kind of transcendence through destruction (85). The judge's philosophy is captured when he tells the Glanton gang that, "Your heart's desire is to be told some mystery. The mystery is that there is no mystery" (252). That there is no mysterious, otherworldly ground to Being becomes a kind of meta-mystery—the mystery of the no-mystery—which validates one's existence by granting infinite freedom, and thus the right to exert your freedom against all others'.

Contrasting with Holden's negative transcendence of dominion is the silent witness of the kid, who models an alternative account of transcendence, one which is based on self sacrifice for the other rather than the will to power. The kid's silent fight against the judge, particularly in the latter half of the novel, suggests that whatever the kid's transcendent object is, it offers an alternative strategy of existential justification, one which does not require violence. If readers carefully follow the kid's progression in *Blood Meridian*, they can see that he moves from embodying the judge's violent materialist philosophy, to an inchoate belief in God, or at the very least, the goodness of selflessness. Amy Hungerford has argued against this reading by claiming that the kid's small acts of mercy lead to more suffering, and are therefore not truly "good" (94). However, her stance assumes a consequentialist ethics; the goodness of the kid's actions are determined by their net good in the world. While I am sympathetic to this ethical reading, it does not seem to allow for the possibility that an act of kindness towards the other is good regardless of whether or not that act creates the opportunity for future evil. In contrast, James Bowers gives a good account of how the kid matures morally. Some critics, Bowers among them, despite his belief that the kid matures, have pointed to the novel's brutal conclusion and the force of Holden's rhetoric to argue that the judge and his

nihilistic philosophy ultimately prevail (Bowers 54, Bell 122, Owens xvii, Holloway 195, Guillemin 89 and 100), but in this chapter I will show how this view begs the question. The judge's murder of the kid can only be interpreted as a validation of the judge's position if you assume that the will to power (the exertion of his will over the kid's) determines truth, a point Robert Jarrett has raised but not developed; thus, we must assume the judge's philosophy to see it as vindicated (Jarrett 83). If, however, violence is not seen as the ultimate arbiter of truth, if existence is not the sole justification for existence, then perhaps the kid and his ethic of silence might not be negated. I will show how the kid's passivity can be read as a victory over the judge's ethos of violence, and how his silence and passivity hint at the possibility of existential validation through a transcendent hypergood other than violence.

As powerful and central as the transcendent is to *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy still leaves the nature of the transcendent quite vague. We know that the natural world gives testament to some other reality. We know that our existence is not validated through violence, but what do these signals of transcendence point to and is it enough for a person to act on positively? *The Road* addresses these questions more directly, but less thoroughly than some readers might wish. As with *Blood Meridian*, at the center of this novel is a conflict between nihilism and transcendent hope, between internal hopelessness and external acts of hope (*No More Heroes* Cooper 143). The nihilist position is best articulated in the wife's argument that the most logical and ethical act after the apocalypse is suicide, rather than face the inevitability of being caught, raped, and eaten by cannibals. And yet, the man and the boy continue to walk to the south, continue to fight for survival, and in the end, they are rewarded for their faith. Standing in starkest

contrast to this nihilism is the boy, who has a preternatural goodness and is regularly described in transcendent language, as a tabernacle, for example (273). In this section I will show how marginalia in an early draft of *The Road* which refers to Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* can help readers to interpret and reconcile this tension between nihilism and transcendent hope in the novel, a tension which is among the main points of contention between critics (Rambo 101, Graulund 76, Kunsa 58-59). Through allusions to Kierkegaard's understanding of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, McCarthy shows that faith in goodness is justifiable and right, even though it is, from a strictly materialist position, irrational. This is an example of Taylor's epiphany of being. Although he does not name this transcendent source, we can know that it *is*, and that it is good. And this is perhaps the most perplexing and surprising aspect of McCarthy's aesthetic, critical, and popular success: despite working in a long literary tradition that offers almost only framing epiphanies or highly conflicted epiphanies of being, McCarthy has presented a form of transcendence that is more than immanence dressed up. In *Blood Meridian* he subtly and roughly allows the transcendent to manifest in conflict with the judge's self-transcendence from the will to power, but in *The Road* this transcendent reality becomes an overt, embodied in a boy. Although this vision of transcendence lacks the institutions and traditions of the old religious world, it nevertheless stands in stark contrast with the indifferent, materialist secular world of modernity. And in so doing, McCarthy offers a glimpse of one way to understand and address the malaise of immanence.

Transcendence as the Will to Power or as External Good in Blood Meridian

McCarthy uses Judge Holden and the kid to present two, conflicting philosophies and strategies of transcendence in a secularizing world. Both characters respond to a world in which transcendence, at least as it was traditionally understood in the western world, no longer makes sense or seems reasonable. The judge embraces secularization, embodying a proto-Nietzschean philosophy of war as god in which the individual only attains existential justification and meaning when he or she transcends all other wills in an act of power. At first, the kid share's the judge's vision, but over time, and in subtle ways, an inchoate belief in a hypergood external to himself, with moral standards that are blasphemous to the judge's philosophy, leads him into direct confrontation with the judge. The evocative and allusive descriptions of the novel, like the kid's action, present a narrative of being counter to the eloquent and effusive narrative from the judge. Despite the grim and nihilistic rhetoric of the judge and the violence of the novel which seems to confirm his proclamation that war is god, McCarthy's prose continually draws the reader's imagination to an interpretation of the natural world which is irreducible to instrumental reason and material reality. In the conclusion, judge Holden faces the kid and accuses him of treason. Because the judge kills the kid, readers are tempted to interpret the conclusion as a confirmation of the judge's philosophy of the will to power—a rather nihilistic interpretation. Yet, as I will demonstrate, the kid's silent vision of a transcendence of peace, remains a viable and even persuasive possibility for humanity.

The Judge

My reading of Holden will build on the current scholarship by interpreting the judge in light of the secularization and the human need for irreducibly higher values (hypergoods) which define and orient all our other values and beliefs and can justify our being in the world. What we will discover is that he embodies an Enlightenment ideal of transcendence through an assertion of will over all of existence. This is not to imply that the judge is transcendent or that his account of transcendence is verified by the novel. There are scenes and images in the novel which suggest that judge Holden might be some maleficent divine, but none of them are certain. Instead, McCarthy crafts Holden as the embodiment of a particular, violent philosophy—one which is a reaction to the "death of God" and the subsequent disenchantment of the world—and allows him to work out the implications of that philosophy in the world. The truth of this philosophy, however, is not certain.

Holden and his philosophy ought to be understood as an uninfluenced contemporary to Nietzsche. As Bell has already established, "the judge is an older contemporary of Nietzsche's and can't very well have read him," (120) but I would suggest that they independently come to similar conclusions about cosmology and its concomitant ethical and epistemological implications due to having similar influences philosophically, scientifically, and historically. Based upon the premise that "God is dead," the judge and Nietzsche both propose existential systems which provide an alternative to the nihilistic vacuum left by the loss of the belief in higher order and absolute morality. Just as the death of God and its implication for humanity was one of Nietzsche's greatest preoccupations, one of the major themes of *Blood Meridian* is the

dialogue over the existence, voice, and agency of God in the world. In exploring the philosophical system that the judge presents through the novel we shall see how his ideas parallel many of Nietzsche's, and in the process the centrality of secularism and the judge's response to it in the novel will be revealed.

In a discussion about the ethics of war, Holden portrays war as the universal hypergood, a value and ideal which is irreducibly higher than all other values and therefore defines and orients the individual. When some in the Glanton gang suggest that war is evil, the judge explains through the metaphor of "the game" that war is neither evil nor good, but rather the essential state of man:

> Men are born for games. Nothing else. Every child knows that play is nobler than work. He knows too that the worth or merit of a game is not inherent in the game itself but rather in the value of that which is put at hazard. Games of chance require a wager to have meaning at all. Games of sport involve the skill and strength of the opponents and the humiliation of defeat and the pride of victory are in themselves sufficient stake because they inhere in the worth of the principals and define them. But trial of chance or trial of worth all games aspire to the condition of war for here that which is wagered swallows up game, player, all. (249)

His argument can be summarized as a syllogism: men are born for games; games have meaning if there is a wager; the greatest wager is existence; therefore, war is the most meaningful human act, for it is only in war that we might transcend all that is. In Nietzsche's famous "Parable of the Mad Man" from *The Gay Science*, the mad man similarly suggests that humans will have to create games in order to atone for the murder of God: "What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent" (181)? Nietzsche argues that with European culture's abandonment of the belief in God and moral order, new rituals will have to be created to fill the void and give meaning to existence. This connection between the mad man's speech and the judge's is important

because it frames Holden's philosophy in the context of the disenchantment of the world. The judge's "game" functions as a "sacred game" which validates the lives of the participants by waging their very being. The game of war is sacred because it brings the participates into the presence of the transcendent, the holy: the will to power. Holden goes on to make this connection between war and the assertion of will: "Seen so, war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god" (249). War is the transcendent hypergood of the secular world because it forces the "unity of existence" to "select" between being and non-being, which finally is all that is. As we shall see later, this leads the judge to challenge not only the wills of other living people, but even dead civilizations, ancient ruins, and animal life.

The judge later claims that the only true question in war is who will live and who will die: "Decisions of life and death, of what shall be and what shall not, begger all question of right. In elections of these magnitudes are all lesser ones subsumed, moral, spiritual, natural" (250). Put in Taylor's language, decisions of life and death are hypergoods which are irreducibly higher than all other values. All methods and systems of judging right action are rejected here in favor of the will to destroy. What is striking is that Holden does not just deny the relevance of religion and traditional morality in regard to war, he also specifically identifies "natural" methods of electing as "subsumed." This philosophy is not a hedonist rejection of all morality and ethics; instead, the judge seems to be claiming that all traditional conceptions of morality are simply trivial in light of war. This principle is the judge's moral foundation, and he claims that whoever takes up

this "higher calling which all men honor . . . would be no godserver but a god himself" (250). In order individuals to be existentially validated, to find meaning in existence, they must become a god, subsuming everything under their will, and establishing their own truths and morals. The only path to transcendence is to become the transcendent. Keeping this aspect of the judge's atheism in mind, Nietzsche's "Parable of the Mad Man" is again relevant: "Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it" (*The Gay Sciences* 181)? For Nietzsche, the act of assuming the role of god was not an optional exercise of the freedoms afforded in a secular world, it was a necessity. The process of becoming an overman and overthrowing old morals and traditions for new, subjective ones by a force of will is the only way to achieve something commensurate with the death of God. In a similar way, the judge argues that the validation of man can only come when he transcends all cultural and material contingencies and restrictions, becoming a god himself and embraces the "will to power."

We have seen how Holden's will-to-power strategy of transcendence comes directly from his secular materialism, and it orients his morals, provides existential validation, and gives his life meaning, but it is important to note that judge Holden quite emphatically rejects all conceptions of the transcendent outside of the individual's will to power. His philosophy is exclusivist. In several places he makes the claim that the universe is strictly material although it gives the appearance of mystery: "Your heart's desire is to be told some mystery. The mystery is that there is no mystery" (252). This is notable because Holden accepts what Taylor, Becker, Ferry and many others have argued about transcendence for the human person: our hearts are oriented towards some vision of

the transcendent. Holden specifically has in mind a transcendence marked by "mystery," some being external to ourselves which is ultimately irreducible and therefore cannot be circumscribed by instrumental reason and the human will. The mystery of existence is that there is no mystery "out there" which might enter into our lives and imbue it with meaning and significance, which might explain the order in the world. This is a mystery because our heart's longing and the facts world seem to imply that there is indeed some mysterious reality to existence, but instead, what we have is our will to search out the world in the bones of things, and out of that knowledge submit the world to our will.

Judge Holden does not merely espouse this philosophy, he enacts it throughout the novel. His orator/trickster status is an example of him imposing his intellectual and rhetorical will against the gang. The judge's penchant for molesting and murdering young boys (118 and 164) and girls (191, 239, and 275) seems to be the sexual implication of his belief as he dominates their wills until they are almost inhuman. This also explains his adoption of the "idiot" (259) near the end of the book who becomes a sort of pet dog to the judge, following at his heels as he travels and accompanying him in his bizarre sexual exploits (275). But perhaps nowhere is this philosophy as clearly exemplified as in the judge's habit of recording facts about history and nature and then destroying their physical counterpart. Mimicking the model of a scientific empiricist, the judge appears as a Darwin-like natural philosopher, recording and sketching unique and interesting elements of nature in a notebook. The judge's motivation for this scientific work is not for the advancement of human understanding, but rather to capture and contain the will of those recorded entities for his own will in an act of what Shaviro rightly calls, "the self-transcending project of Enlightenment" (149):

> Whatever exists . . . whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent . . . he nodded toward the specimens he'd collected. These anonymous creatures, he said, may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men's knowing. Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth . . . The judge placed his hand on the ground . . . This is my claim, he said. And yet everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation. (198-199)

This passage goes beyond a benign positivism; the judge desire to control the universe through his will: a transcendence of the material world through domination of every each of it. The very idea of autonomy is "an insult" to the judge because it means that there is something outside of his will: "In the spirit of the imperialist collector, the judge craves knowledge as he does power. By reducing life to its constituents, its bones, he can 'read' it, engulf it and ultimately control it" (Campbell 223). The alternative to this totalizing domination of being, according to the judge, is death. If we even allow a crumb outside of our will, it may devour us. Of all the strategies and visions of transcendence we have explored in this study, judge Holden's is the first to insist that there are no viable alternatives. In the secular world, the only transcendence is that which gambles one's existence against existence.

In addition to nature, Holden also attempts to subjugate the past by recording and destroying remnants of past cultures. During one stop on the gang's journey across the desert, the judge spends the whole day collecting artifacts from ancient civilizations that used to live in the area. Once collected, the judge sketches the pieces and then throws them into a fire (140). The narrator tells us that after he burned his archeological find, "he seemed satisfied with the world, as if his counsel had been sought at its creation"

(140). The connection the narrator makes between the judge's actions and his resemblance to a god reaffirms Holden's later claim that he who takes up the tools of war becomes "a god himself" (250). Noting his actions, a member of the Glanton gang, Webster, questions the judge's motivations for his sketches. We are told that the judge replies that "it was his intention to expunge them from the memory of man" (140). While Holden answers Webster correctly, he only tells him half of the truth. If it was the judge's only intention to "expunge them from the memory of man" then there would be no reason for him to sketch the artifacts before he destroyed them. The act of finding, recording, and then destroying relics of past cultures shows that the judge's real intention is to expunge them from the memory of *other* men. Just as the judge later claims that "the freedom of birds is an insult to me. I'd have them all in zoos" (199), he is obsessed with capturing artifacts and keeping them for himself, thus exerting his will over not only the physical objects, but also the record of history: "The judge must remove their record and replace it with his own narrative ledger, just as he would challenge the will of God to write his words in 'the bones of things'" (Campbell 223). The act of capturing history within a notebook appears as another strange corruption of the nineteenth century scientist and an example of his all-encompassing "will to power." In all of the judge's actions we can find his philosophy of war lived out, in his sexual deviance, his adoption of the imbecile, his interested in nature, and his eradicating distortion of archeology.

While this philosophy and its violent implications seem utterly dark, it is important to keep in mind that it is not nihilistic, but an existential vision of transcendence much in the same way that Nietzsche's work is a response to nihilism rather than an argument for it. At the foundation of his worldview is the judge's belief in

meaning and value for the human individual, albeit through the violent conflict of wills which forces the will of reality to extinguish one will. In this sense the judge seems to espouse a type of Nietzschean existentialism which attempts to provide meaning for existence in light of the rise of secularism. For both Nietzsche and the judge the "will to power," or "war is god" are ways of thinking about existence in a post-Christian world, a world where God is either dead or lacks agency. The judge's will-to-power hypergood defines the ethical dimension to life (the imperative to assert one's will against others), a system for establishing value and meaning in life (entering into war both loosely and strictly defined), and a belief in free will (which is contingent upon the individual's decision to establish order in the universe by the force of their will). As compelling and forceful as the judge's philosophy is, McCarthy's novel contains a challenge to it, in the form of the kid.

Judge Holden reveals the defining hypergoods of the Enlightenment manifested in the American West. In an exclusively material, immanent world, the greatest good, that which validates the individual ultimately, is the successful assertion of one's will over all else. McCarthy allows the judge to present his case eloquently and forcefully. The facts of the novel appear to confirm the judge's vision. But his is not the only voice in the novel, and if we carefully consider the kid's actions, we will find an alternative conception of transcendence manifested. This alternative is quiet and less forceful, but it is persuasive in its own way.

The Sublime

One of the reasons that it is a mystery that there is no mystery in the novel is that experiences in and visions of material world often allude to a higher, transcendent reality.

Blood Meridian owes much of its praise to the stunning descriptions McCarthy employes to describe his violent world. These descriptions have a remarkable characteristic: they elevate the action or object by evoking the transcendent. The effect this style has is to give the reader the sense that the world is haunted with the irreducibly other. In such a world, it is strange to believe that there is no mystery, and so reconciling these two aspects of the text—the sublime and the utterly material—has proved no small challenge for critics. Note the way Bell tries to navigate this terrain:

> *Blood Meridian* is haunted by the mystery that its own language challenges the very nihilistic logic that it gives representation to. The richness generated out of such morally impoverished material seems intended to appear miraculous and in some sense transcendent and beyond the reach of the mind, which is finally merely a fact among others. (128)

This is the tension I have noted throughout my study between a longing for transcendence and a social imaginary which denies its possibility. Bell concludes, in agreement with the judge, that whatever mystery there is in life, it is merely an illusion, and that illusion is "merely a fact among others." The text certainly allows for this interpretation; there is no evidence that the sublime images in the novel necessarily and certainly reflect some transcendent reality. However, I will argue that this interpretation is misguided because it precludes the tension between the otherworldly and the utterly material by privileging the latter. Instead, we should accept this tension as central to the text. It is the tension between the enchanted, older world and the secularizing world of modernity.

There are numerous descriptions in the novel which would serve as examples of McCarthy's allusive style, including some of the most bloody passages of the novel. I have chosen to look at one of the few lovely passages from the novel, but just as with the

violent scenes, McCarthy's prose is elevated by the use of grand language and otherworldly allusions:

> They passed through a highland meadow carpeted with wildflowers, acres of golden groundsel and zinnia and deep purple gentian and wild vines of blue morningglory and a vast plain of varied small blooms reaching onward like a gingham print to the farthest serried rimlands blue with haze and the adamantine ranges rising out of nothing like the backs of seabeasts in a Devonian dawn. (187)

What defines this image is its irreducibility, its inability to be comprehended and captured by the riders' sense perception or knowledge. The repeated idea of the infinite in the fields lifts the image from the mundane to the otherworldly. Language like, "vast," "varied," "farthest serried rimlands," "rising out of nothing," and "Devonian dawn" all combine to create an image that is seemingly endless and that overwhelms the senses of the riders. The morning glories are described as "reaching onward" in a way that connotes endlessness, while the "adamantine ranges" appear to be "rising out of nothing" which suggests that they have no beginning. Both of these allusions to the infinite are augmented by the "Devonian dawn," a reference to the geological time of the fourth period of the Paleozoic Era. This reference is emblematic of the larger tension in the novel. On the one hand a reference to the Paleozoic Era grounds the image in a thoroughly natural, historical timeline. On the other hand, because it is such an irreducibly foreign era, it resists the reader's ability to comprehend and imagine it. Even this field of flowers seems to have a value that transcends time and the narrative itself. In addition to the sublime aspects of this passage, it is very important to note that nature here is clearly not portrayed as hostile or evil. The sublime loveliness of this image is not shown to be an illusion, but rather a genuine part of the natural world. Thus, nature in

Blood Meridian appears to register a meaning and significance that transcends history and the narrative of the novel, and also is capable of true beauty.

Another way in which McCarthy's prose defies a strictly materialist vision—such as the judge espouses—is through descriptions which reflect the moral corruption of the characters. The judge's Nietzschean pronouncements and the profuse violence of the text inclines readers to interpret nature in the novel as indifferent or hostile to the characters, yet this is simply not the case. The narrator repeatedly describes the world in language which implies a moral order to the universe. Attempting to reconcile the novel's materialism with the narrator's use of transcendent language, Bell claims: "The work of such an idiom [as McCarthy's] shows itself most clearly in a reverence for nature and for the way in which nature corresponds to an imagined condition of being that the facts of life otherwise contradict" (128). Bell astutely observes that nature corresponds to an "imagined condition of being." This "condition of being," I suggest, is one irreducible to material reality, one in which value judgements are not whole defined by the will to power of the victor, as the judge would have us believe. Nature in the text often reflects the state of the Glanton Gang and suggests a moral order to the world external to their individual wills:

> Under the hooves of the horses the alabaster sand shaped itself in whorls strangely symmetric like iron fillings in a field and these shapes flared and drew back again, resonating upon that harmonic ground and then turning to swirl away over the playa. As if the very sediment of things contained yet some residue of sentience. As if in the transit of those riders were a thing so profoundly terrible as to register even to the uttermost granulation of reality. (247)

McCarthy's use of simile simultaneously posits a moral correspondence between nature and the Glanton Gang and also questions that order. The simile reminds us that these are

not empirical observations about the truth of the world, but it also invites the reader to interpret the landscape figuratively. It is this quality to McCarthy's style which caused Frye to write that nature in the novel "is also an elaborate metaphor for an incomprehensible realm that exists beyond human perception and reason" (81). The idea that the riders are so "profoundly terrible" that the universe recoils in disgust implies a moral order to existence, one irreducible to material reality. It is this order that Bell discounts as imagined, and his evidence for this is that the "facts of life otherwise contradict" this condition of being. In this passage, the facts of life are that the "profoundly terrible" Glanton Gang rides on, unabated. This is true—they do ride on unpunished, seemingly in contradiction with the simile's allusion—yet the narrator has evocatively drawn our attention to just how profoundly terrible they are.

Another example of the narrator's allusive language can be seen in the first massacre of the novel when Comanches surprise and kill the first gang the kid joins. The description of this massacre is marked by a sublime otherworldliness. It is not just nature that seems to evoke the numinous, but even violent acts seem to register on some immaterial level, one that is not without a moral center. At first the sublimity of the description of the massacring Indians is found merely in the carnivalesque, grotesque, and chaotic nature of the passage: "A legion of horribles, hundreds in number, half-naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream" (52). The list that follows seems to give a description of every single rider in the party, each unique in his bizarre dress and appearance. While the terror and the compounded image that McCarthy gives us in this massacre party is enough to evoke a sublime emotion in the

reader, the ending of this passage is what truly takes it from the horror of the moment to an otherworldly image:

> . . . all the horsemen's faces gaudy and grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of christian reckoning, screeching and yammering and clothed in smoke like those vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing . . . (53)

The narrator guides the reader to the sublime quality of this image by comparing the Comanches to otherworldly elements in three allusions. First, they are called "death hilarious," alluding to the personification of death himself. Second, the narrator evokes the Christian conception of hell, which he suggests is not horrible enough to rival the Comanches. Third, the conclusion of this passage, as with others that we will see in the novel, describes the image as alien to this world, "like those vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing" (53). In each of these comparisons the emphasis is upon the alien nature of the warriors, as the descriptions allude to forces that transcend the natural world. Steven Frye has described this scene as "apocalyptic," evoking the otherworldliness of the action (76). In another passage which recounts a battle between the gang and Apaches, we can again see this same reference to the otherworldly evil in the Apaches' description: "they augmented by plans in lurid avatars and began to coalesce and there began to appear above them in the dawn-broached sky a hellish likeness of their ranks riding huge and inverted . . . and the high wild cries carrying that flat and barren pan like the cries of souls broke through some misweave in the weft of things into the world below" (109). This passage describes the optical illusion the gang saw of the charging Apaches. The illusion consists of a "hellish" vision of the Apaches, but even the Apaches' cries seem to come from hell or "the world below." The horrible sights and

sounds of these riders reflect their nature and hint at the approaching bloodshed. Additionally, this otherworldly element to the description implies that an order exists in the universe which can identify evil from good, even though that order may itself be elusive. In order to accurately capture the horror of this violence, the narrator has to resort to language of transcendent moral order. Clearly, the "facts of life" in this case, although horribly brutal, do not work in contradiction with the idea of nature demonstrating a correspondence with order in the world; rather, the sublime imagery of these attacks seems to evoke this very order.

Whereas most of the transcendent descriptions in *Blood Meridian* come in the form of similes and oblique allusions, one scene evokes the transcendent more directly, and in Christian imagery. *Blood Meridian* is filled with Judeo-Christian iconography including a ritual sacrifice (219), baptisms (27, 259, and 308), an exorcism (289-290), and a crucifixion (247), but one of the most powerful images occurs when the kid watches a burning tree in the desert:

> It was a lone tree burning on the desert. A heraldic tree that the passing storm had left afire. The solitary pilgrim drawn up before it had traveled far to be here and he knelt in the hot sand and held his numbed hands out while all about in that circle attended companies of lesser auxiliaries routed forth into the inordinate day, small owls that crouched silently and stood from foot to foot and tarantulas and solpugas and vinegarroons and the vicious mygale spiders and beaded lizards with mouths black as a chowdog's, deadly to man, and the little desert basilisks that jet blood from their eyes and the small sandvipers like seemly gods, silent and the same, in Jeda, in Babylon. A constellation of ignited eyes that edged the ring of light all bound in a precarious truce before this torch whose brightness had set back the stars in their sockets. (215)

The image of a burning tree is a clear allusion to the burning bush of Exodus, out of which Yahweh speaks to Moses. The narrator's description of the tree as "lone" and "heraldic" emphasizes numinous nature of the image. What does the burning tree herald,

we are forced to wonder. The kid is described as a "solitary pilgrim," imbuing his wilderness journey with a religious significance. His reaction at the sight of this tree is to kneel before it and hold out his hands, a supplicant. While he kneels, "companies" of animals and insects, most of which are deadly, silently surround the tree in a "precarious truce." The word "companies" and the inclusion of so many deadly animals and insects reminds the reader of the various, violent companies of the novel: White's company, the Glanton Gang, various native American tribes, and the Mexican authorities. Before the burning tree, an allusion to Yahweh, all the violent companies cease their war of wills. The reverence and awe shown by the "auxiliaries" and the kid speaks to the numinous quality of the image. As Old Testament figures would react in the presence of God, so they stare in fear and awe at the fire. Although the kid and the animals do not hear a voice, the tree does seem to communicate some truth about reality and the cosmos. It heralds a truth that forces him and the others to silent awe. The Judeo-Christian imagery of the burning tree, the description of the kid as a "pilgrim," his worshipful kneeling, the peaceful congregation of otherwise deadly animals and insects, and the general numinous quality to the scene herald the presence of the transcendent. For a moment the brutal violence of nature is held transfixed, all wills—from human will to insects—are oriented towards the lone burning tree in the dark wilderness. I do not mean to imply that this tree is a theophany; McCarthy is careful to allow for a rational, materialist explanation for the scene. Yet, as an allusion to one of the most iconic images of western religion, and as a scene which for the moment undoes both the terrible violence of the novel and the will-to-power philosophy which drives this violence, the burning tree is a visible sign that the

judge's transcendence through the will to power is not the only possibility remaining for people in a disenchanted world.

The Kid

It is easy for readers to accept the judge's testimony about the world of the novel as the truth: men do seem to be bent toward violence, the natural world is hostile and evil and must be dominated, and the characters' existence appears to be validated as they assert their will over others. However, the vision of heroic transcendence over the mundane world is challenged in the novel; the kid offers readers an alternative vision of transcendence: "The kid's resistance [to the judge] is implicitly founded on a faith in the transformative power of moral order and meaning, as well as ethics and benevolence, and at the center of these virtues is the question of God and his nature" (Frye 87-88). Instead of the violent will-to-power as the hypergood which provides us existential meaning and value, the kid's silent acts of kindness and his refusal in the end to assert his power over the judge, belies an orientation toward a hypergood in which selflessness and nonviolence are virtues, a hypergood which transcends the material world in its entirety, which even may overcome totalizing violence through silence and passivity.

Like the judge, his orientation towards the transcendent is largely determined by the disenchantment of the world. The kid is raised seemingly without any sense of religious tradition or conviction. And although he lives in a world replete with Christian language and images, they are all in decay. The plausibility structures which made an enchanted world reasonable and a basic part of our social imaginary has been removed. Everywhere we see the ruins of the old structure. The churches he comes across are in ruins. The strongest example of a priest is the expriest, Tobin, whose abandonment of his

order reflects the inability of faith to hold weight in the modern world. The ideal of the old world, in which religious faith and affections were inseparable from the ordinary functions of life and the order of society is ancient history, yet through the ruins of this period and inexplicable moments of being in the narrative, the kid bears witness to the possibility of the transcendent other than the will to power.

At the beginning of the novel the kid's worldview is in almost perfect agreement with the judge's. We are told that he had "a taste for mindless violence," (3) paralleling the judge's belief in the innateness of violence. When he leaves home, the kid immediately begins getting into fights which have an almost spiritual significance to them, as they unite all men: "They fight with fists, with feet, with bottles or knives. All races, all breeds. Men whose speech sounds like the grunting of apes. Men from lands so far and queer that standing over them where they lie bleeding in the mud he feels mankind itself vindicated" (4). The belief that mankind can be "vindicated" through violence mirrors the judge's own proclamation that a life finds its greatest validation through the act of opposing the will of another with existence as the stake. Totalizing, all-or-nothing, violent conflict is the hypergood which validates him and orients his values. Over time the kid matures and comes to question the morality of violence. Specifically, beginning with the massacre of the peaceful Tiguas Indians, the kid exhibits a strong suspicion about the rightness of the judge's worldview and his character in general. He, Toadvine, and Bathcat "confer together" and question the rightness of killing the Tiguas (173). Although they still partake in the violence, the mere fact that they are able to resist the judge rhetorically is significant, for it will lead to greater challenges to the power to will ideology. During this massacre and directly after it, the

kid assists others in a way that is diametrically opposed to the teachings of the judge. McGill gets "skewered through with a lance" and only the kid comes to his aid (157). David Brown gets shot in his thigh with an arrow, "and none would touch it," except for the kid (161). Most notably, when he is chosen to execute the wounded Shelby, he lets the man live and shares his water with him, even after the wounded man tries to steal his gun (208-9). When he helps McGill, Brown, and Shelby, he gains nothing materially, he risks his own life, he helps those who desire to kill him, and he defies the narcissistic logic of the judge. Each of these scenes reflect a "love thy neighbor" and "love thy enemy" ethos that is absent from practically every other character in *Blood Meridian*. While some critics, like Shaviro and Hungerford, have attempted to read these scenes as ultimately trivial, their very uniqueness in the text and the consistency between them indicates that they are extremely significant.

After these episodes, the kid enters into the wilderness to be tested and tempted by Tobin and the judge in a section which evokes the biblical motif of testing in the wilderness. The spiritual test for the kid is whether he will accept the judge's teaching about the primacy and goodness of violence or not. During this journey through the desert, the judge attempts to lead the kid away from the expriest while Tobin continuously urges the kid to kill the judge, but the kid refuses to follow the judge or kill him. When given the perfect chance to shoot the unarmed and naked judge, despite Tobin's insistence, the kid holsters his pistol and remains silent (286). The kid emerges from the wilderness, like Christ, untainted by refusing to enter into violence altogether. After his period of trial, the kid exhibits contrition as he confesses his sins to his jailers and is then baptized (305, 308). From this point until the novel's conclusion the kid is

quite changed; he seems to have completely shed his desire for violence, killing once more, and then only in self-defense. In its place we find a moral maturity and a significant, although ultimately unfulfilled, recognition of divinity and the sacred. Specifically, the kid's adherence to a Christian ethic, his spiritual testing in the wilderness, his confession and baptism in jail, and his procurement of a Bible all seem to indicate an inchoate belief in the Christian faith (312). The voices of Tobin and the kid both challenge the judge, and the kid's moral maturity suggests that humans can live without resorting to the narcissistic and violent philosophy of the judge. More tellingly, the kid acts in accordance to an orientation towards a hypergood which transcends the purely immanent world of human will. The kid's death at the novel's conclusion can be interpreted as evidence that the judge's voice and philosophy ultimately prevail. But it can just as reasonably be read as evidence that his philosophy ultimately fails.

When the kid and the judge meet up in the final chapter, their dialogue is primarily concerned with their vision of the world. Their discussion helps to establish the meaning of the kid's murder and makes the ending representative of the larger dialogue between these two voices and the strategies of transcendence which they represent. McCarthy offers readers two, competing accounts of the transcendent in a post-disenchanted world through the judge and the kid, and forces the reader to wrestle with each is more reasonable and desirable.

The judge, anticipating his act of murder, explains to the kid that it is only if a man embraces warfare entirely that he will be validated: "Only that man who has offered up himself entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart, only that man can

dance" (331). For the judge, the only existentially valid and authentic life is the one of violence. Only in the gamble of all in an ardent assertion of will and being has the judge transcended his contingency and gross materiality, has he taken control of his being-in-the-world and founded it upon the force of his own will, rather than that of another. This statement represents Holden's final argument for his worldview before going to kill the kid. By continuing to attempt to persuade the kid of the truth of his philosophy, the judge frames the coming murder as a confrontation between the two voices. This is not one of the judge's simple murders for pleasure; rather, directly proceeding from a discussion with the kid about the singularity of violence among all sacred acts, the judge kills the kid in order to assert the validity of his belief system. As we shall see however, the kid's death is not necessarily evidence for the privileging of the judge's philosophy.

After the he murders the kid, the judge returns to the saloon and leads the entire place in a debauched dance. The celebratory nature of the novel's conclusion could be interpreted to suggest that the judge, and the strategy of transcendence which he advocates, has overcome his only challenge:

> Towering over them all is the judge and he is naked dancing, his small feet lively and quick and now in doubletime and bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant. He never sleeps, he says. He says he'll never die. He bows to the fiddlers and sashays backward and throws back his head and laughs deep in his throat and he is a great favorite, the judge. He wafts his hate and the lunar dome of his skull passes palely under the lamps and he swings about and takes possession of the of the fiddles and he pirouettes and makes a pass, two passes, dancing and fiddling at once. His feet are light and nimble. He never sleeps. He says that he will never die. He dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die. (335)

The movement of this passage and the repeated assertion that the judge will never sleep or die, and that he is a "great favorite" all imply that he and what he represents ultimately

dominate the world of the novel and will continue to do so indefinitely; however, a close reading of this passage shows not that the judge is the eternal victor, but only that he believes himself to be. The only information that the narrator verifies is that the judge is a great and popular dancer. Every time it is claimed that he does not sleep and that he will not die the claim is modified with "he says." The repeated use of "he says" undermines the validity of these statements and forces the reader to view the judge not as a mythical creature with immortality, but as a human who is completely convinced of his worldview's veracity. Of course, it is entirely in keeping with his philosophy of will that the judge asserts his own greatness, his own victory at the novel's conclusion. According to the judge, "there is room on the stage for one beast and one alone. All others are destined for a night that is eternal and without name" (331). The judge's belief in the power of warfare and the narrator's repeated use of "he says" both make it unnecessary for the reader to interpret this final scene as a validation of the judge's philosophy. The reader's interpretation of this scene depends entirely upon which vision of transcendence he or she accepts as true: the will-to-power as self-transcendence over being in its totality, or the transcendent as an external good, irreducible to will or being.

If we assume that the judge's worldview is correct, then we must also conclude that when he kills the kid he invalidates the worldview the kid represents. If the only kind person in the text (the only person able to resist the intellectual power of the judge) dies, what hope can there be for any opposition to Holden? In this way, the kid's death can be read as the defeat of not only a Christian ethic, but any system of ideas that oppose the notion of war and violence as the defining feature of existence, as the single strategy of transcendence. It must be noted here that earlier in the novel the judge states that "a

man falling dead in a duel is not thought thereby to be proven in error as to his views. His very involvement in such a trial gives evidence of a new and broader view" (250). This statement might seem to indicate that the kid's death does not invalidate his worldview; however, when the kid is murdered it is not in a duel. The kid does not concede to enter into "such a trial," but rather he is attacked surreptitiously and in the most inappropriate places for battle. This difference is significant. If the kid had died in the desert during his wilderness testing in an attempt to kill the judge, then his death would not signify that his values and ideas were wrong, for the act of entering into a duel would be a validation of the judge's vision of transcendence through the will to power (which is precisely why the kid does not fight the judge in the wilderness). Therefore, by refusing to fight, the kid and his accompanying vision of transcendence are nullified based on the judge's philosophy.

However, if we assume as a premise that the kid's vision of transcendence is valid, then the protagonist's death at the conclusion does not invalidate his worldview at all. The kid's voice comes to represent a belief in a non-violent solution to conflict which is directly informed by a Christian ethic of brotherhood. If he adopts, or even if he merely begins to haltingly adopt Christ as a model of the good, this orients his values in such a way as to transcend the logic and material force of the world. His identification with Christianity near the end of the novel, particularly as evidenced in his wilderness testing, confession, baptism, and possession of a Bible, all imply that he has the beginnings of a religious faith. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, death is not seen as final, or as an intellectual defeat. Quite to the contrary, a sacrificial death bears with it a tremendous spiritual significance. The kid's own understanding of this fact is

demonstrated in his willingness to help others when it endangered or cost him greatly (specifically Brown, Shelby, and the old Mexican woman whom "he could not leave . . . or she would die" [315]). In light of this, the kid's death at the hands of the judge takes the form of a kind of martyrdom; the judge kills the kid for refusing to recant his belief in brotherly love and enter into violence. Far from invalidating his worldview, the kid's death appears to confirm his faith. In addition, if we accept the kid's voice as truth, then the judge's celebration after killing the kid is hubristic; through his martyrdom, the kid transcends the violent, corrupt world and the consuming will of the judge. While the judge may interpret his murder of the kid as a step toward the domination of all of existence under his will, the kid's refusal to accept and act upon this vision of existential validation allows him to in fact transcend the nihilistic logic of the will to power. This is notable, as McCarthy has repeatedly stated that he is very suspicious of the idea that humankind can progress or improve itself. In such a dark view of human nature, the only hope for goodness must be found not in acts of will (in willing and forcing ourselves to a better world), but in selflessness, in faithfully acting upon goodness, despite its irrationality in light of the world. Thus, if we assume from the outset that a sacrificial abnegation of violence and power transcends the nihilistic logic of a strictly material, immanent world, then the kid's refusal to kill the judge and his murder are signs of a faith in a vision of goodness which is irreducible to the material world and instrumental reason.

A significant part of the artfulness of *Blood Meridian* is McCarthy's unflinching depiction of human evil and his persuasive justification for that evil through the life and words of the judge. But McCarthy also offers an alternative vision, embodied in the kid.

Based on the facts of the novel and the competing visions of transcendence which McCarthy depicts, it is possible to see either the judge's will to power, materialist philosophy or the kid's inchoate faith in the otherness of transcendence and the goodness of sacrifice as ultimately winning out. I do not think McCarthy has left readers without the ability to discern between these accounts of transcendence; however, the reader cannot adjudicate based on instrumental reason. Instead, we have only recourse to aesthetic judgements. Whose account of transcendence is more beautiful? The judge's worldview has the preponderance of evidence, yet the kid's hints at a way of being in the world which is not primordially violent and coercive. While his voice lacks the eloquence and support which the judge's has, the kid's vision of a transcendence which is located outside of the individual will is far more attractive.

The Absurdity of Hope in Cormac McCarthy's The Road

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If readers and critics often struggle to find hope or goodness in *Blood Meridian*, *The Road* presents an even greater challenge. Certainly, the father and son relationship in the latter novel and the boy's precocious morality are far more uplifting than anything found in *Blood Meridian*; however, the horrors of *Blood Meridian* are not universal or eternal (unless we believe judge's Holden's claims to immortality), whereas there is no reasonable hope the world will get any better in *The Road*. There is no reason to think that goodness exists elsewhere or even could exist. McCarthy may depict the depths of human evil and thirst for violence in *Blood Meridian*, but in *The Road* he depicts a world

with no hope for tomorrow, no culture or institutions or traditions or communities to define our lives and orient us, no future to justify pain and suffering, no framework to understand a conception of the transcendent. The judge preaches the ultimacy of existence to his devotees, but he and the Glanton Gang willingly wager their being; for the man and the boy, existence and its impending termination is the only question. *The Road* is unlike any of the other texts we have treated thus far, because in it the historical reality of secularism is trivial and irrelevant. Whatever strategies and visions of transcendence culture had devised to order and validate modern life were destroyed with that culture. In this way, McCarthy positions readers in an intriguing hypothetical situation: when all traditional hypergoods have been destroyed, abandoned, or forgotten, what remains? Put differently, what hypergood might satisfy and drive a father to keep his boy alive in this world? What we will discover is that McCarthy advocates for a transcendent hope which defies materialism and the nihilism which has dominated the post-apocalyptic world.

Readers of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* face a challenging thematic and philosophical balancing act: if they acknowledge the novel's weightiness, they must reckon with its stark, unrelenting fatalism and its profound and yet complex hope for a better future. This is a world where the transcendent is an unintelligible luxury or a siren, calling its victim to death. From the opening lines we see a world bereft of civilization, beauty, justice, warmth, food; a world with little-to-no vegetation or animal life; a world with no foreseeable future for humans; a world which can "[n]ot be made right again" (McCarthy 287). Yet within these first few pages the narrator also introduces us to one of the most intimate and loving father and son relationships in American literature.

Additionally, as the critic Rune Graulund notes, the novel ends with a *deus ex machina* when the boy meets a family of friendly survivors, "validating the father's words [concerning goodness] in physical as well as conceptual form," contrary to all that McCarthy has led us to expect (76). The actions of the main characters are driven by some logic that is utterly incongruous to their material realities. At the heart of McCarthy's novel resides a paradox, irrationality, or at the very least a tremendous complexity: how can readers reconcile the ending, which is hopeful about the future, with the fatalism that dominates the text?

In the typescript copy of the first draft of *The Road*, housed among the Cormac McCarthy Papers in The Wittliff Collections at Texas State University, San Marcos, McCarthy wrote a note which implies that the novel might have a specific philosophical source: "(Kierkegaard: Abraham and Isaac)." This note appears to have no relationship to the immediate text surrounding it, which contains fairly standard McCarthy descriptions of a destroyed civilization and nature; however, the allusion to Kierkegaard does have many significant implications for how we understand the role of hope in *The Road*. This note is a specific allusion to Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, a philosophical and theological text which wrestles with the question: why is Abraham considered a great man of faith for his willingness to sacrifice his son? The similarities between Abraham and Isaac and the man and the boy in *The Road*, particularly as the former are read in Kierkegaard's work, can help to resolve this paradox of hope and the transcendent ideal which orients it at the center of McCarthy's novel. Kierkegaard argues that Abraham's faith was completely dependent on him simultaneously believing that he had been commanded by God to sacrifice his son and that God will not require him to

sacrifice his son. The father in *The Road* displays a similar absurd faith in goodness and the future which can be best explained in relation to Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*.

Many of the scholarly articles written on *The Road* have attempted to address the issue of hope. Shelley L. Rambo has claimed that, "McCarthy catches the reader in a schizophrenic, and distinctly American, post-apocalyptic crisis of meaning: between the craving for a happy ending (for resolution, for redemption) and the recognition of its impossibility (there is, in Christian terms, no resurrection ahead)" (101). Rambo is right to draw the connection between a "happy ending" and "redemption." A good ending can redeem all of the past, imbuing each moment with meaning and significance, but in *The Road* this is impossible, according to Rambo. Donovan Gwinner claims that "The novel places readers in the position of knowing *and* not knowing what to make of an apparently hopefully resolution that cannot fully overcome the pervasive images and declarations of dissolution and hellish desolation" (emphasis original, 138-9), thus coming down in favor of the nihilistic reading while still acknowledging the presence of hope. Gwinner argues that the father and son operate on a kind of pragmatist ethic, but the father's confidence that "goodness will find the boy," which it does, confounds this reading, leading him to conclude that, "there is no pragmatically satisfying answer to the question we might put to the father: how do you know?" since there is no rational reason to believe in such goodness (148). Similarly, Dana Phillips forcefully makes the case that, "The world McCarthy describes in *The Road* seems better suited to archaeological than theological treatment" (184). He places the significance of the novel's conclusion on the final paragraph, which he interprets to represent the "deep time explored by the geologist and the paleontologist," rather than the boy's rescue (187). In order to perform this nihilistic

and entirely immanent reading, Phillips denies the hopefulness that so prominently defines the text.[8] Rune Graulund shows that the novel can sustain several hopeful readings such that we can "invest our hopes *either* in nature, in humanity or in God" (76). However, he claims that we cannot simply choose one of these readings, because to do so would be to "ignore quite a few signs to the contrary" (76). Ashley Kunsa makes the case that the redemption found in the novel is ultimately a linguistic redemption: "the novel, I argue, is best understood as linguistic journey toward redemption, a search for meaning and pattern in seemingly meaningless world—a search that, astonishingly, succeeds" (58-59). Each of these articles offers a way to reconcile *The Road*'s nihilism and its hope, the reality of the impossibility of transcendence and its very presence, but in order to achieve this reconciliation it is necessary for the scholars to diminish the significance of the novel's hopeful ending. For Rambo, the novel "testifies to the 'unmaking of the world'" but does not have a "happy ending" (113). Graulund acknowledges the presence of hope but is unsure of its nature or significance, concluding that the novel "opens up the possibility that hope *might* matter" (emphasis original, 76). Kunsa acknowledges the significance of hope but locates it in the novel's "linguistic journey," and thus does not fully consider what other forms redemption might take in the novel (59). Allen Josephs has given a thorough and compelling account of *The Road*'s case for the existence of God, and therefore of the hope which concludes the novel. Josephs writes, "The critics who say that Parka-man is a deus ex machina are right, and that is precisely the point" (27). But while Josephs demonstrates that there is "more evidence [for the existence of God] than the negative case, and more convincingly," readers are still left with the challenge of reconciling the evidence for such a God with the evidence to the contrary

(24). Matthew Mullins's "Hunger, Apocalypse, and Modernity" offers a reading of transcendence and secularism in *The Road.* He argues that "the omnipresence of hunger" reveals the transcendent quality to our being in the text (82). Unlike my own argument, however, Mullins claims that, "Rather than necessarily equating transcendence with God, McCarthy suggests a kind of human transcendence, whose source lies beyond the immediacy of relationally" (85). Cooper also argues that the transcendent meaning in the novel comes from human sources. Cooper and Mullins are right to note the transcendent nature of this meaning, but they situate it firmly in the immanent. As I will demonstrate, the transcendent may have an immanent presence in the boy, but its source is not human ("Cormac" Cooper 230, Mullins 85). Reading *The Road* in light of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* allows us to understand the nature of this *deus ex machina* and the hope that ends the novel without denying the stark horrors that fill the story.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Søren Kierkegaard works through the question of how the biblical Abraham can be considered a hero of faith for his willingness to sacrifice his son. Kierkegaard addresses this question through the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio. The basic challenge with understanding Abraham's faith, according to de Silentio, involves accepting the horrifying and paradoxical nature of the patriarch's faith and actions: "The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac—but precisely in this contradiction is the anxiety that can make a person sleepless, and yet without this anxiety Abraham is not who he is" (30). For de Silentio, we cannot understand Abraham and his faith if we in any way minimize or excuse his actions. It is necessary for us to believe that Abraham knew that God commanded him to sacrifice his son and that God would not take his son.

God's command was unethical (murder), but right and good as a command of God. God had promised Abraham a seed, a child named Isaac who would make Abraham the father of great nation (Gen. 17). God also asked Abraham to sacrifice the very son who was promised to fulfill this prophecy. This would require a faith that transcended human understanding.

In the opening section of his book, Kierkegaard's speaker explores several ways in which Abraham could have avoided the full absurdity of faith. De Silentio tells us that Abraham, "did not doubt, he did not look in anguish to the left and to the right, he did not challenge heaven with his prayers. . . . he knew . . . that no sacrifice is too severe when God demands it—and he drew the knife" (22). He could have doubted that God would truly ask him for such a severe sacrifice, but he did not doubt, "he drew the knife." He also speculates that Abraham could have doubted that God would save his son, and instead have sacrificed himself (20–21). By doing this, Abraham would be fulfilling his ethical duty: "In ethical terms, Abraham's relation to Isaac is quite simply this: the father shall love the son more than himself" (57). But, de Silentio reminds us that this is not what Abraham did, and had Abraham sacrificed himself he would not have been considered a great man of faith (21). A third possibility is that Abraham might have resigned himself to lose his son. In this way, Abraham could have gone to the mountain fully knowing that he would be required to sacrifice his son, and having faith that this was the right action, but also failing to have faith that God would not demand this sacrifice. This position has the appearance of a kind of spiritual maturity, where one might say, "[now] all is lost, God demands Isaac, I sacrifice him and along with him all my joy—yet God is love and continues to be that for me" (35). But this resignation is not

the kind of faith de Silentio finds in Abraham. De Silentio argues that had he been in Abraham's position, he would have chosen to resign himself in just this way, but the result would have been that he would not have "loved Isaac as Abraham loved him" (35). To have Abraham's faith requires both a profound love for Isaac, a love which would not kill, and a commitment to obeying God in faith. After demonstrating the inadequacy of these alternative responses to Abraham's situation, de Silentio describes what Abraham actually did:

> But what did Abraham do? He arrived neither too early or too late. He mounted the ass, he rode slowly down the road. During all this time he had faith, he had faith that God would not demand Isaac of him, and yet he was willing to sacrifice him if it was demanded. He had faith by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the question, and it was certainly absurd that God, who required it of him, should in the next moment rescind the requirement. He climbed the mountain, and even in the moment when the knife gleamed he had faith—that God would not require Isaac. (35–36)

As far as reason or "human calculation" was concerned, Abraham's faith was absurd, and we might add that it was also criminal. For de Silentio, however, Abraham was justified by his faith precisely because it was absurd, because he knew he must obey God's command to sacrifice his son and yet he had faith that God would not require him to sacrifice his son. Abraham's faith was absurd because it required a faith which transcended reason, experience, and articulation. It was inexplicable. In McCarthy's novel, the father's confidence that his son will have a future worth living for reveals that Abraham's absurd faith is at work in the man.

Within the first few pages of *The Road*, we learn that the father believes that he has a God-given duty to care for his son and that his son is a living sign of God's presence, an incarnation of the transcendent in an otherwise impoverished world. His

divine calling creates an ethical dilemma for the father, since in the world they inhabit it appears that the kindest act a father can do for his child is to kill him or her before the child suffers too greatly. The father's similarities to Abraham are evident in the conflict between his ethical obligation to spare his son from enduring severe suffering and his duty to preserve his son according to his divine calling. The narrator tells us that in a world with no perceivable future and no order, the only thing the father can know is his relationship to his son: "He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (5). The word "warrant" here most likely refers to a "[j]ustifying reason or ground for an action, belief, or feeling" ("Warrant," def. 8a). In an earlier draft of the novel the use of this word is a bit clearer: "He'd no notion of God except to see in the evidence of his absconding the clearest argument for his existence. That and the child. The child is all the warrant that I hold, he said" (*The Road – first draft*). The question arises then, what is the father warranted to do? What does the son's existence justify for the father? It is not merely that the father is obligated to care for this child; it is also that the child's existence authorizes and justifies his father's world. This point is further clarified by the following sentence in which we are told that the boy is the word of God, or if he is not, then "God never spoke." At the very least then, for the father, the child warrants the existence of God. The boy authorizes his father to live in a way that is consistent with the belief in God, to live with a particular vision of the transcendent. In fact, the son seems to be a divine incarnation to the father. The man calls his son "[s]omething all but unaccountable" (48), a "tabernacle" (273), he calls the boy's head a "[g]olden chalice, good to house a god" (75), and he implies to a stranger whom they meet on road that the boy is "a god" (172). In each of these cases, it is the

boy's irreducibility to his material being in the world, the fact that he is "unaccountable," which makes him transcendent. Schaub gets at this transcendence when he writes that, "*The Road* is unique in locating the basis for meaning in the father's love for his son, and even suggesting that this meaning transcends the father's efforts to affirm and protect his son's life" (153). Because of his innocence, goodness, and youth, the boy's existence is incongruous with the world he inhabits, and so he becomes for the father an embodied sign of God's presence, a warrant for God and his goodness.

Since the son is the living warrant for the existence of God, the father feels duty-bound before God to care for him. After a scene in which a cannibal attempts to take his son and the father is forced to kill the man, the father explains to his boy, "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you" (77). Just as God chose Abraham to be the father of a great nation, and that election, or appointment, entailed a promise, the man in *The Road* believes himself to be appointed by God to care for his son, which also entails a promise with a moral obligation: it must be right and good to keep his son alive even in a world which appears to offer no future of goodness. As de Silentio tells us, Abraham's promise led him to an absurd faith because he was forced to believe that God would not take his son from him, since his son was the fulfillment of that promise. Likewise, the man's appointment to care for the boy leads him to an absurd hope: that it would be better to keep his boy alive despite the apparent hopelessness of the world. Readers might think that it would be justifiable for the father to "take care of" his son by killing him; however, if the man chose to murder his son in order to fulfill his divine appointment, then he would not be displaying the kind of faith that Kierkegaard, through de Silentio, finds in Abraham. Killing his son would

amount to Abraham taking his own life in place of his son, since both actions show that the individual does not have faith that God will provide as he promised. The man's belief that he has been appointed to care for his son is also a belief in the goodness of God, because an appointment to preserve the life of his son is only reasonable if there is some better future or good to preserve it for. Thus, this divine appointment is the man's hypergood, and it orientates his view of the world, the future, and God.

While the father's belief in his appointment to care for his son functions as a hypergood, his experiences in the world lead him to see that fatalism is reasonable and ethical, forcing him into the absurd position of having faith that his son will have a bright future while also knowing that no such future appears to be possible, a faith which mirrors Abraham's. Perhaps the most articulate description of the characters' hopeless condition comes from the man's wife in the scene where she informs him that she intends to commit suicide:

> You have two bullets and then what? You cant protect us. You say you would die for us but what good is that? I'd take him with me if it werent for you. You know I would. It's the right thing to do.
>
> You're talking crazy.
>
> No, I'm speaking the truth. Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen. But I cant. I cant. (56)

This scene, which occurs fairly early in the text, establishes the hopeless situation the characters face. Inevitably, they will be raped, killed, and eaten. While the reader at this early point in the novel might wish to write off the wife's pessimism as an exaggeration, the novel soon substantiates her prediction by presenting us with horrible images of violence: starving, naked people trapped in a basement to be eaten limb by limb; roaming bands of cannibals with sex slaves; and a pregnant mother who eats her newborn child.

In this world, there is not only no perceivable hope for the future, but even more unsettling, the end that will inevitably come appears horrible beyond imagining.

This exchange between the husband and wife is framed by language of reason and ethics, which serves to highlight the absurdity of the father's hope in his son's future. Even more, it parallels Abraham's unethical and ineffable decision to murder his son at God's request. The wife claims that the "right thing to do" is to kill the son so that he will not have to suffer the inevitable, horrible death that awaits him. Her language implies that she is making the ethical judgment. The husband responds by calling her ideas "crazy." He finds whatever ethical system she uses to come to this conclusion deeply flawed. She replies that she is "speaking the truth," as if the brute facts of their situation clearly and unambiguously support her ethical decision. She believes that the only two options are suicide or rape and murder: "You talk about taking a stand but there is no stand to take" (57). Based on what they know about the world after the disaster, there is no reasonable response except suicide. Before going off to kill herself, she tells him that if he is to survive he must live for the boy:

> The one thing I can tell you is that you won't survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far. . . . As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart.
> He didn't answer.
> You have no argument because there is none. (57)

A short while after this passage, the man thinks to himself, "And she was right. There was no argument" (58). Although the man tries to persuade his wife not to kill herself, her words ultimately leave him speechless. Much like Judge Holden's words, her logic cannot be argued with.

There are a few crucial insights to be gleaned from this conversation. First, McCarthy allows the wife to make the most rational and ethical argument, such that the man must concede the validity of her reasoning. It is unethical for him to keep his son alive under these conditions, just as it was unethical for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Yet, also like Kierkegaard's Abraham, the father's decision to head south with the boy represents a "teleological suspension of the ethical. As the single individual he became higher than the universal" (Kierkegaard 66). The father's belief that he has been "appointed . . . by God" to take care of his son by preserving his life is higher than the universal ethical obligation to keep the boy from suffering needlessly, a fact that will become more evident when we discuss the novel's conclusion (77). In this teleological suspension of the ethical, it was impossible for Abraham to speak to others about his obligation to sacrifice Isaac, according to de Silentio (133); similarly, the father has no response to his wife's argument—he cannot articulate why he must preserve his son's life. Second, her rational ethics inevitably lead to nihilism, as she longs with all her heart for "eternal nothingness." It is important that readers do not reject the wife's argument here or suppose that the man is able to do so. On the contrary, the man, at least at certain points in the text, agrees with his wife that their situation is not only hopeless but also horrible. What is striking is that he, unlike his wife, refuses to accept suicide as a solution.

Throughout *The Road*, the man expresses doubts concerning God's existence, general hopelessness concerning the future, and the conviction that his life is a lie. Early in the novel, the man wakes one morning coughing, foreshadowing his death at the end of the story, and questions whether or not God, or at least a good God exists: "He raised his

face to the paling day. Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God" (11–12). The father goes through several possibilities concerning the deity. God might or might not exist. If he does exist, there may or may not be an afterlife in which the man may meet this God. If he could meet this God, he might not want to, since it is not clear that this God's character is good, that he has a "soul." The horrific tragedy of daily life forces the man to question God at every turn. In addition to his doubts about God, the man agrees with his wife that their existence is futile and will end badly: "The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The black dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which sorrow it" (130). The father describes the vision of a profoundly antagonistic and malicious world, one in which he and his son are merely hunted animals living on borrowed time. One can hardly imagine a more nihilistic worldview. In light of this stark perception of existence, it is easy to understand why the man regrets finding the bunker with supplies that saves them from starvation at the last minute: "Even now some part of him wished they'd never found this refuge. Some part of him always wished it to be over" (154). Despite his insistence that they continue south on the road, the man believes that someday soon it will be over, and in his weaker moments he agrees with his wife that it would be better for the end to come soon. In moments like these, it is evident that the father agrees with his dead wife's nihilism. Ultimately, their journey to the south

is a lie; their death, probably by violent means, is inevitable; they are alone in a brutal, antagonistic world; and God's presence and goodness are uncertain.

Kierkegaard's account of Abraham's faith truly begins to elucidate *The Road* when we consider the novel's nihilism in relation to the profound sense of hope seen particularly in the man. There are two primary manifestations of the father's hope in *The Road*: his constant reassurance to his son that everything will be "okay" and his insistence that they keep going south. Significantly, both of these manifestations of hope are blatantly irrational. The father consistently comforts his son in situations where things are not okay, where he does not know whether or not they are safe. Once during their journey the characters hear sharp cracks around them and the father informs his son that "[i]t's just a tree falling" and that "[a]ll the trees in the world are going to fall sooner or later. But not on us" (35). The son asks his father how he knows that the trees will not fall on them. The man replies, "I just know" (35). Later in the novel the pair run out of food and the son believes that they are going to die of starvation:

> Why do you think we're going to die?
> We dont have anything to eat.
> We'll find something.
> Okay. (101)

In yet another situation where they have run out of food and are desperate, the father and son find a house that they suspect might contain some food. The son, however, is terribly frightened that if they go to the house they will find cannibals who will eat them:

> There's no one there. I promise.
> How do you know?
> I just know.
> They could be there.
> No they're not. It will be okay. (203)

In each of these passages the father offers his son assurance which he cannot possibly justify based on his knowledge or experience. The facts are that since all the trees in the world are falling one very well might fall on them; once they run out of food they might never find any food again; and given the horrific encounters they have with cannibals, it is not unreasonable to expect any given house to be a trap. The father's optimism could be easily explained as merely a desire to keep his son alive, but *The Road* does not permit for such an easy explanation. If the father's hopeful encouragement is merely a lie to keep his son alive, this only pushes back the question of hope one step. We then must explain the hope that would drive this father to keep his son alive in such a hopeless world. Keep him alive to what end?

There is also a sense that the man acknowledges his own irrational hopefulness. Right before they reach the coast, the father recognizes that he has put false hope in what they might find there: "He knew that he was placing hopes where he'd no reason to. He hoped it would be brighter where for all he knew the world grew darker daily" (213). This passage demonstrates that the father's reassurance to his son is not entirely duplicitous. As Gwinner states, "The man accepts that there is no basis for belief; he believes anyway" (146). Just as he irrationally comforts his son by saying that they will find food, he appears to assure himself irrationally (with "no reason") that they will find a better place on the coast. In both cases he knows that the world is growing increasingly hostile, and yet he hopes for a brighter future. It is precisely in this irrational hope that we can begin to see the parallels to Kierkegaard's conception of faith.

Two contradictory perceptions of the world and the future can be identified in the father. The father is convinced from the outset that the world is growing darker, there is

no future, and they will both die a frightening and horrible death. This conviction is observable in the father's agreement that there is no argument against his wife's nihilism; her nihilism is reasonable and ethical. It is also evidenced in the above-cited passage where the man states that he knows that he has "no reason" for his hope. Yet, at the same time the father carries a hope that he and his son will find some good in the world and that they will both be taken care of: no trees will fall on them, they will have enough to eat, they will not be caught by cannibals. The novel is careful to frame these contradictory perspectives as irrational, and they are irrational precisely because the father believes them both simultaneously. We could interpret this irrational hope as a testament to the human desire to survive, but given the fact that the novel leaves us no real room to hope for any meaningful, sustained human survival, this hope would have to be a testament to an empty gesture towards the desire for human survival, a futile and cruel gesture at that. Similarly, we could follow Erik J. Wienlenberg and see this irrationality as a necessity in order for the father and son to continue enjoying their loving relationship, which is the one phenomenon that can give meaning to existence, but in such a brutal world, can the feeling of "deep connection" attained by "working together toward a common goal" and learning from one another really justify the horrors and suffering that the boy experiences or risks experiencing (Wienlenberg 10)? What beauty, goodness, or rectitude could there be in risking a boy's life for the sake of the mere idea of human survival or in order to feel "deep connection"? By understanding the boy 's role as the fulcrum of his father's hope, we can begin to see that the man's irrational hope is not an empty gesture towards human survival, nor a psychological cover to allow a for feeling of "deep connection" through shared experiences, nor is it a blind leap of faith in

some inarticulate form of goodness; rather, the son's function as an Isaac figure reveals that the man's hope is strikingly similar to Abraham's faith in that they both receive a promise or appointment from God concerning their son and are faced with a contradictory command or situation which forces them into an absurd position. Abraham absurdly had faith that God had demanded his son as a sacrifice and that God would preserve his son. Similarly, the father absurdly has faith that God will preserve his son for a better future while also believing that there is no possibility for a better future. Right before the father dies, he sees his son, "standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle" (273). The man has hope in a future for his son, but is incapable of conceiving of how such a future could come about. He believes in an ineffable, incomprehensible future of goodness, because of the warrant of his son. In addition to the father's absurd faith in his son's future, we can see further similarities to Abraham in the man's decision not to kill his son.

In an inversion of Abraham's test of faith, the father in *The Road* must make the absurd and unethical decision to preserve the life of his son. While the father faces many ethical dilemmas through the course of his journey, the most central and constant dilemma is whether or not he should kill his son to prevent him from suffering greater harm. Whereas the test of Abraham's faith was whether or not he would sacrifice Isaac knowing that God would preserve his son, the test of the father's faith is whether or not he will preserve his son's life knowing that there is no possibility for a better future. The symbol of the former's test was a knife, which he held over his son, committed to obeying the Lord in an act of absurd faith. The symbol of the latter's test is the gun he carries which can take the life of his son. For Kierkegaard, Abraham's faith is displayed when

he raised the knife above his son without looking to the right or left, and, as we shall see, the man in *The Road* displays this faith when he chooses not to raise the gun to kill his son.

Near the beginning of the novel the man has a gun with two bullets, and after spending one bullet to defend his son against a cannibal, he is left with just one bullet which he intends to use to kill his son in the event that they are caught by cannibals or if the father is about to die and leave the boy alone in the world. The gun is a constant source of anxiety for the father, who often wonders to himself if he can take his son's life "[w]hen the time comes" (29). After the father kills the roadrat and he and his son flee, fearing the dead man's cohort, the father muses, "A single round left in the revolver. You will not face the truth. You will not" (68). There are several truths the father could be referring to here: his wife's truth that the only reasonable and ethical action is to take his son's life; the truth that the future holds no real possibility of being brighter; or the truth that the father is incapable of using the final round to kill his son. In fact, the father cannot face any of these truths, although he knows them to be truths. Later, after the father realizes that his son is incapable of committing suicide if the need should arise, he again questions whether or not he can do what needs to be done:

> Can you do it? When the time comes? When the time comes there will be no time. Now is the time. Curse God and die. What if it doesnt fire? It has to fire. What if it doesnt fire? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock? Is there such a being within you of which you know nothing? Can there be? Hold him in your arms. Just so. The soul is quick. Pull him toward you. Kiss him. Quickly. (114)

In this passage the relationship between killing his son and hope is clearly observable. To kill his son would be to "curse God and die," a reference the Book of Job. In the story of Job, his wife encourages him to curse God and die since his suffering continues to

increase and has no foreseeable end. As the allusion implies, to kill his son and commit suicide would be for the man to attest to his wife's, like Job's, belief that God is not good and that there is no better tomorrow waiting. Conversely, the choice not to kill his son and himself is an absurd act of faith that God is good and tomorrow will be a better day. It is a faith in a transcendent good, incomprehensible in the world. This faith, as we recall, is based on the belief that since God has appointed him to care for his son, then God will provide a good future for his son, just as Abraham's faith was based on God's promise that through Isaac he would create a great nation. Other than the presence and goodness of his son, who is for the father a warrant of God's goodness, the man has no reason to prolong his suffering and await a cruel death. For both Abraham and the father, faith comes from a trust in a promise made by God in the past concerning a future of hope. The father's choice throughout the novel not to take the life of his son is a demonstration of his faith, which is absurd, but by far, the most compelling display of faith comes when the father is about to die and he must make his decision whether or not to take his son with him.

The culmination of Abraham's test was the moment in which he had to raise his knife to kill his son, and similarly, the culmination of the father's test is when he has to choose not to kill his son, knowing that the boy would be left alone in the world. From the start of the novel readers are given clues that the father has some kind of illness, perhaps tuberculosis, and will soon die. He intends to kill the boy before his own illness takes his life so that they can be together in death, and at one point promises his son never to leave him (113). When the time does finally come, however, the man chooses to let his son live:

> Just take me with you. Please.
> I cant.
> Please, Papa.
> I cant. I cant hold my dead son in my arms. I thought I could but I cant.
> You said you wouldnt ever leave me.
> I know. I'm sorry. You have my whole heart. You always did. (279)

Because this scene is so emotionally powerful readers can easily overlook the gravity of the man's actions. Although his son has learned many survival skills during their time on the road, the brute fact is that the man chooses to leave his son alone, with little food, in a hostile environment, and in a world where there is no foreseeable hope for human recovery. This is child abandonment, in a war zone, during a famine, after a natural disaster, at the end of the world. And at this point in the narrative the father has less reason to hope that his son will find a better future to the south, not more. They have made it to the coast and traveled a considerable distance to the south without finding any other "good guys," significant sources of food, or indications that life might be better further down the road. Gwinner notes, "Every character other than the father and son is either a threat or a likely burden, so until the veteran appears, there is no model for the 'good guys' besides the protagonists themselves" (148). By choosing not to kill his son, the father makes the ultimate act of faith, risking the only meaningful, valuable, and important thing in the world to him. He has faith that God will preserve his son and that the boy's future will be worth living, although he has no logical reason to believe this other than the boy and what he warrants. When the boy asks his dying father about the well-being of another little boy that he allegedly saw earlier in the novel, his father assures him that he will be okay in a statement that is surely spoken in regards to his son as well as the boy in question: "Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again" (281). If read in light of Kierkegaard's understanding of Abraham's faith, these

lines from the father suggest that he is not being naïve or deceptive when he tells his son that goodness will find him; rather, he is acting on absurd faith, trusting in the goodness of God without denying the evidence of the world's end. Perhaps what is most compelling about this comparison is that the father's faith in a future worth living for is validated, just as Abraham's faith, by a sudden and unexpected intervention.

Three days after his father dies, the boy is approached by a "good guy," seemingly saving the boy from a horrible fate in a scene that mirrors Isaac's salvation from sacrifice. At the last second, God spares Abraham from sacrificing his son by providing a ram as a substitute sacrifice. This intervention is a testament to Abraham's faith. In a strikingly similar way, the man's absurd faith that his son will be taken care of by "goodness" is justified when a family of "good" people take him in. This family has a little girl, and it is possible that she and the boy could help humanity make a new start. In this sense, the boy could again parallel the biblical Isaac by becoming the seed of a great nation. Regardless of whether or not the boy goes on to help reverse the process of the world dimming away, it is clear that the father's absurd faith in the transcendent is validated and his son has been cared for by "goodness," the God whom he warranted for his father.

What then are we to do with the hopelessness and desolation of the preceding pages? Put differently, how does McCarthy acknowledge the reality of corruption and decay in light of the transcendent. Does the miraculous appearance of the "good guys" negate the horrors experienced by the father and son? Does it make the decision to keep the boy alive ethical and rational, contra the words of the mother? In his exegesis of Abraham and Isaac's story, de Silentio models for us how to reconcile hopelessness in *The Road* and its unsettlingly hopeful ending:

> If I were to speak about [Abraham], I would first of all describe the pain of the ordeal. To that end, I would, like a leech, suck all the anxiety and distress and torment out of a father's suffering in order to describe what Abraham suffered, although under it all he had faith. I would point out that the journey lasted three days and a good part of the fourth; indeed, these three and a half days could be infinitely longer than the few thousand years that separate me from Abraham. (53)

This "anxiety and distress and torment" is Abraham's experience living with the knowledge that he is obligated to kill his son—that his son has no future—and that to kill his son is unethical yet commanded by God. That God intervenes in the last moment does not diminish the horror Abraham faced or untangle his ethical dilemma. To faithfully speak of Abraham, de Silentio has to dramatically recount the patriarch's torturous journey and his anxiety over the religious duty to sacrifice his son and the ethical duty to preserve his son; otherwise, Abraham is no longer a hero of faith. In the same way, our reading of *The Road* must stress the "anxiety and distress and torment" felt by the father as he lives with the obligation to keep his son alive and the knowledge that this obligation is unethical because the boy has no foreseeable future except tremendous suffering. And although the novel ends hopefully and the father's absurd faith in the future is validated, the world's end was no less real and certain to the man than God's command to sacrifice Isaac was to Abraham. In the novel, McCarthy offers a manifestation of the transcendent incarnated in the boy which does not deny or neglect the the reality of the immanent, suffering, or the temporal. Thus, we can reconcile the nihilism and hope in the novel not by dismissing either, but by seeing them as the absurd conditions of the man's trial. This still leaves us with the *deus ex machina* ending that offends our sensibilities. Let me suggest that it should offend and unsettle us, just as Abraham's reward (Isaac) for acting to kill his son offends and unsettles us. Because it

suggests that there exists a transcendent God (or at least a "goodness" in *The Road*), one who would allow or even orchestrate a painful trial, and to whom we have a duty that transcends the ethical as a universal social morality.

McCarthy's note in the draft of *The Road* referring to Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* has many implications for understanding the novel, but perhaps foremost is that it can help us to understand how to navigate the novel's forceful evocation of both nihilism and hope. Reading the novel in the light of Kierkegaard's treatment of Abraham and Isaac allows us to accept the nihilism of the novel without in any way diminishing its hope, to think transcendence and immanence together. The father acknowledges and understands that the rational, ethical response to such a brutal world is suicide, and yet he also believes that God has appointed him to care for his son, to preserve his son, and implicit in this preservation is the promise of a good future for the boy. By choosing to live out this absurd faith, the man displays a profound belief in the goodness of God. In this reading, the sudden appearance of the "good guys" at the end of the novel is truly a *deus ex machina*, but a calculated one that is grounded in and developed through a sustained engagement with biblical characters and Kierkegaard's philosophy. Through his characters McCarthy gives us a vision of absurd faith in transcendence, and in so doing suggests that regardless of how horrific our situation might be, we can act in faith and resist the siren call of nihilistic suicide or cannibalism; we can choose to have hope in a good God, in goodness itself, although such a hope is irrational by "human calculation," maybe foremost to contemporary secular culture.

Conclusion

McCarthy's novels are shaped by secularism as much as any of the authors we have considered, but in his works very different strategies of transcendence are presented as responses to a disenchanted world. The kid in *Blood Meridian* and the boy in *The Road* quietly but powerfully assert a vision of transcendence which goes beyond the "transcendent without transcendence" which largely dominates fiction of the twentieth century.

Although his subjects often incline readers to interpret him as a hopeless nihilist, a dark prophet of our demise, a careful reading of McCarthy's novels reveals visions of transcendence which not only contrast with the finitude and the impoverishment at the core of materiality, but also with strategies of transcendence that have traded epiphanies of being, which point to a transcendent reality through art, for framing epiphanies, which seek to capture the transcendent in form. McCarthy offers powerful and important visions of transcendence in his novels, visions which cost his characters everything and radically orient their lives, standing in protest against prevailing, immanentist strategies of transcendence. The central conflict of *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* is overcoming the dominant, materialist philosophy, conceptually and physically. The kid achieves this by refusing to capitulate to the judge's will-to-power ideology, even as it costs him his life. Considering the incredible power of the judge in the novel, even death at his hands, if it comes through a refusal to concede to him, is a startling and bold act; yet, the precise nature of the kid's conception of the transcendent good is never carefully or adequately elaborated upon. Much later in his career, McCarthy articulates more clearly what this hypergood entails. As with *Blood Meridian*, the transcendent in *The Road* appears in the

language of the Christian faith. Through the depiction of brutal human suffering and impoverishment, and without denying or diminishing the realities of these things as such, McCarthy draws our attention to the irreducible, the incongruous, the ineffable, the inexplicably good and beautiful which allude to a transcendent reality. McCarthy's characters find not the image or language of transcendence shorn of its referent or presence, but the transcendent incarnate. Compellingly, in both novels McCarthy validates his characters's belief in the transcendent, albeit to varying extents. The kid's choice to deny the judge's philosophy of violence as heroic self transcendence validates his own death at the hand of the judge. In *The Road*, the man's faith in a transcendent good despite all the existential evidence to the contrary is validated through the arrival of the "good guys." For our study, the question arises, why is it that McCarthy's fiction contain manifestations of transcendence which deny the central place of secularism?

The answer is that McCarthy's novels take novel approaches to the historical and sociological reality of secularization. While *Blood Meridian* contains perhaps the most clearly and persuasively articulated immanentist vision of transcendence, it takes place in a historical context in which the enchantment of the world was still beginning to retreat, as seen in the incredulous reactions to the judge's speeches by the Glanton Gang. This is a world which does not assume a secular, immanent world from the outset. Similarly, *The Road* takes place in a world largely removed from culturally and societally shaped conceptions of being and transcendence. In both novels, McCarthy is able to use this foreign context to foreground the centrality of questions of existence for the reader. In the earlier novel, the judge's ideology and the kid's challenge to it stress the significance of wrestling with meaning and morality in a world after God's alleged death. In the later

novel, the father and son's belief in the goodness of existence in defiance of all rational argument stresses the importance of love and faith and goodness in a world where God's presence makes no sense. These settings, then, provide McCarthy the opportunity to explore these issues in rather explicit ways, and yet his characters do not merely return to a pre-disenchantment vision of the world. It is not that the kid or the boy simply become Christians and thereby dispel all the force and drama of secularization and its concomitant strategies of immanentist transcendence. The hypergoods which his characters discover are not unfamiliar with the secular world. They appear out of conflict with the brutal, destructive forces of the material world and various philosophies which justify it. Cormac McCarthy's novels, then, are nothing if not imaginings of a post-secular world. In such worlds the tension between an orientation towards transcendence and a social imaginary in which such transcendence is impossible is as powerful as it ever was in the twentieth century. Indeed, many critics have misread McCarthy's texts as fundamentally nihilist precisely because he so beautifully captures the vision of a secular, materialist world. But also within McCarthy's texts, the reader finds the transcendent asserting itself again as a presence in the world. This transcendent good remains mysterious and elusive, but its presence, particularly in *The Road*, is undeniable. And this is what I believe makes McCarthy's writing so compelling: as someone who so eloquently makes the case against any sort of transcendence of immanent, materiality, McCarthy draws the reader into the presence of a reality which is utterly incongruous with the social imaginary of secularism.

CHAPTER SIX

The Significance of Transcendence: A Conclusion

Many of the most influential and acclaimed novels of the twentieth century have, as a central concern, a vision of transcendence which orients and drives the main characters. The nature of the transcendent differs between authors and novels, but they all share a conception of it as an irreducibly higher, incommunicable reality which can grant us existential justification and orient our desires, our moral and aesthetic values, and our hopes. However, in the works we have explored from Fitzgerald, McCullers, and Salinger the transcendent appears almost exclusively in form—what Ernst Bloch would call the "transcendent without transcendence" or Charles Taylor refers to as a "subtler languages." These experiences take the shape of what would have been commonly considered an experience of the numinous—an experience of something truly irreducible—but which in the twentieth century has been largely reduced to only a gesture towards irreducibility. There are notable exceptions, of course. In some of Salinger's works, the truly adept can experience a transcendence of the world, as in "Teddy," or of themselves through endless acts of service to their neighbors, as in *Franny and Zooy*. However, Salinger's characters struggle to find a way to conceive of a transcendent good which does not in some meaningful way deny material reality and human suffering. As in these Salinger stories, McCarthy makes space for the transcendent, but unlike Salinger, he does so without denying or escaping the horrors of our world. The transcendent appears as more than mere form. In *Blood Meridian* there

are powerful indications that the world and its being resonate beyond material existence and that the violent will to power is not final arbiter of truth, and then in *The Road* the author gives us a vision of an irreducibly higher, and spiritual, moral good in the boy. In both texts, evil and suffering are real and unjust, even if they are powerful, and the transcendence his characters find does not resort to a denial of the material world, but rather a denouncement of its corruption, symbolized in the judge and cannibalism. With an unflinching vision of the depths of human depravity and suffering, and a rich understanding of the pressures which modernity places on the individual to discover a immanent hypergood, McCarthy envisions the possibility and goodness of transcendence in a post-secular world.

What can this story of fiction writers desperately wrestling with the transcendent in the twentieth century tell us about the period? First, it reveals a profound cognitive dissonance in these authors and, we may extrapolate, the twentieth century American between the normalizing demands of secularization and a basic human desire for a transcendent good which can grant meaning, justification, and orientation to the life of the individual. These authors have competing commitments to a disenchanted vision of the world and a longing for a world where enchantment is still a possibility. These competing commitments comprise the tension that lies at the center of many of the great works of the twentieth century: the tension between the "unutterable visions" of Daisy Buchanan and her "perishable breath," between the great beauty and order of music and the alienation and chaos of atomistic individualism, between love and squalor, and between the nihilistic logic of violence in this world and a redemptive hope for the future.

The conflict between secularism and a human longing for the transcendent is thus show to be the principal conflict of twentieth century American novels.

Second, by understanding that a conflicted desire for and vision of the transcendent is a central concern in the twentieth-century American novel, we can better understand the relationship between these works. Comparing the ways in which different authors manifest the transcendent in different ways over the course of this century can give us a deeper understanding of the relationship between the authors and the relative force of the secularization project over time. This relationship is not necessarily the work of direct discourse between authors—there is no need to posit that McCarthy, for example, is responding to Hemingway's particular brand of transcendence-through-bloodshed in *Blood Meridian*; but it is valuable to see how these two authors, separated by so many decades, wrestle with the same essential problem. Understanding that the same basic desire for existential justification from a transcendent source drives Jay Gatsby, Mick Kelly, Holden Caulfield, and the man in *The Road* reveals the nature of the twentieth century social imaginary, the unique crisis it produced, and the conception of identity it relied upon, but also gives us a fuller insight into each of these novels, so that the man in McCarthy's late novel is actually just a recent example of a character who considers violence, love, and sincerity as ways of mastering his world and thus gaining existential significance. This thematic reading of the modern period helps us to understand how these disparate texts speak to a common American experience in distinct ways. It gives us a deeper appreciation for the preoccupations of the period and for the unique perspective of each author. If applied to other literary works of the twentieth

century, this approach could produce a more nuanced and insightful picture of the period, but it can also serve as the basis for other meaningful lines of inquiry.

By considering how transcendence is defined and articulated in twentieth-century fiction, we can see how various socio-economic forces, cultural institutions, and ideologies respond to secularization. With the loss of a meta-narrative to define the nature and form of the transcendent, individuals are left to discover and define such a force for themselves, but practically, our embodied existence—our physical, communal, cultural, societal, economic, and political conditions—shape what we conceive of as a hypergood. In this light, the Hollywood star system of the early twentieth century is revealed to be a formative institution for strategies of transcendence. Likewise, romantic love, fame and the public artist, sacred living, and violence becoming important strategies of transcendence, influenced by such ideas as celebrity culture, modern conceptions of romantic love, and understandings of the self. A study of the relationship between these conditions and ideas and the vision of transcendence in these novels give us great insight into the intellectual climate of the time and the role of these conditions in our existential justification.

This close reading of the ways in which transcendence shapes and drives the modern American novel can help us to better understand the literary and historical period. It elucidates the thematic and intellectual relationship between the texts, showing that a concern for articulating the transcendent in a modern, secular world defines many of these novels. Moreover, this focus allows us to see how the various ways in which our conception of the transcendent has been shaped by our embodied experiences. But perhaps most notably, through a close reading of these texts we have traced the

appearance of a formative problem in American culture as it appears in literature, and through this we have given a deeper appreciation for the rich ways authors summoned language and narrative to create sacred games for the modern world.

NOTES

1. Also note Arthur Mizener's claim that Fitzgerald's "basic feeling for experience was a religious one" (*The Far Side of Paradise* 86).

2. The fact that Amory has not read Brooke at this point in the narrative in no way diminishes his reoccurring hope for existential validation through sensuality. If anything, the imagery of this passage points to the extent to which Amory is primed to accept Brooke's romanticism later in the novel.

3. Other critics have considered the role of film in *Tender is the Night*. As Alan Bilton notes, "Ronald Berman . . . and Milton R. Stern . . . , reads this cinematic mode of perception as clear proof of a mass cultural regression and collective flight from adult responsibility" (30). In his article, Bilton focuses on the way Fitzgerald employes and critiques a film aesthetic in the novel. My reading will differ by looking exclusively at the sociological significance of film stars and narrative.

4. For example, when he tries to persuade her to go back to the US and get married, she is crushed, and he concludes that, "Nicole's world had fallen to pieces" (143). And her first step towards her affair with Tommy begins when she realizes that she does not need to exist entirely as an image in his mind, a part of his oneness (277).

5. Hamilton denies this interpretation, claiming that [Seymour's suicide] "is one of spiritual splendor, 'out of this world' and causing a sparkle of heavenly radiance to shine on earth" (Hamilton 31). Ranchan describes the suicide as Seymour the climax of entering into the "continuum of Nirvana" (63). One may only reach this conclusion by denying the weightiness of his deep suffering and the trauma he causes for his wife and family. Other critics confirm my own reading: "The reality of the phony world becomes too great to bear" (Goldstein and Goldstein 177). Kaufman similarly sees Seymour's suicide as an inherently violent and destructive act (138).

6. Ranchan offers a different account of the conclusion, arguing that Franny learns to rely on "True Ego" and "Pure Action" (97). In this reading, Franny is returned to transcendence through perfected ordinary living.

7. We might also see the influence of Heraclitus in the judge's philosophy, as well: "We must know that war is universal and strife right, and that by strife all things arise and are used" (99). However, given the historical context of the novel, Nietzsche is a much more appropriate antecedent. Both the judge and Nietzsche's philosophies are directly inspired by a denial of a transcendent, good God.

8. For example, concerning the passage where the father thinks, "If he is not the word of God God never spoke," Philips states that "McCarthy does not have to comment on this statement's dismal implications, much less complete the syllogism" (182).

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