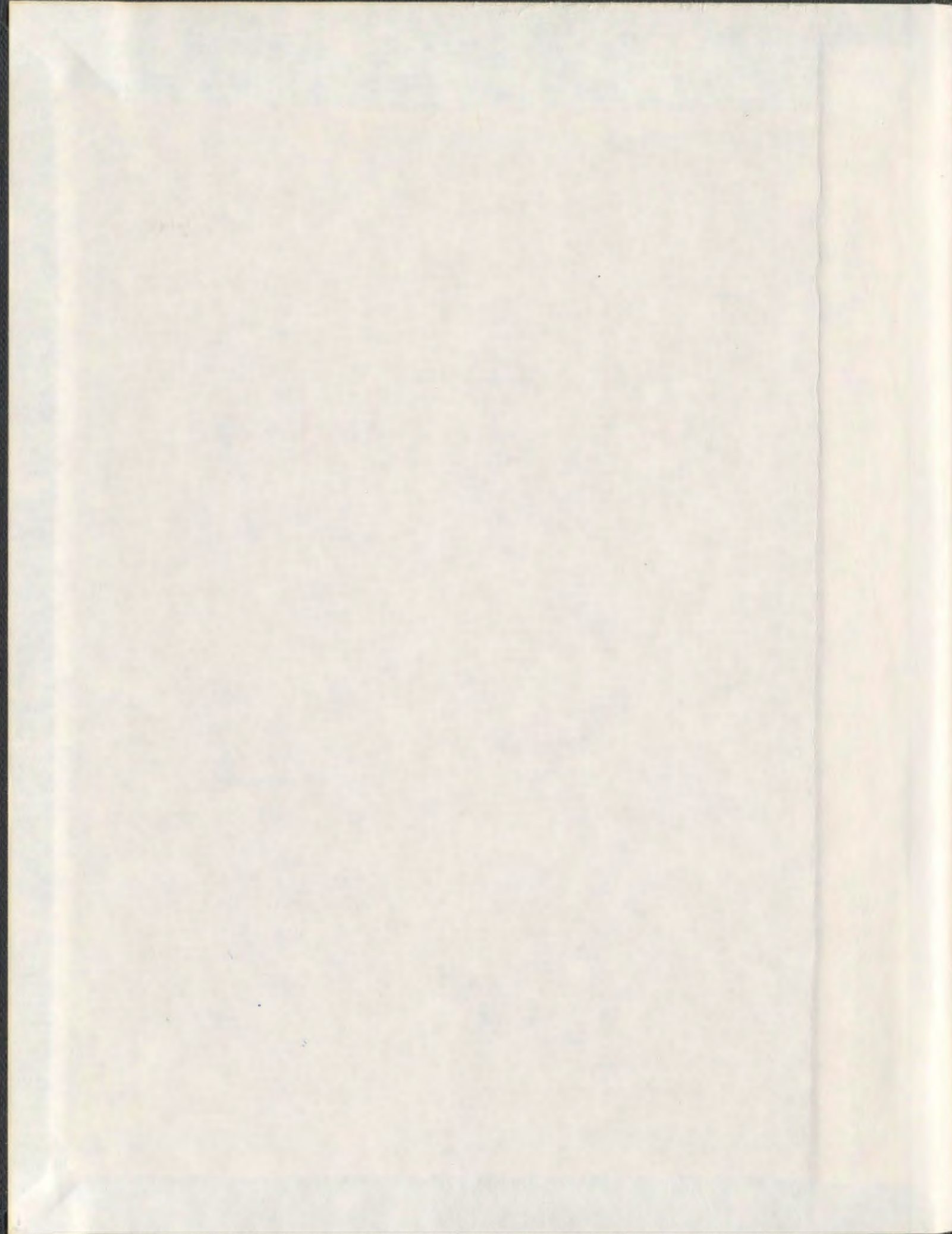


BLEACHED BONES RATTLING  
Reviving the Art of Sacramental Reading

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**Bleached Bones Rattling**  
***Reviving the Art of Sacramental Reading***

By

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### Abstract

In my thesis, *Bleached Bones Rattling: Reviving the Art of Sacramental Reading*, I examine recent novels by David Adams Richards, Michael Winter, Lisa Moore, and Michael Crummey in order to flesh-out the idea of “holiness” and to show ways in which this idea has been refigured in contemporary Atlantic Canadian fiction. I begin with Richards because he is a writer who has long claimed that the holiness of human life is his central subject matter: a theme that has received harsh, cursory criticism by Christopher Armstrong and Herb Wyile (1997) and more in-depth, historical treatment by Tony Tremblay in *David Adams Richards of the Miramichi* (2010). Beginning with Richards and working through novels by these three other Atlantic Canadian authors (who do not necessarily share Richards’ Catholic worldview), I examine varying ways in which holiness confronts a reader, calls her<sup>1</sup> to responsibility, draws her out of herself into a world of others, and, through a sacramental encounter, returns that reader to herself and her world with a broader view and experience of others.

Each chapter begins with an articulation of these stages in terms of theory and then explores the shape that theory takes in a reading of a specific novel. In chapter one, I bring the “religious” philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida to bear on David Adams Richards’ *Incidents in the Life of Markus Paul* (2011) in order to illuminate how a reader is

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<sup>1</sup> In an effort to make the language of this work (1) gender inclusive and (2) less clunky, I have opted to refer to theoretical readers, writers in the feminine.

called to responsibility through the “adieu” of another. In the second chapter, I examine the covenant a reader makes with a story (and the dialogic world of others therein) in a discussion that approaches Michael Winter’s *The Death of Donna Whalen* (2010) through the literary criticism of J. Edward Chamberlin and Deborah Bowen. In the third chapter, I give shape to a reader’s journey out from herself—her own ego—in looking at Lisa Moore’s *February* (2009), Gregory Wolfe’s essay “Stalking the Spirit,” and the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. And in the fourth and final chapter, I examine the sacramental nature of the reading experience by comparing the theoretical views of Daniel Coleman with those of Richard Kearney and “tasting” the substantiation of these views in Michael Crummey’s *Galore* (2009).

My aim throughout this work is to construct a new theoretical language, out of an old religious language, in which to house the idea of holiness and to give it new critical shape in contemporary literary studies. In doing so, I demonstrate how holiness, despite its religious history and connotations, is more than an “idea” but a “real” life-giving and humanizing presence in fiction that can be encountered by all readers.

This encounter, far from being idealistic or utopian, is a messy, combative affair which I depict as Jacob wrestling the angel: a reader grappling with that which is beyond her. In doing so, I demonstrate what Jean-Louis Chrétien, in *Hand to Hand: Listening to the Work of Art* (2003), describes as the “intimate violence” of this encounter: this covenant. I do this by confronting theories of holiness with their “twin” forms in specific novels, forcing these theories to wrestle with their fictive figurations—like the left-handed and right-handed twins of Mother Earth in Iroquoisian myth—in order to see how stories can wound and bless these theories and transfigure them into a new theory of holiness.

Ultimately, I argue that reading allows for a continuing substantiation of holiness—an empathetic sense of human worth—in the life of a reader. Such readings, as I demonstrate in my encounters with novels by Richards, Winter, Moore, and Crummey, open a reader to be both wounded and blessed by the humanity of others, allowing that reader imaginative opportunities to become ever more human herself. This involves more than “recovering the human in an ideological age,” to riff on the subtitle of Gregory Wolfe’s recent book *Beauty Will Save the World* (2011). What I propose is a *re-imagination* of what it can mean to be human *if* we see our fellow humans as, in some way, holy and irreplaceable: utterly unique and of infinite value.

Central to my thesis is the belief that stories wrestle *from* us such re-imaginings: of ourselves and our worlds. And we too leave our mark on stories in our interpretations of them. Stories, after all, can be catalysts for imaginative awakenings in the life of a reader, and these awakenings—these re-imaginings—are, ultimately, the prophetic outworking of sacramental readings: Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones rattling, beginning to rise up.



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## Prologue

*There was once a man who stood on a cliff overlooking a mass grave. As far as the eye could see there was nothing but sun-bleached bones picked clean by vultures. Nothing moved in the grave that stretched from rock cut to cliff. Not even vultures for they had flown off in search of other carcasses. The man on the cliff tried to imagine ligaments growing between the bones; he tried to conjure in his mind muscle and bowel, heart and skin; he tried to dream of these bones coming back to life. After a while his daydreaming gave him enough courage to whisper the words he had come to this place to say. And soon his whispering turned to speaking and then to shouting, until the words dried up and everything was silent again over the mass grave. That's when the strangest thing happened: the bones began to rattle.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Drawn from Ezekiel 37 in *The Holy Bible*.



Ezekiel's story is a familiar one: the valley of dry bones coming to life. It has been around for eons and will no doubt persist because we love stories where the impossible happens. We desperately want to believe in something—whether that is that the Pope is infallible or that all priests are perverts; that Western capitalism will save the Arab world or that the West only wants to exploit the Middle-east. Some would like to see Anglicans resolve their “daddy” issues and rejoin the Catholic church while others would like to see jumper cables attached to the genitals of all bugging priests; some would like to see more Tim Hortons in Afghanistan than Islamic mosques while others would like to worship at a mosque in New York without fearing a Molotov cocktail. Each of these desired ends is somebody's utopia, someone's dream. And each one is equally as unlikely—maybe even impossible.

These bones cannot live. Certainly the papal jawbone can never be connected to the anti-catholic knee bone, or the Western femur to the Islamic tibia. There is no ideological ligament between these, surely. But what if there was? What would such an “idea” look like in the flesh? In this study I am not proposing an ideology or singular idea that would bring peace between the likes of the Catholic Church and its dissidents, or between the capitalist West and the Islamic Middle-east.

I am not really interested in ideology<sup>3</sup> at all, but in what Gregory Wolfe calls a “recovery of the human in an ideological age”—I’m interested in what it means and what it can mean to be fully human and to treat others as fully human. This involves an idea, yes, but an idea brought to life in specific contexts, embodied in unique situations, vivified in different stories—that idea, if it can be given a name, is “holiness.” But before hands are raised in either praise or protest, let me say that I am not talking about religious doctrine but a primary intuition that can lead to ethical perception and moral capacity.

To see someone else as in some way holy has the potential to change how you treat that person. And reading, I argue, is a powerful means by which our perceptions are sharpened or changed. That is why I am interested in exploring how “holiness” is recovered *and* re-imagined in novels by four contemporary Atlantic Canadian authors: David Adams Richards, Michael Winter, Lisa Moore, and Michael Crummey. As I have mentioned, I begin with Richards because he is a writer who has long claimed that the holiness of human life is his central subject matter<sup>4</sup>: a theme that has received harsh, cursory criticism by Christopher Armstrong and Herb Wyile in “Firing the Regional Can(n)on: Liberal Pluralism, Social Agency, and David Adams Richards’s *Miramichi Trilogy*” (1997) as well as more in-depth, historical treatment by Tony Tremblay in *David Adams Richards of the Miramichi* (2010). Starting with Richards, then, and working through novels by three other Atlantic Canadian authors (who do not necessarily share Richards’ Catholic worldview), I will examine varying ways in which holiness confronts a reader, calls her to responsibility, draws her out of herself into a world of others, and, through a sacramental encounter, returns that reader to herself and her world with a broader view and experience of

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<sup>3</sup> I see ideology as involving what Gregory Wolfe, in his book *Beauty Will Save The World* (2011), calls “a fundamental alienation from being” (3). Though it can take many forms—“logical positivism, deconstruction, and so on”—in its basest form it is a system of ideas that purports to make sense of human life but without a profound awareness of the “ambiguity of human life” (3, 11).

<sup>4</sup> See Martin, “A Conversation with David Adams Richards,” 55-63.

others.

My aim, in the end, is to show the profoundly different ways in which this idea comes to life in recent works by each of these writers, and also to demonstrate the vitality of holiness when awakened continually in new metaphoric ways in the mind of a reader. But in order to resurrect the idea it will be important to recognize that reading is often a sacramental experience—one in which holiness transubstantiates into the flesh of the reader who sees the world otherwise. I would call such a reader a sacramental reader: one who sees and endeavours to treat the other as more fully human and who becomes, through readerly encounters, more fully human herself. My goal, in the end, is to re-imagine what it means—what it can mean—to be human *through* sacramental readings. However, in order to do this, that which figures holiness—the story itself—must be consumed in practice before this idea is re-imagined in theory.

To draw this back to Ezekiel's infamous valley of dry bones, we see that before Ezekiel ever prophesied a word he began his career as a prophet by eating a book that was both bitter and sweet. For us, before we can theorize the humanizing effect that considering holiness can have on readers we need to taste some of the different forms this bittersweet idea takes in the contemporary fiction, particularly the fiction of Atlantic Canada. In this way we will come to the real-life prophetic potential of re-imagining holiness by sacramental means: learning to read in a new way which is really an old way re-imagined.

And by doing this, we might just hear the rattling of old bones.



## Introduction

Since this is a work of criticism, it might seem apt to begin with what Paul Ricoeur considered the basic, hermeneutical question: “*Where* do you speak from?” The criticism of Atlantic Canadian fiction, at a glance, reveals an obsession with answering this question, both historically and in contemporary contexts: defining the Atlantic provinces in terms of their difference from the rest of Canada, and in terms of their unique regional identities.<sup>5</sup> In fact, if you were to judge all readers of Atlantic Canadian fiction by the literary criticism of the place, you would assume that regional identity—be it Acadian, Maritime, or Newfoundland—is the primary question that troubles writers from this part of the country. That is, if you start with the criticism.

I am not trying to say that Ricoeur’s question is not an important, even primary, critical inquiry, or that the literary criticism of Atlantic Canadian fiction is somehow impoverished for seeking to answer it. What I do want to explore, however, is an experience of reading that precedes this question and informs how a reader might answer it: an experience that begins not with answering but with *listening*, with radical openness to another, others, the world. In saying that reading, as an experience, begins with listening, attending to a story before its criticism, I am not trying to pull a New Critical sleight-of-hand: insisting that a reader’s attention ought to be on

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<sup>5</sup> See O’Flaherty, *The Rock Observed: Studies in the Literature of Newfoundland* (1979); Kulyk Keefer, *Under Eastern Eyes: A critical reading of Maritime fiction* (1987); Creelman, *Setting in the East: Maritime Realist Fiction* (2003); Pierson, *Hard-Headed and Big-Hearted: Writing Newfoundland* (2006); Tremblay, *David Adams Richards of the Miramichi* (2010); Wylie, *Anne of Tim Hortons: Globalization and the Reshaping of Atlantic-Canadian Literature* (2011).

the “thing itself,” the story an author has written, at the expense of considering the work’s cultural and historical contexts. “Attending” to a work is where “listening” begins, not where it ends. My goal is to demonstrate the call and response that I see as the reading experience. With that as an overarching aim, in this introduction I will begin by examining a reader’s experience as an encounter with another outside that reader’s self: a “sacramental” encounter that can enliven a reader’s sense of that other’s holiness or infinite worth.

Atlantic Canadian fiction, as I have said, judging by its criticism, seems to be largely concerned with answering questions of regional identity: of where one writes (and reads) from. And though I am sure there are readers to whom questions of regional identity are of primal importance, my approach to reading contemporary Atlantic Canadian fiction will explore interpretive possibilities before and beyond these questions. Encountering the holiness of another’s life is, as I have already mentioned, how David Adams Richards has consistently talked about his own fiction throughout his writing career—something that many of his critics have downplayed or ignored. It is my belief, though, that there are readers of Richards’ fiction (and contemporary fiction in general), who desire such holy encounters—even if they are sceptical of using religious language to define their experience. That is why, in discussing “sacramental reading,” I will be using the provisional phrase “*a* reader” instead “*the* reader” to signify that this reader who desires holy encounters in fiction is not *every* reader, but a *possible* reader.<sup>6</sup>

I have chosen to focus my discussion on this possible reader’s interactions with the works of contemporary Atlantic Canadian authors for three main reasons. The first reason is because I began exploring what it might mean to see reading as a sacramental experience in studying

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<sup>6</sup> The conceptualization of this reader is, admittedly, drawn from own reading experiences. But, as I will show, these experiences are not peculiar to me, judging by the writings of John Gardner and Marilynne Robinson (among others), whose work I will discuss in more detail in this section.

Atlantic Canadian fiction, particularly David Adams Richards' Miramichi novels, as well as his essays and interviews on the subject of his own narrative process. The second reason is because I think that writers, though not the sole authority on their own work, are careful readers intimate with their own stories, and each of the authors in this study has given articulate and insightful interviews regarding their fiction, each expressing, in different words, a desire for their work to be read as more than a mere commentary on regional identity.<sup>7</sup> The third reason is because other Atlantic Canadian authors, aside from Richards, such as Michael Winter and Lisa Moore, have discussed<sup>8</sup> the intricate ways in which they write about the mystery of human life, and such discussions have rarely been taken up in critical discourse.

My aim is to take up these discussions in the following chapters: in sacramental readings of novels by these authors that explore the different ways in which each one values the holiness of human life: how each writer figures the human body as the "centre of value."<sup>9</sup> However, in order to flesh out what I mean by the holiness of another's life, encountered in reading a story, and why I see this as a uniquely sacramental experience, I will begin by defining what I mean by "sacramental reading." This way of reading, as I have said, is one in which a reader comes face to face with another and sees, in that other's face, holiness—something Emmanuel Levinas describes as another's infinite worth and Jacques Derrida as that other's irreplaceability.

In this section I will use the literary criticism of John Gardner and George Steiner, as well as the philosophy of Jean-Luc Marion and Jean Baudrillard, to substantiate what I mean by a "sacramental reading." Such a reading is first of all an encounter with the face of another, an

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<sup>7</sup> See Martin, "A Conversation with David Adams Richards," 55-63; Wyile, *Waterfront Views: Contemporary Writing of Atlantic Canada* Web; Wyile, "The Living Haunt the Dead: Michael Crummey," *Speaking in the Past Tense*, 295-319.

<sup>8</sup> See Wilkshire, "Michael Winter: The Force of Mystery," 11-26; Moore, "Kernels," 41-49; Wyile, "All Over the Canvas: An interview with Lisa Moore," 107-123, 133.

<sup>9</sup> See Bakhtin qtd. in Bowen 46.



encounter that calls a reader to love. As such, it is also a quasi-religious experience in which a reader takes on another's experiences as her own. That is to say, it is a way of paying loving attention to another's holiness through a work's beauty, and doing this can leave a reader with the feeling of being hollowed yet hallowed, wounded yet blessed. Ultimately, I will be arguing that a sacramental reading is an experience analogous to a writer's own creative encounter with another.

Encountering another's holiness in reading a story, then, is the result of listening to that other, and listening, before anything else, is an act of love: meeting another face to face in a story. But for love to be love, it has to be given freely; it can never be coerced from a reader. A story can call a reader to love more fully but it cannot make that reader do so. In order to expand on this idea I will examine John Gardner's claim that fiction wars against life's confusion, but also against a reader's apathy: fiction's main weapon being the empathy for others that stories evoke in readers' hearts—love of another.

This is how I propose coming face to face with another, with others: in readings illuminated by empathetic or sacramental imaginations. But in order to show why I see a reader's empathy as sacramental, I will first explain in more detail my use of religious language. My aim, after all, throughout this work, is to renovate an old religious language to house a new way of theoretically understanding and practically engaging others in contemporary fiction. This is why the four sacramental readings in this study each begin with theoretical sections that explore varying ways in which holiness confronts a reader and calls her to responsibility, draws her out of herself into a world of others, and, through a sacramental encounter, returns that reader to herself and her world with a broader view and experience of others.

Each chapter begins with an articulation of these stages in terms of theory and then explores the shape that theory takes in a reading of a specific novel—putting theory into practice. In chapter one, I bring the “religious” philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida to bear on David Adams Richards’ *Incidents in the Life of Markus Paul* (2011) in order to illuminate how a reader is called to responsibility through the “adieu” of another. In the second chapter, I examine the covenant a reader makes with a story (and the dialogic world of others therein) in a discussion that approaches Michael Winter’s *The Death of Donna Whalen* (2010) through the literary criticism of J. Edward Chamberlin and Deborah Bowen. In the third chapter, I give shape to a reader’s journey out from herself—her own ego—in looking at Lisa Moore’s *February* (2009), Gregory Wolfe’s essay “Stalking the Spirit,” and the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. And in the fourth and final chapter, I examine the sacramental nature of the reading experience by comparing the theoretical views of Daniel Coleman with those of Richard Kearney and “tasting” the substantiation of these views in Michael Crummey’s *Galore* (2009).

Ultimately, the whole point of confronting specific theories with different novels is to show how stories can wound and bless these theories and transfigure them into a new theory of holiness. This is my overall aim: to show how reading, as a sacramental experience, allows for a continuing substantiation of holiness, an empathetic sense of human worth, in the life-transforming self-awareness of a reader. Such readings, as I will demonstrate in my encounters with novels by Richards, Winter, Moore, and Crummey, open a reader to be both wounded and blessed by the humanity of others, allowing that reader imaginative opportunities to become ever more human herself. This involves more than discussing these novels in terms of their various regions, and it involves more than what Gregory Wolfe might refer to as “recovering the human in an ideological age.” What I propose, through these readings, is a *re-imagination* of what it can

mean to be human *if* we see our fellow humans as, in some way, irreplaceable and holy: utterly unique and of infinite value.

Before this re-imagination begins, however, we need to rethink what it means—what it *can* mean—to see reading as a sacramental encounter.

### **Sacramental Reading**

The idea that reading fiction is a mysterious and potentially transformative process is not new. Reading can be a very deep experience: a submersion into another world, into another's *view* of the world—sometimes there are multiple worlds and many perspectives on them. But at its root, reading involves a basic immersion in which a reader takes on the experiences of another as her own, and this affects, to a greater or lesser degree, that reader's own view of the world.

This journeying out from the self into the world of another is usually cast as an ethical or moral process that allows the reader to cultivate a broader view of things and to be more able to empathize with others who see things in a very different light.<sup>10</sup> Without putting too fine a point on it, the end goal of such an ethical reading is tolerance and understanding. This tolerance is tested, however, when one attempts to describe this ethical endeavour as in any way “sacramental,” which is what I will be doing in this study. I am interested in the ethics of reading but I also wish to theorize the mysterious source out of which an ethical reading might ignite—the idea of holiness, an idea undergoing a renaissance in our critical discourse<sup>11</sup> and one which, I hope to show, transcends the binary between sacred and secular because of its incarnation in the human face of the other and the physical world in which we live.

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<sup>10</sup> See John Gardner *On Moral Fiction* (1978).

<sup>11</sup> A renaissance predicted by Paul Ricoeur in his essay “Manifestation and Proclamation” in *Figuring the Sacred* (1995), 48-67.

Before this theorizing begins, however, we need to have a closer look at who (or what) this “face of the other” is and is not. The human “other”—neighbour, stranger, friend, enemy—is and *is not* who we meet face-to-face in the act of reading. On the surface, the other we meet in a book cannot be the other we meet on the street because the first is fictional and the second actual: the world of the book is, after all, not the real world. But on a deeper, more mysterious level, the borders between book and reality, word and world, have the potential to transfigure in the effect a story can have on a reader. This doesn’t negate the logical difference between stories and reality—between the other in the book and one’s neighbour—but it does allow that difference to be transformed so that *how* the other is seen in a book has the potential to affect how one sees one’s neighbour and one’s world in real life.

The American novelist Ron Hansen, author of *Mariette in Ecstasy*, cites John Gardner’s *The Art of Fiction* to illustrate a similar point: “the value of great fiction... is not just that it entertains us or distracts us from our troubles, not just that it broadens our knowledge of peoples and places, but also that it helps us to know what we believe, reinforces those qualities that are noblest in us, leads us to feel uneasy about our faults and limitations” (“Writing as Sacrament” 4). For Gardner, as seen throughout his jeremiad *On Moral Fiction* (1978), stories can be windows through which we *see* and thereby broaden our understanding of others and our world. In this way stories can be said to bring about a measure of tolerance, but stories can also be mirrors by which we examine ourselves as readers: affirming what is noble in us and making us feel uneasy about our prejudices and apathy. Gardner writes that the “traditional view is that true art is moral: it seeks to improve life, not debase it. It seeks to hold off, at least for a while, the twilight of the gods and us” (5). This idea of art, or fiction, holding off the end of gods and men comes from the metaphor that frames *On Moral Fiction*, that true art is Thor’s hammer, our last

weapon against the trolls of chaos. Hansen takes up a similar idea in his book of essays on faith and fiction, *A Stay Against Confusion* (2001), in which he explores the idea that fiction can make the chaos of everyday existence bearable, that fiction has the potential to transform the absurdities “of our brief lives by giving context and purpose and significance to every gesture, every desire, every detail” (xv). The “stay against confusion” that fiction can provide, for Gardner and Hansen, is what Robert Frost called “a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on,” but a momentary repulsing of chaos by order: Thor’s hammer driving back the trolls (Gardner 5-6). What flourishes in art, according to Gardner, following his metaphor of siege and resistance, is “what is necessary to humanness” or morality embodied, renewed and re-understood in each generation, as those things that are good, true, and beautiful—those things that are ultimately life affirming (6).

Fiction that is “moral” for Gardner is fiction that is “life-giving,” not stories written to fit dead ethical codes or to fulfill the laws of rote religions, but stories that discover *by their process* what they can say about life and living (14-15). Morality, for Gardner, is more than a list of “right” actions; for him, morality, as the task of art, is, quoting Tolstoy, “to make [the] feeling of... love of one’s neighbour... the customary feeling and the instinct of all [people]. By evoking under imaginary conditions the feeling of... love, [...] art will train [people] to experience [that] same [feeling] under similar circumstances in actual life” (27). That is to say, a moral law like “love your neighbour as yourself” is not in and of itself life-giving unless it is first enacted, and fiction can provide ways in which to imaginatively embody or act out what it means to love your neighbour, and this imaginative embodying of moral action we see as *good*. So, ideally, we endeavour to re-enact that good in our real lives.

That is in a perfect world of course. We always have the choice not to re-enact the good we have seen, and often we take this route—we lose touch with what makes us humans and not monsters. After all, we can still consume what Gardner calls moral art and remain unchanged by it, just as a SS officer could listen to Beethoven's arrangement of Schiller's "Ode to Joy" after a day of running the gas chambers, or, in our own day, a priest might read Graham Greene's *The Power and The Glory* before downloading child pornography onto his laptop. In light of these extreme horrors—even in light of our own apathy—reading or consuming art in any form cannot be seen intrinsically as redemptive. Terry Eagleton, in *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* (2009), says that "[works] of art cannot save us. They can simply render us more sensitive to what needs to be repaired" (Eagleton 159). But consuming art *can* be redemptive if received or engaged in the right spirit—a spirit of love, through which we see the other's humanity with new eyes.

For Gardner, "true morality... requires sympathy and responsible judgement" and by sympathy he means charity or love (74). Morality can be embodied in a given work of art, in the way an author empathetically portrays her characters, but this is only the author's voice calling out to the reader, as if to say, "I love this character enough to present her in all her humanness, foibles, faults, and all. What do you make of her? Look at her face, and tell me what you see there." We always have the choice to look blindly or to look away—to be apathetic—or we can choose to see the face of this other and judge it without sympathy. This of course is what too much criticism of literature has done over the years and it is a problem that prompted Rainer Maria Rilke to write in his "Letters to a Young Poet" that "[works] of art are of infinite loneliness and nothing can reach them so little as criticism. Only love can grasp them and keep them and be just to them" (23 April 1903). That is not to say that in criticism one cannot judge and that many critics do not judge fairly, but Gardner I think rightly insists that this judgement



needs to be sympathetic and responsible: a type of judgement that comes only out of looking the other—the author’s creation—in the face. Whether the author herself has done this with sufficient responsibility and empathy, will be evident in the overall *truth* of the work—its believability and authenticity—as well as its *beauty*—the result of it being lovingly crafted. If a work is *good* it is because it is true and beautiful, an authentic encounter fully imagined and skillfully crafted to engage a reader in the violent intimacy of understanding—the difficult work of love that Gardner calls morality.

In fiction, morality is often birthed or given flesh in characters: as readers we do not use these characters as ladders to some lofty, Platonic ideal of the good—we do not stand on their shoulders or think ourselves inherently better than them. That would crack their backs and break our legs, crippling us both. Instead, we meet them *in* their world and we learn to empathize with them, we begin to feel a growing responsibility toward them, and when, finally, we close the book and “judge” them it is fairer because we have met them face-to-face. In terms of fiction, this is what I mean by encountering “the face of the other” or reading deeply. How this type of reading can transfigure our perceptions of our neighbours and our world is what I will be theorizing through the idea of the *sacramental*, because, as Gardner insists, this type of writing and reading requires love, and sacraments, as I understand them, are movements into love made out of love. Gardner writes that “it seems all but self-evident that it is for the pleasure of exercising our capacity to love that we pick up a book at all” (84). I think this might be an overstatement on Gardner’s part: we do not always read or consume art to exercise love. But the point I will try to demonstrate in this work is that *if* we choose to read out of love (which does not negate criticism but nuances it with empathy)—if we choose to approach reading as

sacramental—we will be better able to recognize the holiness of the other, the other's inherent worth, and to be changed in light of that reading.

In this study I will not pretend to know all of the reasons that different people read different books in different ways, and I will do my best not to negate other ways of reading that are not necessarily "sacramental." My aim is to add my voice to the renaissance of a critical discussion of reading rooted in what Gardner calls the "primary intuition" that the world is *holy*. My use of religious language in this critical analysis is not to sacralise something that is understood to be secular—force a Christian lens on literary theory—but to use the connotative breadth of sacramental language to articulate what it means and what it *can* mean to see the world as *holy*, or, in some way, sacred. I know that religious language is distasteful to many because it is negatively associated with fundamentalist dogmas and what are perceived to be reductive worldviews, but dogmas (despite their historical-religious or current-political uses) were never meant to be "dry bits of theological rationalism, but deeply metaphorical attempts to enshrine mystery. To vary the analogy, dogma are not so much efforts to give logical accounts of... mysteries... as they are a process of creating a tabernacle for... mysteries within" (Wolfe "Shaggy Dog Stories" 168). The mystery I will attempt to build a critical tabernacle for is that primary intuition Gardner asserts: that the world is holy, an idea not evident in all literature but undeniable, though often unacknowledged, in literature by both religious and secular authors.

This analysis, then, will be housed in the form of sacramental language, not to reduce it to fitting a particularly religious view of the world but because the metaphoric depth of sacramental language is necessary to evoke or give critical shape to "the face of the other" that we encounter in literature. Gregory Wolfe writes that "Form is mediation: it makes something intangible known to us—in and through tangible words" ("The Form of Faith" 129). So, by using

religious words like “sacramental” and “holy” in this study of contemporary Atlantic Canadian literature I hope not just to mediate or make further sense of stories that seem to be written from Gardner’s “primary intuition” but also to show the strikingly different forms that intuition takes in different novels. I will also explore the ways in which holiness more accurately describes what is often encountered in reading, as well as the ways in which a reader’s world could be transfigured by this face-to-face meeting. However, since a reader’s world is seldom changed by one novel, this study will not just be looking at novels individually but at how these novels can create a cumulative change in a reader’s perspective of a particular era and region—contemporary Atlantic Canada.

I’d like to begin by using a metaphor from Annie Dillard’s *Holy the Firm* to illuminate, at least initially, Gardner’s “primary intuition”—the idea of the holy that takes different shapes in the novels of David Adams Richards, Michael Winter, Lisa Moore, and Michael Crummey. The metaphor sparks first in Dillard’s story about camping alone in the Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia, reading, among other things James Ramsey Ullman’s *The Day on Fire*, “a novel about Rimbaud that had made [her] want to be a writer” (428). She read, “lost, every day sitting under a tree by [her] tent, while warblers swung in the leaves overhead and bristle worms trailed their inches over the twiggy dirt at [her] feet; [she] read every night by candlelight, while barred owls called in the forest and pale moths massed round [her] head in the clearing, where [her] light made a ring” (428). In the morning she would find her “cooking stuff gilded with torn flecks of moth wings, triangles of shiny dust here and there on the aluminum” (428). And then one night “a moth flew into the candle, was caught, burned dry, and held” (428). The moth’s skeleton combusted and crackled until all “that was left was the glowing horn shell of her abdomen and

thorax—a fraying, partially collapsed gold tube jammed upright in the candle’s round pool” (428-429).

Dillard writes of being enamoured with “this moth essence, this spectacular skeleton [that] began to act as a wick. She kept burning. The wax rose in the moth’s body from her soaking abdomen to her thorax to the jagged hole where her head should be, and widened into flame, a saffron-yellow flame that robed her to the ground like any immolating monk. That candle had two wicks, two flames of identical height, side by side. The moth’s head was fire” (429). Dillard tells us that the moth “burned for two hours without changing, without bending or leaning—only glowing within, like a building glimpsed through silhouetted walls, like a hollow saint, like a flame-faced virgin gone to God,” all while Dillard watched and read (429).

What Dillard describes here is a deep reading experience, a descent not only into the world of her book—Rimbaud’s Paris and his own troubled poetic mind—but an immersion into the world around her: the twiggy dirt, warbler song and flame-drawn moths of Virginia’s Blue Ridge mountains. By looking intently into one world (Paris), another world (Virginia) comes into sharper focus for Dillard, just as her candle sets fire to the moth and the moth’s body becomes a second wick casting more light on both page and campsite. Word and world, fiction and reality, coalesce, and both become the subjects of Dillard’s sharp attention.

Gregory Wolfe, in an essay on Annie Dillard and Gerard Manley Hopkins, says this type of attention paid to the world is a form of “stalking the spirit” or seeking a glimpse into mystery:

Dillard tells us that to get a glimpse into mystery is to become like Moses sitting in the cleft of the rock so he can get a peek at God’s “back parts.” The discipline needed to make that kind of seeing possible—the ability to wedge ourselves into that cleft—she calls “stalking.” It demands patience—the kind of patience one needs to wait, perfectly

still, in a bush for forty minutes just to catch sight of a muskrat. (“The writer should never be afraid of staring,” says Flannery O’Connor.) (“Stalking the Spirit”)

Gardner calls this type of person not a stalker of the spirit but a “reality-hunter,” like an artist or religious person “whose primary intuition is that the world is holy” (Gardner 155). “Like the artist, [she] does not articulate [her] intuition by analyzing [her] way to a proof that what [she] guessed all along was right; instead [she] tells a story. Reality, [she] says thoughtfully, is like this... and [she] makes up the story of Job, or of the dying Buddha, or of Achilles” (155). Or Dillard tells the story of the flame-drawn moth that illuminates for her the interconnectedness of faith, thought, and art in the act of reading deeply—the moth stuck in hot wax, burning. For Dillard, there is something sacred in this act of reading and so she writes:

A nun lives in the fires of the spirit, a thinker lives in the bright wick of the mind, an artist lives jammed in the pool of materials. (Or, a nun lives, thoughtful and tough, in the mind, a nun lives, with that special poignancy peculiar to [the] religious, in the exile of materials; and a thinker, who would think of something, lives in the clash of materials, and in the world of the spirit where all long thoughts must lead; and an artist lives in the mind, that warehouse of forms, and an artist lives, of course, in the spirit....) (431)

According to Dillard, there is not so much dividing the work of a nun, thinker, and artist—the attention they pay to the world—as a cloister, university, and studio might indicate. Their thinking and reading is done in different locales and the language used and wrestled with is different, surely, but the subject—the world itself in its multi-faceted and infinitely mysterious otherness—is the same. It is this type of close attention paid to the world—a world that is seen as holy in ways unique to each author’s worldview—that I will be examining in the works of these

four writers. All of these authors, in ways similar to yet distinct from Dillard, are stalkers or hunters of reality or the holiness of the world glimpsed through its beauty.

Now, the crux of Gardner's argument and key to my own is that "the idea of holiness and the idea of beauty are one and the same" (Gardner 156). That is, the best way to give shape to one's intuition of the world as holy is to show in one's art the beauty of the world. But beauty, according to Gardner is "an apparently meaningless word which we continue to use [only] because we understand it [intuitively]": "Beauty is something that doesn't exist except in the instant it jars the soul and thus at once comes into being and attracts" (156). As much as authors stalk beauty in their writing, in the close attention they pay to the world around them, readers also obsessively hunt beauty in literature: a work that a reader deems *good* "rings *true*" because it successfully expressed something *beautiful* about the world—about human thought, experience, or language. In literary criticism, this is always, rightfully, couched in close readings and in examinations of characterization, theme, linguistic play, irony (all ways of stalking beauty through literary criticism), because it is through such things that beauty takes form or "'gets across'—that is, makes profound but inexpressible sense, as [Paul] Tillich says, 'on the level of deep experience,' whatever that means" (156).

All this talk of reading *deeply* or beauty being understood on some *deep* level can, of course, be seen as a way of covering over a critical lack of depth in terms of analysis: the purpose of grounding this theory in readings of the literature of a certain time and place is to articulate the form that beauty takes in each author's work, thereby giving flesh to each author's unique expression of holiness in his or her fiction and seeing how deep that idea runs individually and collectively. How this is expressed in David Adams Richards' work will differ from how it is articulated in Lisa Moore's fiction or Michael Winter's: "All this is to say,"



according to Gardner, “that the artist can approach the beautiful in a thousand ways—by trying to imitate it straight, by painting its monstrous opposite, or of any of the ways in between” (157). The “monstrous opposite” of beauty, following Gardner’s argument, is all that can be metaphorically summed up by the word *death* (156): nihilism, entropy, evil. For Gardner, and I think he is right in this, the beautiful (or the holy) is always life-giving in some essential way; for Gardner, the artist who sees beauty in the world “looks at life” and sees not a Nietzschean void (Gardner’s troll-run vision of chaos against which true art wars). Rather, an artist like this sees, if only in part, a flash “of glory obstructed”—that is, holiness splintered down and incarnated in the world (157).

Before a sacramental reading can begin, however, the primary intuition that the world is holy needs to be seen in the beauty of the work being considered. The idea of literature bearing witness to such transcendent mystery in the world was given early critical form for me in my reading of George Steiner’s *Real Presences* (1989), in which Steiner attempts to fly close to the flame of the reading experience: to set criticism alight and to catch it in the wax and flame of literature itself. This burning—this combustion: the primary act of reading—is volatile and unpredictable because it is, for Steiner, no less than an encounter with Transcendence (a *presence* seen in the articulation of goodness, truth, and beauty in a work of art). For Steiner, in this book, reading is much more than simply interpreting a series of signs and symbols, a reaction against certain deconstructionist theories, which, in recent years, seem to have become passé (*cf.* Wolfe “Real Presence” 43). For Steiner, as for Dillard, reading is a deep experience and swooping into a work is like settling into another world and having an encounter with “otherness” that leaves one hollowed and, mysteriously, hallowed.

This encounter, for Steiner, is with the other in its “condition of freedom” (its freedom to be other than what a reader expects). It is, at root, an encounter with God or the Transcendent: that which Richard Kearney names “the stranger,” Gregory Wolfe “mystery,” and John Gardner the idea of beauty or holiness. This way of reading perceives the work itself as something of infinite critical depth which no amount of criticism—Marxist, psychoanalytic, deconstructionist, or any other school—can fully get to the bottom of, including itself. Though Steiner’s critique of criticism as parasitic to literary art seems to me to undermine the authority of *Real Presences* as a work of criticism, I found the work particularly helpful in refocusing my attention on what is in fact at stake in reading. It reminded me that more is on the line than mere interpretation, and that good criticism should be more like the reading experience itself: a face-to-face encounter with the other.

The word “hermeneutics” gives us a hint of this *vis à vis* experience with the other in the act of reading, inhabited as the term is by the god Hermes, “patron of reading and... messenger between the gods and the living, between the living and the dead” (Steiner 7). Just as Hermes’ flight path is never simply one way, so too reading in the manner Steiner proposes is not just flight from reality to the world of the book, any more than interpretation should be a flight into a lofty but fixed theoretical position. There is always traffic in both directions. Reading is not mere escapism or surrender to story. Even Dillard, in *Holy the Firm*, is forced from her reading and seclusion into a world of real pain—with “no hope of heaven”—when a plane crashes nearby and a young girl, whom Dillard calls Julie Norwich, has her face “burned off” (437). There is always the return, even after being consumed by a work that is very much alive with Dillard’s everyday gods or Steiner’s mysterious Transcendence or Gardner’s hallowed sense of beauty: a world in which the holiness animates “everything that is, wholly here and emptied—flung, and

flowing, sowing, unseen, and flown” (436). Reading, Steiner insists, involves passage from reality to a book’s otherworld, yes, but it also returns us to our own world—only changed by our time spent abroad in a book.

To say that I have always *known* this is not to say that I have always understood it—or that I fully understand it now. As I was learning to read, bookish worlds like Narnia and Middle-earth changed how I saw my own world. I learned wide-eyed wonder from Lucy Pevensie and stubborn, often foolish courage from Bilbo Baggins and his nephew Frodo. Further along, as an adult, reading Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* altered my worldview in markedly similar yet distinctly different ways. Each of these works came to me as mere words—signs strung together artfully—but reading them enlivened worlds, called places like Muhammad’s Mecca and Macondo into being in my head. Gregory Wolfe says, in his essay “Transfiguration,” that the “purpose of art is not to strand us in an alternate world, but to return us to the realm of the ordinary, only with new eyes” (118). This has indeed been the case in much of my reading experience. These worlds have marked me, not in shallow sentimental ways but in deep paradigm shifting ways—opening my eyes to cultures, places, and people beyond me. Each of these paradigm shifts is a swoop close to what Gardner would call *truth*: the momentary illumination that literature has the potential to give—Dillard’s candle in the dark. If a single work has the potential to illuminate a reader’s life in this way then imagine the illumination of a particular time and place given by reading several novels by different authors writing of that particular era and locale. Such a study would have the potential to bring an intensification of truth—the *thisness* of another world and the otherness of the people who live in that world. This intense experience of flying close to the flame of a burning “otherness” in reading continues to be ritualistic for me: something often done alone by

lamplight, candlelight, or flashlight. It has always been consuming: something easily romanticised, yes, yet very real and affecting—as real as the horse-patterned blanket I once accidentally set on fire because the hot bulb of my lamp was pressed for too long against the tufty fabric as I read inside a make-shift tent on my bed.

Even though I had an intuition that there was something real and affecting in my early reading experiences, I would not have called it either beauty or holiness. It was only an inkling that the world was larger and more mysterious than I could imagine: a sense that love was something transformative and powerful and life-giving—you cannot read of Frodo and Sam's struggle toward Mount Doom in *The Return of the King* and not sense this. It was not until I started thinking of reading in terms of sacraments, however, that I began to see both sacraments and stories in a different light that began to illuminate this holiness I *sensed* in some authors' work, like Tolkien's, but could not name. To be immersed in a story reminded me of being immersed in water when I was baptized as a kid. We were told that when we went under the water our "old self" died and when we resurfaced we did so into a "new self." We were told this but I knew it was both true and untrue. I believed there was a change but I also knew I was the same kid as before, only soaking wet and with water up my nose. This feeling that things were different yet still the same, even after something as supposedly significant as baptism, took new shape for me in reading *The Lord of the Rings* and learning that Frodo, even after destroying the One Ring and returning to his beloved Shire, still had a scar from a wraith's knife wound that continued to ache and torture him. Years later, thinking back on this experience and the theology behind sacraments like baptism, I began to see a correlation between sacrament and metaphor, particularly after reading J. Edward Chamberlin's *If this is your land, where are your stories?*

(2004), in which Chamberlin speaks of the common ground stories provide between differing cultures or worldviews.

This common ground, in terms of reading, Chamberlin outlines as the metaphorical space between the real world and the world of a book, where a story can become “real” enough to affect the way a reader sees the world.<sup>12</sup> I know Middle-earth is not real but Sam’s and Frodo’s friendship—their dogged persistence through Mordor—affects my thinking as if Middle-earth was real, as if it all really happened; just as I know I didn’t really kill my “old self” when the pastor dunked my head in the lake the day I was baptized, but I know I am to live *as if* that’s true if there is to be any hope of making it true. It is the *effect* that sacraments are supposed to have on those that receive them that make them “strong metaphors” for me, evocative ways of seeing in new lights the effect that literature can potentially have on those that read. By “strong metaphor” I mean a simile shot through with so much promise that the qualifiers “like” and “as”—linguistic markers that this is all mere wordplay—evaporate and what Kearney calls the “*thisness*” of the metaphor becomes incarnate or *real*: just like a sacrament, received in the right spirit, becomes part of the reality it is only gesturing toward—the bread of the Eucharist, for the believer, becomes the body of Christ. In reading, as in sacraments, something can potentially happen that is real and affecting.

This assertion relies on what I perceive to be the strong relation of word to world—book to reality—in fiction, as well as on *how* that relation is perceived or read. Sacramental reading is not the only critical means of affirming a strong, metaphorical relation between books and life but, as I hope to show, it is an effective way to read. To flesh out the initial importance of this connection between word and world it will be helpful to use the sacramental language of icons,

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<sup>12</sup> I emphasize here the common ground between the real world and the world of a *book* because the focus of this study is the sacramental reading of four novels; however, it should be noted that Chamberlin’s conceptualization of common ground does not favour the world of books over oral/aural storytelling

specifically the difference between icons and idols according to Jean-Luc Marion's "The Idol and The Icon" in *God Without Being* (1991). Marion calls an idol "the gaze's landing place" or the place where the gaze of the viewer (or reader) stops or comes to rest, "when it can no longer pass beyond" (Marion 11). A reading of a book that cannot see beyond the story's artifice—its stylistic innovation, its finely-wrought prose, or even its ability to accurately mirror reality—is what Marion might call idolatrous. Such a reading *sees* the book: it perceives (often clearly and lucidly) how the story works or that the story is effective in creating a mimesis of reality. But if it goes no further, if it does not in some way expand one's vision of the world or allow a reader to see something about her world in a new light, then it simply mirrors what that reader already knows about the world (spectacular and dazzling as that may be). In such a reading there is no journey out from a reader's self into the world's otherness, just a short circuit from self to self—the reader's worldview is affirmed but not challenged or broadened. This way of reading is always seductive because it has the illusion of clarity of thought and ideas but it has no comprehensive, complicating vision; ultimately, it is for those who prefer the clarity of ideology's scrubbed mirror to the obscured view of art's hand-splotched window.<sup>13</sup>

I am alluding, of course, to a reading of a book and not necessarily to the work itself. Marion tells us that "the idol results from the gaze that aims at it [whereas] the icon summons sight in letting the visible... be saturated little by little with the invisible" (17). If we can apply this to reading then we are talking about the posture of the reader toward the work: an idolatrous reading being one that is closed to the idea that a reader needs to be hospitable to the work's otherness—reading the work on its own terms. This hospitality or reverence does not negate the ability or need to judge a work but it slows that judgement long enough to allow the other, as

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<sup>13</sup> A writer of fiction gives into this same kind of idolatry if her work favours "ideas" at the expense of a carefully crafted, "comprehensive, complicating vision" of the world.



seen in the work, to speak in its own right. It requires, on the part of the reader, a willingness to *listen*—a radical openness to the work and to the world that suffuses it. If this is done, the work, the thing visible to the reader, is given space in the reader's mind to be “saturated little by little with the invisible” or suffused with the mystery that animates the world—beauty or that which is ultimately life-giving, holiness.

Seen in this way beauty is both surface and substance: it is seen in the artfulness of the work, its surface, but that artfulness is also a gesture toward the mystery the work tries to house or give shape to, its substance. In this scheme, the book, the signifier, depends for its very life on the world, the signified. Marion says that the icon “summons sight”—it speaks and calls to the viewer—indicating that *what* the icon signifies has a voice and a life beyond the icon, but that *it* lives and speaks through the icon. Andreas Andreopoulos, in *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography* (2005), outlines the specific functions of icons agreed upon at The Second Council of Nicea in 787 AD, and among these functions were the ideas that icons were meant “to suggest or ‘symbolize’ the presence of the depicted person; and to unite the material and spiritual realms” (Andreopoulos 26). So, when I speak of sacraments as “strong symbols” it helps to picture this in relation to the icons that symbolize the presence they depict but also unite the viewer with that presence; in the icon, signifier and signified become *consubstantial*. Solrunn Nes, in *The Mystical Language of Icons* (2000), citing St Theodore the Studite, explains consubstantiality in this way: “The portrait (the type) is associated with the model (the prototype) like a print is to a seal and a shadow to a figure. They resemble each other, but exist in quite different forms” (16). In Orthodox theology, then, an icon of Christ is seen as consubstantial with Christ just as Jesus is consubstantial with the Father. But what happens when a book is seen as consubstantial with the world?

Marion writes that an icon has “that strange property of transforming the visible and the invisible into each other” (Marion 19). The visible then becomes consubstantial with the invisible, both remaining what they are—surface and substance—yet inseparable, like a lake’s undulating surface and its frigid depths. Of course, the depth of a lake cannot be fully known by skimming its surface in a boat, any more than the world can be comprehended through a single story, but the depth of the lake can be felt and fished and seen hazily just as a story can give us a feeling of something beyond us, allow us to hook the inexpressible in words, and give us a silvering glimpse of a deeper world. To carry the metaphor a little further, the unseen buoys up the visible just as a book rests on the surface tension of the world. Without the outside world, literature is an abandoned boat on a sand dune. So, if, according to some deconstructionist theorists who claim to have read Baudrillard, there is no world outside the text, if there is no depth of existence to buoy up our stories, then why are we paddling so hard in critical bog lands? Where will it get us? But if we see literature as in some way consubstantial with reality—the way metaphor is—then what is signified (the world) can never be reduced to that which signifies it (a book) nor can one be drained away from the other.

Baudrillard, in “Simulacra and Simulations,” a work more descriptive of contemporary views than prescriptive, shows the postmodern interrogation of this idea by arguing that “[all] of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could *exchange* for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange—God, of course. But what if God... can be simulated [or] reduced to the signs which attest his existence?” (Baudrillard 173). This inquiry leads to Baudrillard’s account of the deconstruction of icons as “strong symbols” of the divine: first, he claims an icon “is the reflection of a basic reality”; second, that an icon “masks and perverts a basic reality”; third, that

an icon “masks the *absence* of a basic reality”; and fourth, that, in the end, an icon “bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (173). The problem with this neat formula is in the third critique, in which the image (signifier) “*plays at being*” reality (signified), which Baudrillard calls “sorcery” of a sort (173). That is, if an image of God, an icon, plays at *being* God, it conjures, magically, the disappearance of God—or, put another way, God is not needed if we have his image, so, essentially, the divine image murders the divine presence.

Baudrillard’s critique of the “logic” he describes is oblique but it is housed in the word “sorcery.” Baudrillard, I think rightly, sees that the “sorcery” is not in the postmodern argument he is describing here but in its rhetoric, for if this argument is held up to Marion’s, we see that this conceptualization of icons really mirrors Marion’s conceptualization of idols, which are not images of the divine but only images of the perception of the divine. Marion writes that an idol is “a function of the gaze,” or, it is a product of the “aim” that produces it (Marion 12). The function of the argument Baudrillard depicts, its aim, is to undermine the Western wager on representation—that a sign can exchange for meaning—by showing as hollow that which, in Western thought, has traditionally guaranteed that exchange: the idea of God or, in Steiner’s terms, the Transcendent. In the end, this postmodern argument does not reflect or prove the absence of God (and by extension Reality), only a contemporary, iconoclastic desire to prove this. According to this line of thought, the image of God murders the divine (something Baudrillard, at best, seems ambivalent about), but for Marion the “the visibility of the face [in the icon] allows the invisibility that envisages [or gives face to the icon] to grow”—to deepen its mystery or otherness (20).

The theological language of icons here gives us a fresh, metaphorical way of seeing the vital connections between stories and reality, words and world. If stories have no connection to

reality then one could assume they are part of a muted hyperreality, the result of cutting beauty off from truth; but if stories are in some way consubstantial with reality then through our reading of them reality has the potential to be transfigured, the result of seeing truth in beauty's skin. In the scheme Baudrillard describes, mystery evaporates and beauty becomes a brittle construct, whereas in Marion's philosophy, mystery deepens and grows and its beauty continues to be life-giving and animate. In terms of the categories we have set up so far in this discussion of literature, mystery can be pictured as holiness articulated through beauty. And beauty can, of course, be expressed in both icons and fiction, sacraments and reading, because both are strong metaphors. Both are mediums through which we can see and be affected by the glory of holiness and beauty in the face of the other, a face that always calls us to respond to it.

Baudrillard, for his part, according to William Pawlett, tried in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993) to articulate a generative understanding of mystery with the idea of "symbolic exchange" which "emerges as a principle that attacks, undermines, annuls or suspends binary oppositions—the very structures of Western rationality, political order, law, logic and meaning" (Pawlett 48). This may at first seem antithetical to what I am describing but because Baudrillard defines "the real" or "reality" as the "product of binary oppositions"—the result of the *relation* or exchange between signifier and signified rather than reality as the signified itself—then the symbolic exchange of reading is actually a very sacramental idea. According to Pawlett, poetry, for Baudrillard, is more than an arbitrary or even artful tying "together of signifier and signified," locked "within the [logical] code of representation and equivalence" (68). It is not that poetry or stories cannot have meaning—Baudrillard was not the relativist his critics suggest, according to Pawlett—only that meaning is not something that a reader gains or possesses. If it was, the reader could have absolute power over a story and be able to reduce it to mere ideas.

But what about a story's power over a reader: its ability to enthrall and startle? A story doesn't just *have* meaning as a lake has fish: a story *means* in the act of reading. "Meaning," in the symbolic exchange that is reading, according to Baudrillard, is, in fact, "not a 'thing' but a 'no(t)-thing'; that is, it is not an abstract unit but a *relation*, an experience, a possibility" (68, *my emphasis*).

This, of course, would fly in the face of a deconstructive theory in which symbols are seen as mere things people invent and interpret, constructs, like the images of the divine Baudrillard described in "Simulacra and Simulations" that are perceived as hollow and unconnected to reality—words divorced from the world. As Pawlett claims, there is, even for Baudrillard, a dynamic relation between poetry and the world, signifier and signified. This is why poetry and stories continue to matter, because they have weight, substance, force and consequence in our real world—in how we perceive and *create* or re-imagine our reality. As we have seen in Dillard's *Holy the Firm*, stories may take us into another world but they always return us to our own with heightened awareness, brightened vision—think of Dillard's candle with twin wicks illuminating the story she is reading but also the world around her. Dillard's candle can be seen as a metaphor for how stories can affect our perceptions and imaginations: how they can give new shape to the way we see the world, as it is and as it could be.

Ron Hansen, in his essay "Writing as Sacrament," cites the theologian Nathan Mitchell as saying that "Symbols are not things people invent and interpret, but realities that 'make' and interpret a people.... Symbols are places to live, breathing spaces that help us discover what possibilities life offers" (13).<sup>14</sup> Hansen goes on to say that "[the] job of fiction writers is to fashion those symbols and give their readers the feeling that life has great significance, that

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<sup>14</sup> This is, of course, a very positive view of symbols. Symbols can indeed help us "discover the possibilities life offers," but these "possibilities" can be negative and destructive as well, as in the case of the swastika as symbol.

something is going on here that matters" (13). The four writers that I will be looking at in this study fashion their stories, each in unique ways, so that their readers see just how significant life is or can be. Not all authors can be said to write with this intent, and their work would call for a different type of reading. And that is not to say the stories by these authors are not open to other readings, only that such stories as the ones written by these four authors call for a way of reading that is open to exploring, and potentially being changed by, the depth of life's significance as glimpsed through a story's portrayal of beauty—both its surface and its substance.

A sacramental reading, then, is first a response to a perceived authorial intent—a reader's intuition that the author sees the world in some way as holy. But it is also a critical working out of *how* a work can potentially affect a reader, how the happenings of a book have the potential to become a part of that reader's memory, and, as a result, affect her worldview. Marilynne Robinson says that "reading a book is a much deeper thing than interpreting a series of signs. Words can inform but they can also enlist, and it is this power to engage consciousness, so that a fiction becomes the reader's own experience, that is remarkable. There is a power, as of ritual or initiation, which claims a place in deep memory, and which remains integral and complex" ("On the Reader" 327). What Robinson is describing is what I have discussed in light of the metaphor of consubstantiality, except now it is not only literature and life that are joined (word and world), but also the reader and life. Or, put another way, a reader accesses what is life-giving in a work and that has the potential to affect the way she lives in the real world. This echoes Hansen's idea that symbols make and interpret people, not necessarily the other way around: we read, yes, but we are also read—picture the flame-faced moth immolating Dillard's memory of that night reading Rimbaud. The shadow this casts, in sacramental language, is Marion's idea that an icon not only allows us to see but it *sees*, it envisages, or gives form (face) to both the visible and the

invisible. In terms of literature, a work not only allows us to see the world in a fresh way but something in that work sees us: something about it, has the potential to give shape and order to our lives at the same time that it gives shape and order to the world through its metaphoric depiction of it.

To say that that “something” is holiness is not to enclose it in dogmatic language and limit its meaning to religious usage, but to show, in close-readings of novels by Richards, Winter, Moore, and Crummey, that the idea of holiness or beauty is a presence as common in myth as it is in irony, as real in tragedy as in comedy—that it is, at root, something essentially life-giving that has the potential to come across, as Tillich says, on the level of deep experience for a reader. Many of us know the feeling of vertigo and breathlessness we have when we snap shut a good book and have to lurch back into the world. We know that something has changed, in us, in our view of the world, even if the world itself seems unchanged. We know intuitively in those moments that what we have read was real in its effect on us, even though every word was a fabrication, a fiction. Yet theories of this experience seem strangely scarce in much recent literary criticism. There are, however, theorists, deep readers, who, though not using the language of sacraments, do explore this encounter with holiness—an often very human encounter incarnated in unique readings. These thinkers have been my guides on this descent into what it means to see reading as sacramental, to marry captivation with criticism, hospitality with sincere questioning. They have shown me what it means to encounter the other through story—to be marked—and to be returned to myself other-wise. Two in particular—Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida—have taught me to listen for a work’s “call”, a book’s *adieu*—its greeting and benediction, twin wicks setting the world between the words alight.



## Chapter 1

### The *Adieu* of Reading

David Adams Richards' *Incidents in the Life of Markus Paul*

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I bring the “religious” philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida to bear on David Adams Richards' *Incidents in the Life of Markus Paul* (2011) in order to illuminate how a reader is called to responsibility through the call of another. If, as Paul Ricoeur claims, criticism begins by asking a question, then this sacramental reading, as I said above, should begin with that which precedes the asking of critical questions—*listening*. But if we first listen, what is it that we listen for? What do we hear in reading?

In the first section of this chapter, I argue that what we hear is the “call” of another: the other's *adieu*, or what Judith Butler refers to as the “irrefutable *thereness*” of another, that other's holiness manifest in either religious or secular terms. To explore the *adieu* in religious terms—a view expressed in Native and Christian symbolism in Richards' *Incidents in the Life of Markus Paul*, discussed in the second half of this chapter—I look at others as “created,” a view I examine in terms of Native spirituality and Christian theology. However, even though the *adieu* of Richards' novel is articulated in religious language, this is not always the case with every novel, particularly with works of fiction that are not written from overt faith-perspectives. So, in

order to broaden a reader's understanding of a story's *adieu*, I examine Derrida's secularization of Levinas' philosophy of the other in which Derrida articulates holiness as one's infinite value rooted in one's "irreplaceability."

Understanding how holiness is articulated in a novel, be it in a religious or secular sense, allows a reader to begin to see how she can signify holiness in her eventual response to the story. Signifying holiness, however, pinning it in an argument, involves wrestling with the form it takes in a book: in order to do this one needs to open oneself to be hollowed and hallowed, wounded and blessed, by another's fictional life.

The theoretical section of this chapter explores such an encounter, and how, as readers we are called to it. First, we will look at the *adieu* as a call to responsibility, an idea Derrida takes up from Levinas. Then, in a reading of Richards' novel in the second half of the chapter, we will see how this responsibility can only be enacted out of love—something Levinasian responsibility does not allow for. In this way, Richards' novel will push back against Levinas' theory, demanding that the theory open itself to life's ambiguities as represented in the story: allowing itself to be hollowed and hallowed, wounded and blessed, by a fictional encounter.

My main aim in the following discussion is to explore how, in reading, we are called to responsibility but also awakened and given a desire to respond to another we have only read about—another who calls to us in the work's *adieu*.

### **The *Adieu* of Reading**

Richard Kearney tells us in his preface to *Anatheism* (2010) that when he arrived in Paris in 1977 to study with philosopher Paul Ricoeur, the first question Ricoeur asked him was: "*d'où parlez-*

*vous*? Where do you speak from?” (Kearney xi). This is a good first question, one in need of answering in the course of this discussion. But the experience of reading, I argue, precedes such inquiry because reading, as encounter, brings one into contact with another’s holiness.

After all, it is a story itself that precedes criticism or commentary. But if you hold to the idea that a story—a book—is merely a series of signs and symbols, mere language, then it is only in reading that the work comes alive. This view, of course, has led to a common misreading of phenomenology: the idea that reading alone brings the work into being. Judith Butler, in her forward to Maurice Natanson’s *The Erotic Bird: Phenomenology in Literature* (1998), takes issue with the misreading and helps solidify the “*thereness*” of reality that precedes perception, or in our case, reading:

The notion that consciousness belongs solely to the domain of subjectivity thus misses the phenomenological point that subjectivity always belongs to the world: consciousness is always consciousness *of* its object, it is nothing without its preposition, and this preposition marks its kinship with the world that it interrogates. Consciousness is, thus, in its very structure, in an implicit relation to the world it seeks to know, and seeks to know that world precisely to the extent that it is “of” it in some way. What this means is that the terms of subjectivity that we often imagine to be residing in a psychic interiority, such as consciousness, memory, and imagination, are to be found precisely in a constitutive and binding relation to the world, intentional relations that posit a world they do not make, that build up a world of objects whose *thereness* is disclosed as irrefutable. (“Forward” x, *my emphasis*)

Before any perception or articulation of the world there is the world itself in all its “irrefutable *thereness*”—its ontological reality beyond (and before) epistemological inquiry. In terms of

reading, the words of a novel are not my words; their artful arrangement is strange to me, circumscribed by another's vision of the world which is circumscribed by the world itself. These words—these stories—have come from somewhere other than me.

The Mohawk writer Brian Maracle, in his essay "First Words," tells us of the story that precedes all stories for his people, the ceremonial tale that begins all formal gatherings: the creation story that describes the defining moment in his people's history. This first story circles a unique vision of the world around its listeners or readers, reminding them always to give thanks to the Creator, and that story is circumscribed itself by the created world. Maracle writes that this Creation Story marks "when [his people] were given the gift of speech and, with it, a unique way of looking at and understanding the world. That was when [they] were given the sacred responsibilities that shape [their] lives. That was the moment that shaped how [they thought] and what [they believed]" (Maracle 2). For Maracle and for his people, this story does not come *from* them; it comes from outside them, from when Shonkwaya'tison gave them their language (10). This first story is of the birth of language through the first humans made from a handful of clay, the *onkwehón:we*, which is what Iroquoian storytellers are called to this day. This original story, for us, can represent the metaphorical otherness of language rooted in the world's mysterious alterity. Just as all other stories, for Maracle, are circumscribed by this Creation Story spoken in the Creator's language—the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwén—so I am arguing that stories are encircled by a mysterious otherness that is always prior to any reading of these works.

This otherness—this irrefutable "*thereness*"—of the work is what intrigues me: alterity that is not reducible to the written word or even spoken language, for it speaks in different ways through intuition, faith, observance, music, and gesture, as well as through language and by other means. But because the focus of our discussion *is* reading, albeit in a certain way, our focus

remains on language, on the written word, and the mysterious otherness we encounter *in* narrative: Gardner's "primary intuition" about the world.

However, before a reader can signify this mystery—put words to it and pin it in an argument, like Jacob wrestling the angel—that reader is often marked by a book, by her encounter with the other: a mark that affects the way that reader walks in the world. To extend the metaphor, a book can wound us as well as bless us—give us a limp as well as a promise. In Richards' novel we will see this in how the book's combative tone becomes its invitation to love the characters more deeply. Marilynne Robinson, reflecting on early reading experiences, tells us that whatever "the books actually said or meant, they told me an astonishing thing, that the world would break my heart. And I learned at the same time that there was a place in my soul prepared almost to welcome the injury" (325). But like Jacob's limp after wrestling with God, the marks left on us by literature are not simply "wounds" as Robinson describes, but something more intimate—signs of struggle but also marks of love. And it is in the very inflicting of these intimate wounds—in the very act of reading—that we are addressed from within the work.

First, before any type of reader-response, we are *called*. And this *call*—that comes from the other, whether in- or outside of literature—is given different names in different cultures. For Brian Maracle and other Iroquois people this is the Creation Story itself with its message of gratitude, the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen or "the words that come before all others" (Maracle 12). Following the philosopher who first brought me to this idea and because this study is using "sacramental" language, I have named this "call" with a word Emmanuel Levinas taught me to hear otherwise, a sacred word redefined in secular terms by Jacques Derrida's readings of Levinas.

*Adieu*. In literature, this can refer to a work's greeting and benediction: twin wicks setting the world between the words alight—making the fictional world “real” to the reader. First, there is the greeting—the *shalom*—or the work's salutation to the reader, which can also take the form of a challenge. For Levinas this is the call to responsibility for the other who addresses me.<sup>15</sup> For our purposes, this “other” is *not* the literary work itself but this other does speak *through* the work to the reader (as the numinous speaks through the icon), calling the reader to responsibility. In Richards' novel *Incidents in the Life of Markus Paul*, the other's call for justice is answered by a longsuffering search for truth on the part of the main characters Amos and Markus Paul. Steiner, using terms similar to those employed by Levinas, tells us that reading is “a commitment at risk, a response which is, in the root sense, responsible” (Steiner 8). For Maracle and other First Nations people the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwén is the story that speaks through all subsequent stories of the responsibility of the listener or reader to Creation—both human and nonhuman. But what does it mean to be responsible for the other, whether that other is in the world or the work—human or not? In *Markus Paul* this call to responsibility takes the form of Amos' and Markus' search for the truth of who killed a promising young native man, Hector Penniac, in the hold of the cargo ship *Lutheran* in 1985. But, for Richards, this responsibility is only enacted because of Amos' and Markus' love for those affected by the murder. According to Levinas, however, responsibility can never be reduced to an empty idea like “love.”

In dialoguing with Christian thinkers, Levinas, a Jewish philosopher, refused to “reduce” his conceptualization of responsibility to “love”: a word nuanced by Christian thought but which has arguably been all but emptied of its meaning in a post-Auschwitz world. If responsibility is to signify love, Levinas says in an interview, then “responsibility is the love without

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<sup>15</sup> For Emil Fackenheim, in *To Mend The World: Foundations: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought* (1982), this takes the form of “Tikkun Olam” or the responsibility, especially after the Holocaust, to “mend the world.”

concupiscence of which Pascal spoke: to respond to the other, to approach the other as unique, isolated from all multiplicity and outside collective necessities. To approach someone as unique to the world is to love him" ("The Vocation of the Other" 108). And Levinas goes on to say elsewhere that the "encounter with the other is straightaway my responsibility for him. That is the responsibility for my neighbour, which is no doubt the severe name for what we call love of one's neighbour: love without eros, charity, love in which the ethical aspect dominates the passionate aspect" ("Philosophy, Justice, and Love" 165). To encounter the other in any form, for Levinas, *is* to be ethically responsible for the other. In Richards' novel we see this is Amos' responsibility for both Hector Penniac, the young native man who is killed, and for Roger Savage, the white man wrongly accused of Hector's death. Because Amos is responsible for both Roger and Hector he is responsible for both the living and the dead, something Richards hints at by his symbolic association of Amos with the mystical figure of the Virgin Mary, someone who contains the uncontainable or bears the unbearable. It is only the reader who can see Amos in this light, however. All Amos knows is that he is responsible for both Hector and Roger.

Hence the primacy of the *adieu*—the call of another—that precedes the hermeneutical question: Where do you speak from? Before you speak you listen and as a listening-reader you are responsible for the other who addresses you from within or beyond the work, from within the story as well as from the world beyond the story. In the case of Richards' novel, this refers to both Roger and Hector who call to a reader through Amos' concern for them. "Responsibility," Levinas says, "is transcendence from the one to the other, the newness of the rapport going from the unique to the unique. Responsibility is, in effect, inalienable.... Transcendence from the unique to the unique, before all community: love of the stranger, hence holier, higher than fraternity" ("Vocation" 108). For Levinas, responsibility begins with the *adieu*—the call of the

other—addressed to me. Because this rapport is from one soul to another, from “the unique to the unique,” it is inflected with all the ontological weight of the Transcendent, becoming the *à-Dieu* (to God) that places me face-to-face with the other, in whose face I encounter God. Richards echoes this in the reverberation *Markus Paul* sounds between Hector, a native, and Roger, a white man, inflecting both with Transcendence through Amos’ sacral view of the world and the old chief’s refusal to dehumanize either Hector or Roger. There is also a resonance of this idea with the Iroquoian Creation Story and the effect that story has on its listeners and readers:

The Thanksgiving Address, which constitutes the first words and the last words spoken at all of our gatherings, is a beautiful and impressive reminder of the abiding and loving relationship we are to have with one another and with all the works of Creation, and it reminds us that our relationship with the earth and our obligations to the Creator are more important than the day-to-day affairs of human beings. (Maracle 13)

Just as Levinas’ idea that responsibility is born out of the rapport between oneself and another, the “unique to the unique,” and this exchange is sacralised by the idea of each being made in the image of God, so also Maracle argues that the hearers of the Creation Story are responsible for one another and the whole of Creation because of their relationship with their Creator. In Richards’ novel, the sacredness of human life is alluded to through a blend of Catholic and Micmac<sup>16</sup> imageries: Amos is seen as a Marian-figure who stands between life and death, the nativity and the cross, Roger and Hector, whereas Markus is likened to the Micmac God Glooscap, who, Markus believes, would be grieved by his people’s condemnation of an innocent man like Roger, regardless of his race. For Levinas, Maracle, and Richards, responsibility is sacralised because the one for whom one is responsible has innate, transcendent worth.

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<sup>16</sup> I will be using “Micmac” instead of “Mi’kmaw” in my discussion of Richards’ novel because it is the word he uses throughout *Markus Paul*.



Put another way, in Christian terms, the two greatest commandments given in the New Testament—love God and love your neighbour—for Levinas, become one and the same. The other, my neighbour made in the image of God, who calls me to responsibility—to radical self-giving love—becomes the incarnate face of God, the only knowable face of the Almighty, according to Levinas. In Richards' novel, Roger's innocence is likened to Amos' friend, Isaac Snow's father, who was wrongfully lynched, and that friend's innocent death is likened to Christ's, and elsewhere in the novel Roger's rough life is seen through Markus' eyes as just as sacred and coarse as Christ's nativity. In fiction, then, when a character is seen to have sacred worth, the stakes are raised in what Steiner calls a wager on "the meaning of meaning" (the very wager Baudrillard showed to have been undermined by the postmodern deconstruction of icons): "[There is always] the potential of insight and response when one human voice addresses another, when we come face to face with the text and work of art or music, which is to say, when we encounter the *other* in its condition of freedom, [which] is a wager on transcendence" (Steiner 4). Any meaning, then, derived from reading a work of literature, following both Steiner and Levinas, comes out of a deep encounter with the other, an encounter that is no less than a "wager on transcendence," a wager that Richards makes in *Markus Paul* through a blend of Catholic and Micmac imageries. This of course begs the question: How do we conceive of transcendence and the other or how might perceiving the Transcendent, as metaphor, affect the way we perceive the human other?

This brings us back to Levinas' insistence that the face of the other is the only knowable face of God: "When I speak to a Christian," Levinas says in an interview, "I always quote Matthew 25: the relation to God is presented there as a relation to another person. *It is not a metaphor; in the other, there is a real presence of God.* In my relation to the other, I hear the

word of God. It is not a metaphor" ("Philosophy, Justice, Love" 171, *my emphasis*). It is here that we again see similarities with the Iroquoian belief that fulfilling one's obligation to the Creator is done by loving and attending to the Creation. In a similar manner, Amos Paul's veneration of the Virgin Mary and his belief in miracles is *realized* (or made authentic) in his seeking for truth, which is undertaken because Amos, like Richards, sees all human life as irrevocably rooted in the sacred and therefore of inestimable worth.<sup>17</sup> It is here, however, in this idea of the other's value stemming from being made in a creator's image or rooted in some sense of the sacred, that Derrida parts company with his religious friend Levinas in an effort to show that the idea of holiness can take both sacred and secular forms; and this idea will be important later on when we look at divergent forms holiness takes in novels by writers who, unlike Richards, do not openly profess faith in a transcendent being.

Derrida calls the other's innate value *irreplaceability*: holiness without Transcendence, without God. But, for Levinas, humanity remains "the voice of God which reverberates in being" ("Vocation" 107). Transcendence, in Levinas' thought, can never be grasped except through care for one's neighbour; so, Levinas trains his eye on his neighbour rather than elusive ideas of God. Richards does a similar thing in *Markus Paul* by focusing less on religious questions (which he tackles head-on in his polemic *God Is*) and more on his characters' lives and their moral dilemmas. This choice to focus on the embodied other in the world is *not*, for Levinas or Richards, settling for flesh over divinity. In Levinas' thought, the other is considered holy because the other's face *is* the face of God—an idea Richards has echoed in a recent interview.<sup>18</sup>

This idea is familiar to Christians, for whom the doctrine of *Imago Dei*—that we are all made in the image of God and are therefore of infinite worth—is a central tenet of orthodoxy.

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<sup>17</sup> See Martin, "A Conversation with David Adams Richards," 55-63.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

Indeed this is an idea common among the three main monotheistic world religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Levinas, knowing this connection and seeking to find common ground between Judaic and Christian thought on this subject, brought to light what he calls a “magnificent meditation” by John Paul II, in which we are taught that:

God would be incarnated not solely in Christ, but through Christ in all men. This divine filiality of humanity is nothing new for Jews: the divine paternity experienced by Jewish piety, as it has been formulated since Isaiah, should be taken literally. In Isaiah, the Israelites are called sons of God, and in the liturgy the words “Our Father” constantly return. (109)

This idea, common to Jewish piety and Christian theology, of “the divine filiality of humanity” is taken further by Annie Dillard, with whom I began my introduction. Dillard refigures holiness as something that is not solely present in others, humans, but in otherness, created reality. For underlying Dillard’s vision of the world is a belief that *all* is created, that all reality comes from the hands of God, imbuing everything, even “time” itself, with holiness. She writes:

Every day is a god, each day is a god, and holiness holds forth in time. I worship each god, I praise each day splintered down, splintered down and wrapped in time like a husk, a husk of many colors spreading, at dawn fast over the mountains split. (Dillard 432-433)

Dillard, through this animistic metaphor, describes created reality—all that each day holds and even “time” itself—as holy, hence the title of that work, *Holy the Firm*. And this broadened understanding of holiness as that which consecrates not only the human other but otherness as creation in all its vast array—an idea the Micmac spirituality depicted in Richards’ novel affirms—will be important when it comes to seeing how an author like Richards describes and reverences (in unique ways) not only specific lives but the region of the Miramichi in which

those lives are rooted, often melding mindscape and landscape, inner and outer worlds, human and nonhuman creation. In *Markus Paul*, Richards does this by seamlessly blending Amos' and Markus' inner searches for the truth with their physical hunts for deer and moose and the spiritual implications of stalking both a metaphorical and literal prey.

In prefiguring a discussion of Richards' novel, and in bringing Dillard, Levinas, Maracle, Derrida, and Richards together here, we see that the call of the text—the *adieu* of the other or otherness within the book—summons us as readers to responsibility because of the holiness that we intuit in a work: that which calls to us. For Levinas, this idea precedes ontology itself; for me, this idea precedes any form of sacramental reading, which, of course, must begin with Ricoeur's hermeneutical question: *d'où parlez-vous?* But what of the reader who doesn't recognize the Transcendent (God or Creator) as an animating force in reality, the source of holiness? Is the very idea of reading sacramentally a closed practice, open only to believers of some stripe? Or can holiness be articulated otherwise to open the very idea of sacramental reading up to a secular audience?

Opening up or secularizing the idea of holiness seems to be the project Derrida undertook in *The Gift of Death* (1992). In the fourth essay in that book Derrida reads Levinas' conceptualization of the other through the evocative phrase: *tout autre est tout autre* or, in my paraphrase, the other is wholly (holy) other (Derrida 82). And for Derrida the idea of the "holy" is indeed bracketed because there is no knowable Transcendental Signified, only endless deferral—endless wandering in the epistemological desert where the Transcendent becomes the mysterious "secret of secrets" always eluding us. For Derrida *tout autre est tout autre* is code, password, trembling dictum: "It becomes the secret of all secrets. Is it not sufficient to transform what one complacently calls a context in order to demystify the shibboleth or decipher all the

secrets of the world” (82). To equate the face of the other with the face of God is then an effort to understand ontologically or to demystify the shibboleth of the other, using the Transcendent as key. For Derrida, the other is not a pawn in any game of understanding—even in seriously understanding our ethical responsibility—and it is on that point that he addresses and differs from Levinas’ thought. “Levinas’ thinking stays within the game—the play of difference and analogy—between the face of God and the face of my neighbour, between the infinitely other as God and the infinitely other as another human” (83-84). For Levinas, there is a play of difference and analogy between God and the other, which he describes in more sacramental than metaphorical terms, citing Pope John Paul II’s meditation on God being incarnate not only in Christ but through Christ in other humans as well. But Derrida argues that Levinas’ “play” favours analogy over difference *in practice*: “[In] taking into account absolute singularity, that is, the absolute alterity obtaining in relations between one human and another, Levinas is no longer able to distinguish between the infinite alterity of God and that of every human” (84). In effect, Derrida argues that the holiness imbued to the other by comparison with the divine, in everyday practice, can more practically affect our actions in the real world than theorizing the divine itself; in terms of his novelistic practice, Richards seems to agree, since in his fiction he tends to focus on the flesh and blood struggles of human characters rather than on the action (or inaction) of God. Marion and Kearney also take a similar tack by not theorizing God as “Being” but God as “gift” (for Marion in *God without Being*) and God as “possibility” (for Kearney in *The God Who May Be*); both see the emphasis in “theology” not as *theo*-logy but as *theo*-logy—not seeing God as a Being conceptualized through reason or *logic* but seeing God instead as *love* revealed through radical self-giving. Gregory Wolfe, in *Beauty Will Save The World*, expresses this as the dialectic between ideology and art.

Since we are dealing with the art form of fiction and not theology, however, we are given storytellers' freedom with language—allusiveness, the "gift" and "possibility" of mystery in literature, that which Wolfe rightly favours. Allusiveness is the double hinge that allows the story to swing between what is and what is not: metaphor. In stories metaphor can function as the door to Transcendence and through which transcendence can slip into the lower-case: the skin or geography of the other, an idea which we will return to in talking about reading as a "ceremony of belief."<sup>19</sup> There is play here, certainly: give and take, elasticity—and, as Kearney rightly asserts, infinite possibility. Derrida, for his part, shows us this stretches into philosophy as well as storytelling:

The trembling of the formula "every other (one) is every (bit) other" can also be reproduced. It can do so to the extent of replacing one of the "every others" by God: "Every other (one) is God," or "God is every (bit) other." Such a substitution in no way alters the "extent" of the original formulation, whatever grammatical function be assigned to the various words. In one case God is defined as infinitely other, wholly other, every bit other. In the other case it is declared that every other one, each of the others, is God inasmuch as he or she is, *like* God, wholly other. (87)

Though there is linguistic play here, this is no mere word game for Derrida. "If this were a game," he writes, "then it would need to be kept safe and untouched [reverenced], like the game that must be kept alive between humans and God" (87). But why reverence this "game" by taking it so seriously? "The game between these two unique 'every others,' like the same 'every other,' opens the space and introduces the hope of salvation, the economy of 'saving oneself'" (87). But how is this economy of "saving oneself" worked out, how is it enacted in the real world? It may be helpful here to understand "saving oneself" through Ricoeur's idea of returning

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<sup>19</sup> See Chamberlin's *If this is your land where are your stories?*.

more fully to oneself. For Ricoeur, one does this *through* encountering the other or otherness, an idea taken up later by his student Richard Kearney and which we will discuss more thoroughly in looking later at reading as returning to oneself “other-wise.”

Kearney, in his latest work *Anatheism*, speaks of this journey out from the self into the world of the other (through reading, among other things) as a passage that involves faith, for even “if faith is not reducible to fiction, it is integral to metaphor. Metaphor involves a transportation (*metaphora*) between self and other. And as such the metaphorical *as* contains within itself a mixed copula of *is/is not*” (Kearney 15). This is metaphor’s double hinge swinging between *is* and *is not* so that the presence we meet in a book is not a direct encounter with *real presence* (cf. Steiner) or blinding Transcendence, but it is still an encounter of a different order. Steiner argues:

[That] we crave remission from direct encounter with “real presence” or the “real absence of that presence,” the two phenomenologies being rigorously inseparable [*which makes for the reader’s sacramental passage between them*], which an answerable experience of the aesthetic must enforce on us. We seek the immunities of indirection. In the agency of the critic, reviewer or mandarin commentator, we welcome those who can domesticate, who can secularize the mystery and summons of creation. (Steiner 39, *my emphasis*)

This is why Derrida’s secularization of Levinas’ theory of “the other as the face of God” into the idea of “infinite singularity”—*irreplaceability*—is a welcome door to this storied space a work calls us to because it metaphorically amplifies the “summons of creation”—the work’s *adieu*—making it heard more broadly. And as we shall see in our discussion of *Markus Paul*, the amplification of the *adieu*—the way in which Richards makes his readers feel the irreplaceable worth of his characters—can hit a heart-piercing pitch in how a reader comes to see the character

of Sky Barnaby through the eyes of Markus Paul. When a reader understands that another's holiness is rooted in that other's *irreplaceability*, that reader's response becomes in and of itself an act of faith: an imaginative journey from oneself into the world of the other through metaphor, a holy act of self-giving.<sup>20</sup>

This call and response, however, is not predicated on full presence, for the other is and is not literally present in the work, like Hector Penniac in *Markus Paul*, who is an absent presence: he is dead by the second page but he haunts the entire novel through everyone's obsession with his death. In more general terms, a work of literature, for all its ability to conjure reality, is not *real presence*. As readers we are situated between the *is* and the *is not* of the other's presence in the story: paradoxically grounded and suspended in metaphor. Steiner calls this an "answerable experience" because the other who is and is not present in the work, does still call out to us, bids us *adieu* out of that mystery signified by the face of God in one's neighbour or the other's *irreplaceability*—the other in the work calling us to responsibility. This call, this *adieu*, goes out to readers as a greeting or challenge from the other (however that other is conceived) but also as a benediction from that other: a blessing that opens up his or her world to such readers.

The call is the gravity of the work, its mysterious draw, much like candle flame entices a moth, returning us to Dillard's reading experience with which we began. The call comes from the other, and, as readers, we are drawn into an encounter with otherness imbued with a sense of the holy—the infinite worth of the other. The fact that English word *worth* finds its root in the word *worship* catches the flutter of the term "the other" in the hot wax of the idea of "holiness," hallowing the face of the other, immolating it. The subsequent illumination that comes from encountering the other in this spirit is the twin wick of the *adieu* (Dillard's flame-faced moth)—the work's benediction: that which, along with the call, sets a fictional world alight.

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<sup>20</sup> See Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 69-79.



As has been said, the call of the other precedes reader-response, which begins with answering Ricoeur's hermeneutical question, *d'où parlez-vous?* Now, between this call and response sparks the idea of benediction, which takes the form of both romantic and sacrificial love in *Markus Paul*, but which, first, returns us to Levinas' thought and then gestures beyond it back into the mystery of holiness. Before reading in light of this double movement of mystery (this to and fro), however, we must understand that for Levinas, the call and response—the question-answer duality we have set up so far—is converted to a “question-prayer that [is], as [Levinas] says... anterior to all dialogue” (*Adieu* 13, *my emphasis*). Derrida, in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (1999), presents his friend's reframing of the question-answer duality as the question-prayer that is, as I have argued thus far, part of the *adieu* of the text.

The question-prayer that turned me toward him [Derrida tells us] perhaps already shared in the experience of the *à-Dieu* with which I began. The greeting of the *à-Dieu* does not signal the end. “The *à-Dieu* is not a finality,” [Levinas] says, thus challenging the “alternative between being and nothingness,” which “is not ultimate.” The *à-Dieu* greets the other beyond being, in what is “signified, beyond being, by the word ‘glory.’” “The *à-Dieu* is not a process of being: in the call, I am referred back to the other human being through whom this call signifies, to the neighbour for whom I am to fear.” (Derrida 13)

Turning the question-answer duality into a question-prayer opens up our possibilities of response to the other who calls us.

This turn of phrase opens a door *between* the call of the other in the text and the response of the reader. But where does the door lead? Derrida, in reading Levinas, says that the *adieu*, inflected here with the sense of being-before-God, *à-Dieu*, encounters the other “beyond being,” an encounter signified by the word “glory.” This exceeds the economy of exchange represented

by a simple call-and-response with an overflowing surplus, an excessive abundance of meaning—the idea of blessing that breaks justice open. In *Markus Paul*, we see this grace at work in how Markus' love for Sky, his childhood girlfriend, persists and becomes deeper throughout the novel—less romantic and more sacrificial—despite the fact that there is no hope of response from Sky, who is too consumed by grief to see the same flash of brilliance in Markus' eyes that Markus sees in hers: a glimpse of what Gardner calls “glory obstructed,” one's irreplaceable worth as a human being.

This is where we encounter the double movement of mystery: moving *beyond* Levinas' idea of being responsible to the other as a human being (an outworking of justice) and also moving *back* into mystery (the grace of fiction). This double-movement beyond and back—to and fro—does not signal stasis but dramatic motion. We see this traffic between the *is* and *is not* of metaphor—that double-hinged door through which we enter into mystery and mystery intrudes upon us. And it is the latter, I argue, that enables the former: when absolute otherness breaks in on our world we are enabled to “intrude on the timeless,” to borrow a phrase of Flannery O'Connor's. But before entering the otherness of a work in a “ceremony of belief,” reading deeply and responding, we are illuminated by the *adieu* of the work—its benediction or blessing.

This is the grace of fiction, or as Steiner words it, the “immunities of indirection” that readers crave in literature. What is literature then but a mediator between radical otherness and oneself? When asked, “Is the face a mediator between God and us?” Levinas responded: “Oh, no, no, not at all, it is not a mediation. It is the way in which the word of God *reverberates*” (171, *my emphasis*). This resonates deeply with the idea I am putting forward of a work's *adieu*—its benediction—opening up the possibilities of interpretation beyond what the closed circuit of call

and response can generate. This benediction does not simply echo the other's call, it harmonizes with it, amplifying further the work's *adieu* so that the idea of holiness reverberates through the face of the other we encounter in fiction.

This is a blessing because as readers we feel the effect of a work deeply and are drawn in, engaged, before we utter a word of our own in response. This affects us and creates the desire to respond that breaks open rigid responsibility (justice) with *love* (grace)—restoring concupiscence or *Eros* to reading. As readers we are not just called to responsibility by a work's *adieu*, its call (following Levinas' thought), we are also driven and challenged to discover ways to respond because the work's *adieu* marks us with its benediction, which is no less than the other's kiss enticing the reader into relationship, or something stronger and more lasting—a covenant.

Responsibility twinned with passion has the potential to illuminate a world of possibilities here for readers. This is the gift a work of literature extends to the reader in its *adieu*: a call to respond and a desire to do so creatively—to meet the other fully even in the other's absence. For fiction is not an encounter with true *being* or *real presence*. And by "sacramental reading" I do not mean to say that we "find God" in stories or come face-to-face with God or anything transcendent. That would take away the allusiveness of stories: the force of mystery that enlivens them—holiness. We do not literally encounter the other in literature but we do ingest words traced through with otherness, words that come from "out there," beyond us. In reading we greet the unseen other. But more than that: we feel the *adieu* of the work—the call—that which hooks us and draws us into the story, as well as the benediction—the stranger's kiss—that which entices us and compels us to respond to the story.

Put another way, we read because we feel ourselves being read—we give ourselves to a work because we feel the other giving itself to us through the work. Otherwise we put the book

down and seek some other encounter. In these instances of deep reading, when we feel called and impassioned to respond, it is not us merely effecting meaning by reading; we are *affected* by what we read. Steiner's "wager on transcendence," like a knock on a door, receives an answer from the other side of the story. We are drawn in: affected *and* awakened, but by whom? The other, in whatever guise, or is it merely the work itself?

### David Adams Richards' *Incidents In The Life of Markus Paul*

As we will see in the following discussion of David Adams Richards' novel *Incidents in the Life of Markus Paul* (2011), work *and* other, style and humanity, labour together to amplify the *adieu* addressed to the reader. In the following section, I will be exploring how the *adieu* of this novel is "heard" through Richards' objective writing style and his religious humanist vision. I will begin by contextualizing the narrative style of *Markus Paul* in relation to Richards' earlier works, emphasizing the style's strengths before exploring the religious humanist vision of the novel. My aim, in the end, is to show how both style and vision work to amplify and make more forceful the novel's *adieu*: its challenge to a reader to love more fully—self-sacrificially—by stepping out of her own world and into incidents in lives of others.

It is interesting to note, as a starting point, that although the "humanity" of Richards' work is recognized and lauded by certain critics,<sup>21</sup> his writing "style" has, throughout his career, been more heavily scrutinized. This is often characterized as Richards' self-professed emphasis on the "life" of his characters over the "form" of his novels (Armstrong and Wylie 7; Mathews "DAR" 204). But I want to show, in a brief sketch of Richards' career and in a more in-depth discussion of his most recent novel, that "life" and "form" have always been integrally connected

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<sup>21</sup> See Currie, "David Adams Richards: *The People of the Roadway*," 132-142.

and that the shifts in his formal style over the course of his career (so far) do not signal a change of artistic vision but a clarifying and amplifying of that vision and its challenge to a reader.

Tony Tremblay, in *David Adams Richards of the Miramichi* (2010), writes of Richards' early artistic vision and how it was expressed in the "subjective" style of his first novels, before the publication of *Nights below Station Street* (1988): "[Richards] valued localism, desiring first to populate place, then listening closely to peculiarities of voice and rhythm; [...] he believed the best way for readers to see was to proceed by imagistic and impressionistic suggestion, thus transporting us into his world on its own terms rather than our own" (Tremblay 94). This idea translated into what many critics called his Faulkner style or what Armstrong and Wylie call Richards' "phenomenological realism"—by which readers are immersed *in* Richards' fictive world, *in* the troubled minds and chaotic observations of his characters, often at the expense of plot and sometimes, according to a few critics, at the expense of reader-comprehension (Mathews "DAR" 227). Without getting bogged down in a discussion of the artistic merit of Richards' early work, up to and including *Road to the Stilt House* (1985),<sup>22</sup> I would simply like to re-emphasize Tremblay's argument that Richards' artistic aim—even from the start of his writing career—was to transport his readers out of their own worlds and into his fictive Miramichi, on that world's own terms.

Tremblay links this observation to Richards' first self-published chapbook *One Step Inside* (1970), citing the "illuminating" title and a passage from Richards' introduction that briefly outlines his own youthful *ars poetica*: "'a poet [should] take [*sic*] one step inside, 'to begin at the beginning,' and dedicate his work to revealing man's emotions, humanity, or the lack of both'" (Richards quoted in Tremblay 118). Tremblay writes that Richards, in his early

<sup>22</sup> For a more detailed account of Richards' artistic achievement in his early works see Lawrence Mathews' article "David Adams Richards (1950-)," *Canadian Writers and Their Works, Vol. 12 Fiction Series, Web, Literature Online*, 15 July 2011, 185-254.

novels, was “‘stepping inside,’ [...] not merely to see with another’s eyes, but to feel and speak as others do” (118). This “stepping inside” was, of course, not simply what Richards wanted his readers to do but it was precisely what he, as an author, was trying to do himself—step out of himself and into another’s world. This, according to Tremblay, led to Richards’ stylistic experimentation in his earlier novels.

Philip Milner, in his 1985 essay “Structure in David Adams Richards’ Unfinished Miramichi Saga,” writes that Richards “indicates [in *The Coming of Winter*] his high regard for the need to re-create the living experience of his place and its people in a manner which conveys it close to the level of the senses” (Milner 205). This is what I have called Richards’ earlier “subjective” stance or what Armstrong and Wyile call his densely constructed “phenomenological realism.” Milner, though he acknowledges Richards’ professed artistic intention, echoes other earlier critics’ complaints that this particular style, especially as manifest in *Lives of Short Duration*, is unnecessarily obfuscating to readers. In these earlier novels, Milner claims, “Richards is less interested in the details of an action than he is in the rhythms or emotions of the mind involved in it” (208). According to Milner, knowing what these characters *do* is apparently less important, for Richards, than experiencing what it is like to be *in* their minds—immersed in the messiness and chaos of their lives.

Sheldon Currie, in “David Adams Richards: *The People of the Roadway*” (1996), writes that Richards’ fiction “is about ordinary people, but not as they ordinarily are. It is about ordinary people in their extraordinary selves, their extraordinary humanity, its goodness and badness” (136). Currie goes on to argue that “Richards’s characters are never ciphers, or literary examples of something or other; always they are complex and mysterious, always behaving in a human way, be it a good way or a bad way. Even the worst, the mean, the violent, the crass, the

cowardly, the inept are behaving with some dim vision of a virtue—are trying, against the brutal tide, for *something*” (137, *my emphasis*). This “something” is certainly vaguer in Richards’ early work; Lawrence Mathews, in his discussion of *Lives of Short Duration*, wonders if this “something” is as apparent as most critical readers of Richards’ early novels claim, since many “sophisticated readers” cannot clearly comprehend “what he is driving at” (“DAR” 227).

*Road to the Stilt House*, however, and the subsequent Miramichi Trilogy (*Nights Below Station Street*, *Evening Snow Will Bring Such Peace*, and *For Those Who Hunt the Wounded Down*), marked a shift in Richards’ writing to a “stripped-down” and, arguably, more readable style. But not all critics were impressed with Richards’ stylistic metamorphoses: Christopher Armstrong and Herb Wyile, in “Firing the Regional Can(n)on: Liberal Pluralism, Social Agency, and David Adams Richards’ Miramichi Trilogy” (1997), see this change as a “lamentable” shift from the “phenomenological realism” (5) of Richards’ earlier novels to the “more combative, didactic humanism” of the Miramichi Trilogy (16).<sup>23</sup> Armstrong and Wyile go as far as to claim that this shift was a reaction, on Richards’ part, to the politicization of his earlier novels which were classed as regionalist and “revisionist” by the likes of Janice Kulyk Keefer in *Under Eastern Eyes: A critical reading of Maritime fiction* (1987). But Armstrong and Wyile’s main problem is with Richards’ “reactionary” and “regressive” humanism—that “something” that Richards claimed was present in his earlier works and which he laboured to make more apparent in his Miramichi Trilogy. Armstrong and Wyile write that “Richards’ trilogy appears set on revaluing... a largely discredited humanism—dignity, self-reliance, self-sacrifice, and moral action” (15). They go on to say that “Richards’ didactic universalism and the valorization of ‘life’ and realist aesthetics need to be challenged” (17) and that it “is hard not to lament the

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<sup>23</sup> It is important to note that Armstrong and Wyile wrote the article in 1997, at what could be considered the height of the so-called “theory wars.”

direction Richards's writing has taken—that is, the increasing tendency of [the Miramichi Trilogy] towards didacticism and closure" (17).

Lawrence Mathews rebuts Armstrong and Wyile's argument in his short but scathing essay "Richards Demonized: The Academy as Greenpeace" (2005) by satirizing the idea that Richards' artistic vision in the Miramichi Trilogy is reactionary: "Armstrong and Wyile suggest that Richards' philosophical position is not the result of decades of intense thinking and feeling about art and life but rather something like a reflex action, a 'response' to the way he has been 'positioned,' much as a lab rat reacts to an electric shock" ("Richards Demonized" 134). Mathews' point that Richards' "philosophical position" in the Miramichi Trilogy is the result of "decades of intense thinking and feeling about art and life" highlights the continuity between what Richards claimed to be doing in his earlier novels and what became more apparent in later novels, starting with *Nights below Station Street*—a humanist vision that valorized "life." One can question whether Richards was able effectively to convey that viewpoint in his earlier novels (as Mathews does) while still recognizing the consistency and veracity of Richards' artistic vision. Richards has gone so far as to claim, in a recent interview with the arts and literary journal *Image*, that he has not changed a substantial opinion of his "in any substantive way" since he was "fifteen" (Martin 7). A change in style, Mathews seems to say (*contra* Armstrong and Wyile), does not necessarily mean a change of artistic vision, and it certainly does not make that vision necessarily reactionary or lamentable.

Mathews, in "Richards Demonized," also takes on Frank Davey's critique of Richards' writing in *Post-National Arguments: The Politics of the Anglophone-Canadian Novel Since 1967* (1993): "Davey's discussion is striking in its attempt to demonize Richards... as being in thrall to outdated 'pastoral ideologies'" (135). Mathews goes on to lambaste Davey's reading of *Nights*



*below Station Street*, in which Davey claims that Richards' message is that the "book's characters... [are] better off leading passive, acquiescent, non-constructive, geographically limited lives, rather than ones full of ambition and effort" (Davey 78). But Davey misreads passivity, on the part of Richards' characters, as "inaction"—seeing it as a sign of fatalism rather than a faith-based, humanist worldview.<sup>24</sup> But we will come back to this question of how to interpret the passivity of Richards' characters in light of his humanist philosophy in our discussion of *Markus Paul*, especially as this pertains to a particular incarnation of holiness in the novel—the longsuffering of both Amos and Markus.

First, however, I want to explore further the connections between Richards' "new" style and his humanist views that were shaped by his Catholic upbringing.<sup>25</sup> Tony Tremblay writes of Richards' later "detached" or "objective" style and relates it to his earlier Catholic education at Saint Thomas University in New Brunswick by arguing that this objective style was "evident for the first time in the [Miramichi Trilogy] and reach[ed] full expression in [*Mercy among the Children, River of the Brokenhearted, and The Friends of Meager Fortune*]" (Tremblay 306). Tremblay links this new style to the influence of Bernard Lonergan's "generalized empirical method": a Thomistic methodology Richards would have been exposed to as STU that "posited that knowledge is advanced through data collection, hypothesis, and verification" (306). Tremblay argues that for Richards "understanding *human values* could be made if data were generalized to include... consciousness and sense" (306). And exploring consciousness seems to

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<sup>24</sup> Andrew Atkinson, in his doctoral dissertation, "Saltwater Sacraments and Backwoods Sins: Contemporary Atlantic Canadian Literature and the Rise of Literary Catholicism" (2009), explores Richards' Catholic worldview in his examination of *The Bay of Love and Sorrows* (43-81), and argues that "Richards' Catholicism is [the best critical] entrance into [discussing] his politics, moral sociology, and his metaphysics" (81).

<sup>25</sup> For Richards' own account of how his Catholicism has shaped his artistic vision and life, see his memoir *God Is. My Search for Faith in a Secular World*, Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2009.

have been the task he set himself in his first four novels. In Richards' subsequent writing, this methodology, according to Tremblay,

[Is] revealed in expanding compilation of data (longer and more detailed, laborious novels), diminished hypotheses (fewer but more muscular themes), and repetitions of conditions to verify outcomes (familiar social and psychic contexts across unrelated works). But this apparent rationing of concern should not be interpreted as a narrowing [or changing] of vision, for it related to Richards' larger [and consistent] theodicy. (306-307)

Tremblay characterizes the shift in Richards' style between his first four novels and *Nights below Station Street* in this way: "Private witness as the point of entry into characterization has passed. Richards's narrator is now omniscient, a general not a soldier, better able to meet ideological challenges with its own salvos. Using a boxing metaphor, Richards now confidently [claims] that he [is] a writer who [has] power in both hands" (307).<sup>26</sup>

Richards' emphasis, however, is still on his characters' humanity—the core of his artistic vision and what Tremblay calls his "theodicy," or faith-based worldview. In novel after novel he continues to explore Armstrong and Wyile's "unholy quaternity of discredited humanism ('dignity, self-reliance, self-sacrifice, and moral action')'" ("Richards Demonized" 137). Now, if "humanity" can be seen, using terms from Gerard Manley Hopkins' theological poetics, as the "inscape" of Richards' fictive Miramichi, then Richards' humanism—defined by dignity, self-reliance, self-sacrifice, and moral action—is the "instress" that sustains and animates that

<sup>26</sup> David Creelman, in *Setting in the East: Maritime Realist Fiction* (2003), depicts this change in style as Richards' shift from the literary conventions of "realism" to "romance," an attempt to "defend his ideological position through [such] a formal shift" (Creelman 150). Though Creelman's reading of Richards' fiction is less condescending than either Armstrong and Wyile's or Davey's, he still sees Richards' stylistic changes as "reactionary." Andrew Atkinson, in his dissertation "Saltwater Sacraments and Backwoods Sins" (2009), responds to Creelman by arguing that this "regionalization" of Richards' work is, in part, the result of literary critics' refusal to engage "theological literacy" or literature, like Richards', that is written out of a religious worldview (Atkinson 81), or what Tremblay calls Richards' Catholic "theodicy" (Tremblay 307).

“inscape”. Gregory Wolfe, in writing of Hopkins in *Beauty Will Save The World*, explains that “[inscape] is sustained and held in tension by ‘instress,’ a concept somewhat analogous to the idea that God constantly maintains the created world in existence” (Wolfe 82). Wolfe, citing Hans Urs von Balthasar’s discussion of Hopkins poetics in *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (1986), goes on to write that “[inscape] must not only be perceived; it must [...] be ‘en-selfed as person.’” (82). Richards’ humanism, then, is not simply a philosophy he “didactically” posits in his novels (though this seems to be how Armstrong, Wyile, and Davey read his fiction); his humanist philosophy is “en-selfed” in his characters’ lives—in their dignity, self-reliance, self-sacrifice, and moral action. What Wolfe sees in Hopkins’ poetry as the movement from “is” to “ought”—an outworking of Hopkins’ Catholic worldview—can be seen in Richards’ stylistic transition from the subjectivity of his earlier “phenomenological realism” to the objectivity of his later “combative humanism”—his earlier novels dealing with the *is*-ness of his characters’ lives and his later novels grappling more directly with the *ought*-ness or moral struggles of his characters.

But the movement from “is” to “ought” can also be discerned in each of Richards’ later novels—from *Nights* (1988) to *Markus Paul* (2011). Richards is still centrally concerned with the inscape of his characters’ humanity but he is also now concerned with stresses that undermine that humanity or the instresses that make it more vital. Hopkins’ idea of inscape came from the philosopher Duns Scotus’ principle of individuation or “*thisness*”—the “unique, individual essence in each created being” (82). For Richards this “unique, individual essence” in his characters is their humanity, their God-given and irreplaceable “life,” and that inscape is animated by dignity, courage, self-sacrifice, and morality—as well as the opposites of each of these. In this we see the shape of Richard’s holistic artistic vision.

In the first part of this chapter I wrote, concerning phenomenology, that the *thereness* of the world circumscribes the world; but what circumscribes Richards' fictive world, the Miramichi of *Markus Paul*? What vision of "life" does Richards offer in this new novel? In a 2011 interview with *Image*, Richards says that "certain things [in life] are rooted in the sacred and must be treated as such" (Martin 4). When asked what some of these things are and how they have been dealt with in his novels, Richards gave this response:

If common people like Maufat in *Blood Ties* or Joe Walsh in *Nights below Station Street* did not exist and have a common decency and goodness—which, in fact, are sacred—the world would not exist: it would have gone to perdition ten centuries ago. It's those people—like Amos Paul in my new book *Incidents in the Life of Markus Paul* and Jay Beard in *Mercy among the Children*—who keep the world safe and sacred. Any child selling Kool-Aid shows hope and faith in a greater power—and they too allow us to see the sacred in our midst. (5)

Compare these remarks with what Richards said in a 1986 interview with Andrew Garrod: "[...] I've always had the idea that no matter how black things are, there's going to be someone who loves someone" (Garrod 219). And, between these two interviews, in his memoir *God Is*, Richards wrote that "kindness is the only thing literature is seeking" (*God Is* 130). Common decency and goodness, everyday kindness and love—these sustain and add vitality to Richards' artistic vision; he calls these things instances of "the sacred in our midst" and they are what make up the instress that enlivens the inscape of Richards' humanism.

Mathews writes that Richards' "vision" can be seen "in the sense that the lives of [his] characters, especially [his] protagonists, are invested with a credible meaningfulness" ("DAR"

250). And this “meaningfulness” comes from his characters’ ability to move us to empathy, which is “always spiritual,” according to Richards in his essay “My Miramichi Trilogy” (1998):

[The] inner man cannot be fully known by exterior circumstances. And [...] exterior circumstances are [...] often a facade. [...] Literature should go a long way to remind us of this. [...] If becoming more spiritual and more understanding of others was not necessary then literature would not be necessary. It does not matter that certain writing does not promote this view, and that other writing denies it. Good writing lasts on the strengths it has to move us to empathy, either for a character or for an idea, and empathy is always spiritual. (“Trilogy” 82)

Just as Hopkins found inscape most profoundly expressed not in nature but in humanity (Wolfe 82), so too does Richards make humanity the centre of his vision—particularly the inner man’s struggle to become more “spiritual” and more “understanding of others.”

Richards’ humanism, then, especially as expressed in novels since the Miramichi Trilogy—from *The Bay of Love and Sorrows* (1998) to *The Lost Highway* (2007)—is not only “combative” but also, as seen above, religious. To an academic reader who sees “any source of ‘authoritative discourse’ [as] spurious [or] ‘authentic moral discourse’ [as] *nowhere* to be found,”<sup>27</sup> Richards’ fiction must sound as bizarre and anachronistic as a man on a cliff top telling the valley of bones beneath him to live. But, as Mathews counters in his review of Richards’ early works, questions of morality, though endlessly deconstructable, are still necessary for “living our lives” because they arise out of “the human spirit’s need to seek such answers” (“DAR” 240). If Armstrong and Wyle, as they claim, want to have a “creative role in the construction of” meaning in reading Richards’ novels, they will need to do it on his terms, engaging with his “combative” narrative voice and wrestling with his humanist vision, rooted as

<sup>27</sup> See Mathews, “Richards Demonized,” 132-139.

it is in a sacral view of life. This is what I am going to do here: listen, seek to understand, and labor to answer the *adieu*—the call—of Richards’ most recent novel.

In *Incidents in the Life of Markus Paul*, Richards’ humanist worldview is embodied first in Amos Paul, the old, scrawny chief of the Micmac tribe that is up-in-arms over the death of one of their more promising young men, Hector Penniac, who was crushed beneath a load of timber in the hold of the cargo ship *Lutheran*, docked on the shores of the Miramichi. This incident leads to others during that hot summer of 1985, and eventually two more lives are lost—Roger Savage, a white man living on the edge of the Micmac reserve, and a young native boy known as Little Joe, who gets caught in the crossfire between Roger and a band of Micmac “warriors.” And it is this band, led by the volatile Joel Ginnish, tries to force Savage out of his lifelong home for allegedly killing Joel’s cousin Hector.

Amos is one of the few people on the reserve who does not get caught up in Joel Ginnish’s vengeful vortex, nor does he use Hector’s death as a means of gaining more political leverage with the band, as does his younger and more charismatic counterpart, Isaac Snow (*Markus* 7). We are told that Isaac “did not want things to go well for the band, for the investigation or for Roger—for any one of these things would hamper the power struggle he was now in against Amos Paul” (88). Amos, unlike Isaac, is an old man: slow to act; quick to smile; and reticent to judge—even though “the evidence” seems to point to Roger Savage as responsible for Hector’s death. It was Roger, after all, who hooked the load of timber that apparently fell on Hector, and it is widely assumed that Savage “hooked” in such a way as to ensure the load came loose (5-7). This is what most people believe, but not old Amos Paul.

Amos could be seen as one of Richards’ “passive” male characters—though less pathologically passive than Sydney Henderson in *Mercy among the Children*. But Amos—unlike

Joel Ginnish, Isaac Snow, or the reporter Max Doran—waits before jumping to conclusions; he investigates before he protests because, ultimately, he is more concerned with “life” than politics; he values Roger’s life and his right to live where he does, on the edge of the Micmac reserve, and he mourns the loss of young Hector Penniac, whose death he feels responsible for because he got Hector the job on the ship (3). He saw promise in the young man who wanted to go off to university and become a doctor, and he loved the boy as a chief is supposed to love his people. It is because of this love for Hector, expressed in his grief over the boy’s death, that Amos is interested in finding out the truth of what happened in the hold of the *Lutheran* that day—not in politicizing Hector’s death to oust Roger from his home, which would give the Micmac easier access to their traditional fishing pools, something Joel and Isaac seem eager to do (8-9).

Amos, however, does not view the world as either Joel or Isaac does. And he certainly does not perceive things as Max Doran does. But we do get an insight into how Amos sees things in a passage a third of the way through the novel. Amos has been trying to talk Joel and others out of “protesting” Hector’s death by going on strike from their work building a community recreation centre—a project Amos masterminded to create jobs and opportunities for the reserve’s youth. Weary from his failing efforts at reconciliation and “lonely enough to cry” (127), Amos heads to bed one night, hearing “the wondrous waves of the great Miramichi that his ancestors had heard three thousand years before” (129). He looks over at his dead wife’s bed, over which hangs a cross: “On the night table between their beds was the Virgin and Child. Amos thought about how that man who had hanged—his friend—had not been guilty either” (129).

Amos, here, is remembering Isaac Snow's father, his friend, who had been lynched years ago for doing "nothing but get drunk in the wrong place, as he had done most of his life" (129). But this memory comes between looking at the empty cross above the bed (a symbol of death) and the statue of the mother and child (a symbol of life), which stands between his bed and his deceased wife's. Amos is the figure who quite literally stands between life and death—between the lone, white, demonized Roger Savage and the increasing number of those who want to protest Hector Penniac's death by driving Savage out of his life-long home. And while Amos stands looking at the statue of the Virgin and Child, Richards tells us:

He believed in miracles, Amos did. That is why the mother and child were on the night table. That is why it [was] so important to him. He believed that the truth was always revealed, for no matter how much men wanted to hide something, they could not. How was that? There was not a thing in the world that was not hidden irrevocably, so this mystery too would be solved, if only they gave it time. That is, when they said nothing was hidden, everyone meant that the big crimes would be solved. But Amos was thinking of the multitude of little things—the betrayals of one another that maybe caused even worse things than big crimes—the unending small things that finally killed love in the soul. (130-131)

Things are not given time: conclusions are jumped to and protests are undertaken without much thought as to the effect these will have on the community. A barricade is constructed using "lumber and brick that was supposed to be for the recreation centre" (138). "If only they gave it time": if only they had been more patient, both Amos and Markus think at different points in the novel, things might have turned out differently—there might have been fewer deaths. This idea—the need for patience—haunts Amos and his longsuffering grandson Markus, who,



twenty-one years after Hector's death, is still trying to solve the mystery. "What would Glooscap, the God of the Micmac, think of them now? If they had just waited, buying some time, Roger would have come out of his house. [...] But they couldn't wait" (231). And two more lives are lost before the snow flies in 1985.

In *Beauty Will Save The World*, Gregory Wolfe cites a passage from George Steiner's *Real Presences* that I think perfectly characterizes Amos' patience and Markus' longsuffering:

[Theirs] is the long day's journey of the Saturday. Between suffering, aloneness, unutterable waste on the one hand and the dream of liberation, of rebirth on the other. In the face of the torture of a child, of the death of love which is Friday, even the greatest art and poetry are almost helpless. In the Utopia of Sunday, the aesthetic will, presumably, no longer have logic or necessity. The apprehensions and figurations in the play of metaphysical imagining, [...] which tell of pain and hope, of flesh which is said to taste of ash and of the spirit which is said to have the savour of fire, are always Sabbatarian. They have arisen out of an immensity of waiting which is that of [humanity]. Without them, how could we be patient? (Steiner quoted in Wolfe 49)

Patience or longsuffering is seen as a holy virtue in this novel because it is the only thing that allows layers of untruth—made molten by the intense heat of rash judgement, resentment, and racism fired by political "progressiveness"—eventually to erode. Longsuffering is perhaps the better term here because Amos' and Markus' patience—their unwillingness to be politically expedient—causes them much suffering over long periods of time. We see this particularly in Markus' case: twenty-one years of waiting, failure, depression, searching.

This idea of patience being a virtue, however, might at first seem contradictory to Richards' earlier assertion, catalogued by Mathews, that "one's true humanity reveals itself in

spontaneous action” (“DAR” 236). Mathews notes a trend in Richards’ early novels (up to the Miramichi Trilogy), which he highlights in his discussion of Richards’ short story collection *Dancers at Night* (1978), that the “male will to power is ridiculed or shown to be self-defeating, and the more passive male character’s impulse to be kind or protective is thwarted” (220). I would say the first assertion is consistent in Richards’ later novels and especially in *Markus Paul*, but I would argue that Richards’ passive characters’ attempts, in later novels, to be kind and protective, though not always successful, help form a sense of nobility forged out of selfless acts and longsuffering (221). While there is little heroic “spontaneous” action in *Markus Paul*, there is plenty of selfless restraint—seen primarily in Amos and Markus—which is often viewed by other characters as ineffectual inaction. But there is a marked difference between Markus’ and Amos’ “inaction” (227-233) and Sydney’s pathological pacifism in *Mercy among the Children*, or Arnold’s inability to act or assert himself in *Road to the Stilt House*.

In *Mercy* we are told that revenge is “anathema to justice” (*Mercy* 18) because justice is tied to love and revenge is fuelled by hatred: as we see in Lyle Henderson’s reactions to his father’s inaction, hatred kills love and murders justice. In *Markus Paul*, Amos’ hesitance to bring Hector’s alleged killer, Roger, to “justice” is seen as weak-minded, slow, and useless by those who have come to hate Savage. But Amos’ passivity—what others see as his vacillation (24)—is fuelled by his conviction that what is assumed to be true is not necessarily true and that what is really true will be revealed, if only people have the patience to wait. For Amos, the way to honour Hector’s memory is to find out who actually caused his death and not use an innocent man as a scapegoat, even if doing so politically benefits the Micmac band. Amos’ waiting is fuelled by his love for both Hector, a young native boy who had been under his care as chief, and Roger, a misunderstood recluse who had been a good neighbour to him for many years. Amos

refuses to act rashly and make the small compromises that others do: “the unending small things that finally [kill] love in the soul” (131).

It is significant, then, that the Virgin Mary is symbolically connected to Amos because she is the traditional icon of waiting or receptivity. Mary, for Richards, is also a bridge between Micmac and Catholic worldviews: in *The Lost Highway* “a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe, one of the ten pictures of Our Lady of the First People that Father Hut have given the First Nations here long ago,” is found in Markus’ sister Peggy’s pocket after she died as a result of a drug addiction (*Highway* 331). Mary is the symbol of hope and waiting *in the midst* of elongated suffering; Mary doesn’t save Peggy and she doesn’t help Amos solve his case—she is the symbol of waiting *and* enduring. She is also a symbol of great courage (cf. Kearney *Anatheism* 24). Mary is the *Khora akhoraton*—“Container of the Uncontainable”—[the] aperture, without which, as in all human openings to the stranger, the sacred could not be embodied” (26). She functions symbolically in *Markus Paul* as an icon functions in Orthodox worship or as Jean-Luc Marion describes the function of an icon; a reader’s eyes barely rest on her let alone focus on her—she is a briefly mentioned statue in Amos’ bedroom. Yet she is the symbol of sacral presence, miracles, and courage—for Richards believes that “it is the spiritual life that is the heroic life” (“Trilogy” 83). And Richards sees both Amos and Markus Paul as such courageous or heroic men, despite their mawkishness; Richards goes as far as to liken Markus to his ancestor Osepitit, long ago chief of the Micmac, who challenged the invading Iroquois chief to a battle to the death, sacrificing himself to protect his people (*Highway* 329).

Amos and Markus are both characterized as courageous because they do not leap to easy, self-vindicating conclusions; they wait and try, over twenty-one years in Markus’ case, to uncover the truth. This is why Markus stands in such contrast to Max Doran, a reporter, who,

because of his job, is required to jump to conclusions in order to meet his deadlines: get the facts and file the story. “Life” in all its messy complexity and ambiguity doesn’t translate well to newspaper articles; but, as Bakhtin has shown us, the novel form allows for more nuance and context—it allows for longsuffering, or, as Steiner wrote, the “immensity of waiting which is that of man” (Wolfe 49). And waiting, though passive, is never inactive for it implies and requires hope, searching, movement—slow movement, but insistent.

Of course, this could also describe the novel’s pacing: there is a slow build, even though Hector’s death occurs within the first few pages, but what is building or accumulating is not action but characterization. It is as if Richards is intent on enlarging a reader’s sense of each character—making each character more familiar and full. But this novel, unlike *Lives of Short Duration* in Mathews’ reading, never loses sight of plot. So not only is a reader “en-selfed” in each character—brought face to face with “other” lives—but she is also “en-plotted” in the novel—drawn into a dynamic world where morality is no longer an abstract idea but a real life matter of action and consequence, life and death. In this world, “life” becomes less an intellectual humanist ideal and more a “thick” experience full of context and nuance, conflict and struggle—a fictive world where ideas and humanity coalesce and crash.

In terms of ideas, a reader of this novel has to grapple with Richards’ insistence that “life” is *given*: the present is what we have; there can be no postcolonial reparation; sons and daughters cannot pay for the sins of their forbears; and all we have is the visceral, naked “now.” Richards plays these ideas out in *Markus Paul* through his emphasis on the value of human life, which is beyond or deeper than any Native/White dichotomy. To an academic reader hyperconscious of postcolonial concerns, this may seem overly simplified, but Richards does attempt to give this idea flesh in his story.

The protest, mentioned earlier, that Joel Ginnish incites against Roger, is, on the surface, an effort to get the riparian rights to the three fishing pools that are on Savage's land, that have been in his family for "three generations" (35). But Amos knows this is only a gloss over a deeper issue, a more profound need that, as far as the old chief is concerned, can never be met:

They wanted justice for crimes of the past. For something they could never get even for. And they had suffered terrible crimes, yes. But they could not get even. They wanted to live in the past the way they had once been, and could not be again. And no protest would ever change that fact.

"You mean we should let what happened to us go?"

"I am an old man. I don't know what to tell you about letting things go—but how could we ever get revenge without burning the entire roof off the world? We are the only people who can make peace now. No white can do it—it is in our power only, and we have to, in order to *live*." (35-36, *my emphasis*)

Even Markus "did not believe" this could be done; he "could not believe that his grandfather would speak such words" (36). Hadn't the priests "beaten [Amos] at the French school" and hadn't the "English cottagers" ignored him and "never looked his way" and hadn't the police "put his wife in jail and [...] hit him in the face" and hadn't they lynched his friend, Isaac Snow's father, simply for getting "drunk in the wrong place"? (73, 129). These things are grievous wrongs done to Amos and his family and friends, representative of the larger crimes done to his people, and they scream out for justice—for reparation. But as far as old Amos is concerned, the "past [is] gone":

[Yet] in so many ways they were told by their elders and leaders that in order to embrace the future and heal, they must re-establish the past that was gone. In this they had been on

a hamster wheel for a hundred years. To leave the hamster wheel was to leave the reserve. To leave the reserve was to leave the land. To leave the land was to leave the past. To leave the past was to leave who they were as a people. That would change them forever. Yet in some way, [somehow], they must leave it. This is what Amos knew. And he knew this is why Isaac, young as he was, would fail. Not because he was not noble—he certainly was—and not because he was not just—he was just—but because his nobility and justice were directed toward something that was impossible to hold, that would slip through his fingers like starlight. And Amos knew that all starlight—even that of the great sun—as soon as it reached them had already passed. (97)

Amos is not intent on doing away with Micmac tradition or identity—he wants to “start a school here, and teach [his] children Micmac”—but he is intent on keeping these things alive “for the future, not the past” (97). The only way forward for his people, according to Amos, is to make peace: something that only he and his people can do; something that they must do in order to truly *live*.

This brings us back to Amos’ symbolic attachment to the Virgin Mary as the *Khora akhoraton*—“Container of the Uncontainable” (Kearney 26). Amos is able to grasp what Isaac cannot—nobility and justice—and contain these “unknowable” things, embody them, because of what Markus, years later, would call the “condition of [his] soul” (277). Isaac is said to be as just and noble as Amos yet there is a profound difference between them: the inscape of their souls is similar but the instress of Isaac’s soul is revenge whereas the instress of Amos’ is forgiveness. Think of it this way: each life is an earthenware vessel that can be filled with either boiling revenge or cool forgiveness. When poured out on seeds of justice and nobility, the kernels of life, revenge scalds and kills these seeds but forgiveness nourishes, causing them to flower into

empathy, kindness, and love: those things Richards refers to as sacred virtues. Even though he is called “half pint,” Amos’ nobility, because it is directed *not* toward justice and the past but toward reconciliation and the present, is able to contain the cool “light” that seems to slip right through Isaac’s fingers—the nobility of past Micmac leaders. This is because of his concern for the future of his people and their present lives over revenge for what was done to them in the past.

In this we see Amos’ concern for “life” in conflict with Isaac’s political concerns; and Amos’ instinct for “life” is passed on to his grandson Markus, who first appeared in *The Lost Highway*, in which Markus is likened to the legendary Micmac chief Osepitit, who sacrificed himself for his people (*cf. Highway* 329-330). Yet Richards writes that “Markus Paul did not know that in many ways he was like that great man, in sympathy and appearance, nor would he ever think of being so” (330). As noble as Markus is, he is also, like his grandfather, humble: self-effacing. Both Amos and Markus are largely unconscious of their greatness, which Richards slowly but insistently describes. Unlike Isaac, they are not concerned with being or appearing noble to increase their public profiles or their political leverage;<sup>28</sup> Markus, in particular, in the latter half of the novel, demonstrates this in a conversation he has with a “Dutchman” while he is visiting “the land of the Lakota Sioux,” something his grandfather Amos had always wanted to do but was never able to (*Markus* 250).

The Dutchman studied the picture of Sitting Bull and said that if he were there at that time, he would have sided with the First Nations people. He asked Markus if he would have sided with the First Nations people too—did he think he would stand up for them?

Markus said he hoped he might. The Dutchman said that he himself certainly would have.

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<sup>28</sup> Isaac’s hunger strike in prison, which Richards describes as a noble gesture, still, for Isaac, has political ends: “If he died [from hunger] they would [at least] have those lobster licenses he so desperately sought” for the band (175).

He would have been there. He would have fought to the death to protect all the Indians. Markus told him that was commendable. The Dutchman seemed pleased. He smiled and nodded to himself. Markus' eyes started to fill with tears. He kept looking out the window so no one would see. The day got dark—there was frost, and Markus was thinking of how the deer would be on the move, up the rut trails in the afternoon. He wanted to speak to the Dutchman about rifles and grains of bullets, and how the deer moved just at dark, with the smell of musk in the air, snow starting to fall and the sound of water before it made ice, but realized there was no point at all. (250-251)

The idea of righting the wrongs of the past is commendable, but, for Richards, it is impossible—as impossible as resurrecting Hector Penniac's lifeless body from the hold of the *Lutheran*, a Dutch ship. The fact that this man who Markus meets on his trip is Dutch brings to mind the ship in which Hector died, which sailed back to Rotterdam so the captain and crew would not become embroiled in the ensuing investigation (30, 45-46). Richards wants us to see that there is something self-serving in both the captain of the *Lutheran* in 1985 and the "Dutchman" on the tour bus in 2006—both show "polite" concern but both are unable to enact their concern, making them cowardly and ineffective when compared to Amos or Markus Paul. Markus, for his part, though passive, is not inactive: while the "Dutchman" talks about defending the First Nations to the death, Markus thinks of those things that are evocative of the *life* of his people—"how the deer moved just at dark, with the smell of musk in the air, snow starting to fall and the sound of water before it made ice" (251). Markus' thoughts are not on the hunt itself—killing the deer—but on that season of the hunt, that time of year when his people hunt in order to have meat for the winter. The season itself is that middle ground between life and death; the emphasis, for Markus, is not on the death of the deer or the coming of winter but on the life of his people



formed out of the coldness of a dead past, symbolized by “the sound of water before it made ice.” And the formation of ice allows for that everyday winter miracle of walking on water—it allows the impossible, for a time, to occur.

In a novel where racial and political barricades are constructed in many forms, Amos and Markus, in their own ways, work to make the impossible happen: reconciliation. They see this as possible because they, like their author, recognize—beneath race and politics—everyone’s common humanity: “[In] the world of the human spirit we are linked forever and irrevocably” (“Trilogy” 73). This is the cold realization that they are, in their own unique ways, responsible for others; and this realization allows them to step out into their respective responsibilities. But doing this is dangerous, slippery, and risky. Amos feels responsible for Roger (*cf.* 149, 64), and Markus feels responsible for Little Joe, who is dead, and for his sister Sky, who is killing herself with drugs (*cf.* 194); but Amos, in the end, is unable to save Roger, and Markus, by the final page, is unable to touch Sky.

The two “noble” characters fail in their responsibilities. So, if life is seen as a simple dialectic between success and failure, Richards has again written about losers and Frank Davey’s critique of *Nights below Station Street* could aptly be applied to *Markus Paul*: “the powerful implication in the novel [is that it is] useless for individuals to try to give shape to their lives, that what happens to anyone is no more than the chance coincidence of disparate events” which we call fate (Davey 77). Richards, however, doesn’t weigh greatness or nobility against success, especially if success is characterized, as it is by Davey, as a life of “ambition and effort” or “self-improvement” (78). Neither Amos nor Markus seems interested in self-improvement—Markus is told by his ex-wife that he has lung cancer and should stop smoking but he can’t bring himself to do so (267, 270). And neither Amos nor Markus seem to lead lives of great ambition, not like

Joel Ginnish or Isaac Snow. But both Amos and Markus love the people they are responsible for and, in the context of the novel, this seems like a much deeper idea than surface-level “political” success, such as that experienced, eventually, by Isaac (259). For Richards, responsibility—whether successfully enacted or not—that is enlivened by love, in all its human messiness, is that which truly ennoble. And “love” takes on many forms in this novel. In Markus we see it as his unrequited love for Sky Barnaby, Little Joe’s sister, which drives Markus to search for the truth of who is really responsible for Little Joe’s death: the tragic event that drove Sky out of his life. And in Amos we see this as his care and concern for Roger Savage, which allows him to see Roger not as a “savage” racist and bigot, but as a neighbour, friend, and outcast.

In the beginning of this chapter, I wrote about responsibility’s Eros, or the desire that can quicken one’s sense of responsibility into moral action. In *Markus Paul*, we first see this in Markus’ unrequited love for Sky, who was Markus’ girlfriend in the summer of 1985 when Little Joe was shot and killed. Years after that summer, during a tour as an RCMP bodyguard for the Governor General, Markus reflects back on his life, his failed relationships, and Sky:

He had married young, a white woman—young Samantha Dulse—but that did not last, even though they were still friendly and she probably still loved him, and then he had a native girlfriend, whom he did not love enough. In fact, he did not love either of them enough. He loved Sky Barnaby. He had always loved [her] from the time he was fifteen.

But she was wild too, and had knifed a man in a fight downriver in 2000. It didn’t kill the man. But Markus had lost touch with her. (20)

Markus has these thoughts on the anniversary of Little Joe’s death, which he is reminded of when he takes off his shirt in the evening and sees “the reflection of the tattoo on his upper chest” that reads “Sky” (21). It is Little Joe’s death that breaks his heart, and his grandfather’s,

and Sky's as well; and Sky's way of dealing with her grief is by "drinking" and going "to dances" and dating "white boys from up the road," trying again and again "to wrest the agony from her heart" with drugs like ecstasy (194). Sky is living a hard life by the time Markus decides to become an RCMP officer; she is seeking self-destruction as a way of dealing with her grief, not self-improvement. And yet Richards doesn't let us forget about her. Why?

Obviously he and Markus both see something in her—in her startling beauty and dark eyes (194)—that a reader cannot yet see. And so we are given this passage from around the time Markus is deciding to become an RCMP officer: he is walking in downtown Newcastle when he sees in "a jewellery shop [...] a little Indian figurine called Miramichi Pete, a little boy who lived long ago, when the Indians ruled the land. When they would have fought the Inuit and the Huron [...]. He stared at it a long moment—wanting to buy it for Sky. But Sky had not spoken to him since her brother had died. He had tried everything he could think of to ask her forgiveness. Except it could not be asked" (190). Miramichi Pete reminds Markus of the past—of the Micmac's former power and bravery when they "fought the Inuit and the Huron"—and this makes him think of Sky. To Markus, she is a powerful character, a warrior—not a poor lost girl or hopeless drug addict. Miramichi Pete also echoes Little Joe, who, even with his empty BB gun, is portrayed as braver than the "warriors" trying to burn out Roger Savage. The bravery of the Micmac past lives on in the present and we see this because the legendary nobility and fierceness of this First Nations people lives on in Markus and Sky—and yet Richards shows us the ramshackle states of both Markus' and Sky's lives. This could, of course, provoke a reader to ask how failures at life, like these two, can be considered noble or brave.

To such a reader I would say that a character's worth, for Richards, is rooted in his or her love for others *and* in the fact that he or she is loved: "[All] of these people are positive and

redeemed not only because they love but because they are loved by the writer" (Martin 7).

Unlike Levinas, who saw responsibility as love without Eros, without concupiscence, Richards seems to say, through Markus' unrequited love for Sky, that love and responsibility are as intertwined as guilt and desire, grief and anger. And it is precisely this snarled portrayal of love, in all its human messiness, that allows Richards to bring us face to face with "the other," with whom we share a common humanity, and for whom, Levinas tells us, we are to care.

For Levinas, as we saw earlier, responsibility is inalienable, unavoidable, because it is from one soul to another, "the unique to the unique," or, using Derrida's phrase, from one irreplaceable person to another. And as Derrida insists, irreplaceability—one's uniqueness—is an articulation of transcendence without transcendence: human holiness or worth. In *Markus Paul*, each death is meaningful—Hector Penniac's, Roger Savage's, Little Joe's—simply because each one lost is irreplaceable and therefore holy. For Richards, one individual life is never insignificant—regardless of how it is perceived by others—because either "the individual is everything or the world is nothing" ("Trilogy" 84). In order to root this idea more explicitly in a religious humanist worldview, Richards, in trying to convey Roger Savage's irreplaceability—his holiness and innate worth as a human being—has Markus remember Roger "at a party with his girlfriend," recalling Roger "in the sunset over the tarred logs on the shore," and thinking of the "first poem by Yeats that" he "had ever picked up": "*What rough beast, its hour come round at last / Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?*" (189). Roger's "rough beast" humanity is associated with the place of Christ's nativity and a page later we read of the beginning of "the Golgotha of Roger Savage, who had just got his grade twelve equivalency" (190). Again it is Amos, who defends Roger by not condemning him out of hand, who stands between the images of the virgin birth and the cross associated with Roger, between Bethlehem and Golgotha:

Roger's life and his death. And to show that Roger's sacral humanity runs deeper than the surface divides between whites and First Nations, Richards intimates, through the narrative consciousness of Amos Paul, that Glooscap, "the God of the Micmac," would disapprove of what was done to Roger Savage (231).

The idea that all life is holy, that every life has worth, is seen in both Markus' love for Sky and Amos' care and concern for Roger—but this idea is also seen, paradoxically, in both Amos' and Markus' hunting scenes in which grandfather and grandson hunt for deer and moose but also for the elusive "truth." In the first of these scenes we see that Amos' way of hunting deer is like his method of investigation—slow and methodical, even painful.

The buck had gone to his left; its tracks were fresh and large. Most men would have followed it down. But resting his .30-06 against a crook in a poplar, Amos had no intention of doing so. He would go to the right—which was easier going. He would cross the river below the beaver dam, where a spine of rocks allowed the best way, and he would move up the other side into the dark spruce to a rut scrape he had seen the day before, *to wait the buck out.* (206, *my emphasis*)

As Amos waits, sitting on a stump, he still feels "pain in his arthritic hands" and he knows that the "day [is] about to turn. [That it is] about to snow, and his visibility [will] be almost zero [and that he has] to keep his scope halfway clean, and keep it from fogging" (207). Amos can only dimly see because of the coming snow and his fogged scope is symbolic of his "surmising" or trying to comprehend whether Hector was actually killed by the falling load of timber, as the Monk brothers claim, or whether he was killed before and his body stuffed beneath the load to make it look like an "accident" that would incriminate someone outside the ship's hold rather than inside. Amos can see enough to know that the case will have to be reopened, even with the

“wind” in “his face, blowing the snow into his eyes” (207). And he “thought of the pain that would come by reopening the case. He felt it deep, deep in his soul. Like the pain in his hands and old, tortured feet” (207). Amos’ aching, arthritic waiting for the deer by the “rut scrape he’d seen the day before” evokes the pain “deep in his soul” caused by his longsuffering search for the truth. Since Hector’s death, he has tracked the “thirsts,” “desires,” and “needs” of people on and off the reserve that compelled them to scapegoat Roger Savage and more and more he has come to see Roger as innocent and wrongly condemned, and that Roger’s “life,” even after his death, is worth vindicating. Amos’ longsuffering has led him to the painful conclusion that he must reopen the case and it also leads him to write in his journal that he has lost everything in his life except his “will to stay alive,” which, he realizes, is not such “a small thing to hold on to” (208). This is certainly a stark picture of nobility: of what caring for the other can cost—a picture with little hope to offer.

In the end, Amos gives his .30-06 to Markus and by so doing he symbolically passes on the hunt for truth to his grandson (235). Amos, ultimately fails to solve the case and clear his friend’s name, but he does pass on to Markus things like self-reliance (he can load his own bullets, tie “his own flies for fishing and [make] his own rods”) and persistence (he still thinks of what happened to Roger years later on a moose hunt on the barrens):

He went to sleep thinking of Roger, and for some strange reason dreamed of his own mother, Conde, whom he had hardly known. The dream, like so many, was out of sequence. But his father, David Paul, came in and sat down, and patted his head, and Conde said: “You see, it’s all right—and we will both be with you forever—and you didn’t even know.”

“That people are raised from the dead?” he asked.

“Yes—almost every day.” (240)

Amos, because he has been wounded so deeply by all that has happened since the summer of 1985, is not able to pass on hope to his grandson, but hope comes to Markus in this “spiritual” dream.<sup>29</sup> Just as Mathews points out that Joe Walsh, in *Nights*, is the “embodiment of the spiritual power that animates” virtues like “dignity, self-reliance, self-sacrifice, and moral action,” so too is Markus Paul the embodiment of that spiritual power in this novel—strength that is born mysteriously out of Amos’ longsuffering and failure (“Richards Demonized” 137).

Markus, like his grandfather, knows that in hunting you have to wait: “Since he had no tree stand made, he would work the ground and wait for a bull to appear” (*Markus* 241). Even though Markus has had a spiritual experience in his dream, where he is reminded that “people rise from the dead [...] almost every day,” he is not given a God’s-eye view of what is happening around him, symbolized by the lack of tree stand; he lives in the world and must “work the ground” in his own hunt for the truth. Amos’ influence is seen in Markus’ use of “his grandfather’s old birch moose call,” and like Amos, who sat on a stump, Markus patiently waits for the big bull rather than actively pursuing it: in “the late part of the afternoon” he sits “in his shirtsleeves [...] playing solitaire on an upside-down box” (241). In his waking hours Markus does little more than play cards and eat “solitary” meals “of beans and wieners” (242). But when he goes to lie down that night, thinking of “rifles and bullets and all kinds of things,” he remembers an incident with his father regarding what specific size of shell fit in his father’s gun—the gun that was given to Roger Savage; the same gun that was said to have shot Little Joe (242). This revelation (that Roger could not have shot Little Joe because the bullet found in the

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<sup>29</sup> I call the dream spiritual because it is more vision than memory; the recollections Markus Paul has of his father David are not of his father patting his head, as he does in the dream, but of putting a knife to his throat in the night while in the throes of a Vietnam flashback (241).

boy would not have fit Roger's rifle) crashes in on Markus—when he is not looking for it—like the big bull that he has been hunting:

Markus slept just in a tarp and sleeping bag. The fire died down, and the rain started about three in the morning. He pulled the tarp over his head and waited until dawn. Then he stood, had a leak and picked up his rifle to check it—see if it was wet or the scope was fogged. He heard a sudden grunt, and turned. In the fallow dawn light a nineteen-point bull was staring at him, no more than seventy-five yards away. He had time to put one 180-grain bullet into the chamber, aim and fire before the bull ran over him. The bull stopped, turned slightly, staggered and fell over on the tarp Markus had just left. [...]

Nothing in the woods was as dangerous as a bull moose in rut. (233-234)

There is in this scene what Mathews calls a “moment of grace”—an unlooked for revelation—but it comes to a mind that is waiting, hunting, receptive: Markus isn't aiming with his rifle but he is checking it, which makes him ready enough to load the one bullet that fells the moose. Markus, then, is, in a way, what Wolfe calls a “stalker of the spirit” or what Gardner calls a “reality hunter”: Markus' hunting involves the same patient waiting that Wolfe says is necessary for the artist to truly see the world as it is. There is also an echo in this scene, where Markus shoots the bull, of a legend that Markus recalls in *The Lost Highway* of Glooscap, the “great magician of his people,” who “tamed the great bull moose by breaking his back” (*Highway* 303). In that instance Markus is investigating a murder and “swimming against the current” of public opinion, hoping against hope for something to *break*—for Glooscap to “revisit him after four hundred years of his people being in the wilderness” (303). If Markus, in *this* “graced” scene, echoes the God of his people in his courage to persist in the hunt for truth that his grandfather started, then in *this* novel Glooscap, in a way, does revisit his people, the Micmac, through



Markus Paul. Suddenly the idea that “the dead come back to life almost every day” takes on new meaning: whereas Amos was associated with the Marian imagery of birth and death, Markus is associated with the Micmac imagery of resurrection.

The kind of resurrection that Markus represents, however, is not eschatological: it happens “almost every day,” in the mundane, here-and-now *thisness* of reality. These are not literal, physical resurrections but figurative, metaphorical ones: metaphor, as I said earlier in this chapter, becomes the door through which transcendence enters everyday life—“revaluing” it, to use one of Armstrong and Wyile’s terms, or vivifying “life” with a more profound sense of holiness. In *Markus Paul* this comes across to a reader through the novel’s “tragic sense of life,” an expression of Richards’ religious humanism realized in the theme of “life *in* death,” which characterizes Richards’ portrayal of the reporter Max Doran.

“The tragic sense of life” is a phrase coined by the Basque philosopher Miguel de Unamuno and adopted recently in Gregory Wolfe’s *Beauty Will Save The World*. Wolfe writes that at “the center of this sensibility is a profound awareness of the ambiguities and divisions within the human heart, along with a stress on the importance of suffering and contemplation [or waiting]” (Wolfe 12). This brings to mind Mathews’ assertion that the “burden of Richards’ theme is that there is something intrinsic to the human spirit that permits such characters to grow, to discover capacities in themselves for compassionate and selfless behaviour” (“DAR” 248). In *Markus Paul* this “selfless behaviour” is seen in Amos’ and Markus’ “waiting” or longsuffering: how they show restraint, wisdom, and kindness. Waiting in this novel, as we have seen already, is not the same inaction or the inability to act that Mathews alerts us to in Richards’ earlier works like *Dancers at Night* (1978) and *Road to the Stilt House* (1985). But the burden of the theme is that this waiting, this passivity, it often read as characters (like Amos and Markus) being

resigned to fate, which has led to Richards being dubbed a fatalist by some critics. Wolfe, however, points out that this is a common critical mistake: confusing “the tragic sense with mere fatalism” (Wolfe 12). Mathews writes that, according to early interviews, “Richards is particularly unhappy with critics who see the darkness of his vision as an endorsement of social or metaphysical determinism. He insists that his characters should not be pitied because they are in the grip of forces beyond their control; they are, in his view, free to oppose these forces and to alter their lives if they choose” (“DAR” 203). In Richards’ view, then, it is free will and not fatalism that best characterizes his treatment of his characters. And as we will see in the case of Max Doran, his “fate” is a result of choices he makes of his own free will: making a succession of compromises that back him into a trap of his own making.

Doran is the voice of “white concern” in the aftermath of Hector Penniac’s death (*Markus* 38). He sees his vocation of “investigative reporting” to be a deeply moral occupation: exposing corruption and championing social progress. He says as much to Amos Paul, near the beginning of the investigation, speaking about the ethics of reporting:

[But all this talk] made Amos feel uncomfortable. Especially how this man said the word *progress*. For Amos was one of those old fashioned men seen in every race, who do not believe in progress when it concerns the hearts of men. He saw that every generation believed they would be the generation to set things straight, and no generation did. (72)

For all Doran’s worldliness, it is old Amos Paul who understands more about what Wolfe calls the “ambiguities and divisions within the human heart.” Amos sees in Doran the divide between someone who genuinely wants to set things right and someone who is under pressure to make his name as a reporter. Because he perceives this, Amos is suspicious of Doran’s desire to set things right—to be progressive—because he sees Doran’s willingness to make compromises in order to

ingratiate himself with Joel Ginnish and Isaac Snow, who are, in Doran's mind, much more forward-thinking than old Amos Paul.

Doran doesn't make his compromises blindly, however. The decision he makes to write "what Isaac Snow [...] wanted" weighs heavily on his conscience (77). But he is caught between his conscience and his ambition: "Doran [...] found himself in a terrible bind. He could not admit [he was wrong] about [his] articles, for then he would have to change tactics. And he would lose the support of those he counted upon [like Issac]. For someone would say, 'I knew he didn't know what he was talking about.' [...] And someone else would get the cream of the story and the national attention Doran craved" (83). So, in refusing to change his tactics and do some ethical revision—which may have done much in terms of setting things right—Doran allows ambition to trump conscience and he finds himself "like lobster in a trap" (84). Even though he is "getting the notoriety he had craved," Doran feels the tightness of the bind he is in and he "rashly" asks "to be removed from the story" so that it doesn't "scatter out of control" with his name attached; but he is told by the managing editor that he is the only reporter with enough connections on the reserve to get the whole story, so he is backed further into his own trap (113). It is Amos who perceives this and tells Doran that it "is not the Conibear trap that kills the beaver, but the drowning that follows," an image that is repeated as the narrative follows Doran's thrashing attempts to stay morally afloat (*cf.* 196, 239, 249).

Doran, as a reporter, is a figure who is trusted by his society because he is supposed to be objective and unbiased, but Richards, by prodding the divisions in Doran's heart, shows the ways in which Doran's ambition undermines his search for truth. Because Richards often shows the failure of those in whom society places its faith—academics, reporters, etc.—critics often assume he is "holding forth a bleak message and [that his] novels are depressing" ("Trilogy" 83).

In my view, Richards novels are, arguably, bleak, but they are not nihilistic or without hope. Richards' "tragic sense of life," though quite dark, never negates the *possibility* of salvation—Doran can always choose to listen to his own conscience and seek the truth, but to do this he would have to see Roger Savage in an unbiased light, a light that would reveal not only Roger's innocence but also his nobility and irreplaceable worth as a human being.

However, to see Roger in this light, Doran would have to sacrifice his own selfish ambition—which keeps him in collusion with Isaac and Joel—and step outside himself into Roger's world. By doing this—by truly being unbiased and seeking the truth—Doran would be able to save himself. As I mentioned in my earlier discussion of Derrida, the economy of "saving oneself" is enacted in one's journey out from oneself into the world of the other and through one's return to oneself other-wise. Doran, however, never takes this journey and instead finds himself at war with his own conscience.

Richards, through Markus Paul, shows how it takes courage—something Doran lacks—to face the truth in all its fierceness, like that dangerous bull that Markus shoots. Later in the novel, we see how ferocious—how heart-rending—the truth can be when we read of Joel Ginnish's discovery that *he* was the one who accidentally shot Little Joe, who was his son (266). This discovery tramples Joel underfoot and he sets out on a path of self-destruction, which only serves to make more visible what Richards calls the "primary war" between self and self, "Joel against Joel" (279). Richards has said elsewhere that "[it] is here, in this battle—the only true battle constantly waged in all of us, that the individual life matters. And men and women, with different strengths and weaknesses, are on an entirely equal footing" ("Trilogy" 81). If this war was not common to everyone, something innate in all humanity, then there would be no equal footing between characters like Markus Paul and Max Doran. But both Markus and Max wage

this same war against themselves: both are given opportunities to make compromises and preserve their reputations and social standing and both have opportunities to sacrifice their reputations in the pursuit of the truth.

It is Doran, however, not Markus, who succumbs in this inner war and descends into his own personal hell, where Richards, paraphrasing Milton, says politics and politically-correct concern were born (*cf.* 266). Doran, as the face of “white concern,” champions all the fashionable politically-correct concerns but he does this, as we have seen, for selfish reasons, making his actions sanctimonious and in sharp contrast to Markus’ self-sacrifice. Sanctimony, for Richards, is the perversion of selfless love because he sees it as masking selfish ambition with politically-correct concern; it is ultimately self-destructive because it is only focused on the preservation and advancement of oneself. This may come across as an “outdated pastoral ideology” to critics like Frank Davey who valorize lives of “ambition and effort” over lives of “non-constructive” selflessness (*cf.* Davey 78). But Richards’ religious humanist vision is not an outdated pastoral ideology. It is a worldview at once orthodox yet radical: orthodox because it insists that selfish behaviour is sinful and ultimately self-destructive, yet also radical because it presents the paradox of self-sacrifice as the only way of saving oneself or justifying one’s actions. Selfish ambition, for Richards, is not the liberal virtue Davey paints it as: for Richards it is the hellfire that fuels sanctimony, which ultimately leads to one’s self-destruction. We see this painfully played out in Max Doran’s thrashing attempts to stay morally afloat—the drowning that follows the compromises that entrap him.

Richards, however, refuses to surrender Doran to his own self-constructed fate: he refuses to let him drown and, in the end, allows Doran, through Markus Paul, another chance at saving himself by telling the story straight—rewriting his account of what happened in the summer of

1985 in light of new evidence that Markus has spent a lifetime gathering (280). Richards' fictive vision is radical because it works on the assumption, rooted in Richards' Catholicism, that to gain one's life, one has to lose it. This makes about as much sense as playing solitaire in the woods and calling it hunting. It is counter-intuitive to claim that to save oneself one has to be self-sacrificing, that to return fully to oneself one needs to get outside oneself and into the life of another. But this is the logic of love that we can encounter in "the grace of fiction": a way of viewing the world that is more concerned with *being-with* than *being*, more concerned with the messiness of human life in all its fullness than with living a life of empty ambition and effort aimed at some sterile idea of "self-improvement."

The former characterizes Markus Paul's bravery, his nobility, and the latter characterizes Max Doran's cowardice, his sanctimony. It takes courage to come face-to-face with life's complexities—life's mysterious fullness—and not look away: to face down a charging bull moose knowing you could be trampled, knowing you might fail to make your shot. For Richards, part of this process is being able to look unblinkingly at oneself: examine the condition of one's own soul, as Markus challenges Doran to do late in the novel.

This unblinking self-examination is characterized by Markus' repetition of the alleged last words of Billy the Kid: *Quien es?* "Who are you" or "Who is there?" Markus Paul repeats this question on pages 251, 258, 261, and 276 and it emphasizes Markus' search for the truth, which is not just the truth about who shot Little Joe but the truth about the hearts of humankind, the truth about his own heart: "the internal struggle that means in the end everything to human beings" ("Trilogy" 81). Markus' search for the truth is characterized by his search for who killed his grandfather's lame, old dog during the barricade; he says to Isaac that he became a police

officer in order to find that person (263). But later, when Markus is talking with Brice Peel, the water boy who saw what happened to Hector Penniac in the hold of the *Lutheran*,

Markus suddenly remembered a pathetic old dog licking his hand one night—and looked down at his wrist, to see the scar from the rabbit snare he had got when he was thirteen. They'd killed that dog with rocks. Even when they were throwing the rocks, it had tried to wag its burr-covered tail. (281)

Killing these old, innocent dogs is symbolic of Cain murdering Abel or Saul trying to kill David (*cf.* 177). In the novel, it is symbolic of everyone's attempt to oust "The Bigot of Bartibog" from their lives, but this "bigot" is not just Roger Savage (as most people think), but, at one point or another, "meant each of them—English, French, Indian too" (117). Markus' search for the truth of who killed Hector, Little Joe, Roger, and his grandfather's dog leads him, eventually, to find out the truth about these "big" mysteries, but he also discovers the "small" truth about himself: his own capacity for murder, hatred, vengeance, sin. By journeying out of himself, giving himself fully to his lifelong investigation of Hector's death, he finally sees himself—his inability to fully love his ex-wife and native girlfriend, his ability to stone a lame, old dog—and he tells Doran that the only way to wrest the "bigot" from their hearts is to recognize their own culpability, their own sin.

*Quien es?* Who are you? Or, who is there?

Markus asks himself these questions as he continues his investigation and he discovers, as does Doran, that the murderer at the door is himself: this is who he struggles against—Markus against Markus. This is the "primary war" in each human heart and by showing that this war goes on even in the "noble" heart of a great man like Markus Paul—a man likened to the

legendary Micmac chief Osepitit and the Micmac God Glooscap—Richards shows us how universal and insidious this struggle is.

This is the bleak part of Richards' fictive vision—the tragedy at the heart of humanity, our capacity for sin and self-deception—but his tragic vision of life is also fired by the ferocity, the vitality, of life itself. We see this in Richards' treatment of each of his characters in this novel. Doran is not the only one drowning in a trap of his own making. Almost all the characters in the novel force themselves into such binds—like Isaac who declares a hunger strike in prison and nearly kills himself to maintain his honour in the community, or Joel Ginnish who finally gets caught by his own scheming. Richards takes no joy in these characters' unsuccessful, gasping attempts to stay morally afloat—to justify themselves and their actions in the end. And he never allows the reader to glory in any character's demise. Instead he makes readers feel the pressure each person is under—whether of their own making or not, whether justifiable or not—and in this way Richards challenges readers either to look each character in the face, acknowledge each one's flawed yet fierce humanity, or look away.<sup>30</sup>

This is the *adieu* of the novel: its invitation and challenge to a reader to recognize the holiness—the irreplaceable worth—of each character by staring unblinkingly at each one's flawed yet fierce humanity: the fullness of each one's life. Armstrong and Wyle are right to call Richards' fiction combative in this regard, but instead of lamenting this forceful tone, I think answering the *adieu*, taking up the challenge, is a more radical and more rewarding reading. *Markus Paul* gives a reader the opportunity to step outside of herself and into the lives of others through an intricate story, to “meet” these others face-to-face through metaphor: the indirection of fiction. This indirection is a “grace” because Richards' characters are too fierce and too raw

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<sup>30</sup> This paragraph is drawn from my review of *Incidents in the Life of Markus Paul*, published in *Image* 70 (2011): 118-120.



for most readers to meet in reality. This is seen most clearly in the last scene where Markus visits the cell where Sky is incarcerated because she got in a drug-fuelled fight in a bar in Neguac. The arresting officer stripped her almost naked and threw her in a cell because he “[didn’t] want to injure her” (291). But Markus, “not staring at her nakedness,” leans in and whispers her name twice, and that’s when “Sky turned, made a lunge at the air, her brilliant eyes flashing. ‘Fuck you,’ she said” (291). So ends the novel.

At first glance it is a brutal conclusion that seems to give no closure to a reader: we are left with a bleak and depressing world where even Markus’ deep love for Sky is not enough to heal the deep wound between them caused by Little Joe’s premature death. But when I read this final scene I think of Gardner’s claim that an “artist can approach the beautiful in a thousand ways—by trying to imitate it straight, by painting its monstrous opposite, or of any of the ways in between” (Gardner 157). Richards is careful not to have us stare at Sky’s nakedness; like Markus we look away. Her beauty is not perceived by voyeuristic leering. Instead, Richards has us look directly into Sky’s “brilliant eyes flashing.” We are shown Sky’s “brilliant” humanity—her beauty, her holiness, her irreplaceable worth—through its “monstrous opposite”: her life-consuming, fierce grief that causes her to lash out at the one man who still truly loves her.

In Sky’s eyes we see a flash “of glory obstructed,” holiness incarnated in blistering human grief (*cf.* 157). It is her gaze that calls a reader, making such a reader feel the gravity of the novel—the weight of her responsibility to these others she has met in reading *Markus Paul*. Such a reader feels this weight, this pull of the story on her heart because Richards has made her grapple with each character’s innate worth, each one’s life. This is the first part of the *adieu*, the Levinasian call to responsibility—Dillard’s first wick. The second part of the *adieu*, the grace of fiction that creates in such a reader the desire to respond and enables her to do so, is when she

sees the other caught in the hot wax of holiness—when she perceives the other’s worth *through* that other’s tragedy—immolating, burning, flashing an innate “brilliance.” This is the “glory obstructed” that Gardner spoke of: the glory or brilliance that flashes in Sky’s eyes even as she lunges at Markus and the reader.

This flash of “glory obstructed” is the novel’s final benediction, its blessing to a reader who is reminded of her inability to touch or change any of the characters in *Markus Paul*. Just as Markus, by the end of the novel, has not managed to connect with Sky, so too a reader can never literally connect with Richards’ characters. This is the indirectness of fiction: its grace. And it is this grace that can bless a reader by breaking open her sense of responsibility for the others she has read about. *Markus Paul* reminds us of the impossibility of justice being meted out: there are no reparations to be made without, as old Amos said, “burning the roof off the world.” And it was Amos who insisted that the only way forward was peace and forgiveness, which are impossible without love. In the end, this is what Richards’ combative vision calls for: unflinching, self-sacrificial love. The only other option seems to be despair and the drowning that follows.

A reader who despairs sees only that the characters cannot be changed, or she sees in Roger and Sky a defiant, backwards rage against those who would try to change them or touch them. But a reader who really gets inside the “life” of *Markus Paul*, someone who begins to see the world through Markus’ eyes, feels this despair as well, but she also understands Sky’s defiant “Fuck you” as the mysterious “stranger’s kiss”—that which awakens love. Though Markus’ love for Sky begins with concupiscence or romantic love, it calls Markus into a deeper love—a longsuffering desire not just for Sky’s body but for her deeper self, which Markus glimpses through her “brilliant eyes flashing.” Such a reader, who is able to step inside Markus’ life, will

find that she not only reads about the “incidents” that make up that life but that she feels herself being read as well by some other outside herself. Such a reader can’t keep the critical distance and detachment that is represented by the arresting officer in the last scene. No, she leans in with Markus and feels Sky spit in her face.

One could ask of this reader: Are you awakened by the other in this novel or by the incidents that entrap the other? Who or what affects you, enabling you to step out of your life and into the life of a story like this? Is it character or plot or both? I would argue that the incidents in the novel’s plot wrestle us into the lives of Richards’ characters so that we lose our footing as readers—our critical detachment—and we actually step inside the struggle of their daily lives. The effect of this grappling with Richards’ characters is that we come to see *Markus Paul* as “not about the outside *them* [but] about all of *us*...” (“Trilogy” 84). Janice Kulyk Keefer, in *Under Eastern Eyes*, echoed this by saying that in reading Richards’ earlier novels we come to understand that “the Miramichi [is] ‘ours’ and not ‘theirs’” (Keefer 176). This is the very source of reader-involvement or response: a novelist’s ability to wrestle us out of our own world and into another’s.

In my readings of Richards’ canon I have experienced this again and again, in novel after novel, from *Nights* to *Markus Paul*, which is why I have a hard time understanding Armstrong and Wylie’s claim that the “didacticism of the [Miramichi Trilogy], combined with its traditional realist aesthetic, closes the reader out of the narrative, a problematical effect when viewed in relation to current postmodern interests in the reader’s creative role in the construction of the text” (Armstrong 12). This complaint about Richards not playing the postmodern game makes no attempt to engage Richards’ creative vision, his tragic view of life, as anything more than a stylistic reaction to a sometimes hostile critical reception. If readers want to participate in “the

construction of the text” or in making meaning out of Richards’ novels, then they have to play *his* game and stop “lamenting” his change of narrative tactics after *Lives of Short Duration*. Tony Tremblay says as much when he writes that “Keefer’s sensible advice, gleaned from Henry James, [is] that ‘our business as readers and critics [is] to judge what the writer makes of her or his choice of material and “home ground,” not to quarrel with that choice’” (Keefer quoted in Tremblay 319). To go back to Richards’ own boxing metaphor, which he used to describe his shift in style, this means going head-to-head with a combative and, in the case of *this* novel, strong narrative voice. It means answering Richards’ consistent challenge, made throughout his writing career, to “step inside” his world and answer his call.

In Richards’ fiction, the *adieu* is rarely mellifluous, ethereal, or gentle. In the case of *Markus Paul*, the reader is “called out” rather than called, challenged rather than enticed, confronted rather than seduced, spat upon rather than kissed. What then? This is where plot works with character to call us into a story where we grapple with different characters’ flawed yet fierce humanity because our lives have become en-plotted in the “life” of *Markus Paul*. And because we are en-plotted in the “life” of the novel we are given the opportunity to become “en-selfed” in each character, brought face to face with “other” lives, and drawn further into a dynamic world where “life” becomes less an intellectual humanist ideal and more a “thick” experience full of context and nuance, conflict and struggle—a fictive world where ideas and humanity coalesce and crash.

The melding and clash of ideas and humanity in a story—plot and character—keeps ideology from reducing the complexity of human life—its mysterious *thereness*—to simple “constructs” shaped by facile forces such as “the ‘selfish gene,’ or the unconscious, or the economic means of production,” or as a reaction to the critical reception of one’s early works

(Wolfe 100). As Mathews has argued, such reductionism makes Richards little more than a rat in a vivisectionist's lab, always reacting to cultural forces like so many electric shocks, rather than *creating* something new out of "decades of intense thinking and feeling about art and life" ("Richards Demonized" 134). When I write about listening for and responding to the *adieu* of a work, I am not trying to pull a New Critical sleight-of-hand and say a reader's attention should be on the "thing itself," the object of artistic creation, at the expense of considering the cultural and historical contexts of that work. Attending to such a work, reading a novel like *Markus Paul*, is where this "listening" begins, but it is not necessarily where it ends. A sacramental reading is always an attempt to answer the call of the work: the *adieu* of the other whose presence reverberates in the story.

I use Levinas' word, "reverberates," because it gets at the proximate nature of knowing: we can empathize with another and know that other in part but we can never fully know that other through fiction. This is at the root of "creative" or "imaginative" knowing: it is also how people for millennia have believed without seeing. Wolfe writes that the "imagination works through empathy, which requires the artist to place herself in the experience of an other—and thus lose herself. While the loss of the self may appear to be a loss of control and individuality, the paradox of artistic creativity" (Wolfe 100) and creative knowing is that when one's self is eclipsed by the life of another in a story, that other enables one to look at a shadow self ringed in glory—the holiness in all of us as humans that can only be seen when it is unseen, the glory Gardner spoke of that is only glimpsed when it is obstructed, Sky's irreplaceable worth made viscerally "real" when she is seen through Markus' eyes.

There is something in these paradoxes that rings true, even in our postmodern age of scepticism:

[This is because] there is something in most of us that accords a high measure of dignity and worth to the creative impulse. Nearly all the world's religions are grounded in a creation story, one that ennobles human beings as agents who continue the divine act of creation through their own actions, each of which partakes in some measure of the supernatural powers of the creator. (Wolfe 96)

In Brian Maracle's account of the Iroquoian creation story, Shonkwaya'tison, the Creator, makes the *onkwehón:we*, which is what Iroquoian storytellers are called to this day, and the *onkwehón:we* know that the Creator's story reverberates in their own stories, ennobling their sub-creations as part of the larger creation (Maracle 10). Tolkien echoed this same idea when he wrote of creating Middle-earth. What reverberates in these sub-creations, Tolkien's stories of Middle-earth and Richards' stories of the Miramichi, is that which ennobles us as human beings—holiness. The paradox is this: that which ennobles us is not anything transcendent but our own flawed yet fierce humanity—that which fiction enables us to see with new eyes.

But this seeing is "as if through a glass darkly": it is only ever what Gardner called a glimpse, an intuition. This, however, is the grace of fiction: that which saves creative knowing from the pitfalls of intellectual arrogance practiced by those "intellectuals who think they can see through everything, but [who] do so at the expense of their own humanity" (Wolfe 101), those who can reduce the fullness of life to an overly simplified ideology or reduce an author's lifelong creative vision to critical reactionism. "Life," as Richards pictures it, is too thick of an experience to critically see through or make sense of at first glance, or in one reading. But it *is* knowable, in part, through stories, which is why his novels of the Miramichi keep coming—because there is something in "life" that obviously calls to Richards, some intuition of holiness that reverberates through his fiction and calls out for a different kind of reading: a reading in

which one discerns that sometimes responding to the other requires longsuffering and patience, that sometimes waiting is the most just form of action.

Paradoxes like this enliven the mystery of creative knowing that is at the heart of a sacramental reading because they are answered only through metaphor—the indirectness of fiction or a story’s double hinge, its *is* and *is not*. Markus’ longsuffering allows him to see Sky’s humanity but, by the end of the novel, he still cannot touch her, and neither can we. The other, who sees us from the far side of a story, remains unseen, but heard. The *adieu* we hear in reading such a story is, as Derrida argues, “dissymmetrical”: it is like a “gaze that sees [us] without [us] seeing it looking at [us]” (Derrida 91). But this unseen seer does more than call our responsibility into being; this stranger impassions us—often by challenging us—as good literature does, and awakens in us the desire not just to respond but to do so imaginatively rather than ideologically: to love the outcast in one’s life rather than merely acknowledge that this is a good idea. This desire that good stories can awaken in us has the potential to create a frenzy in us that keeps us awake long into the night, endlessly flipping pages, eyes jumping ahead. This is when we lose ourselves in stories and travel out from ourselves, called we know not by whom. We only ask, excitedly, to *where* are we being called?

## Chapter 2

### Reading as a “Ceremony of Belief”

Michael Winter’s *The Death of Donna Whalen*

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the covenant a reader makes with a story (and the dialogic world of others therein) in a discussion that approaches Michael Winter’s *The Death of Donna Whalen* (2010) through the literary criticism of Deborah Bowen and J. Edward Chamberlin. I use these two scholars’ work because they both, with different foci, discuss stories as dialogic spaces in which a reader takes on the role of mediator. According to Bowen and Chamberlin, a reader takes on this role because stories are middle spaces—common ground—between a reader, another, and that other’s world. As such, stories are spaces in which to listen and receive, but also to mediate and discern.

As I argued in the last chapter, it is in the imaginative space of a story that a reader’s response to the *adieu* is enacted. A reader who inhabits a story, after all, is the only one who can do this: perform the role of both listener and mediator of that story. But what does it mean to mediate? In the theory section of this chapter, I will expand on the idea, drawn from Chamberlin’s work, that to mediate as a reader is to recognize the arbitrariness of differences in a story—such as the conflicting testimonies of different characters—rather than ignoring or



glossing over those differences. My aim is to show that a reader who does this allows for a re-imagination of categories like “self” and “others.” After all, re-imagination has its genesis in listening. And listening is *where* reading rightly begins.

A sacramental reading, then, begins with a reader who covenants to listen—intentionally listen—which is not merely passively receiving but actively mediating. That is to say, in reading we don’t just surrender ourselves to another’s will and worldview. No, we grapple with the other in the story, *experiencing*—through imaginative, sacramental encounter—what we only read about. Because we wrestle with stories in this way and because they push back against our imaginations, stories have the potential to wound and bless us, hollow us by emptying us of self-obsession and hallow us with the burning presence—the fiery holiness—of other lives.

This kind of covenant—grappling with a story—is the form and feel of a sacramental reading. Such a reading, as we’ve discussed, begins by answering the *adieu* of another, but in doing so a reader opens herself not only to that other (who is often the narrative voice) but also to other voices that sound the depths of the story’s fictional world: voices dissonant yet resonant. In a novel, it is usually the narrative voice that orchestrates these other voices, but it is a reader who needs to mediate between the narrative voice of a work and the other voices in a novel that speak *in*, *with*, and *within* that unifying voice: a phenomenon that Bakhtin calls “heterglossia.”

In the second half of this chapter, when I look at Michael Winter’s *The Death of Donna Whalen*, I will demonstrate how the heterglossia of that work demands response but does not allow for interpretive closure. A sacramental reading, after all, is *a* way of responding and mediating—covenanting. That is why my reading of *Donna Whalen* will only be a *possible* reading, one that opens up other possibilities of response.

My reading will of course reflect my own covenant with *Donna Whalen* because it comes out of my relation *to* and my relation *with* Winter's novel and the people written about in it. And these relations, I argue, are what enable me to better understand myself as a reader, my world, and how I am to live in that world. Although this will be an intensely personal engagement, I will give it not as *my* reading, but as *a reader's* covenant, so that my interpretation does not remain a dead assertion but a living invitation to further engagement with this story—to that which I find nourishing to the human spirit in this novel—Sheldon Troke's troubled yet undeniable love for Donna Whalen.

My overall aim in this chapter is to show that to read is to mediate, and that to read sacramentally is to navigate a story's wilderness—its portrayal of human nature—by means of holiness' white hot light that flashes in unexpected glimpses of love. In Winter's novel, this sparks as Sheldon's love for Donna and her love for Sheldon, despite their mutually abusive relationship. Their genuine love for each other, flawed as they both are, is what is life-giving in the novel. But a reader only glimpses this love through Sheldon's confession of his grief over the loss of Donna, his bewilderment in the face of her grizzly murder. It is a reader who takes on the role of juror and judge in the novel, and who, in the end, must decide whether she believes Sheldon or not.

To do this, however, such a reader needs to covenant with Winter's novel by entering into a ceremony of belief: a reading of this work of documentary fiction in which Sheldon's voice speaks *in*, *with*, and *within* Winter's orchestration of conflicting testimonies concerning the death of Donna Whalen.

### Reading as a “Ceremony of Belief”

In order to approach *where* we are called to in reading a story, we must turn back, for a moment, to Ricoeur’s question: “Where do you speak from?” As an initial inquiry it is not necessarily reducible to deciphering a first premise or a critical stance. Speaking of where I am called *to* is different than articulating what I think and do once I’m there. As I discussed in the last chapter, Brian Maracle tells us that in a gathering of Iroquoian people the Thanksgiving Address is recited before all other stories. This does more than fulfill ritual or set a specific tone: it re-inscribes *place*—the place of the meeting within the tribe within the people within the world within the Creation. It lays out the Creator’s covenant with his people and it tells of their place within the larger Creation where not one but many voices compete: voices of spirits and humans, animals, insects, lands and oceans.

How are all these voices heard though, and are they always in concert with each other? How does the world speak in or through the words of a story? Derrida, author of the idea that there is “nothing outside the text” or that there is “no outside-text”—an idea examined earlier in my discussion of Baudrillard’s deconstruction of icons—does not go as far as to say the basic reality of something beyond language is absent, even in our age of hyperreality. Derrida does not deny such a possibility; he only says that this “something beyond language” is elusive. Deborah Bowen, in her dealings with this conundrum, cites the following passage from Richard Kearney’s *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (1984), in which Derrida gestures to what he calls “the other of language,” arguing that his whole philosophical project—his critique of logocentrism—was not to say that there was nothing beyond language, but was “above all else the search for the *other* and the *other of language*” (*Dialogues* quoted by Bowen

5). It is the other, I have argued, who is very much *present* in the work who calls to us in the *adieu*; this is the other who calls us to responsibility and who creates in us the desire to respond. But because the other who calls is not seen but is *heard*, our focus shifts from the face of the other to the other's voice—to his or her *speaking*. And it is the other's speaking that will reveal how the voices of the world are heard through the words of stories—the beyond of language reverberating in stories.

The space sketched out between word and world is what Bowen calls the “middle space” of stories: where language is not a closed system, contra Baudrillard's analysis, but a living thing intricately connected to a living world that also speaks in its own right. J. Edward Chamberlin calls this space the “common ground” between concepts of Them and Us, others and ourselves.<sup>31</sup> However, in order to enliven this idea with the sense of the other's holiness, as mentioned in the previous section, I want briefly to look at how Kearney conceives of this middle space as *anatheistic*.<sup>32</sup>

Kearney describes this idea—*anatheism*—by relating it to Kierkegaard's famous concept of “repetition” as a looping back in order to go forward toward an encounter with radical otherness:

We are, to borrow from Kierkegaard, not concerned with “recollection” *backward* but with a “repetition” *forward*. The *ana* signals a movement of return to what I call a primordial wager, to an inaugural instant of reckoning at the root of belief. It marks a reopening of that space where we are free to choose between faith and nonfaith. As such,

<sup>31</sup> As I noted earlier, Chamberlin's conceptualization of “common ground” includes the space between words and the world but is not reducible to that space because his theorization includes oral/aural storytelling as well.

<sup>32</sup> This is an idea that he draws from the word “*Ana-theos*,” or glimpsing “God after God.” Kearney tells us that *anatheism* is “another word for another way of seeking and sounding the things we consider sacred but can never really fathom or prove [Gardner's “primary intuition”]. Another idiom for receiving back what we've given up as if we were encountering it for the first time” (*Anatheism* 3). If in Baudrillard's thought the world is given up to simulacra and simulations, then in Kearney's philosophy the world is given back to us in a fresh way: the absence of a basic reality suddenly filled anew with a “strange” presence.

anatheism is about the *option* of retrieved belief. It operates *before* as well as *after* the division between theism and atheism, and it makes both possible. Anatheism, in short, is an invitation to revisit what might be termed a primary scene of religion: the encounter with a radical Stranger who we choose, or don't choose, to call God. (7)

This encounter with a Stranger that incites an “epiphanic moment of awakening” is what I have called the *adieu* of the text (7). In meeting this Stranger there is a call to responsibility and an awakened desire to respond to that call. The twinned wicks of the call and the desire to respond to that call illuminate the ceremony of belief that is reading: a ceremony that is, following Kearney, *anatheistic*, taking place on middle ground, where belief and unbelief are equally possible—in the metaphoric *is* and *is not* of stories. This is *where* we, as readers, are present and where we meet the other and are given the opportunity—the gift—to be transformed in some way.

This place, where a reader encounters the other, is in the narrative being read: the story that is inhabited for a time. First, let me briefly explain what I mean by inhabiting a narrative, an idea drawn from Deborah Bowen's *Stories of the Middle Space* (2010). All narratives, Bowen argues, are relational and require response, at the very least, to the other, one's neighbour: the Stranger encountered in story. And this idea, for Bowen, is rooted in an understanding of the Christian Story as a metanarrative of faith that begs to be inhabited.<sup>33</sup> “[With] this epistemology and from this first premise,” Bowen argues, “language becomes a major site of social responsibility, and therefore a key means of addressing perceived injustice. ‘Discourse’ no longer denotes interactive speech in any value-neutral way; rather, you come to understand discourse as a textual practice conditioned at every point by cultural, social, and historical

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<sup>33</sup> See Bowen 24-25.

factors” (25). Stories, then, as sites of discourse, are never “value-neutral”; they ask us, as readers, to inhabit them—to mediate.

Chamberlin tells us in his Larkin Lectures (March 2010) that “language is the biggest deal we can enter into,” and in entering this deal, reading a story, we can be conscripted by ideas that take hold of us. As a result we often take sides—Us and Them, self and others—and though we find ourselves in separate camps, I think many of us hope for a space in which to come together. This is the source of covenants, peace agreements, and treaties; and as broken and abused as these have been in our history, at root, they signal a desire for some common ground to meet on. But what does this “common ground” look like in the real world? In Canada we pride ourselves on cultivating a pluralist society but there is a stark difference between *pluralist* and *pluralism*. In the former many voices speak and are heard but in the latter it is acknowledged that there are many voices but few are genuinely heard. A pluralist society cultivates diversity by allowing for conflict and mediation whereas pluralism, as an ideology, has a shallow sense of diversity that denies deep differences. An example of the latter can be seen in reading the history of the literary criticism of Atlantic Canadian fiction, which reveals a consistent critique of centrist Canadian *pluralism*: a prevailing, critical condescension (at worst) and ambivalence (at best) toward writers and critics of Atlantic Canada.<sup>34</sup>

For Chamberlin, whose focus is comparative literature, categories like Us and Them are not reducible to simple *pluralism*; both stories about Us and tales about Them demand attention and both present unique, powerful, and often conflicting claims. Anyone who has sat as mediator between two religious or cultural traditions, as Chamberlin has, knows this to be true. However, in the ceremony of belief that is a story, both *can* be heard because reading is a covenant to

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<sup>34</sup> See the “Introduction” to Wyile’s *Anne of Tim Hortons* (2011) for an analysis of how Atlantic Canada and its literature has been perceived historically as well as how it is perceived in our increasingly globalized, contemporary context.

*listen*, to participate in a ceremony of belief where *believing*, like *truthing* (an idea we will explore more fully), is verbalized—enacted and embodied—so that story takes precedence over concept, interaction over position, *believing* over belief.

Chamberlin, in this matter, makes an interesting distinction between listening to a plurality of voices, stories, and giving into an overly simplified pluralism. He argues that a story as a ceremony of belief creates a hinge between truth and fiction, the world and words, and this hinge is an arbitrary link. However, this is where pluralism sets up its tent: on the arbitrary nature of truth claims as solid links between reality and the written word. All claims to truth are equally arbitrary in this scheme and are therefore equally tolerated because they are all essentially *unbelievable*. This diminishes the strong connection between the world and words that are invested with belief and it inhibits the border crossing between what *is* and what *is not* that belief allows. “The closer we come to this borderline between art and life,” Chamberlin argues, “or [the] ‘is’ and ‘is not,’ or truth and lies, the better able we are to recognize the arbitrariness of both. And the better able we will be to *reimagine* Them and Us” (Chamberlin 137, *my emphasis*). Chamberlin is never interested in simply conflating Them and Us; he seeks to re-imagine these categories, not deny that they exist. This re-imagining has its genesis in listening to the stories of each side. For Chamberlin, *listening* is in itself an act of belief or, to use a literary phrase, a suspension of disbelief—it is not only the beginning of this re-imagining, it is its *means*. It opens up the possibility of truth claims to be true. It allows for many stories to be heard—stories about Them and stories about Us. And these stories, when truly listened to, are given strength: the muscle of conviction. They are enlivened by the possibility that they *may* be true.

This can be a terrifying thing: a story's ability to enlist its listeners and potentially dominate other stories. Recognizing that a story can do this has, of course, led to poststructuralist attacks of logocentrism in narratives that seek to master other narratives, leading to their deconstruction. A way of accomplishing this deconstruction theoretically has been to see words as mere signs: recognizing the signifier as the linguistic flipside of the signified but not essentially connected to it. This deconstructive reading practice allows a story to be viewed as a merely linguistic construct: a series of signs artfully arranged along a narrative arc, yes, but a story that has forgotten its history, its true face. Deconstruction, as a theoretical (and ethical) practice, came in part out of recognizing that myth was essentially a haemorrhage of reality, an evaporation of history (*cf.* Barthes 143). But in deconstructing myth—seeing it as a construct or idol in need of unmasking—those things which myth has siphoned off—reality and history (the world)—have not been restored, or, in Chamberlin's terms, re-imagined. *What* the signs signify, the reality behind them, seems less important than the fact *that* they signify and are, therefore, potentially not what they claim to be. Language is then imagined as nothing but itself: a closed system we are locked within. "There is nothing outside the text," we are told by others who have co-opted Derrida's words. Words are just words, just as icons are merely idols in Baudrillard's world of simulacra and simulations: there is no outside "real" world, only hyperreality—fictions, constructs. But, as we have seen, the system Baudrillard describes does not take into account the animating force of belief that sees language in stories as essentially dialogic rather than as a series of signs: focussing on the interaction of the one who listens and the one who speaks *as well as* paying attention to *what* is said.

Belief gives life to stories because it awakens us to the fact that language is never just language and stories are never just stories—that both are not mere words but words *enacted*: read



and interpreted. And this interpretation is never at arm's length: we grapple with the other in the text, and what we read about, we, in some mysterious way, experience. This is why Deborah Bowen, in her dealings with Bakhtin's focus on the dialogic nature of stories, points out the following:

[That] for Bakhtin the word is "not, as in Saussure, a two-sided sign—signifier and signified—but a two-sided *act*. Bakhtin's linguistics is a linguistics of *parole*. The words we use come to us already imprinted with the meanings, intentions and accents of previous users" (*After* 21). Thus words are not static or abstract elements of a system, but fundamentally social and dialogic. This perspective is shared by Levinas, who asserts that words do not have "isolable meanings" reducible to content, because "language refers to the positions of the one that listens and the one that speaks, that is, to the contingency of their history." (David Lodge quoted by Bowen 41)

Chamberlin takes this one step further in quoting Derek Walcott and showing that in stories what *is* cannot be isolated from what *is not* because "[there] is a memory of imagination in literature which has nothing to do with actual experience, which is, in fact, another life, and that experience of the imagination will continue to make actual [in memory] the quest of a medieval knight or the bulk of a white whale" (Walcott quoted by Chamberlin 139). In this way, reality, though never fully suspended in stories, is never fully separate from them either, nor is reality ever really safe from the effects of fiction. After all, the events of *Don Quixote* and *Moby Dick* never historically occurred—even though they were written out of Cervantes' and Melville's imaginative encounters with their respective worlds—but these same events *are* remembered as if they had historical consequence and weight. And because they are remembered in this way, they do have *real* substance: they can leave literal marks on our literature and imaginations.

Stories can injure us, even as Jacob was maimed by his grappling with the angel in the night. But the limp that fiction leaves us with can be both debilitating *and* empowering. Jacob was crippled for the rest of his life after his encounter with the Stranger. But that Other, in wounding him, also blessed him with a story to live within: that he would be the father of nations and his name would become Israel (*cf.* Genesis 32). A similar thing can be seen in the Iroquoisian Creation Story in which Tharonhyawá:kon, the right-handed, right-headed son of Mother Earth, and Thawihskaron, the left-handed, wrong-headed twin *wrestle*—Tharonhyawá:kon *creating* and Thawihskaron causing mischief and trying to undo his brother's good work (Maracle 7-8). The right-handed twin creates while the left-handed twin destroys but the one who cripples only encourages the one who creates to create more, eventually forming the *onkwehón:we* or the first people. And just as the angel called Jacob into covenant in that ancient Semitic story, so does Tharonhyawá:kon, also known as Shonkwaya'tison, call the *onkwehón:we*, his people who speak his language, into covenant (11). But what is the purpose of the covenant in both stories?

In Jacob's story the covenant is made so that God, through Jacob, could create Israel, his chosen people, so that they could be lights to the other nations. In Tharonhyawá:kon's story the covenant is made with the *onkwehón:we* so that these people, the Iroquois, could help take care of the Creation and protect it from Thawihskaron's mischief. Both covenants are rooted in their respective stories and both of these narratives *involve* those inhabiting the story with those outside of it. Israel as a people is to be a light to the nations, according to Hebrew Scripture. And the Iroquois people are to care for the Creation of which they are a part. Both covenants involve those on the inside, a chosen people, with those on the outside, so that those on the outside can be blessed through those on the inside. In this way both stories reveal something about the heart

of a Creator for his or her Creation; in both stories the purpose of creating a people is not to enclose that community in covenant, but to bless the lives of others *through* covenant and so fulfill the covenant and bring blessing on themselves.

When I speak about sacramental readings I am, at root, speaking about a reader's covenant with a work in which serious attention is paid to the other in that story. And through that attention, which is an act of love, that reader is somehow marked and changed. But the change wrought is not always a positive thing (such as the blessings of the covenants outlined above): to think so would be to romanticise or ignore the ways in which a story can enlist a reader's belief and use that blind trust to authoritarian ends—succumbing to Thawihskaron, the left-handed twin. Bowen tells us that for “Bakhtin, writing under the oppression of Stalinism, what he calls the ‘monologic discourse’ of a single authoritarian voice intent on interpretive closure is unethical because it functions as a repressive, totalitarian imposition that denies the validity of paying serious attention to the other” (Bowen 42). By sacramental readings I do not in any way mean to force a Christian reading on any reader or story and thereby force interpretive closure. Sacramental reading, for me, is rooted in a covenant with the other in which I am called and in which I desire to pay “serious attention” to the other—to *listen* first. This, for me, is rooted in the idea that before I utter a critical word, something beyond language—beyond the story—is calling me to respond. This is the work's *adieu*: that which first addresses us before we respond to the work.

It is the other who calls us in the *adieu* and awakens in us a desire to interpret, to engage the world of the book in a ceremony of belief—a covenant with the work where we enter the world of the work. It is the voice of the other who calls us to this world, but in this space there are other voices that speak with and within the narrative voice: the source of the *adieu*. Bowen

tells us that “Bakhtin uses the term ‘heteroglossia’ to describe the coexistence in any utterance of other utterances in conflict with it, and argues that this conflict is at its most concentrated in the novel: he asserts that ‘heteroglossia either enters the novel in person (so to speak) and assumes material form within it in the images of speaking persons, or it determines, as a dialogizing background, the special resonance of novelistic discourse’” (“Discourse” quoted by Bowen 43). This dynamic interplay of voices in conflict with each other—what Bakhtin terms *heteroglossia*—is a living link between words and world because language draws its life from the complexity of the world out of which it springs.

In other words, [according to Bowen,] far from bracketing the referent and suspending the world outside the linguistic sign, Bakhtin’s notion of “discourse” depends on the referent for its very life. Bakhtin has reintroduced the world into the linguistic equation; the signifying word does not merely signify within a system but “lives beyond itself.”

[Bakhtin] believes... in the vital significance of the beyond-language. (43)

This other, beyond language, who is the source of any story’s *adieu*, calls to us from beyond the story, beckoning us into ceremonies of belief, where “[the] story properly told, or the song properly sung, *is* true” (Chamberlin 147).

For Chamberlin, “[the] text [is] a ceremony of belief... not a chronicle of events, and the reading of it [is] a crucial part of its power, then and now. It [is] a charm” (179). The power of stories is their ability to enlist our belief; stories give themselves so fully to us that we in turn give ourselves fully to them in suspending our disbelief. The charm of stories, then, is, as we have seen, that they involve us and mark us and call us to respond. Bowen elucidates this phenomenon in her reading of Bakhtin by stressing “not only that the discourse of the novel expects readerly response to its rhetoric, but also that, in its freedom to include all kinds of

‘heteroglossia,’ it works to establish a centrifugal impulse that stands in tension with any tendency toward totalizing control” (Bowen 44). A story demands response, yes, but it does not foreclose meaning; there must be response, but the heteroglossia of the work, its many-voicedness, makes readerly response centrifugal (open) rather than centripetal (closed), part of dialogic discourse rather than monologic interpretation.

A sacramental reading, because it listens first, hears the heteroglossia of a work—its many voices—and because its focus is voice instead of face, it is less concerned with who is speaking than with what is being said and *how* what is being said can potentially affect the reader. Chamberlin, though not using sacramental language, writes that

[it] is... more important to turn for sustenance to the treasury of values that stories and songs provide. These values do not inhere in opinions, which may vary, nor in doctrines, which will differ, but in imaginative structures—the rhythms and rhymes of song, the plots and characters of stories, the performances of theatre, the ceremonies of belief. They introduce us to the profoundly human values of friendship, love and loyalty, as well as to the profoundly human conditions of envy, failure and despair. They give coherence and consistency to human experience that otherwise seems unpredictable and intimidating. [...] It is only through the pressure of our imagination that we can resist the pressure of reality. (192)

There is an echo here of Hansen’s view of literature as something that provides a momentary “stay against confusion”—confusion being pictured here as “the pressure of reality” that is resisted through the “pressure of imagination.” This is the grace of stories: that we as readers can face in a story what we do not have to face or cannot bring ourselves to face in real life. And, in

facing in a story that which we cannot bear to face in life, we are often given courage to face our real fears—a gift from beyond the story.

If a story can give one a gift like courage—something that has the potential to be life-giving—then that courage gives something as mysterious as holiness a knowable form. This gift of courage then becomes a way to better understand oneself as a reader and as a human living in the world—to better understand what one fears and why—and to define oneself over against that fear as not being mastered by it. It will be helpful, in looking at how one's self is potentially understood in the act of reading, to examine Bowen's contrast between Levinas' understanding of the "self" and Bakhtin's understanding of "selves": "Levinas understands the self as defined in its relationship of responsibility to the other; Bakhtin understands selves as constituted by their answerability before others—dialogism liberates the self into meaning, so that intersubjectivity is a life-bringing gift" (Bowen 44). So far in this discussion I have focussed on a reader (a singular self) being called by the other—a term connoting the mystery of holiness as seen in human others, the world, the Transcendent, or beauty. And the reader is called by this "other" to respond out of responsibility but also out of love (the "call" being pictured as Dillard's candle with its twin wicks). What Bakhtin rightly illuminates, in his differing from Levinas, is that though a reader may respond to a book's call that comes from "the other," that reader, in responding to the work, is answerable to a plurality of voices—many others not necessarily speaking in chorus. This is why a covenant between reader and book is so important in a sacramental reading, so that all the voices are allowed to speak and affect that reader in different ways. Such a reader defines herself in relation *to* and in relation *with* these others in order to better understand herself, her world, and how she can live within it. "For ultimately," Chamberlin tells us, reading "is all about the nourishment of what we might as well call the human spirit, that part of us which invests and

discovers, as well as listens and watches and waits, and hopes and prays. Without it we are desperate" (193).

So what is it exactly that nourishes the human spirit? According to John Gardner it is what is life-giving (or moral) in literature, those things that awaken what is noblest in us. And for Gardner those things manifest in fiction as beauty, through which we catch a fleeting glimpse of holiness. So it is, as Dillard might put it, "holiness splintered down in" stories that give us life, nourish what we call the human spirit, remind us or show us anew how we can live. As a sacrament gives form to the Transcendent, so a sacramental reading has the potential to give form to holiness in a reader's life—even in something as seemingly mundane as courage to face one's fears.

In order for stories to nourish the human spirit, however, they have to be invested with belief—covenanted with. Chamberlin says that believing "in a story is like sitting on a one-legged milking stool. It needs us as much as we need it" (199). Believing, according to Chamberlin, is investing or giving credit to the intangible. So why believe in stories, in their ability to affect us? What backs them? What about them makes us want to believe them? Or, put another way, what do we seek through them? "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious," said Albert Einstein. 'It is the source of all true art and science.' So maybe this is why we believe in stories. They are backed by a sense of wonder" (203). Wonder or mystery: what we have been calling holiness. This is what draws us, calls us, to stories. Something mysterious calls us into covenant with a book just as some mystery called that book's author into a creative covenant with the world in relation to which the book was written.

Both types of covenant are, at root, concerned with how we live our lives—what Bakhtin calls "ethics" and Gardner calls "morality." To be either a reader or an author is to fill an

essentially ethical role because both reader and author are mediators. Bowen, quoting Bakhtin, writes that “[narrative] is ethics in the sense of the mediating and authorial role each takes up toward another’s story” (Bakhtin quoted by Bowen 45). To mediate, as a reader, is to hear the many voices clamouring to be heard in any given story—what Bakhtin calls dialogism—and to believe in them enough to listen to each one, thereby fulfilling the reader’s covenant. But to mediate as a reader is also to “take up another’s story”: to take on an authorial or interpretive role toward the story. The reader, as mediator, is then both listener and interpreter; but these two faces of the reader are two sides of the same coin: a reader’s full investment in the story, an offering needed for a sacramental reading.

These two mediating roles of the reader can each be seen to correspond to Levinas’ thought on the one side (the responsibility to listen) and Bakhtin’s philosophy on the other (the desire to respond and interpret). In Levinas and in Bakhtin, as Bowen presents their philosophies, we can see the twin wicks of the *adieu*. In Levinas we see the call to responsibility, the demand for justice that the face of the other places on the reader, and in Bakhtin we see the desire to respond to the other’s call awakened. This desire to respond is the reviving of Eros that quickens or gives life to justice. We have already seen, in the discussion of the *adieu*, that Levinas chose the word “responsibility” over “love,” because he felt the power had been drained out of that latter word. But, as shown in that section, the *adieu* of the other to the reader not only calls the reader to responsibility (to do justice) but awakens in the reader the desire to respond out of love or care for the other.

So why choose the word Eros over other forms of love like *Philia* (friendship) or *Agape* (divine love), especially given the nuance invested in the latter by Slavov Žižek in *Living in the End Times* (2010)? In that work Žižek defines *Agape* as “political love,” an idea given currency



earlier—with different nuance—by Terry Eagleton in *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* (2009). I use the word Eros because of the idea of human longing—a longing for the other awakened by the other—and because Eros, as carnal love, linguistically grounds these ideas and gives them flesh. Eros is love of the body and, following Bakhtin, I see the body as “the centre of value,” particularly for any sacramental reading of stories (*cf.* Bowen 46). Sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, never negate the human body; rather, a sacrament like the Eucharist makes the human body the site of divine incarnation in the world. So, a sacramental reading doesn’t negate a book’s humanity—the lives of its characters—in search of some Transcendent truth; instead, such a reading sees a book’s human characters as the bodies through which truth has the potential to become incarnate or real in their world as well as in a reader’s.

Chamberlin tells us that stories “share not so much a common understanding of the world as a common need to make sense of it” (202). If that is so, then stories do not all contain a common truth about the world but they are almost always written to embody some ambiguous truth about our existence: some deeply felt intuition about the significance of life that first sparked in a writer the *desire* to give that idea form in the body of a story. Bowen calls this process of embodying truth the activity of *truthing*: “This kind of emphasis on *truthing* as activity, rather than truth as proposition, may run counter to the tradition of ontological philosophy, but it is in tune with the dialogic and dynamic character of the creation and reception of stories” (Bowen 46). If storytelling can be seen as *truthing* then the telling of stories is a way in which mystery—any sense we have that the world is holy—can be birthed. Stories like this, however, are often first conceived in a paradox, like joy coming out of a tale of sorrow:

How this happens, how a kind of joy comes out of a song of sorrow, is one of the mysteries of art, as baffling as any of the mysteries of science. It requires, and rewards,

faith. Understanding it is part of understanding how stories work, how they offer a moment in which the imagination pushes back against reality even as it surrenders to it. It is a covenant in wonder between ourselves and the world. (Chamberlin 206)

Chamberlin, here, is speaking about “understanding how stories work” or interpreting them: he is speaking to a reader now and not of the author. After all, *truthing* can still be done by a reader as well as by the author because it is the result of a covenant with the other in a story. It is the result, not only of responding, but, prior to that, of desiring to respond out of love. The ceremony of belief that is reading can then be seen as both the site of the covenant (a reader’s responsibility to listen) *and* its enactment (interpretation birthed out of listening).

Without response to one’s responsibility there is no covenant and reading becomes merely a mental exercise. To refer back to our earlier discussion of icons, without veneration (belief), an icon ceases to be consubstantial with its subject—the border between the viewer and the numinous closes, like shutters made from mirror slats, and the viewer sees only herself, instead of beyond herself to the other. She remains trapped in a world of self-interest. By belief, in terms of reading, I mean the attitude or posture of a reader toward the work; a story read in an attitude of belief, in Chamberlin’s words,

[Opens the reader to a moment] when mystery and clarity converge, when we cannot tell whether we have surrendered ourselves or are still separate, when intensity has a casual quality to it. [What I have called the re-awakening of Eros in reading.] That’s the beginning of moving beyond Them and Us [the other and the reader]. It’s not that there’s no difference, any more than we would say there’s no difference between reality and the imagination.... Of course there is. But the difference becomes transformed in the ceremony of belief that is the story. (223-224)

Chamberlin goes on to write that we “need to understand that it is in the act of believing in these stories and ceremonies rather than in the particular belief itself that we come together, and that this act of believing can provide the common ground... that we long for” (224). This helps clarify what I mean when I say that a sacramental reading creates an *anatheistic* space, middle ground, where a sense of holiness can be believed in, glimpsed in the beauty of a work by both those who believe in a transcendent reality and those who do not. A sacramental reading is, simply, a reading in which it is possible to be affected by something outside of oneself—something other—that is life-giving.

Such readings can be seen as important ceremonies that “draw our attention to the difference between the natural and the human, the barbaric and the civilized, the secular and the sacred” (238). They draw our attention to these differences:

[But then] they show us how to ignore [them]. They give us a way of saying “I believe” when we are not sure; of getting consolation when our hearts are broken; of watching spring come in when we know it will never again come for us; of understanding every word when the words do not make sense. They take place in moments of grace, but these moments are always precarious and often downright dangerous. They build up and break down our sense of who we are and where we belong. And they keep us in a state of wonder. (238-239)

This wonder Chamberlin writes of is, for me, the sense of holiness in a book that calls us as readers out of ourselves into the other, whether that be Levinas’ transcendent other seen in every human face or Bakhtin’s dialogic and buzzing world of heteroglossia. The form this takes is different in each book examined in this study, but in Michael Winter’s *The Death of Donna Whalen* this sense of holiness takes dialogic form, wrought from Winter’s covenant with the real

people he writes about. Reading this “novel,” then, not only demonstrates Winter’s covenant to orchestrate these voices into a readable story, but it also reveals how Winter allows these voices to speak in their own right, without the interference of his own compelling narrative voice. It is into this covenant that we as readers are drawn by the voices of real people who call from beyond this “novel,” compelling us to enter into and fulfill our own covenant with *Donna Whalen*. The fulfillment of that covenant, of course, begins with our journey out from ourselves into the lives of others—a journey that has the potential to return us to ourselves *other-wise*.

### **Michael Winter’s *The Death of Donna Whalen***

In the following reading of Michael Winter’s *The Death of Donna Whalen*, I will demonstrate how a reader might covenant with this work of documentary fiction—this novel about real people and real events—by examining Winter’s own covenant with the story he orchestrates: an arrangement that mutes Winter’s own narrative voice, which is quite lively in his earlier novels. Winter, in his “Forward” to *Donna Whalen*, admits quieting his voice so that the voices of real people involved in the investigation of Donna Whalen’s murder and the trial of her alleged killer are allowed to speak for themselves.

My aim in this reading is to show that Winter’s choice to silence his own voice is an act of authorial love, but that this love is also revealed in Winter’s artistic mediation and orchestration of these voices, and in his belief in both the innocence of Sheldon Troke and the genuineness of Sheldon’s love for Donna. Of all the people in the novel Sheldon is Winter’s main focus: the one man in the trial whose words were never believed. In *Donna Whalen*, then, Sheldon’s testimony, though still suspect, is invested with belief, allowing a reader to glimpse—

in the clashing accounts of Sheldon's love for Donna and his abusiveness toward her—a flash of holiness that illuminates a new critical path into the novel and the covenant we are asked to make with it.

Michael Winter, in his “Foreword” to *The Death of Donna Whalen* (2010), describes being “drawn” to the real-life subject matter that his “novel” is based on. He begins by saying, “There was a murder in the city I lived in. Donna Whalen was stabbed thirty-one times in her apartment on Empire Avenue. We all knew about it—it was in the newspapers and on the radio and television for months. I walked the same streets the victim walked, and often passed the house where the murder happened” (*Donna Whalen* vii). Winter goes on to describe how he “looked up the newspaper reports and talked to people who worked on various aspects of the trial,” that he got his “hands on the court transcripts” and “received print copies of the wiretaps that were referred to in the trial” (vii). “It occurred to me,” he says, “that I could write about this murder and conviction in an updated version of Truman Capote’s method. I was excited about dramatizing a true event” (vii).

Winter’s original tackling of this true story, however, turned back on him when he “was deep into the narrative” (vii). He writes:

A cold emotion ambushed me: I didn’t like how I was using someone’s tragedy for personal gain. There was a dead, innocent woman at the centre. She had been alive, really alive. The family of Donna Whalen is still around, and who was I to turn their suffering into fiction that, if lauded, was praise to me—who needed that? So I put the manuscript away. (vii)

There is a macabre image in Don McKay’s book *Vis à Vis* (2001) that I think metaphorically describes the ethical bind that Winter found himself in, which led to his decision to abandon his

initial version of Donna Whalen's story. McKay—poet, philosopher, and avid birder—writes that he was “on [his] way back home [when he] got [his] best look at a raven. It was hung up by the roadside at the entrance to a lane, a piece of baler twine around one leg, wings spread. There was a huge shotgun hole in its back just above the tail, which was missing altogether” (McKay 18). McKay goes on to reflect:

Shooting the raven was one thing: we all know, each of us, that sinister delight in causal brutality and long-distance death. Displaying it was another—controlling its death, as well as taking its life. Displaying it declares that the appropriation is total. A dead body seeks to rejoin the elements; this one is required to function as a sign, a human category—a sign which simply says “we can do this.” The raven's being, in Martin Heidegger's terms, was not just used, but used up. (18-19)

This relates back to Winter's decision to “put the manuscript away” because I think that he not only feared “using” the story of Donna Whalen's death for personal gain, but that he feared “using up” her life—cinching her story within Capote's *In Cold Blood* method, leaving her memory on brutal display like the dead, baler-twined raven McKay depicts.

The word McKay uses to describe what was done to the raven's body is *matérialization*,<sup>35</sup> an idea that aptly describes what Winter feared he was initially doing with Donna Whalen's life. When documents were made and gathered during the course of the murder trial after Donna's death, her life was “conscripted” to the cause of catching her killer: people who knew her, through their testimonies at the trial, made their relationships with her into tools of either defence

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<sup>35</sup> *Matérialization*, according to McKay, occurs when “someone tries [to] make things into tools in the first place [by removing] them from autonomous existence and conscript[ing] them as servants, determining their immediate futures. To make tools into matériel, [one] engage[s] in a further appropriation. This second appropriation of matter may be the colonization of its death, as in the case of the raven, the nuclear test site, the corpse hung on a gibbet or public crucifixion. On the other hand *matérialization* could be a denial of death altogether, as in the case of things made permanent and denied access to decomposition, their return to the elements. We inflict our rage for immortality on things, marooning them on static islands; and then, frequently enough, we condemn them as pollutants” (20-21).

or accusation—tools to determine *their* innocence, protect their own self-interests. These “tools”—court transcripts, wiretaps, testimonies—are what Winter was drawn to because they retained traces of what McKay calls “wilderness,” Donna’s human vitality, the holiness of her irreplaceable life. What I think Winter feared he was doing in his original draft was matérielizing these tools, appropriating them further, denying Donna her death by using the story of her death for his own notoriety.

So, Winter “gave up on it and wrote other things. But then some afternoons,” he writes, “I’d find the boxes of transcripts on the top shelf of my cupboard and be drawn to them. I’d stand on my toes and flick through the photocopied testimony, my face very close to the voices of those who loved Donna Whalen” (vii-viii). What drew Winter back to these “tools” of the trial was not their usefulness, for they had already served their purpose (or ‘dis-served’ it) in catching Donna’s killer. Winter was never out to re-open the case and set the record straight: his venture was not investigative journalism. What drew him back to these documents, of his own admission, was something that he sensed “accumulating” as he read: “a wedge into the human condition that was truer and more vivid than what [he] could fabricate” (viii). Truer and more vivid, yes, but also darker and more terrifying: the thunderous cloud of unknowing that is as much a part of the human condition as holiness’ white hot light. Both of these together—lighting and thunder, knowing and unknowing, holiness and its “monstrous opposite”—are what Derrida in *The Gift of Death* calls the “*mysterium tremendum*” or “the terrifying mystery” when a subject “sees itself seen by the gaze of another” (Derrida 6). As I have argued, we diminish this if we call it “otherness” so that we can simply critique it, categorize it, and look away. But otherness that captivates us as subjects, readers, and human beings—that mystery in a book that shakes us out of ourselves, that moment in reading when we feel ourselves being read, that

striking instant of re-cognition—is what Kafka described when he said “a book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.” Donna Whalen’s story, for Winter, became this “wedge into the human condition,” an axe blow to the frozen sea within him—that “cold emotion” that froze his initial attempt at writing Donna’s story.

So far I have depicted this “wedge” as the *adieu*, the other’s holiness that calls to us through beauty, but in the case of Donna Whalen’s story, holiness does not call through beauty but howls through beauty’s monstrous, brutal opposite—the dark fens in the wilderness of the human condition. McKay’s conception of “wilderness” is, of course, more expansive: encompassing and exceeding human holiness and its monstrous opposite. For McKay, “[by] ‘wilderness’ [he wants] to mean, not just a set of endangered spaces, but the capacity of all things to elude the mind’s appropriations”:

[Like when] there is [that] sudden angle of perception, the phenomenal surprise which constitutes the sharpened moments of *haiku* and imagism. The coat hanger asks a question; the armchair is suddenly crouched: in such defamiliarizations, often arranged by art, we encounter the momentary circumvention of the mind’s categories to glimpse some thing’s autonomy—its rawness, its *duende*, its alien being. (McKay 21)

It is that “sudden angle of perception, the phenomenal surprise” that Winter wants to “arrange by art” in *Donna Whalen* so that readers will “glimpse” the “rawness,” the “alien being” of a murdered woman who had been “really alive.” Winter’s self-professed point in writing this book is to make a largely *unread* story, that exists in the public domain, readable and compelling, to take “ten thousand pages of documents” and pare this down to “eighty thousand words” *so that* Donna Whalen’s life, appropriated in these court files, is *not* matérielized as so much filed evidence in a forgotten murder trial or made the subject of a self-aggrandizing literary thriller.



Winter explains that he wrote the book “because it is important to understand what the repercussions of such an act are once the shock has worn off” (ix). It is equally important to feel the reverberation of holiness pulsing in another’s life, even a life as wild and tempestuous as Donna Whalen’s.

This, of course, is not the first time that Winter has taken “wilderness” as his topic, but the wilderness evoked in *Donna Whalen* is markedly different from that which is described in his earlier works, where “nature and contemporary life” are mutable categories.<sup>36</sup> In *Donna Whalen*, Winter is not dealing with the “mutability” or contrast of city and wilderness, nature and contemporary life; what this novel does deal with, though, is the contrast of light and darkness in human life, the mutability of violence and love in a relationship and in a community. “Wilderness” in *Donna Whalen* is human “nature”—the human condition. When McKay writes of inspecting the baler-twined raven, he wonders where he got the “notion that black was ‘merely’ the absence of colour?” (McKay 19). In Winter’s most recent novel, we are shown the dark side of a community but we also see shimmers of light—hope, happiness, vitality, strength—that silver that inhumane darkness with humanity.

This human vitality in *Donna Whalen* is allowed to glow as brightly as it does because it is not clouded by authorial self-interest, something Winter was very conscious of trying to avoid, and which I think he does successfully. The end result is that wilderness in *Donna Whalen* is

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<sup>36</sup> Susan Marshall, in her essay “Moose Steaks on Styrofoam: Michael Winter Reimagines Newfoundland Wilderness and Identity” (2010), argues that in Winter’s “Gabriel English” books—*One Last Good Look* (1999), *This All Happened* (2000), and *The Architects Are Here* (2007)—Winter reminds “us that the natural is always enculturated, and [he is asking] us to reconsider both the natural world and regional culture as entities [or identities] constantly in process, affected by everyday, individual actions” (77). Marshall’s focus is on how, in these three Gabriel English novels, Winter brings together “city and wilderness, nature and contemporary life,” showing on one level the “mutability of the two categories,” and on another level the ethics of his own artistic vision: “Winter’s careful observation and celebration of the particular, and his insistence on a heterogenous truth to be gained through a dialogue of numerous, limited ways of knowing [...] combine to produce a vision of the world that cultivates an awareness of wilderness in our lives and constantly reminds us of our responsibility toward it” (90-91).

given greater voice because Winter restrains his own voice that is so ebullient in his other novels, even the historical novel *The Big Why*, in which Winter infuses the historical character of Rockwell Kent with his own personal inner life in order to make Kent feel more modern and alive (Wyile "This All Was Said" 125-127). But the character of Rockwell Kent, based on the famed historical persona, is very self-centred, which, in the case of *The Big Why*, is part of what makes him such an interesting character: the perfect antihero. Winter's goal in that novel, judging from his interview with Herb Wyile published in the *Antigonish Review*, was to bring the "sense" of a real life to life, not through the veracity of historical detail but through the creation of an "authentic" inner life. In the case of *The Big Why*, it is precisely Winter's authorial presence—his vibrant Gabriel Englishness—that makes Kent's human vitality compelling.

In *The Big Why*, as in all the Gabriel English books, it is the *presence* of Winter's authorial voice that allows the "beyond of language"—his characters' irreplaceable worth—to reverberate. This voice, however, despite its own vitality and freshness, remains *one* voice—a singular "I" in a world others—and Winter, in telling Donna's story, attempts to step outside the home of this "I" and inhabit other lives, other stories. This is certainly a significant step in Winter's evolution as a writer, moving him beyond the authorial stage described by Terry Goldie in his essay "The Angel Gabriel."

In this essay about Winter's first novel *This All Happened*, Goldie argues that though the narrative "seems to be other-driven," in that it is a series of daily vignettes describing the lives of Gabriel's friends, it is actually "rather more interested in [Gabriel's] view of the world than in what the world actually does" (Goldie 178). In *Donna Whalen*, however, Winter seeks to avoid this narrative self-obsession by taking his own voice out of the story, making the "narrator" merely an artistic curator of actual events. Juliet Waters, in her *Quill & Quire* review of the

novel, quotes Winter as saying that he “shaped the material to create an easier reading experience without harming, really, the truth of what actually happened” (Waters). *Donna Whalen*, then, figures Winter in an editorial rather than writerly role:

[He] created the book by condensing and rearranging court testimony, television reports, and the transcripts of wiretap recordings from the [real-life] criminal investigation.

Winter transposed quoted speech into the third person but otherwise left it intact, preserving each individual voice and showcasing the rich linguistic distinctiveness of Newfoundland English. (Syms)

Though Syms, like most other reviewers of the novel, seems to think that Winter’s main artistic achievement was to show off the “distinctiveness” of Newfoundland “townie” English, I think it is Winter’s preservation of “each individual voice”—at the expense of his own compelling voice—that is the greater achievement.

What Winter does in *Donna Whalen* is create for the reader—without the postmodern Virgil-like presence of Gabriel English as narrative guide—the possibility of a “home” in the hellish circumstances of Donna’s story. That is to say, he gives you a “succinct snapshot into the life of a neighbourhood” but he also manages to make you feel as if this could be “*your* neighbourhood” (Winter xi). This imaginative space is the middle ground between Us and Them, ourselves and others, and it is how this story becomes a *home*<sup>37</sup> for the reader. However, in *The Big Why*, as in Goldie’s reading of *This All Happened*, Winter is “more interested in” his own “view of the world than in what the world actually does” (Goldie 178). So “home,” in both of those earlier novels, is constructed differently than it is in *Donna Whalen*. In those novels the other is not rendered *as* either Gabe’s or Rockwell’s interior. Instead, Winter’s inner life, *his* interior, is rendered through the fictive and historical other. There is a difference here, between

<sup>37</sup> For a more nuanced description of this idea of “home” see McKay 22-23.

taking the other into oneself and projecting oneself into the other. Neither movement escapes the initial act of appropriation: the grasping of the other that relieves that other of his or her autonomy. After all, all storytelling, in some way, makes a “tool” of reality, and this is done to explore the deep mysteries of the world and to know them in some way—to grasp, in some limited sense, reality’s wilderness.

The difference is that when Winter projects his inner life into Gabriel English or Rockwell Kent, the story does not transcend the narrative “self”—the other, be it English or Kent, becomes a fictive tool that makes possible the possession of the self but not the possession (or deep discovery) of the world (or the other). Both *This All Happened* and *The Big Why* are about self-discovery and self-possession, learning to be oneself, often at the expense of friendships, relationships, and community: Gabriel English breaks up with Lydia and leaves St. John’s at the end of *This All Happened* and Rockwell Kent destroys his marriage and is forced out of Brigus by the end of *The Big Why*.

*The Architects Are Here*, however, is different in this regard because it is dedicated from its outset to bearing witness to *another’s* life, that of Gabriel’s friend David Twombly, and it marks that point in Winter’s work—mid-career and mid-life—when the authorial self *becomes* “other-oriented” rather than just seeming to be so, becoming, mysteriously, more fully itself: more fully at home in the world.<sup>38</sup> Winter’s fiction thus far plays out what McKay calls a “paradox of home-making” in that his earlier works, up to and including *The Big Why*, show how someone “*claims place*” in the world through self-discovery; but his two most recent novels, *The*

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<sup>38</sup> McKay writes: “To make a home is to establish with a primordial [colonizing] grasp, yes; but it is also, in some measure, to give it away with an extended palm. We might try to sum up the paradox of home-making by saying that inner life *takes place*: it both *claims place* and acts to *become* a place among others. It turns wilderness into an interior and presents interiority to the wilderness” (McKay 23).

*Architects Are Here* and *The Death of Donna Whalen*, show how someone (narrator or reader) can act to “*become*” oneself among or in relation to others.

Winter’s fiction, then, from *Creaking in Their Skins* (1994) on, demonstrates a continuing and evolving effort on his part to negotiate and renegotiate the covenant between himself and the world, his own inner life and the wilderness of human nature surrounding him. To make a “home,” after all, is not only a metaphorical way of understanding what it means to *write* a story but also what it can mean to *read* a story: in both there is a covenant between self and narrative, word and world, interiority and wilderness. Winter has always claimed that in writing he is “picking out the novel things from the detritus of everyday ordinariness” (Wyile 121). This is the basic writerly task of making the ordinary extraordinary, or showing the mystery of our own mundane existence. But with *Donna Whalen*, Winter presses further: “I’m sort of saying to the reader that maybe we have enough creative stories out there already. Maybe there are things we’ve missed about real life—murder and life and love—that exist in other forms. I’m encouraging people to look for these stories” (Waters). Between these two statements, concerning his artistic process, there is a marked shift from extrapolation to meditation, from telling stories to listening to them, from creatively imagining to paying careful attention. Of course, this is not an *either/or* binary but rather a *both/and* artistic vision by which imagination is fed by attentiveness and extrapolation becomes more mysterious and terrifying because of the wildness of other lives revealed in sustained meditation on human nature.

In line with this, it is significant that Winter’s last two novels deal more with death than any of his earlier works (with the exception perhaps of the short story “The Pallbearer’s Gloves” in *One Last Good Look*). It is the increased presence of death in these two books that heightens the sense of life explored in them. In a similar way, the increased number of voices in *Donna*

*Whalen* amplifies rather than muffles Winter's own unique narrative voice. That is to say, Winter "voices" his own deep meditation on the wilderness of human nature by artfully orchestrating a cacophony of other voices in his own fictional arrangement of true events.

As I have shown in my discussion of "heteroglossia," stories are pluralist spaces echoing with many voices; because of this, a story can be like a rowdy dinner party—or dysfunctional family reunion—where everyone is shouting to be heard at the table. But even though this is going on in the story, all the characters hollering over each other, this din is mediated and orchestrated by the author, so that a reader can "feel" confused without "being" confused. So that the reader can hear *a* voice while at the same time understanding that voice is not solo or solely authoritative.

This sense becomes heightened in *Donna Whalen* because Winter conflates real people into composite characters: "There are about 400 people in this murder trial, [and] I knew it would be really confusing to the reader to have that many characters" (Waters). The fact that Winter is so forthcoming with what he has done in terms of arranging true events allows the art of his editing to become less apparent and therefore less obstructive to a reader fully entering the story. The "autobiographical quality" of Winter's fiction or his artful arrangement of real life has always been a controversial flashpoint in critical discussion of his work, something that I think distracts from the stories themselves—their fictive *thisness* (cf. Wyle 119).

The importance of entering a story as a story, when reading fiction, is outlined by Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa, in *A Writer's Reality* (1991), in which he argues that it is only when fiction is recognized *as* fiction that it can become part of objective reality:

[Fiction] is negative, has negative results for society and for history when it is *not* perceived as fiction, when it is disguised as objective knowledge, when it is an objective

description of what reality is; [however], *fiction is positive and useful to society and history and the individual when it is perceived as fiction*, when, while reading a novel or poem, you know that this idea of experiencing something real is an illusion, when you are not lying to yourself believing that this is not an illusion, but a factual experience. I would like the novel to make this paradox evident, that when fiction is perceived as fiction and accepted as such, it becomes part of reality and is transformed into something that is objective and factual reality. I think in this sense we incorporate novels into our lives because we are aware that novels are in fact not reality. (Vargas Llosa 154, *my emphasis*)

There is, of course, a distinction to be made here between Vargas Llosa's "fiction" and Winter's "story" because *Donna Whalen* is drawn directly from textual tools used to reconstruct the "objective reality" of the events surrounding Donna's brutal murder. My point in citing Vargas Llosa is not to downplay the documentary nature of Winter's novel—which he calls "documentary fiction"—but to emphasize the power of this story when experienced as a story. Vargas Llosa writes that "fiction that is accepted as fiction, accepted as an illusion, can very easily be incorporated into our real experiences and give us a better understanding of ourselves and of what society is" (154). It is this "incorporation" of the story in a reader's life that is of interest to me because when *Donna Whalen* is read as a story it first incorporates a reader into itself before that reader incorporates the novel into her life. The book takes in the reader prior to the reader taking in the book.

The effect of the Levinasian priority of other before self, book before reader, is that a reader is circumscribed within the narrative, making that reader witness to the unfolding events: renegotiating the covenant between a reader's self (her own interiority and prejudice) and the

plotted wilderness of the community (rife with its own clashing prejudices) that has been violently affected by Donna Whalen's murder. This renegotiating of the covenant between self (interiority) and wilderness (community) is thus able to en-plot a reader more thoroughly in the real lives of those involved in the investigation and trial than reading 10,000 pages of court documents.

By bringing to our attention in his "Forward" the arbitrariness of the link between truth and fiction in *Donna Whalen*, Winter beckons us beyond the construct of the story and *into* the story itself. As Chamberlin says, recognizing the arbitrariness of the link between reality and fiction makes us better able to *re-imagine* the relation between Them and Us, self and others. This, I believe, is Winter's aim: to have us re-imagine ourselves *not* as "objective" readers but as members of this community subjected to "subjective" knowing. In his review of the novel, Syms writes that "Winter intentionally frustrates the reader, assembling the testimony in such a way as to create a chorus of chaos, paranoia, and disorientation; the result is that it's impossible to know whom to believe" (Syms). While I agree with Syms that the story is meant to disorient and "disquiet" its readers, I do not think this accurately sums up the overall effect of the book. Yes, Winter's narrative arrangement gives us a "succinct snapshot into the life of a neighbourhood" through a "book full of the voices of people who know something tangential to darkness"—who know "what fear is"—and *an* effect of this is to make us feel that Donna Whalen's neighbourhood is *our* neighbourhood (*Donna Whalen ix*). But this is not the only effect Winter pursues (and achieves) in retelling this story.

A narrative effect that Winter claims to pursue in his fiction is what he calls "the chiaroscuro on the page," using contrast to reveal something essential—using darkness to emphasise light. For Winter, a main use of this chiaroscuro technique is to show contradictions



in a character, a way of exploring a character's depth and humanity (Wyile 131). In referring to the darker vision of *The Architects Are Here* and the "sense of menace throughout" that novel, especially in contrast to the lighter tones of *This All Happened* and *The Big Why*, Winter says that "I think [that novel's] vision is a little darker, again as a part of the chiaroscuro on the page, the contrast of lightness and dark, making the contrasts more vivid and pronounced" (131). In *Donna Whalen*, this chiaroscuro on the page is seen through juxtapositions of violence and kindness in both Donna and her long-time boyfriend Sheldon Troke, who was (wrongfully) convicted of her murder.

Donna and Sheldon are revealed in the novel as deep, complex characters, both living paradoxes in whom contradictions like love and rage, gentleness and anger, clash and create stark contrasts in their personalities. These juxtapositions are most pronounced in both Donna's and Sheldon's differing treatments of Donna's kids, Sharon and Cory. According to her old boyfriend Albert Canning, Donna kept a clean house: she "wouldnt be the type to leave a pair of rubber gloves on the kitchen floor. She was a pretty organized lady. She was a smoker when Albert saw her but not a heavy drinker. Occassionally she'd go to a club, but Donna wasn't the type of person to get drunk" (18). Albert Canning remembers her as a decent mother who kept a clean house. But, though she "wasn't the type of person to get drunk" she was the type of person to deal and use prescription meds. Her doctor, Hubert Galgay, knew "that she had seen other doctors in the city to obtain prescriptions for codeine, valium, cough mixtures, diet pills [and that she] was also using hashish," but Dr. Galgay still considered—even knowing that she had a son Cory—that "Donna was fairly stable. She wasnt weepy but frustrated" (19).

Sheldon, on the other hand, according to Donna's daughter Sharon, "smacked" Cory: Sheldon "smacked him on the hands and on the behind. He smacked him hard. It sounded and

looked hard. Cory would cry” (43). But Sheldon is not simply cast as an abusive boyfriend; he also gave Cory his Chicago Bulls hat because one “Christmas Cory wanted to get a Chicago Bulls hat like Sheldon’s, but they couldn’t find one his size. He got a hat,” we are told by Sharon, “It was Sheldon’s” (44). Though there are extreme contrasts within both Donna’s and Sheldon’s individual characters, they also create, within the book, contrast for each other—we see this most profoundly in various witness accounts of their many, volatile fights. But they also complement each other because of griefs they have shared and in their efforts and desires to “get clean,” at least according to Sheldon, who says, “There was nights [when he] cried, yes. There was nights he went to Donna, crying, and some nights he’d cry over his brother Raymond. He was going to quit alcohol and she was going to quit pills” (35). Sheldon’s account of things can of course be considered suspect, as can every other account in the book: a reader very quickly suspects Sheldon of being a liar, just like most of the other self-serving characters. But for a reader of *Donna Whalen*, Sheldon’s story—his account of his relationship with Donna—not only reveals a man trying to convince his listeners of his own innocence but it also sketches a picture of a woman whom he obviously loved and relied on, even despite their respective addictions and volatile personalities. Sheldon may be lying, he may just be telling a story, but it is through *his* story, along with other equally suspect stories, that Donna comes to life in a reader’s mind, captivating that reader and challenging her in no less a way than Sky Barnaby in Richards’ *Incidents in the Life of Markus Paul*.

The possibility that Sheldon is lying *is* and *is not* the point, just as what *is* cannot, in a story, be separated from what *is not*. What is important to remember here is that we inevitably take on the experience of the text—which is what Winter explicitly says he wants in his “Forward.” He certainly achieves this immersive effect: we as readers do feel that Sheldon is

being evasive, that he is not telling the whole, objective, unbiased truth; but we also cannot help but feel that he did love Donna in a deep way, that he knew her faults and addictions and still wanted to be with her and to be there for her and her kids, and that he was genuinely shaken by her death. *Donna Whalen*, as a story, allows us both to disbelieve and believe Sheldon Troke. In fact, it is this contrast of readerly disbelief and belief that makes Sheldon such a fully *realized* character through whom Donna Whalen comes into sharper focus.

The fact that Sheldon is not a reliable narrator, any more than anyone in the trial was a reliable witness, can certainly unsettle and frustrate a reader, but, as I have argued, we covenant with stories not just to enjoy them but to *involve* ourselves in them and open ourselves to the possibility of change. Of course, doing so often involves frustration as well as suspicion and outrage on the part of a reader. But all of these reactions reveal a reader's deep involvement in the story. In *Donna Whalen*, we see this as a reader's costly investment in the lives of often unlovable and suspect characters like Donna and Sheldon, and such an investment is rooted in the novel's *adieu*: that which awakens the desire in such a reader to respond and to care. As I argued earlier, it is usually the narrative voice that is the source of the *adieu*, and that voice is also intricately ensnarled in the heteroglossia of the novel. But, as we have established, in *Donna Whalen* there is no narrative "voice" (like Gabriel English's), only a narrative orchestration of the novel's many voices arranged in such a way as to make Donna's troubled and tragic life *meaningful*—to convey to a reader the force of the *adieu* Winter felt when he was drawn again to Donna's story, the vitality of her irreplaceable life.

*Donna Whalen* is different from *This All Happened* in this regard because of Gabriel English's authorial presence in the latter. In *This All Happened*, Gabe quotes his writer friend Maisie Pye, saying, "A novel should be told by the voice of an authority, yet a voice that is still

discovering the meaning of what the story is. There should be *wonder*” (*This All Happened* 15, *my emphasis*). Later, near the end of that novel, picking up on this very idea, “Maisie says there’s wonder in this life. [And Gabe] says, And *bewilderment*. Thank you, Gabe. That’s the word” (269, *my emphasis*). Winter’s latest novel may not have a Gabe-like narrator or even a recognizable narrative voice, it may not even have much of a sense of *wonder*, but the events of it are bewildering and this bewilderment is the shape mystery or holiness takes in this novel—the wilderness of human nature. Sheldon tells us as much at the end of the novel when he confesses that “since Donna’s death [he’s] been left with disbelief and bewilderment. There is not a day goes by that he doesn’t think of Donna and her children” (*Donna Whalen* 253). The novel’s many voices are artfully configured in such a way as to increase this sense of bewilderment, to “disorient” as Syms says, but all the conflicting testimonies have the effect of sketching in the negative spaces in a reader’s mind so that Donna’s presence burns intensely through her absence.

This searing absence in the novel is keenly felt *not* because Winter is recounting a “true” case but because he configures true events into fictive arrangements. Earlier in his career, in an interview with Claire Wilkshire, Winter said that “to be honest in a story is to deal with a bunch of lies about the real world, but to configure them in the best way you can to contrive some kind of truth out of it” (Wilkshire 16). The testimonies given at the trial were not given in the order or way that Winter delivers them: the arrangement is a fabrication or fiction, a lie. But in that interview Winter went on to say: “[Even] I feel like I’m lying, with each sentence, [but] as long as I know the effect of what I’m writing, I’ll get to some kind of truth about the emotions that I want to express” (16). And, as Waters points out concerning *Donna Whalen*, the “subtitle—A Novel—is an admission that, despite his efforts to stay as close to the original testimony as possible, Winter shaped the story in significant ways” (Waters).

Winter, for his part, seems conscious of the effect that his crafting of the story—using the tools of court documents—will have on a reader, particularly on that reader’s en-plotment in the story itself. In *This All Happened*, Maisie Pye, Gabe’s writer friend, says:

When you describe an experience, what you are recounting is your memory of the act, not the act itself. Experiencing a moment is an inarticulate act. There are no words. It is the sensory world. To recall it and to put words to it is to illustrate how one remembers the past, rather than actually experiencing the past. Keep this in mind as you read the words of others as they remember an incident. (*This All Happened* 273)

This is precisely what Winter’s novel allows us to see: that there is no objective way of remembering Donna Whalen, of reconstructing the events that led to her murder or those that followed in its wake. All we have are accounts of memories twisted by fear, loss, guilt, and even mental illness. Through Winter’s imaginative arrangement of these memories—so that one testimony clashes with another like different pressure systems thundering—we see the striking reality revealed in the trial: Donna Whalen’s death. We see this fact in its brutal intensity in Sheldon’s bewilderment, but like him, we too are bewildered, blinded. We see Donna Whalen, but we see her *as* a character, a memory, an imaginative apparition conjured from conflicting memories. We “feel” her presence in the book, even though we “know” the real Donna Whalen is forever absent, murdered. It is this heightened awareness of our own *unknowing*—the crashing of what we thought we knew—that shakes us out of ourselves in reading this novel.

The very fragility of our own knowing can be seen in the symbol of the shattered glass elephant discussed in the first section of the novel. Whenever the glass elephant is brought up it is in testimonies in which Donna’s and Sheldon’s relationship is being discussed, each time giving a new perspective that causes us to reconsider what we thought we knew about them

before. We first hear of the glass elephant from Kim Parrott, Donna's best friend: "Sheldon smashed an elephant a couple of months before Donna died" (*Donna Whalen* 36). On that night, Donna was allegedly at Kim's house late and Sheldon phoned looking for her.

Donna asked Kim not to say that she was there. Tell him I just left. So she told him and he said she's nothing but a whore. Kim didn't want to carry no conversation off with him because Donna was there sitting in front of her. And when Donna went home [Sheldon] grabbed her by the face and shoved her and she phoned Kim [...] and Donna told her what he had done and Kim heard him going with the vacuum cleaner. He was after smashing this glass elephant. He gave Donna money to get a second elephant. (36-37)

When we next hear of the glass elephant it is from Sharon, Donna's daughter, when she is giving her testimony at Sheldon's trial for her mother's murder.

Before Sharon gives her account, though, she is apparently asked if she knows what the "truth" is. She replies by saying that "[a] truth is something that happened and you say it happened, and a lie is something you made up and it didnt happen" (39). Having stated what her understanding of the "truth" is, she proceeds to tell the truth as she remembers it: "Another time [her mom and Sheldon] were in the living room watching TV and Sheldon tipped the coffee table over and he broke a glass elephant. Sharon didn't see this, her mother told her. It was like a round ball with an elephant inside of it like those things that [when] you shake the snow in them the sparkles come up. Sharon heard the bang. She went out to see what happened and her mom was already cleaning it up and Sharon saw sparkles all over the floor. The coffee table was stood up like normally. Sheldon was gone out" (40-41). Already, we have Donna's best friend's testimony conflicting with Donna's daughter's remembrance; it is also important to note that

both memories come from people who were not actually present in the room when the elephant broke.

For Sharon, the shattered glass elephant was an accident that didn't really reveal anything about her mom's relationship with Sheldon, unlike Kim Parrott's account. Sharon, however, does go on to describe how she remembers her mom's relationship with Sheldon: "Sheldon called her mom the H-word. Whore. The B-word is a female dog. The S-word is spelled s-u-l-t. Her mom used to call Sheldon back bad words. Not the same ones" (41). When asked about this particular event and his relationship with Donna in general, Sheldon points out:

When the elephant broke Sharon wasn't in the living room. It was a talk show that was on and they were porn stars and they got into a conversation about that. Donna was asking would [Sheldon] watch porn flicks and he said he's after watching them and this led to an argument. He had his feet up on the coffee table and gave it a push and he stood the coffee table up and put on his boots and left. He broke an ornament on top, a crystal elephant. He paid for it. [...] Yes Sharon heard arguments, half the time the whole street did. [Sheldon admits that] Sharon is a smart youngster. [He] don't know about lying, but all youngsters are prone to being misled. (42)

A reader, at this point, cannot be certain of what exactly transpired in the living room between Sheldon and Donna concerning the broken glass elephant; she knows that their relationship is a stormy one from all accounts but she is less certain of whether it is a mutually antagonistic relationship or an abusive one.

In later testimony, Edie Guzzwell, Donna's aunt, describes the relationship as physically abusive, with Donna cast as victim: "Donna was in to the hospital. So for that she had red marks on her legs. He must have kicked her because it was from her knees down. She was complaining

that her head was paining and she got Edie to feel the bump. Sheldon had put Donna's head through the wall. The bump was the size of an apple and it was soft and spongy" (30-31). But a reader has to counterbalance this version of events with Sheldon's, in which he and Donna were having a fight because Donna thought he was out drinking at the 301 Club, because she could smell "beer off his breath." According to this account, Sheldon claimed to have been visiting his grandmother's:

Donna was throwing the socks down and Sheldon was saying every fucking time I moves through the door there's a fight. He was holding her by the shoulder and he turned her and both of them were using the language. They were having words and he walked out and slammed the door. He went into the bedroom. There was a glass on the night table and he was still roaring saying I'm fucking fed up with this. Every time I goes somewhere we got a fucking racket over it, and he was shouting out and picked up the glass and bounced it off a picture. The picture broke. He ended up putting his head through the wall. It wasn't Donna's head, it was his head. (34)

Later, before recounting his version of the glass elephant episode, Sheldon said "you dont need a considerable amount of force to break a wall. Youre talking gyproc. He controls his temper. Sometimes when he was drinking he lost his temper. When he wasnt drinking he'd go for a walk" (42). The reader is left as confused as a jury member after listening to all this testimony, wondering who (if anyone) is to be believed. But listening is only one flame on a candle with two wicks; the other in need of a spark is *mediation*.

This of course involves the basic task of reading the story as a story, remembering that descriptions of an experience are not the experience itself but only "the words of others as they remember an incident" (*This All Happened* 273). This primary mediation, reading the story as a



story, allows the novel's many voices, its thrumming heteroglossia, to create a centrifugal, interpretive force—critical openness. The shape this takes in *Donna Whalen* is how the novel en-plots a reader in its story, involving that reader in the novel's mysteries rather than simply solving these mysteries for the reader or jumping to foregone conclusions. To invoke McKay's metaphor, this way of reading Winter's novel is more like imaginatively depicting the flight of a raven in a poem—imagining the “racket” between lifelong mates as a way of creatively knowing the raven—rather than shooting it out of the sky and matérielizing it, or in the case of *Donna Whalen*, getting the “facts straight” and simply, damningly turning the key on the (alleged) killer's cell door.

The novel shows the danger of this kind of easy matérielization: taking subjective testimony like that of inmate Leander Dollymont (a.k.a. “Dolly”) as objective evidence in a murder trial. Winter's arrangement of testimonies implicitly critiques this process, leading a reader to doubt Dollymont's confessions, which directly led to Sheldon being “charged with the murder of Donna Whalen” (*Donna Whalen* 216). Dolly's testimony is continually called into question in the novel. He claims that Sheldon, looking at a picture of Donna,

[Said] that he never loved anybody this much, he had been planning on starting a family with this woman and she was his only reason for staying out of trouble. [According to Dolly,] Sheldon told him first that he found out that Donna Whalen was having an affair with Jacob Parrott and because of that he stabbed him. [But according to Sheldon,] Jacob Parrott was never stabbed. (218-219)

Dolly openly admits to being bribe-able when he states that he “would not betray Sheldon Troke for money, but if there's something through Corrections Canada to help him get on his feet when he gets out, he's willing to accept it” (222). He writes Sheldon a postcard in which he claims to

have been out with Kim Parrott, Donna's best friend, saying, "I told [Kim] there were two things you were not capable of, your charge and being my boyfriend" (228). He even claims to have had "oral sex" with Sheldon in "the last shower room," saying that the "inmates [nearby] over by the clothes room... probably all noticed" but that nobody said anything, except "in a joking way," because "nobody in that penitentiary [was] going to look at Sheldon Troke and refer to him as a faggot" (241). Sheldon responds to this accusation by saying, "Dolly says [we] had sex. You think [I'd] remember that" (241). When called to witness against Sheldon in court Dolly claims that he "came forward to testify because what Sheldon told him was bothering him. It wasn't something that he wanted a part of. To go around the rest of his life knowing there was a little girl and a little boy out there who lost their mom, who was murdered and somebody had confessed to him that they committed the murder" (245). But Sheldon responds to this testimony by saying that "[them] youngsters are the farthest thing from [Dolly's] mind," and that "[he's] trying to *use* two youngsters to save himself from going to jail" (246, *my emphasis*). Sheldon, in McKay's terms, is accusing Dolly of not just "using" Cory and Sharon but "using them up" to play on the jury's sympathies.

That, of course, is not how Crown prosecutor Robert Ash interprets Sheldon's counter-testimonies, which he entirely ignores when he summarizes the case, claiming that Sheldon must have killed Donna because there was no other person, aside from "the accused," who "had a reason or motive to kill" (250). Jim Lythgoe, Sheldon's defense lawyer, points out the obvious (and outrageous) unfairness of assuming Sheldon's guilt simply because no other viable suspect could be found, and he highlights both Sheldon's cooperativeness in the investigation and major holes in the Crown's case:

Throughout this so-called investigation, Sheldon Troke cooperated with the police fully and he didn't have to. He did a DNA test and a polygraph test. He was even willing to submit to hypnosis. Why? Because he did not murder Donna Whalen. The Crown's chief witnesses are Leander Dollymont and Ruth Vivian. If you look closely at some of the things they told police, it was just not so. Even after Leander failed the polygraph test, Inspector Hedderson said that he would be a good witness. (251)

But even still Dolly's testimony is allowed to stand and the "jury returned a verdict of guilty of second-degree murder" and "Judge Richard Adams sentenced Sheldon Troke to life imprisonment with no eligibility for parole for fourteen years" (257, 260). However, the novel directly criticizes this miscarriage of justice, this *matérialization* of subjective testimony into objective evidence, by stating that "[six] years after Sheldon Troke's conviction, following an application to submit fresh evidence, the Newfoundland Court of Appeal overturned his conviction and ordered a new trial. Two police investigations into the murder concluded that Paul Troke [Sheldon's brother], if alive, would have been charged with the murder of Donna Whalen and that there exists no *credible* evidence upon which to charge Sheldon Troke" (267-268, *my emphasis*). In this way *Donna Whalen* shows how *matérializing* subjective testimony into objective evidence works counter to the ethical (centrifugal) force of inquiry that any criminal investigation seeking justice should be driven by. Instead what we see in this novel is how investigators, Crown prosecutors, and Judge Adams crank the wheels of justice backwards with their unethical (centripetal) assumptions of Sheldon's guilt.

*Donna Whalen*, even before its conclusion, reveals how Winter works against Sheldon's assumed guilt by privileging Jim Lythgoe's defence of Sheldon, highlighting not only Sheldon's cooperativeness in the investigation but also his love for Donna, expressed in different ways by

Donna, Sheldon, Sharon, Leander Dollymont and others. It is clear, reading Winter's arrangement of testimonies, that he *believes* Sheldon's story (that he loved Donna and would never have killed her) and this belief comes to life in the dialogic arrangement of the novel, which brings a reader's focus not only to *what* different witnesses and investigators say but to *how* they listen to each other, corroborate, contradict, intimidate one another, change their stories, lie, and try to tell the truth as they remember it.

Winter's belief in Sheldon's innocence gives this story "life" because this novel forcibly awakens us to the fact that "language is never just language" and testimony is never objective—testimonies are memories *enacted*, and they require context, scrutiny, and interpretation. This is why, even though Winter appears to believe Sheldon's story, evidenced in his privileging of Jim Lythgoe's defence (250-252), he also grapples with the darker aspects of Sheldon's humanity, characterized by Donna in a letter to Sheldon as her fear of his abusiveness:

I never wanted you like that, Sheldon. I didnt like the arguing and I didnt like the fighting and the violence and everything else, the way you used to get on with me. Jesus, I was frightened to death to say something to you and I didnt know if a table was going to tip over or what. Sheldon, I promise to love you in good times and in bad with all I have to give and all I feel inside and the only way I know how, completely and forever. Wishing you were here, love, always. (252)

As seen in this letter, however, Donna being "frightened to death" of Sheldon clashes with her promise to "love [him] in good times and bad and with all [she has] to give and all [she feels] inside and the only way [she knows] how, forever and completely." Both of Donna's feelings towards Sheldon, expressed in this letter, struggle against each other in a reader's mind. But this shows how interpretation is never at arm's length: we grapple with the other in the text, and what

we read about, we, in some mysterious way, experience. Winter, in his arrangement of testimonies, seems to want readers not to resolve these conflicting emotions but embody them, feel what Donna felt for Sheldon before judging him.

A reader, however, taking in this letter near the end of the novel, is keenly aware of its context: it is a document that Donna wrote while alive. They are her words, her voice, but without her presence, her face. Because a reader, in this instance, is focussed on Donna's voice instead of her face, the emphasis is on *what* she says and *how* it is said: *what* she says is that she fears Sheldon but also loves him deeply; *how* she says this is in a letter, "Wishing [he] were here," in Sheldon's absence. A reader has every right to question whether Donna would or could say these things to Sheldon's face, given their relationship and how quickly they would whirl into violent arguments when together. But this does not negate the second half of the letter.

To read the letter this way, I think, gives into an easy *either/or* interpretation of their relationship, rather than fully grappling with the *both/and* story Winter presents from the case files. This is not to say, recognizing that Donna both feared and loved Sheldon, that love legitimates fear (or the abuse that caused it), only that love, to some degree, struggled with Donna's fear, making her wish Sheldon were with her as she confessed her conflicted feelings for him. In this way, *Donna Whalen* introduces us to what Chamberlin calls the profoundly human values of friendship, love, and loyalty *as well as* the human conditions of envy, abuse, and fear; but "human values" are what inhere in the imaginative structures of fiction and become "real" in the *remembered* structures of this novel: that inarticulate sense of holiness or human worth that allowed Donna to love Sheldon despite her fear of him.

This "remembered value" of love gives narrative consistency to a relationship that appeared, in reality, to be very inconsistent and tumultuous. In this novel, this is the "stay against

confusion” that Hansen writes of, Dillard’s candle with its twin wicks burning in the dark:

Donna’s love for Sheldon allows a reader’s opinion of him to be shaped by how Donna saw him, both out of fear *and* in love. It is Donna’s documented love for Sheldon that makes a reader believe Sheldon when he says that Donna “was a wonderful person and a loving mother. There’s no words to express [my] sorrow and loss. There is just contemplation. [I] loved Donna and [I] still loves her and [I have] wonderful memories of the things we shared and [I] will cherish them” (253).

Tim Lilburn, in his essay “Sorrow; The River” from *Living In The World As If It Were Home* (1999), could be talking about Sheldon’s particular sorrow when he writes: “Within this sorrow is gratitude for the augmentation of the oddity of what one wishes to comprehend but cannot. You are struck by the generosity of things being what they are; are enlarged by this generosity” (Lilburn 65). For Winter, the enlarging effect of this mysterious “generosity” toward others has long been a subject of interest in his fiction. It has taken the forms of Gabriel English wanting to be “big” in *This All Happened* (cf. 172, 216) and Rockwell Kent being described as being “big” in *The Big Why* (cf. 42, 57). This generosity, however, at least for Rockwell Kent, does not stop him from being self-centred and self-destructive, like David Twombly in *The Architects Are Here*. However, even though Winter narrates both Rockwell Kent’s self-destruction in *The Big Why* and David Twombly’s in *The Architects Are Here*—characterizing both of them, at different points, as being self-centered—he also writes of the excess of “desire” in both of them, an “internal life” that is dangerous but also, potentially “life-giving.”

In *The Big Why*, desire is often described as religious (*Big Why* 126) and in *The Architects Are Here*, when David has an affair with Nell, Winter writes (as English) that “they were bringing the secrets of the afterlife into ordinary reality, and I wasnt ballsy enough to

accept it” (*Architects* 266). In light of this, I have often wondered if attending to characters like Rockwell and David—being struck by their “generosity” of “being what they are”—can actually somehow “enlarge” those who read these lives (like Winter’s Gabriel English), even while “damaging” or wounding them in some way. Gabriel, near the end of *The Architects Are Here*, writes: “It was important to have someone, and all I had was David. That seemed enough. I loved him. We’d wronged each other but when it comes to love these errors dont seem to affect a deep connection. I admired his breathing. I enjoyed whatever is the flare that is will and desire” (317). And when Gabe is saying goodbye to David he writes: “Goodbye David. You are the biggest man I’ve known, a strong big man, a funny man. Generous guy you are. Fucking asshole too but what can you do with appetites. In fact you were restrained. You could have been worse, but you tried hard to be good. For some people it’s hard to be good” (370).

This, of course, is consistent with Gabe’s character going back to *This All Happened*, revealed in Gabe’s juxtaposition of his way of seeing the world with his then-girlfriend Lydia’s: “[She] appraises the world as a canvas to improve. I accept the canvas, am content to live within its confines. I dont think to upgrade the armchair or paint a room. I exist in a state of being, Lydia in a state of flux” (*This All Happened* 133). It is this “generosity” that can be misread as “apathy” in Gabriel English. However, it is Gabe’s “generosity” toward others that allows him to accept modern life’s fullness, its irreplaceable *thisness*. It is this “ballsy” acceptance of the wilderness in others—the antithesis of apathy—that makes Gabe “big” enough to embrace (and forgive) the abundance of “desire” in people like David. This volatile, human “desire” is what draws Gabe to David; it is also the Eros that draws a reader to someone like Rockwell Kent, whose desire, when unchecked by selfless love, proves devastatingly destructive (*cf. Big Why* 126, 307). It is also the love that drew Donna Whalen to Sheldon Troke; that which drew Winter

to side with Sheldon's story; that which draws us back to Sheldon as well. Winter, in this novel, allows Sheldon to be himself, showing both sides of him in conflict with each other: raging against himself, the law, and his own loss. Yes, Winter sides with Sheldon in his authorial arrangement of events but he does not hide Sheldon's flaws or filter them through the "generosity" of a narrator like Gabriel English. He leaves being "big" up to the reader. But, through Winter's chiaroscuro on the page, we find that Sheldon's flaws allow us to see the "rawness" of his sorrow, his "alien being," his fullness—abusive yet loving, deceitful yet truthful.

Earlier I said that the reviving of Eros quickens or gives life to Justice. In *Donna Whalen* I think Winter is trying to do justice to Sheldon's story as much as to Donna's—to be generous toward this man in actually listening to his story, something the courts never really did, even though he testified from the same stand as Leander Dollymont. Following Winter's example, then, I think that to be answerable to the other in reading this novel is to be answerable to Sheldon Troke as described by a plurality of witnesses orchestrated by Winter. This is why a covenant is necessary—like Winter's covenant with his "real life" material—between reader and book. As I have said before, being answerable is the beginning of belief and it is the *means* of nourishing the human spirit. Winter's use of his chiaroscuro technique (presenting contrast in character) is how, through form, he keeps himself, as "curator" of real events, answerable to the real other and that other's wilderness. His belief in Sheldon's innocence concerning Donna's murder must, then, be answerable to those (including Donna in her letter) who testified to his abusiveness. Only by doing this can Winter truthfully convey Sheldon's love for Donna in its fullness, its wild *thisness*. By nakedly confessing Sheldon's faults, through Donna's letter, Winter is able to convince a reader of Sheldon's truthfulness when he confesses how Donna's



death continues to bewilder him: “Since Donna’s death Sheldon’s been left with disbelief and bewilderment. There is not a day that goes by that he doesn’t think of Donna and her children. Who would have done something like this and why?” (*Donna Whalen* 253). It is Sheldon’s love for Donna that leaves him so bewildered at her death, vowing that “[one] day he will find out who murdered Donna,” declaring that “until that day he will not rest and neither will Donna” (253). A reader, however, might rightly find herself at a loss to see how this “bewilderment,” grief, and restlessness in Sheldon can nourish the human spirit.

What is it, then, that makes us seek this “nourishment” in such stories? What evokes this desire in us, what awakens Eros? Chamberlin tells us that it is *mystery*: the most beautiful thing we can experience according to Einstein. But this is only remembering lightning’s phosphorescence and forgetting the storm’s dark clouds and fierce winds. Stories, Chamberlin tells us, are backed by a sense of wonder but wonder’s light is often made more intense when it flashes against horror’s dark storm. This is the *mysterium tremendum* of being human: it is Sheldon’s abusiveness that reveals his love for the mysterious light that it is, and it is his *love* for Donna that reveals his abusiveness as the terrible, inhuman darkness *it* really is.

When Winter says in his “Forward” that he found in Donna Whalen’s story a “wedge into the human condition,” it is the human condition that embodies “mystery.” And this mystery, according to his interview with Claire Wilkshire, is what he always seeks in his writing:

I sometimes get depressed that people think the stories are centred on the material world—they’re very concrete, and objects are described—[but] I feel like secretly I’m injecting everything with a spiritual side, there’s something larger, a larger force beyond everything that’s going on, or that the *love* between people is a bigger force... Maybe I fail to get that into my stories, but that never seems to come up, the idea of a bigger

presence in the stories, of a force that's beyond the characters or the teapot that's on the kitchen table. It's a force of mystery that allows these absurd things to be said and done."

(Wilkshire 25, *my emphasis*)

Of course, this "force of mystery" is read by some people as an exclusively transcendent or metaphysical idea, unconnected to the physical, human world—above the story rather than *of* it. Terry Goldie, in writing about *This All Happened*, makes this distinction: "Female literature looks at the world immediate to the protagonist, who is often the narrator, frequently in a form such as a diary. Of course, male literature can be diurnal, but this is often an excuse to examine the metaphysical, as in the case of Kierkegaard. Female literature looks at the diurnal for the sake of its revelations not of the universal but of one small person's hopes and travails" (Goldie 174). In light of this one could ask whether Winter is using the diurnal (or observed) details of Donna Whalen's daily life (like her letter to Sheldon) to wedge himself into a metaphysical mystery concerning what it means to be human or into the mystery of "one small person's hopes and travails." What I have been trying to show thus far is that in a sacramental reading what Goldie calls "female" and "male" literatures are consubstantial: our neighbourhood *is not* Donna Whalen's, yet somehow mysteriously, it *is*. Her life remains her life, full of her own irreplaceable "hopes and travails," just as Sheldon's memory of her remains his memory, but as readers of *Donna Whalen* we are affected by her life, especially as it is remembered by Sheldon.

As I have argued, some mystery calls us to covenant with a book just as some mystery called the author to covenant with the world in writing the book: both are concerned with how we live our lives. In *The Architects Are Here*, Gabriel English speaks of this mystery as the persistence of life in tragedy: "There is, in selective corridors of tragedy, a brute force that persists" (*Architects* 153). But can this apply to *Donna Whalen*? In this novel, who is it that

persists? And are they diminished or not? Is the reader diminished? At the close of the book we read:

The public housing unit Donna Whalen was living in has since been torn down, though several other duplexes still exist alongside hers on Empire Avenue. [...] The city has prospered since the murder of Donna Whalen. Sheldon Troke is still living here, cycling in and out of prison on misdemeanour charges. While in prison, Sheldon got addicted to a painkiller for cancer patients. He was also wired into morphine. Oxycontin, he's said, do nothing for him—that's how high the drug was he was using in jail. His lawyer, Jim Lythgoe, still represents him. He says the drugs offered Sheldon a crutch. That Sheldon was ashamed that people thought he was Donna's killer. He was insecure and drugs are a way to escape the world. There are times Sheldon has asked the court to put him in jail to get him off his drug problem. (*Donna Whalen* 268)

The city persists architecturally, it even thrives economically. And Sheldon persists; he continues to live in St. John's (268). But his life, "cycling in and out of prison," "wired into morphine," "addicted to a painkiller for cancer patients," can only be likened to a trampled weed pushing up through cracked concrete. His is a half-life, a diminished life.

So what nourishment can be drawn from his story without a reader feeling like a vampire, preying off the living? If a reader tries to suck something "nourishing to the human spirit" from *Donna Whalen* while trying to remain critically detached and objective, that reader risks doing to Sheldon what McKay saw done to that raven: the result is not nourishment but *matérialization*. However, if a reader enters the story—covenants with its many voices to *listen*—then that reader does not draw anything from the story *per se*, but, rather, takes up the story as her own: as both listener and interpreter. As readers we learn how to do this by studying how Winter has done it:

by evoking compassion for Sheldon without offering any false hope of salvation. We are meant to suffer with him, to feel compassion for him, but our empathy can only be given flesh, made *real*, in our response. No book, of course, can guarantee this. But *Donna Whalen*, by circumscribing us in its world, by making its neighbourhood *ours*, shows us *where* this response needs to take place. It needs to take place in “hell,” where Sheldon has lived since “being released,” since finding out “about his brother’s involvement in Donna Whalen’s death,” since visiting his brother “Paul Troke’s grave,” finding “it hard to forgive the brother he loyally defended” (269). This is *where* a reader of *Donna Whalen* becomes responsible.

Without response to one’s responsibility there is no covenant, just as for Bakhtin “selves” are only constituted by their answerability before others: both involve “being-with” the other. We get to this place of covenant through belief, which, in a story, awakens Eros. And it is this “desire” that draws us further into the world, through a book, beyond Us and Them, into an *anatheistic* middle space of dialogue between ourselves and the world, history and present reality. This middle space, of course, is the life-giving realm of stories, of beauty. Beauty is rarely seen in *Donna Whalen*, except in too-rare glimpses of light and love. However, covenanting with this book, reading it sacramentally, allows one to *discern* beauty as “home” even in its absence or in contrast to its monstrous opposite, “hell,” just as Chamberlin has argued that covenants allow us to discern between things like “barbarism and civilization, truth and untruth, love and flattery.”

These in-between spaces are the empty lungs wisdom’s breath fills in such readings. And wisdom allows a reader to discern that “home” in this novel is certainly not a safe place, for murder can happen even here. Wisdom does, however, allow a reader to see how this can be a good place. It is here that wisdom can come alive with what Chamberlin describes as dangerous

grace. After all, stories “build up and break down our sense of who we are and where we belong.” Stories keep us as readers in a state of *wonder*, ever seeking the other’s holiness in that other’s wilderness. In Winter’s novel this wilderness takes the shape of “home” as McKay depicts it. In reading Sheldon’s story we instinctively know that home, for us and for Sheldon, is the opposite of Sheldon’s hell: we know this home through Sheldon’s eviction from it, his life with Donna. In this sense, we can understand ourselves, in McKay’s words, as being “made-of” the other, or in contrast to Sheldon. Even Sheldon, if he read Winter’s book, could potentially see his life without Donna as being, at least in part, made-of the reality of his life with her.

The trick, however, is realizing that this appropriation of Sheldon’s life becomes *matérialization* if we as readers do not, in some way, evict ourselves from ourselves, leave ourselves open to Sheldon’s continued intrusion on our thoughts and lives. In this we realize that the only way to truly know ourselves is to get outside our own lives and into the lives of others. In other words, just as the only way to substantiate one’s self is to separate it somehow from the world—“break the plenum of experience,” as McKay says—so the only way to *know* ourselves is in relation to others. After all, for a home truly to *become* “home” it must be hospitable—it must be open to the Stranger. And, strangely enough, as Winter shows us in *Donna Whalen*, this does not in fact *break* the plenum (or community) of experience: it re-imagines and re-inscribes it. After all, according to Bakhtin, for selves to be themselves they must *be* in relation to others: this is how we, according to McKay, “coagulate”—in open relation to others. This is the openness sought in a sacramental reading, when a reader covenants to listen. But because such reading is active and not passive, this kind of hospitality—to remain truly “generous”—involves a journey out from the self into the world of others. A book like *Donna Whalen* shows us just how rare this “generosity” toward others is. It also shows, through its orchestration of a plurality

of voices (all allowed to speak for themselves) how this hospitality can be enacted. A result (among many) is that we learn the importance of journeying out from ourselves into the world of others—being hospitable in our readings—and not staying ghettoized in our own self-interests. And it is this journey outside our own egos, as we shall see in a reading Lisa Moore's *February*, that has the potential to lead to new life.

### Chapter 3

#### Reading as Returning Other-wise

Lisa Moore's *February*

##### Introduction

In this chapter, I give shape to the reader's journey out from herself—her own ego—in looking at Lisa Moore's novel *February* (2009), Gregory Wolfe's essay "Stalking the Spirit," and the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. To begin, I will explore how covenanting with a story can affect a reader's self-understanding, which comes about as a result of gaining access to what Ron Hansen calls the "otherwise unsayable thoughts and feelings" of others ("What Stories Are" 39). Stories provide glimpses into other lives, and in so doing they satiate a hunger in our souls—a human longing for community and the closeness of other lives: relations that slip beneath the surface of superficiality. This is why I will work from the assertion that readers often desire not just surface but substance: real encounters with other lives.

This desire, on the part of a reader, is roused by the story whose writer crafted it in such a way as to make it and its characters desirable. To support this idea, I argue that a writer artfully shapes a story so that her authorial vision becomes consubstantial with a reader's memory: so that the imagined experiences of a novel become the remembered experiences of a reader. Wolfe, in his essay to young writers, calls this the authorial process of "sacramentalizing." In order to do

this, however, a writer cannot keep the world at a distance or adopt a solely ironic stance.<sup>39</sup>

Likewise, a sacramental reading cannot keep a book's world at a critical distance. So far I have shown that in order for a reading to become, in any way, sacramental, a reader must respond to the work's *adieu*, which is a response to the *specific* world of a novel and the others who inhabit that otherworld.

The very idea of sacramental reading, then, is based on the belief that good writing is "moral," or, more simply, world-based and other-oriented. Which is another reason why so much "good" writing is coming out of Atlantic Canada, evidenced by the calibre of the books discussed in this study. The quality of the writing in these books is due in part to the fact that these writers are both world-based (setting their stories in their specific regions) but also other-oriented (writing *of* and *for* people beyond these regions).<sup>40</sup> It is because of the outward focus of the novels in this study that readers of these texts will find themselves drawn out of *their* worlds and into these fictional, otherworlds.

One of the main points I make in the theory section of this chapter is that the insights that come from reading in this way come as a result of letting-go, surrendering to the story: beginning with what Paul Ricoeur calls a "hermeneutics of affirmation" instead of beginning with a deconstructive "hermeneutics of suspicion." This way of reading, as I will show, does not deny other forms of critical insight that are achieved by other analytical means; rather, it nuances them with empathy.

In order to demonstrate this, I will show, in a sacramental reading of Moore's novel *February*, that affirmation *of* and belief *in* Moore's fictive world has the potential to cast more

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<sup>39</sup> See also Brett Lott 149-170.

<sup>40</sup> See Wyile, *Waterfront Views: Contemporary Writing of Atlantic Canada*, Web, particularly the video interviews with Michael Winter and Lisa Moore on the Burning Rock Collective and the importance of being read and published outside Newfoundland.



light on what can be perceived critically in that work. To do this, I will contrast my own reading of the novel, performed out of a hermeneutics of affirmation, with Barbara Kay's criticisms of *February* published in two reviews in the *National Post*, both of which were written out of a hermeneutics of suspicion. This contrast will reveal, first, Kay's wish for the novel to be more about Cal than Helen, and second, how Kay, by despising Helen as a "surrogate victim," misses Moore's rounded, emotionally complex portrayal of Cal as remembered by Helen.

The aim of the second half of this chapter is to show that a sacramental reading of *February* allows for a reader to re-imagine Cal through Helen's memories of him: to learn with Helen what it can mean to remember fully but also to live fully in the present. The novel, read in this way, becomes what Richard Kearney calls a "shareable world" (*On Stories* 3), one that has the potential to transfigure a reader: illuminate her self-understanding while allowing her to remain herself; return her to herself other-wise.

Such a reader is both responsible and responsive, an idea I explore in the first half of the chapter in my analysis of Bowen's reading of Bakhtin in *Stories of the Middle Space* and Kearney's reading of Ricoeur in *The Owl of Minerva*. In light of this discussion, I will show that a sacramental reader is one who actively interprets herself in terms of other lives she reads about, liberating herself into spaces of imaginative possibility, which Ricoeur describes as "eschatological," in which the pressure of a reader's immediate world is temporarily suspended.

It is in this space, in this reading experience, that a reader's imagination is nourished, and this nourishment is necessary because it is *in* the imagination that real-life change is conceived. I will explore this assertion further in looking at what Ricoeur means by "the archeology of symbols" and their "eschatological" resurrection, arguing that a sacramental reading, in the end, is *not* this resurrection—the enactment of real-life change. Such a reading is only the

imaginative, prophetic precursor to such change: it opens up the possibility of recovering worlds that have been lost to us, but it also enables us to re-imagine these worlds: to imagine new ways to live more fully within them.

A sacramental reading leads to this imaginative space in which the pressure of reality is suspended, but this suspension of real life is only temporary. Such a reading is never an escape from one's own world, but an imaginative means of returning to that world with new insight, with an ability to see other-wise.

### **Reading as Returning Other-wise**

Ron Hansen, in his essay "What Stories Are and Why We Read Them," says that in reading we are not "escaping" anything; we are, rather, "entering into" something. In the previous section we have called that which is entered into a covenant between reader and work. In this section I want to explore how such a covenant can affect a reader's self-understanding. Hansen, in his essay, provides us with a cursory glance at this when he writes that stories "give us access to otherwise hidden, censored, unsayable thoughts and feelings now shiftily disclosed in the guise of plot and character. [...] The hungers of our spirits are fed by sharing in the glimpsed interiority of others" (39). The "hunger" that Hansen speaks of here is what makes us as readers responsive or open to the *adieu* of the other in a work; this hunger is Eros, our desire for the other or for a world not our own. But, as Hansen indicates, we desire not just surface but substance as well: not just exteriority, the philosophical construct of the other, but interiority, unique individual lives and worlds revealed in stories.

The task of the writer then is to create this effect in a work of fiction: to make the other's interior life real and desirable to the reader—to attempt to do no less than conjure Eros through prose. But a writer does not create *ex nihilo*, out of nothing; a writer's fictive vision is an imaginative transfiguration of her own glimpse of another's inner life in which some form of holiness is sensed, intuited. An author often writes to satiate her own hunger for the world of the other—another world that *is* and *is not* the author's own. In this we see the world a writer creates as drawn from the real, yet expressed in fiction; but we also see that world—the work itself—as belonging and not belonging to the author. In the end, a book is meant to be read and a writer's goal is often for her vision to become consubstantial with the reader's in the act of reading.

John Gardner has argued that this consubstantiation is accomplished in fiction when the writer becomes a “reality-hunter”—someone intent on transmuting the Real to the page where its gravity (its morality) is sensed by the reader. Gregory Wolfe nuances this idea further by describing a writer not as a “reality-hunter” but as a “spirit-stalker.” According to Wolfe, “The [writing] process might be described as a four-fold effort involving sacrificing, seeing, stalking, and sacramentalizing” (“Stalking the Spirit”). Wolfe orders these in this way because according to him “seeing the [literal] world” is not the first step for a writer. He goes on to say that “seeing is a far more complicated act than the mere opening of our eyes” (“Stalking”). Wolfe, in this essay, reads Annie Dillard's work as testifying to the fact that “we cannot see truly without first practicing a kind of sacrifice” (“Stalking”). Things get in the way of an author truly seeing the world—things in need of being sacrificed in order to sharpen the author's vision. But what are these things? Wolfe writes that basic obstructions to authorial “sight” can take the form of “boredom, weariness, fear, alienation—and the persistent human tendency to hold the world at a distance, to prefer the cleanness of ideas to the capacity to be fully embodied, fully present to our

experience. [...] In short, *we* get in the way” (“Stalking”). Keeping the world at a distance is, in our dialectic, preferring surface over substance, talking *about* the other as an idea but never coming face to face with the other in an encounter or covenant. A work of fiction does this, for Gardner, when it is extrinsically philosophical instead of intrinsically philosophical—when ideas trump characters or plot.<sup>41</sup> But certain ways of reading can do this as well—keep the world at a distance—by ignoring a work’s clamouring heteroglossia and listening only to what the work “means” or how it can be of “use,” giving into the temptation of reducing the dialogic messiness of life, as conveyed in stories, to the “cleanness of ideas” or philosophical abstraction. Such a reading is centered on the self, which all readings essentially are, but without genuine, costly interaction with the other—covenanting. Authentic interaction with the other, with the world of the other, always has a price for both writer and reader.

Wolfe, in addressing young writers in “Stalking the Spirit,” articulates this cost in this way: as writers, what “needs to be sacrificed before we are able to see is... *us*. Or at least our selfishness and fear and abstraction. Our sense that we are detached, solitary observers” (“Stalking”, *my emphasis*). Sacrificing this type of selfishness is basically getting beyond one’s self-interestedness or self-consciousness—what the work means to *me*, how it can be of use to *me*—and allowing the work to speak in its own right, allowing it to devastate, confound, and silence as well as confirm, illuminate, and speak. The poet Robert Cording, in his essay “Finding the World’s Fullness,” writes that “we live in a world which we did not create. This world of objects should force us out of ourselves, out of our subjectivity, since description, the task of the poet, demands attention, demands an attending to the world” (Cording 54). In order for a reading to become, in any way, sacramental, a reader must respond to the *adieu* of the other in a work,

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<sup>41</sup> This is Gardner’s issue in *On Moral Fiction* with the contemporary novels of Walker Percy, Thomas Pynchon, and John Updike.

which is a response to the *specific* world of the other that a writer has given form to in the work being read.

A writer's response to the world, seen in this way, is what Steiner refers to as the wager of art: "This wager—it is that of Descartes, of Kant and of every poet, artist, composer of whom we have explicit record—it predicates the presence of realness, of a 'substantiation' (the theological reach of this word is obvious) within language and form. It supposes a passage, beyond the fictive or the purely pragmatic, from meaning to meaningfulness" (Steiner 4). The story itself, according to Steiner, substantiates meaning (surface) into meaningfulness (substance); the story itself gives form to truth, as we have seen, through its active, narrative *truthing*. Cording writes that the "truth [the writer] seeks does not find its end in the recitation of creedal belief; rather it seeks the experience of the world itself" (Cording 55). In light of this, Steiner's substantiation of *meaningfulness* can be seen as the idea that meaning is made full, *realized*, when it is given substance (or when it is experienced) in a story: meaning, then, truly comes across to the reader when it is fully embodied in narrative. But a writer is only able to practice this substantiation if she sacrifices her explicit authorial intentions—be they artistic, philosophical, political, or religious—and instead opens herself up to *listen* to the world, to pay serious attention to it and the others in it. What I would call good writing, then (like good art, philosophy, politics, and religion) is essentially ethical or, as Gardner terms it, moral, because it is, at root, world-based and other-oriented.

Good writing, because it is world-based and other-oriented, presents a story that unfolds entirely outside the reader or *other* to the reader's self. And this type of writing only opens itself—reveals its *meaningfulness*—to an unselfconscious (though not uncritical) reader. Wolfe quotes Dillard as saying, in regard to stories, "that there is a kind of seeing that is methodical and

analytical but that there is a better kind ‘that involves letting go. When I see this way I am transfixed and emptied’” (“Stalker”). An unselfconscious reader believes in the story being read and participates in the story actively as a covenanter with that story’s world. Such a reader is, as Dillard suggests, emptied—hollowed—just as that flame-drawn moth was hollowed and yet continued to burn and to cast more light on Dillard’s campsite and the book she was reading in *Holy the Firm*. Reading in this way—practicing what Paul Ricoeur would call a “hermeneutics of affirmation”—does not preclude reading in a more analytical way—practicing a “hermeneutics of suspicion.” But, as I hope to show in this chapter, affirmation *of* or belief *in* a fictive world (covenanting with the other in the work) has the potential to cast more light on what one critically *sees* in a work and, beyond that, to quicken a desire to *stalk* what one does not see but senses in a work—holiness—and to give that mystery, which lives in imaginative literature, new life in literary criticism.

The difference between a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of affirmation, in Wolfe’s dialectic, is the difference between *stalking* and *seeing*, or, going back to our discussion of icons, the difference between surface and substance—language and beyond-language. Dillard uses the story of Moses sitting in the cleft of the rock, waiting patiently so he can catch a glimpse of God’s “back parts,” as a metaphor for stalking or the discipline needed to make that type of seeing of the unseen possible: “It demands patience—the kind of patience one needs to wait, perfectly still, in a bush for forty minutes just to catch sight of a muskrat. (‘The writer should never be afraid of staring,’ says O’Connor)” (“Stalking”). Wolfe also highlights the irony here “that the writer’s form [of stalking] generally takes the form of sitting at a computer for hours on end,” during which “one’s ‘back parts’ grow numb,” but, Wolfe insists, during this time “there is still a chance that the imagination will venture out and take its place in the cleft of memory and

begin to *see*” (“Stalking”). But what is it that we see, not just *in* language but *beyond* language? Cording argues that to be enclosed in language’s labyrinth is to be closed off from the world (Cording 53). So, as I have argued thus far, in seeing the language of a story we see more than language’s labyrinth: we see its intricacies but we also see that *other* reality that the language of the story is intensely interested in—reality, first, but also the mysterious holiness that animates it.

Just because I affirm that something beyond language calls to the reader through a story, I cannot launch into a story’s substance—a search for holiness in the world—without passing through the surface of a work: its artifice. Wolfe knows this as well, which is why he writes that the “creative writer’s goal is *not* simply to explain the meaning of what might have been glimpsed [beyond-language]. Rather, it is to recreate—to enact—the very process of sacrificing and seeing, and stalking” so that the reader joins the hunt (“Stalking”). Ricoeur, as we shall see, echoes this need to go beyond meaning to *meaningfulness*, or to go beyond explanation to *enactment*, when he talks about the importance of hermeneutics going beyond the mere archaeology of symbols to their eschatological resurrection.

Before launching into the eschatology of symbols, however, we need to “unearth” what Ricoeur means by “archaeology.” In stories, this kind of archeology refers to that out of which the story itself is formed—the bones and muscle of setting and plot, the flesh of characterization, and the lifeblood of theme. The sacramental experience is centred in the reading of a book where literary forms take on life in the reader’s imagination and the story lives. This cannot be considered an explicitly religious phenomenon *if* “religious” is understood as connoting something spiritual or gnostic: concerned with something other than the ordinary. But it can be seen as a “sacramental” phenomenon because, as Wolfe argues, a “sacrament is meaningful not because it is esoteric but because it is ordinary; in the course of the rite the world that has been

lost to us is restored” (“Stalking”). A sacramental reading, seen this way, is only meaningful inasmuch as it sacramentalizes those things that are ordinary—investing them with belief in order to give them *life*. Wolfe might argue that it is the literary rite by which our lost worlds—such as human holiness or sacredness—are returned to us. Now, by disagreeing with Wolfe on this last point I am not arguing that there is not something potentially restorative or redemptive about reading. What I would like to argue for, however, is a more dynamic experience that supplements and enlivens the restoration of lost worlds—what Ricoeur might call *re-imagination* or learning to see the world other-wise.

In the end, I really do not think that Wolfe is necessarily opposed to Ricoeur’s theorization of reading as a way of creatively re-imagining ourselves in terms of another. It is just that Wolfe’s medium—short editorial essays collected in *Intruding Upon the Timeless* (2003)—does not allow for the same kind of detailed, philosophical consideration Ricoeur gives this idea in his life’s work, as recounted by Kearney in *Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (2004). But Wolfe’s vision of stories, like Ricoeur’s, is essentially other-oriented. After all, when Wolfe writes that fictional works can be seen as sacraments, he is alluding to more than the potential transfiguring power of stories. On a more basic level, for Wolfe, stories can be seen as sacraments because they are made by authors as mediums through which to join their journeys to their readers’ journeys. And the route of these fictional travels is always out from oneself into the lives of others. Seen in this way, calling a story a sacrament does not, at least initially, spiritualize it, but highlights it as something written to be given *to* and shared *with* others.

Kearney, in his book *On Stories* (2002) writes that “[myths] were stories people told themselves in order to explain themselves to themselves and to others. But it was Aristotle who first... argued, in his *Poetics*, that the art of storytelling—defined as the dramatic imitating and



plotting of human action—is what gives us *shareable worlds*” (3). This sharing of worlds is what Wolfe means when he says authors seek to tell stories—confect sacraments—that join their journeys to their readers’. Kearney says this is essentially what all stories do: “no matter how distinct in style, voice or plot, every story shares the common function of *someone telling something to someone about something*” (5). If, as Kearney claims, a story is essentially a “*communicative act*” (5), Wolfe, in likening a story to a sacrament, makes the further claim that stories have the potential to communicate in a way that can transfigure a reader’s perception of her world. Cast in terms of this study then, a story, on a basic level, can be viewed as a means of seeing into the lives of others—glimpsing their world—but entering into that world in a ceremony of belief, so that reading becomes a “real” encounter with the other, going beyond the surface level of communication into a story’s ability to affect a reader in a deeply transformative way. For Ricoeur, this is a “transfiguration” of a reader: a basic but profound re-imagining of that reader’s selfhood, which is more than a surface-level altering of her perceptions.

Mark I. Wallace, in his forward to Ricoeur’s *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (1995), writes that, for Ricoeur, “there are no ‘shortcuts’ to selfhood, [because] only when the subject traverses a hermeneutical ‘long route’ through the revealing power of the symbol can she... enlarge and empower a fuller and more satisfying understanding of the self” (5). To relate this to reading, we could say that the journey out is also the journey in: travelling out into the world of the other, for a reader, is simultaneously a way of enlarging and empowering her understanding of the other, but it also leads to a fuller understanding of herself. Wallace, in a reading of Ricoeur’s *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Interpretation of Meaning*, helps us to see that this “empowering” of the reader’s self comes from a story’s ability “to disclose new possibilities [offered to] the reader [as] an expanded view of the world [that has

the potential to generate] a deeper capacity for selfhood. ‘It is the text, with its universal power of world disclosure, which gives a self to the ego’” (8). Understanding oneself in this way, according to Ricoeur, is a “revelation” of one’s potential for being otherwise than one is. But revelation, for Ricoeur, is performative not propositional: “it is an event of new meaning *between text and interpreter*, rather than a body of received doctrines under the control of a particular magisterium” (9, *my emphasis*). So, Ricoeur’s concept of revelation as essentially dramatic begins to look a lot like Bowen’s dynamic concept of *truthing*—any truth in a story is therefore revealed in the advent “of new meaning” birthed out of a reader’s dramatic interaction with that story. And, as Ricoeur points out, this “new meaning” can be figured as a self realizing it can be otherwise than itself or that it can be itself other-wise. In terms of this study, then, we see that one can venture into another’s world by reading about it and through that narrative creatively re-imagine new ways of being in one’s own world.

What makes such a reading sacramental, in my view, is not simply seeing the world as sacred: this is only Wolfe’s first order of seeing, a result of sacrificing one’s self-consciousness—intuiting holiness or mystery in the world. What makes a reading sacramental is both *seeing* the world as sacred and *making* the world sacred. This is the active sacramentalizing that comes from stalking holiness in literature. Ricoeur writes in *Figuring the Sacred* that to “see the world as sacred is at the same time to *make* it sacred, to consecrate it” (Ricoeur 51). A sacramental reading relies on this sacramentalizing, and this mirrors in a way what I believe Richards, Winter, Moore, and Crummey have done in composing their novels: they have not just intuited some sense of holiness in the world but they have, in different ways (whether consciously or unconsciously), made that intuition “real” by figuring it in their stories. In a similar way, my sacramental readings of these novels are not meant simply to analyze what

shape holiness takes in each book but *through* such readings to show new ways of being a reader in and of the world. In particular, I am interested in revealing, through the sacramental readings in this work, new ways of reading contemporary Atlantic Canada fiction: being able to see in the literature of this place more than mere artful commentaries on regional identity.

Sacramental readings, then, are not merely *descriptive*, nor are they simply *prescriptive*; they are, however, necessarily *creative*. Reading in this way can keep criticism from becoming a mind-numbing narcotic, as Steiner says it can. Steiner writes in *Real Presences* that the “secondary [world of criticism] is our narcotic. Like sleepwalkers, we are guarded by the numbing drone of the journalistic, of the theoretical, from the often harsh, imperious radiance of sheer presence” (Steiner 49). For Steiner, “sheer presence” in literature is the “often harsh, imperious radiance” of God’s presence or what Derrida calls the elusive beyond-language of which language speaks in shibboleths or mysteries (3). This mystery is what we have been calling holiness, or, more simply, that which is life-giving in a work.

For Ricoeur, this vitality in literature is sought in the journey out from the self into the other, a journey that a story gives opportunity for. And, as we have seen, that journey leads back home to the self. For Steiner, this return is to a lost “central humanity” that engaging with art allows us to re-experience (49). In this we hear an echo of Wolfe’s assertion that *in* reading “the world that has been lost to us is restored” (“Stalking”). But stories can do more than restore lost worlds to us, they can do more than allow us to re-experience what makes us human; this is what Steiner alludes to when he speaks of redefining “the life of meaning in the text.” (Steiner 50).

Reading is not just a journey out from the self into the other and back home to the self. In the act of reading we have the choice to be changed by our encounter with the other. But there is

never a guarantee of transformation on the part of the reader.<sup>42</sup> A story has the *potential* to evoke change in a reader, but the story itself—even read directly—does not ensure the reader’s transfiguration (or that this transformation will be positive). We can always turn a deaf ear to the other’s *adieu*. We can always choose to be cold and unaffected by a story’s Eros, just as we can shirk our responsibility to the other. This is the flipside of a reader’s freedom: to read yet remain unchanged, unmoved, unresponsive.

The other side of this freedom, however, is that in responding to a work’s *adieu*, a reader journeys out from herself into the otherness of the work, covenanting with the other in the work, and, as a result of keeping covenant, that reader returns “other-wise” to herself. She does not simply return to herself unchanged or re-experience what it meant for her, at one time, to be human. If she returns “other-wise” then she has been affected by her encounter with the other, she has actively learned from the other, and she understands, in new ways, what “the life of meaning in the text” can potentially mean. This is the *other* wisdom she gathers and it is what allows her to return to herself other-wise. Such a transfiguration of the reader, going back to Dillard’s metaphor of Moses in the cleft of the rock, comes only from that reader sacrificing her own self-consciousness enough to see the backside or the trace of holiness in the other who passes by in a story.

Such a reader knows that this kind of brush with holiness *is* and *is not* real: it is not a *real* encounter with “sheer presence,” but it is an encounter that can burn—one that can illuminate

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<sup>42</sup> This is why I have trouble with Steiner’s thesis that art is underwritten by God’s presence or the Transcendent. For Steiner, this metaphysical assumption seems to guarantee that if only a work of art is engaged with directly, apart from secondary criticism, then the “sheer presence” underwriting the work will enable the one engaging it to re-experience her lost humanity. My problem is not with Steiner’s metaphysical assumption—that there is something beyond language that calls to us in language; my issue is with what, for Steiner, that assumption implicitly guarantees.

further this reader's own world, like Dillard's candle with its double wick.<sup>43</sup> And this burning encounter calls for response, which cannot be guaranteed, even when it is seen as a sacred responsibility for the other incarnated in a story's Eros: the very desire, evoked by the story, to respond to the other out of love. *Love* is the responsive side of a reader's freedom and, though it can be called for in a story, a story itself can never guarantee it. That said, without it there is no covenant, no chance for the reader to give herself fully to a story and, in return, be given by that story new and meaningful ways of re-imagining herself in her own world.

Before exploring ways in which stories disclose new ways of re-imagining a reader's self, however, we need to look at how this responsive (and responsible) "self" has been theorized, particularly by two thinkers we've already encountered—Levinas and Bakhtin. Bowen writes that for "Levinas, the self is virtually an effect of the other. [But for] Bakhtin, only another consciousness, outside of my own and able to view me from a number of different spatial, temporal, and psychological perspectives, can offer me a unified sense of my personality" (Bowen 44). Bowen goes on to show how "Bakhtin characterizes this as 'a loving gift mutually exchanged between self and other across the borderzone of consciousness' [and this] gift-giving potential of one for another has a particular connection to the genre of the novel because it may be 'most meaningfully bestowed narratively—across time, and through a call of/for stories'" (44). We will come back to the means by which the "loving gift [is] mutually exchanged between self and other" in the act of reading, but first I want to focus on Bowen's claim that

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<sup>43</sup> Steiner, to a degree, seems to acknowledge this grudgingly when he says that both "in theory and (rare) practice, there can be liberating interpretation... by those who only respond" (Steiner 22).

“Levinas undertheorizes the self in order to focus discussion on the other, and thus redress what he perceives as the imbalance of Western philosophical history.”<sup>44</sup>

Bakhtin provides good critical ballast here: he does not abandon ship in terms of his theorization of the self, particularly a reader's self. Bowen tells us that “Bakhtin as a literary critic is concerned to retheorize the self of author and [reader], as well as of fictional characters, as dialogic constructions. In fact, *he goes as far as to see the temporally unfolding experience of reading a novel as analogous to the development of the self*” (45, *my emphasis*). Reading a novel, then, is not just listening to the other, as Levinas and Steiner seem to intimate; the author and the work speak in, of, and through the other—enlivening narrative with dynamic heteroglossia. But the reader speaks as well and in responding enacts the fulfillment of her responsibility to the other, thereby sacramentalizing the story.

Kearney, in his study *On Paul Ricoeur*, writes that the “human subject... comes to realize that it can only interpret itself by interpreting the ‘signs’ of an external world not its own. The hermeneutic self is not self-sufficient [but is] an incarnate being which discovers that it is placed in language before it possesses itself in consciousness” (Kearney 13-14). Here Kearney alerts us to the primacy of this dialogue between self and other that, as Bakhtin has shown, finds unique and focussed articulation in the novel. A reader realizes, in engaging with such a novel, that she begins to understand new things about herself: her own life takes on meaning or becomes more *meaningful* by understanding herself in relation to fictive others made “real” enough to affect her in profound ways.

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<sup>44</sup> This is something that I think Steiner is guilty of in focusing, as he does in *Real Presences*, on the Transcendent Other or God: an effort on his part to redress what *he* perceives to be a postmodern prejudice in criticism against “the life of meaning” beyond a work of art, or its ontological mooring in transcendental mysteries.

Andres Wiercinski tells us that “Ricoeur’s diacritical hermeneutic<sup>45</sup> allows for a discovery of the other in the self and the self in the other, thus offering new ways of interpreting oneself in terms of otherness” (Wiercinski). A primary site of this diacritical hermeneutic—this interpretation of the other in the self and the self in the other—is, for us, the dialogic act of reading a novel. Kearney, summarizing Ricoeur, writes that the “human subject can only come to know itself through the hermeneutic detour of interpreting signs—that is, by deciphering the meaning contained in myths, symbols and dreams [or works of art] produced by the human imagination. The shortest route from the self to itself is through the images of others” (Kearney 41). This “hermeneutic detour” Ricoeur talks about is seen in how the self returns to itself otherwise through images of others. In these hermeneutic detours that I am calling sacramental readings, self and other coalesce in different ways to create new ways for the self to be itself other-wise. This is re-theorizing or re-cognizing a reader’s self, a process that we have seen prefigured in both Bakhtin’s and Steiner’s systems of thought.

This journey is seen in literature through the reader’s imaginative journey into the fictive world’s otherness. Kearney writes that for Ricoeur “[the] poetic imagination liberates the reader into a free space of possibility, suspending the reference to the immediate world of perception [both the author’s and the reader’s] and thereby disclosing new ways of being in the world” (41). If metaphor is seen as the covenanting of what *is* with what *is not*, then in metaphor what *is* suspends the reference to the world because the world in metaphor is not the literal world; but metaphor *is not* a suspension of the world because metaphor creates new ways of being in the world that *exceed* the literal. For Ricoeur the “function of imagination in poetry or myth... is defined accordingly as the ‘disclosure of unprecedented worlds, an opening into a possible world which transcends the limits of our [literal] world’” (41). To take a step back into how Ricoeur

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<sup>45</sup> “Diacritical hermeneutic”: Ricoeur’s hermeneutic approach to criticism as necessarily dialogical.



sees the functioning of the imagination, Kearney points us to Ricoeur's idea that "[imagination] comes into play," that it comes to life, "in that moment when new meaning emerges from the ruins of literal interpretation" (40). Steiner termed this "the life of meaning" or what we have been saying is life-giving, humanizing, or holy in a work. But how is "the life of meaning" birthed, if not through the "semantic shock" of metaphor? I am talking about "the 'semantic shock' engendered by the coming together of two different meanings which produce *new* meaning. And imagination, [as Ricoeur claimed], is precisely the power of metaphorically reconciling opposing meanings, forging an unprecedented semantic pertinence from an old impertinence" (40). This "semantic shock" then is no less than a prophetic voice in a story, another's *adieu*, that brings an archaeology of symbols—characters, plot, theme: the story itself—to eschatological life in a reader's imagination.

This eschatological pulse beats differently in every novel, but it is the heart of each of the novels to be discussed in this study—whether it be a heart-wrenching tragedy like Lisa Moore's *February* or a folkloric epic like Michael Crummey's *Galore*. It is this pulse that invigorates Ricoeur's idea that the "[imagination] can be recognized accordingly as the act of responding to a demand for new meaning, the demand of emerging realities to *be* by *being said* in new ways" (40). In returning this discussion to a more general application, we see, through Kearney's reading of Ricoeur, that the "metaphors, symbols or narratives produced by imagination all provide us with 'imaginative variations' of the world, thereby offering us the freedom to conceive of the world in other ways and to undertake forms of action which *might* lead to its *transformation*" (42, *my emphasis*). The conditional nature of this "transformation"—what I have earlier called the transfiguration of the reader—is something that both Ricoeur and Kearney, in his own work *Anatheism*, highlight. Kearney writes that the "*possible* world of



imagination can be made real by action [which is never guaranteed]. This is surely what Ricoeur has in mind when he says that there can be ‘no action without imagination’” (42). If, as Ricoeur rightly perceives, there can be no action without imagination, *and*, as I have argued earlier in this section, there can be no response without love, then imagination itself must be seen as the result of a coupling of Eros and responsibility. This coupling takes shape, for the author, in the writing of the work itself.

Imagination, for Ricoeur, may not necessarily lead to action—just as the other in a work cannot necessarily guarantee a response from the reader—but, as we have just seen, there can be no action without imagination. And imagination must be pictured here as something much more than the mere “intuition” of holiness in a story: “the hermeneutic conviction [is] that meaning is never simply the intuitive possession of a subject but it is always mediated through signs and symbols of our intersubjective existence” (42). “Meaning” or what Steiner calls “the life of meaning” does not come from Gardner’s basic “primary intuition” that the world is holy; it only comes through the mediation of this intuition in signs and symbols, metaphors and stories. This is why Bowen favours Bakhtin’s incarnate sense of holiness in a novel’s heteroglossia over Levinas’ transcendent sense of holiness in the face of every other. Bakhtin’s idea of heteroglossia thrives on intersubjectivity—on dialogue between author, work, characters, and reader (and the multiple utterances present *in* each of these)—whereas Levinas’ idea of responsibility silences the one (the reader) in order to let the other speak.<sup>46</sup>

Both are covenants predicated to some degree on *listening* to the voice(s) of the other, but Levinas’ philosophy presents responsibility (without concupiscence, without love or empathy) as a heavy burden on the reader, while, in Bakhtin’s criticism, responsibility finds its Eros in

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<sup>46</sup> Žižek gives a harsh critique of Levinas’ conceptualization of responsibility in his essay “Neighbors and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence” in the collection *The Neighbor* (2005).

dialogic narrative—and that awakened desire for the other makes a reader's responsibility to that other bearable. Only when a reader's responsibility to the other is successfully shouldered—*enacted*—does the "life of meaning" in a work begin to draw breath. This "life of meaning"<sup>47</sup> in a work does not come from the work's ability to reproduce the world mimetically.<sup>48</sup> But this living meaning, this *meaningfulness*, comes when a work's disclosure of re-imagined worlds evokes in the reader the desire to respond to the other by returning to herself other-wise.

This definition of *meaningfulness* coalesces with Ricoeur's idea that stories are not simply (archaeological) *explanations* of the world but that they are, more than that, (eschatological) *explorations* of the world, and these explorations are carried out through a story's "symbolizing power" (42). Kearney tells us that "Ricoeur defines a symbol as a double intentionality, wherein one meaning is transgressed by another" (42). In a story, then, the way the world is perceived literally, is transgressed by the way the world is re-imagined metaphorically. Put another way, a sense of holiness in the world, mediated in a story, transgresses the sense of the world's ordinariness. But the sacramental creak to this—the squeaky double hinge—is that the holy never negates the ordinary. Rather, it allows us to re-imagine the ordinary as holy, to see the mundane as mysterious, and thereby sacramentalize the one by the other. In sacramentalize we see the things of this world as holy and holiness splintered down in the things of this world.<sup>49</sup> This allows us to see reading as more than merely allegorical (or archaeological):

Instead of adopting the reductive approach of an "allegorical" reading—which would seek to uncover a disguised message beneath the image-symbols of myth—Ricoeur

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<sup>47</sup> Ricoeur's eschatology of symbols.

<sup>48</sup> Ricoeur's archaeology of symbols.

<sup>49</sup> See Kearney, *The Owl of Minerva*, 43, for Ricoeur's description of "cosmic symbolism," from *The Symbolism of Evil*.

advances a hermeneutic imagination which would, on the contrary, “start from the symbols and endeavour to promote the meaning, to form it, by means of creative interpretation.” (46)

This type of creative interpretation does more than read literally: unearth allegorical connections to the world. It does this, yes, but it is not limited to this type of reading, which Ricoeur calls an “archaeology” of the imagination (49). A creative interpretation—because it is responding to a work’s *adieu*, a response made out of desire, Eros—brings new life to criticism by vivifying the archaeology of imagination with its potential eschatology (49). This brings us back to a symbol, at its most basic level, being both a thing and a sign: to say that a symbol *is* something is to archeologically interpret it in relation to the world (unearth Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones), but to say a symbol, at the same time, *is not* that something is to eschatologically interpret it in relation to a possible world—a world that is not *yet* (prophesy to the bones, as Ezekiel did, and see them come to *new* life). But, as Chamberlin has shown us, metaphor’s double hinge swings between what *is* and what *is not* true in stories—between “archaeological and eschatological reference”—and this allows us, through stories, to lose ourselves on a journey into others’ motile experiences of the world. And these experiences of others have the potential to affect how we see ourselves in relation to *our* world.

By seeing metaphor in this way, stories can be framed as narratives that turn “‘imagination into the place where the figurative meaning emerges in the interplay of identity and difference’” (51). Figurative meaning—the life of meaning—emerges in a creative interpretation in which self and other, reader and text, imagination and reality, consubstantiate and bring into existence new ways of being. Ricoeur says that the “poetical imagination at work in a text is one which *augments* my power [as a reader] of being-in-the-world” (54, *my*

*emphasis*). A novel then, has the potential to affect a reader's way of being herself—even the way she sees the world—by disclosing to her new ways of *seeing*.

So far in this study I have been looking at how the narrative imaginations in certain novels, like Richards' *Markus Paul* or Winter's *Donna Whalen*, open up new ways of being in the world in light of their differing visions of holiness. However, in order for new ways of being in the world to open up, as I have tried to demonstrate, such readings need to be done out of love or in a spirit of love, which is why I have selected the authors and novels I have: because of what they have awakened in me as a reader. As I have said earlier, a hermeneutics of affirmation opens up a more intricate world for a hermeneutics of suspicion to explore. And affirmation—what Chamberlin terms “belief”—will be a necessary sacrifice in order to begin to *see* that which is unseen in a novel like Lisa Moore's *February*: holiness humanized and *imagined* in the face of Helen O'Mara.

Kearney, in his analysis of Ricoeur, writes that while “the poetical reference suspends literal reference and thereby appears to make language refer only to itself [à la Baudrillard], it in fact reveals a deeper and more radical power of reference to those ontological aspects of our being-in-the-world that cannot be spoken of *directly*” (53). That which cannot be gotten at directly, but which can be imagined indirectly in stories, is “the life of meaning” buzzing in a novel's cacophonous heterglossia—mystery or holiness narratively incarnated in stories, intuition given flesh in imagination.

If “the life of meaning” takes form in the language of a story, then a novel's *meaningfulness* (its eschatology of symbols) necessarily relies on its meaning (its archaeology of symbols); and this echoes the idea, mentioned earlier, that a work relies on its connection to the world for its imaginative life. Reading a novel can then be seen as the process in which the

imagination of a reader is always vivifying stories into experiences, language into life, fictions into memory. Kearney, in his analysis of Ricoeur, writes:

As soon as one recognizes the schematizing and synthesizing power of imagination at work in narrative, the very notions of tradition and innovation become complementary. Thus Ricoeur can claim that the term tradition must be understood not as the 'inert transmission of some already dead deposit of material but as the living transmission of an innovation always capable of being reactivated by a return to the most creative moments of poetic activity'. So interpreted, tradition can only survive, can only pass itself on from one generation to the next, by fostering innovation in its midst. (56)

In light of this, part of a reader's journey in re-imagining herself other-wise is seeing the new ways in which a work discloses other, innovative ways of imagining how one can go about the traditional business of *being* in the world—dirty, day-to-day living.

In his readings of Ricoeur, Kearney writes that "tradition cannot survive without innovation, neither can innovation survive without tradition" (56). Thus the dual function of imagination can be seen in both writing *and* reading as "poetic creation of the new by reference to the old" (57). Such newness is seen in how Moore's *February* creates new ways of imagining a historical event, like the sinking of the *Ocean Ranger*, by creatively re-imagining that story. The result is that a historical tragedy continues to reverberate in the present.<sup>50</sup>

*February*, as a novel, does what a legal inquiry, like the Royal Commission Report, cannot do, just as *Donna Whalen*, as documentary fiction, does what thousands of pages of court transcripts cannot do. *February* imaginatively shifts the focus from statistical reports that account for the tragedy and sharpens our emotive focus—our empathy—on the fact that this was

<sup>50</sup> In Newfoundland and Labrador the reverberation of the *Ocean Ranger* tragedy was keenly felt in the wake of the helicopter crash of Cougar Flight 491 on 12 March 2009, at which time Moore's novel would have been in production at House of Anansi, prior to its June 2009 release.



a human tragedy that affected the lives of everyone in any way connected to the 84 men who perished when the *Ocean Ranger* capsized. Without diminishing the truth of the actual tragedy, Moore allows readers, through *February*, to experience what it is like to live in the wake of such an event—an event now of another time, and, for non-Newfoundland readers, of another place.

A sacramental reading of *February*, then, is an engagement with a novel that implicitly seeks some way of dialogically plotting a reader in the story. This is done so that reader inhabits the story by living in light of what it has revealed about surviving life-shattering loss. This “inhabiting” of a narrative can be seen as the effect the work has on a reader and how that is lived out in the real world. For Ricoeur this “is [the] final stage of narrative imagination—the reader’s reception of the text—[where] the hermeneutic circle returns to the world of action. The act of reading is the ultimate indicator of the ‘refiguring of the world of action under the sign of the plot’” (57). A reader plotting herself into a story, seen in this way, echoes what I was getting at earlier in discussing Wolfe’s idea of a writer sacramentalizing the world in a narrative. A reader who seeks to plot her life in light of what she has learned by engaging with a story is implicitly re-imagining her own way of being in the world. She is sacramentalizing the story by allowing it (or something mysterious in it) to affect her and change who she *is* in light of storied-images that suggest what she could *become*.

This “mysterious” presence in stories is what I have been calling holiness. But how, as readers, can we comprehend something like this—something Derrida claims is an unknowable but deeply affecting *other*, an arcane shibboleth? Wolfe holds out more hope than Derrida of *knowing* and understanding the holy because he sees holiness, transcendental mystery, as communicable through *beauty*. In his essay, “The Wound of Beauty,” Wolfe writes that the “imagination is the faculty honed to apprehend beauty and unfold its meaning” (“Beauty”). For

Wolfe, any transcendent reality is only knowable through or in relation to beauty and beauty can only really be known through the imagination. He writes that beauty “allows us to penetrate reality through the imagination, through [its] capacity... to perceive the world intuitively” (“Beauty”). Beauty, in a story, is therefore not only an author’s means of mediating a “primary intuition,” like seeing the world as holy. It is a reader’s means of mediating this as well and exploring new ways of *seeing* holiness in the world as well as *making* the world holy.

If holiness and beauty are in this way consubstantial—Gardner insists that they are one and the same thing—then holiness must be more than a metaphysical assumption: after all, I am saying it can be made, confected, *realized*. If holiness is to be seen then it needs to be made visible: holiness must be substantiated in beauty in order to come into being, and its being can only be known by its beauty or by the effect of its beauty—its attraction. Gardner writes that “[beauty] is something that doesn’t exist except in the instant it jars the soul and thus at once comes into being and attracts” (Gardner 156). This can be said of holiness as well, that it cannot be said to exist—which is to say it cannot be seen—except when it “jars the soul” in the “semantic shock” of metaphor that we have called a story’s Eros, that which draws us in as readers.

Wolfe furthers this idea when he writes that a “work of art has a flash of radiance [or beauty] about it that we find pleasurable, but the pleasure comes from our recognition of meaning, [seeing anew] a pattern within our normally chaotic experience” (“Beauty”). This is Hansen’s “stay against confusion” or Dillard’s double wick. It is the other immolating in being read, making it possible for the reader to see more than she could before as the other’s presence grows more intense even while it burns down and disappears—living on in the reader’s memory as pulsing afterimage. In *Holy the Firm*, Dillard writes that the moth “burned for two hours

without changing, without bending or leaning—only glowing within, like a building glimpsed through silhouetted walls, like a hollow saint, like a flame-faced virgin gone to God” (Dillard 429). The moth-light allows Dillard to see more clearly her “cooking stuff gilded with torn flecks of moth wings, triangles of shiny dust here and there on the aluminum”—this other light gives her a clearer vision of her literal world (428). But it also opens up an imaginative way of seeing in which the burning body of a moth becomes “a hollow saint” or a “flame-faced virgin gone to God”—a re-imagination of that world as *other*, as holy or wholly mysterious.

Don McKay has said that in poetry, language finds its Eros. Dillard shows this to be true in her prose as well, which is obsessed with the sensual world. But Eros, like beauty, is not prisoner to any particular form. It burns in works of the imagination where it is possible to recognize the world as it is *and* see it in a new light. When seen this way, beauty in a story can be both edenic and eschatological: restoring a lost world and opening up possibilities for the future, just as truth is understood best in stories through narrative *truthing*. “A work of art,” Wolfe tells us, “doesn’t invent truth, but it does make it accessible to us in ways that are not normally available because words and images have been tarnished by overuse or neglect. Art fails when it merely tells us what we already know in the ways that we already know it” (“Beauty”). That is, art as an idol fails, whereas art as an icon succeeds. Art that stops the viewer’s gaze at itself—a reading that doesn’t escape language’s labyrinth—provides no vision beyond the here and now *is-ness* of reality, but art that draws the viewer’s gaze beyond itself—a reading that engages with the unsayable beyond-language—enables one truly to see reality’s *is-ness* and *in* it perceive that which is life-giving, holy, beautiful.

Beauty, according to Wolfe, enables us to see what I have called “reality’s *is-ness*” or the “*thisness*” of ordinary, mundane things. It allows us to see these things for what they are *and*



what they can mean. The Eros of stories is that metaphors can come beautifully to life and illuminate other realities (thoughts of hollow saints and flame-faced virgins) while remaining rooted in the hot wax of reality and casting light on that mundane reality as well (cooking pots gilded with silver flecks of torn moth wings). One always involves the other in a sacramental reading, or, as I have said earlier: the journey out is also the journey in.

A sacramental reading that allows a reader to journey out from herself into another's world also returns that reader to herself and her own world but with a more vivid vision of her own reality as perceived from the differing viewpoints of others. This is the "loving gift mutually exchanged between self and other"—one's home re-imagined dialogically. Wolfe says this return home is the goal of stories:

Beauty also has the capacity to help us to value the good, especially the goodness of the most ordinary things. The greatest epics, the most terrible tragedies, all have one goal: to bring us back to the ordinary and help us love and cherish it. Odysseus encounters Circe, Cyclops, the sirens, Scylla and Charybdis, but his real destination is home and the marital bed that makes it his place in the world. ("Beauty")

In a sacramental reading of Moore's *February*, then, the goal will not be to spiritualize Helen O'Mara's story, or even to examine the role of religion in the novel's depiction of 1980s St. John's. The goal of this sacramental reading is to re-imagine—through Helen O'Mara's loss of her husband Cal—Helen's ordinary, domestic world after Cal's death: to begin to experience, with Helen, the richness of life, even in the wake of a life-shattering tragedy like the loss of the *Ocean Ranger*, an oil rig that went down off the coast of Newfoundland in 1982, killing 84 men. In doing this reimagining, we will have to sacrifice our own view of things—as readers and outsiders—and covenant with Helen's way of remembering and experiencing her loss of Cal.

This covenanting can then become a way of seeing that which is unseen in this story—holiness—and sacramentalizing such a mystery by allowing it, through its incarnation in the beauty of Helen's life, to affect us as readers: allowing us to see Helen's world as she learns to see it—other-wise in a sharp new light.

### Lisa Moore's *February*

The following reading of Lisa Moore's *February* is an effort to re-imagine—through Helen O'Mara's loss of her husband Call—Helen's ordinary, domestic life after Cal's death: to begin to experience, with Helen, the fullness of life, even in the wake of a life-shattering tragedy, like the sinking of the *Ocean Ranger*. In experiencing Helen's return to her own life, in reading Moore's novel through a hermeneutics of affirmation, I argue that a sacramental reader can also experience a return to her own life, but with deeper insight into the holiness of ordinary, mundane existence—the sacred *thisness* of reality.

In "All Over The Canvas," an interview with Lisa Moore (2008), Herb Wyile asks Moore to speak to the "palpable sense of mourning" he senses in her earlier fiction, her short story collections *Degrees of Nakedness* (1995) and *Open* (2002), and her debut novel *Alligator* (2005). Moore, referring to the book she was writing at the time, published a year later as *February*, gave this response:

My father died quite suddenly, without warning, when I was sixteen. I adored my father in every way, and his sudden death completely changed my life, all I thought I understood about the nature of life and of time and of love and security, the physical and the spiritual, all the things I had taken for granted, never questioned, were suddenly

thrown into question. Nothing could be depended on. I could not believe how blunt and irrevocable death was. I couldn't accept it. And in some ways, I guess, all literature is an argument against death. Every story written down retrieves something that was lost.

(Wyile "Canvas" 2008)

If literature is an argument against death, and *February* is Moore's most personal version of this argument, then we can assume that this second novel is an attempt, in some way, to retrieve "something that was lost." Moore describes this in light of the death of her father, an event that banished Moore from her childhood views of "life," "time," "love," "security," "the physical and the spiritual." In *February*, we see this in terms of Helen O'Mara's life after she loses her husband Cal in the sinking of the *Ocean Ranger*. For Helen, her husband's death doesn't just separate the spiritual from the physical, Cal from Helen. In losing Cal, Helen loses herself, all sense of who she is and who Cal was. She not only finds herself banished from "the spiritual"—all semblance of faith, hope, and love—but also from "the physical"—her ordinary, mundane life.

*February*, however, is less an argument against death and more a contemplative passage *through* death to new life.<sup>51</sup> In the novel, the mourning that Wyile perceived in Moore's earlier works, takes form as Helen's sorrow, her desire to indwell her life as if it were home—to feel at home in her own skin in spite of her own alienating loneliness. In "All Over the Canvas," Moore says:

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<sup>51</sup> In his essay "Sorrow; The River," from *Living In The World As If It Were Home* (1999), Tim Lilburn explores this kind of "contemplative passage" and its relation to sorrow and mourning by writing that the "Syrian word for monk, the person given without remainder to contemplation, is the name for those honoured in the second beatitude: blessed are those who mourn. Sorrow is the way back, sorrow the return. It is the telos that the eros to know God, the eros to recover lost salvation, comes to, said the desert monks: it is the state to which the desire to live in the world as if it were home... comes" ("Sorrow" 64).

When you lose someone central to your life, early on, you become aware of finitude in a strange way, you get up close and personal with the idea that all of this will not last, nothing is certain, and it's an awareness that's hard to shake. The up side is that sometimes you are able to recognize how precious everything is and that it's important to experience it, to really experience it with all your senses, while you have the chance.

(Wyle 2008)

Helen's desire to experience life "with all [her] senses, while [she has] the chance," builds like a cresting wave, until—twenty-eight years after losing Cal—Helen, at fifty-six, begins to realize the finitude of her own life, her own short chances to see "how precious everything is," to "retrieve" the holy in the mundane—in herself and her life as a mother and grandmother.

In reading *February*, we begin to see the cracks in Helen—her brokenness. And these cracks, as Leonard Cohen sings in his song "Anthem," are "how the light gets in"—they are the fractures that allow holiness' slatted light to illuminate Helen's humanity.<sup>52</sup> It is in the dramatic alteration between who she *is* and who she *once was* before Cal's death that we glimpse Helen's interior life: her sorrow at the impossibility of becoming who she was before the *Ocean Ranger* went down, the cold irrevocability of Cal being absent. But Helen's attempts to imagine what is impossible to remember fully—her busy, chaotic life *with* Cal—allow her, eventually, to live with what she *can* know "with all her senses": herself.

This self-realization, however, only comes about in the novel through memory, and Moore's construction of Helen's memory involves an intricate, painterly layering of time. This is

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<sup>52</sup> According to Lilburn, "Sorrow is the alteration of self before extreme dissimilarity [the other]; it is admission of the unlikeness of what one craves toward and one's exclusion from its beauty, its community, and thus is what knowledge of the thing's uncontainability feels like; sorrow is what fashions courtesy, work of reverence, toward what one would know utterly. It is what makes it possible for us to live with what we know, a renunciation drawing us near. Sorrow disarms the passions so that [other lives] may live contiguous with human consciousness safely" ("Sorrow" 65).

seen in the novel's blending of chronology with concurrence, real events with imagined scenarios, sequence with simultaneity. Moore, in "Kernels," collected in *Writers Talking* (2003), discusses simultaneity versus sequence and how she thinks that sequence is needed in literature for ambiguity, that which draws the reader into the story:

Marshall McLuhan talks about cubism developing at the same time as film. Cubism allows us to see an object from all angles at once: the top, the sides, the back, the front. McLuhan suggests cubism is about simultaneity rather than sequence, and the absence of sequence destroys ambiguity. Norman Levine, in an interview with Michael Winter, once said the less a writer gives the reader the better. Levine is referring to what McLuhan calls a cool medium: a medium in which the audience does most of the work. The reader is a fully engaged participant in the act of creation. It's that ambiguity, or coolness, that draws me primarily to writing rather than the visual arts in the end. Trusting that certain unsaid things are present. ("Kernels" 43)

Moore seems to be siding with Levine over McLuhan in saying that sequence is needed in stories because stories become more fully engaging when there is ambiguity in them, and ambiguity is laid bare or revealed through simultaneity—the cubist effect of seeing all angles and sides at once. However, in *February*, Moore uses simultaneity in constructing Helen's memories—different recollections flooding her all at once. But the effect of this is not to lay bare Helen's inner life, see it plainly from all angles, but to thicken and texture Helen's memory by layering recollection with imagination—deepening memory while striving to understand it. Moore says in her interview with Wyile that "[literature] is a doubling back, it is reflection; as such, it kind of stops time" (Wyile 2008). Yes, stories are reflection. They are what Tim Lilburn might call a

form of “contemplation”: they “kind of” stop time. That is to say, they *do* and they *do not* stop time, as we see in *February*.

In this novel, sorrow substantiates the ambiguity of human life through both memory’s simultaneity and narrative sequence. The effect is to involve a reader in the depth and process of Helen’s mourning, through which she, by novel’s end, returns to herself otherwise, returning to her “ordinary, shining life,” and inhabiting her life *as if* it were home. The phrase, “ordinary, shining life,” is a reversal of a phrase used by Father Richard Rhor in his book of Lenten meditations, *Wondrous Encounters* (2011). His phrase—“shining, ordinary life”—is used in his mediation on the Transfiguration of Jesus. Rhor’s intent, in ordering the words the way he does, is to highlight the sacramental nature of one’s mundane life; my use and reversal of the phrase is to highlight the transfiguring process Helen goes through in her mourning, illuminating how Helen comes to see her life for what it is and can be, even as a fifty-six-year-old widow. Rhor wants his readers to reflect back; I want readers of *February* to contemplate forward. Reading the novel in this way should not be seen as by-passing or looking beyond Helen’s grief—that would be to begin the novel at its end, ignoring its sequence and ambiguity. However, reading *February* sequentially, covenanting with Moore’s story from beginning to end, allows a reader to pass through Helen’s sorrow—to be wounded by it and to see that wound heal over time, see it scar. It is the scar that a book like *February* leaves on the mind of a reader that draws that reader back to her encounter with the book, with another’s sorrow, with Helen’s life.

Hansen says that the human spirit hungers for the “glimpsed interiority” of other lives. This is certainly true of Helen, and Moore gives us a glimpse into Helen’s “interiority” first of all through the “texture” of her married name, O’Mara. In “Kernels,” Moore talks about the “texture” of words, saying, “I think certain words have texture. *Lugubrious* has the texture of

baked okra. *Serendipity* has the texture of rain bouncing off the surface of a lake” (“Kernels” 42). Aside from its Irish-Newfoundland prefix, the name O’Mara has the texture of skin wrinkling around eyes and lips as one lets out a bitter cry. “Mara” is what Naomi, in the biblical story of Ruth, wants to be called after her husband and two sons die in Moab, leaving her a widow—the name literally means “bitterness” (cf. Ruth 1:20). In *February*, prior to Cal’s death, Helen had kept her maiden name and even given that name to her children, but after the *Ocean Ranger* sinks, Helen’s father-in-law Dave asks her to give her unborn daughter Cal’s last name—O’Mara (*February* 52). Helen honours Dave’s request and she even takes on the name herself, as well as giving it to her other children.<sup>53</sup> “Mara” is also a Hindu god of death, or one face of a god whose other face is Kama—erotic desire. The texture of skin around one’s eyes and lips, after all, is similar for a bitter wail as for an ecstatic cry. And Helen’s life has both bitterness and ecstasy: sorrow and joy, panic and beauty (cf. 271-272). But these are not separate states: they are concurrent, overlapping, coalescent—consubstantial.<sup>54</sup>

Moore has said: “When I write, my goal is to *transport* the reader. I want her to surrender her immediate surroundings for whatever I’ve cooked up. In order to seduce like that I have to create vivid concrete worlds with lots of texture and shadow” (“Kernels” 42). The lighter textures of *February*—joy, beauty, love—are highlighted in contrast to the book’s dark shadows, its explorations of sorrow, panic, and loss. But both light and darkness are part of the same picture, the same story of Helen’s life. We glimpse Helen’s inner life in *February*, its surface and substance, her public and private grief, her outer and inner world, her life as a widowed mother

<sup>53</sup> We know this because they are all referred to as O’Maras in the present action of the novel.

<sup>54</sup> It is important to note here that Moore was unaware of these “textures” when she chose the name O’Mara. What I have described in this paragraph are merely my own reflections and associations as a reader. Moore, a guest in one of Lawrence Mathews’ graduate English courses at Memorial University of Newfoundland (22 May 2012), stated that she selected the name simply because it was an Irish-Catholic name that was *not* on the list of men lost when the *Ocean Ranger* went down—an effort to reinforce the fictive nature of *February*.

and as a middle-aged lover. The cracks between these dualities—outer and inner realities—do not separate them. Rather, they allow the light of the story, its Eros, to flood the narrative and illuminate the reading of it. Constructing this is what I have earlier called “conjuring Eros in prose”: making an “inner life” desirable, as Moore artfully does, so that Helen’s inner life becomes consubstantial with a reader’s. The result is the creation of “real” shared experience through fiction, taking on the experiences of those we read about as our own memories.

Wolfe describes this as the four-fold experience of sacrificing, seeing, stalking, sacramentalizing: sacrifice enables seeing, seeing is necessary for stalking, and stalking leads to sacramentalizing. But what does Helen have to sacrifice? What does she then see? What does she pursue? Kurt Vonnegut famously asserted that all characters must want something: so, what does Helen want? What does she desire? What becomes real to her in a new way?

If we start with Moore’s earlier assertion, in “All Over the Canvas,” that when you experience loss—like the death of a loved one—you become intimate with the finitude of life but that you also become more sharply aware of “how precious everything is and that it’s important to experience it... with all your senses” (Wyle 2008), then we arrive at this truth: holding the world at an objective distance, out of fear or suspicion, dims one’s vision of the world, one’s ability to experience life fully with all one’s senses. As Wolfe argues, such fear or suspicion needs to be sacrificed—the objective, critical distance collapsed—so that one can see in a deeper, more meaningful way. Helen has to sacrifice her grief by working through it (without ignoring it) in order to embrace her world as it is, without Cal. The irony (or the blessing) of this sacrifice is that the very process of working through her grief allows Helen to remember Cal more clearly.

As readers of Helen’s story we have the choice to be critical voyeurs, but we can also choose to sacrifice, at least initially, our critical stance so that we can imaginatively collapse the



distance between Helen's experience and our own. Choosing the former and reading Helen's story as a detached, solitary observer will, I believe, result in hackneyed, cold-hearted criticism, as we will see in a more detailed examination of *National Post* columnist Barbara Kay's angry reactions to *February*. Choosing the latter, however, allows a reader to experience the "fullness" of Helen's life—her sorrow and joy. A reader, by observing, can discover meaning in a story but only when she involves herself in that story can she experience its *meaningfulness*. In *February* we do not get the truth of what happened on the *Ocean Ranger*, which is what Barbara Kay says she wanted Moore to explore, even though historically it is impossible to know much for certain because there were no survivors. Instead of imagining an event we cannot know—an event void of testimony—Moore gives us the truth of Helen's experience of this tragedy. In this way, contrary to Kay's argument, the tragedy is more authentically *realized*.

As I have argued, authentic or good writing is other-oriented. And other-, world-oriented writing only opens itself to an unselfconscious reader. But what does this mean? When I think of an unselfconscious reader, I imagine Dillard's second wick, the immolating moth's body: such a reader feels emptied or hollowed in reading a story, but she also feels filled or hallowed by what she has read. Such a reader gives of herself by first performing a "hermeneutics of affirmation" rather than a "hermeneutics of suspicion." The former, I believe, can cast more light on what one sees in a story than the latter. As I hinted at earlier, this was seen in the critical reception (or rejection) of *February* by Barbara Kay in her two lambasting *National Post* articles: "Unreadably Canadian" (15 July 2009) and "Dying in Beauty" (9 Sept. 2009).

Kay caustically *pre-reviewed* *February* in her first column without actually having read the novel, pre-emptively dragging Moore into "the aesthetic woodshed" (15 July 2009). When commentators on the *National Post* website lashed back at Kay (including a feature length

rebuttal by Canadian novelist Steven Galloway), and after Anansi (Moore's publisher) sent Kay a copy of the book, she read the novel and wrote a second article, in which, "[duly] chastened," she reported "in good conscience" that she had "no apologies to make for [her] pre-emptive 'review'" (9 Sept. 2009). In my mind, Kay's articles aren't really about *February* at all, but are harangues against most Giller-winning novels which she sees as "hieratic, hermetic art object[s]," not "literature for pleasure," which she defines as more "plot-driven" fiction. When Kay does manage to pay a little critical attention to the novel that Moore actually wrote, she does so through what I would call a hermeneutics of suspicion. In her first article she judges the book before cracking it open and in the second article she tells us she was justified in doing so. She read the novel through a pre-existing assumption and did not really allow the novel to challenge or even slightly modify that assumption. Kay, of course, like any reader, is entitled to her opinion, crass as it is.

What I would like to demonstrate, however, is that reading *February* through a hermeneutics of affirmation can avoid both sentimental and judgemental short-sightedness, what I have earlier depicted as surface-level readings. Both types of short-sightedness result from a critical lack of attention: a sentimental reading ignores real negatives and a judgemental reading glosses over real positives. The kind of reading I propose is one in which, following Lilburn, "[attention] builds, tilting into adoration," which is neither sentimental nor shallow but affirmative and deep: life-loving and human ("Knowing As Ritual" 111). In *February*, Helen's memory is explored through her "adoration" of Cal—their life together—but this adoration veers from sentimentality (seen in Helen fleeing the Basilica during the mass held after the initial news of the loss of the *Ocean Ranger*) and balks at "spin" (the political language used by the oil companies in speaking about the "situation" of the 84 lost at sea). Helen, after Cal's death, lives

her life without hope or sentimental comfort, and her life, as Moore portrays it, cannot be reduced to a “situation” that needs to be “managed” by a settlement from the oil company that owned and operated the *Ocean Ranger* (cf. *February* 268-269). Moore does not allow herself or her reader these false comforts. She even refuses the comfort of having Helen think that things should have been done differently—both on the *Ocean Ranger* and in how the oil companies dealt with the tragedy afterwards. She writes that “later, much later, someone [will] say: We should have done some things differently; but that was also spin” (269). “Spin,” in this novel, is designed to dizzy a person like Helen, not allowing her to face the unnerving stillness and damning silence of losing Cal. Such a loss can only be faced—seen—through what Wolfe calls stalking. And Moore does this—stalks the public loss of the 84 men on *Ocean Ranger*—through Helen’s personal memory and private loss of Cal.

It is through the artifice of Helen’s memory, as constructed by Moore, that we are able to get beyond the legal shorthand of the tragic events recounted in the Royal Commission Report and, with Helen, become swept up in that tragedy’s wake. *February*, like *Donna Whalen*, in Ricoeur’s terms, is designed to take us beyond an archeology of historical events to their imaginative eschatology: the living effects of that tragic event, the continued effects of that tragedy on the living. The bones of this story—its basis in a real, historical tragedy—live insofar as they restore what has been lost, allowing us who were not there in 1982 Newfoundland to, in a way, be present, or to “remember” the events in a transfigured way. A world that would otherwise be dead to us comes to life. *February* allows us to experience this resuscitation because, as a living story, it restores a dead world or, as Moore might put it, stops time long enough to fully experience time. What is resurrected, however, is not Cal’s life—that would sentimentalize rather than sacramentalize. What is restored is Helen’s life: her life transfigured

so that Cal, though dead, remains with her in memory, affirming her life not unlike the shades of Moses and Elijah, present with Christ during the Transfiguration, affirming Jesus as a “beloved” son—love being the fulfillment of the law, given by Moses, and the prophets, represented by Elijah (*cf.* Matt. 17:1-11; Mark 9:2:12). Wolfe, in his essay “Transfiguration,” writes that the “transformation [in this biblical story] does not consume or destroy what is being transformed. The ordinary becomes extraordinary without becoming something wholly other” (Wolfe “Transfiguration” 116). Contrary, then, to Kay’s reading of *February*, it is through Helen’s memories that her life is seen most vividly; it is through these memories that Helen (and a reader of *February*) is able to “really experience” life with all the “senses” (Wyle 2008). This is not the self-absorbed “navel-gazing” that Kay says it is. Helen is not self-obsessed. If anything she is too selfless; it is only in the latter half of the novel that she begins to see her own needs, particularly her very physical need for love. Kay wilfully misreads Helen as self-absorbed, when in fact Helen is the picture of selflessness. The interesting twist in the novel, which Kay misses altogether, is that Helen has to become more self-concerned—by focussing on renovating herself—in order to show her son how to be selfless and loving in his relationship with Jane Downey.

Transfiguration, for a reader, involves not just altering one’s perceptions but actively changing or being “jolted” out of one’s preconceptions. Moore says in “Kernels”: “I enjoy being jolted. Made uncomfortable. Being edged, squeezed, jammed, thrust out of some position I hold. I like being forced to give up what I believe, if only for a while” (“Kernels” 45). In the biblical story of the Transfiguration, this was Peter’s experience on the mountain. He was edged out of his perception of Jesus as “the messiah”—a military leader like the Macabees—in order to see Jesus as a “beloved son.” Peter’s perception of Jesus’ power is forced to change: instead of

seeing Jesus as a strong political leader, Peter is forced to see him as a loved son, one perhaps worth listening to—and Luke’s droll caricature of Peter in his account of the story shows that listening was not necessarily what Peter was known for (Wolfe 117).

So, how does a reader effectively listen to Helen’s story? How is a reader jolted out of her world and into the shareable world of Helen’s sorrow? And how is it possible that a reader’s world is enlarged by sharing in Helen’s grief, rather than diminished by it? Maybe listening to Helen’s story jolts a reader, enlarging her world without diminishing it, because such a reader perceives that Helen’s grief is not separate from her joy. In seeing this, such a reader catches a glimpse of the consubstantiality of Helen’s joy and grief. They are different, but of the same substance—life. But what does this consubstantiality look like? Moore says:

[The] things I’m interested in are actually hard to think about. I’m interested in time, and what time is, and how it’s elastic, and why sometimes we experience a winter in the snap of a finger and sometimes it feels like twenty years, and how that connects with emotions. I’m interested in memory and I’m interested in the fact that there are things that we remember with our senses, and other things, important things, that we have no recollection of. I’m interested in how, if I pick up a coffee in a café, a whole year or two of flashes of imagery might go through my head and be completely forgotten by the time I put the cup down again. (Wyile 2008)

In *February*’s first chapter, “*Sunrise or Sunset, November 2008*,” the consubstantiality of seemingly conflicted emotions, like grief and joy, is seen through the consubstantiality of future, present and past events: “Helen watches as the man touches the skate blade to the sharpener. There is a stainless steel cone to catch the spray of orange sparks that fly up. A deep grinding noise grows shrill and she thinks: Johnny is coming home. [...] The sharpener vibrates the

counter beneath her fingers; John had phoned last night from the Singapore airport" (February 3). The grinding of steel on the sharpener lessens the steel but it also hones it; this could of course be read as an image for Helen's life. The "shrill" grinding noise makes her think of her son John coming home with news of his becoming a father and how this will alter his life (and her own). Helen thinks of John's call—of her son, her "three girls and... two grandchildren"—while fishing a quarter out of her purse so her grandson Timmy can buy a jawbreaker. And these thoughts grinding against this mundane action spark remembrances of the compliance of Helen's daughters: "She thinks of a slap, stinging and loud; she slapped Cathy's cheek once, the white print of her hand flooding red—this was years ago, a lifetime ago. Helen demanded of the girls that they give in, do what she said; but Johnny had been ungovernable. [...] A boy just like Cal" (3-4): her husband, who drowned when the *Ocean Ranger* sank on 14 February 1982.

John's call from Singapore was to ask her: "Have you ever tried to figure out the difference between what you are... and what you have to become?" (5). He asks this while looking at a big red sun over the tarmac, "Rising or setting, he did not know" (5), eventually revealing that he was not calling to tell her about the sunset or to do some "grandiose philosophizing": "This time he had something to say" (6).

What John has to say is that he thinks that he has got somebody pregnant (31). As John says this to Helen over the phone, he remembers the phone call he had received a few days earlier in Tasmania; it had been Jane Downey calling, the woman he'd had a brief affair with in Iceland, and she tells him she is pregnant with his child. The redness of the Singapore sun, in John's mind, remembering Jane's call while talking to his mother, echoes the "dull red light" reflected in a candy ring on a girl's finger in Tasmania, a glow "going flat and bright by turns, like a twist of love or fear" (30). John had loved his time with Jane, "fucking and eating and

drinking fabulous wine,” but he was not ready for fatherhood to “wreck” his life (33, 32). Any love he’d had for Jane twists in his thoughts—in Singapore, talking to his mother—with his fear of having to become a father. While trying to convey this to his mother on the phone, he realizes that what he wants most is for Helen to absolve him of his awakened sense of responsibility: “John wanted his mother to be indignant on his behalf, avenging. He wanted her to leap at the throat of the world” (30). John thinks this as he watches a man in a white suit saunter toward a plane, “holding a wand lit fluorescent orange, and he turned toward John and waved it slowly back and forth,” seeming to signal, as if “from a dream: *Get out of the way*” (31).

Helen, on the other side of the world, doesn’t see this arch of “fluorescent orange” in the dark of her bedroom any more than John sees the orange sparks fly up from the skate being sharpened when Helen is remembering her late night phone conversation with her son calling from Singapore; but the one echoes the other in a reader’s mind, particularly in the opening sequence when orange and red imagery flashes so vividly. Moore means for the light in one setting to illuminate events and emotions in another: this is why the sunlight in Tasmania is remembered in Singapore and why Jane Downey’s “perfect skin... pale and freckled and lit with honesty” (28) reflects Helen’s grandson Timmy’s “pale freckled skin, lit up. The blue vein on his temple. Orange hair. The spit of his mother. The very spit out of her mouth. It is joy, the colourless eyelashes, green eyes flecked with hazel. The sharpener on the second skate blade. The smell of burning metal. And the fan of orange sparks” (4-5).

The joy of her grandson Timmy’s face brings Helen’s mind back to that fan of sparks, which jolts her back to the reality that her son is going to be a father, even though “Johnny” had barely known his own father, Cal. Past, present, and future become consubstantial in Helen’s

memory because, as Moore observes, memory is so often triggered by the senses: melding one image to another to another. Moore has claimed:

Writing is a redemptive act, because we glean from experience some sort of meaning when we write, and so we're always reflecting, which is another reason to talk about light in fiction, because there is kind of a connection between reflection and light. But I think when we come to know the meaning of experience—those moments in life (I don't want to use the word epiphany, because I don't mean an epiphanic moment, I mean a series of epiphanic moments) when the meaning of the last ten years or two hours hits us, so that it has some kind of unity—it comes to us at once. There is this at-onceness about it, but at the same time it is the pulling together of a series of shards of information. There is a duality there; there are the parts and the whole. (Wyile 2008)

In this chapter, as in the rest of the book, different characters experience and remember different things: Helen's recollections are distinct from John's. But a reader does not just take on *either* Helen's memory *or* John's. A reader remembers many memories in one narrative: she experiences the whole story, the transfiguring "at-onceness" or simultaneity of all memories voiced *in* the novel's unifying narrative.

This readerly experience seems different than what Ricoeur calls the "hermeneutical long route," where a self travels through the lives of others and back to itself. In Ricoeur's philosophy this process seems sequential at first glance, but in Moore's *February* it seems both sequential and simultaneous, at least for a reader. A reader can easily distinguish 1982 in the novel from 2008 and can follow the sequence of events between these two significant dates, events that when narrated open up Helen's outer world. Such a reader also perceives, through Moore's textured layering of Helen's memories, how past events become concurrent with present ones,



effectively “disclosing” Helen’s inner world. Both coalesce in a reader’s single, unified vision of Helen’s life and how that life comes to be both physically and emotionally renovated. Moore’s ability to bring Helen’s outer and inner lives together, to make history coalesce with imagination, is what makes the storytelling in *February* so good.<sup>55</sup>

In contrast, Herb Wyile caricatures bad writing, in terms of contemporary Atlantic Canadian literature and criticism, as that which immobilizes Maritime and Newfoundland cultures by depicting them as populated by “poor, cute, and simple-minded fisherfolk”—a descriptor penned by Paul Chafe in an essay on Edward Riche’s novel *Rare Birds*, which Wyile, in his introduction to *Surf’s Up! The Rising Tide of Atlantic Canadian Literature* (2008), shortens to “the Folk” (Wyile 20-21). In *Surf’s Up!*, there is an essay by Susan Marshall, “‘As if There Were Just the Two Choices’: Region and Cosmopolis in Lisa Moore’s Fiction,” which looks at Moore’s first two collections of stories—*Open* and *Degrees of Nakedness*—and how the Newfoundland stories in these collections force “us to think beyond ironic rural stereotypes of Newfoundland” (Wyile 17). Moore’s fiction, then, (including *February*) forces us to “think beyond” these “stereotypes” because it is written with Eros or “epektatic” appetite,<sup>56</sup> because it enacts a deep desire for the lives of others.

As we saw earlier, for Ricoeur, “[the self] is a revelation of one’s potential to be otherwise than one is.” Revelation, therefore, in literature is epektatic, painterly—erotic. It is performative, not propositional. It truths in the telling rather than telling a static truth; it is active,

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<sup>55</sup> According to Lilburn, “Bad writing,” in contrast, “simply ravishes those whose permeability is without discernment; it enchants but takes one nowhere: instead it immobilizes the soul, robbing a person of eros and its mobility, its epektatic appetite, [...] working the erotic deformities of charm’s fat sleep and dogmatism” (“Philosophical Apokatastasis” 40).

<sup>56</sup> Lilburn derives the adjective “epektatic” from “Epektetos,” a painter of vases dating between 500 and 400 B.C. whose name means “newly freed,” suggesting he had been a slave before being an artist. In *February*, then, epektatic appetite can be seen as Moore’s painterly hunger—her freeing desire—for the fullness of Helen’s life. Lilburn might say that this authorial appetite conjures Helen’s “motility,” her life as epektatic rather than static: full of motion and verve.

not passive—body, not just bones. In *February*, this revelation is seen through Helen’s literal and figurative renovations—those alterations to her house and life that let “the light” in:

You’ve got to put down hardwood, Louise said. Do something about the kitchen. You want to keep up the property value, you’re going to have to renovate. You have to hire somebody.

Cal had been dead twenty-six years and she is capable sometimes, for a stretch of time, of forgetting Cal had died and how he died. She talks to her daughters every day. She is taken up with the house and her yoga. She sews wedding gowns, a kind of business venture that grew from a hobby.

I’m a young fifty-six, Helen thinks. Her grandchildren need her. She plays bridge. She took up curling but she hated the bloody curling. Her sewing gives her satisfaction.

Helen has mastered loneliness; nobody thinks of her as lonely any more.

You want something light, Louise said. On the floor.

A bloody fortune, Helen said.

[...]

I’d get rid of these walls, Louise said. She was standing in Helen’s living room, her hand raised, and gesturing in the direction of the bookcases.

I’d open this place up, she said. It’s too goddamn dark in here.

And now there are two ragged gaping holes on either side of the fireplace where the bookshelves had been. (*February* 114)

This scene begins with Louise pointing out to Helen the need for physical renovations in her house and it ends with the renovations already being underway. Louise’s recommendation to hire someone brings Cal to Helen’s mind: her husband and the fact that he has been dead almost three

decades. Over the course of those long years she has “mastered loneliness,” kept it hidden and to herself. But doing this, drawing the curtains on her loneliness, has made it too “goddamn dark” in her life. So, she listens to her family—Louise and her daughters—and she commences renovations, which take various shapes, including Barry opening up her home as well as her heart.

*February*, in this way, not only allows us to see the light in Helen’s life (her relationships with her daughters and with Louise) but it also creates more light through Barry’s altering presence. This is how the novel allows us not just to see what *is* sacred in Helen’s world, but also to experience and participate in the birth of holiness in the novel: new light and life. Reading in this way, then, begins to sacramentalize imagination *and* reality. Lilburn, reading Plato’s *Symposium*, writes that “eros is a skilled hunter who ‘plots to trap the beautiful and the good’” (“Where Desire Goes” 60). Moore, in her plotting of *February*, captures “beauty” and “goodness” in Helen’s “ordinary, shining” life, and “the good,” Lilburn reminds us, citing Dionysius, “is ‘beauty’” (“Knowing As Ritual” 124). *February*, then, in its hunt for beauty, shows this stalking to be a “healing,” “divining,” “conjuring”—“a balm, a knowing” (“Where Desire Goes” 61). Moore not only stalks beauty in this novel, she captures it—consecrates it—by figuring “the light” in Helen’s and Cal’s life together as their youthfulness and desire, their visible love for each other as well as their private lusts.

Moore captures both their seen and unseen love when she describes Helen’s and Cal’s wedding reception at the Masonic Temple, where Helen lifts her wedding dress to let Cal under so he can slip off her garter.

Cal got on his knees, inching the garter down, and the men were clinking beer bottles together, and Helen dropped the skirt over his head. She let the whole thing fall over him

and he, like a clown, stayed under a long time, just his shoes sticking out. [...] He put his mouth on her. There on the dance floor. His head a lump under her skirt, and she put her hands on that lump, both hands. His fingertips just barely touching the front of her thighs. Stroking her thighs. He breathed hot breath through her panties while she stood there. She had to close her eyes. She played along, fanning herself like crazy, and everybody cheering and laughing. Everybody whooping it up. And when he came out he had the garter swinging from his finger. (*February 73-74*)

It is this light—their youthful love, Helen’s longing for Cal—that forces Helen to live “through the disaster [of the *Ocean Ranger*] every night of her life. She has read the Royal Commission report. She knows what happened,” she knows the public account of the tragedy. “But she wants to be in Cal’s skin when the rig is sinking. She wants to be there for him” (70).

These two scenes, Helen’s past and present, show the interplay between Helen’s inner and outer lives. When everyone sees her at fifty-six (as we see her in the passage where Louise tells her she needs to renovate) they do not see her loneliness, her sorrow. They do not know that she still lives with memories of Cal’s breath between her legs, his hands on her thighs, and that she misses him so terribly that she wants to be in his skin when he drowns. They see the wedding dresses she makes, they see a hobby spun into a job, they’ve likely even read the Royal Commission report, but they do not see deeper. A reader, however, does glimpse below the surface of Helen’s life, perceiving that “[Helen] sleeps and sometimes dreams [of Cal], and it is wrenching to wake up”:

There is no talk in these dreams, no actual words in these dreams, but she knows what he wants; he wants her to follow him.

How awful. Death has made him selfish.

Forget the children. This is what he means. Forget yourself. Come with me. Don't you want to know what happened?

And she *does* want to know what happened. She wants to know so badly, but something is holding her back—the children, the roof, the phone. Is there a way to go and come back? Why can't Cal come back?

When she wakes up she is full of guilt because she decided to stay. Something rigid and life-loving and unwilling to cave takes over. She betrays him in this way, every single night of her life, and it's exhausting. She denies him, she forgets him. Every time she says no to him in a dream she forgets him a little bit more. (69)

Helen imagines Cal telling her to “forget herself,” get outside herself, give up—stop trying to appear fine by leading a normal life. But Helen is already outside herself, as we read earlier in the novel when Helen is remembering the mass at the Basilica the night the *Ocean Ranger* sank, before they knew for certain all hands were lost: “She wanted [Cal's] body. She remembers that. [...] Not that she could have put it into words then. [...] What she might have said then: She was outside. The best way to describe what she felt: She was banished. Banished from everyone, and from herself” (13).

Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, reading Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, writes: “The body is the absolute *zero-object* (Heidegger), that is, one *so near* that it is not thematized [or imagined]—it is something that we do not experience in our experiencing, what we overlook in most cases” (Patočka 26-27). I read Patočka as describing a normal body: a person who has not experienced the trauma that Helen has. Helen's experience of being banished from herself means that she experiences her loss consciously: she witnesses herself, her life, as if from outside. Later she will think: “You see your life but it's as though you are behind a glass

partition and the sparks fly up and you cannot feel them. [...] You know it's your life, because people behave as though it is. They call you by name. Helen, come shopping. Helen, there's a party. [...] Mom, where's the peanut butter. [...] There are bills. You wake in the middle of the night because you hear water and there is a leak in the kitchen roof. The plaster has cracked open and water is tapping on the tiles, faster and faster" (*February* 65). Helen describes herself as being evicted from her own life, but she also describes small and mundane things—"rigid" and "life-loving" things—that continually bring her back under the immense weight of living. These ordinary things that give life its bulk and heft—the outward reality of everyday tasks and relationships—are also, strangely, what make Helen "unwilling to cave."

Life's ordinariness is her crushing load but it is also her buttress. This becomes more fully realized in the novel when Helen listens to one of the insistent, "life-loving" voices that keep calling her back to her own life—Louise. And it is on Louise's recommendation that Helen hires Barry, who begins to renovate not only her house but also how she sees her own life, her ability to love. "His stories had to do with sacrifices that paid off, and minor redemptions. There was a self-deprecating humour to his stories, and he was willing to let a silence stand. There was respect for privacy and a belief that pleasure required mystery and that there was a mystery behind every bald and ordinary fact" (146). Though a reader can see the impasto whirl of Helen's inner and outer lives—their consubstantiality—in Moore's textured prose, Helen herself gains access to this insight only through Barry, who "would tell her it was a nice evening. He would call out to her about the sky. [...] You should see this, Helen, he would say. There's a bloody big red sun" (147-148). Helen thinks of this as "a Catholic thing to say," but a reader recalls the big red sun John saw over the Singapore airport and remembers how John, at that point in the novel, was waking up to the weight of his new responsibility as a father. Here, in this

scene with Barry, Helen finds herself, like a Catholic child of Barry's generation, "cowed by the idea of original sin" (feeling guilty for betraying Cal by wanting to love another), "confirmed" (called back to her life), and strangely still able to pray (to hope for more than sorrow's cold company).

By figuring Cal in Helen's memories, Moore revives these memories, allowing Cal to live *and* die, haunt *yet* bring peace, cause us (as readers) to ache *and* laugh. These memories also illuminate Helen's growing love for Barry, and her longing for Barry becomes a needed instress that sustains her sorrow, even if it does not excise this inner ache. Losing Cal is part of who Helen *is* and she knows this. Applying Patočka's line of thought to *February*, we could argue that if Helen's loss of Cal was an unconscious loss she might have been able to bear it with more ease, but because she is "banished" from herself, she is therefore conscious of her loss and its great weight. Lilburn writes that "the going out, the largesse, the communion, is [or becomes] a stable inwardness" ("Knowing As Ritual" 125). For Helen, opening herself to Barry—renovating her life to let in the light of his "bloody big red sun"—allows her "a stable inwardness," the newly realized instress of love.

Love, of course, takes many shapes in this novel—Helen's youthful love for Cal, the love between Helen and her girls, Helen's motherly love for John, her deepening love for Barry. All of these taken together create the instress of Helen's life: holiness. Or that which is vital and life-loving—that which does not necessarily save or resurrect but transfigures. This vitality, this holiness, for Ricoeur, is sought (and found) in the journey out from oneself to another and back again. Wolfe describes this same experience when he writes that in reading "the world that has been lost to us is restored." But, for Wolfe, the world is more than restored, just as for Ricoeur, the self one returns to is always in some way re-imagined: transfigured, itself illuminated. There

is of course never a guarantee of this. Seeking it involves sacrifice and vulnerability. We can always choose to be cold and unaffected by a story's Eros just as we can shirk our responsibility to the other. Freedom allows for indifference, but it also cannot banish fear—fear of Eros or lust, vulnerability or drowning, love or sparks.<sup>57</sup>

We see Helen's fear of lusting after Barry when she starts convincing herself that they "are too old for love. It is laughable. For an instant she sees them fucking: grey pubic hair, puckered skin, creaking joints. It is a grotesque comedy, this hunger. She is starving for physical tenderness—the shock of it buckles her knees, there at her sewing machine, and she pauses over her stitch; she is dizzy with lust" (*February* 243). And this longing eventually causes Helen to invite Barry over for dinner on New Year's Eve, "risk candles," and open herself to Barry, symbolized when she takes him to her bedroom to show him the wedding dress she's been working on (286-287). She wants to make herself vulnerable, open, but she is also afraid, which we see (or don't see) when Helen becomes suddenly self-conscious that Barry is in her bedroom and she turns "off the light to make the bed go away" (287). That is when Barry says "her name," and she fumbles to turn the light back on, the "hundred-watt bulb in that lamp" shining "an uncompromising light" (287). In this scene's "uncompromising" light we see Helen's vulnerability, her fear. And her fear in this novel is so often associated with Cal's drowning (148-153)—imagining the wave that toppled the *Ocean Ranger* as a hungry "void," as "God" or "death" (298-299)—that when, watching fireworks later in this scene, her thoughts sink to "the bottom of the ocean," it is shocking when she "step[s] back" and imagines that the "fireworks looked like underwater plants. Starfish, phosphorescent flowers with stamens and petals and seeds. They pushed up out of the dark and were extinguished by it before they could touch or come anywhere near her. [...] A red spurting fountain shot up a geyser of white spirals. More

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<sup>57</sup> All of these can destroy as well as create, as Žižek argues in "Neighbors and Other Monsters" (2005).



flowers over their heads dropping petals” (288). The sparks echo those at the beginning of the novel when Helen takes Timmy to get his skates sharpened; Helen’s longing for Cal grinds against her longing for Barry, but the violence of this longing appears like new flowers opening and dropping petals. The “bottom of the ocean,” the pit of Helen’s sorrow, her loss of Cal, remains. But it is illuminated with Eros’ upsurge—her love for Barry.

In this way loss and love become consubstantial in Helen’s life, each drawing meaning from the other. The emptiness of Helen’s world after Cal’s death fills a reader’s mind with strange light, stronger than hope. We see this illuminated many times by the use of light and shadow in *February*, what Michael Winter called chiaroscuro on the page—contrast. Early on in Moore’s novel, in the second section titled “*Basilica, February 1982*,” we perceive people’s blind hope for the survival of the 84 men onboard the *Ocean Ranger* when it went down: “It took three days to be certain the men were all dead. People hoped for three days. [...] [Helen] envied the people who knew the winds were ninety knots and could still show up at the Basilica in a kind of ecstasy of faith” (7). The clarity of Helen’s vision, her inability to hope for Cal’s survival, clears a reader’s mind of all sentimentality at this early stage of the novel. A reader is forced past the “ecstasy” of belief into Helen’s unbelief, her bewilderment—her loss, which she describes as being robbed: “The statue of the Virgin with snow in the eye sockets and over one cheek and the mouth like a robber’s kerchief. She remembers that because already something was rising inside her: the injustice of being robbed” (8). But robbed of what? Cal, her husband, certainly, but what is it in Cal, about Cal, about the 84 men who drowned, that made them so precious to the people gathered in the Basilica that night, blindly hoping for their survival?

Barbara Kay, in her initial *National Post* blast against *February* (15 July 2009), argues that the “real” tragedy of the *Ocean Ranger* was the loss of “strong, psychologically unconflicted

men nobly attending to work no woman would do.” Kay, bombastic as she is, highlights a truth of the tragedy: the “manly courage” demonstrated by workers on the rigs is “nobility” of a sort, if nobility is setting oneself against the gods, or, in this case, the ocean that spawned so many ancient gods. What Kay doesn’t see in Moore’s novel (perhaps because she had not read *February* when she wrote that initial rant) is that Moore describes this quiet nobility, the strange light of these men’s irreplaceable lives, and she does so without sentimentalizing these men as “psychologically unconflicted” titans:

There were men out on the rig who had said goodbye before they went out, that was the funny thing. Some men phoned their mothers. Men who were not in the habit of using the phone. A lot of the men weren’t used to saying how they felt. They didn’t think that way. They certainly did not say *thank you*. Not *goodbye* or *I love you*. [...] They were in the habit of turning those sentiments into actions. They chopped wood or they shovelled. A big pile of wood stacked under the blue tarp out by the shed. They brought over moose steaks. They put in an apartment for the mother-in-law. They got up on the roof with a bucket of tar. That was *thank you*. (*February* 9)

There is more to Cal’s quiet nobility than the one “claim to manly singularity” that Kay ascribes to him in her second article. Kay, in her rage against Moore and Helen, seems to miss Cal altogether as he is given flesh in the novel.

Yes, Cal has the “ability to make his wife ‘come and come and come’” but that is only a flare shooting out of the red sun that is Helen’s memory of him (9 Sept. 2009). Kay explicitly writes that she wanted *February* to be another novel with a different “plot-driven” storyline focusing on Cal and the “male victims” of the tragedy, rather than what she perceives *February* to be: a novel content “to hover solicitously over a surrogate victim” (15 July 2009). But Helen

isn't Moore's sole focus in the novel and a reader whose first focus is *not* defending her uninformed opinion in a national paper will see, in the first Basilica scene (and elsewhere in the novel), that Moore draws us into Helen's emptiness—her loss—not to indulge in self-centred “navel-gazing,” as Kay claims.

If the novel was about that, Helen would have stayed in the Basilica, inside where the “organ thrummed a long, low note like a human moan,” which she “felt in the soles of her feet; it vibrated between her legs, in her pubic bone and in her gut, turning her insides to water” (*February* 10). But Helen runs away from this “ecstasy of faith”—the quivering “candle flames” blurring to “sharp stars and the stars [throwing] out spears and her eyes [filling] and the flames [becoming] a wall of sluicing light” (10-11). Moore writes that when the “singing began [Helen] had to get out” (11). And here is the reason “why Helen left the church in the middle of mass: Some of those people were full of hope. Insane with it, and the lore is that hope can bring lost sailors home. That's the lore. Hope can raise the dead if you have enough of it” (13). The “sluicing wall of light” in the church, the hope that she could have Cal back from the frigid waters of the North Atlantic, is a seduction, symbolized by the sexual thrumming of the organ.

Hope is impossible for Helen, and she rejects it. What she wants is Cal's body, not some ecstatic, fleshless faith (13). She wants Cal. It is Cal, and not Helen, that is the focus of this scene. But we only glimpse Cal's life as it immolates in Helen's memory. The effect is that we are pulled deep inside the black hole of Helen's grief, in which we feel the crushing gravity of her collapse—her loss. But we are pulled into Helen's memories so that we can imagine, *through* her loss, the pulsing heat and light of Cal's holy, irreplaceable life.

If Cal's life, as remembered by Helen, is an image of holiness, it is important to remember that, according to Ricoeur, “what matters in imagination is less *content* than the

*function* of images” (Kearney 40). Because *February* centres on an historical tragedy—a real event—the “function” of Cal’s remembered presence in the novel is to figure imaginatively the irreplaceability of the lives of the 84 men lost when the *Ocean Ranger* went down. This could be read as Helen’s memory of Cal standing metaphorically for the collective memories of the 84 men who died in February 1982. We could argue, in light of Levinas’ philosophy, that we are able to imagine the holiness of these other lives by “remembering” Cal’s life. But metaphor cannot simply be taken as a “one for the other” formula. If it could, then the following counter to Levinas’ philosophy, written by Žižek, would alter the way we view Cal in a sacramental light:

We should therefore assume the risk of countering Levinas’s position with a more radical one: others are primordially an (ethically) indifferent multitude, and love is a violent gesture of cutting into this multitude and privileging a One as the neighbour, thus introducing a radical imbalance into the whole. In contrast to love, justice begins when I remember the faceless many left in shadow in this privileging of the one. Justice and love are thus structurally [or literally] incompatible: justice, not love, has to be blind; it must disregard the privileged One whom I “really understand.” (Žižek 182)

Žižek, here, reads “the neighbour” of Leviticus 19:18, whom we are commanded to love as ourselves, in terms of that idea’s content, its (structural or political) literalness, instead of reading it as a functional metaphor, an enabling story, or, more accurately, a story that enables us to function and live with (or, in the case of *February*, without) each other. Kearney argues that “[a] key function of narrative memory is... empathy. And empathy is not always escapism” (*On Stories* 62-63). Empathy is something neither Levinas’ nor Žižek’s understandings of justice allow for. But it *is* empathy—imaginative empathy—that makes Levinas’ ethics (illuminated by the face of a singular, irreplaceable other—Moore’s fictional Cal) consubstantial with Žižek’s

justice (which sacrifices the illuminated specific for the shadowed general—the 82 men who actually drowned on the *Ocean Ranger*). Empathy, or love, does not, as Levinas and Žižek fear, sacrifice justice, which, for both of them (unconcerned with fiction), is always literal. In contrast to this literalness, empathy allows for the imaginative substantiation of justice in real life. By forcing us to remember Cal, *February* forces us *not* to forget the 84.

The effect is similar to that in a film scene where a single character stands in the foreground and a crowd stands in the background. To focus on the face in the foreground, the camera blurs those in the background, and the camera blurs the person in the foreground to focus on those behind. To focus on one at the expense of the others, or the others at the expense of the one, would reduce the drama of the scene to sequential still shots. The living drama of a story like *February*, however, allows for a reader's attention to shift, fade, and refocus continually: moving between fiction and history, memory and imagination.

And imagination, according to Ricoeur, can be recognized as *an* act of responding to a demand for new meaning, “the demand of emerging realities to *be* by *being* said in new ways” (Kearney *Minerva* 40). Stories, then, are “imaginative variations” of the world that offer readers the freedom to see the world differently (as more holy) and to undertake actions that can lead to “transformation” (42). For Steiner, as I have argued, this transformation seems inevitable and for Žižek it seems impossible, but for Ricoeur there is no action without imagination, so, therefore, with imagination action *is* possible—in stories as well as in life. This is why Helen can love Barry, because she remembers Cal—imagining his death (which is impossible to know) as well as his life (which she remembers)—and these “imaginative memories” allow Helen to wake-up to her loss as an irreplaceable part of her life.

Helen is responsible for Cal's memory and, initially, loving Barry seems to be a betrayal of that trust. But Helen is able to imagine loving Barry, even at fifty-six, because imagination is the coupling of Eros and responsibility: it enables. In general, it makes an "intuition" of holiness into a "presence" of holiness incarnate in a work's heteroglossia. If the intuition, however, simply remains an idea, it does not live. Imagination, in the case of *February*, brings Helen's love (for Cal, her children, her son, and for Barry) to life in the midst of her grief. Imagining Cal allows her to remember their love—and it allows her to persist without it—and to imagine Cal's silence, his absence, as his response:

Helen had not believed in an afterlife before Cal died and she still did not think of it. But she listened for Cal after he died. She listened for his tread on the stairs; she listened for his advice. She listened for him pouring cereal out of a box, the clink of his spoon; she listened for the dog's nails on the hardwood as Cal set out its food in the back porch. She listened for his breathing at night. If she was lost in sewing and the kettle whistled, she expected Cal to turn it off. She asked him what he thought of the girls. (*February* 291)

This listening for Cal leads Helen to a cold conclusion—something she "cannot fathom or forgive":

We are alone in death. Of course we are alone. It is solitude so refined we cannot experience it while we are alive; it is too rarefied, too potent. It is a drug, that solitude, an immediate addiction. A profound selfishness, so full of self it is an immolation of all that came before. Cal was alone in that cold. Utterly alone, and that was death. That, finally, was death. (292)

Helen dreams that she "wants to jump into the ocean in the middle of the night when it's snowing just to see what it feels like" (292).

Sometimes, like tonight, she is so awake she feels she will never sleep again. [...] It is very cold out and dark, and Helen longs for some movement in the dark, for a taxi to go by. Out on the street the asphalt is so solidly itself. It will always be itself. The house across the street is the house across the street with its naked light bulb in the third-floor window. And there is Helen. But Helen is not sure she is herself.

She lifts her sleeping mask and the furniture buzzes and she feels pins and needles in her feet and a mounting wave of terror; she is solidly alone. She is as alone and cold and obdurately dull as the tree in her backyard, as the fender of a car under the street light, as the apple in the bowl on the kitchen table, as the church across the street, as the steeple covered on one side with snow; she is not Helen, and who is Helen? A scrap of a dream, a fragmented, a frayed—and the phone rings, it blasts into the room, it rings and rings. There is a body in the bed with her and she goes cold with terror. It is Cal. Cal is back, but he is dead.

But it is not Cal. It is not Cal.

Barry switches on the light. (292-293)

Helen's subconscious listening for Cal leads her to the conscious realization that she is "solidly alone." And so it shocks her when she wakes to a body with her in bed, which she had slept in alone for the past twenty-six years, and in her grogginess she thinks the body is Cal. But, when the light is switched on, it turns out to be Barry, and instead of hearing Cal's voice, as she had in her dream, she hears Barry "pissing in the toilet down the hall. And she answers the phone" that had startled her out her dreams of Cal, and hears John's voice, "crying" (293). Her imaginative memories of Cal—her conscious and unconscious dreaming—eventually lead her to the only response Cal can give to Helen's longing for human touch, for Barry: Cal's answer is his

absence. And this revelation is what finally shocks Helen awake to the fact that she *can* love Barry and still remember Cal—loving one will not betray the other.

For Helen, this awakening allows her to see, as Wolfe says, “a new pattern in a chaotic experience.” This is Helen’s “stay against confusion.” It is, for Helen, like Dillard’s candle with its double wicks—her “other,” Cal, immolating in being remembered. We see this when we read that the “past yields, it gives way, it goes on forever. The future is unyielding. It is possible that the past has cracked off, the past has clattered to the floor, and what remains is the future and there is not very much of that” (263). The past yields, and because of this, it becomes possible for Helen to see and to love Barry, as himself, in contrast to and in light of Cal, whose memory still burns in Helen’s mind and body—a pulsing afterimage, an aching scar.

Beauty in this novel is most often figured as Helen’s memories of Cal which burn in her imagination and make it possible for Helen to see the world as it is *and* in light of what it can be. Helen’s memories, then, become both a mirror and an icon. I have argued that art fails when it only mirrors a world we already know, but that it succeeds, in Lilburn’s words, when it “coaxes one to an at-homeness,” when it decentres “the ego” and sways “one nearer to what one desires,” when it comprises “an inebriative ascesis,” when it becomes an intoxicating uplifting that is essentially life-giving (“Knowing As Ritual” 119). That is to say, art succeeds when, as an icon, it allows us clearly to see reality as it *is* but also to see *through* reality’s *is*-ness and to perceive, dimly, what is life-giving *in* reality: love.

In centering the novel on a true event, Moore holds up her story as a mirror to reflect history. But, as with most of the mirrors and windows in it, *February*, as fiction, shatters surface level mimesis. Cal breaks the mirror on their honeymoon night by looking at it, and Helen, remembering this and their life together, all of it, experiences her life cracking and spreading,



bursting, “curled like a wave” that splashes “onto the carpet” (*February* 77). And, later, while Helen is trying to pick up the pieces of her life after Cal’s death, John—as a shoplifting, ungovernable boy—crashes through a store’s window, lacerating his body, but, interestingly, not disfiguring his face, which more resembles Helen’s face than Cal’s (174). We read earlier in the novel that John is not a mirror of Cal, but Helen (79). Helen’s life is shattered by her loss of Cal, and we see this foreshadowed in the broken mirror in the hotel room on their wedding night. But even though her loss of Cal scars her in innumerable ways—like the lacerations on John’s body after he bursts through the storefront window—her face, herself, is not disfigured.

This is how Helen returns to herself by the novel’s end: she is scarred by her loss of Cal, her body is older and full of aches, but she opens herself to Barry, as Barry opens her house up to let in the natural light. We see this light symbolically glow in the scene when Helen first makes love to Barry on her couch, while the little espresso maker perks on the stove’s hot element. It is in this scene that her desire for Barry is fully awakened, desire that calls up what Helen thought forever lost at sea: her ability to love. And this awakening echoes John’s earlier awakening—in the Singapore airport, ordering an espresso—to his responsibility as a father (24-32). John’s sense of responsibility to Jane Downey and his unborn child transfigures in the course of the novel, until this heavy responsibility turns to unbridled joy at the birth of his baby girl (293). When Helen makes love to Barry there is a similar awakening, symbolized by Helen’s espresso maker’s bottom “glowing orange as if it were about to melt,” echoing the intense heat of the big, red sun John sees in Singapore, while he is ordering his own espresso (286-290).

This awakening is also symbolized in the novel by John’s passing back into consciousness, returning to himself, after he passed out underwater during a simulated helicopter crash (182). This process of waking up, for John and for Helen, is not always a pleasurable

experience, like the holding of a newborn baby or having a wild orgasm. Before these pleasures come the “shame and failure and vomiting”—the sorrow—involved in coming back to oneself: back to consciousness, life, and the body (182).

If Helen wakes to her ability to love Barry and John wakes to his responsibility as a father, then what does *February* wake us up to? What does it mean to see reading as returning to oneself other-wise? Lilburn writes that “[in] such cognitive stripping”—a sacramental reading—“knowing is a being-taken-in, a ‘belonging’ where one is ‘neither oneself nor someone else’” (“Knowing As Ritual” 140). A sacramental reader, like Lilburn’s contemplative, “belongs” to something that “is equally beyond denial; it is not conceptual; it is not power; it is not light; not wisdom; not divinity; not goodness; not being; not nonbeing [...], yet it permits, or rather is, consanguinity” (140). Consanguinity: the sharing, joining, and mixing of blood. A sacramental reading, then, is the blood of a new covenant shared between reader and story.

It is also the intoxicating means by which that blood can turn to wine: life can become a story, as it does in Michael Crummey’s *Galore*. And that story can taste both bitter and sweet, it can devastate and surprise a reader: make her feel loss keenly while bringing her again to what has been lost. In *Galore*, what has been lost is a sense of the value of outport life in Newfoundland. In Crummey’s novel, we taste the bitterness of that hard life, but we also taste its tart sweetness: its fleshy holiness, its “Devine” humanity.

## Chapter 4

### Eucharistic Reading

Michael Crummey's *Galore*

#### Introduction

In this final chapter, I will examine the sacramental nature of the reading experience by first comparing the theoretical views of Daniel Coleman with those of Richard Kearney, and then tasting the substantiation of those views in a reading of Michael Crummey's multi-generational epic *Galore*. I will begin by exploring what Coleman calls the pleasures of the text—the pleasures of devastation, confirmation, and surprise—and how experiencing these pleasures, through a sacramental reading, what Kearney describes as “a eucharistics of profane perception,” might enable a reader to taste the possibilities of the imagination in the *thisness* of everyday life.

The idea of eating a book is a poetic image that has been around since the times of the Hebrew prophets. So when I write of reading as a means of feeding our hunger for otherness, I am not inventing a metaphor but refiguring a long tradition of “incarnational thinking” about stories, particularly as expressed in so called “Religions of The Book” such as Judaism and Christianity. This way of thinking about stories as things to be consumed, things that can nourish the soul, always comes out of a gnawing realization of a lack of something essential. Steiner might call this the realization of a malnourishment caused by being starved of our “central,”

fulfilling humanity. I have been arguing thus far that one of the things contemporary writers and readers are hungry for is a “real” sense of life’s mystery, its life-giving holiness. And if, as Hansen puts it, the “hungers of our spirits are fed by sharing in the glimpsed interiority of others,” then we, from the outset, need to explore *how* this is accomplished: in the previous sections we have given critical shape to this desire—its origin in another’s *adieu*, its embodiment in a covenant between self and other, and its outworking in re-imagining oneself other-wise—but now we need to explore the specific ways in which narrative satiates this hunger for holiness and thereby begins the substantiation of real change in the life of a reader.

In the theoretical section of this chapter, the biblical account of the prophet Ezekiel eating the “bitter book” that tastes “sweet as honey,” recounted in Daniel Coleman’s *In bed with the word*, will table a gustatory image for us through which to taste the different pleasures stories can give: the pleasures of devastation, of confirmation, and of surprise. But in order to explore in greater depth *why* these things give readers pleasure I will be exploring their phenomenological substance in a reading of Richard Kearney’s *Anatheism*, through which we will see how things like devastation, confirmation, and surprise in stories can be substantiated into readerly *pleasures* through a sacramental reading of a work’s *thisness*.

In the second half of the chapter, working from this idea of tasting the pleasures of the text, I will show how even a book of sorrow and devastation like Michael Crummey’s *Galore*—a book full of surprise and confirmation as well—is a story that tastes “sweet as honey.” The sweetness of this magically real, folkloric saga, I argue, can be tasted through the “miracle” of the world-made-flesh in the body of *Galore*, in the generational return to the life of “the flesh” made by the inhabitants of Paradise Deep and the Gut. What is often bitter, though, as I will demonstrate in a reading of the novel, is when the epiphany of the world-made-flesh compels a

reader to become the flesh-made-word by living prophetically—differently, other-wise—in light of Crummey’s earthy depiction of “Devine” humanity. That is to say, the communion with humanity a reader is called to in reading an epic like *Galore* is bittersweet because such a reader knows that to live fully is continually to lose herself, to be hollowed out like Dillard’s flame-drawn moth, but in losing herself in the lives of others, like Judah and his descendant Abel Devine, she may find that *life* itself can burn more intensely in and through her. This will spark, with new fictional flare, the idea, drawn from Bowen’s reading of Bakhtin, that the body is the centre of value, particularly for any sacramental reading.

In light of Kearney’s argument, explored in the first half of this chapter, I will show that the pleasures of reading, when *realized* in a novel like *Galore*, create epiphanies—glimpses of holiness—that can spark in a reader prophetic critical reaction to Crummey’s story: reaction that can work to change that reader’s “cultural politics” or how she lives in the world. Kearney might call this type of sacramental reading *anatheistic* in that it allows for both “epiphany *and* prophecy”, belief *and* interrogation, a hermeneutics of affirmation *and* suspicion. Reading in this way, then, can become a means of actively sacramentalizing the “pleasures of the text,” working to substantiate them into the cultural politics or the life-transforming self-awareness of a reader. The poetic image I have used to capture this drama is that of Ezekiel prophesying to the valley of dry bones, telling them to come to life. Seen in this way, the epiphanic and prophetic are two sides of a sacramental reading: the effect a story has on a reader and the effect that reader has on her world as a result of that story.

But before there can be prophecy there must be epiphany: that eye-opening glimpse of holiness; that moment in reading a book when the words of the story taste “sweet as honey.”

### Eucharistic Reading

In the last chapter of *In bed with the word*, “Eating the Book,” Coleman writes of the Jewish Feast of Shavout as it was celebrated in medieval society. A central ritual of the Feast of Shavout involved a rabbi writing words of the Torah in chalk on a slate which was then covered in honey and handed to a young Jewish boy who was to lick the chalky slate clean, thereby ceremonially “ingesting holy words” (Coleman 96-97). Coleman tells us that the belief behind this rite was that what “was one element, words on a page, [became] absorbed, reconstituted into muscle, brain cells, saliva, hair follicles. This [was considered] incarnational thinking: that the Word [did not] merely remain ideas on a page, not merely... abstractions in the mind, but that it [became] fused into the viscera of our bodies” (98). Coleman explains what he means by this mystic “fusion” of story with a reader’s body when he applies this medieval Jewish rite to reading in general, not just to readings of the Torah: “The book we eat becomes us: shapes what we see, how we hear, what we perceive through touch or taste or smell. The object of eating the book is pleasure, rumination, and sustenance. [It] is not rushed through but savoured and digested—tasted all the way through” (98).

Coleman’s objective in his book is to “renovate” our reading habits by showing how reading was and still is a spiritually formative endeavour, regardless of a reader’s professed orthodoxy or agnosticism (*cf.* 124). So, it is interesting that he cites “pleasure” as the primary object of eating the book or reading; the spirituality Coleman goes on to describe as being nourished by reading in this way comes out of this first focus on pleasure or what I have been calling Eros. It is, in its most basic form, concerned with the sensual world and the other who inhabits that world. The very image of eating is symbolic of Coleman’s focus on embodied

spirituality over an ethereal sense of transcendence. Reading, then, for him, is spiritual inasmuch as it is worldly and *knowable* through pleasure.

Coleman writes that this “Jewish ceremony [of Shavout] echoes the weird scenes of book-eating that recur in the Jewish Scriptures. Book-eating launches the careers of several Hebrew prophets, including Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as well as John of Patmos in the Christian book of Revelations. Each of these men has a vision in which he is given a scroll to eat and, having eaten the book, he then sets out to communicate God’s message to humanity” (98). The direction of communication here is important to note because it mirrors what I have argued about the *adieu* of a work preceding any critical engagement with it; the *adieu*, the other’s shalom and benediction, form the call of the other and the desire to respond. The *adieu* of a story is like Ezekiel’s vision; it is when we hear the voice of the other calling for response: “Take this story, it is my body, eat it.” A story’s *adieu* is the call of that which is beyond language—holiness—*reverberating*, as Levinas says, in language. And for Bakhtin and Ricoeur this reverberation thrums with particular intensity in narrative. Put more simply, before we read we feel ourselves being read: we feel ourselves called to respond to the other who beckons us in stories, with whom we have covenanted in the act of reading, and through whose eyes we have learned to see ourselves other-wise. So if Ezekiel, after experiencing this encounter (this *à-Dieu* from God), set out “to communicate God’s message to humanity,” the question is, what can we set out to do in light of a sacramental reading? What type of action in the real world might this type of reading elicit?

Answering these questions is the aim of Coleman’s book: understanding how reading can be seen as a spiritual practice that influences one’s “cultural politics” or how one lives in the world. “By this phrase,” Coleman writes, “I don’t mean the little ‘p’ of party politics, with its

democrats and republicans, Whigs and Tories, communists, socialists, and rhinoceroses.” By “cultural politics,” Coleman means the plunge “into an everyday negotiation of the possibilities and inequities of the world” (2). And he goes on to flesh out the connection between one’s reading and one’s cultural politics by writing:

Although it would be easy to dismiss [reading] as mere escapism, as simply taking a break from the daily grind of reality, I want to argue that by learning to follow a melody you would never have invented on your own, by comprehending a concept or imagining a world you had never heard of before, you *are* changed. You become *capable* of actions, skills, and insights that were previously impossible for you. You have been changed, modified, through contact with an Other, who is a kind of companionable ghost, the other breath within your breath. (84, *my emphasis*)

Cultural politics as “change,” then, is intricately connected to readerly empathy: that which makes one more “capable of actions, skills, and insights” *if* cultivated in one’s practice as a reader—hence the focus of this study on sacramental reading. The cultivation of empathy, after all, is nothing less than the prophetic outworking of reading a story sacramentally. Prior to this “change,” however, is the consuming of the story itself: eating it whole.

For a story cannot be sacramentalized, substantiated in the life of a reader, until it is fully engaged with as a story. To bring Bakhtin back into the discussion, this means listening to *all* the voices clamouring for attention in a work, even the ones whose words are bitter and whose stories are devastating. Coleman writes that this type of “reading chews on difficult, even painful passages: it doesn’t push them to the side of the plate...” (100). All the biblical writers who are told to eat a book are required to consume one filled with bitterness, and this observation leads Coleman to see both the necessity of reading fully—even that which is not palatable—but it also



allows him to perceive the strange pleasure that reading fully can give: a pleasure that comes from a “real” encounter with the other rather than an analytical brush with an idea of “otherness.”

The book Ezekiel is required to eat is a book of lamentations, wailings, and moanings; Jeremiah’s name has become synonymous with despair; John of Patmos eats from the unhappy book. Theirs is not a book about the purpose-driven life or the power of positive thinking, nor is it about the habits of highly effective people or how I’m okay and you’re okay. It is not a book of instructions, happy endings, jokes, erotic stimulation, beautiful poems, or suggestions for self-improvement. (101)

If the book that Ezekiel eats can be said to contain what Cording has called “the world’s fullness” then part of what makes up that fullness—that *meaningfulness*—is sorrow. But if, following Gardner, what we are looking for in reading is essentially life-giving then we need to ask: What is holy or beautiful about sorrow?

In response to this, thinking of the novels discussed so far, I would argue that sorrow is, ironically, often the form that “semantic shock” takes in stories. Eros takes this form to pierce, in Coleman’s words, the armour of hard-hearted, cynical readers (101). Coleman tells us that a book’s sorrow is the “sad music” that awakens in us “the awareness [that we are] not living up to the polish we present to one another; the sadness we feel about not being able to match our behaviour to our own values; the sorrow of living... in a world whose advertizing and cynicism have gotten inside of us and alienated us from what truly nurtures us” (101-102). Books that truly nourish us then, first awaken us, through the semantic shock of sorrow, to the reality of our malnourishment: to our hunger for that which gives life and ultimately humanizes us. “For in speaking honestly to our hurt, to our human pain,” Coleman tells us, “the book of grief can put a

healing hand upon the parts of us that need desperately to be acknowledged and touched” (102). This is why the so called “pleasure of devastation” comes, for Coleman, before the other pleasures of reading like confirmation and surprise (102-103).

Coleman writes that a “book can be sweet *because* it is devastating. And devastation, though I wouldn’t recommend it as a daily ritual, can be one of the most important spurs to spiritual growth. It can bring you face to face with the parts of yourself that you thrust farthest away. And no spiritual life can grow if it refuses to look these parts in the eye” (104). The spiritual growth that is spurred here by the pleasure of devastation is what I have been referring to as that which humanizes us—reconnecting us to those parts of ourselves that we “thrust farthest away.”

Contemporary Atlantic Canadian fiction—judging by the works of Richards, Winter, Moore, and Crummey discussed in this study—seems to favour these kinds of stories about devastation and loss.<sup>58</sup> Which is another reason why I have chosen to focus on the literature of this region: because, in writing about loss, many of the novelists of Atlantic Canada demonstrate a preoccupation, in their fictions, with reconnecting their readers with parts of themselves that they have lost touch with: often this takes the shape of the past, but not always. My readings of Richards, Winter, Moore, and Crummey—though they deal with past—also show the different shapes loss can take: particularly as those parts of ourselves that humanize—what we have been calling holiness. But the pleasure of devastation is only *a* means by which we can encounter humanizing presence in stories. Closely related to this pleasure of devastation is the pleasure of confirmation, which can also, paradoxically, be both negative and positive. Coleman writes that there is “a real delight that comes when some words on the page give clear, concise shape to a

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<sup>58</sup> A reading of the works of Wayne Johnston and Alistair MacLeod would serve to establish this claim further. Even comic novels like Ed Riche’s *The Nine Planets* or Jessica Grant’s *Come, Thou Tortoise* deal with devastation and loss to a degree.

morass of ideas or opinions that you haven't had the opportunity or stimulus to sort through" (105).

According to Coleman, as readers we are more open to confirmation in reading, be it negative or positive, because of our readerly "solitude": "There's something about my solitude that opens me up to this unique form of companionship found in reading" (106). He goes on to say that "there's a significant difference in the level at which I can allow myself to be open to an idea or thought in conversation as compared to in solitude" (107). In reality we can be quite closed off from others, not to mention that their inner lives are carefully sealed off from us, but in reading we allow ourselves more freedom and a greater sense of vulnerability to others outside ourselves, to other ways of being outside our egos—we allow ourselves to stare. Coleman argues convincingly that "when we are reading a book, we can open ourselves to the words on the page with impunity. There's an honesty we can allow between ourselves and the page" (107). Coleman characterizes this openness as an "undefended posture... made possible by the structure of absence" so that a reader feels open to what the work confirms in her, even if that reader would not admit to these confirmations in a social or political setting (107).

This *initial* undefended posture is the key, I think, to a reader sensing the mystery of life's *meaningfulness* and feeling free enough to give shape to this intuition in a sacramental reading. I have elsewhere<sup>59</sup> described a reader practicing this kind of hermeneutics of affirmation as a "reverent reader," a concept that has been harshly critiqued because "reverence" or "openness" is apparently seen in today's academic climate as synonymous with "uncritical" or "impressionistic." Such charges are legitimate only if a reader remains in this undefended or reverent posture and does not sacramentalize, through a critical hermeneutics of suspicion, her

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<sup>59</sup> See Martin, "Sacramental Readings of Spoken and Written places in Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief* and Wayne Johnston's *The Custodian of Paradise*," (30 Sept. – 3 Oct. 2009).

primary intuitions of the world's *meaningfulness* into communicable meaning, or, to borrow a phrase from Aristotle, into "shareable worlds." Critics who deny a reader the option of this initial reverence toward a work are in danger of practicing intellectual solipsism in which one way of knowing—reading the world through a hermeneutics of suspicion—is seen as the *only* way of knowing. This kind of current academic insistence on suspicion over affirmation implicitly denies "the structure of absence" that deconstructionist readings were originally supposed to defend by making the physical absence of the other in a work—the idea that there is nothing outside the text—an ontological fact rather than an epistemological method for exploring the legitimacy of the other's figurative presence in the story.

We will revisit this idea in our discussion of Kearney's *Anatheism*, but for now let it stand that the confirmation a work gives a reader—like the pleasure of devastation—is an absolutely necessary thing for a reader to take in if she is to "eat the book" in its wholeness and thereby taste its "sweetness." This pleasure is essential in reading if what is read is ever to awaken desire in a reader powerful enough to affect the way she lives in the world.

Another essential pleasure that comes from reading is what Coleman calls the pleasure of surprise: "that feeling when a completely new way of seeing, an entirely new thought, allows you to make sense of [intuitions] or experiences that had before remained opaque" (108). Sometimes seeing something in an entirely new light comes as a result of perceiving a tension, a mystery, and pondering it—carrying that tension instead of trying to resolve it. It is this kind of pondering that can lead to epiphany. There is an echo here of Wolfe's idea, in "Stalking the Spirit," that a writer's goal is not to explain the simple meaning of the mystery that has been glimpsed but, rather, to involve the reader in the story so that the reader experiences the mystery: so that she feels the unresolved tension herself. To experience mystery in this way as a reader,

rather than having it philosophically explained to you by the author, opens up new ways of *seeing* that can only come from reading a work, at least initially, in an undefended posture.

Coleman, citing Rolheiser, suggests “that the willingness to carry tension [or mystery] is a sign of great respect [or reverence], for it allows others to be themselves without demanding that they resolve one’s own concerns; it is also a mysterious mode of gestation, which [can turn] hurt into healing, wound into supple flesh, and discord into friendship” (109).

This is what we see in a novel like *February*, in which the pleasures of bitterness, confirmation, and surprise coalesce and blend in Moore’s textured telling of Helen O’Mara’s story. It is the unique mix of these pleasures in each novel that gives Eros form in each story, and it is Eros (a desire or hunger for the other) that makes a reader self-aware in a more meaningful way than merely being self-conscious. A self-aware (or self-giving) reader is one who has journeyed out from her own ego into the world of others and seen herself refracted in the dialogism of a novel. It is this type of self-awareness—that is conscious and actively mindful of the other—that can affect how a reader lives her life in her own sphere. The pleasures of reading, particularly the pleasure of devastation, are what create in us as readers a gnawing hunger to taste the world’s sweetness—to experience the world’s mysterious fullness. This is why Coleman writes that “the experience of devastation can be sweet as honey because, although it feels like jackboots on the soul, it can make you self-aware in a remarkably powerful, life-transforming way” (111).

The “powerful, life-transforming” self-awareness is the collective fulfillment, in a reader’s life, of a work’s different pleasures: the effect that devastation, confirmation, and surprise have on a reader. As I have argued, when a reader experiences these pleasures in a work, that work, through its Eros (the desire created in a reader by experiencing these pleasures), opens

a reader up to the “reality” of the other’s figurative presence—the other’s “real” and affecting holiness—even in that other’s literal absence. But a story’s Eros can also open a reader to the pleasure of the story itself—what I earlier described as the book’s *thisness*. In terms of Kearney’s *Anatheism*, we can see these two effects of Eros take shape in two reader-vocations: first, the other’s holiness can be seen as that which is desired in a reader’s “pilgrim vocation,” while a work’s *thisness*—the work itself—can be seen as the object of attention in a reader’s “sacramental vocation.” Kearney, in trying to describe what he means by *anatheism*, speaks of these two vocations in relation to two streams of thought in Christianity:

From the beginning, and at its best, Christianity professed both a pilgrim and sacramental vocation. The first went out in search of aliens and strangers. It was a quest for a kingdom still to come, which ran from early migrant missionaries to the bold thinkers of the Reform movements (including advocates of a “religionless faith” like Bonhoeffer and Ricoeur). The second vocation—the sacramental—sought to welcome the stranger into the here and now: the kingdom already come. This hosting of the transcendent in the immanence of the present was epitomized by the great mystics of the monastic and mendicant orders (Carmelites, Beguines, Franciscans, Benedictines) as well as by numerous religious artists and saints. *Anatheism* draws from these two vocations, seeking to combine the pilgrim commitment to protest and prophecy with a sacramental return to epiphanies of the everyday. It endeavours to balance the journey outward with a sojourning in the here and now. (Kearney *Anatheism* 85)

What Kearney is trying to do with the idea of *anatheism* here is similar to what I am trying to do with the concept of sacramental reading. Just as *anatheism* is an attempt to balance prophecy with epiphany—the pilgrim vocation with the sacramental vocation in religious philosophy—so

a sacramental reading is a means by which a reader is drawn into the world of the other as a pilgrim, but this is only done *through* sacramental engagement with the work itself *as* a work of fiction. In terms of a sacramental reading, it is only through a close-reading of a work itself that one can journey out into the world of the other: in other words, it is only in epiphany that prophecy is conceived.

For Kearney a “[sacramental] return is a retrieval of the extraordinary in the ordinary. [Kearney uses] ‘sacramental’ here in a more general sense than that of ritual ‘sacraments’ (though it may include these) to cover those special awakenings of the divine within the bread and wine of quotidian existence” (86). From the outset of this study, I have been arguing that a sacramental reading is a hunt for “special awakenings,” creative sightings, or epiphanies of holiness in the diverse embodiments of beauty found in novels by Richards, Winter, Moore, and Crummey. And beauty, as Wolfe argues in his essay on that topic, known as it is through a reader’s imagination, is that by which the everyday is transmuted into sacrament. Beauty, which Gardner says does not rightly exist, comes into being in that “flash of radiance” when a reader catches a glimpse in a story of the “back parts” (or the humanizing) side of holiness. Beauty becomes incarnate in that sudden awakening that occurs in reading a story, that “semantic shock” a reader finds strangely pleasurable—the barking of epiphany.

This hunt for holiness in reading begins with a close-reading of the work itself, “returning to the things themselves,” to use a key phrase from Husserl’s writing on phenomenology. But Kearney, in *Anatheism*, wants to make sure that this idea of “returning to the things themselves” is actually worked out, enacted, *realized*: something he argues does not occur in Husserl’s philosophy, which remains snarled in “the nets of transcendental idealism” (88). Kearney argues that the phenomenology “of the flesh”—of things themselves—was taken up then by Heidegger:

“But the fact remains that Heideggerian *Dasein* [being-in-the-world] has no real sense of the living body: *Dasein* does not eat, sleep or have sex. It too remains, despite all the talk of ‘being-in-the-world,’ captive of the transcendental lure” (88). Even in reading the works of Max Scheler, Edith Stein, and Jean Paul Sartre, Kearney does not find a “fully fledged phenomenology of the flesh” until Maurice Merleau-Ponty, writing in 1960s France: “Here at last the body is no longer treated as a mere project, cipher, or icon but as *flesh itself* in all its ontological depth. The ghost of metaphysical idealism is laid to rest. We return to the body in its unfathomable *thisness*” (88). By linking the language of icons here to the ensnaring “transcendental lure” that haunts phenomenology from Husserl to Sartre, Kearney’s reading of Merleau-Ponty seems to come into conflict with my earlier reading of Jean-Luc Marion.

A work of fiction, I have argued in my reading of Marion, functions as an icon because of its consubstantial link to the real world: there is always a world outside a novel that that novel is intensely interested in. So a novel’s heteroglossia is of the same dialogic substance—the world, others—but in a different form. The novel is to the world or others what the surface of a lake is to its depth. Consubstantiality is what makes sacraments, like icons, strong metaphors; and icons, like stories, are not mere ciphers of another reality, the other’s world—they are figurative surfaces to substantive realities. And these realities—like holiness—are substantiated, *realized*, in reading. Because something like holiness can become substantiated as beauty when perceived through the imagination, the transcendental ideal of holiness becomes the incarnation of beauty in the “flash of brilliance” that simultaneously blinds a reader to metaphor’s hinge while at the same time making that flange more visible. This epiphanic “flash of brilliance” does not allow a reader’s gaze to rest on categories like real or unreal, Us or Them, but quickens the paradox between them into a living incarnation of mystery.



Reading the work itself, then, as a sacrament, never bypasses surface for substance or considers a novel as a mere cipher for reality. A sacramental reading, concerned as it is with the work itself, is actually consubstantial, in theory, with what Kearney calls Merleau-Ponty's "eucharistics of profane perception": "What we have here is a basic analogy of proper proportionality: A is to B what C is to D. Namely, the sacrament of transubstantiation is to the responsive communicant what the sensible is to the capable perceiver" (89). To take this a step further I would say that the sensible is to the capable perceiver what beauty is to a sacramental reader. Kearney enacts this very thing in the second section of *Anatheism* where he looks at the "sacramental imagination" in the novels of James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Virginia Woolf.<sup>60</sup> And in this section he writes that "each sensory encounter with the strangeness of the world is an invitation to a 'natal pact' where, *through sympathy*, the human self and the strange world give birth to one another. Sacramental sensation is a reversible rapport between myself and things, wherein the sensible gives birth to itself through me" (89, *my emphasis*). It is important to note that Kearney says it is not "I" or a reader who births the sensible but it is the sensible (what I have called the sensual) world that births itself in a reader *through sympathy* or love (Eros). This preserves the mystery of the world's otherness, its strangeness to a reader—this same strangeness that Don McKay terms "wilderness"—while still making the world's fullness knowable to a reader through love (*cf.* McKay *Vis à Vis*).

To translate Kearney's point into our discussion, a book's *meaningfulness* gives birth to itself through a reader—the other's figurative presence becomes a "real" presence in the act of reading. This idea could then be seen as the "natal pact" between Steiner's idea of "real presence" and Coleman's idea of "the structure of absence." Coleman writes that "[awareness] of [the structure of absence as a form of mediation] is central to the spiritual experience because,

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<sup>60</sup> See Kearney, *Anatheism*, 85-132.

first, it keeps us from engulfing the Other. It maintains the otherness of the Other because the Other is physically removed from us in the moment of contact; it reminds us of the limits of our desire for and understanding of the Other” (Coleman 127). Coleman’s emphasis is on the *is not* side of metaphor, an ethical stance made to preserve the other’s alterity, whereas Steiner’s emphasis is emphatically on the side of metaphor’s *is-ness*, its “blinding” and affecting reality. But Kearney takes a middle road here between Coleman’s emphasis on the other’s literal absence and Steiner’s emphasis on the other’s real presence.

For Coleman, a work’s *meaningfulness* seems only to come into existence when a book affects a reader and influences that reader’s cultural politics—how she lives in the world. According to Coleman, the ability of a book to influence a reader is due, as we have seen, to the literal absence of the other: an absence that allows the reader to be more open to the suggestiveness of “other” ideas in a book. And because a reader is more open to the other, the other can exert more of a “real” influence on her. But I have been arguing that it is not only the other’s absence that makes us more open as readers to what a work suggests; I have been arguing that it is the Eros of the story, the desire the other awakens in us as readers through the pleasures we experience in reading, that *births*, through epiphanies, the desire to sacramentalize a work’s suggestiveness, its holiness, into action—this is the sacramental vocation that precedes and facilitates the prophetic.

But, as the god Hermes reminds us, in metaphor there is traffic in both direction between what *is* and what *is not*; so too in a sacramental reading there is a “mysterious circuit” (to borrow a phrase from Merleau-Ponty) between reader and work, reality and fiction, self and other, epiphany and prophecy (Kearney 90). It is the vitality of this mysterious circulation that I want to emphasize because this is the pulse that can be quickened in a sacramental reading, in which, as

Kearney says, “the bread of the world is the very stuff consecrated in the body of the work,” and because of this, referring back to our discussion of Ricoeur’s “eschatology of symbols,” setting and plot can fuse with a reader’s bones and muscles, characters can conjoin with that reader’s flesh, and themes can transubstantiate into the reader’s lifeblood (*cf.* 91). Before a reader can *realize* this, however, she must be awakened to its possibility by Eros’ “Song of Songs” in a story (what Coleman calls the pleasures of the text): before Ezekiel ever called the dry bones back to life he was himself first called by God and told to eat the bitter book.

That Ezekiel’s book was both bitter and sweet—and that it was God’s Word to his people—creates a poetic image of the Transcendent in which judgement and promise, death and resurrection, divinity and flesh coalesce, concoct, and conjure a prophetic vision for God’s people to be Other-wise than what they are *in* their own world. The resurrection of the dry bones is not to some fleshless afterlife; it is a resurrection of the flesh *in* Ezekiel’s own world. I emphasize this to shed further light on the idea that a sacramental reading, as “a eucharistics of profane perception,” is concerned with *actually* being in the world and that the hunt for holiness is not a critical slip into the snare of the “transcendental lure” but something that is real and knowable in the world and in fiction concerned with that world. Kearney gets at this idea in his reading of Merleau-Ponty when he writes of the latter’s “intriguing phenomenological interpretation of Eucharistic embodiment as recovery of the divine within the flesh, a kenotic emptying out of transcendence into the heart of the world’s body, becoming a God beneath us rather than a God beyond us” (91). For Merleau-Ponty and for Kearney, transcendence “no longer hangs over” humanity; humanity, rather, “becomes strangely its privileged bearer” (91). In terms of this study, holiness no longer hangs over us as a solely religious “idea” but, in readings that stalk holiness in the world and sacramentalize it into something knowable through

narrative, this “idea” can become *realized* in the reader’s imagination in the reading of a work itself *and* in the effect that work’s beauty can have on the life of that reader.

Kearney reads Ricoeur as favouring the latter—the effect of a work on a reader—just as I read Coleman as doing, but he reads Merleau-Ponty as emphasizing the former—the *realization* of holiness in the reader’s imagination—in a way that bridges Steiner’s and Coleman’s views. This bridge, Kearney tells us, is Merleau-Ponty’s supplement to Ricoeur’s emphasis on the “prophetic” vocation: a renewed emphasis on the “sacramental” vocation, or what Kearney calls the “‘sacramental’ acoustic of natural existence” (94). This “sacramental acoustic” is described below, in a passage from *Signs* (1960), not as the absent or fictive other through whom I become self-aware but as “flesh of my flesh,” my “twin” who, though absent, still stands in “strange proximity” to me:

Before others are or can be subjected to my conditions of possibility and reconstructed in my image [à la Ricoeur’s re-imagination of the self], they must already exist as outlines, deviations, and variants of a single Vision in which I too participate. For they are not [merely] fictions with which I might people my desert—offspring of my spirit and forever unactualized possibilities—but my twins or *the flesh of my flesh*. Certainly I do not live their life; they are definitively absent from me and I from them. *But that distance* [or absence] *becomes a strange proximity* as soon as one comes back home to the perceptual world, since the perceptual is precisely that which can haunt more than one body without budging from its place. (Merleau-Ponty 15, *my emphasis*)

This “strange proximity” that a reader can feel toward another in a story—the sense that a character is “flesh of my flesh,” of the same world, a sister or a brother—is *realized* through

Eros: the pleasure fiction provides of our ghostly proximity to other lives, that which satiates our hunger, according to Hansen, for the interior lives of others.

Though Merleau-Ponty describes this intuition as a filial relationship between oneself and another, it also extends to the deep exchange between reader and work. The words of a story feel alive—flesh of my flesh—because they echo or sound the acoustics of my reality. In light of this—transfiguring an auditory image to a tactile image—we *feel* what Lisa Moore means when she says that words have “texture” (“Kernels” 42). Referring back to Merleau-Ponty, Kearney tells us that he remained intrigued “by a certain ‘miracle’ of existence, whereby ‘being invests [humanity] in order to make itself manifest through [it]’” (Kearney 94). Relating this back to Moore, I would say that in her novel *February* she is entranced by an epiphany of the persistence of life, even after a terrible tragedy like the sinking of the *Ocean Ranger*, and this illuminates the language she uses, making “the persistence of life” knowable as a life-loving theme through her metaphoric use of light.

The “miracle of existence,” for Merleau-Ponty, is that the otherness of “being” becomes knowable through its manifestation in the perceiver. For me, this miracle is that something as unknowable and mysterious as holiness becomes knowable in its metaphoric presence in a work of fiction. Kearney gets at these similarities by likening Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological method—his “eucharistics of profane perception”—to an author’s “poetic licence”:

[This method] is analogous to the literary suspension of belief and disbelief for the sake of inclusive entry into the “kingdom of as-if.” This suspension... allows for a specific negative capability regarding questions of doubt, proof, dogma, or doctrine, so as to better appreciate “the thing itself,” the holy *thisness of our flesh-and-blood* existence.

(95)

This, to me, seems a much more compelling way of reading than the one Steiner presents in *Real Presences*, ensnared as that work is to the “transcendental lure.” For all that Steiner speaks of reading the work itself, he does not formulate a way of reading that is as convincing or engaging as Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualization of “pure attention”—appreciating the thing itself as “flesh of my flesh,” rather than seeing it as a cipher for Transcendence.

Kearney writes that this “attitude of pure attention... is not far removed... from what certain mystics have recognized to be a crucial preparatory moment [enabling] sacramental vision: a moment they have called by such various names as the ‘cloud of unknowing,’ the *docta ignorantia*, or in Eastern mysticism the *neti/neti* (neither this nor that)—experiences that pave the way for the deepest wisdom of reality” (95-96). This echoes my reading of Wolfe’s essay “Stalking the Spirit” in which a writer “stalks” the world itself in acts of “pure attention”—hiding in the cleft of the rock by sitting in front of a laptop for hours—preparing to catch a glimpse of holiness in the world. In a sacramental reading—stalking of holiness in the “flesh-and-blood” *thisness* of a work—a reader’s “pure attention” is her covenant with the work itself that gives her imaginative entry into the world of “as-if.” This world, of course, is enlivened by the circulation between what *is* and what *is not* in a reader’s mind so that there is, as Kearney writes, a “free traversal of the imaginary [where] everything is permissible. Nothing is excluded except exclusion [and this allows] us to attend to the sacramental miracle of the everyday... [offering us] fresh insights into the eucharistic character of the sensible” (96). That is, stories give us ways of seeing the “miracle of existence”—holiness, the “deepest wisdom of reality,” or that which is life-giving—infusing and enabling our humanity, our flesh-and-blood existence, to be ever more human.

Kearney, in his readings of Joyce, Woolf, and Proust, characterizes this “miracle of existence” as a “sense of transcendence” that is “alive in their work,” but transcendence that is “inscribed in everyday immanence” (102). In this study I have been looking for holiness inscribed in the beauty of specific fictions, showing how each author intuitively imagines holiness and how this “intuition” can come to life in a reader through the pleasures that reader experiences in the body of each work. Just as mystery is preserved in Kearney’s readings of his three modernists, so, in my readings of these four contemporary Atlantic Canadian authors, mystery “is preserved, even celebrated, not as ecclesiastical dogma but as a mystical affirmation of incarnate existence” (102).

As I have said, these readings are “sacramental” *because* they are concerned with flesh-and-blood *thisness* as “something strange and enduring [in] embodied space and time far from the otherworldliness of metaphysical forms” (103). Holiness, as we shall see in the following reading of Michael Crummey’s *Galore*, is not a cadaverous dogma, but a living (if silent) presence that is both able to be perceived *and* experienced (seen and touched)—something life-giving and potentially life-changing. To involve *my* readers in this process I will, following Kearney, “concentrate on certain ‘eucharistic’ events” in *Galore*, suggesting how they signal recoveries and re-imaginings “of the holy in the happenstance” (103).

These “eucharistic” events of course are those happenings in a novel that, when a reader chews on them, bring pleasure: pleasure that awakens that reader with an epiphany in which she begins the continuous process of prophetically re-imagining herself other-wise in the world. “Eucharistic” events are those often bitter devastations, confirmations, and surprises that taste strangely sweet. Coleman writes of the effect these narrative events can have on a reader who has consumed them, arguing that there “are ways in which eating the book can open us up to

cultural politics, to real social and political worlds in which we live” (Coleman 111). In saying this Coleman is arguing that a very private activity like reading is a real way of engaging with one’s world and the worlds of others. He writes:

[We] tend to think of the personal and private benefits of reading and, in so doing, we forget the wide-ranging social and political effects it has. We tend to psychologise reading—and spirituality, too, for that matter—and fail to see one of the central points I have been trying to emphasize, which is that eating the book is not solely an exercise to feed one’s inner life. Rather, eating the book—not just nibbling at it, or having a little taste here and there, but eating it wholesale—produces a changed person, an empowered person, a different kind of person; and changed people means social and political change, too, not just personal change. (121-122)

This is the kind of renovation of our reading habits that Coleman desires: a way of reading that can be much more than just sacramentally nourishing—satiating our hunger for the interior lives of others—but that can be a means of prophetically re-invigorating our cultural politics, our way of being in the world.

Coleman echoes Ricoeur in saying that when “we wish to reach out beyond our egos to a new awareness of others, of the world around us [...] we often do so by the aid of a book. We do this because reading is a process that simultaneously *individualizes* us by placing the words on the page between us and the world and *connects* us by drawing us out of ourselves through imaginative projection toward the thoughts and experiences of others” (125). This “connection” is what Merleau-Ponty tried to explain as that “strange proximity” between self and other, reader and work—a connection that is *realized* not just in the effect that strange proximity has on a reader but in the “flash of radiance”—the re-cognition of beauty—in which true imaginative



engagement is born. And, as Coleman has rightly shown, this kind of “real” engagement with a work begins with openness to the work—what Wolfe calls self-sacrifice and what Ricoeur originally called a hermeneutics of affirmation.

We need to become vulnerable to the voice of the Other in the book. We need to learn a discerning attentiveness so that the voice in the book can do more than echo back to us our own pre-existing views. If we are to be changed by a book, we must consume it deliberately and slowly, allowing ourselves to taste its many flavours, whether sweet or sour, whether comforting or devastating, whether full of comfort or full of pain. By so doing we can let our experiences of reading teach us about the cultural politics in spirituality—about the ways in which we are connected to others [...] and to the world beyond ourselves. (125)

Reading, Coleman argues, can give us the experience of “reaching across the structure of absence so that we learn to read the present signs of the Other even in the Other’s absence and, by that means, to put ourselves in contact with communities that would not be available in our own time and place” (126). Reading in this light becomes more than learning to see oneself in light of another—even seeing oneself anew through a novel’s heteroglossia. Someone who reads in this way not only returns to herself other-wise, having been changed by her encounter with “the deepest wisdom of reality” that we are calling holiness; such a reader *continually* returns as a pilgrim to herself and *continually* goes out as a prophet into the world.

Sacramental reading, then, is not a mere intellectual pursuit but *a* way of living, or a means by which one can learn to live more fully. Reading in this way shows again and again, in ever more imaginative ways, that to live fully is to live relationally. As Coleman writes, reading “reminds me that I am not an autonomous individual, that I am interdependent with others. For,

reading is a process of intimate mental projection into the mind of another where each of us makes contact with what Don McKay calls the ‘companionable ghost,’ that other breath that breathes within our breath” (126). But this “companionable ghost” is not just an idea; it has weight, substance, a body, blood, breath. This is the absent other Coleman writes about, whose presence still burns in a very real way, like the flame-hollowed moth torso sunk in the hot wax of Dillard’s candle, burning without being consumed, intensifying the light.

What burns is Eros—desire, longing. This is why Coleman writes that we need “a posture that is fuelled by longing for connection. [...] [We] cannot remain passive. We must perform the text to bring it to life” (127). In doing this, in reading deeply, we will be “like the boy on the rabbi’s lap [eating] the books we have been given. [Consuming] them wholly, fully, and slowly, so that they become parts of our bodies, the very structure of our lives” (127). This is how the body of a work is brought to life in a reader: when that reader eats the book and sacramentalizes it in imagination, forming empathy that comes to life in real acts of love.

“For reading,” Coleman tells us, “can give us a role to play, a direction for our energies, a way to channel our spiritual hunger that takes us into the social and political worlds in which we live. Because it does this, we will find that even a book of sorrow and devastation,” like Michael Crummey’s *Galore*, a book full of surprise and confirmation as well, “is a story that tastes sweet as honey” (128). The sweetness of this magically real tale is tasted through the “miracle” of the world-made-flesh in the body of *Galore*, in the generational return to the life of the “the flesh” made by the inhabitants of Paradise Deep and the Gut. What is often bitter, though, as we shall see in a reading of the novel, is when the epiphany of the world-made-flesh compels a reader to become the flesh-made-word by living prophetically—differently, other-wise—in light of Crummey’s earthy depiction of “Devine” humanity. That is to say, the communion with

humanity we are called to in reading an epic like *Galore* is bittersweet, because to live fully is continually to lose yourself—to be hollowed out like Dillard’s flame-drawn moth—but in losing yourself in the lives of others—like Judah and his descendant Abel Devine—you find that *life* itself can burn more intensely in and through you.

### Michael Crummey’s *Galore*

In the following reading of Michael Crummey’s Newfoundland novel *Galore*, I will work from the claim, put forward by Paul Chafe, that to write about Newfoundland is to write about loss. Beginning with this assertion, I will show how Crummey’s earlier work fits with this idea, but I will also demonstrate how *Galore* goes beyond it in recounting generations of loss in a heart-rending yet raucous narrative recovery of the life of “the flesh”—the deep value and holiness of outport life. *Galore*, however, does not merely enact an imaginative recovery of a past way of life. In this novel, Crummey *re-imagines* “life along the shore” by breathing new life into old folkloric yarns: taking old, baroque tales and making them his own.

Michael Crummey’s *Galore* may not have much in common with David Adams Richards’ *Incidents in the Life of Markus Paul*, Michael Winter’s *The Death of Donna Whalen*, or Lisa Moore’s *February*, but the “bitterness” dealt with in each novel is similar in that it comes from a devastating experience of loss. In Richards’ novel this loss is experienced as the deaths of Hector Penniac, Roger Savage, and Little Joe; in Winter’s novel it is experienced as Donna Whalen’s murder; and in Moore’s novel it is experienced as Cal O’Mara’s drowning.

Crummey’s work prior to *Galore* has also dealt with loss in different ways, using different literary forms. Paul Chafe, in his essay “Lament for A Notion: Loss and the Beothuk in

Michael Crummey's *River Thieves*" (2004), takes this basic idea and makes the broad claim that "[to] write about Newfoundland is to write about [loss]" (Chafe 93). And in an interview with Herb Wyile, "The Living Haunt the Dead" (2007), Crummey seems to concur, admitting that "over the course of several books," he has come to realize "that loss in all its forms is really what [he's] interested in—personal loss, cultural loss" (Wyile "The Living Haunt" 297). In Coleman's terms, Crummey's writing, at this point in his career, seems primarily focussed on the pleasures of devastation.

Crummey's early work—five poetry collections, one short story collection, and his first two novels *River Thieves* (2001) and *The Wreckage* (2005)—all deal with various embodiments of personal and cultural loss, a theme in the literature of Newfoundland that Patrick O'Flaherty highlighted in *The Rock Observed* (1979). In that seminal study, O'Flaherty argues that "new" writers, like Arthur Scammell, wrote about loss of the pre-confederation way of life by depicting outports of that era as pastoral idylls: "Leaving out the hardship, dependence, poverty, isolation, and peril—leaving the bad out" which "made the good more conspicuous" but "still there": "a 'something worthwhile' not easy to define" (O'Flaherty 154). This not-easily-defined sense of human worth—the value of life lived "along the shore," as Crummey frames it in *Galore*—is a theme as prevalent in Newfoundland literature since the 1970s as the theme of loss, though the former has received much less critical discussion than the latter. In *Galore*, as we shall see, human worth is seen as the fleshly bawdiness of "life insisting on life" (*Galore* 31), an insistence that avoids the pitfalls of idyllic sentimentality that O'Flaherty noted in the pre-1970s work of Scammell and others.

The most famous example of this kind of sentimentality in Newfoundland literature post-1970 is E. Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* (1993), which Stuart Pierson, in his review of the

novel, criticizes for its Scammell-like, “misky”<sup>61</sup> portrayal of Newfoundland as “a pastoral, in which the gentle, human bucolic past has been overcome or subverted by the violent, harsh Americanized present. ‘The world was all knots and lashings once—flex and give, that was the way it was before the brute force of nails and screws’” (Pierson 155). What O’Flaherty sets against such idyllically sentimental portrayals of outport life is his notion of “‘the epic story of a people’s struggle against overwhelming natural forces and economic adversity’: ‘the elements of wind, tide, and crag’ [that] compose a kind of canon which the writer may articulate but never alter” (Kulyk Keefer 4). O’Flaherty, as read by Kulyk Keefer in her book *Under Eastern Eyes* (1987), sees Newfoundland writing as fatalistic in this regard, with Newfoundlanders forced always to face the sea because there is no “Garden of Eden” or “Happy Valley” at their back, as there had been for Maritime writers such as Ernest Buckler, writing about the Annapolis Valley. Kulyk Keefer, in her introduction, affirms O’Flaherty’s thesis by writing that “if there is a shibboleth which distinguishes Newfoundland from the Maritimes, it must surely be ‘outport,’ with its associations of an epic struggle against starvation and the sea” (4).

There are passages from *Galore* that at first glance might seem to support O’Flaherty’s thesis, bolstered as it is by Kulyk Keefer. Take this passage from the early pages of the book’s second part, about the unfinished and abandoned roads into the island’s impenetrable interior:

Half a dozen government roads ran miles into the backcountry beyond Nigger Ralph’s Pond, built by destitute fishermen forced to work for their dole during the worst years of the century. They were intended to open up the island’s interior where fields of arable land were simply waiting to be plowed and planted, according to Shambler and his like. That mythic Arcadia never materialized and roads petered out among the same dense

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<sup>61</sup> “Misky”: wet and foggy. (*The Dictionary of Newfoundland English*).

stands of spruce and low scrub and blackwater marshes that covered the entire island.

(*Galore* 152)

*River Thieves* also explores this “impenetrability” of the island in its mapping of the fatal clash between the Peyton clan, whose settlement eventually became one of Newfoundland’s famed outports, and the last of the Beothuk, who used to winter inland up the Exploits River. But there is more going on in that novel—as there is more going on in *The Wreckage* and in *Galore*—than the ebb and flow of epic struggle and disheartening loss.

Herb Wyile, in his recent book *Anne of Tim Hortons: Globalization and the Reshaping of Atlantic-Canadian Literature* (2011), writes that “the preoccupation with the past [in Newfoundland literature] is imbued with a sense of loss that, Paul Chafe contends, ‘is a fundamental part of Newfoundland identity and heritage’” signposted by such events as “‘eradication of the Beothuk, the loss of independence, the loss of a generation of men at Beaumont Hamel in the First World War, the moratorium on the cod fishery’” (Wyile *Anne of Tim Hortons* 173). And these losses are often symbolically linked to the island’s mysterious heart, particularly in Wayne Johnston’s memoir *Baltimore’s Mansion* (1999) and his novel *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (1998). Wyile goes on to assert—after his readings of works by Wayne Johnston, Michael Crummey, Bernice Morgan, and Michael Winter—that “while [contemporary Newfoundland literature does] reflect a sense of loss, most of [it reflects] rather than [suppresses] the significant *divisions* that run through Newfoundland society, past and present” (Wyile 216, *my emphasis*).

If Chafe’s earlier claim was that to write about Newfoundland is to write about loss, then Wyile rightly rephrases this thesis, claiming that to write about Newfoundland is to write about the various divisions within its culture, both historical and contemporary. Crummey’s *Galore*

certainly explores these divisions, these deep wounds: probing them, giving fictive prognosis. But he does even more than this in *Galore*, which, as a contemporary story, is more than a historical lament or an imaginative recovery of something irretrievably lost. *Galore* is a novelistic act of re-imagination in which old wounds between warring factions—Catholic and Protestant, Irish and English, the Devines of the Gut and the Sellers of Paradise Deep—are inflicted and healed, slashed and stitched, gouged and charmed in a mythic retelling of Newfoundland outport life. It is a story that bears witness to Newfoundlanders' epic struggles not only with what O'Flaherty depicts as unrelenting natural forces but also with the impenetrable wilderness of the human heart, the deep mystery out of which is birthed holiness in all its bawdy humanity.

*Galore*, then, is not merely a "recovery" of the holy in the happenstance, but a re-imagination of this deep human mystery. And to this end it is important to note that *Galore* is not historical fiction like *River Thieves* or even *The Wreckage*. It is, according to Crummey, a novel about Newfoundland's folkloric and mythic heart. And it is myth that brings the holy and the happenstance together just as it brings fiction and fact together—word and world.

Tomson Highway, in his lecture "Comparing Mythologies" (2003), writes that in Cree, "the language of [his] people... there are three distinct terms for the concept of narrative":

The first term is *achimoowin*, which means "to tell a story" or "to tell the truth." The second is *kithaskiwin*, which means "to tell a lie," meaning "to weave a web of fiction," as it were. And the third, which lies at a point exactly halfway between these first two is *achithoogeewin*, which means "to mythologize." Meaning that the visionaries of [his] people, the thinkers who gave birth and shape to the Cree language as we know it today,

chose the exact halfway point between truth and lie, non fiction and fiction, to situate mythology. (Highway 22)

*Galore* certainly fits Highway's definition of mythology as the middle ground between folklore and history: oral storytelling and the written word. Myths, like other stories, are still things that "nourish the soul" and, as I have discussed earlier, this hunger for the lives of others comes out of a "gnawing realization of a [loss] of something essential." This leads us back to the theme of loss in Newfoundland literature. If *Galore*, as I contend, is about more than loss, it must still in some way deal with loss. But what, then, has been lost in the world *Galore* depicts? In my mind what is lost over the course of the novel's generations is a sense of life's mystery, that life-longing holiness that is sensed in *February* and given body in *Galore* as "the flesh," an idea that is associated in Highway's lecture with Native feminine spirituality.

If "the flesh" is what is lost in *Galore* then we need to ask how this idea has been attacked and eradicated historically, particularly in Newfoundland. Highway argues in his lecture that a sense of "the flesh" in North America was lost in the systematic raping of Native mythology by Christian mythology:

Christian mythology arrived here on the shores of North America in October of the year 1492. At which point God as man met God as woman... and thereby hangs a tale of what are probably the worst cases of rape, wife battery, and attempted murder in the history of the world as we know it. At that point in time, in other words, the circle of matriarchy was punctured, most brutally, by the straight line of the phallus. And the bleeding was profuse. (47)

In *River Thieves* this loss of feminine mystery (Highway's Native female goddess) is symbolized by the demise of Demasduit, or Mary March, as she is called in Crummey's novel and in much



of Newfoundland's written history. "The Flesh," for Highway is most often feminine because for him the Christian God—as was taught in Canada's Catholic residential schools, which Highway was forced to attend—is masculine, transcendent, and Gnostic, hating pleasure and "the flesh" (Highway 28-32, 38). Though *River Thieves* fits this dualist scheme quite neatly, *Galore* does not, because in this novel Crummey presents a strong cast of female "saints"—Devine's Widow, Mary Tryphena Devine, and Bride Newman (née Freke)—*as well as* their strong male complements and sometime-antagonists—Father Phelan, Judah the Sea Orphan, and Dr. Newman.

Crummey's story is, using Highway's categories, "Christian myth," but it is certainly *not* Gnostic: spirit and flesh, otherworldly and mundane, folklore and history, female and male are as entangled as the roots of the family trees recounted by Azariah and Obadiah Trim in the second half of the novel (*Galore* 156-157). Because of this, *Galore* is more than a recovery of feminine spirituality or myth within a male-dominated Christian mythology, just as thematically it is about more than a rebirth of "the flesh" and its appetites in a stark world of starvation and sacrifice. It is a novel of excess, which *does* enact a recovery of feminine spirituality and a rebirth of "the flesh," but it does more than these things. *Galore* is about life along the shore in all its fullness—its stark nobility, bawdy baseness, and mythic complexity.

This fullness of life is vivified in *Galore* through the "eucharistic" events of the novel: those significant parts of this multi-generational epic—this magical realist romp—that turn wounds to supple, scarred flesh: where divisions become strange openings through which holiness intrudes on and blesses the mundane. The first of these events is the occasion when an albino-skinned stranger is birthed out of a beached whale's belly on the Feast of St. Mark, the same day that Lazarus Devine is birthed out of Lizzie Devine's womb; Lizzie, the daughter of

wealthy English merchant King-me Sellers, is wed to Callum, the son of the impoverished Irish midwife Devine's Widow. Both stranger and baby appear to have been "born" dead, yet both manage to sputter and cry (and shit) themselves to life, making miraculous recoveries. Because of their births on the same feast day, both man and child are conjoined in the Widow Devine's mind—they are inseparable for life (*cf.* 12, 65, 163-164). They are, in Merleau-Ponty's words, flesh of each other's flesh. And this conjoining of Judah with Lazarus in the mind of Devine's Widow echoes Judah's symbolic connection to Jabez Trim's Bible in a reader's imagination: Judah, cut from the belly of the whale, is linked symbolically to Jabez Trim's Bible, cut from "the gullet of a cod the size of a goat" (19). And this again links Catholic to Protestant, though this is not the only division *Galore* works to heal, as we will see in the stranger's filial and mythic links to Abel Devine at the end of the novel.

Working from the beginning, however, we see that the stranger is like Jabez Trim's Bible in that they are both miracles and deep mysteries, one mute and inscrutable and the other almost unreadable: "There were portions [of the Bible] so distorted by their soaking they were barely legible, but for many years it was all they had of the Word of the Lord among them" (19). Just as Jabez Trim's Bible symbolizes the jointure of human and divine, "the Word of the Lord among them," so Judah, as the stranger comes to be called (8-9, 28), symbolizes the conjoining of fleshly and divine mystery, pagan and Christian gnosis. Judah is a mythic figure "christened" during a pagan ritual at Kerrivan's Tree but he is also blessed by the rogue Catholic priest Father Phelan. However, the figure responsible for both the stranger's pagan "christening" and Christian blessing is not Father Phelan, the Dominican priest, but Devine's Widow—the local midwife who is considered by King-me Sellers to be a witch (3-4). She has Judah's limp, white body passed through the twisted boughs of Kerrivan's Tree, and it is also the old crone who prompts

Father Phelan to bless his reeking flesh, saying, “He’s neither fish nor fowl, this one. But he could use a blessing, Father” (18).

Once blessed, Judah is “adopted” and comes to be known as Judah Devine: “The Great White”, “St. Jude of the Lost Cause”, the “Sea Orphan” (1). Prior to Judah’s arrival on the shore, “the God we knows out here”—the God depicted in Jabez Trim’s Bible in the story of Abraham and Isaac where “the verses... were blurred beyond reading and Isaac was left with his father’s knife poised above him”—is a God of judgement and wrath, terrible as the sea (19-20). But after Judah’s “birth” from the belly of the whale, different words of Scripture—words of passion and erotic desire—appear in mysterious love letters to young Mary Tryphena, the Widow Devine’s granddaughter. The strange letters are composed of verses from the Song of Songs copied in baroque lettering like the hand-etched cursive of Jabez Trim’s ancient Bible.

Recognizing the lettering but being unable to read it herself, Mary Tryphena seeks out Jabez Trim and has him read the letters aloud, with Judah looking on silently (37-39). Mary Tryphena thinks the letters are from King-me Sellers’s stuttering son Absalom, and she is embarrassed, when Jabez reads the letters aloud, that Judah is overhearing the illicit words of passion: “She’d forgotten he was in the room and was mortified to see she had an audience. Jude seemed no happier to be overhearing the exchange, his fish eyes bulging in his head. —No, she said. She pointed at him and shouted No a second time, and Jabez went across the room to usher Judah outside” (38). Neither Mary Tryphena nor any reader, at this point in the story, understands *why* Judah’s eyes are bulging out of his head. And this remains a mystery throughout much of the novel until Jude eventually sacrifices himself—facing the hangman’s noose—for Lazarus, Patrick and the other Devine men who dressed as mummers and carved Levi Seller’s ears off his head with a fillet knife (214-215). When Judah gives himself up for his

“family”—his “twin” Lazarus and his son Patrick—he is locked away and begins scribing biblical passages on the wall of his makeshift asylum cell in a fishing stage by the water (217-220, 227-229). In all of this, the theme of the “word made flesh” is teased out. Judah is the silent Word come among the people of the shore, his mute presence like the blurred out passages of Jabez Trim’s Bible. He even becomes the scapegoat that stays the Abrahamic hand of Levi Sellers: an embodiment of grace, but grace reeking of Eros—Judah’s fishy stench.

This same incarnational theme of “the word made flesh” is seen in other hot-blooded, eucharistic events in the novel, particularly the events surrounding the philandering priest, Father Phelan. Phelan stands in sharp contrast to the other ecclesial figures in *Galore*, such as the Episcopalian Priest, Reverend Dodge, and the Italian Catholic priest, Father Cunico. Phelan, drunken lecher that he is, labours to heal divisions by ministering to both Catholics and Protestants along the shore. This is perhaps best symbolized by the church he wishes to build, late in his life, which he initially wants constructed on the Tolt Road directly between Paradise Deep, mainly populated by Protestants, and the Gut, largely populated by Catholics (117).

In contrast, Reverend Dodge, when he arrives on the shore, constructs a fence in the French Cemetery to separate the Catholics from the Protestants, who, until Dodge’s decree, had been buried side by side for generations, their bodies blessed by Father Phelan or read over by Jabez Trim in Phelan’s absence (57-58). Father Cunico (or “Cuntico,” as he is called on the sly), the Italian priest, physically accosts James Woundy and the Devines—Lazarus, Judah, and Patrick—on the Tolt Road in an effort to turn members of his Catholic flock back from attending Absalom Sellers’ Protestant wedding, only to find himself heaved into the frigid sea after he knocks out one of Judah’s teeth (123-126). We see in this confrontation how the sectarianism Cunico preaches is offensive to the grace Judah embodies. But Cunico, with the authority of the

Bishop of St. John's, is able to cow the Catholics of the Gut into grumbling submission after he recoups from his icy dunking, at which point he turns on the Devines and even goes so far as to condemn "the tradition," carried on by Devine's Widow in secret, "of passing infants through the branches of Kerrivan's Tree as a pagan rite" (135).

Both Dodge and Cunico not only deepen the denominational division in Paradise Deep and the Gut, they both physically and figuratively look down on the Devines and their ilk. This condescension is seen symbolically when each priest, at different times, struggles to stand upright in the Devines' "pathetic shack" in the Gut (54, 124). Phelan, however, in contrast to both Dodge and Cunico (who are both reported to have "delicate" sensibilities), glories in the reek of outport life—the "meanness" of his parishioners' lives—symbolized by his preference for "the pungent effluvium" of the outhouse, his "holy place," over the incense used in the High Churches (120). Phelan also displays a "manic glee" in telling how he'd "escaped arrest by the English a dozen times, once by slipping down the hole of an outhouse while soldiers searched a parishioner's home thirty feet away. [All while] he stood up to his knees in shit, praying that none of the English be taken by the call of nature" (16). While Dodge and Cunico are pictured as towering in judgement above the Devines, Phelan is remembered as standing knee deep in their shit so that he can serve them his once-outlawed sacraments—the Holy Eucharist, the Body of Christ.

Whereas Dodge and Cunico think themselves better than most of those who live in Paradise Deep, Phelan knows that he is "a lousy priest" who deserves "no better than to serve in such a backwater shithole of Christendom. But he [also can't] deny the Lord at work in him, that hammer striking" (32).

He was a prodigal with blessings in his drunkenness. He turned to the south to bless the people of the Gut and to the north to bless Paradise Deep. He blessed the figure of Mr. Gallery who had waited near the Commons to follow him home and waited for him now just off the Tolt Road. He opened his trousers and wavered at the lip of the precipice to piss into the waters below. He blessed his shrivelled little pecker before tucking it away to walk into Paradise Deep. He held a number of particular blessings in reserve, thinking of Mrs. Gallery waiting for him in her bed and the archipelago of angels they were about to inspire to fits of jealousy. (32-33)

Aside from trying to exorcize the ghost of Mr. Gallery by making raucous love to the murderer's widow, Mrs. Gallery, Phelan also gives drunken, priestly advice to young Callum, who is pining away for King-me Sellers' daughter Lizzie: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, he quoted drunkenly, do it with thy might, for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave. The priest slapped at Callum's crotch. —With thy *might*, you useless tit" (95). To Phelan, denying one's appetites is "an insult to God" (95). And Phelan's appetites are matched by few save Mrs. Gallery, the widow haunted by her dead husband, Martin Gallery, who committed suicide after he'd murdered a man because he thought wrongly that he'd been cuckolded (106-107).

Phelan's relationship with Mrs. Gallery twists the knot of spiritual and physical desire in this novel even tighter. Mr. Gallery's ghost is a spiritual problem but also a physical presence: his passage "through the thatch and plaster" of Selina's House after his death leaves "a cloud of debris [and] a wash of soot" (109). It had been Martin Gallery who awakened Virtue, his wife, to the holy "give-and-take" of love, "of a physical pleasure she hadn't considered possible outside some paradisaical realm reserved for the virtuous dead" (102). But it was also Mr. Gallery who

gave into his drunken, jealous thoughts and began to suspect his wife of getting pregnant by another man, the father of James Woundy, a friend of the Devines. As a ghost, Mr. Gallery is after penance for damning his love for Mrs. Gallery with his own hellish jealousy: he sits by the fire, forever cold, while “Father Phelan... [leads] Virtue through the most varied and perverse acts of love his years of lechery [have] taught him. [Mr. Gallery’s] ghost a tortured witness to it all” (113).

“The holy give-and-take of love,” that Virtue first experienced with Martin, is not wholly sacrifice and not wholly jealousy, for both in their extremes can be selfish, as shown by Father Phelan and Mr. Gallery, respectively. Love, as experienced by Virtue and Martin in the early days of their marriage, is described in sexual terms as profane “physical pleasure” and heavenly “paradisical” appetite. The other, High Church priests—Reverend Dodge and Father Reddigan, Cunico’s replacement—distrust “appetite as a moral compass” (249), but for Phelan appetite is a sacred sacrament and “feeding an appetite [is] at the heart of proper life” (143). Phelan’s physical appetites are not closeted or cloistered: they are celebrated, filled to exhaustion, and openly gossiped about.

Phelan is perhaps this novel’s finest and filthiest embodiment of “the flesh.” However, Phelan, as embodiment of “the flesh,” can go too far and take his appetites to selfish extremes, as with his “selfless” sacrifices in the building of his church with its outhouse doors, “bravely” putting himself in danger of being lynched by Sellers’ mob, which Mrs. Gallery calls him on: “You’ll get yourself killed at this foolishness... And I’ll be left alone with that creature by the fire. [...] You’re just like him, you know,” Mrs. Gallery says, referring the frigid ghost of her dead husband, “You think of no one but yourself” (129). Phelan, to his credit, is sobered by Mrs. Gallery’s chastisement, as he is earlier sobered by Devine’s Widow, who “thought him a fool

and made no secret of her opinion. But she knew years on the coast without liturgy or sacraments and was happy for those comforts now, despite the package they arrived in" (16).

Though Phelan's appetites can go too far—veer into selfishness—he is still a needed, desired, and blessed presence in Paradise Deep. In Phelan's dealing with the Widow Devine and in his raucous relationship with Mrs. Gallery we see how the otherworldly sobers the worldly, how the feminine straightens out the masculine, and how these dualities *can* complement and bless each other, just as children in Paradise Deep, even after Cunico's decree, are still secretly confirmed and blessed by Christian sacrament *and* by being passed through the limbs of Kerrivan's Tree, like both Lazarus and Judah Devine and the generation before them (13-18).

This cohabitation and co-dependence of differing worlds can be seen again in how Devine's Widow schemes to keep Judah alive and with them by having Father Phelan marry "The Great White" and Mary Tryphena, so that Judah is not sent to England and eventually to the gallows for a crime he did not commit (115). In Mary Tryphena's marriage to Judah, we witness the tense and intense marriage of the worldly and the otherworldly, outspoken and mute, land and sea. Out of this physically satiating yet emotionally unhappy union comes Patrick (the legitimate son, who reeks of his father Judah), and from Mary Tryphena's one night tryst with Absalom Sellers, who she still thinks wrote her the biblical love letters, comes Henley (the bastard, who stutters like his f-f-father Absalom), once again joining the Catholic Devines to the Protestant Sellers, despite the best efforts of Dodge and Cunico.

Patrick, Judah's son (who reeks like his father), accesses the otherworldly through his library that he rescues from the deep with the help of Judah and Azariah and Obadiah Trim (221-224), echoing the story of Jabez Trim's Bible cut from the cod and Judah's own mythic "birth" on the shore. And Henley, Absalom Sellers' bastard and Patrick's half-brother, has his own



“otherworld,” the Labrador coast, where he goes to escape his wife Bride Devine (née Freke) (183), who goes from wild, foul-mouthed “bushborn” to straight-laced, spiritual Methodist after the difficult and bloody birth of her son Tryphie (166-170).

Bride’s transfiguration from Bride Freke to Bride Devine to Bride Newman shows again, in yet another way, how different worlds in *Galore* are “twined” and deep divisions fused into supple scars. Young Bride Freke, who steals a bagful of earth from the Devines’ garden (165) and “fucks” Henley out of spite, finds herself pregnant and engaged to this stutterer she hates but still screws “on the sly [...], taking the sex as consolation for” her loveless marriage (168). But with the birth of her son Tryphie, Bride becomes as chaste as a virgin, sleeping alongside Henley but not making love to him, her “mind too full of the Lord’s light to think of [the] more carnal pleasures” of allowing “anyone between her legs” (170). This “born again” Bride persists in her strict Methodism until Henley dies along the Labrador coast and Dr. Newman begins to court her, in his clinical way, eventually persuading her to marry him and become Mrs. Newman. In Bride’s marriage to Newman we finally see the happy marriage of stranger and “the shore,” atheist and Methodist, flesh and spirit.

Bride’s teeth, hauled out of her head by Dr. Newman before she married Henley, is a first sign of her eventual denial of “the flesh,” which reaches fulfillment in her conversion and sexless marriage to Henley. With the difficult birth of Tryphie, her “flesh” is mortified—ripped and torn—but it is Dr. Newman who sews the folds of her sex back into a “semblance of womanhood.” The whole bloody procedure ruins Bride in Henley’s mind, but the intimacy of the surgery, healing what was torn, makes Newman pine after Bride even more:

[Newman] fell into a light sleep and dreamed again of Bride, of her upturned face as he wrenched molars from the back of her mouth, the dark eyes wide and watching him

steadily. Of kneeling between her legs to suture the brutalized flesh, his fingers tattering the delicate folds into some semblance of womanhood while Bride whispered to him words he tried and tried and was unable to recall when he finally came to himself in the cold. (166)

The joining of the holy and the human is seen further when Newman accompanies the Methodist revivalist Reverend Violet on his “mission trips” to the outports: “Reverend Violet was leery of allowing a hardened apostate to accompany the evangels [like Bride and Obadiah and Azariah Trim], but [he] came to appreciate how physical relief and spiritual rebirth could follow one on the other” (184). Where Newman represents the “physical relief” of his medical profession, Bride represents the “spiritual rebirth” of her Methodism. It is the “eucharistic” marriage of the two—flesh and spirit—that allows each to affirm and “follow one on the other.”

This “marriage” is seen in a different light when Tryphie, Bride’s son, gets badly burned while horsing around with his cousin Eli on the beach, and Newman thinks that the boy, whose “blood pressure [is] bottoming out,” might die “in shock,” but Bride says simply that “he’ll live,” and Newman finds that there is “something distressingly erotic in her surrender to the compass of his knowledge and skill” (206). It is at this point that “Newman thought it possible there was a God after all” (206). And this “spiritual” awakening is symbolized by the lamp-lit room in Newman’s clinic where “[the] sheets and pillowcases [used by Tryphie] were sterilized in gentian violet [and glowed] like a Sacred Heart, the pale, unearthly purple visible through the window outside” (206-207).

The two worlds represented by Bride and Newman—Newfoundlander and outsider, Christian and atheist, spirit and flesh—become more intimate after their wedding in the “Methodist chapel” and their honeymoon in “Connecticut,” where “Newman attended

fundraisers to outfit the new hospital while Tryphie was guinea-pigged through skin grafting and physical therapy [and] Bride [got] a set of false teeth [and returned home] pregnant with a second child” (238). But even in this newfound, newlywed closeness, there is still something about Bride that remains mysterious to Newman, just as there is something about Newfoundland that remains impenetrable to him as an outsider:

You can't bear the notion there's more to the world than what your little mind can swallow, Bride told him. [...] There was more to Bride than his little mind could swallow, that much he was willing to admit. He'd known from the outset that something of his wife would remain a stranger and his jealousy of that private corner kept his appetite for her keen. All their disagreements seemed to end with his face buried in her neck, his hands on her thighs to bring her close and close again. Glory and mystery enough in those moments to shut him up awhile. (265-266)

Mystery, far from numbing physical appetite, keeps that “appetite... keen.” As for Bride, she “lay catching her breath after they made love, her face pressed against her husband's back. She never tired of it, the afterglow of giving and giving and being fed in return” (244). The eucharistic event of Bride marrying Newman symbolically heals many of the deep divisions that render “the flesh” in this novel—life along the shore—brutalized, torn open, and bleeding out.

If the different family lines in *Galore* can also represent the different worlds co-existing on the shore (symbolized earlier in the novel by the Protestant occupied Paradise Deep and the Catholic occupied Gut), then Eli and Tryphie, in contrast to Bride and Newman, show how difficult (and even impossible) a marriage between these worlds can be. With Eli and Tryphie the novel shifts its focus from divisions between Catholics and Protestants, the impoverished families of the Gut and the wealthy “quality” of Paradise Deep, to the divide between politics

(represented by Eli) and invention (represented by Tryphie): cultural control and cultural creativity.

Increasingly their friendship felt like a straightjacket, an attachment cemented by obligation and guilt, and an edge of cruelty crept into it. Tryphie's hunchback made him an easy target, the livid skin stretched across his shoulders like a carapace. Ladybug, Eli called him, Monkey-man, Ape. They set tests of endurance to watch the other fail, holding their palms over a candle flame until someone surrendered, pushing the other's head underwater for the panic and choking, the snot and tears. Both boys felt diminished by their attachment but couldn't see how to escape it. (240)

Eli is attracted to Tryphie, physically, and this queer attraction only grows more intense with each boy's sexual explorations of the other's body (240), until Tryphie begins to try to pull away and distance himself from Eli. But they both find that they cannot be free of each other, just as both are strangely tied to the shore (242, 253).

These difficult ties to the shore are symbolized by their eventual marriages to girls from the shore. From Eli's marriage to Hannah comes Abel Devine and from Tryphie's marriage to Minnie comes Esther Newman. And it is in Esther's and Abel's weird affair that the novel circles back on its incarnational theme of "the word made flesh": Esther awakening Abel to the mysteries of their shared history, the twining of the worldly and otherworldly. Esther, who has inherited her ancestor Callum Devine's "otherworldly" voice, sings "Amazing Grace" at Obadiah Trim's funeral, "the hymn carrying all the way to the harbour where even the gulls flew silent to hear it. [...] [Her] voice inspired the same sense of proprietary awe as the new cathedral. As if it was the best of what they were, distilled into something elegant and pure and inviolable" (253). But young, innocent Esther, with her ethereal voice, experiences a fall from grace in the

eyes of her community because she goes away to Europe, becomes a famed singer, but returns a “ruined” woman haunted by scandal. “They would all remember her as she was at Obediah’s funeral, when she made their grief seem regal and glorious, when she still belonged to them alone” (254). But “[she] had taken to drink in the aftermath of an adulterous affair or an abortion or some other European scandal and only their respect for the doctor saved her from open ridicule. They’d surrendered her gift to the wider world without complaint or envy and they couldn’t forgive her for coming home a fallen woman” (294). Esther, then, embodies the wound inflicted when the otherworldly and worldly are torn apart—when a woman is expected to be angelic rather than human—and it is only in Esther’s incestuous affair with Abel that the possibility of this wound fusing into scarred “flesh” is conceived.

Abel is born a sickly child: he “was barely a child at all when [he] came into the world, a glove of translucent skin, dark clots of the organs showing through the flesh” (260). And, fearing he would die, Eli and Hannah listened to Mary Tryphena and christened him in the old way at Kerrivan’s Tree, reviving a tradition that died with Eli’s generation: “Eli had been christened in the old way but the ritual had fallen out of use in [his] lifetime” (262). Still, “[they] passed the nearly weightless package through the dead limbs in the dark, hand to hand, the child silent the entire time. As she let him go Mary Tryphena said, A long life to you, Abel Devine. And Eli wept all the way back to Selina’s House with the helpless infant in his arms, the last infant ever to be welcomed into the world at Kerrivan’s Tree” (262). Abel is known by Newman and others in the Gut and Paradise Deep as a “[tough] little bugger” because he “was smaller than other youngsters his age and prone to fevers and infections that packed his lungs with fluid and threatened to drown him in his bed. A raw smell of decay rising with his temperature, as if the death he’d cheated was leaching from his pores” (262).

Abel struggling against the fluid in his lungs, gasping so as not to drown, symbolizes the generations before him who struggled against the sea, and his foul smell is the same fishy stink that clings to Judah—the rank smell of fish, the reek of life on the shore. Knowing the potency of this stink, the dangers of this wretched way of life, and because of his delicate nature, Hannah shields Abel from the world: “She refused to allow talk of politics or local gossip or the family’s checkered history in his presence, as if he might catch something fatal from such topics” (263). Hannah tries desperately to keep the world in all its messy *thisness* from infecting Abel.

So it is ironic that Abel begins growing in strength and stamina when Esther infects him with her seductive wiles, beginning to unearth the twisted roots of his family’s “checkered” history. But before this occurs, we see in what other ways sickly, young Abel echoes his biblical forbear Judah, reviving the theme of “the word made flesh”:

He stood on a chair to reach Jabez Trim’s Bible tucked away on the highest shelf. He had no memory of seeing the book in Patrick Devine’s library and didn’t know what to make of the artifact. The pages were leathery and thick, the hand-lettered text archaic and blurred. It seemed a foreign language he was looking at and he wrote out lines and verses, trying to imitate the baroque bells and curves as if he was sketching a landscape. He spent weeks writing his way through Genesis and Deuteronomy and Psalms and Ecclesiastes, figuring one letter at a time, making the strange script his own through repetition. (287)

The description here of the hand-lettering in Jabez Trim’s Bible, which was cut from the belly of a cod, echoes the description earlier of the ornate handwriting of Judah, who was cut from the belly of a whale (219). Abel, “making the strange script his own through repetition,” makes one

think of Judah who communicated in biblical phrases after he was shut away, wrongfully accused of carving off Levi Sellers' ears.

Abel continues to make the strange script of Jabez Trim's Bible his own when he goes to live in Selina's House, now a part of Newman's hospital, to look after his drunken cousin Esther, but he also begins "picking through the clutter and junk, puzzling over the arcane surgical equipment or browsing through stacks of medical notes" (297). It is Abel's inquisitiveness that leads him to unearth the different twisting roots of his own history, sacred and secular, symbolized respectively by Jabez Trim's Bible and Doctor Newman's surgical equipment and notes. But Esther is also a key player in this unearthing or undressing, as we see in the passage where Esther is taunting young men marching off to war, calling them "*Cannon Fodder*": these same men "watching after the woman and pale youngster in her wake. Abel had grown to almost six foot and towered over his alcoholic charge, the pair like a carnival marriage on display, their strangeness a twinned thing" (300). This is the first hint of Esther's eventual, illicit affair with Abel, which is doubly taboo because they are cousins and she is twice his age.

Esther begins telling Abel about her sordid past, "the whole merry-go-round of desire and flesh and betrayal and hope" (302). But it is not until news of Beaumont Hamel—the massacre that killed all but 68 Newfoundlanders out of an entire regiment—reaches Selina's House that Abel begins copying out Song of Songs (303) and Esther begins "unspooling the family's tale as she undressed the youngster, navigating the complications of one generation and the next, rowing her way toward them where they lay together in the servant's quarters... blood on blood on blood. Abel lying silent through it all, willing to take every word as Gospel as long as her mouth came back to his, as long as her hands" (304-305). It is in this erotic retelling of their shared history on the shore that we realize that Esther, while she is bedding Abel, was really

thinking of “[all] those young men rotting somewhere in the irredeemable stain that was France. And she’d come downstairs to claim Abel before he was stolen away from her, kneeling over him now to bless his body and the soul it housed. A drunken notion though she was sober. Wanting to keep him safe from the world those few moments” (305). But just as Hannah could not keep Abel from his family’s history or from sleeping with Esther, so Esther cannot keep Abel from feeling “[certain] it was all a lie, the life she’d given him, her mouth on his, her hands, the preposterous little history she’d spun to make him feel at home in the world. He felt like he’d been made to look a fool” (314).

It is this certainty that he has been made to look a fool that sends Abel to the frontlines of France, so he can escape the hounding of his mother, Esther’s seductive stories, and his father’s queer obsession with “the country’s petty politics” and William Coaker: the man responsible for leading the Newfoundland fisheries out of the dark ages. In fact, it is Coaker, despite the good that he has done, who uses Abel’s signing-up to his own political advantage (314, 316). However, on the ship overseas—having left Hannah, Esther, Eli, and Coaker behind—Abel discovers something in his gear that he knows he did not pack, a talisman of the world he has tried to escape but cannot:

Jabez Trim’s Bible tucked away inside, tied up in its leather case. Only Esther could have stowed it there, he knew, to say something she was too goddamn precious or traumatized to speak, and in a fit of childishness he pitched the book over the rail. It floated alongside the boat awhile and Abel ran the length of the deck to keep it in sight, shouting at the water. He could just resist the urge to go over the rail after the book as it churned in the wake and sank below the surface. (320)



But Jabez Trim's Bible, like Abel's forebear Judah, came up out of the deep, and so a reader is left wondering how the prophecy of *Galore's* second epigraph, taken from the Psalms, will be fulfilled: "I will bring my people again from the depths of the sea." We are left wondering how the Word and the Word made flesh—and all that Jabez Trim's Bible and Judah have come to symbolize—will "come again" out of the bloody depths of the carnage at Ypres, where Abel pitches himself into the frontlines' fray.

Abel's decision to go to war helped his father's and William Coaker's political campaign advance. That is, until Coaker decided to back the Military Service Act, allowing the Newfoundland government to conscript young men into military service. Coaker's decision to back this act in the bloody wake of Beaumont Hamel led to his political downfall: "In thousands of homes [Coaker's] portrait was turned to the wall or smashed on the floor or taken down and put away for good. It was as if half the country had woken from a collective dream to find the world much the same as when they'd drifted off" (323). Coaker had hawked a dream of a better, more progressive Newfoundland, and he had worked to establish the Fishermen's Protective Union (FPU) to wrest power from the hands of wealthy merchants, such as Levi Sellers, heir to King-me Sellers' "empire."

Coaker did bring positive political change, particularly for those outport families like the Devines who made their living by the fisheries, but by supporting conscription, especially in the wake of Beaumont Hamel, Coaker, as portrayed in *Galore*, comes across as willing to sacrifice young Newfoundlanders such as Abel Devine for the political progress of Newfoundland itself. Even Eli, who had been so enamoured of Coaker, politically and otherwise, "took the frame off its nail and turned Coaker's face to the wall" (323). In this way, *Galore* echoes the belief, espoused by old Amos Paul in David Admas Richards' novel discussed above, that there is no

progress when it comes to the human heart. Saying this, however, does not deny the irreplaceable worth and holiness of each human life: an ongoing theme in both Richards' and Crummey's fiction.

This theme comes back into focus in *Galore* when elderly Dr. Newman goes to see his granddaughter Esther, who everyone thinks is pregnant with Abel Devine's child. What others have taken for a baby bump, however, is actually a "tumour at least the size of a cabbage" (326). And Newman, going to check in on Esther, is "[ambushed] by an image of Bride as cancer dismantled her one organ at a time, the veins showing through her papery skin" (326). He remembers offering to make Bride's suffering stop, "knowing she would never consent to such a thing," but hearing her say, "Now the once" (326). "It was the oddest expression he'd learned on the shore. Now the once. The present twined with the past to mean soon, a bit later, some unspecified point in the future. As if it was all the same finally, as if time was a single moment endlessly circling on itself. Bride forever absent and always with him" (326). It is through Newman's brief meditation on this phrase, while he is standing on the porch of Selina's House waiting to see his "fallen," shunned, and cancer-stricken granddaughter, that Newman's love for Bride substantiates his love for Esther. There is no hint in this scene that Newman calling Esther "my love" is in any way incestuous, even though the conversation that follows blurs the generational lines between Newman and Esther so that their conversation seems as if it should be between Newman and Bride.

Their oblique banter also blurs the lines between reality and desire, Esther speaking of her tumour as if it is a baby: "I didn't realize, she said, how much I wanted this" (327). It seems clear that both Esther and her grandfather know that she is dying, and that Esther wants her death "now the once," like Bride—a relief from suffering; a chance truly to come home; to twine *then*

with *now*, her past voice, youthful and otherworldly, with her present rasp, ravished by years of drinking and “Sapphic love” (301). Newman, who is present out of compassion for his granddaughter and concern for her body, allows Esther to voice her longing for her own death because she knows that she is loved “now the once” and that because she is loved she can die “unselfconscious, and looking for all the world like a child herself,” without any regrets (327).

Across the Atlantic, on the frontlines in France, an unnamed young Newfoundlander (who may or may not be Abel Devine)<sup>62</sup> is also faced with his own death at Ypres after an ambush near an old farmhouse leaves him crippled: “He tried to crawl deeper into the undergrowth... but his legs would not move. Dead to the touch when he reached down, the flesh no more his than the tree roots or ground itself” (328). The artillery shell that cripples him blasts the young Newfoundlander outside himself, rendering him mute and with no memory of home, even though he retains a deep longing for it. We see this when he is convalescing in a hospital and being nursed by a Newfoundland woman from Belleoram, Fortune Bay:

He was following her with his eyes [much like Judah’s eyes followed Mary Tryphena after he’d been cut from the whale] and she could see he didn’t know what she was talking about. —You don’t remember home, do you.

He shook his head.

— But you miss it.

And after he’d considered this a moment he nodded. (330)

Months later, after Christmas, this young Newfoundlander is shipped across the Channel and examined by professionals who can only conclude that “[his] muteness and the paralysis [are] clearly the result of shell shock and they [prescribe] fresh air and quiet along with electrical

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<sup>62</sup> Crummey maintains this character’s namelessness throughout the rest of the novel, strongly hinting that this is in fact Abel Devine, but keeping his identity purposefully ambiguous.

massage to slow the muscle atrophy while he [recovers] his senses” (331). But time passes and when they see there is “no improvement they [begin] to suspect the debilitation might be permanent. And the smell of the man [is] a riddle they [have] no answers for” (331).

This terrible reek, which recalls in a reader’s mind the ever-present stench of Judah Devine, begins after this young Newfoundlander had been shocked out of himself by the exploding shell. As he lay in the bushes that day, still as death so the ransacking Germans would pass over his body, “[a] mortal darkness [gathered] at his *heart’s heart* as that anonymous death sidled toward him—dread and resignation and a searing, wistful longing that felt like homesickness, all of it rising in him like the stench of the fallen world” (328, *my emphasis*). The reek is potent enough for the Germans to assume that he is a corpse that has been rotting in the woods “a long time” (328). When the Allies find him, “[the] smell” to them “[suggests] an infected wound and they [strip] him out of his clothes but there [is] nothing there to be found” (329). There is nothing to be found physically because the cause of this young Newfoundlander’s ungodly stink is, in a way, like the cause of his muteness and paralysis, as the doctors across the Channel conclude: his injuries are internal, not external. But “shell shock,” though it explains to a degree his inability to speak, walk, or remember, still does not answer the riddle of the boy’s smell, which is so bad that he is “bathed twice a day in a concoction of carbolic and lye” (330).

As with Abel’s forbear Judah, “The Great White,” this young Newfoundlander’s stench is symbolic of the reek of Eros, human desire, longing’s lingering odour that emanates from the “heart’s heart”: the fishy rot of unrequited love. The first of *Galore*’s two epigraphs, by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, hints at this: “The invincible power that has moved the world in unrequited, not happy, love.” This is the love that drives Judah to sacrifice himself for Lazarus and Patrick, the brother and son of Mary Tryphena, the woman who never returned his silent, “baroque”

affections. It is the love that tethers Newman to Bride, who embodies Newfoundland's strangeness, contradiction, vitality, and lure. It is expressed for this young Newfoundlander by "[the] girl from Belleoram [who] imagined it must be a ring of Dante's Hell to remember not the barest scrap of the place you came from. As if all you loved, the world itself, had forgotten you existed" (331). This last sentiment brings to mind *Galore*'s opening, which recounts how Judah "ended his time on the shore in a makeshift asylum cell, shut away from the profligate stink of fish that clung to him all his days" (1). Shut away in his makeshift asylum, Judah is forgotten by the people of Paradise Deep, to whom he came "during a time of scarcity when the ocean was barren and gardens went to rot in the relentless rain," bringing them squid galore and the good luck needed to catch "enough... fish to clear their debt with Sellers and set aside a good store for themselves" (1, 26-27, 41). This young Newfoundlander, like Judah, is forgotten by the world he loves: for, if he is Abel, the people of the shore believe him dead in battle, lost among the unnamed casualties of Ypres.

This mute, paralyzed figure, who may or may not be Abel Devine, *is* and he *is not* one of those unnamed Newfoundlanders lost to the Great War. As he lay paralyzed in the bushes, after the Germans found him and assumed him to be a rotting corpse, he "tried to choke back a suspicion the German soldier was right, that he was dead... [and that] death wasn't sudden and complete but took a man out of the world piecemeal, a little at a time" (329). There are images of this kind of "piecemeal" death all the way through *Galore*: Absalom's blur into blindness, Mrs. Gallery's slip into senility, the loss of Lazarus' leg along the Labrador coast, Bride's brutal death to cancer, the loss of Esther's ephemeral voice. This young Newfoundlander, in the end, embodies the losses—personal and political, cultural and economic—that, according to Chafe, define Newfoundland and its people. This young man holds in himself—symbolized by his

sustained lack of speech, memory, and movement—"that absence yawning beneath him, the shadows flickering across blank space, nameless and unidentifiable" (332). But this mute and crippled young Newfoundlander is more than merely an embodiment of loss.

He is also that "'something worthwhile' not easy to define" that O'Flaherty, in *The Rock Observed*, perceived in his look at the literature of outport Newfoundland. In so many respects this young man, if he is in fact Abel, is the archetypal Newfoundlander: the one who fought heroically against "drowning" to live; the enduring link to the "old ways" symbolized by his "christening" at Kerrivan's Tree; the face of the younger generation in thrall to the music and lore of a dying culture, symbolized by Esther, pregnant with her turnip-sized tumor. But this unknown Newfoundlander is more than a mere archetype of loss, just as *Galore* is more than a mere exploration of loss. Crummey is after something deeper than a surface-level recapitulation of what O'Flaherty called "a people's struggle against overwhelming natural forces and economic adversity." He artfully articulates this struggle, but he also plunges deeper, ending *Galore* on the day it began: on the Feast of St. Mark (1, 332-333).

On the book's last day, the Feast of St. Mark, the unknown Newfoundlander is left alone on the deck of a ship a day outside St. John's: "Alone he could turn his back on the absence, look at the world as if there was nothing to it but surface, the endless present moment" (333). This world of surface without substance is his amnesia, his forgetting and muteness—the present unmoored from history, the Word left unread, incarnation aborted. But the scene does not end with this idea of "the endless present moment." Instead, in the final eucharistic event of the novel, we plunge with the unknown Newfoundlander back into the depths of possibility out of which *Galore*'s incarnational theme is birthed, out of which the Word is made flesh again and again.

In this final scene, the surface-level “now,” symbolized by the unknown Newfoundlander’s amnesia, is given substance (a depth hinted at earlier in the novel by the phrase “now the once”) when “he [spots] a whale steaming clear of the ship’s wake, so close he [can] see the markings under its flukes, the white of them glowing a pale apple-green through seawater” (333). The whale breaches, coming “full into the air a second time and a third,” seeming “to be calling his attention. And something in that detail turned like a key in a lock, a story spiralling out of the ocean’s endless green and black to claim him” (333). And the first face recognizable in that spiralling story from the depths, glimpsed beneath the sea’s surface, is “[the] face of a girl waiting at home” and that mermaid-like flicker of remembrance calls him like the whale’s “sounding,” awakening in him a desire stronger than his pungent fear of death so that he “[drags] his dead legs to the rail” and “[sheds] his clothes as he [goes], returning to himself naked as a fish,” picturing the girl as he falls, “watching from across the room the next time he opened his eyes to the light” (333).

“The face of [the] girl waiting at home” may or may not be Esther: there is the strong possibility that it could be Esther (if the unknown Newfoundlander is in fact Abel), but Crummey doesn’t give us her name. The name he *does* give in this final scene is the name of the holy day on which this face appears “below the surface”: the Feast of St. Mark, the same feast day Judah was born on the shores of Paradise Deep, harkening a reader back to the novel’s mysterious beginning. The Feast of St. Mark occurs on April 25<sup>th</sup>, a day traditionally marked by excessive appetite and raucous celebrations of community that bring together insiders and outsiders to eat and drink in unity. In Newfoundland, the feast day falls in that long, misty interstice between the end of winter and the beginning of spring. This day, which begins the novel, marks a time of “excess” between the harsh leanness of winter and the miraculous harvest

of squid that saved the fisher families of Paradise Deep from impending starvation. *Galore*, by ending on the same day on which it began (a day to celebrate appetite and desire), makes its end concurrent with its beginning, and reminds us of the excessive passions that drive the novel's main characters—the reek of Eros and the fishy scent of holiness that clings to them, passing from generation to generation.

In this way, *Galore* demonstrates what I argued earlier: that stories give us ways of seeing the “miracle of existence”—holiness, the “deepest wisdom of reality,” or that which is life-giving—infusing and enabling our humanity, our flesh-and-blood existence, to be ever more human. In the case of *Galore*, holiness becomes incarnate in the fleshly acts of characters feeding their human appetites, and also in those rare, eucharistic moments—like Bride's marriage to Newman—when spirit and flesh happily marry. These are the book's pleasures of affirmation: those instances concerned with the sensual world and with inhabiting this world in all its pungent paradox, its fishy *thisness*.

In *Galore*, the pleasures of devastation are ensnarled with the pleasures of confirmation and surprise. And these are the pleasures, as Coleman writes, that force us to face the parts of ourselves that we thrust furthest away: like Mary Tryphena forced to recognize that her mysterious and mute husband Judah is also the author of the love letters she received as a girl, composed of lines from Song of Songs and penned in a baroque hand she thought was Absalom Sellers'. Mary Tryphena's anger upon realizing this, when Judah gives himself up for Lazarus and Patrick, mirrors our frustration when we are faced with that which we, as postmodern readers, have thrust furthest from ourselves—a sense of our own holiness.

A novel like Crummey's *River Thieves* shows us how we have lost something essential: something that Highway might characterize as Native spirituality and which Crummey depicts as



the Beothuk and their language, which have been all but wiped from memory (cf. Chafe 93, 96, 115). *River Thieves* reminds us that we have lost something life-affirming, something holy and irreplaceable. In *Galore*, however, loss is figured in how Devine's Widow looks on her great-grandson Patrick, Judah and Mary Tryphena's son:

[That] foreign face of his. She'd gifted him a set of rosary beads after Mary Tryphena began carting him to the Protestant church in Paradise Deep and she once or twice talked him into reciting the mysteries but the habit never took. Hardly a word of Irish in his head besides. She felt as if she was being erased from the world one generation at a time, like sediment sieved out of water through a cloth. (138)

We see a similar sense of loss in the Widow Devine's son Callum and how he laments the loss of his religion, which is not just Catholicism but Father Phelan's irreverent, "bawdy" faith:

The only real religious affiliation Callum knew was a personal one, and Father Phelan's absence cut deeper each season. He never shared Phelan's weakness for drink and women and the sacraments, but Callum was a child of deprivation and there was comfort in the priest's insistence that feeding an appetite was at the heart of a proper life. —The Word was made flesh for a reason, he'd said. Callum thought it was the priest's lust for life he was grieving as his own body faltered. But it was the certainty of Phelan's calling he missed most, its suggestion that the people on the shore were something more than an inconsequential accident in the world. (143)

The certainty of Phelan's calling is that lost "something" that *Galore* brings us face to face with: the sobering belief that "the people on the shore were something more than an inconsequential accident in the world"—that their lives are worthwhile in and of themselves, irreplaceable and holy. *Galore* brings into focus this sacral sense of life—missing so often from our own lives—

and it does so again and again, generation to generation, in the pleasures of its telling. We recognize it in Phelan's "bawdy" faith that labours tirelessly and hilariously to bridge the gaps between English and Irish, Protestant and Catholic, Paradise Deep and the Gut. It is confirmed in the biblical desire for broken beauty first seen in Newman's longing for Bride and it comes as a surprise in Abel's longing for Esther, just as it is devastatingly revealed in Judah's silent, epic yearning for Mary Tryphena.

We don't find out that Judah is the author of the love letters to Mary Tryphena until well into the novel's second half. But even when we discover that it was Judah, we still, after hundreds of pages, know little of this character. His name, Judah, is a twining of his nickname St. Jude, "the patron saint of lost causes," with the names Judas and Jonah: the biblical names coming from an argument between the illiterate James Woundy and the literate Jabez Trim as to who it was who "come right out of the whale's belly" (28, 8-9). All the names hint at who Judah is or what he represents but ultimately he is like Jabez Trim's Bible with its pages half-blurred with sea water and fish slime—a mystery. He is birthed on a godforsaken shore on which life is nothing if not a "lost cause." But even after revealing his identity elliptically as "God's Nephew," he does not abandon the "damned" shore, staying on in his "makeshift asylum cell" as a living sacrifice for the Devines (226). In this way Judah stands between Judas as a symbol of damnation and Jonah as a symbol of resurrection. He lives with and sacrifices himself for a family he does not try to condemn or save, unlike the ecclesial figures of Dodge, Cunico, Reddigan, and Violet.

In this way Judah is most like Dr. Newman and Father Phelan, who are both more concerned with physical health or "a taste of God's Heaven on earth" than with condemning or saving souls (22). In fact, when Phelan is thinking about God in the outhouse, his musings on the

mystery of God bring to a reader's mind the mystery of Judah: "God spoke to no one, [Phelan] knew that. God was scattered in the world and the word of God was a puzzle to be cobbled together out of hints and clues" (120). Like Phelan's God, Judah is mute: he speaks "to no one." And he is certainly a puzzling presence of which little is known. But Judah's love letters, drawn from the Song of Songs, are his "hints and clues" to Mary Tryphena (and to us), along with his clandestine gifts of partridgeberries, "smooth stones or shells from the beach, the weathered skull of a bird, a sweet apple from Kerrivan's Tree" (33, 38, 220). Judah's gifts are drawn from the detritus of the sea, the bones of an air-born creature, and the meagre fruit of the shore. His gifts are tied to the place where he finds himself, and where he falls in love.

Love, ultimately, is the real mystery of *Galore*. It, and not "the outport" (contra Kulyk Keefer), is the shibboleth that defines life on this shore. Judah embodies this mystery and that is why he—like Dr. Newman and Father Phelan—stands between Dodge's and Cunico's sectarian condemnations and Reverend Violet's zealous need to save souls. But love *is* a mystery and (like Judah and Jabez Trim's Bible) is hard to read and difficult to comprehend. Julia Kristeva, in "A Holy Madness: He and She" (1987), sheds some light on this shibboleth when she writes:

[Sensuality] in the Song of Songs leads directly to the problematic of incarnation. The loved one is not there, but I experience his body; in a state of amorous incantation I unite with him, sensually *and* ideally. [...] As intersection of corporeal passion and idealization, love is [indisputably] the privileged experience for the blossoming of metaphor (abstract for concrete, concrete for abstract) as well as incarnation (the spirit becoming flesh, the word-flesh). Unless incarnation is a metaphor that has slipped into the real and has been taken for reality? (Kristeva 94-95)

Kristeva's reading of "the loved one" in Song of Songs illuminates something of Judah in *Galore*. Judah is first experienced as a mere body, presumed to be dead: his presence on the shore as flaccid as his limp cock, which Devine's Widow flicks with "the tip of her knife" (*Galore* 4). But Judah becomes a much more potent figure in a reader's mind by the night that Mary Tryphena and he are clandestinely wed, and Mary Tryphena hoists her skirt and reaches for him in the dark, grasping what she thinks is his "wrist" (116). In this erotic moment, when Judah's reek is "as strong as ever" but seemingly "less oppressive" (115), a reader "unites" with Judah "sensually," impregnated with an intuition of Judah's mysterious significance. It is this very intuition that compels Devine's Widow to connive to have Mary Tryphena marry "The Sea Orphan" in the first place: to keep their "saint" with them (115). However, the sensual and the ideal do not fully come together in Judah until he sacrifices himself for Lazarus and Patrick, and Mary Tryphena learns the truth of who actually wrote her love letters from the Song of Songs.

In that instance of self-sacrifice, "corporeal passion and idealization"—epiphany and prophecy—coalesce and the ideal gives depth to the sensual, or, in Kearney's terms, the "sacramental vocation" intersects with the "pilgrim vocation." These two vocations in a sacramental reader, like the different realities of *Galore*, are conjoined: they trouble and compliment, antagonize and barter, fuck and make love. Kearney argues that "the sensible" (or sensual) world births itself in a reader through sympathy, empathy, compassion, and love, and I have argued that the sensual or the flesh is the conjoining of conflicting realities, which we see in Judah as the archetype of "the sensual" or *thisness*, which is both worldly and otherworldly, land and sea. This is why he was birthed from a whale in the landwash: the constantly shifting shoreline where land and sea meet, where two worlds marry.

Just as Kearney takes the middle road between Coleman's emphasis on the other's literal absence and Steiner's emphasis on the other's "real" presence, Crummey takes a similar middle road—the Tolt Road between the Gut and Paradise Deep, the sensual and the ideal—with Judah and later with the unknown Newfoundlander, who opens our eyes to the depths of Judah's enduring significance: giving epiphany prophetic depth. The marriage of the sensual and the ideal can be seen in how Judah is strongly present and outrageously virile while remaining mysteriously "other" through his silence. Two worlds meet in Judah and because of this there is ebb and flow between these realities. Judah comes into focus in the novel's beginning and over the years he fades into the background, his reek present but welcome (30), coming again into focus when Levi Sellers wrongfully jails him, and again fading from memory as one generation succeeds the next, until it is discovered that he is gone from the shore altogether. The effect of this ebb and flow of focus is that a reader sees less and less of Judah's strangeness and more and more of his familiarity and familial connection. Judah, in the course of the novel, becomes a Devine and his presence brings the other generations of Devines into sharper focus. The light of Judah's albino presence, like the ubiquitous light of Ralph Stone's oil lamps or the "light" that the unknown Newfoundlander opens his eyes to in the end, is another's light that illuminates the holiness incarnate in the people of Newfoundland: their love for each other and for life on this shore in all its selfishness and selflessness, its "Devine" humanity.

In a myth like *Galore*—where different realities collide and coalesce—we as readers learn through the generations of betrayal and prophecy, lust and love, what it means to be both holy and unholy, that is to say, more fully human. This human love, this "holy madness," is the light that the unknown Newfoundlander opens his eyes to in the novel's final plunge. It is the home that war wipes from memory but not from one's "heart's heart"—one's flesh. And though

this love is turned toward selfish ends, though it is bent and buggered and abused by bad religion or crooked politics, it still persists below the surface of our collective unconscious. In a novel like *Galore*, we hear it sound and see it breach. In reading such a myth we are stripped bare and returned to ourselves. And when we open *our* eyes to the light—when we snap shut the book—we find ourselves back in our own worlds, as near to heaven by sea, compelled by love to live more fully.

## Conclusion

### Refiguring Holiness

Early on in this study I said that I was interested in “the mysterious source” out of which an ethical reading, one concerned with how we live in the world, might ignite in the mind of a reader. And over the past four chapters I have attempted to *realize* that idea—holiness—and to show ways in which this idea has been refigured and given flesh in novels by David Adams Richards, Michael Winter, Lisa Moore, and Michael Crummey. The idea of holiness (like its conjoined twin, the sacred), as I’ve shown through readings of Levinas, Derrida, Ricoeur, Bakhtin, Bowen, Kearney, and Coleman is indeed alive in criticism and philosophy. My aim, however, has not been merely to catalogue this phenomenon but to construct a new theoretical language out of an old religious language in which to house this idea and to begin to give it new critical shape. I have also endeavoured to demonstrate how holiness, despite its religious history and connotations, is more than a mere “idea” but a “real” life-giving presence in fiction.

Certainly holiness is not conceived of today as it was a century and more ago, let alone millennia. But there are those who believe holiness—in all its flesh-and-blood *thisness*—still persists, even in our age. Gregory Wolfe, in his essay “Always Now” (2009), cites Annie Dillard’s *For the Time Being* where she argues that it “is a weakening and discoloring idea, that rustic people knew God personally once upon a time—or even knew selflessness or courage or

literature—but that it is too late for us. In fact, the absolute is available to everyone in every age. There was never a more holy age than ours, and never a less. There is no less holiness at this time—as you are reading this—than there was the day the Red Sea parted” (Dillard quoted in Wolfe). If, as Wolfe and Dillard claim, holiness is “always now”—a reality that persists in humanity and enables human persistence—then we can still inquire as to what forms it might take in our day.

Ricoeur, in his essay “Manifestation and Proclamation” from *Figuring the Sacred* (1995), argues that what was once a sacral universe—with its ceremonial forms wrought to house the holy—has undergone a critical desacralization in modern times. But Ricoeur, far from being nihilistic about this, sees in the death of the sacral a chance for its rebirth in a re-imagination of its symbolism (Ricoeur 67). This rebirth of the sacred—signified by the resurrection of the sacramental language housing *this* critical discourse—is what my chapter studies have discussed in greater detail. The aim of each chapter, focussed on a specific novel, has been to demonstrate this rebirth of the holy through close readings of contemporary novels, regardless of whether holiness takes overtly religious forms (different as these can be), as in the works Richards and Crummey, or more secular forms, as in the works of Winter and Moore. These novels, however, are not mere retrievals of lost, sacral worlds, since we no longer live in such worlds where “life,” as something holy, “may be seen in the cosmic rhythms, in the return of vegetation, and in the alternation of life and death” (52). Now, instead of such a world, we have—at least in the West—the “iconoclastic discourse” of post-modernity that, in the introduction of this study, was typified by Baudrillard’s philosophy of hyperreality that bears witness not only to the liquefaction of the sacred but of the “real” as well.



Ricoeur acknowledges openly that we “live in a desacralized world,” such as Baudrillard describes. He even argues that our “modernity is constituted as modern precisely by having moved beyond the sacred cosmos” (61). In our day and age “[human] beings no longer receive the meaning of their existence from their belonging to a cosmos itself saturated with meaning” (61). The very idea of the sacred, like the very idea holiness, is now connotative of “the archaic”—something old-fashioned, used by repressive religious systems, and uselessly otherworldly (61). This certainly seems to have been the gist of Armstrong and Wyile’s 1997 critique of Richards’ *Miramichi Trilogy*, when they attacked Richards’ “lamentable” and “discredited” religious humanism as combatively trying to valorize the holiness of human “life.” And yet, as I have shown, the idea of holiness persists not only in Richards’ writing but also in novels by those who do not necessarily profess his Catholic worldview. This adds muscle to Ricoeur’s conviction, as well as to Wolfe’s and Dillard’s, that holiness persists in our industrialized, market-driven world as more than mere “traces” of an archaic sacred or as more than “a substitute sacred that does not merit survival” (62).

However, in the midst of this contemporary and openly iconoclastic era, Ricoeur’s argument that modernity is “neither a fact nor our destiny [but] an open question” still rings true, especially in the post-modern times in which we live (63). Binaries like modernity and the archaic can be deconstructed or, in Ricoeur’s terms, re-evaluated. And such re-evaluations—as we have seen in the continental philosophy of Kearney and the literary criticism of Bowen—reveal ways in which both sides can consubstantiate to create new meaning. As I have shown in the preceding chapters, particularly in focussing on Crummey’s *Galore*, this middle ground of narrative is where “archaic” holiness can be re-imagined or shocked back to life in new storied-

forms that can jolt a reader into new ways of being and seeing in which tradition and innovation feed and nourish each other, re-invigorating a profound and vital sense of self-awareness.

Marilynne Robinson, in her essay “Reclaiming a Sense of the Sacred” (2012), calls this vital “self-awareness”—this “human ability to consider and appraise one’s own thoughts”—the “soul,” a term “Modern discourse is not really comfortable with” (Robinson 5). Regardless of this discomfort, however, Robinson goes on to insist that “the loss of [this] word has been disabling... to literature and political thought and to every human pursuit” because we perceive the world through the soul—that “astonishing nexus of the self”—making the soul “[the] locus of... human mystery” (5). Ron Hansen seems to believe similarly, hence his claim that we read to nourish the hunger in our souls for the lives of others. And this hunger *can be* filled in the act of reading, in the tasting of the pleasures of a story—its devastation, confirmation, and surprise—and the substantiation of these on the life of a reader. This way of reading, which I describe as “sacramental,” explicitly re-evaluates binaries like modern and archaic but it also implicitly re-imagines the relationship between what Coleman calls spirituality and cultural politics, what I have been depicting as the fusion of the sacramental and the prophetic—when a reader realizes that to live more fully, given the ambiguities of existence, imaginative empathy needs to become incarnate in real acts of love.

Ricoeur describes this, in terms of the history of Christianity, as the dialectic between sacraments and “kerygma” (proclamation or preaching). The kerygmatic (or prophetic) impulse in reading can be seen as the deep “concern to ‘apply’ the word here and now both ethically and politically” but the sacramental impulse in reading gives “symbolism... the upper hand. [...] The sacrament” can then be seen as “the mutation of a sacred ritual into the kerygmatic realm” (Ricoeur 67). This is another way of articulating the logic of incarnation that I explored in my

readings of Coleman and Kearney and Crummey's novel *Galore*, and it is another way of understanding why I call these "sacramental readings" rather than prophetic readings or ones concerned primarily with re-invigorating one's cultural politics. Such re-invigoration, as a result of reading, *may* and *should* occur, but it cannot be guaranteed.

A reader's cultural politics can certainly be affected by reading in a sacramental way, but that is the second substantiation of a story in the *life* of a reader; the first substantiation is in the *imagination*—and this is the actual reading of the work itself, eating the book whole. Both occur in a reader's soul, the "nexus" of life and imagination, and both *can* become consubstantial in a sacramental reading, though this consubstantiality, as I have said, can never be guaranteed. Such a reading not only reveals the "renewing power of the sacred" that keeps a story from becoming "abstract and cerebral" but also actively sacramentalizes a sense of holiness that is, even in contemporary fiction, "ceaselessly reinterpreted" in order to give stories something meaningful "to say, not only to our understanding... but also to our imaginations and hearts; in short, to the whole human being" (67). Put another way, holiness humanizes. Whatever *it* is, we know holiness first through the imagination—through beauty, through the pleasures of reading—and this knowledge, this "other" wisdom, *if* we respond in love, can affect our understanding of our world, and, subsequently, how we live in that world.

A sacramental reading, then, is more than just a way of recovering the human in an ideological age: it is refiguring the human or imagining what it *can* mean to be more fully human. However, to say this is the task writers set for themselves when they sit down to write a novel would be to say they play the prophet without first eating the book. A writer is not necessarily after "meaning" (at least not directly) but, as Robert Cording claims, she is more likely after "the world's fullness"—the world's holy *thisness*. After all, the world becomes flesh

in a writer's imagination and in writing that "flesh" transubstantiates into words, symbols, and metaphors—narratives. And those stories, when read, can become *new* flesh in a reader's life. Dillard says as much in her essay "Does The World Have Meaning?" from her collection *Living by Fiction* (1982): "The order which the artist devises from [her] fabrications is a chip off the universal order, and partakes of its being. We learn. If we may learn to know, may we not learn to understand? After all, our physical knowledge is, although partial, nevertheless not only adequate but also increasing" (Dillard 184). This could, of course, be interpreted as historicism: blind belief in human progress. But I think Dillard knows that is a line only ideology can travel straight to "utopia," which is really "no-place," or a place that the mind can go, though not necessarily the flesh. As Kearney reminds us, however, sacraments and stories, unlike ideology, continually bring to mind the reality of our flesh, our bodies, like Helen O'Mara's re-awakened physical lust for Barry in *February*.

Put another way, a sacramental reading, in its hunt for holiness, never imagines an eschatological resurrection of symbols without an archaeological uncovering of symbols. Ezekiel, after all, didn't prophecy to disembodied spirits: he spoke to sun-bleached bones and saw them take on flesh. Wisdom, then, gained from a sacramental reading, concerns *continually* re-imagining new ways in which to see others and ourselves *in* our present day, *in* this world, because stories, as Coleman argues, can have the potential to affect the way we live in the ambiguity of the here-and-now, or, as Kearney puts it, in the flesh-and-blood *thisness* of our daily lives.

That is why reading a book can be like Jacob wrestling the angel, grappling with the irresistible flesh-and-blood holiness of another, others, the world. Jean-Louis Chrétien, in his essay "How to Wrestle with the Irresistible" from *Hand to Hand: Listening to the Work of Art*

(2003), dives theoretically into the skirmish between the biblical story of Jacob's "divine" encounter and Delacroix's "agnostic" rendering of that struggle in the Church of Saint-Sulpice, commissioned in 1849. Chrétien's essay, though focussed on fully encountering a work of art, can be applied to how a reader fully encounters a story. In such full, flesh-to-flesh encounters, a reader—like Chrétien's listening-viewer—is wounded like Jacob in the violent intimacy of encounter (Chrétien 4-5). He writes that "the wound blesses and the benediction wounds" (x). As Chrétien shows, Jacob (like a reader covenanting with a book), "[responds] with... joy to the provocative, unexpected presence of something greater than [himself], which comes upon [him] from outside: that is, [he] unreservedly [throws himself] 'body and soul' into intimate struggle with this presence. Such total commitment can result only from an undivided, fearless love of such an encountered presence" (x). This can be seen in how a reader can be bowled over by a story: lunged at by a character like Sky Barnaby in David Adams Richards' *Incidents in the Life of Markus Paul*. Or this intimate struggle is experienced as "falling toward and into" (6) the transfiguring textures of Helen O'Mara's sorrow in Lisa Moore's *February*.

Reading in this way *is* like wrestling the angel—the holy, the "irresistible." It is like entering the fray of the Iroquoisian Creation Story as Tharonhyawá:kon, the right-handed, right-headed son of Mother Earth, and struggling against Thawihskaron, your left-handed, wrong-headed twin—you, the reader, *creating* meaning as your twin confounds (Maracle 7-8). You, as a reader (like the writer), create while your left-handed twin, the wild human nature of the story, bewilders and wounds. But what cripples you in a story also encourages you to create more, to read further and, in so doing, fight to substantiate the other's struggle *in* your own life.

This struggle certainly leaves a mark and, as Chrétien writes of Jacob, you as a reader will carry the memory, the scar, of this encounter. Chrétien calls this heady memory "the

thickness of this night” (Chrétien 12). And reading does thicken experience: the stories we read continue to smoke in our memories like the sage burned at an Iroquoisian Talking Circle where the Creation Story is retold, where Tharonhyawá:kon and Thawihskaron enter the ring and encounter each other—each listener—again. Chrétien writes that the “intertwining” of art and viewer, story and reader, “renders intimacy adverse and adversity intimate” (15). Thawihskaron, the left-handed twin, is never banished and never ceases to cause mischief for Tharonhyawá:kon in their flesh-to-flesh, life-and-death struggle. But, as Chrétien argues:

Such are the conditions of combats that are in truth life-and-death matters, combats in which something of ours must die, and a new life enter to dwell within us. Only the disarmed can grow in strength. To take arms, to surround oneself with defences, is already to place oneself in a position of weakness, and at the same time to refuse the salutary intimacy of close combat. (14)

This is why a sacramental reader privileges a hermeneutics of affirmation: openness to the story being read. To engage only in a hermeneutics of suspicion is to refuse “the salutary intimacy of close combat,” the blessed struggle with another who is flesh-of-one’s-flesh—one’s twin, nemesis, angel.

Vulnerable struggle with a story’s otherness blesses more fully, making a reader more aware of the heart-rending world of others: awakened out of the numbing sleep-hold of egocentricity. Hans-Georg Gadamer argued this very thing in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays* (1977), writing that a “work of art,” like a novel, can awaken “shared consciousness” (Gadamer 150). When Robinson speaks of the soul’s “self-awareness” she hints at this imaginative awakening, described more fully by Chrétien as a viewer of art who “[lives] convinced of the likelihood that something or someone outside [herself can] fundamentally

transform [her] life” (Chrétien xiii). A sacramental reader, likewise, holds this enabling, illuminating conviction: that satiating her hunger for the inner life of another in reading a story *can* in fact change her—continually free her and make her restless in her own claustrophobic ego. Chrétien writes that “[nothing] suffices for the soul but that which exceeds its capacity” (xiv). And since the world of others always exceeds any reader’s capacity fully to understand, it is that world’s very mystery that awakens imaginative appetite: what I have been calling Eros or, more simply, love. And it is love for others that makes us uneasy with our own self-contained, self-centered worlds because love longs for others, for community. Love grapples with our fear to reach out beyond ourselves. It is, in fact, the depth of love’s holy mystery that makes us restless, like the life-giving, creative restlessness of Jacob and Tharonhyawá:kon: a restlessness we have seen in different forms in the lives of Amos Paul and his grandson Markus, Sheldon Troke and his defence lawyer Jim Lythgoe, Helen O’Mara and her son John, Judah Devine and his descendent Abel.

It is this restlessness that keeps us up at night, reading and catching glimpses of holiness, like Dillard’s moth, that flutter into our candles and sink into the hot wax of our minds, so that we begin to see new ways in which holiness is being illuminated in contemporary fiction: to feel that gnawing hunger that reminds us, in ever new and dumbfounding ways, that there is more to being human than we have yet imagined.

But is this always the case? Does any story always and at any time bowl us over or pull us forward into its world and out of our own, wounding us and blessing us? What of art or artfulness: novelistic craft? What is it that makes a novel’s holiness desirable and compelling? What causes its *adieu* to reverberate in a reader’s soul? Is it not that which holds a reader’s attention: that which compels and is, finally, irresistible? Chrétien defines this as “a dramatic,

intimate relationship with what is outside our self-understanding—another person, beauty” (xv). This is certainly true but fiction also faces us with beauty’s monstrous opposite, the shadow side of grace.

Robinson describes this “shadow” using a phrase drawn from Virgil’s *Aeneid* that is used when the hero, “Aeneas, a Trojan who has escaped the destruction of his city, sees a painting in Carthage of the war at Troy and is deeply moved by it and by what it evokes, the *lacrimae rerum*, the tears in things” (Robinson 11). Robinson goes on to write that “Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides would surely have agreed with Virgil’s Aeneas that the epics and the stories that surround them and flow from them are indeed about... a great sadness that pervades human life” (11). But this low-pressure human sadness, this cloud of unknowing, clashes with high-pressure human holiness in a story’s conflict, its plot, and this dramatic clash flashes a white hot light: the illuminating chiaroscuro effect that sears a novel like Michael Winter’s *The Death of Donna Whalen* into a reader’s mind.

Stories that flash with such revelatory brilliance—stories that sear the mind, that scar imagination’s retina—burn because their writers, by the force of their prose, hurl us into the human hurricane where “the tears in things” and the holiness in things collide. Put another way, writers like Richards, Winter, Moore, and Crummey do not allow us merely to observe Thawihskaron—the destructive twin—wrestle with Tharonhyawá:kon—the creative twin. These writers draw us into the human struggles they depict, the fiery frays of human conflict. And such encounters wound, as Chrétien reminds us with his retelling of Jacob wrestling the angel, struggling with the irresistible and limping ever after. Such encounters burn but they can also illuminate, like Dillard’s candle with its twin wicks. Near the end of *Holy the Firm*, Dillard advances her metaphor, figuring the artist—the writer—as the moth-wick, the one immolated in



the telling. For “[what] can any artist set on fire but [her] world? [...] What can [she] light but the short string of [her] gut...?” (Dillard 453).

When an author lights the short string of her gut, when she illuminates the holiness in things, in the lives of others, she also enables us, her readers, to see “the tears in things,” as well as the bloody separation of these twin realities, like the gory splitting of conjoined twins Lazarus and Judah—the flesh and the spirit—in the Widow Devine’s nightmare. All of the novels discussed in this study reveal different gashes in the flesh of the world: deep divisions between the world of others and a reader’s self. And seeing these brutalizations—neighbours abusing neighbours—*can* kill hope, leave its carcass to rot and its bones to be bleached in the sun, crow-pecked and scattered. These four Atlantic Canadian novels, however, like the best of literature, also speak of love, which is deeper than hope. And love for another called forth in such stories—prophecy’s sacramental breath—can still raise the dead: fill a reader’s silence, her solitude, with the rattling of old bones.

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