

Burlesque Prophets to Media Messiahs: Grotesque Representations of Religion in *The Violent Bear it Away* and *Survivor*

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Introduction

The introduction of the word ‘grotesque’ into a discussion of religion in American culture immediately brings to mind images of scandal: televangelists and conservative religious leaders caught embezzling money, soliciting male prostitutes, or found in the possession of child pornography. Such a response reflects two basic aspects of American culture. First, it reflects the usage of the ‘grotesque’ as common critique of popular culture, the grotesque carrying an idiomatic definition of “an event or appearance noteworthy only for its bizarre or perverse qualities and only for its effects of scandal.” (Goodwin 1) It is this colloquial definition of ‘grotesque’ with which Flannery O’Connor described the problem for a serious writer of the grotesque writing from the context of the mass media pop culture of 1950s America as “one of finding something that is *not* grotesque.” (in Goodwin 1) Second, it reflects Christianity’s profound significance within even the most secular aspects of American culture. The glee felt by opponents of Christianity in response to those public scandals is equally as indicative of this significance as the anger and betrayal felt by the faithful. These strange juxtapositions scandal and piety, culture and theology have characterized much of 20th century American culture, and are therefore unsurprisingly inscribed in some of the important literary works of this period.

This thesis is an exploration of the two such works, each characterized by the grotesque portrayal of religion, Chuck Palahniuk’s *Survivor* and Flannery O’Connor’s *The Violent Bear it Away*. These brutally satirical novels, which are among these authors’ most prominent works, are defined by the interaction between the grotesque, religion and American culture, tropes and themes that act as a major point of continuity between the two authors. This phenomenon warrants investigation because O’Connor and Palahniuk represent two profoundly different American literary movements, and the thematic and rhetorical continuity in their work gestures toward a significant yet ill defined commonality between their respective literary movements. O’Connor’s writing can firmly be placed within the Southern Gothic tradition, a literary movement in the early-to-mid 20th century authors in the American South, defined by such authors as William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Eudora Welty. Southern Gothic is typically associated with modernism, and a strong regional aesthetic. Conversely Palahniuk is considered a figurehead of the American Transgressive Fiction movement, named such by LA Times columnist Michael Silverblatt, of the latter half of the 20th century that was dominated by the authors such as William Burroughs, Charles Bukowski, and Bret Easton Ellis. The Transgressives are typically associated with postmodernism, and typically responds to issues arising from consumer culture and globalization.

Despite these marked differences in intellectual and cultural context, Southern Gothic and Transgressive literature continue to be linked in the cultural imagination by vague yet persistent description of “grotesque’. The Southern Gothic was, after all, characterized by what O’Connor calls ‘freaks,’ figures with mental or physical handicaps, exhibiting outrageous or psychopathic behavior, and transgressive literature is infamous for its portrayal and celebration of the taboo. However, in order to have a meaningful discussion of the mechanisms behind this aesthetic and its rhetorical effect, it is necessary to refine this vague sense of the grotesque, characterized by broad reactions such as feelings of ‘wrongness’ or ‘perversity,’ into a theoretical concept

specific enough to be critically useful, extending beyond the colloquial or aesthetic. To these ends, this thesis will define the grotesque as a mode of representation that estranges, responds to, and critiques the ideal. This definition of the grotesque is derived from the theoretical work of two key critics. The first is Wolfgang Kayser, who in his seminal aesthetic treatise, *On the Grotesque in Art and Literature*, saw the grotesque as an aesthetic marked by hybridity, which undermined the audience's ability to categorize and thus understand the figures. Such hybrids did not need to be physical (e.g. plant-animal) but could instead be formal (tragic-comic) or archetypal (e.g. hero-villain.) The second important critic is Mikhail Bakhtin, who outlined a different but complementary conception of the grotesque as part of his critical inquiry into the work of François Rabelais, entitled *Rabelais and His World*. Bakhtin saw the grotesque as linked to the spirit of Carnival, a season of festival before Lent in Catholic countries, social mores and hierarchies were inverted and the flesh and its functions (eating, sex, defecation, etc.) were celebrated over the spiritual or abstract (the soul etc.) Kayser and Bakhtin conceptions of the grotesque differ greatly in scope and application, but they have one important similarity: they are both dependent on the distortion or inversion of the ideals of society, estranging them from the audience. The grotesque can then be conceptualized as a mode of representation that presents a contentious viewpoint which undermines the ideal, and forces a new perspective on what is taken for granted or would rather be ignored.

In light of this definition, my thesis revolves around two key propositions. First, that Palahniuk has appropriated a mode of grotesque representation established by O'Connor and that these appropriations constitute major points of continuity between their works, not only the subject matter, but also the rhetorical technique. The grotesque is what connects these two authors, their work, and their respective literary movements. Second, that the grotesque operates as the primary mechanism behind the satire and caricatural depictions for which these authors are infamous. Through these grotesque representations of religion, these authors both exploit and satirize the process by which American culture typically uses these icons and tropes to convey meaning. Third, that these grotesque representations call attention to the arbitrary relationship between theological tropes or images and their cultural meaning or value. The interpretation of Biblical theme and imagery is an integral part of the theologically influenced process that Erich Auerbach describes in great detail in his essay, *Figura*, in which participants of a culture use Christian symbols and concepts to understand themselves, to make sense of their art values and traditions. The breakdown of this relationship calls into the question Western culture's entire interpretative apparatus.

In order to support these propositions, I will examine specific instances of the grotesque representation of religion and religious concepts in O'Connor's *The Violent Bear it Away*, and Palahniuk's *Survivor*. Then, I will argue that these tendencies represent purposeful and specific application of the grotesque as defined by both Kayser and Bakhtin. To facilitate this analysis, I will categorize these tendencies into two basic morphological categories defined by the cultural ideal being targeted and the aspects of the narrative in which these tendencies are manifest. Finally we will examine the effect that these both morphologies of grotesque modes of representation within the novel have on the cultural process of interpreting the religious tropes and narratives described by Auerbach, and the consequences on how these tropes communicate of meaning. Lastly we will explore the implication these points of continuity have on common critical positions on both of these works and their respective authors.

My thesis is organized into four sections. The first section will look to the Kayser and Bakhtin have of the grotesque, in addition to those of critics influenced by their thinking and of

the authors themselves, to crystallize an understanding of the grotesque and relationship to the ideal, its effects and applications, and to define the set of criteria I will use to identify it. It will also examine the uniquely American ideals that O'Connor and Palahniuk interacted with, ideals arising from the influence of Christianity on American cultural practices of symbolic communication and mediation, as opposed to classical Greek and Roman ones Kayser and Bakhtin concerned themselves with. This step is necessary to develop a critical apparatus that I will apply to specific elements within the works in question.

The second section will examine the grotesque representation of the religious experience, as experienced by each work's primary protagonist, *Survivor's* Tender Branson and *Violent's* Francis Marion Tarwater. The narrative trajectory of both characters undermines the ideal conception of religion as a relationship with the divine that is ennobling and constructive, that actualizes the self, and ultimately liberating. The details of Tarwater and Branson's lives present in its stead a constrictive and deterministic image of redemption that eventually results in the negation of the self.

The third section will analyze the grotesquerie that arises from the mixture of the sacred and the profane, the divine and the mundane evident in the manner in which both authors portray characters of divine significance, characters defined by prophetic and messianic ideas and images. Such portrayals outsized burlesques that act as saints and other uncomfortably carnal and clownish vessels for the divine undermine the hierarchies and categories by which American culture understand their moral and cosmic reality.

The final section will examine the consequence both these types of grotesque representation, and present the thesis that the meaning that the American culture relies on these images and trope to convey becomes disrupted. It will argue that the grotesque, ultimately, calls into question the relationship of these religious symbols and ideas to their culturally accepted meaning, not just within the context of the novels, but within our cultural discourse as a whole.

The Critical Definition of the Grotesque

While Wolfgang Kayser traced the origins of the grotesque as an aesthetic from second century Rome "*On the Grotesque in Art and Literature*," he described the 18th and 19th century critical resistance to the recognition of the grotesque as a legitimate aesthetic category as characterized by the fear that it would jeopardize the classicist notion of aesthetics: "the principle of art as an imitation of beautiful nature or its idealization." (30) In this context, the ideal has an epistemological dimension in addition to the aesthetic, and were not limited to physical ideals (ideal proportions of a statue), but also included archetypal ideals (an ideal hero) and formal ideals (ideal comedy and ideal tragedy). This is evidenced by the classicist Johann Winckelmann's allegations of nihilism against grotesqueries in artwork and literature: claiming that they offended not only "good taste" but failed to be "truthful or meaningful" the way good art should be. (25) To these thinkers, ideals were, in conceptual and metaphysical terms, the concepts around which human knowledge is organized, the conduits to 'truth' and 'meaning' and the means by which the world was understood.

Mark Dorrain offers the ideal hero as an example of the ideals significance to a society, as the hero acts as a "cynosure of society's idealized power and promise," capable of "[overcoming] monsters and the threat of annihilation." (qtd. in Goodwin 7) Conversely, the grotesque was seen as undermining this identity, subverting these values, leaving society defenseless against these fears: Dorrain continues, "The vision of the modern age advanced by

the [authors of grotesqueries] is by comparison certainly not epic or valorous, nor does it provide the reassurance possible when a worldview is aligned along an axis of hero monster.” (Ibid.) Kayser argued that as a consequence of the semiotic function of the cultural ideal, the grotesque’s undermining of the ideal rendered the entire system of meaning upon which a culture relies unstable and unreliable as an attendant consequence. The grotesque thus was a mode of representation that “structurally [...] presupposes the categories which apply to our world view become inapplicable.” (185)

However, in *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin found Kayser’s conception of the grotesque to be incomplete and unfairly negative, questioning Kayser’s assertion that the breakdown of these categories and ideal concepts so alienated the audience as to “instilled a fear of life rather than a fear of death” (Ibid.) In response, Bakhtin formulated the idea the “grotesque realism,” asserting that estrangement from the ideal is a means to return to physical material reality, conceptualizing the grotesque as democratic and even celebratory in its demolition of the constraints of idealism. (Dentith 68) In Bakhtin’s conception, the breakdown of value structures and the resultant inversion of traditional hierarchies was a source of cultural revitalization, a means of allowing the oppressed to mock their oppressors. The grotesque allowed commoners to mock kings. Furthermore, the ideal communicated not only meaning but expectation and thus often circumscribed social possibilities a culture afforded the individual, and thus the grotesque provided a means for the its practitioners to define their own lives and identities outside what was ordinarily available to them. Bakhtinian grotesque was often characterized by its dark humor frequently characterized by the amoral trickster archetypes of folklore traditions, which often reflected the material aspects of the human experience, especially as it contradicted the worldview defined by the ideal. (Goodwin 26)

The Grotesque and Christianity in American Culture

Despite the differences between these definitions, the grotesque is consistently disorienting and subversive, and can be defined by this deviation from and deformation of the ideal as found in orthodox, mainstream definitions of art and culture.

However, as contemporary American authors began to incorporate grotesque figures into their own works, it became evident that they were responding to a set of ideals distinct from those of Winckelmann and other classicists, distinct American ideals upon which what James Goodwin calls American society’s “structures of cultural value”(25) are built. Flannery O’Connor, in an essay defending her work entitled “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” writes that the ability of Southern Gothic writers to write about freaks is because of a shared Southern ideal of a whole man,

To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological, [...] approaching the subject from the standpoint of the writer, I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted. (3)

Given the ‘Christ-haunted’ American culture, it seems evident that Christianity would be the most immediate source of these American ideals, with its specific theological conceptions of morality, truth, and the nature of the human. However, the delineation of these ideals is complicated by the phenomenon in American society in which Christianity exists as a cultural entity informed by but distinct from Christianity the religion. In *God in Public*, Mark Toulouse argued that Christianity has taken an iconographic existence in American culture in which the

images associated with religion are reappropriated for secular purposes. (52) This creates a malleability and multiplicity of the cultural meaning communicated in religious ideals, which is demonstrated by the fact that organizations as ideologically diverse as the Red Cross and the Ku Klux Klan can both use the bible in their ceremonies. (61) Thus, the grotesque referred to in discussing religious scandal in American culture, in discussing O'Connor's 'freaks' and Palahniuk's messiah's are responding to cultural ideals and values created in this interplay between theology and ideology.

It then becomes evident that these authors of American grotesqueries are not degrading the ideal without reason, but are rather critiquing the ideal and its intersection with society. Of O'Connor's fiction, Marshall Gentry writes:

O'Connor characters constantly make us aware of their connection to ideals, most often religious truths shared by all the "children of God." At the same time, the ideals are wed to misunderstanding, banality, even cruelty, so that the characters are oppressed by degraded ideals. [...] as a result of these degradations, the term "ideal" [is] two-faced; while pointing to something ultimate and desirable, ideals [...] can be mechanical and arbitrary. (5)

Gentry's observations echo Bakhtin's assertion that the ideal can be arbitrary and confining. Given Christianity's many moral imperatives, it's evident that it's ideals can quite easily become constricting. This oppressiveness is further exasperated by the fact that the religious ideal is not immutable, and is frequently influenced by secular ideological agendas. In *Modern America Grotesque*, James Goodwin claims that the religious ideals of early American society was informed by the legacy of Western imperialism: "As one consequence of the histories of exploration, conquest and slavery in the West, differences in skin color were inescapably incorporated into the structures of cultural value founded upon moralized contrasts of light and dark. In North American colonies, local Puritan theocracies codified such differences into spiritual doctrine." (25) This is made possible by the fact that, as Mark Toulouse argued, religious ideals are born of the interplay between theology and ideology. Theology ostensibly remains constant; however, ideology can change to reflect the social and political concerns of the time. Thus grotesqueries of religion comment on the work's cultural moment rather than just the represented theological figures. This facilitates the social satire, the caricatural fringe O'Connor and Palahniuk are known for.

Lastly, the grotesque has a semiotic dimension: ideals are intrinsically related to the conveyance of meaning. The allegations of nihilism described by Kayser are rooted in this reality. Thus the grotesque, the disruption degradation and the deformation of the ideal, is a form of semiotic play that toys with and warps the meaning that ideals both embody and facilitate. As religion provides a significant source of these ideals, serving as what Clifford Geertz describes as a "system of symbols [which which societies] formulate conceptions of the general order of existence," (qtd. in Toulouse 52) to undermine religious ideals is to undermine cultural meaning and thus the order of existence itself, an effect that can be used to devastating satirical ends.

This is the basis of the satirical paradigm that O'Connor so elegantly demonstrates in *The Violent Bear it Away* Palahniuk then appropriates these Southern Gothic paradigms and transposes it to a postmodern context to pay specific attention to meaning, symbol, and mediation. Palahniuk and O'Connor engage in a very specific form of grotesquery situated within specific cultural questions of religion, faith and destiny. These distinctly American authors interrogate the ideals of this 'Christ-haunted' America by shocking their audiences into a state of unfamiliarity with them by way of the grotesque, taking very specific and purposeful

steps to portray these ideals from contentious perspective, forcing the reader to contend with them without the aura of authority they are usually imbued with.

Nihilism and the “Devilish” O’Connor

The characteristics of the first morphological category of the grotesque and its relationship to the social and theological ideals can be clearly seen in the many accusations of religious perversity O’Connor’s work accrued in the decades following their publication. In 1968, Tom Lorch wrote an essay on *The Violent Bear it Away* that characterized O’Connor’s novel as deeply anti-Catholic, despite the author’s professed faithfulness. The figure of Tarwater, Lorch claimed, undermined a central tenet of Christian dogma: man’s relationship with God, and subsequent redemption, was subject to man’s free will. Indeed, Tarwater attempts to reject Christ and resist the call to prophethood laid out for him while being raised by the Elder Tarwater, and accepts his religious calling only after apparently having been broken by the trauma of drowning his cousin and being raped. The origin of Tarwater’s religious calling and the trajectory of his journey to this calling, Lorch wrote, essentially characterized the religious experience as a regressive and ultimately self-negating process, and eliminated the role choice needs to play in order for Christ’s sacrifice to make any sense.

This grotesque representation of faith is one of the main critical problems of O’Connor’s work: Lorch was only one of a wave of literary critics who characterized as “devilish” or “demonic” O’Connor’s depiction of the redemption by way of God’s plan for humanity, essentially accusing the author of being a spokesperson of spiritual worldview that hinged on nihilism and determinism, rather than on Christianity and its resultant redemption in the eyes of God as a meaningful choice. (Gentry 3, 145) O’Connor defended her portrayals of these theological concepts of by claiming “If you live today, you breathe nihilism. In or out of the church it’s the gas you breathe.” (in Goodwin 112)

It is particularly striking how the charges of nihilism levied by critics against O’Connor closely mirror Winckelmann’s complaints about the grotesque as an aesthetic, of how it disrupted of sense and meaning through the denigration of the ideal. Indeed, central to these allegations of purported “devilishness” was as an ideal, specifically the dogmatic definition of redemption, which is commonly described as “the actions of Christ and of grace, (the individual’s role being merely to cooperate); [wherein] redemption is experienced consciously; and the moment of redemption is a natural conclusion to a sequence of preparations.” (Gentry 4) This process is traditionally conceived as fundamentally liberating. Indeed, the Oxford English Dictionary’s first definition of the word “Liberty” is “Freedom from the bondage or dominating influence of sin, spiritual servitude, worldly ties, etc.”

O’Connor’s narratives pervert this traditionalist notion of redemption, a paradigm that casts the religious experience as the culmination at the end of a constructive process and relationship with the divine. This is manifest in a specific grotesque pattern of imagery Gentry identifies in O’Connor’s work in which characters “lay tracks to the oven of redemption,” unconsciously working towards a religious redemption or fulfillment that is perversely equated with self annihilation. (4) It is redemption, arguably the single most important tenet of the Christian faith, which is degraded in O’Connor work. These high theological ideals are brought down from the ideal and forced into confrontation with the oppressive circumstances of her characters. As a result, she depicts faith as constricting, implicating the process of redemption in

the ultimate nullification of the self, and the degradation of the spirit through undermining free will.

Agency in the Religious Experience

The issue of free will is brought to the fore in the opening pages of *The Violent Bear It Away*. The novel begins on a failed act of defiance, as Tarwater disobeys his great-uncle's command to bury him, abandoning the grave half dug. The voice in his head, the "stranger/friend," urges him to rebel, tells him with the Elder Tarwater gone, he is freed from his great-uncles oppressive influence, and encourages him to find his own way. So in an act of spite, Tarwater burns down the house, attempting to give his Great-uncle the cremation the Elder Tarwater had tried to avoid. Tarwater's symbolic exercise of his newfound freedom is however undermined by a fact that narrator lays down in the first paragraph, that unbeknownst to Tarwater, "a Negro named Buford Munson [...] had to finish [digging the grave] and drag the body from the breakfast table where it was still sitting to bury it in a decent and Christian way." (1) The Elder Tarwater's command is still fulfilled, and Tarwater's attempt to distance himself from his Great-uncle and his teachings is rendered absurd and ultimately meaningless.

This opening episode crystallizes of the novels structure as a whole, with all the factors that eventually bring Tarwater to his call to prophecy working in microcosm. Claire Kahane described the shadow this opening scene casts on the rest of the novel: "The circle of completed action has closed on Tarwater from the start. In a sense, this is a metaphor for the state of being of all O'Connor characters, precluding free choice[...] *The Violent Bear it Away* shows us that the more Tarwater thinks he is going forward in time, the more he is carried backward to the point where he began." (in Gentry 148) This perverse image of the religious experience with its determinist, recursive trajectory persists throughout the entire novel. Near the outset of the novel Tarwater with the delusion that he has agency within this divine transformation, as he travels with Meeks the traveling salesman into the city: he says "I mean to wait and see what happens,' ... 'And suppose nothing don't happen' Meeks asked. 'Then I'll make it happen, I can act.' (80) Tarwater initially envisions prophethood compatible with this independence and individualism. As such a prophet, Tarwater would not be beholden to his great-uncle's devices, and his identity as a prophet not yoked to his great uncle's agenda: "[God] don't mean for me to finish up your leavings. He has other things in mind for me.' And he thought of Moses who struck water from a rock, of Joshua who made the sun stand still, of Daniel who stared down lions in the pit." (9-10) The biblical episodes Tarwater alludes to are all examples of prophets exerting supernatural influence at the behest of God, and Tarwater hungers for this magnitude of power. Yet Tarwater's attempts to exert his will and fill the role of a prophet as he conceives it are ultimately impotent, as every attempt Tarwater makes to forge his own path seems to have been preordained: "With a terrible clarity he saw that the schoolteacher was no more than a decoy the old man had set up to lure him to the city to do his unfinished business" (89) By the end of the novel, Tarwater is disabused of the his delusion of agency. Having attempted to reverse his course towards his divine calling, he is raped, and left broken in a field, a turn of events that is anticipated by the Elder Tarwater, as he describes early in the novel exactly how the rapist will pick Tarwater up: "'You are the kind of boy,' the old man said, 'that the devil is always going to be offering to assist, to give you a smoke or a drink or a ride, and to ask you your bidnis.'" (58) By the end, Tarwater is finally forced to recognize that he is the passive agent in the process: "He knew that his destine forced him onto a final revelation." (233)

Palahniuk's Anti-Conversion Narrative

This thesis' key proposition that Palahniuk has appropriated O'Connors paradigms is furthered by close parallels between the details of *Violent's* Tarwater and *Survivor's* Tender Branson. *Violent's* careful balance and frequent, aggressive, and deliberate foreshadowing creates in Tarwater's narrative arc an oppressive and inescapable sense of preordination and it results in a representation of redemption and the religious experience rife with the nihilistic implication that choice is meaningless. This representation bears stark similarity the representation of Tarwater's religious life as the last survivor of a suicide cult is eventually pushed to become a media prophet, then inexorably drawn to suicide despite all of his attempts to escape his cults machinations. From these similarities, it becomes evident Palahniuk is "devilish" in the exact same way critics described O'Connor, exhibiting the same tendencies they interpreted as nihilism and determinism in her work. The parallels between Tarwater and Branson's lives suggest that this pattern presents the first of many points of continuity between O'Connor and Palahniuk. Sherry Truffin's description of the role of free will in *Survivor* is eerily similar to the "oven of redemption" pattern in *Violent*: "[Palahniuk writes characters who] feel haunted by the past, and trapped in the present, characters who experience some kind of psychological dissolution" (81) In this regard, Palahniuk works against the same ideal as O'Connor, and appropriates elements of her redemption paradigm – the ultimate nullification of the ego, and the degradation of the spirit through undermining free will.

Palahniuk's novel begins with the shocking and absurd – beginning in medias res as Branson is narrating his to a plane's black box– the last member of a suicide cult committing a spectacular suicide by crashing an empty passenger jet into the Australian wilderness. It is a fulfillment of a particular spiritual destiny: through his brother's machinations, Branson finally succumbs to the cult's call to return to God. The secular novel's religious undertones have been noted by scholars, including Tatyana Shumsky who links the novel to a specific genre of Christian conversion narrative in the tradition of Saul's conversion to Christianity on the road to Damascus. Shumsky goes as far as to attempt to link the *Survivor's* themes to the genre, wherein "Conversion is about progress; it involves leaving behind a way of life and thought and moving forward to a new lifestyle and cognitive framework." (41) This is the ideal conversion narrative, but as Shumsky attempts to tie Branson to this ideal, some problems arise. Shumsky argues that Branson's turning point, analogous to Paul's blindness being lifted upon reaching Damascus, occurs as he hijacks the plane, citing a passage where Branson, gun in hand, forces his hostages to eat a meal following strict rules of etiquette, finally "serv[ing] dinner the way I always dreamed" (*Survivor* 5) Shumsky interprets this episode a transcendent event, in which Branson "assumes a position of control and demonstrates his newfound agency" (47) However, such a reading ignores the fact that the ritual is absurd and pointless, and the irony is clearly not lost on Branson as he jokes to the passengers of the hijacked plan, "we're at the pinnacle of human achievement, and we are going to eat this meal as civilized human beings." (4)

Indeed, reading meaning and constructive purpose into Branson's story seems counterintuitive, as Branson's narration continuously resonates with deep nihilism and determinism. At the death of his caseworker, Branson finds a morbid humor in the lack of meaning he finds in her death:

What do you call a caseworker who hates her job and loses every client? Dead.
 What do you call the police worker zipping her into a big rubber bag? Dead.
 What do you call the television anchor on camera in the front yard? Dead.

It does not matter. The joke is that we all have the same punch-line. (162)
 Branson's narrative characterizes free will and agency as impotent in the face of the inevitability of death. For this reason, Shumsky's attempts to relate Branson's fate to the traditional narrative, which hinges on the transformative power of his agency, is ultimately unconvincing.

Towards God and Towards Oblivion

Tarwater and Branson both establish a negative spiritual trajectory, of which the only logical end is self negation. The redemptory annihilation that Branson faces is a physical and visceral. The suicidal hijacking Branson performs can be conceived as the culmination of a series of nihilism fueled destructive acts—recommending suicide from a fraudulent crisis hotline, to embracing life as a celebrity televangelist. In Branson's spiritual paradigm, these actions are permissible because the inevitability of death has rendered his spiritual well-being moot. Branson understands human life, and all the spiritual endeavors that it encompasses as a metaphorical "Stairmaster to Heaven," wherein "You're going up and up and not getting anywhere. It's the illusion of progress. What you want to think is your salvation." (153) From this world-view, Branson's description of his suicidal plane ride, and by extension his life, as a "terminal descent into oblivion" (12) seems uncomfortably sane.

However, the nullification that Tarwater faces is less literal, less physical. Tarwater faces annihilation in the loss of his identity, demonstrated as the novel has Tarwater's mysterious inner voice phrasing his predicament in terms of a terrible contradiction, a mutually exclusive binary choice: "It aint Jesus or the Devil. It's Jesus or *you*." (39) These anxieties spring forth from Tarwater's memories of his great-uncle:

In the darkest most private part of his soul, hanging upside down like a sleeping bat, was the certain undeniable knowledge that he was not hungry for the bread of life. The boy sensed that this was the heart of his great-uncles madness, this hunger, and what he was secretly afraid of was that it might be passed down, might be hidden in the blood (20-21)

Tarwater is arrested by the fear that he would eventually become the old man, that this inherited madness would subsume his selfhood. Because he feels his ego threatened by his spiritual calling, Tarwater begins to view it as a "silence that confronted him, that demanded he baptize the child and begin at once the life the old man had prepared him for" (160) Tarwater views his calling as an regression, defining it in the negative with the motif of silence. Silence, it seems, acts as a surrogate for oblivion, consuming all the force Tarwater exerts trying to escape it: "He tried to shout 'NO!' but it was like trying to shout in his sleep. The sound was saturated in silence, lost." (92). These anxieties ultimately reflect the fact that in Tarwater's paradigm, identity is tied fundamentally to agency, and therefore if process of redemption negates agency, it must also negate identity.

O'Connor's Harlequin Saints and Bakhtinian Comedy

However, the degradation of the ideal extends beyond the O'Connor's broad narratological paradigms. The second morphological category of the grotesque becomes manifest in the individual characterizations of her protagonists. DiRenzo notes that in *Violent*, O'Connor articulates her inquiry into the relationship between redemption and determinism through the mouths of clowns: "Wearing matching porkpie hats and sweat-stained t-shirts, Mason and Tarwater are a parody of Elijah and Elisha. The subject of their debate, free will versus

predestination is serious, but O'Connor chooses to burlesque it." (116) The "burlesque" aspect of these characters is a result of their slapstick and the exaggerated nature; their harlequin-esque mischief undermines the gravitas of their self-identified religious purposes, and ultimately renders ludicrous the entire conception of divinity as separate and superior to the vulgar and mundane. Such is the defining characteristic of this category of grotesque: the overt intermingling of the divine and the mundane, and how divinity is as a result cheapened and made vulgar while the mundane is elevated.

Indeed, O'Connor's burlesque revels in the profane interplay between the mundane and the divine, embodying a conception of the grotesque rooted in satire that Mikhail Bakhtin termed 'grotesque realism': a mode of comedy centered around hierarchal inversion and upheaval. Bakhtin himself describes the primary technique of such comedy as "a lowering of all that is high, spiritual ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity." (in DiRenzo 5) Via this technique, O'Connor's grotesques are comic in a very specific manner – peculiar, deviant, and paradoxically both celebratory and disconcerting. However, O'Connor extends a concept Bakhtin formulated to explain the societal inversions Rabelaisian Carnival's to the popular theological conception of cosmic order. Bakhtin's court jesters mocked earthly kings and his courtiers, but O'Connor mocks a heavenly Lord and his prophets. DiRenzo traced this O'Connor's peculiar tone to a peculiar quality in the treatment of the divine in folklore. The reverent depictions of saints and prophets in these folk tales, extraordinary and heroic both in body and spirit, were often undercut with a derisive black humor at the saints' expense. This folklore tradition spoke of the divine with a double voice, one reverent and humble, one clownish and mocking. (98) O'Connor emulates this folk humor resulting duality of O'Connor's literary voice is the fulcrum of her satire, the mode by which she characterizes the nature of human faith in relation to the ideal, and the ultimate justification of her grotesques.

Trickster Prophets and Miniature Preachers

The divine and reverent half of O'Connor's double-voice describes and praises God and his love, understands humanity in light of the Christian imperative to be Christ-like, and calls all people to his service. The divinity of Christ and of man forms the starting point for O'Connor's downward characterization, as she drags down the ideal to meet her characters. Christ is manifest in the mundane vulgar details of these characters' existence: DiRenzo writes: "Christ is ubiquitous for O'Connor's characters. He inhabits their dreams, their obsessions, their profanities, and their prayers... The incompatibility between Christ and O'Connor's grotesques gives her satire its special bite. Christ judges her characters, trips them up. His idealized humanity exposes their cartoonishness." (20-21) Indeed, more important than Tarwater's piety and faith are the low human faults that wrap around them. Tarwater is so proud of his professed prophethood that he twists and reinterprets some of the darkest and ugliest facts about his life to support it, "The boy was very proud that he had been born in a wreck. He had always felt that it set his existence apart from the ordinary one and he had understood from it that the plans of God for him were special, even though nothing of consequence had happened to him so far." (VB 41) Tarwater comes across as cartoonish and delusional in the face of the ideal that O'Connor invokes, wherein such tragedies are meaningful, an expression of God's love, a fulfillment of God's plan. Yet, given their context Tarwater's outlook seems profoundly human rather than divine— Tarwater seeks an explanation for why he is more or less alone in the world. There is

also the mundane way this belief is manifest. Tarwater later tells Rayber, “‘I’m out of the womb of a whore. I was born in a wreck’ He flung this forth as if he were declaring a royal birth.” (106) Rather than guide his action, Tarwater’s divine significance does little more than serve as the retort of a petulant child to an overbearing authority figure.

While young Tarwater may or may not be delusional, the Elder Tarwater actively participates in the Bakhtinian inversion, deliberately engaging in actions invoking the “laughter of the Crucifixion, the sardonic absurdity of the cross. [As the] saint becomes the clown.” (DiRenzo 113) As a prophet, a representative and spokesman for the Divine, the Elder Tarwater is ludicrous, violating conventional morality, and focusing on his imminent earthly concerns. He is more passionate and self-righteous in the face of being cheated by his lawyer than in any of his divine concerns (29), and in the face of death, he is more concerned with having his body buried to his liking than the afterlife (14). The voice speaking to the younger Tarwater comments on the absurdity of a prophet being enmeshed in such vulgar earthly concerns and activities, and mocks the Elder Tarwater for having made a living making moonshine, “A prophet with a still! He’s the only prophet I ever heard of making liquor for a living. (VB 45) The prophet engages in vaudevillian doublespeak, acting as the jester in response to character’s deathly self seriousness. The younger Tarwater accuses the elder of having lied to Rayber how about need to be nursed in old age, “you had told him a bare-faced lie. You never had no intention of dying,” and the elder Tarwater retorts “‘I was sixty-nine years of age,’ his uncle said. ‘I could have died the next day as well as not. No man knows the hour of his death’” (71) absolving himself of blame on a technicality. The drunkard prophet and his holy purposes often extend beyond vulgar degeneracy to more destructive mischief, as when the Elder Tarwater gleefully passes the younger Tarwater off as a mentally retarded child to the truant officer to avoid school, framing his scheme as divinely inspired: “The Lord had told the old man to expect it and what to do and old Tarwater had instructed the boy in his part... (VB17) In his degeneracy and unscrupulousness, the Elder Tarwater better embodies the trickster archetype that is commonly associated with the devil in Christian folklore, rather than the prophet Elijah, with whom the Elder Tarwater often equated himself.

Furthermore, the trappings of the broader theological context in which Tarwater’s belief are not immune to this Bakhtinian inversion. The novel also contains frequent examples of the divine being subject to the indignities of the flesh, “ridiculous vulnerable tattered and imperfect” (DiRenzo 120). The best example is Lucette Carmody, the child preacher whom Rayber finds as he follows Tarwater to an evangelist revival tent. The young child is introduced by the announcer as evidence that “Jesus is wonderful, friends. He teaches wisdom out of the mouth of babes,” (124) and the child’s preaching presents what is possibly the clearest image of the traditional theological Jesus, removed from the interpretive agenda *Violent*’s protagonists: that “Jesus is the Word of God and Jesus is love. The Word of God is love.”(130)

It has been the impulse of a whole host of critics, including Preston Browning and Ralph Woods, to read Lucette Carmody as wholly neutral holy innocent, an angelic presence, a physical representation of the theology of Christ, in light of O’Connor’s self-professed religious agenda. Yet the physical description of this physical representation is strikingly incongruous with such a reading: “Eleven or twelve with small delicate face and a head of black hair that looked too thick and heavy for a frail child to support. A cape like her mother’s was turned back over one shoulder and her skirt was short as if better to reveal the thin legs twisted from the knees” (129) The entire description renders her, and by extension her message, uncomfortably corporeal, and the details –the heaviness of her hair, the twisting of her legs, the fact that her

cape makes her look like a shrunken version of her mother –serve as jarring reminders of both this girls physical awkwardness, and the absurdity of her symbolically representing a divinity too profound to be contained by her awkward and unfit physical being The entire episode presents an image of Christianity that is uncomfortably carnal and mundane.

Bakhtinian Humor and the Abhorrent

Ultimately, however, the uncomfortably mundane and vulgar images of divinity O'Connor's grotesques present are intrinsically comic, populated by jesters and parodies. However, Di Renzo alleges a shift in tone and perspective occurs as Violent progresses, claiming that O'Connors grotesquery loses its comedy and thus its satirical rhetoric:

The dialogic tension between the narrator and the young prophet, so comical and humanizing, which shapes the first half of the novel, has been replaced by a brooding *folie-a-deux* whose only outlet is violence. The laughing conspiracy between O'Connor and Tarwater is now the murderous conspiracy between O'Connor and Tarwater... the humor has failed to combine the laughter and the violence” (120)

Renzo cites the abhorrent and monstrous nature of Tarwaters actions in the latter quarter or so of the novel as the reason for the shift towards seriousness. This reading seems to hinge on Tarwater's actions being too abhorrent to be funny, almost too morally outraged to continue to be complicit in O'Connor's Bakhtinian revelry. The problem is perhaps that DiRenzo insists on attempting to read O'Connor's work strictly in light of traditional positivist notions of prophethood, which he demonstrates as he writes: “Despite the novel's picaresque ironies and the Rabelaisian figure of old mason, O'Connor in the end betrays its comic structure by striving to make Tarwater heroic. The young man finally achieves his prophethood but at the price of Bishops blood.” (161) DiRenzo reads Tarwater's eventual transformation into a prophet as a narrative move that transforms him into a tradition hero, a reading that renders the novel's end startlingly incongruous the burlesque aspects of the rest of the novel.

However, such a reading is undermined by the fact that even in this final “serious” portion of the novel, O'Connor continues to gesture towards the comic absurdity of even its most abhorrent aspects. Tarwater tells the truck-driver he rides with about how he murdered his young mentally disabled cousin all the truck-driver has to say in response is “Just one?” (209) Tarwater is inept in his monstrosity, evoking apathy from observers within the novel rather than disgust. Thus, Tarwater remains more anti-hero than either hero or villain, still comically petulant and unimpressive.

The O'Connor's Burlesque in Palahniuk's Media Messiah

The minor exchange between Tarwater and the truck driver demonstrates that O'Connor was willing to follow the implications of her clownish grotesquery to its most abhorrent ends, and that even in such extremes, the trope is effect. This presents yet another aspect of O'Connor's work that Palahniuk appropriates. In *Survivor*, Palahniuk revels in the comically abhorrent, making extensive use of O'Connor's burlesque inversions of degraded prophets, absurd and uncomfortably carnal manifestations of God and Christ, sacred and profane. These thematic interactions crystallize as Branson begins receiving suicidal phone calls due to a misprint in an ad for a suicide hotline and begins to actively encourage the callers to kill themselves, reveling in how they “They call me. Messiah. They call me. Savior.” (279) Despite

the horrific nature of this scene, Branson's disturbing overtures towards divinity in his sadism are comic in just how jarring they are. An O'Connor-like double voice is present here, except now the laudatory Christian side of the voice is the derisive one, the source of the comedy, and the humanist voice is the one being undercut. The base abhorrent and vulgar is elevated to the divine.

Perhaps more interesting, is how Palahniuk's version of the divine-mundane inversion functions in a capitalist context, and is best understood in terms of meaning, symbol, and mediation. The divine dragged down to a mundane defined by image marketability. This culminates in an especially absurd episode in which Branson, now a celebrity televangelist, preaches in a superdome, broadcasted to the entire country. Branson performs for the camera, gives his sermon from a teleprompter: "The gift of life, I read from the script, is precious" (129) The implication of the ordeal is, of course, that spirituality is now a script rather than an actual experience, an implication which adds postmodern element to the lowering of the divine to the mundane. Branson's celebrity franchise comes with merchandise, including a "Book of Very Common Prayer," a title that puns on the name for the traditional liturgical texts for Anglican churches, The Book of Common Prayer. However, Branson's version includes such prayers as the "Prayer to Delay Orgasm," the "Prayer to Lose Weight," and the "Prayer to Stop Smoking." (125) These prayers manifest the divine in a manner that is not only distinctly mundane, also uncomfortably carnal. The text of the prayers themselves exhibit faux-formality and reverence of the clownishness that so defined O'Connor's grotesque:

"Our most holy father.
Take from me the choice You have given.
Assume control of my will and habits.
Wrest from me power over my own behavior.
May it be Your decision how I act.
May it be by Your hands, my ever failing.
Then if I still smoke, may I accept that my smoking is Your will.
Amen." (125)

The exultant voice seeking the assistance, reverent and pleading is undercut by a second voice in sarcastic disdain of the mundanity of the subject matter. The passage, cacophonous and disorienting in both tone and substance, exemplifies every feature of this second category of the grotesque.

The Grotesque as Satire and its Consequence on Symbols and Meaning

The previously discussed continuities between O'Connor and Palahniuk's novels have been manifest in two key morphologies of the grotesque, rooted in American religious tradition. The first class of grotesquerie is the nihilistic, deterministic, and self negating picture of redemption, in which characters are eventually destroyed by the divine. The dogmatic traditional conception of redemption in which a willful participant achieves self-actualization through a constructive relationship with the divine is grafted onto a narrative structure actively deconstructs itself. The second class of grotesquerie arises from the mixture of divine and mundane, and is evident in both authors' usage of outsized burlesques that act as saints and uncomfortably carnal vessels for divine. These characterizations are respondent to an idealist understanding of cosmology, a hierarchical view in which the divine is elevated above and held separate from the mundane, their combination sacrilegious.

It is important to realize that O'Connor and Palahniuk purposefully chose to respond to those particular ideals because they are relevant to their particular sociohistorical moment. Their subversion of the ideal in their novels presents a satirical view of the pervasiveness of Christianity in American culture; their outrageous and degraded characters and nihilistic narratives provide that contentious mode of representation, delivering a counter-narrative to America's popular understanding of religion. Thus, their work cannot be fully understood without an examination of the philosophical and cultural context of these degradations. A culture's religious ideals are, after all, born of the interplay between theology and ideology, and while theology ostensibly remains constant, ideology can change to reflect the social and political concerns of the time. The ideological component of these ideals can be conceived as what Mark Toulouse termed 'iconic faith' — a system of meaning that exists in parallel to tradition and dogma, in which the images and ideals derived from theology are appropriated to secular contexts. In light of this, the consequences of O'Connor and Palahniuk actively undermining religious ideals disrupt the broader 'meaning-making' process of their culture.

Palahniuk's Messianic Simulacrum

An example of this phenomenon at work can easily be found in Palahniuk's *Survivor*. There is a short yet peculiar scene near the beginning of the novel in which the characters Tender and Fertility wander a mausoleum with various wings built during different decades:

In the oldest wing of the mausoleum, the wing called Contentment, Jesus is gaunt and romantic with a woman's huge wet eyes and long eye-lashes. In the wing built in the 1930's Jesus is a Social Realist with huge superhero muscles. In the forties in the Serenity wing, Jesus becomes an abstract assembly of planes and cubes. The fifties Jesus is polished fruitwood, a Danish Modern skeleton. The sixties Jesus is pegged together out of driftwood... (244)

Palahniuk crafts a scene that comes across as unsettling and perverse from what ostensibly seems to be a mundane and commonsense observation — that artistic trends change over time. The unsettling nature of the scene arises from the grotesque schema that Palahniuk appropriated from O'Connor: the mixture of the divine and the mundane. Jesus — the incarnation of an eternal God — is juxtaposed with the fluctuating and unstable economic and cultural movements of the 20th century, ranging from socialism, to high modernism and to the hippy counterculture.

The grotesquerie of this scene arises from a response to a particular ideal concerning figures of religious authority within the American religious imagination. From local clergymen to Jesus of Nazareth, human representatives of divine authority are supposed to act as conduits of meaning from the spiritual world to the mundane: "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." (*NIV* Hebrews 13:7-8) The hierarchical view of the divine superseding the mundane demands such order, and American society, having been informed by such theology, considers these figures to possess special access to truth and holds their narratives about themselves and the world to be stable in time and consistently relevant. Toulouse discusses the cultural capital society invests into these conduits to the divine: "The priests of this faith assume authority and know all the answers because they are experts in the American cultural tradition. [...] Nothing can rival the faith received through the ages." (79) These values trace a trajectory of influence from the divine and the past, through either the priestly or messianic figure, to the public.

It is precisely this conception of religious meaning that Palahniuk responds to. Of the mausoleum passage, Mary McCampbell writes “Palahniuk suggests that Christ is created in the image of man, not vice versa. These narratives bear witness, not to a god that discloses the ultimate truthful end of life’s narrative, but simply to the narratives themselves, stories that were crafted and conformed in our cultural images to point towards a hollow hope for a ‘revelatory end.’” (149) In other words, the portrayal of divine iconography as unstable and subjective disrupts the ideal trajectory of divine truth to human understanding, reconfiguring it as a feedback loop. The scene in the mausoleum is comic, perverse and grotesque because Palahniuk’s interrogation into the source of these religious narratives results in this epistemic disruption, demonstrative of the apparent nihilism that so often defines the grotesque.

However, the rhetorical implications of such simulacra Jesuses are less clear, and a substantial contingent of Palahniuk criticism tends to read his work as part of a broader atheist-Marxist project. In an essay entitled “Althusser, Foucault, in Palahniuk’s Early Novels,” Ron Riecki interprets this subversive reconfiguration of truth and authority as a critique of religion’s role as what Althusser calls an ‘ideological state apparatus.’ Such an apparatus is essentially what Goodwin has called a “cultural value structure,” except couched in more cynical, anti-authoritarian suspicions, and Althusser’s Marxist criticism is quite appropriate here. Societal ideals and cultural values are, after all, the stuff ideology is built upon. Riecki alludes to Althusser’s critique of regarding such structures as conduits to meaning: “Althusser goes so far as to make the claim that ideology has no history; it is manufactured, ‘nothingness’ [...] God has no history, is manufactured/man-made, is nothing/fake,” (95) and describes Palahniuk’s conception of prophethood and authority as a literary expression of that critique: “The attack in *Survivor* is directed specifically at religious ISA control and Palahniuk pulls no punches, creating such a level of satire that it seems part of the broad reaching atheistic attempts to deconstruct the ‘banal discourse’ that is the God myth.” (Ibid.) This conception of divinity as simulacrum, representation without a concrete referent, is shared by McCampbell, who interprets Branson’s narrative trajectory self-nullifying, as Branson’s eventual status as a celebrity messiah is characterized by “no values or principles, only a desire to both consume and exhibit wealth through the creation of celebrity. Palahniuk clearly emphasizes the exploitation of the apocalyptic longings of the masses when fed to the corporation of religious spectacle.” (153) To these critics, Palahniuk’s opposes the divine-mundane hierarchy in a manner that gestured toward issues of consumption and mediation, the apparent target of Palahniuk’s apparent nihilism seen in his burlesqued portrayal of *Tender*, shilling the snake-oil of religion on the big-screen.

Survivor’s usage of the grotesque is likely not as devastating to deism as Riecki and McCampbell purport it to be. The grotesqueries encountered in the mausoleum respond more directly to the contradictions inherent in the iconic existence of religion within American culture. Geertz writes that religion acted as a system of symbols within a culture formulated to express its “conceptions of [the] general order of existence” and “cloth these conceptions with an aura of factuality.” (in Toulouse 52) This symbolic structure is integral to the American cultural vocabulary. It’s the basis for communicating and expressing identity, and it enables the members of a culture to participate in it. It thus is intrinsically related to the grotesque — which we defined in relation to the ideal — because it serves as the system of ideals that are being deformed and subverted. With this in mind, Palahniuk’s grotesque can be conceptualized as both enabled by and respondent to the ‘iconic confusion’ that inevitably occurs within such a system, a phenomena that Toulouse describes as “the symbol structure of American life [...] becoming

confused and intertwined with the symbol structure of Christianity.” (75) Iconic confusion results from the assumption that “the use of Christian images or icons in public life witnesses to Christian faith when, in fact, these icons are created and used for purposes related explicitly to public life, not to Christianity,” (53) and ultimately undermines the semiotic stability of imagery, concepts and patterns related to Christianity. Essentially, Palahniuk’s grotesques are not a critique not of the theology itself but of the irrelevancy of its secular usage, the ‘religion without religion’ that exists within the American cultural imagination.

Furthermore, the atheist reading of Palahniuk’s grotesques is seriously made problematic by his links to O’Connor, whose purported nihilism arose from her usage of the same techniques of grotesque representation. Christian critics such as Ralph Wood interpret O’Connor’s jester-saints and self-nullifying prophets as a response to the theological flaws within the popular conception of the divine, a logical extension of a post-Nietzsche, Marx and Freud world — thinkers who had, as Wood writes, “sought rightly to refute the layer cake theology of popular Christianity that envisioned god as the Grandfather of the skies, a remote deistic deity whose relationship to the world is essentially extraneous and occasional.” (180) O’Connor can be understood as responding to how secular symbols have also invaded the Christian sphere and bastardize the symbols and images within: “Over and over O’Connor lamented the magical kind of Christianity that pervades the church, envisioning the triune and unknown God as our heavenly Step n’ Fetchit, the divine factotum whom William Blake called “Old Nobodaddy.” (Wood 181) These readings form an interesting counterpoint to the critical attention paid to Palahniuk. Wood reads the seeming sacrilegious contradictions and hybrids of O’Connor’s grotesqueries as a reaction to the trespass of the mundane into the divine, whereas McCampbell and Riecki read Palahniuk’s grotesquerie as a reaction to the trespass of the divine onto the mundane

It should be noted that Wood is a Christian critic, while Riecki and McCampbell are reading with a decidedly Marxist critical lens. These critics manage to draw wildly different conclusions from morphologically similar patterns of the grotesque in O’Connor and Palahniuk’s work, and so it stands to reason that there must be something more fundamental at work in these tropes than a mere critique of pop theology.

Implications on Interpretation

O’Connor herself understood her deviations from both theological and sociocultural ideals in her work. These critics manage to draw wildly different conclusions from morphologically similar patterns of the grotesque in O’Connor and Palahniuk’s work, and so it stands to reason that there must be something more fundamental at work in these tropes than a mere critique of pop theology. work in light of a concept Erich Auerbach delineates in *Mimesis*, *figura*, a term he derived from a concept in biblical hermeneutics that describes the relationship between image and meaning; between analogical understanding of events and their description of their occurrence. Auerbach explains the concept as follows:

"Figural prophecy implies the interpretation of one worldly event through another; the first signifies the second, the second fulfills the first. Both remain historical events; yet both looked at in this way, have something provisional and incomplete about them; they point to one another and both point to something in the future, something still to come, which will be the real, and definitive event." (58)

The concept of ‘figura’ constituted a specific mode of representation that hinged on the incomplete unresolved nature of the represented events. O’Connor claimed to allude to this mode of figural representation — which relied more heavily on allusion and evocative detail rather

than on a narrative's internal logic and reconcilability — with broader social and theological ideal in order to contain and convey meaning, a phenomenon that as Goodwin noted, often resulted in an “antagonism between sensory appearance and meaning” (101) which then justified the outsized deformation and profound misapprehension that resulted from the blurred barrier between the divine and mundane in O'Connor's work. The figural nature of O'Connor's work also justified her defiance of progressive narrative logic, as “horizontal, that is the temporal and casual, connection of occurrences is dissolved; the here and now is no longer a mere link in an earthly chain of events, it is simultaneously something which has always been and which will be fulfilled in the future, and strictly, in the eyes of God, it is something eternal.” (Auerbach 74) O'Connor's divine grotesques, in other words, conveyed meaning in a manner that needed not be reconcilable with narrative causality, in essence justifying the apparently negative structure of her work. Within this mode, the mystical and invisible divine created meaning and charted the character's narrative trajectory, as O'Connor writes: “The hardest thing for a writer to indicate is the presence of the anagogical which to my mind is the only thing that can cause the personality to change.” (in Goodwin 102)

This concept is important to the understanding of the grotesque as the mechanism that renders literary meaning is inherently indeterminate rather than nihilistic, an effect that allows for the presence of alternate and distorted systems of meaning layered beneath the existing cultural thinking. This is perhaps best demonstrated in the relationship between the younger and elder Tarwaters, especially at the events at the close of *Violent* wherein Tarwater accepts his great-uncle's charge of prophethood as he “stooped and picked up a handful of dirt off his great-uncles grave and smeared it on his forehead.” (242) Understood in light of O'Connor's asynchronic and evocative mode of representation, the detail could tie the younger and elder Tarwater to Elisha and Elijah, respectively, as Elijah is depicted in the Bible as having been told to “anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet.” But the moment could just as easily be undermining that connection, its religious allusion undermined by its various grotesqueries, both in the self negation that the moment represents and burlesqued nature of the characters involved. The absent distinctions between these modes of communicating value and interpreting reality (synchronic vs. diachronic, holy vs. sacrilegious, positivism vs. nihilism) present the truly transgressive aspect of *Violent*, and indeed, all of O'Connor's work that make use of these tropes.

Like O'Connor, Palahniuk writes to exploit the semiotically multiplicitous nature of the grotesque. He writes using a similar layering of representative modes, juxtaposing Branson's exposure to sexuality and his mental bible verse recitation to create this indeterminacy. As Fertility Hollis asks Branson to “say something to get me off,” he mentally responds with “Genesis Chapter Three, Verse Twelve. ‘The woman whome thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the three and I did eat’” (233) The scene is littered with moments like this, which collectively gesture simultaneously to the carnal reality, yet inviting asynchronic interpretation. McCampbell notes that Branson is so indoctrinated that he is “unable to tune out the background noise of randomly decontextualized pieces of scripture that constantly interrupt his thinking [...] Tender ultimately rejects the scriptures that haunt him, recognizing the structure they provide is an extreme alternate reality, a contrast to the ‘real’ world he now inhabits.” (151-2) McCampbell's description of the persistence of Branson's indoctrination as “background noise” is rather misleading, implying a dominance of one mode over the other. Rather the indeterminacy providing the 'space' in which the grotesque can operate, and allows a malleability and multiplicity of the cultural meaning communicated in religious ideals.

Conclusion

Having demonstrated the shared morphologies of the grotesque, the common rhetorical effect, and the attendant consequences on the interpretation and meaning of Christian symbolism, the remaining questions revolve around purpose — what exactly is achieved by the grotesque. These elements from O'Connor and Palahniuk's works demonstrate the considerable rhetorical power of the grotesque. It is a power that exists almost paradoxically, in light of the grotesque being an aesthetic marked by the purposeful confusion of icon and value in a manner that willfully defies reconciliation. It is interesting that Carol Schloss recognized in O'Connor's subversion of the ideal — in her estrangement of the religious icon from secular values — the precursor of postmodernism. (in DiRenzo 168) Just as the Southern Gothic authors seem to anticipate the Transgressives with their defining trope of the grotesque, the aesthetic itself seems to have always anticipated the postmodern. The grotesque not only provided a means for artists to question their social reality. As a participant in a culture is constantly negotiating its values using the ideals of that culture, the task of reevaluating those ideal becomes nearly impossible without disrupting the entire process. The grotesque, with its interdeterminacy of icon and paradigm, is uniquely suited to that task. By disrupting the process of interpretation and decontextualizing a culture's icons and value structures, the grotesque stripped them of their aura of authority, exposing the arbitrary hierarchies and assumptions supporting them, revealing contradictions that often could not be reconciled back into the cohesion of a stable worldview.

The grotesque's unwillingness to yield to interpretation led staunchly orthodox Kayser to make the flawed assertion that the grotesque was in the end, characterized chiefly by the distinctive 'lack' of idealist beauty and the visceral "laughter, disgust, and astonishment" it aroused, capable only of leaving the reader "so strongly affected and terrified because it is our world which ceases to be reliable, and we feel that we would be unable to live in this changed world." (180) However this was the response O'Connor strived for, claiming the project of a novelist using the grotesque is to "find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience." (qtd. in Browning 13) I believe my analysis has proven the objections of Kayser, of Winckelmann and of all the classicists that feared the grotesque signaled the end of art, to be profoundly misguided. Instead, the grotesque achieved quite the opposite, acting as the primary mechanism behind genres of art such as caricature and satire that made it more difficult for a culture to remain blind to its own flaws.

The cogency of O'Connor and Palahniuk's satire evince the social necessity for the aesthetic, especially in regards to religion. Their writing ultimately reflects Christianity's long influence on American culture, especially our cultural conception of the individual: of his role in the universe, of his ethical obligations in that role and of his ability to fulfill them. I have spent a great deal of this thesis discussing critics who, while writing on the grotesque, recognized the potentially incarcerating nature of these ideals and the expectations and restrictions they are inexorably yoked to. Christianity has been, for better or for worse, so pervasive that it has become a necessity to satirize it — for believer and non-believers alike — to reevaluate the trappings of the institution. This is ultimately purpose of the grotesque in both O'Connor and Palahniuk's work: to show these startling juxtapositions, to question the blind adherence to these values, to show their readers into a position that allows them to take an honest look at themselves and their relationship to this monolithic presence in their lives.

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