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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

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Breaking Bread with the Dead: Social Radicalism and Christian Traditions

in Twentieth-Century American Literature

by

Jonathan David McGregor

A dissertation presented to
the Graduate School
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

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Washington University in St. Louis

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For Jennifer

Abstract

Breaking Bread with the Dead: Social Radicalism and Christian Traditions
in Twentieth-Century American Literature

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in English and American Literature

Washington University in St. Louis, 2016

Professor William J. Maxwell, Chair

This dissertation argues that a tradition of modern American literary intellectuals, including Vida Dutton Scudder (1861-1954), T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), Claude McKay (1889-1948), Dorothy Day (1897-1980), Walker Percy (1916-1990), and Wendell Berry (1934-), leveraged sacred history to sanction surprisingly radical critiques of modern society. Devotion to the religious past energized, rather than enervated, the imaginations of these socialists, anarchists, and Catholic personalists. When they criticized American capitalist life, these writers looked back to past exemplars of radical community, from sixth-century monks to 1930s radical preachers of the U.S. South. By showing how Christian traditions nourished radical thinkers, *Breaking Bread with the Dead* challenges both secular Left historiographies that tie the spread of democracy to the demise of traditional religion and religious Right ideologies that assume the equivalence of doctrinal orthodoxy and political conservatism. It offers an alternative history of a modern American literary radical tradition deeply rooted in religious commitment.

I lack the peace of simple things.
I am never wholly in place.
I find no peace or grace.
We sell the world to buy fire,
our way lighted by burning men,
and that has bent my mind
and made me think of darkness
and wish for the dumb life of roots.
—Wendell Berry, “The Want of Peace” (1968)

Chapter 1:

Introduction: Social Icons: Religious Tradition and Political Vision in Twentieth-Century American Literature

[I]n a society dedicated to economic development and “personal growth” at the expense of all larger loyalties, conservative values are too important to be left to pseudo-conservative apologists for capitalism. In our time, the most profound radicalism is often the most profound conservatism.

—Jackson Lears, Preface to *No Place of Grace* (1983)

In 1912, the Boston-based architect and writer Ralph Adams Cram (1863-1942) beguiled the aging Henry Adams (1838-1918) into publishing *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, a study of medieval art, thought, and architecture. Though the book was originally printed privately in 1904, Cram secured a national release by Harper & Row through his influence with the American Institute of Architects. In his preface to the work, Cram attributed astonishing powers to Adams, making him out to be practically divine. By his power of incarnation, Cram declared, Adams “merg[es] himself in a long dead time...thinking and feeling with the men and women thereof” (vii). Having assumed the nature of the Middle Ages, Adams resurrects them, “breathing on the dead bones of antiquity that again they clothe themselves with flesh and vesture, call back their severed souls, and live again” (vii). The undead ages thus raised are neither ghosts nor zombies, beings with which Cram, a sometime writer of weird fiction, was presumably acquainted: “And it is not a thin simulacrum he raises by some doubtful alchemy; it is no phantasm of the past that shines dimly before us in these magical pages; it is the very time itself in which we are merged” (vii). Adams’ powers of incarnation and resurrection guarantee the real presence of the Middle Ages in his book, a presence in which the reader may participate

through the communion of reading. The Middle Ages are present not only to the reader's imagination but also to his senses, "before his very eyes" (vii)—an effect only heightened by the inclusion of photographs in the Harper & Row edition. For Cram, to read *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* was to have a visual encounter with sacred history, with divine presence in the past. To read this book is to behold an icon, not of an individual saint but of a saintly society.

This quasi-visual experience was, for Cram, at once "vastly heartening and exhilarating" and profoundly depressing (vii). Adams' reconstruction of medieval life only made more apparent the disasters suffered by labor, art, and religion between the thirteenth century and the early twentieth century. Cram hoped that this encounter with the religious past would drive Adams' readers to criticize the industrial capitalist order and to imagine a better future:

If [the reader's experience] gives new and not always flattering standards for the judgment of contemporary men and things, so does it establish new ideals, new goals for attainment. To live for a day in a world that built Chartres Cathedral, even if it makes the living in a world that creates the "Black Country" of England or an Iron City of America less a thing of joy and gladness than before, equally opens up the far prospect of another thirteenth century in the times that are to come and urges to ardent action toward its attainment. (vii-viii)

By contemplating Adams' icon, Cram's idealized reader gained "new . . . standards for . . . judgment" of American life under industrial capitalism, a life figured by the metonymy of the "Iron City." Contemplation and criticism, Cram believed, led to imitation. To bring forth "another thirteenth century in the times that are to come" meant to build new forms of social life that aim at the virtues glimpsed in the old. When Cram looked at Chartres Cathedral, he did not see an oppressive aristocracy best left buried in the potter's field of history. Rather, he saw something close to what the radical essayist Randolph Bourne did: "the great democratic Gothic society of medieval Europe" (Bourne 216). In Cram's telling, medieval cathedrals become monuments to a possible future as much as a lost past. His preface to Adams serves as a guide to

his own ambitions as a writer: to criticize modern American life and inspire social reconstruction by illuminating the virtues of medieval Europe.

This dissertation argues that Cram helped to inaugurate a tradition of modern American literary intellectuals, including T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), Claude McKay (1889-1948), Dorothy Day (1897-1980), Walker Percy (1916-1990), and Wendell Berry (1934-), who leveraged sacred history to sanction surprisingly radical critiques of modern American society. Devotion to the religious past energized, rather than enervated, the imaginations of these socialists, anarchists, and Catholic personalists. By showing how Christian traditions nourished radical thinkers, *Breaking Bread with the Dead: Social Radicalism and Christian Traditions in Twentieth-Century American Literature* challenges both secular Left historiographies that tie the spread of democracy to the demise of traditional religion and religious Right ideologies that assume the equivalence of doctrinal orthodoxy and political conservatism.

Some writers, I argue, were social radicals *because* they were theological conservatives. For example, the Anglo-Catholic socialist critic Vida Dutton Scudder (1861-1954) contended “that a really conservative view of Christianity carries with it a critical, not to say revolutionary, attitude toward society. Those who cling most ardently to tradition are likely to shock and alienate the surface orthodoxies of their day” (320). Unlike many progressive intellectuals who saw history as an unbroken drama of moral uplift, Scudder understood history in terms of significant repetitions. For her, arguments in the 1930s over Christianity’s relationship to capitalism reiterated thirteenth-century debates on the ethics of private property spurred by St. Francis of Assisi and his followers. But if sacred history repeated itself, it also offered models to emulate, and Scudder made herself a modern disciple of St. Francis as a socialist churchwoman. Like Cram’s writings about medieval architecture, Scudder’s novels and histories of the

medieval Franciscans depict what I call *social icons*: images of past religious communities crafted to highlight the shortcomings of the present and to embody possibilities for the future. Through the trope of the social icon, the writers in this study creatively applied the insights of Christian traditions to modern social crises ranging from the staggering inequalities of the Gilded Age to the devastation of the Great War, from the economic collapse of the Great Depression to the brutalities and indignities of Jim Crow and our own age of widespread austerity and environmental depredation.

When I say that the writers in this study were social radicals, I mean first of all that their criticism went to the roots—historical and economic as well as spiritual—of modern social relations (as “radical” derives from the Latin *radix* for “root”). The common denominator between these writers is an imaginative anticapitalism inspired more by a resurrected religious past than by a projected utopian future. In one sense, then, this dissertation traces the seam where the radical meets the reactionary. At the same time, I emphasize that for writers such as Scudder, McKay, and Day, traditional religion fueled commitments to socialism and anarchism and related political ideologies commonly assigned to the radical Left.¹ Other writers, such as Cram and Eliot, maintained ideas of a good society that celebrated hierarchy and intimated practices of religious and racial exclusion. I do not deny or excuse these positions but instead treat them as integral parts of their social philosophies. But I also show how their conservative outlooks fostered more radical concerns with nonnormative sexuality and environmentalism.

The “Christian traditions” of my title indicates both the unity and variety of the historically

¹ Before the Cold War and its attendant hardening of political discourse, which arrives for my purposes in the final third of Chapter 3, the meaning of socialism—whether it signified state communism, social democracy, or libertarian socialism, and whether it was the fulfillment of Christianity or Christianity’s replacement or something else—was much debated by American intellectuals. As I show in Chapter 1, both Cram and Scudder considered themselves socialists. When they left the ranks of moderate religious progressives—Scudder for party-aligned revolutionary socialism, Cram for his idiosyncratic theory of libertarian-hierarchical religious enclaves—each writer thought they were preserving the true essence of socialism from its liberal adulteration.

extended ecclesiastical and theological bodies of thought in which the writers in this study were immersed. Of primary importance for the story I have to tell are Roman Catholicism and the Anglo-Catholic tendency within the Church of England. Both Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism are vast and various traditions, and I don't present them here as united or univocal. Instead, I emphasize particular transnational networks of thought and writing that connect British and American Anglican socialists, on the one hand, and French, British, and American Social Catholics, on the other. I use "Social Catholics" or "Social Catholicism" here and elsewhere as catchall terms for those Catholic thinkers inspired by the sequence of modern Catholic social teaching begun by Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (On the Condition of the Working Class) to theorize and practice social and economic alternatives to capitalism and socialism. Within their larger church traditions, the Anglican socialists and the Social Catholics shared a commitment to traditional theology and liturgy and a condemnation of capitalism. Other Christian traditions important to the story I tell are Southern U.S. Protestantism, both white and black, and the self-critical strain of nationwide U.S. liberal Protestantism often called "neo-orthodoxy," the most well-known exponents of which were the contentious brothers Reinhold (1892-1971) and H. Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962).

All of these Christian traditions, Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Anglican, held theological resources capable of challenging the social assumptions of the liberal capitalist order. By building communities around definite and elaborated theologies and shared liturgical practices, these traditions refused the primacy of private belief and individual experience. And the value they placed on the instructive power of sacred history rebuked the progressive pretensions of endless development. When writers in this study such as Scudder, John Crowe Ransom (1888-1974), and Will D. Campbell (1924-1913) brought the wisdom of these traditions

to bear on modern social problems, they often did so in the accents of orthodoxy. I take this discourse for the main subject of my second chapter, but it is treated throughout. Claiming orthodoxy for their own positions enabled these writers to discredit their liberal, fascist, or communist rivals as heretics. But more importantly, “orthodoxy” cemented definite belief to liturgical community and sacred history as the threefold norm of these writers’ social criticism. Orthodoxy was thus their theological language of protest, not a marker of their alignment with regnant religious or political powers.

1.1 Radicalism without Progressivism

The writers I study in *Breaking Bread with the Dead* embraced a distinctive approach to the politics of history: a radicalism uncommitted to the ideology of social progress. Many of the writers covered in this dissertation, including Scudder, McKay, Day, and British-born W. H. Auden (1907-1973), embraced liberal or Marxist histories of progress early in their careers, only to reject them later in favor of histories of recurrence. But far from abandoning their radical convictions, they regrounded their commitments to justice and democracy in the creative imitation of virtuous communities of the religious past.

The French Protestant philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) helps to clarify what is at stake in such an approach to history in his essay “Christianity and the Meaning of History” (1951). Ricoeur distinguishes three levels of historical meaning: the rational, the existential, and the surrational, “as when we say surrealist” (94). Progress, which Ricoeur defines as the accumulation and growth of knowledge, human works, and productive capacities, is history’s rational meaning. But because the importance of such growth in terms of morality or even bare survival—whether for a civilization, a community, or an individual—is always obscure, history’s existential meaning remains ambiguous, always open to advance or decline. In this inherent

ambiguity, the existential meaning of history is always in danger of slipping away into meaninglessness. By recognizing these two different levels of historical meaning, Ricoeur acknowledges historical advances in learning and technology while putting their larger significance in question. Yet for him, Christian theology further dictates a third level of historical meaning. Beyond progress and ambiguity, or rather overlaid upon them in Christian experience, is the “mystery” of hope engendered by sacred history, the surrational significance of which nevertheless exceeds rational understanding.

“[T]he great events that I recognize as Revelation have a certain pattern, constitute a global form, and are not given as pure discontinuity,” Ricoeur avers (93). This “global form,” though grasped in flashes and fragments in a life often felt as meaningless, holds out the promise that history itself has a form, and therefore a meaning:

[W]hat allows the Christian to go beyond the disconnectedness of lived history and to transcend the apparent ambiguity of this history, which very often resembles “a tale told by an idiot,” is the fact that this history is imbued with another history whose meaning is not inaccessible to him and which may be *understood*.

Hence the Christian is the man who lives in the ambiguity of secular history but with the invaluable treasure of a sacred history whose “meaning” he perceives. . . .

The Christian meaning of history is therefore the hope that secular history is also a part of that meaning which sacred history sets forth, that in the end there is only *one* history, that all history is ultimately sacred. (93-94)

Ricoeur emphasizes that this ultimate meaning of history “remains an object of faith”: it “is eschatological, meaning that [the Christian’s] life unfolds in the time of progress and ambiguity without his seeing this higher meaning, without his being able to discern the relation between the two histories, the secular and the sacred” (94). Like Ricoeur, the authors in this study do not deny the reality of material and intellectual progress. But they do question its moral and political significance, and they discern in sacred history a better grounding for their radical convictions than progress can provide.

The social icons crafted by Scudder, Day, McKay, Dabbs, and Auden crystallize symmetries in the pattern of sacred history, putting the crises of their respective presents in touch with the past. These icons also implicitly testify to their future hope that, in Ricoeur's words, "the 'last day'" will reveal "how the histories of empires, of wars and revolutions, of inventions, of the arts, of moralities and philosophies—through greatness and guilt—are 'recapitulated in Christ'" ("Christianity and the Meaning of History" 94). Their faith in history's ultimate meaningfulness does not offer an escape from its existential struggles. Rather, this faith sustains ethical and political action in the present. "On the basis of this faith, life presents itself in the form of a task," Ricoeur affirms (95).

Auden's poem "The Garrison" (1969), one source for the title of the present study, deploys the Eucharist as a metaphor for sacred history's nourishment of social imagination:

...it's possible for the breathing
still to break bread with the dead, whose brotherhood
gives us confidence to wend the trivial
thrust of the Present,
so self-righteous in its assumptions and so
certain that none dare out-face it. (lines 9-14)

Communion with the dead lends "the breathing" courage to "out-face" the challenge of a "Present" both ethically "trivial" and imposing enough to warrant capitalization. That courage derives from the paradigm, to invoke a word Auden uses later in the poem, of community left by the dead. The fructifying example of the past supplies the present task of imagining and practicing community. Auden limns this task in the poem's final lines:

Let us leave rebellions to the choleric
who enjoy them: to serve as a paradigm
now of what a plausible Future might be
is what we're here for. (lines 21-24)

Rejecting violent “rebellion,” the community of “The Garrison” determine to live as a peaceful community of hope, feeding on the past with the knowledge that they will, in turn, be fed upon in the future. In their aversion to rebellion, they exemplify Ricoeur’s contention that “faith in meaning, but in a meaning hidden from history,” tends to breed political confidence as well as skepticism, “both the *courage* to believe in a profound significance of the most tragic history (and therefore a feeling of confidence and resignation in the very heart of conflict) and a certain rejection of system and fanaticism, a sense of the *open*” (“Christianity and the Meaning of History” 96). Yet this ideological openness and opposition to rigid systems does not absolve the community of its present political task: namely, to model a more just future, rendering justice more believable in the present. Ricoeur sums up this affective posture towards history as one of “tragic optimism” (“Emmanuel Mounier: Personalist Philosopher” 149). In his embrace of a radicalism without progress, Auden was a representative tragic optimist in the literary line I trace out here.²

1.2 Criticism without Progressivism

1.2.1 Medievalist Sacraments

In Chapter 4, I argue that Auden’s historical model for the community of “The Garrison” was the medieval monastery. Auden’s medievalism is representative of many of the writers examined in this study, from Cram, Scudder, and Peter Maurin (1877-1949), to McKay, James McBride Dabbs (1896-1970), Day, and Berry. In all of the ensuing chapters, I expand on many reasons for the predominance of medieval social icons in their work. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century British and French medievalist intellectuals, including art critic John Ruskin (1819-

² Christopher Lasch makes a similar point to Ricoeur when he distinguishes political “hope” from progressive “optimism”: “Hope does not demand a belief in progress. It demands a belief in justice: a conviction that the wicked will suffer, that wrongs will be made right, that the underlying order of things is not flouted with impunity. Hope implies a deep-seated trust in life that appears absurd to those who lack it. It rests on confidence not so much in the future as in the past” (80-81).

1900), writer G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), poet Charles Péguy (1873-1914) and philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882-1973), exerted a strong influence on several of the figures that I cover. Yet a more intrinsic appeal of the Middle Ages emerged from the simple fact that they preceded the full flowering of capitalist emergence. By appealing to this epoch, writers could recover social possibilities bypassed by the history of capitalist triumph.

Most important for my purposes, however, is what Bruce Holsinger calls “the sacramental sensibility motivating much medieval historiography” (5). This sensibility “finds in discrete past events and surviving relics the wondrous promise of an invisible totality it can only occasionally glimpse in the lived present” (5-6). Holsinger has shown how this sensibility made fragments of medieval cultural history into “productive sacraments of creative ingenuity” that allowed postmodern French theorists such as Bataille, Bourdieu, and Derrida to practice “interpretive and ideological resistance to the relentless inevitability of modernity” (5). Similarly, when tragic optimist intellectuals in the U.S. such as Scudder, Cram, and Auden turned to the Middle Ages for social icons, they were not just expressing their anachronistic tastes or indulging in unproductive nostalgia. They were appropriating this sacramental historiography to subvert the presumptive inevitability of capitalist development. They were premodernist postmodernists *avant la lettre*.

1.2.2 Queer Temporalities

In “The Garrison,” Auden speaks explicitly to Chester Kallman (1921-1975), his sometime lover and longtime companion and artistic collaborator:

... We, Chester,
and the choir we sort with have been assigned to
garrison stations.
Whoever rules, our duty to the City
is loyal opposition, never greening
for the big money, never neighing after

a public image. (lines 14-20)

This community, strengthened by feeding on the past and set against the powers of the City and its values of greed and ambition, is one that welcomes difference from sexual norms. It is Kallman, in fact, who sets out the “savory mess” Auden likens to the Eucharist, the meal that makes communion possible between the breathing and the dead (line 4). Kallman is the priest of this sacrament, and the love that he and Auden shared—queer but by the time of the poem’s composition chaste for more than twenty-five years—centers the community. The deep imbrication of sexuality and religious practice with social imagination in “The Garrison” outlines another important critical theme of *Breaking Bread with the Dead*: its engagement with queer approaches to the problem of time and history.

Auden shared the “anticipatory” approach to history evident in the poem with other “queer figures” who “looked to the past in the present in order to imagine the future” (Stein 863). Queer writers’ characteristic approaches to history have been a major concern of queer studies over the past twenty years; more recently, scholars have taken particular notice of the convergence of queer historiographies with religious ways of relating to the past.³ Under the rubric of “queer temporality,” queer studies practitioners have formulated a productive theoretical discourse devoted to unsettling many forms of linearity—including the linear progress narrative of economic development shared by many varieties of capitalism and socialism. As theorist Annamarie Jagose succinctly defines it, queer temporality is “a mode of inhabiting time that is attentive to the recursive eddies and back-to-the-future loops that often pass undetected or

³ See Peter Coviello, *Tomorrow’s Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: NYU Press, 2013); Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2008); Elizabeth Freeman, “Sacramentality and the Lesbian Premodern,” in Noreen Giffney, Michelle M. Sauer, and Diane Watts, eds., *The Lesbian Premodern* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) and “Sacra/mentality in Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood*” *American Literature* 86.4 (2014), pp. 737-765; and Benjamin Kahan, *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life* (Durham: Duke UP, 2013).

uncherished beneath the official narrations of the linear sequence that is taken to structure normative life” (Jagose 158). The “eddie” and “loops” of Jagose’s queer temporality echo the recurrent rhythms of Christian sacred history cherished by the writers in this study. In Chapters 1 and 3, I draw on theorizations of queer time and radical celibacy, as well as on histories of Christianity and homosexuality, to illuminate the mutual influence of sexuality and religion on Cram, Scudder, and Auden’s unprogressive radicalisms.

Breaking Bread with the Dead thus expands the burgeoning conversation between religion-and-literature and queer studies to encompass self-consciously traditional forms of Christianity. Just as devotion to sacred history fueled some writers’ opposition to capitalism, I argue, similar commitments, often for the same writers, could also nourish queer existence. Especially during the first half of the twentieth century, as same-sex desires were increasingly medicalized and pathologized, religious practices opened an important cultural space for queer writers. Because of historical Christianity’s ethical prohibitions on homosexual practice, however, this space was strictly qualified. It was located primarily in traditions of celibacy that gave religious sanction to life-aims not comprehended by successful reproduction and child-rearing in a heterosexual family. Yet queer Christian writers exploited what they could of these celibate traditions, conceiving for themselves forms of life in which, by their own testimony, they experienced celibacy as the socialization, rather than the repression, of sexual desire. On the evidence of her autobiographical novel *A Listener in Babel* (1903), Scudder indeed felt this socialized desire as something like her true orientation: “Not...the presence of one exclusively beloved, but the presence of all men, had ever been, so she believed, the substance of her unconscious desires” (4). In this connection, medieval monastic communities served as crucial social icons for Scudder, Cram, and Auden. Conceiving of monasticism as a religious community structured by

passionate same-sex attachment, common worship, and common ownership, they melded nonnormative sexuality, religious practice, and anticapitalist radicalism.

1.2.3 Postsecular Spiritualities

In a similar manner, *Breaking Bread with the Dead* expands the purview of recent religion- and-literature scholarship on the postsecular in twentieth-century American literature. This dissertation tells the story of writers whose radical embrace of Christian tradition was impelled by what they understood as the devastating economic, political and spiritual effects of secularizing modern social forces, industrial capitalism in particular. Though explicitly responding to secularization, they do not fit the mold of the spiritual-but-not-religious writers critics of twentieth-century literature have usually comprehended under the label “postsecular.” Nor can the writers I discuss be consigned to the camp of fundamentalism or the Religious Right, against which such critics have defined postsecular spirituality. Current formulations of the postsecular stand in need of revision in light of this literary history.

In contemporary scholarly debates, the postsecular commonly names a widespread turn in critical practice away from longstanding narratives of religion’s decline and replacement—usually by art or science—that previously grounded both the professional identities of literary scholars and their interpretations of literary texts (Fessenden 154; Kaufmann 607).⁴ On this understanding, recent historical developments spurred literary scholars to count religion as culturally forceful rather than inevitably fading. In neighboring halls of academe, social scientists grew disenchanted with secularization theory, while Continental philosophers embraced

⁴ Compare this definition with the taxonomy of the senses of “the postsecular” given by Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman, who—oddly, to my mind, given the ineluctably historical associations of the prefix “post-”—sideline any attempt to make a “particular historical claim” about the emergence of the postsecular (645). When Coviello and Hickman write of “an epistemological and methodological reorientation from which history might look different”—i.e., shot through with multivariate forms of spirituality, whatever historical or geographical field one investigates—it seems to me that they effectively define postsecularism (as opposed to “the postsecular”) as a loosely-affiliated school of or approach to literary criticism, of which this dissertation could rightly be considered an iteration.

theology; it was from these two fields that literary scholars first imported the term “postsecular” (Fessenden 156). Meanwhile, “9/11 and the political revival of the religious right” gave students of American culture particularly pressing reasons to renew their inquiries into religion (Rivett 989). In this sense, *Breaking Bread with the Dead* is a postsecular literary history that attempts to understand the continuing force and appeal of Christian traditions for a misunderstood group of twentieth-century American writers committed to radical social ideas.

However, in its emphasis on writers committed to elaborated doctrinal beliefs, liturgical forms of worship, and particular Christian churches, *Breaking Bread with the Dead* ventures into territories sidelined by the most influential postsecular studies that address twentieth-century American literature. When delineating postsecular *literature*, rather than postsecular *criticism*, recent critics allow for fundamentalism as a conservative cultural foil to postsecular writing, but not for the sort of traditionalist radicalism that I present in this study. The three most important books on the postsecular in twentieth-century American literature, John McClure’s *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fictions in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (2007), Amy Hungerford’s *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (2010), and Pericles Lewis’ *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (2010), all take William James’ pluralized and individualized notion of religious experience as paradigmatic for postsecular belief. According to these critics, either religious experience, private and capacious, or fundamentalism, dogmatic and dangerous, are the religious alternatives that survive secularization.

McClure and Hungerford take a deep interest in the progressive political potential of Jamesian postsecular faith in opposition to fundamentalist conservatism. McClure argues that writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, Don DeLillo, and Michael Ondaatje offer images of enchanted and welcoming but ephemeral communities—what McClure calls “open

dwelling[s]”—as a healthier alternative to the militarized camps of the culture wars (*Partial Faiths* 192-196). Hungerford traces a phenomenon she calls “belief in meaninglessness”—by which she means the way writers invest those formal elements of language that carry no referential meaning, and indeed literary form itself, with enchantment—from President Eisenhower to Allen Ginsberg to Cormac McCarthy to the *Left Behind* novels (xiii). Hungerford is ambivalent about the belief in form evacuated of content that religiously-inflected postmodern literature encourages, but she recognizes that belief in meaninglessness gives writers and readers a way to express their faith amid the thrust of conflicting convictions. “Belief in literature,” as she puts it, might make it possible to continue being religious while participating fully in a culture of religious pluralism (xxi).

Unlike William James, recent postsecular critics do not propose to uncover the essence of all religions in private experience. Their rehabilitation of the concept of religious experience is nonteleological; it denotes the continual proliferation of spiritualities rather than religion’s common core. This version of religious experience closely resembles contemporary invocations of the idea of political progress, which in this version connotes an endless expansion of liberty not directed towards any particular goal. In their current forms, both of these notions—progress and religious experience—conform strikingly to liberal and neoliberal conceptions of ever-expanding markets.⁵ This suggests to me that the neo-Jamesian postsecular is better understood as a product of neoliberal culture than a challenge to it. *Breaking Bread with the Dead* traces an intellectual tendency distinct from Jamesian pluralism—one that grounds oppositional political stances in commitments to definite ecclesiastical and theological traditions. In its passionate, if unquenched, pursuit of wholeness, or what the philosopher Charles Taylor calls “fullness,” the

⁵ On markets and the idea of progress, see Lasch 40-81.

renovation of Christian tradition practiced by the writers I discuss offers a more profound challenge to the narrative of religion's inevitable decline than the fragmentary, empty, or residual forms of faith chronicled by McClure, Hungerford, and Lewis.⁶

These three critics' articulation of the postsecular in modern American literature is committed to a historiography of unquestioned gains (religious tolerance and freedom of conscience) and irrevocable losses (religious tradition and community). They reproduce the ambivalence towards the fruits of progress and resignation to the inevitability of progress characteristic of the classic sociological accounts of secularization (Lasch 143-148). Tracy Fessenden has recently criticized McClure and Hungerford, among others, for replicating this progressive "patterning of secular time" (157). McClure's partial faith and Hungerford's belief in meaninglessness put a new spin on the old story of secularization: once faith was whole but now it is partial; once we believed in content but now we can only believe in form. *Breaking Bread with the Dead* resists this progressive historiography that consigns religious tradition to a lost world, whether to be knowingly deplored or nostalgically mourned. Instead, I follow philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre in conceiving of tradition as "an argument extended through time" about shared symbols and practices that puts the present in lively continuity with the past (12). By showing how this ongoing argument empowered radical social thought, I offer grounds for rethinking the assumptions underlying much postsecular criticism about what forms of religion

⁶ "Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be. This is perhaps a place of power: we often experience this as deeply moving, as inspiring. Perhaps this sense of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off; we have the powerful intuition of what fullness would be, were we to be in that condition, e.g., of peace or wholeness; or able to act on that level, of integrity or generosity or abandonment or self-forgetfulness. But sometimes there will be moments of experienced fullness, of joy and fulfillment, where we feel ourselves there" (Taylor 5). Taylor's account of fullness recalls the "global form" of sacred history recognized by Ricoeur. Sacred history, or sacred remembrance, is that place or activity in which the writers I discuss most often find the sense of fullness Taylor describes. In his acknowledgment that fullness is sometimes only glimpsed from a distance, Taylor echoes Ricoeur's admission that historical hope remains a mystery of faith for the Christian, whose life is lived on history's rational and existential planes and not the surreptitious.

are viable, interesting, and politically desirable in modern literature.

1.2.4 Intellectual Histories

I've also been guided in this historiographical approach by my reading of American intellectual history, a discipline long favorable to countercultural appropriations of the past. In his landmark study *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (1983), Jackson Lears showed how American antimodernist intellectuals—Cram, Scudder, and Adams among them—mounted an “articulate religious protest” against emerging consumerist and therapeutic impulses across the long turn of the twentieth century (197). I demonstrate here that subsequent generations of literary intellectuals took up that protest, remolding it to respond to later challenges. Christopher Lasch's *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (1991), determined to find in the populist tradition a criticism of progress that does not give way to nostalgia, has been immensely instructive—even if I discuss favorably some approaches to the religious past that Lasch would no doubt dismiss as nostalgic. Eugene McCarragher's short but wide-ranging *Christian Critics: Religion and the Impasse in Modern American Social Thought* (2000) sympathetically argues that progress and religious tradition are falsely opposed. McCarragher charts a century-spanning tradition of Christian social critics including Cram, Scudder, Eliot, and Day, establishing myriad connections and providing many jumping-off points for textual analysis that have proved crucial to this study.

More recently, in *The Right of the Protestant Left: God's Totalitarianism* (2012), Mark Thomas Edwards has argued that mainline Protestant Christian Realist theologians including the neo-orthodox Niebuhrs employed “conservative religious concepts in the service of a countertotalitarian, radical democratic politics” (7). Beginning in the 1930s, the Realists’ “innovative nostalgic faith” looked back to medieval Christendom as a model for a new world

community linked by religious communion rather than markets or communist ideology (38). “Perhaps Christian Realism’s message to us is that we say good-bye to gothic only at our peril,” Edwards concludes, wondering if “the path to reconstructing political and religious foundations now lie[s] through counterintuitive thinking” that transcends contemporary political divisions (188). *Breaking Bread with the Dead* answers in the affirmative, but it looks more often to Roman Catholic and Anglo-Catholic thinkers than to Protestants for its imaginative resources.

1.3 Literary History without Progressivism

My commitment to a radical historiography that rejects the ideology of progress inflects the narrative of *Breaking Bread with the Dead*. Though it hews to a roughly chronological scheme that begins in the 1890s and ends in the 2000s, this dissertation does not pretend to offer a continuous story. Instead, it takes up particular moments of social crisis in which a literary recovery of the past became especially attractive to American religious radicals. My second chapter, “A Queer Orthodoxy: Monastic Socialism and Celibate Sexuality in Ralph Adams Cram and Vida Dutton Scudder,” argues that these two Anglo-Catholic writers looked to St. Benedict and St. Francis, respectively, for medieval social icons to guide the reform of American industrial capitalist culture. Cram, a practicing neo-Gothic architect as well as a man of letters, proposed quasi-monastic “walled towns” as a model for reorganizing Western social life in the wake of the Great War. Scudder imagined a fifth column of neo-Franciscans who would reject the institution of private property and overthrow capitalism in a nonviolent “Christian revolution.” Both writers developed their medievalist visions in modern monastic communities that allowed them to cultivate passionate, but chaste, same-sex attachments. Cram periodically resided with the controversial Anglican Benedictines of Wales’ Caldey Island monastery, known for its homoerotic atmosphere. Scudder’s long-term living companion and socialist comrade

Florence Converse (1871-1967) joined her in the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross, an order of Anglican women devoted to prayer and social justice work. Together, Scudder and Converse made pilgrimage to Assisi and renewed the Franciscan vision for the modern world. Monastic social icons allowed Cram and Scudder to fold queerness and anticapitalist dissidence together in an appeal to sacred history.

Cram and Scudder began their anticapitalist campaigns during the Social Gospel reaction to urban industrial misery of the 1890s; when they were firing their final volleys in the 1930s, the Great Depression galvanized another generation of intellectuals to join them. My third chapter, “The Ways of Orthodoxy: The Christian Antimodernisms of John Crowe Ransom, T. S. Eliot, and Dorothy Day,” argues that poet-critics Ransom and Eliot, usually considered implacable conservatives, shared a common language of theological politics with the journalist-activist Day, customarily seen as a woman of the Left. All three writers employed a critical discourse of orthodoxy that allowed them to cast liberalism, fascism, and communism as political and economic heresies. I discover in their Depression-era writings the outlines of a “fourth-way” political alternative, both religious and communitarian. Though more abstract and fragmentary than the medievalisms of Cram and Scudder, this 1930s discourse of orthodoxy also suggested a social icon against which these writers measured present-day capitalist dysfunctions.

Claude McKay worked this discourse of orthodoxy into sonnet form with “The Pagan Isms” (1945), published in Day’s *Catholic Worker* newspaper, as I show in my fourth chapter, “Midcentury Medievalisms with a Difference: Peter Maurin, Claude McKay, W. H. Auden, and the Catholic Worker Movement.” This chapter argues that, between the 1930s to the 1960s, immigrant poets associated with the Catholic Workers re-fashioned medievalist social criticism to meet the needs of the working class, people of color, and sexual minorities. Maurin, a

homespun poet-philosopher born into a French peasant family, used the *Catholic Worker*, the paper of the social movement he co-founded, to distribute his “Easy Essays.” These plainspoken poems relied on surprisingly dense rhetorical techniques of repetition to indoctrinate his readers with a Catholic critique of capitalism. In his post-conversion poems, McKay adapted this working-class medievalism to his own purposes, as he had done with other radical ideologies throughout his career, producing what I call a black medievalism. McKay carefully blended his Catholic commitments with cultural pluralism, painting a picture of the Middle Ages that emphasized religious diversity, the contributions of people of color to church history, and the entanglements of Protestantism with the development of modern capitalism and racism. After returning to Anglo-Catholicism, Auden, like Cram and Scudder before him, turned to monasticism to imagine a queer medievalism. In his Cold War context, monasticism became a potent vehicle for Auden to criticize the baptism of Western capitalist imperialism. As a non-aligned Christian radicalism pioneered by sexual outsiders, Auden’s queer monasticism served as a potent rebuke to what Eugene McCarraher calls “the civil religion of Chrapitalism: the lucrative merger of Christianity and capitalism, America’s most enduring covenant theology” (“Love Is Stronger than Debt”).

My fifth chapter, “Tradition Beyond Tragedy: Walker Percy, James McBride Dabbs, and Will D. Campbell’s Committee of Southern Churchmen,” argues that Percy, Dabbs, and Campbell—a Roman Catholic, a Presbyterian, and a Baptist, respectively—deployed the idea of Southern tradition to support the African-American struggle for civil rights. Earlier white Southern writers, such as Ransom, Faulkner, and Walker Percy’s uncle William Alexander Percy, narrated Southern history as a tragedy of sectional, racial, and economic division, offering variations on the “Lost Cause” theme. Yet beginning in the mid-1960s, in their journal

Katallagete: Be Reconciled! and other platforms, the Churchmen narrated Southern history as a comedy of reconciliation awaiting its final act. In their comic approach to Southern tradition, the Churchmen offered what Dabbs called a new “practical poetry” of reconciliation that they judged more faithful to the requirements of the Christian gospel than the old practical poetry of segregation. Looking back to the example of the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, which I characterize as a Left Agrarian interracial alliance of Protestant leaders founded in the 1930s, Campbell’s Committee unearthed a buried vein of religious dissent in the white Southern Protestant heritage. In a Southern-fried riff on Catholic Worker-style Christian anarchism, the Committee of Southern Churchmen attempted to mobilize an ecumenical alliance of Christian churches to supersede the state as the guarantor of social justice and spiritual brotherhood.

In my coda, “Wholeness in an Age of Fracture; or, the Home Economics of Wendell Berry and Marilynne Robinson,” I bring my analysis up to the recent past, showing how Christian traditions have furnished radical visions of wholeness to literary intellectuals in the last quarter of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first—a period that intellectual historian Daniel Rodgers has compellingly dubbed an “age of fracture” (3). In his “Mad Farmer Poems” Wendell Berry chronicles the adventures of a mythic persona, at once a Southern Left Agrarian anarchist and a medievalist apocalyptic plowman in the style of William Langland. In this ongoing series of lyrics begun in 1970, Berry welds the rhetoric of postmodern avant gardes to that of Southern and medievalist antimodernisms. Like Berry, Marilynne Robinson reimagines “small town America” not as a conservative bastion but as a site of religiously inspired resistance to neoliberalism. For Robinson, this resistance emerges from a liberal Protestantism newly aware of itself as one religious tradition among others, rather than the assumed religious culture of all Americans. I close by considering her defenses of individualism and optimistic progressivism—

wedded, in her thought, to Calvinist theology—as a counterpoint to the tragic optimist voices featured throughout this dissertation.

The literary history of the 1930s anchors the narrative of *Breaking Bread with the Dead*. The economic, social, and religious upheavals of this decade produced the Catholic Worker movement, the critical discourse of orthodoxy, and a flowering of social icons. Chapter 2 ends in the 1930s with Scudder’s Franciscan writings. Chapter 3 narrates the emergence of the critical discourse of orthodoxy in 1930s writings by Eliot, Day, and Ransom. Chapter 4 traces the fortunes of Catholic Worker-affiliated medievalist poetry from its development by Maurin in the late 1920s, through the Second World War, and into the middle decades of the century. Chapter 5 shows how, in the 1960s, Campbell’s Committee of Southern Churchmen drew upon the legacy of dissent left by the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen in the 1930s. The Coda finds Berry drawing on Ransom’s Depression-era critique of industrialism and Eliot’s *Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) to develop his own poetics of anticapitalist Sabbatarianism. Peter Conn has recently argued that a “thick texture of ‘pastness’” defines the literature of the American 1930s (8). When the ever-expanding empire of liberty experienced a catastrophic economic contraction, a “debate over the meaning of America” opened up in which Depression-era writers of many different political persuasions “frequently revived the past to criticize American values and institutions” (Conn 5-6). *Breaking Bread with the Dead* demonstrates that for many this debate was not only about America but also about the meaning of Christendom and, indeed, of history itself.

I researched and wrote this dissertation in the long shadow of the Great Recession of 2007-2009, the lowest economic trough this country has experienced since the Great Depression,

which was followed by the slowest economic recovery since World War II.⁷ As pundits and economists sought a name for the recent financial debacle that echoed the disaster of the 1930s, I found myself gravitating toward the writers of that decade to make sense of literary culture's role in social crisis. Jackson Lears claims that "all scholarship is—or ought to be—a kind of intellectual biography" (xx). This is true in the present case at least. After finishing my B.A. in the spring of 2010, I was lucky to secure a spot in this graduate program, despite departmental belt-tightening that shrunk the incoming cohort from the size of more prosperous years. As spring turned into summer and fall, I watched many of my equally qualified friends' searches for jobs or graduate schools languish. The breakdown of our personal progress narratives seemed to resonate with system-wide shivers in the economic structure.

For me, these shivers splintered the connection between my faith and small-government conservatism—a connection I had embraced passively growing up and later rationalized by reading libertarian thinkers. When I first came to St. Louis in March of 2010 as a prospective graduate student, I had abandoned this politics but had not yet formulated my discontent into a viable alternative position. At the time, I wasn't looking for a new philosophy so much as I was seeking new examples, historical predecessors on whom I could model my own search. On visiting weekend, I discovered a clue.

After a late night sounding the depths of Kierkegaard and other, shallower subjects with current students and fellow prospectives, I woke early on the Saturday morning I was to return to Texas. My generous host said he had to take care of something and asked if I wanted to join him. I agreed, groggily. We drove from his Dogtown apartment to a nearby grocery store in his

⁷ See Catherine Rampell, "'Great Recession': A Brief Etymology," *Economix Blog*, *The New York Times*, Mar. 11, 2009 (<http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/03/11/great-recession-a-brief-etymology/>) and Paul Wiseman, "Economic Recovery Ranks as Weakest Since World War II," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, Aug. 26, 2012 (<http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/2012/aug/26/tp-economic-recovery-ranks-as-weakest-since-world/>).

housemate's car, a minivan in such bad repair that I had to sit on the middle bench and hold the sliding door closed at speed. We took on a load of no longer shelfworthy but entirely edible food and delivered it to what I thought was a non-profit women's shelter. As I helped unload the van, I met some of the volunteers who called the building home. The impression they gave, at once antinomian and ascetic, struck me. Passing briefly through the dining room, I glimpsed a quote on the wall:

We know Christ in the breaking of the bread,
and we know each other in the breaking of the bread,
and we are not alone any more.

—Dorothy Day⁸

I only half recognized the name. Maybe my host told me at the time, or maybe I figured out later that we had delivered the food to a Catholic Worker community. In any case, Day's words lingered with me that morning as we stopped by a protest against Bank of America's foreclosure practices and ate breakfast at an anarchist bakery. And they remained with me long after that. I carried them like hot coals in the horn of my memory while I gathered material—small dry bits at first, then branches, then logs—until I knew that I could build a fire.

Like all of my subjects, save Berry and Robinson, Day has died. Reading their works and studying their lives has often felt like a form of communion. I have tried to get some of that feeling into the writing. The result, I hope, is that *Breaking Bread with the Dead* invites, but does not impose, a reading experience befitting its title: an experience of communion that discloses a vision of community.⁹ And this kind of experience doesn't depend on a shared religious

⁸ The quotation is from Day, "The Final Word Is Love," *The Catholic Worker* May 1980, p. 4 (<http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/articles/867.pdf>). This piece is printed in recent editions of her autobiography *The Long Loneliness* as a postscript.

⁹ Joanna Brooks has recently offered the Methodist "love-feasts"—evenings of testimony capped by a simple meal of bread and water—enjoyed by Olaudah Equiano in his *Interesting Narrative* (1789) as a model for religion-and-literature scholarship. "Religious narratives like Equiano's aim to draw readers into that ensemble [of the love-

profession, as the Anglo-Catholic Cram's passionate response to the agnostic Adams' *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* suggests. This dissertation is written for anyone looking for a history of modern U.S. literary radicalism that eschews the historiography of progress. *Breaking Bread with the Dead* gathers up living strands of argument about Christianity, capitalism, and history from the past 125 years of American literary writing, and it holds those strands out to its readers in the hope that they will take them up and weave something new.

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feast], testing out experience the way one might at a soul feast and expecting readers to join in the breaking of bread and the passing round of mugs of water," she observes (950). She concludes with a series of questions, including, "Is professional literary criticism, or the classroom, a variety of soul feast?" (951). This dissertation represents one possible way of answering in the affirmative.

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Chapter 2:
A Queer Orthodoxy:
Monastic Socialism and Celibate Sexuality
in Vida Dutton Scudder and Ralph Adams Cram

How queer to find the Middle Ages growing in your back yard!
—Florence Converse, *The Burden of Christopher* (1900)

In Boston, in the spring of 1890, Vida Dutton Scudder (1861-1954) and Ralph Adams Cram (1863-1942) helped to launch a new experiment in Christian community: the Episcopal Church of the Carpenter. Boston's Puritan founder John Winthrop dreamed of a City on a Hill in which the affective and material ties of charity connected rich and poor. But that imagined city lay in ruins amid a Gilded Age culture that worshiped wealth and individual ambition. Scudder, a literary critic and professor at Wellesley, and Cram, an architect and bohemian *littérateur*, joined with other religious radicals at the Church of the Carpenter to preach the good news of Christian Socialism as the antidote to the gospel of greed. Their congregation embraced “all sorts and conditions of men,” from wealthy philanthropists to hardscrabble labor leaders (Yeames 41). It embodied the possibility of a new religious-social order—one that went beyond Winthrop's vision by aiming to ameliorate social inequality through moral suasion.

At the Church of the Carpenter, ancient liturgy fueled anticapitalist dissent. Scudder soon joined the “Brotherhood of the Carpenter,” an order attached to the congregation that proselytized on behalf of Christian Socialism, investigated the labor practices of local businesses, and helped unemployed Brothers find work (Yeames 42). Of their meetings, she recalls, “[n]ot only did we worship together, singing with special zeal the Magnificat, but we had wonderful suppers, true agape, when the altar at the back of the little room was curtained off and we feasted on ham and pickles and the hope of an imminent revolution” (Scudder, *On Journey* 165; cf.

Markwell 276-77n106). The Magnificat—a song attributed to the Virgin Mary in the Gospel of Luke and a staple of the Anglican Order for Evening Prayer—evokes a revolutionary God, dedicated to the overthrow of the rich and powerful and to the welfare of the poor and needy:

He hath put down the mighty from their seat :
and hath exalted the humble and meek.
He hath filled the hungry with good things :
and the rich he hath sent empty away. (Protestant Episcopal Church 22)

Though it attracted over three hundred people to its inaugural service and enlisted over a hundred members in the Brotherhood, the Church of the Carpenter sustained fewer than twenty regular communicants, and after six years, it folded (Markwell 120-27). But the spirit of the congregation—the idea of a worshiping community bound in and through ritual to seek the good society—lived on for the next five decades in Scudder’s and Cram’s writings on medieval monasticism.¹⁰

Medieval monasticism served Cram and Scudder as a social icon that enabled them to read the social future in the sacred past. Historian Jackson Lears has noted that for Anglo-Catholic intellectuals at the turn of the century, “monasticism as a disciplined, ascetic way of life offered an eloquent witness against the emerging culture of comfort and convenience” (201). For Cram and Scudder in particular, monasticism adumbrated a whole way of life opposed to the bourgeois values of wealth, family, and personal fulfillment. They looked to historical communities of monks, nuns, and friars sworn to poverty, celibacy, and obedience as models for how to live in the secular world after an epoch of secularization culminating in economic disaster and world war. They took the vow of poverty as an injunction to oppose the exploitative system of

¹⁰ By opening this chapter at the Church of the Carpenter, I’m following up Joanna Brooks’ call to her Americanist colleagues to study “the deep religious ties” of American authors “that can be traced back across the decades through particular congregations and particular denominations and connected to larger movements in American history” (448). Other literary luminaries involved with the Church of the Carpenter—though not necessarily sharing its religion—included realist novelist William Dean Howells and Edward Bellamy, author of the socialist utopia *Looking Backward* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1888) and of the political theory of “Nationalism” (Kirk and Kirk).

industrial capitalism. They took the vow of celibacy as a mandate to imagine, and to practice, communal forms of love bent towards social renewal that challenged and often exceeded the norms of reproductive heterosexuality. And they took the vow of obedience as an invitation to affirm what Cram called “definite, dogmatic, and sacramental religion” (*Gold* 21).

Cram and Scudder’s monastic writings pose searching criticisms of industrial capitalist life. But the norms of their criticism derive from sacred history rather than the imperatives of social progress—from a sanctified past rather than an imagined future. In their mature thought, Cram and Scudder eschewed the optimistic historiography of turn-of-the-century liberals. As a result, they traded the gradual meliorism of the Church of the Carpenter for radical visions that melded, in different measures, the reactionary and the revolutionary. In the formation of their historical sense, religious belief and practice, political conviction, and sexuality are deeply intertwined. Monasticism constellates the sacramental Anglo-Catholic faith, critical outlook on capitalism, and divergence from heterosexual life-scripts that Cram and Scudder shared. It offers the best window into their literary-historical significance and centers my analysis in this chapter.

Cram and Scudder’s efforts to reimagine monasticism combined historical research and creative vision with personal experiences in modern monastic and quasi-monastic communities. Cram emphasized the need for a radical break from mainstream US culture, drawing on Benedictine monastic tradition to propose “Walled Towns”—beautifully built, self-contained alternative societies. These Benedictine convictions took shape among the controversial monks of the Caldey Island monastery where he visited and worked. Scudder took her cues from St. Francis of Assisi and stressed presence with the poor and suffering, rather than retreat; she opposed monastic withdrawal almost as vigorously as she rejected capitalism. Scudder imitated Francis alongside her companion, the writer Florence Converse (1871-1967) and their sisters in

the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross, an Anglican women's order devoted to social justice and intercessory prayer. However salient their differences, they both pursued a radical *ressourcement* of Christian tradition made possible, in part, by the extra-normative forms of love they cultivated.

2.1 Medievalism, Socialism, and Sexuality in American Anglo-Catholicism

When they each converted into the Anglo-Catholic branch of Anglican Christianity after encountering European Catholic art on Continental tours in the 1880s, Cram and Scudder traded their familial connections to New England Protestantism for a spiritual kinship to the Middle Ages.¹¹ As High Church Anglicans, rather than Roman Catholics, they laid claim to pre-Reformation Christian tradition without the social penalty of membership in what most New England Protestant elites still considered an immigrant church. But their preference for Anglo-Catholicism over Roman Catholicism was not merely a matter of prejudice or convenience. By their Anglicanism, Cram and Scudder declared their loyalty to the English Christian socialist tradition of churchman F. D. Maurice (1805-1872) and art critic John Ruskin (1819-1900), among others. A conversion to Rome, by contrast, seemed a conservative move before Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) spoke up for workers' rights. If Anglo-Catholicism offered Cram and Scudder a partial exit from Protestantism and a portal into the Middle Ages, it also gave them the opportunity to identify with the radical heritage evident at the Church of the Carpenter.

Cram and Scudder's Anglo-Catholicism doesn't map neatly onto the liberal-fundamentalist divide that cleaves late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century US religious

¹¹ The Rev. Bliss and his Mission of the Carpenter were not particularly High Church, but in this they are the exception rather than the rule among Anglican socialists (Kilcrease 3). Scudder's father was a Congregationalist missionary, while Cram's was a Unitarian minister in rural New Hampshire.

history. Neither wholeheartedly embracing progress with pluralistic religious liberals nor implicitly endorsing the status quo with Protestant fundamentalists, Cram and Scudder turned to Christian sacred history for spiritual nourishment and political guidance. Turn-of-the-century religious liberals like William James (1842-1910) affirmed a multiform sacred outside all dogma. His *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) was a key text for religious liberals, a compendium that testified to the common mystical root of all religions and to religion's essentially solitary character (Schmidt 14, 98-99). His famous definition of religion there is both individualistic and pluralistic: "*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*" (*Varieties* 31). Like James, Scudder also investigated the varieties of religion. Daughter of a missionary to India, Scudder affirmed that "every definition of 'God' that I have ever met is helpful to me," and she closed her autobiography with a quotation from the Gita rather than the Gospels (*On Journey* 363, 434). But Scudder explicitly rejected James's individualist and pluralistic definition of religion as she encountered it in the writings of Alfred North Whitehead. She defined her own religion in organic, communal terms:

I remained an orthodox Christian because I knew that faith was an adventure; and also that it was a growth springing straight from life. . . . I am called a revolutionist, but I am also very much of an authoritarian—that is, I am humble enough to find tremendous force in testimony. Religion, says Whitehead, is what one does with his solitariness. I think this only partially true; my own approach is social, and the witness of other minds has great weight with me (234).

Both James and Scudder sought a more catholic sense of the sacred. But while James moved beyond the strictures of any faith tradition in particular, Scudder's explorations drew her more deeply into Christian liturgy, history, and dogma.

Cram and Scudder gave fresh articulations to basic Christian tenets such as the Trinity and the Incarnation, recalling in some ways the project of Protestant fundamentalists. But in their

hands, these Christian doctrines rebuked the dogmas of industrial capitalism. Cram argued that the enfleshment of God in the Incarnation ennobled matter and invalidated the crass materialism enabling the exploitation of both natural resources and human bodies (*Gold* 84-85). Scudder reasoned that the doctrine of vicarious atonement demanded a “class-sacrifice” of the haves on behalf of the have-nots (*Social Teachings* 148-151). The evangelical Protestant apologists of *The Fundamentals* (1910-1915), on the other hand, considered socialism tantamount to heresy (Vol. II 92; Vol. III 96). Like their liberal opponents, fundamentalists labored to show how smoothly religion could fit with modern ways of being and knowing—and, implicitly, of making a living. But Cram and Scudder each recovered Christian tradition to point up, in different ways, the incompatibility of modern capitalist life and Christian faith.

Anglo-Catholicism also set Cram and Scudder apart from their contemporaries who sought to ground radical social thought in Christian belief. Progressive Christians at the turn of the century—such as the Baptist theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, whose writings, including *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907), were the leading intellectual documents of the Social Gospel movement—followed a Jamesian trajectory away from liturgy and dogma, reading a slimmed-down Scriptural canon composed of the Gospels and the Prophets and vaguely urging social service as Christian moral duty. Although Scudder shared many of Rauschenbusch’s aims, she pushed him and her other Left Christian colleagues to develop a more elaborated theology and a more radical politics (Hinson-Hasty 24, 30-33; Corcoran 56-57). She further believed a more radical politics *followed from* a more full-orbed theology. For Scudder, Jesus’ injunctions on behalf of the poor in the Sermon on the Mount might be interpreted as a call for private charity, but the doctrine of the Trinity calls for outright socialism (*On Journey* 371). For his part, Cram decried revolution, although he did so in the name of the “spirit of real communism”—

less egalitarian in reality than he makes it sound—that he glimpsed in medieval Christianity (*Great Thousand Years* 31).

Scudder and Cram kept faith with the social idealism of their New England Protestant heritage even as they embraced Catholic forms of worship and belief. In 1884, Scudder was one of the first two American women to study at Oxford. There, Scudder, daughter of a Congregationalist missionary, picked up Anglo-Catholic theology from the second-generation disciples of the Oxford Movement and anticapitalist dissidence from Ruskin’s final public lectures of (*On Journey* 78-85). She subsequently volunteered with the Salvation Army and, on her return to the United States, pioneered New York’s Rivington Street settlement house weeks before Jane Addams’ storied Hull House opened in Chicago (135). But it was at the Church of the Carpenter that Scudder first integrated her Anglican with her socialist convictions, and she remained attached to the congregation throughout its tenure (Markwell 170-72). At the time of its demise, however, she was already moving Leftward—and, as it were, backward. By 1912, she strove to reconcile “conservative Christian and revolutionary socialist” as an Anglo-Catholic churchwoman and a member of the Socialist Party (*Socialism and Character* vii).

In between were years of personal crisis. Scudder’s labors in women’s education, settlement work, and Christian Socialism made not so much as a dent in the hide of the industrial capitalist behemoth. When Wellesley accepted Rockefeller money over her protests in 1900, she felt betrayed (*On Journey* 180-83). Under these pressures, Scudder suffered a neuraesthetic breakdown in 1901 (Lears 212-13). When she had partially recovered, she made pilgrimage to Italy and found a guide for her writing and life in St. Francis of Assisi. Scudder drew “prophetic hints for socialists” from Francis’ holy poverty (*Socialism and Character* 286-87). Francis also helped her to resolve her personal crisis. Before her breakdown, Scudder had lamented the

ineffectual and “purely inward torture, which only in rare moments can they believe to hold in itself some expiatory grace,” suffered by the “sensitive souls” of privileged reformers “helplessly aware” of the great gulf fixed between them and the working masses (*Social Ideals in English Letters* 178-79). In Francis’ stigmata, however, Scudder glimpsed a suffering no longer merely inward but palpable and salvific. Scudder shared, as Francis had shared, in the “sacrificial passion” of Christ’s sufferings by publically uniting with workers in the Socialist Party (*Socialism and Character* 365).¹²

It was before the tomb of St. Francis in Assisi that, in 1886, Ralph Adams Cram first felt compelled to pray. A year later, the lapsed Unitarian was converted during a midnight Mass in Rome (Shand-Tucci, *Boston Bohemia* 60-75). While Scudder studied at Oxford, Cram was touring the Continent to learn about architecture. Seeking an aesthetic education in Italy’s churches, he was beguiled by the lure of the holy. Cram returned to the United States an Anglo-Catholic like Scudder and soon joined with her in Christian Socialist agitation at the Church of the Carpenter. But Cram marked his departure from the community with *The Decadent* (1893), a novella of intellectual debate pitting his apocalyptic vision of social renewal against Christian Socialist gradualism. Protagonist Aurelian Blake explains his loss of confidence to his socialist mentor: “You taught me that we lived in another Renaissance; I know it now to be another decadence” (31). At the country estate he calls his “monastery,” surrounded by male companions, opium, and art, Blake awaits capitalism’s collapse and guards “the seeds of the new life” to come (24-25). Even in this explicitly anti-socialist text, the idea that animated the Church of the Carpenter—that a religious community could serve as the womb of a new world to come after capitalism—persists in transfigured form as a decadent monastery.

¹² As Bernard Markwell notes, the example of St. Catherine of Siena, about whom Scudder wrote two books, was more immediately helpful to Scudder’s mental health (203-5). But Francis’ influence was longer-lasting.

Cram had rejected by 1893 what Vida Scudder abandoned only after her breakdown: the optimistic philosophy of social progress. Reflecting back on the “assumption of progress” drawn from “evolutionary thought” that was endemic to “the later nineteenth century,” Scudder admitted in 1923 that “change is one thing, progress quite another” and “we can no longer lay the flattering unction to our souls that change inevitably or even naturally means advance; it is just as likely to mean decay” (*Social Ideals in English Letters* 320). As an alternative to the historiography of linear progress, Cram offers a wave model of history that he would go on to elaborate in later works:

Ah, that “law of evolution”—I knew you would quote it to me sooner or later. You hug the pleasant and cheerful theory to your hearts, and twist history to fit its fancied laws. You cannot see that the law of evolution works by a system of waves advancing and retreating; yet as you say the tide goes forward always. Civilisations have risen and fallen in the past as ours has risen and is falling now. Does not history repeat itself? (*The Decadent* 33)

The assumption of linear progress leads ironically to “a vain repetition of history,” while the sober recognition of history’s repetitive structure can secure true progress, since evolution comes in waves (29). Industrial capitalism’s new decadence is but vain repetition, despite its veneer of productivity; Aurelian Blake’s new monasticism is productive, despite its appearance of dissipation. This distinction between vain and productive repetition is grounded in Cram’s Anglo-Catholic understanding of the sacramental nature of time. The productive daily repetition of the liturgy connects worshipers to the past and anticipates the eschatological future of the kingdom of God. Cram and Scudder, feeling abandoned by the historiography of religious progressives, turned instead to this liturgical temporality. They found wisdom in sacred history about a future whose outcome was, to them, no longer assured. This shared, deeply felt existential dislocation in time drove them to medieval monasticism in their quest to find new imagery for their social visions.

Cram and Scudder shared their “anticipatory” relationship to history with “queer figures” of the period who “looked to the past in the present to imagine the future” (Stein 863). Through teaching, writing, and personal devotion to medieval literature and religious figures, Scudder found her “real home” either in the “Middle Ages or in the Utopian future”: “I know that in both the nineteenth and the twentieth century, I have often felt homesick enough” (*On Journey* 126). Her temporal homesickness is inextricable from her sexual subjectivity. Scudder’s conviction that material progress in the industrial capitalist West had failed to provide a home for social idealists like herself was predicated upon the felt discrepancy of her vocation as celibate reformer with the heterosexual marriage plot. “Until I was thirty, I wanted desperately to fall in love [with a man]. . . . I was eager for the experience without which, all literature assured me, life missed its consummation. Once or twice I tried to compass it, but I couldn’t” (212). Feeling askew of the dominant life-narrative consummated by heterosexual marriage, she also grew skeptical of narratives of social development that made her present moment the cutting edge of progress. Her desire found a home in the medieval celibate religious communities she researched, imagined, and imitated.¹³ But when Scudder moved toward the Middle Ages, she was also moving dialectically toward “the Utopian future.” Though Cram married in 1900, same-sex, celibate monastic communities that would bring nearer “the far prospect of another thirteenth century in the times that are to come” remained the center of his social imagination (“Preface” viii). Both writers believed the road to modern social renewal ran through an imaginative engagement with the medieval past. For Cram, however, utopia could only be approached through a disaster worthy of the Dark Ages.

¹³ In other words, I’m connecting the medievalist form of Scudder’s political imagination to her dissent from the American chronobiopolitics that aligns national and economic progress with sexual development towards the telos of heterosexual marriage with children. On chronobiopolitics, see Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: NYU Press, 2007).

2.2 Ralph Adams Cram: The Walled Town and the Decadent Abbey

In Cram's monastic writings, an ineluctable sense of doom jars with a dogged intuition of hope. Monasticism signifies both negativity and utopia for Cram: the refusal of the social project of civilization and the creation of an alternative society (significantly, an alternative society of same-sex religious community).¹⁴ This doubled affect comes through clearly in Cram's mid-career essay "The Great Thousand Years" (1908), in which he explicitly prophesies a crisis for modern Western civilization that will catalyze the redemption of community in a new form of Benedictine monasticism:

When the abandoned insolence of man, mad in his pride of life, has dashed itself to the stars and, falling again, crumbles away in impotent deliquescence, then perhaps will come the new prophet, son of S. Benedict (though perhaps in a new habit and with an amended rule), who as in 500 and 1000 and 1500, will release the souls of men from their captivity, and strive again to make all things new in Christ. (*The Great Thousand Years* 35-36)¹⁵

Cram relishes decay. His paradoxically energetic description of civilizational entropy culminates in the purple phrase "impotent deliquescence," which conjures the grotesque image of a liquefying phallus.¹⁶ Despite the reproductive failure this implies, Cram's hope for a new "son of S. Benedict" persists. This conjunction of images—the failure of civilizational reproduction figured as sexual impotence, on the one hand, and the "son" arising from the chaste reproduction of monastic tradition, on the other—shows that the architect and social visionary's language of building is inextricable from the languages of sex, of desire and of reproduction. For Cram, the

¹⁴ This suggests that monasticism, as a sort of antisocial sociality, could serve as a productive mediating figure for the debates between antisocial and social versions of queer theory—between those who, like Lee Edelman, emphasize queer negativity's "threat...to social order as such" and those who, like the late José Muñoz, insist that "queer aesthetics map future social relations" (Edelman 11; Muñoz 1; see also Freeman, "Sacra/mentality" 744, 758-760).

¹⁵ Intellectual historian Eugene McCarraher opens his book *Christian Critics* (2000) by quoting this neo-Benedictine prophecy (1). But McCarraher doesn't note the publishing context—or the implicit queerness—of Cram's prediction.

¹⁶ Cram also wrote horror; his *Black Spirits and White* (Chicago: Stone and Kimball, 1895) is a minor classic of the weird fiction canon.

monastic way of making “all things new” runs athwart the presumptions of progress. His break with normative conceptions of social development also implies a break with normative conceptions of sexual development issuing in heterosexual marriage and child-rearing.

Cram published “The Great Thousand Years” through queer monastic connections. The essay, composed in 1908, first appeared in *Pax*, the quarterly magazine of the Anglican Benedictine monks of Caldey Island, Wales, in 1910. Founded in 1906, Caldey was perhaps the most colorful experiment in monastic community among later nineteenth- and early twentieth-century devotees of the Anglo-Catholic movement within the Church of England (Hilliard 185, 192). Cram spent time at the lavishly furnished and architecturally splendid monastery during his British travels, and he carved a figure of St. Benedict, as well as the Cram coat-of-arms, for an altar at Caldey (Shand-Tucci *An Architect's Four Quests* 28). Benjamin Aelred Carlyle, a charismatic and alluring figure “of dynamic personality, hypnotic eyes, and extraordinary imagination,” led the Caldey monks (Hilliard 194). Carlyle encouraged physical displays of affection and recreational activities such as nude swimming and reading Baron Corvo’s homoerotic stories. Such features lead Cram’s biographer Douglass Shand-Tucci to describe Caldey as an “all but explicitly homosexual monastery” (*An Architect's Four Quests* 24-33). Carlyle’s religious name, Aelred, refers to Aelred of Rievaulx, a twelfth-century Cistercian abbot (the Cistercians are an offshoot of the Benedictines) whose writings, especially the treatise *Of Spiritual Friendship* (c. 1164), sanctified passionate love between men even as they preached celibacy for monks (Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* 221-26).¹⁷

¹⁷ Aelred of Rievaulx has become a contested icon in contemporary religion-and-sexuality debates. Integrity USA, an organization that is “working for the full equality of LGBT persons in every part of The Episcopal Church”—Cram and Scudder’s church—claims Aelred as its “Patron Saint” (“Welcome”; “Resources”). Meanwhile, the group blog *Spiritual Friendship*, named for Aelred’s treatise, hosts “discussion of celibacy, friendship, [and] the value of the single life,” largely by celibate queer Christians who “embrace the traditional understanding that God created us male and female, and that His plan for sexual intimacy is only properly fulfilled in the union of husband and wife in

When the Great War led Cram to republish “The Great Thousand Years” as a small book in 1918 with a new afterword, he dedicated the work to Carlyle, styled “Lord Abbot of Caldey.”

The Caldey community helps us, in particular, to understand how monasticism functions in Cram’s writings as a social organism that runs on desire. At the same time, monastic life redirects desire through embodied practices of ritual and recreation into religio-social renewal (“making all things new in Christ”) without merely sublimating that desire into religion or politics. The celibate structure of desire produced remains susceptible of productive understanding as sexuality. It is tempting to read *through* the sensual celibacy of Carlyle’s monks to see their activities either as a religious practice screening homosexual sex or as inauthentically sublimating sexual energies into religious practice. Benjamin Kahan rightly warns against the perils of such paranoid readings of celibacy and argues instead for a “depthless hermeneutic” that “leaves the knottedness of coding and difficulty intact, reading the blockage not as an impediment obstructing a flow elsewhere but an elegant formation in and of itself” (5). Under such a hermeneutic, Caldey emerges as a community in which monasticism sustained an atmosphere of Aelredian “spiritual friendship,” intensely, often playfully sensualized through embodied practices. This incarnate friendship accepts the restraint of chastity, even as it also creates a communal love extending beyond the nuclear family and with the potential to transform social life. At the same time, the monastery also depends on sexual reproduction for its continued existence: new monks must come from somewhere. The communal love of Caldey was neither entirely sexually normative nor entirely nonnormative. A married man and father when he visited Caldey, Cram moonlighted as a monk, putting on for a time the abbey’s celibate communal ethos of incarnate friendship and appropriating it for his social criticism.

marriage” but remain frustrated by “prevailing narratives about homosexuality from those who embrace this traditionally Christian sexual ethic: an excessive focus on political issues, and the ubiquity of reparative therapy in one form or another” (Belgau and Hill).

The practices sanctioned by Carlyle at Caldey must not be thought of as wholly aberrant to monastic tradition. The transformation of desire—and not its repression or manipulation—has long been a primary function of monastic discipline, as Talal Asad argues with respect to Aelred of Rievaulx’s more famous Cistercian colleague and contemporary, Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard’s practice is particularly relevant because he was dealing with many men who took up a monastic vocation later in life, after military service in which they had had both sexual and violent experiences. “Monastic rites in the programme of Clairvaux are thus not to be seen as ways of repressing a socially dangerous psychic force...nor are they simply to be understood as inculcating new values...” (Asad 174). Instead, “rites are at the center of the *transformation* of pre-existing ideas, feelings, and memories”—including sexual ideas, feelings, and memories (174, emphasis in original). Asad stresses that the transformation of desire always risks transgression because of “Bernard’s deliberate decision to court danger in order to overcome it. The novice is thrust into ambiguity and contradiction, and his *fragmented* self made the precondition of a virtuous reformation. Such a decision was connected to the fact that with adult recruitment the danger of sensual desire could not be deal with directly by simple rejection: the re-description of pleasurable memory was necessary” (175).

Such a redescription of desire did not deny the perceptions and pleasures of the body. In his *Mirror of Charity*, a work traditionally thought to be written at Bernard’s request, Aelred of Rievaulx deems physical attraction good in itself:

We must not shun it as if it were evil, nor must we allow ourselves to be too much drawn to it. It is near to the inclination that leads to vice, and unless we are on our guard against the latter, we can be carried away by it. But as long as we find virtue among the attractions which appeal to us in anyone’s outward appearance, and as long as allow ourselves to be drawn by it moderately and sensibly, then we have nothing to fear (119).

But Aelred's language of moderation belies the intensity of connection—portrayed with imagery of kissing and sleeping together—that he attributes to a virtuous friendship.

[S]omeone to whom one is deeply united by the bonds of love; someone in whom our weary spirit may find rest, and to whom we may pour out our souls...someone whose conversation is as sweet as a song in the tedium of our daily life. He must be someone whose soul will be to us a refuge to creep into when the world is altogether too much for us; someone to whom we can confide all our thoughts. His spirit will give us the comforting kiss that heals all the sickness of our preoccupied hearts. [...] And we will be so deeply bound to him in our hearts that even when he is far away, we shall find him together with us in spirit, together and alone. The world will fall asleep all round you, you will find, and your soul will rest, embraced in absolute peace. Your two hearts will lie quiet together, united as if they were one, as the grace of the Holy Spirit flows over you both. (139, first ellipsis in original)

Cram's principal innovation in this tradition is to emphasize social reformation over personal holiness as the aim of transformed desire.

His visits to Caldey thus afforded Cram intervals of heightened medievalism within his modern life. There, Cram could sustain his "allegiance . . . to the *medieval* church . . . that Aelred Carlyle was clearly dreaming about at Caldey" (Shand-Tucci *An Architect's Four Quests* 33). But in his writings, Cram sought a more lasting synthesis of same-sex communal love with family life. *Walled Towns* (1919) imaginatively integrates his public life as prominent architect and paterfamilias with his semiprivate life as aspiring queer monastic by portraying a Benedictinism for "the human family" (36). The medieval walled town exemplified a quasi-monastic separatist community embracing "groups of natural families, father, mother and children" alongside single-sex monastic communities. The logic of this model, Cram emphasizes, is one of addition, not supersession: "for the monks, canons-regular and friars, of the old tradition and the old line, will be as necessary then as ever; instead it will be an amplification of the indestructible idea [of monasticism], fitted to, and developing from, the new conditions that confront society" (36). This logic of addition speaks both to the structure of Cram's concept

of history and to his personal life insofar as marriage and children were, for him, an addition to, not a replacement for, same-sex relationships.

Walled Towns' middle chapters constitute a fierce polemic against a progressive ideology of history, "the nineteenth century superstition that life proceeds after an inevitable system of progressive evolution, so defiant of history," in favor of a history structured by intervals (20). Here, he systematically elaborates his theory of historical change in terms of 500-year waves of civilizational rise and fall (Fig. 2.1):

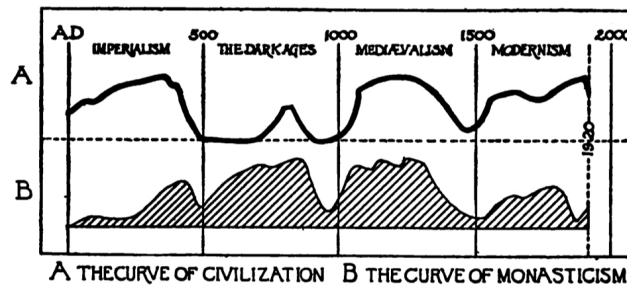


Fig. 2.1: Ralph Adams Cram's graph plotting the development of civilization against the development of monasticism in *Walled Towns* (1919), p. 33

These waves, similar but not precisely symmetrical, describe a temporality of simultaneous forward motion and backward resonance. Although time moves ever onward and historical circumstances always change, the similarities between different intervals allow the student of the past to gain historical wisdom. For Cram, that wisdom finds expression through creative imitation of heroic figures, especially saints like Benedict of Nursia. Rather than stranding monastic forms on the forgotten shores of the past, then, Cram's waves reactivate and add to those forms but do not altogether replace them. Monasticism endures to "transmute itself into new forms"; the type calls forth new antitypes in new historical intervals (*Gold* 14). Refreshing the sixth-century vision of St. Benedict just as he understood the tenth-century Cluniacs and the

sixteenth-century Jesuits to have done (*The Great Thousand Years* 35), Cram proposes a twentieth-century monasticism.

Walled Towns figures that monasticism at its most utopian. The book ends with a sketch of a new Walled Town called “Beaulieu” and a rousing call to imitate its scheme of social redemption (59). It opens with a pair of tableaux in which Cram juxtaposes an ideal medieval walled town against a grimy modern industrial suburb, taking the latter scene verbatim from his novella *The Decadent* (1893). A scandalous work that betrayed the influence of European Decadent writers—especially Joris-Karl Huysmans and Oscar Wilde—notorious for depicting and/or practicing sex between men, Cram’s book was originally published anonymously. Cram’s publisher Fred Holland Day, in a letter, referred to Cram’s writing *The Decadent* as “doing the Oscar” (qtd. in Shand-Tucci, *Boston Bohemia* 366). Compared with *Walled Towns*, *The Decadent*, written while Cram was a single man and a central figure in Boston’s fin-de-siècle cultural Bohemia, is almost unrelenting in its negativity.

A crucial text for a full understanding of Cram’s monastic vision, the novella, subtitled “The Gospel of Inaction,” depicts same-sex communal desire on monastic lines bent towards social catastrophe rather than social transformation.¹⁸ Malcolm McCann, a socialist, finds his former protégé Aurelian Blake gone luxuriantly to seed at Blake’s New England estate, called, in a reference to Dante, “Vita Nuova”—literally, “new life.”¹⁹ Inside Vita Nuova, dissolute young white men, attended by black men and a Japanese woman, lie about on couches in an opium haze, surrounded by books, paintings, and sculptures representative of both Eastern and Western cultural splendor. While the men in the story focus their overt sexual attentions on Shiratsuyu,

¹⁸ See Shand-Tucci, *Boston Bohemia* 35-46, 140ff.

¹⁹ Since this work chronicles Dante’s love for Beatrice, the name of the estate seems to re-inscribe the queer community of the estate within heteronormativity. But it’s interesting to note that, like the male-male desires intimated in *The Decadent*, Dante’s desire for Beatrice remains unconsummated, and is indeed dramatically transformed, as through monastic discipline, into love for God.

the Japanese woman, the novella erotically charges the relationships between Blake and his “brothers” through phallic imagery like this quivering, spurting snake:

[A] dark figure with closed eyes, swaying softly as it leaned forward . . . while the curtains closed, fell with a long sweep gently toward the brazier,—not as men fall, but as a snake with its head lifted high might advance slidingly, and as it came, droop lower and lower until it rested prone on the uncrushed flowers. So Enderby, heavy with the suave sleep of haschish, came among the smokers and dropped motionless in the midst of the cushions. The movement set a tall glass quivering until it fell to one side, and the yellow wine sank slowly into the silky fur of a leopard skin. (12)

The scene at Vita Nuova seems calculated for maximum outrage to the socialist McCann: exploitation along the lines of class, race, and sex, compounded by the accumulation of wealth and, worst of all, an atmosphere of amoral languor. But in its unproductiveness, inefficiency, and anachronism, Vita Nuova affronts the capitalist work ethic as much as the socialist sense of justice. Blake explains to McCann that he no longer considers socialist reform to “the system of the nineteenth century” radical enough (37). Rather than work to improve liberal capitalism, Blake preaches its passive destruction while preserving the beauties of the past against the present order’s demise. So he takes the monastics for his model:

Even as in the monasteries of the sixth century the wise monks treasured the priceless records of a dead life until the night had passed and the white day of mediævalism dawned on the world, so suffer me to dream in my cloister through evil days; for the night has come when man may no longer work. (41)

In its luxury and sensuality, though not in its languor (no vigorous nude swimming here), Vita Nuova prefigures the Caldey monastery that Cram would later frequent.

The book’s elaborate frontispiece underscores its status as a social icon for the reader’s contemplation (Fig. 2.2):



Fig. 2.2: Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue's frontispiece to *The Decadent* (1893) by Ralph Adams Cram. Courtesy of Falvey Memorial Library, Villanova University. (https://blog.library.villanova.edu/wp-content/archive/6/files/2012/07/i_1.jpg).

Designed by Bertram Goodhue (1869-1924), Cram's architectural partner and creative soulmate and "after some fashion, lover," it depicts Shiratsuyu attending Blake and Eveleth (Shand-Tucci *Boston Bohemia* 140). Cram is the model for Blake in the foreground; Goodhue is the model for Eveleth in the left background (Shand-Tucci *Boston Bohemia* 140).²⁰ Several elements of this image directly echo fifteenth-century Russian iconographer Andrei Rublev's famous representation of the Holy Trinity (Fig. 2.3).²¹

²⁰ Cram dedicated the book to "MEO CARO BGG": "My Dear **B**ertram **G**rosvenor **G**oodhue." Cram's Boston bohemian circle—including Day (1864-1933), a pioneering photographer as well as Cram's publisher, and the Catholic poet Louise Guiney (1861-1920)—knew exactly who wrote the anonymous novella and exactly to whom it was dedicated (Shand-Tucci, *Boston Bohemia* 35-46). With Day, Guiney, and Goodhue, Cram played at Jacobite monarchism and published a little magazine of neo-medievalist verse and essays called *The Knight Errant* while he worked up *The Decadent* for publication (Cram *My Life* 20). *The Knight Errant* ran for two issues in 1892. Cram contributed the publication's manifesto-like material and a pair of lyrics to the Virgin Mary.

²¹ The icon depicts the scene from Genesis 18 where Abraham entertains three angels at the oak of Mamre. Since Abraham addresses the angels by the personal name of God, the tetragrammaton "YHWH," early Christian



Fig. 2.3: Andrei Rublev's Holy Trinity (15th century). Public domain.
(<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0b/Angelsatmamre-trinity-rublev-1410.jpg>).

Three figures, dressed in flowing robes, occupy the three segments of both images. Depths are compressed in Goodhue's image as in Rublev's icon, drawing the three figures into strong lateral relationships. Two of Goodhue's figures' heads—Shiratsuyu's and Eveleth's—tilt downward in deference, while Blake's head looks up and out, clear-eyed, emphasizing the strong Cram chin. The angles of the figures' heads in Rublev's icon, too, show deference to the figure of the Father, seated at the left. A few supercharged symbolic elements rest in the immediate foreground of the frontispiece, in front of Blake's hammock—an elaborately bound book, a single flower, and a hookah, the smoke of which caresses Blake's head and wraps around Shiratsuyu, drawing the

interpreters took the scene to be hinting at the doctrine of the Trinity. The icon is a particularly interesting intertext for Cram's novella because in Genesis 18 Abraham pleads with the angels not to destroy the city of Sodom. Without delving into the long and vexed interpretation history of this section of Genesis, I will point out that Sodom's destruction turns on hospitality. In chapter 19, two angels are met with violence rather than Abrahamic welcome in Sodom, leading to the city's destruction despite Abraham's intercession.

pair together, before rising towards the ceiling. The book and the hookah are mentioned in the text: beautiful medieval volumes stock the Vita Nuova library, and *The Decadent* itself apes their appearance. A cross is just visible on the cover of the book pictured in the frontispiece; it stands for all the cultural riches of Catholic Europe. The hookah, like Shiratsuyu herself, whom its smoke embraces, represent an intoxicatingly lovely East. The flower isn't mentioned in the text. Shand-Tucci tells us that a single carnation was a coded emblem of love between men in the period (*Boston Bohemia* 142).

Like Rublev's icon, Goodhue's frontispiece is an image of hospitality—at least, after a fashion. It offers us a gracious host and a comfortable guest to look upon. However, at the center of the image, vying for attention with Blake, is the servant Shiratsuyu. Goodhue's frontispiece treats her with more humanity than the text does. In the image she is grossly orientalized and objectified (though, to be sure, Blake is also objectified), but in the text she is reduced to the status of mere decoration. Blake and Eveleth are seated, while Shirayatsu stands to serve. Rather than Rublev's image of equality, of mutual recognition in table fellowship, Goodhue and Cram construct an image of hierarchy. The medium of communion is vaporous intoxicant rather than Abraham's sacrificial meal. Instead of beauty, we have aestheticism; instead of mutual rest, we have the leisure of some powered by the labor of others. Where Rublev's icon offers an opening welcome to the viewer, Goodhue's image excludes the viewer: Blake's transverse position cuts the spectator out of the circle. *The Decadent* is finally an anti-icon, an outrageous act of symbolic sabotage.

The quasi-monastic community of *The Decadent* incarnates a sort of being toward destruction dialectically opposed to the “being toward reform” evident in Cram's later Caldey-

inspired monastic writings such as *The Great Thousand Years* and *Walled Towns*.²² Unlike the exemplary community of *Walled Towns*' Beaulieu, Vita Nuova recapitulates—in heightened, grotesque form—the social ills of the nineteenth-century order it condemns. Instead of by faith, the members of Vita Nuova's community are bound together by despair. To the extent that Aurelian Blake's decadent abbey symbolically concentrates the exploitative forces that threaten the idea of the social, *The Decadent* refuses the futurity of civilization—at least, in its industrial capitalist form. Even in *The Decadent*, however, Cram leavens his pessimism with hope. “Within my walls, which are the century-living pines,” Blake declares, “is the world of the past and of the future, of the fifteenth century and of the twentieth century” (41). Out of the death of the capitalist order—and out of the premodern past—will come the new life promised in the name of Blake's estate. But in *The Decadent*, that new life will come only through wholesale spiritual revolution, not piecemeal political improvement—messianic rupture, not steady progress.

The Decadent's negativity highlights what is at stake in the queerness of Cram's Benedictinism, even when he articulates it in a utopian register: the refusal to reproduce the sociopolitical status quo. For Cram, this status quo was defined by ever-increasing aspiration toward greater size and control; his most stinging epithet for modern Euro-American civilization was “imperial.” “For five hundred years there has been unbroken, cumulative progress towards the imperial scale in all things, and the perfection of this system was achieved during the first decade of the twentieth century,” he wrote in 1918, parodying St. Paul's famous paean to Faith, Hope, and Charity. “Imperial States, Imperial Finance, Imperial Industry rose triumphant over society, and the greatest of these was Imperial Finance” (*The Great Thousand Years* 63).

²² “Being towards reform” is the “content” of modern celibacy, according to Kahan (17).

Benedictine monasticism modeled “*communal life conceived in the human scale*” rather than the Imperial (63).

Cram’s appropriation of Christian monastic tradition enabled him to imagine human-scale communities of incarnate friendship where desire, directed but not destroyed by the discipline of chastity, participates in the renewal of all things. Although his Walled Towns integrate nuclear families and same-sex monastic communities side-by-side in a larger whole, they also police the boundary between them. In Beaulieu, “each family must maintain a separate house,” and “no multiple houses of any sort are permitted,” though the town includes “several conventual establishments” (71-72). As in Cram’s life, his writings leave the tension between normative and nonnormative forms of communal love unresolved. His thought is riven through by such paradoxes or contradictions. A handicraft renaissance and a guild system power the Walled Towns’ industry—though citizens also own small factories in common. Under the leadership of prophet heroes, each Walled Town is religiously unanimous—though they’re also voluntarily constituted. In a lecture on workers’ housing delivered in 1918, Cram maintained that “to live decently and in an environment that has some elements of attractiveness if not actual beauty” was a “natural right” of every person, whether proletarian or bourgeois (“Scrapping the Slums” 761).²³ That Cram considered beauty, but not the franchise, a universal right is typical of his political outlook. Though his criticism of modern life may be powerful, Cram’s vision appeals only to a privileged few.

²³ This lecture (and, indirectly, *Walled Towns*) drew on Cram’s experiences as the first Chairman of Boston’s City Planning Commission during the years of the Great War. He considered his improvements to immigrant workers’ housing in Boston’s North End his greatest accomplishment in city planning. In the lecture, Cram invokes the Dark Ages to prophesy the fate of a civilization that refuses to democratize beauty. This illustrates the historical texture of his medieval imagination. The Middle Ages were not, for Cram, a static Golden Age but a richly various span of cultural heights and depths.

2.3 Vida Scudder and Florence Converse: Wedded Sisters of St. Francis

In the summer of 1911, Vida Dutton Scudder wrote the preface to her book *Socialism and Character* (1912) while staying at the holy mountain of La Verna in Tuscany. It was while praying on the mountainside at La Verna that, in 1224, St. Francis of Assisi received the stigmata, co-suffering the wounds of Christ in his own body (Robinson). Scudder traveled with her companion Florence Converse, Converse's mother, a liberal-minded Italian baron, and the baron's Jewish-American wife. The pilgrims skipped the easy tourist's route and followed the saint's rocky path up the mountain—until that path proved too much for their automobile and they were forced to renounce the comfort of motorized conveyance. A farmer donated a donkey to the group, and the elderly Mrs. Converse rode bareback like Christ on his triumphal entry into Jerusalem while the rest climbed on foot. The next day, horses—styled in biblical idiom by Scudder as “four great white beasts”—towed the overwhelmed auto into La Verna (*On Journey* 315). The automobile shocked the friars; many had never seen such a machine before. Some called it sacrilege, others a miracle. The anecdote allegorizes one major argument of *Socialism and Character*: in order to reach holy heights, the forces of modernity needed help from premodern, even preternatural, powers. *Socialism and Character*'s particular melding of modern and medieval—political socialism and Catholic Christianity—was greeted as revelation by some, as heresy by others (Corcoran 8).²⁴

In the preface she composed at La Verna, Scudder navigated the difficult rhetorical challenge that *Socialism and Character* presented. Having recently left the comparatively comfortable precincts of social Christianity to join the Socialist Party of America, Scudder penned the book as a double apologia, commending socialism to her co-religionists and

²⁴ Often it wasn't greeted at all. Scudder later called *Socialism and Character* her “favorite though forgotten book” (*On Journey* 168).

defending Christianity to her comrades. Alienated on the one hand from socialists who considered religion the people's opiate and on the other from churchmen who thought socialism a demonic force, Scudder nevertheless thrilled at her act of solidarity. She spoke of herself as a proselytizing "convert to socialism" and painted her political choice as a leap of faith:

We have known what it is distrustfully to content ourselves with 'near-socialism'; to take refuge in timid platitudes concerning brotherhood and democracy; to assuage inward unrest by philanthropic zeal and social service. For us, for many, none of these things suffice. In full allegiance to political socialism, in alliance with the international socialist party, we find a satisfaction which they were powerless to afford, and it is a satisfaction we should like to share. (*Socialism and Character* vi)

"[T]he cost" of her leap to socialism, Scudder admitted, was "frankly speaking, not small," although she knew her adversities paled beside those of the working people on behalf of whom she agitated (vi). Because of her political views and activities, within the next year Scudder would resign from Denison House, the Boston settlement she had helped to found almost twenty-five years before, and endanger her job as professor of English at Wellesley College (Corcoran 7-8). When stigmatized for her new allegiance, Scudder looked to St. Francis for encouragement. But Francis' ecstatic agony at La Verna was more than just an example to Scudder. She believed that she could share with the saint in the "sacrificial passion" of Christ's sufferings, along with "all who would spend themselves for the world's need and rescue it from its sins by the very anguish of their penitence, following the Captain of their salvation" (*Socialism and Character* 365). In her social struggle, Scudder understood herself to be sacramentally bound across time and space to Christ, to St. Francis, and to her contemporary comrades.

Foremost among those comrades was Florence Converse, a New Orleans-born poet, novelist, and assistant editor at the *Atlantic Monthly* (Corcoran 109). Converse had been Scudder's student at Wellesley; she joined the work at Denison House and the prayer of Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross, and she went on to become, if anything, a more ardent

socialist than Scudder herself. From 1919, the two women shared a house in Wellesley together with their mothers and, occasionally, other housemates (Corcoran 108). Framed as an epistle dedicatory to Converse, her “Comrade and Companion,” Scudder’s preface to *Socialism and Character* publicly declared the love, socialist conviction, and Christian faith that she shared with Converse. This document was the central token in a lifelong exchange of book dedications between the two women (Maglin 18-19).

Throughout their careers, Scudder and Converse exploited the dedication’s paratextual function to publicize their love. “Dedicating a work is a public act that the reader is, as it were, called on to witness. A typically performative act . . . for in itself it constitutes the act it is supposed to describe” (Genette 134). As an act that “proclaims a relationship” between two people through the public performance of a witnessed utterance, a book dedication resembles nothing so much as a marriage (Genette 135).²⁵ Converse’s first novel, *Diana Victrix* (1897), ends with its two heroines, social activist Enid and author Sylvia, deciding to live together after having rejected marriage proposals from men. To seal their bond, Sylvia gives Enid a copy of her just-published novel. In the final line, Enid opens the book: “It was dedicated to her” (362).²⁶ Converse also dedicated her second novel, *The Burden of Christopher* (1900), to Scudder, who, in turn, dedicated *Socialism and Character* to her. A vow witnessed by her readers and sanctified by the presence of St. Francis, Scudder’s dedication cements their love to their socialist radicalism and Franciscan devotion.

²⁵ Here Genette relies implicitly on J. L. Austin. When Austin defined “performatives” as statements for which “the issuing of the utterance is the performing of the action” in *How to Do Things With Words* (1962), his chief example was the matrimonial “I do” (6).

²⁶ For more on Converse and *Diana Victrix*, see Kate McCullough, “The Boston Marriage as the Future of the Nation: Queerly Regional Sexuality in *Diana Victrix*,” *American Literature* 69.1 (1997): 67-103. The novel is briefly mentioned in Kahan’s *Celibacies* as well.

Yet this intense love was by Scudder's account chaste. And that chastity was not incidental but key to the sociability of their love, rendering their particular bond the nucleus of a wider structure of socially transformative desire. As Scudder puts it in her semi-autobiographical novel *A Listener in Babel* (1903), "the presence of all men" rather than "the presence of one exclusively beloved" was "the substance of her unconscious desires . . . The craving for joy of a whole race sorrowing and dispossessed throbbed . . . in her heart" (4). By Scudder's admission, Converse "entered the inmost region in my power to open" (*On Journey* 220).²⁷ But for her, the way to that "inmost region" was not through sex acts. Addressing her celibacy head-on, Scudder teases the reader of her autobiography with the "empty secret" of her sexuality.²⁸ "At this point the reader—if I have any—will immediately become less languid. He knows what to expect. He is now going—yes, you anticipate—he is going to hear about my Sex Life" (*On Journey* 210). By delaying gratification through interruption, Scudder's syntax builds up her reader's arousal. That very delay seems to promise erotic fulfillment, but Scudder ends in perpetual deferral: "I am sorry to disappoint" (210). She insists, humorously, that her own reticence on the matter of sex does not stem from prudery: "I am not squeamish and I don't think I am a prig . . . My imagination is immune from shock; but I do not see why one should pay so much attention to one type of experience in this marvelous, this varied, this exciting world" (211-12). Scudder's rhetoric of celibacy refuses to sublimate either her desire or her readers'. Instead, she recruits desire through her style before channeling it into the various and profound romance of activist friendship centered on, but not exclusive to, her relationship with Converse.

This poem is inscribed next to the preface on the flyleaf of Converse's personal copy of *Socialism and Character*:

²⁷ Scudder strongly implies that this most intimate friend is Converse without actually naming her.

²⁸ I take the phrase "empty secret" from Benjamin Kahan (3).

Lo, here is felowschipe;
 One fayth to holde
 One truth to speake,
 One wrong to wreke,
 One loving-cuppe to syppe,
 And to dippe
 In one disshe faithfullich
 As lambkins of one folde.
 Either for other to suffer alle thing.
 One song to sing
 In swete accord and maken melodye.
 Right so thou and I good-fellows be:
 Now God prosper thee and me. (qtd. in Corcoran 109-110)

The poem is signed “F.C. to V.D.S., V.D.S. to F.C., S.C.H.C.,” indicating the women’s initials and the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross (125n25).²⁹ It places the love of these two women in the wider context of Christian worship—particularly, of those worship practices that function as rituals of union, a theme the poem drums home by repeating the word “one” seven times. The poem references two methods for receiving the blood of Christ in the Eucharist: “to syppe” the “loving-cuppe” or “to dippe / in one dish,” via the intinction of the Host. The Eucharist is the quintessential rite of Christian union, forming worshipers into a body as they partake of the body of Christ. Congregational singing “in swete accord” likewise performs congregational unity by actively joining voices; singing appeals to the sense of hearing alongside the senses of sight and taste activated in the Eucharist. A determination to fight the injustice that prevents unity (“one wrong to wreke,” with “wreke” in the sense of avenge or make right) and a

²⁹ Though apparently written by Scudder to Converse in this context, the signature begins “F.C. to V.D.S.”—Converse to Scudder—and indeed the poem first appears in print as the anonymous dedication (“To”) in Converse’s novel *Long Will: A Romance* (1903). “Lo, here is felowschipe” was printed one last time by Converse as the dedicatory poem (“To Vida D. Scudder”) in her *Collected Poems* (1937). The same year, Scudder published her autobiography *On Journey*, which repeated *Socialism and Character*’s dedication to Converse as “Comrade and Companion.” By recapitulating earlier dedications, both of these books—in different ways the summation each woman’s career—crown the life-long circulations of a gift economy of devotion with the re-affirmation of their vows. Converse’s *Long Will* is a historical novel about William Langland, the fourteenth-century English author of *Piers Plowman*. Geoffrey Chaucer also appears as a character in the book. Significantly, Converse imagines Langland as a reform-minded Franciscan friar; *Piers Plowman*’s depiction of corrupt friars is infamous. The medieval scholar Lawrence Clopper argued for Langland as a reformist friar in “*Songes of Rechelesnesse*”: *Langland and the Franciscans* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1998).

willingness to suffer for the good of others flow naturally from these embodied practices of unification.

These practices fold the love of the couple into the worshiping community. The “here” where “felowschipe” is found is at once the space of intimate friendship (“two lambkins”) and the space of church community (“one folde”)—particularly the women’s community of the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross. “Felowschipe,” then, refers to a ritualized, sacramental love shared by the poem’s “thou and I” as well as by other worshipers. It is a love at once exclusive and inclusive, private and social. Articulated through the imagery of embodied liturgical practices—especially the Eucharist—“Lo, here is felowschipe” expresses a communal love of incarnate friendship which admits varying degrees of closeness or intensity, but places the friends on the same level of authority.

If in many ways this “felowschipe” sounds like a marriage, it most directly resembles the medieval Christian institution of liturgically consecrated same-sex “wedded brotherhood” that historians such as John Boswell and Alan Bray have brought to scholarly attention over the past 30 years (Bray 13-41). Boswell pioneered research into medieval Christian liturgies consecrating same-sex unions: “Passionate friendships, especially among paired saints and holy virgins, continued to exercise a fascination over the early Christians . . . and in time were transformed into official relationships of union, performed in churches and blessed by priests” (*Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* 280). While Boswell emphasizes the sexual potential of such relationships, Scudder’s defense of chaste friendship leads me to align her with Bray, for whom friendship “has a facticity all its own, is a direct challenge to the foundations of much work on the history of sexuality” (Davidson). Scudder likewise argues that friendship plays no second fiddle to sex, and contemporary readers should take her claim to celibacy seriously even while

recognizing the radical challenge to heteronormative scripts for womanhood that her vowed “felowschipe” to Converse poses. While it is unlikely that Scudder and Converse knew about the particular ceremonies for “wedded brotherhood” discovered by Boswell and others beginning in the 1980s, “Lo, here is felowschipe” intuits just such an historical possibility.

I read the poem’s adoption of morphological and orthographic conventions of Middle English as a stylistic form of “temporal drag”: at once “a crossing of time” akin to the transgression of gender boundaries and “a *productive* obstacle to progress, a usefully distorting pull backwards . . . a necessary pressure upon the present tense” (Freeman, “Packing” 728-29). This temporal drag registers a longing for the intimate and social possibilities of sacred history—like the institution of wedded brotherhood—and the desire to make the future in accordance with those possibilities. Explicit ecclesiastical recognition of their attachment was not available to Scudder and Converse in the Episcopal Church in the early twentieth century. Instead, they solemnized their bond through the sacrament of publishing.

Though this shift from medieval spoken liturgy to modern printed literature seems to betoken a process of cultural secularization, in this case literature actually becomes a vehicle for returning repressed aspects of religious tradition—that is, the Christian tradition of liturgically consecrated same-sex unions—to cultural consciousness. Scudder and Converse reimagine the medieval tradition of wedded brotherhood, first of all by claiming the tradition for women, otherwise unprecedented in the male-dominated archive of medieval liturgy. By writing in the vernacular rather than in ecclesiastical language, they add a further ahistorical twist. “Lo, here is felowschipe” enacts the historical fantasy of a socially-conscious medieval vernacular Christian

worship service that consecrates the love of two women for one another. In this wedded sisterhood, the spirit of the Church of the Carpenter returns in queer medieval form.³⁰

The populist bent exemplified by this vernacularization of medieval tradition is the key mark distinguishing Scudder's Franciscan vision of cultural renewal from Cram's Benedictinism. Her populism drew her away from the cloistered monastics and towards medieval icons of solidarity with common people, such as the farmer-Christ of *Piers Plowman* and, especially, the Franciscan friars. Scudder's Franciscan writings implicitly criticize Cram's neo-monasticism within a shared medievalist framework. In her major statement of social theory, *Socialism and Character* (1912), Scudder allows that "monasticism held distinct prophetic hints for socialists," especially its architectural and agricultural practices that fostered vital common life and labor (286). But monasticism serves as a faulty signpost for socialists in its reliance on "corporate segregation of elect individuals" (287). "The Franciscan movement, on the other hand, carries us out into the open" and away from the cloister; its "unworldliness and devotion [are] carried on spontaneously among normal men" (287). The early Franciscans abjured cloisters in favor of "the cloister of the whole wide world" because of their ethics of property, which Scudder considered the mendicant movement's greatest prophetic hint to modern radicals (*The Franciscan Adventure* 313). While monastics disclaimed private possessions, they sometimes held great wealth in common with their orders. However, St. Francis—and his more extreme followers, known as the Spiritual Franciscans—repudiated all property whatsoever. Scudder insists on the value of the Spiritual Franciscan ethic not because she believes common ownership of property to be wrong; she is, after all, a socialist. Rather, Scudder challenges the complacency

³⁰ Historian of lesbianism Martha Vicinus, in her book *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (2004), argues that many Victorian women, both within and outside of established churches, publicized and consecrated their romantic friendships via "neo-Christian rituals" (7-11, 85-108). Scudder and Converse differ from Vicinus' examples in both their medievalism and their socialism.

of a modern monastic imagination content to pursue true community for a select few but indifferent to injustice beyond the boundaries of the cloister, or the Walled Town.

Scudder dramatizes her quarrel with monasticism in her novel *Brother John: A Tale of the First Franciscans* (1927), in which a young English lord abandons his wealth and privilege to become a friar and later dies in prison, a victim of the persecution of the Spiritual Franciscans. Soon after joining the friars, John visits his uncle, the subprior of a Benedictine monastery, who is appalled that his nephew has “joined a company of lazy vagabonds” (30). When John examines his surroundings, “the contrast between the noble Benedictine monastery and the mean little [Franciscan] house he had left at Exeter flashe[s] through his mind. To be frank, the monastery smelled clean” (30). His defiance flaring, John asks his uncle to consider which of their vocations is more Christ-like:

Your community is rich and strong. You are sheltered; I would follow One who was shelterless. You are fed; I would be one with all the hungry. You live secure in this fat and pleasant priory; my new brothers wander over the world, ignorant of security, sharing the common lot, begging their way or earning it by their labor (33).

Here we are equally distant from either pole of Cram’s Benedictine dialectic—the decadent abbey Vita Nuova or the Walled Town Beaulieu. Brother John would condemn the former for its pleasant riches and the latter for its isolated strength.

Nevertheless, as with Cram’s monasticism, Scudder’s Franciscan mendicancy signifies both negativity and utopia. In *Brother John*, negativity takes the mystical name of “naughting,” releasing the soul from all attachments to achieve union with God in Nothingness (311-23). The elective poverty of John and his fellow friars is part and parcel of this spiritual practice of detachment. But in the narrative, “naughting” also looks like an attachment, a practice that anticipates utopia: when John and his brothers chant the litany of naughting, they cavort in fields, pick flowers, and dance hand in hand. Unlike Cram’s built-to-last walled towns, Scudder’s

utopia is fleeting, carried in human relationships and constituted by gestures, as when John kisses the cord of a habit that once belonged to Francis and declares, “I am henceforth of your fellowship, my brothers” (27). Such gestures, as José Muñoz argues, open onto “the not-yet-here,” always promised eschatological social possibilities that never fully arrive (90-91). Nor does utopia ever fully arrive in *Brother John*. Told in flashbacks from John’s prison cell, the novel’s form foregrounds defeat and refuses narrative progress (Markwell 233-34). For Scudder, however, a utopia deferred ensures the perpetual pilgrimage of the radical conscience. Indeed, she rejected cloistered partial utopias like Cram’s Walled Towns because she hoped for the total transformation of the social order rather than enclaves of religious community.

Vida Scudder never wavered in her conviction that the broken-down automobile of industrialism could climb the holy mountain with a little help. Early in her career, she believed that the motor of social evolution alone could do the trick, but later she came to believe that the great white beasts of social revolution would have to drag it. For a brief period, Scudder countenanced revolutionary violence as a regrettable political necessity, but her Franciscan studies helped her to imagine a nonviolent “Christian Revolution” to which she dedicated her labors from the late 1920s forward (*On Journey* 302-306, 328-329). Cram, for his part, would leave the automobile behind in the Tuscan dust, at most raiding it for a few parts. He could only conceive of rebuilding the social order after catastrophe, not of changing it. Scudder’s Franciscanism reflects her—presumptuous, perhaps—desire to identify with the working poor as well as her radical demand for total social transformation. Cram had no interest in identifying with the poor, and he believed that liberal capitalism could only be transformed through withdrawal into voluntary separatist communities that would school the rest of the world in human flourishing. His Benedictinism was an elitist aesthetic project: craft a beautiful image of

community to oppose the “Iron City” of industrial America (Cram, Preface vii).³¹ Scudder’s Franciscanism was a populist ethical project: live simply in the secular world as a present sign of contradiction against that world’s principalities and powers. Despite these differences, medieval sacred history provided both authors with a grammar of dissent from the normative progress narratives of political-economic and sexual development.

2.4 Sacred History and Utopia

Through literature, Cram and Scudder blur the traditional Christian distinction between secular and religious vocations—between the calling to live and work in the world of temporal concerns and the calling to live and work in communities devoted to prayer. This renegotiation of boundaries both resists and accommodates secularization. By modeling worldly life on the religious, Cram and Scudder reclaim, at the level of social imagination, some of religion’s lost turf. In another sense, their secular monasticisms testify to the loss, in modern Western culture, of a theological rationale for life peculiar to the world of temporal affairs. Still, their religious response to secularization differs crucially from recent critical accounts of the postsecular that envision religion as persistent but fragmented, hollowed out, or marginalized by secularization.³² As such, these writers offer a starting point for a new genealogy of the postsecular. Postsecular narratives of splintered faith need to be supplemented by accounts of faith as the desire and pursuit of the whole. Such treatments will necessarily attend to traditional forms of religious

³¹ In *No Place of Grace*, Lears notes the “aesthetic” quality of Cram’s critique of capitalism (205).

³² To take two examples whose terms of analysis overlap most pertinently with my own: The trope of Benedictine monastic community is crucial to John McClure’s *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fictions in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (2007) (21, 164-165). Unlike Christian monasteries, however, McClure’s postmodern collectives practice “open dwelling”: “a form of communion no longer dependent on absolute conviction and doctrinal conformity” but rather on “weak religion” (*Partial Faiths* 5; 12; 192-196). McClure sees this weakened faith as a necessary rejoinder to a dangerous Christian fundamentalism (*Partial Faiths* 4). On this account, monasticism only becomes postsecular when it is detached from specific creedal and ecclesiastical commitments. Joanna Brooks argues that “creative heterodoxies” offer welcome historiographical alternatives to “the old teleological, developmental narrative that runs from orthodoxy to secularization” (449). One of my aims here is to show that there might be such a thing as a creative orthodoxy, too, that could offer a revelatory new religious-literary narrative.

belief. Full-orbed faith, like Cram's or Scudder's, may have political perils, but it also possesses extraordinary resources for radical social imagination.

Cram and Scudder crystallized their social criticisms and social hopes in medieval-inspired images of same-sex communal love sustained by Christian belief and practice. The normative pressure of reproductive heterosexuality on the loves that each nurtured pushed them toward times and social forms in which they could imagine their affections would be welcome. They turned to the monastics in the hope of inaugurating new forms of life imbued with the virtues, eclipsed in capitalist modernity, that they glimpse in their contemplations of the past. And they realized, in partial yet profound ways, these new-old forms of life for themselves. If in many ways Cram wanted to turn back the clock on modernity, Scudder reminds us that hours marked by prayer are permeable to the future as well as the past—to utopia as well as sacred history. Both in their literary works and their lives, the histories of sexuality, social thought, and religion that they discern come together in the unique intellectual formation of a queer, socialist, orthodox Christianity. In our current moment—a time of legal milestones marking increased mainstream acceptance of the rights of queer people, of renewed public debate on socialism, and of heightened attention to religion across academic and intellectual discourses—that formation deserves this closer look.

The sacramental socialisms of Cram and Scudder inaugurate the tradition this dissertation recovers of modern American writers whose sustained engagements with the sacred past fund radical critiques of their industrial capitalist present and give shape to their social hopes for the future. Indeed the social icons of their monastic writings challenge the very pastness of this past by acknowledging its continuing exemplary force in the present. This tradition has its roots in Anglo- and Roman Catholic social theologies whose most important early reception point in

America was in the circle of turn-of-the-twentieth-century Anglican/Episcopal socialist intellectuals, of which Cram and Scudder were the literary luminaries. Some of those who carried on this tradition were likewise Anglo-Catholics, including two great transatlantic poets who doubled as penetrating social essayists: T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden. Situating these men in the radical-traditionalist line of Cram and Scudder, I'll argue, puts pressure on the narratives of conservative religious decline that often attach to their careers. In the next chapter, I give reasons why we should hear a radical call for full employment in the midst of the Depression—"A Church for all / and a job for each / Every man to his work" (I.90-92)—in Eliot's pageant-play *The Rock* (1934). Likewise, in Chapter 3, I argue we should see Auden's Christian conversion as a transformation of, rather than a total break with, the Leftist politics of his early period.

Nevertheless, beginning in the 1930s, Anglo-Catholicism ceased to exert such a strong attraction for U. S. literary types who sought to unite sacrament and social justice. At least two factors contributed to this shift by erasing Anglo-Catholicism's distinctiveness vis-a-vis other Christian traditions. The first factor is chronicled by Mark Thomas Edwards in his 2012 book *The Right of the Protestant Left*. Mainline ecumenical Protestant intelligentsia of all denominations, he shows, disappointed with the thinness of Social-Gospel-era Protestant liberalism, discovered a Catholic and liturgical consciousness, and this discovery inflected their worship, their politics, and their forms of thought. Anglo-Catholics were no longer the only game in town for those seeking a socially-conscious middle way between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. H. Richard Niebuhr's writings are a great example of this Protestant catholicizing tendency: for instance, nineteenth-century Anglican socialist F. D. Maurice is the

hero of Niebuhr's landmark *Christ and Culture* (1951).³³

But by time of the Great Depression, many were no longer seeking a middle way between Catholic and Protestant. Al Smith's 1928 presidential candidacy signaled Roman Catholics' move towards the American mainstream. In 1934, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin founded the Catholic Worker Movement and its associated newspaper, which became the heart of what historian James T. Fisher calls the "American Catholic Counterculture," sustained mainly by the intellectual energies of adult converts. The Workers' movement was, among other things, a literary enterprise. As I'll argue in the next two chapters, Day and Maurin are important writers in their own right, and the movement drew a number of other authors into its orbit, including Auden and Claude McKay. This counterculture incubated the midcentury flowering of U. S. Catholic literature by Flannery O'Connor, J. F. Powers, Thomas Merton, and, most important for my purposes, Walker Percy, whose debts to Catholic radicalism I outline in Chapter 4.

The collapse of liberal capitalism in the Great Depression and the attendant rise of fascism lent fresh urgency to the tasks of social critique and social imagination. These pressures pushed many writers to the far Left, but the official Communist antipathy to religion made straightforward partisanship difficult for writers of faith, however disappointed by liberalism and repelled by fascism. In the 1930s, sacred history became an invaluable resource for articulating a Christian antiliberal antifascism, a mode of critique that took on the rhetoric of orthodoxy and heresy as its characteristic form. While Cram and Scudder were turning to the reflective mode of autobiography at the ends of their respective careers, a younger (but by no means any longer young) generation of Christian literary intellectuals, including Eliot and Day, launched

³³ Historian Thomas F. Jackson has also shown recently, in *From Civil Rights to Human Rights* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), that Martin Luther King, Jr., as a Baptist minister, is an important inheritor of Scudder's Christian Socialist tradition within liberal Protestantism. As I expand revise this dissertation project towards publication, I am anxious to trace that genealogy in a new chapter.

backwards-looking manifestos that sought utopia in sacred history once more.

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Chapter 3:

The Ways of Orthodoxy:

The Christian Antimodernisms of John Crowe Ransom, T. S. Eliot, and Dorothy Day in the Great Depression

*A Church for all
and a job for each
Each man to his work.*

.
O Father we welcome your words,
And we will take heart for the future,
Remembering the past.

—T. S. Eliot, “Choruses from ‘The Rock’” (1934)

In an April 1929 review of T. S. Eliot’s essay collection *For Lancelot Andrewes*, the critic Edmund Wilson (1895-1972) noted a troubling trend among his literary contemporaries. These writers were unaccountably given to imagination, always conjuring up impossible visions “in which they can allow their minds to take refuge from the perplexities and oppressions about them” (Wilson 439). Wilson takes to task Ezra Pound’s “medieval Provence” and John Dos Passos’ “class-conscious proletariat” along with the Southern Renaissance delusion of the antebellum South (440). Even H. L. Mencken is vulnerable to the charge of fabulism; for him, the ideal is “a sort of German university town, where people drink a great deal of beer and devour a great many books” (439). Emdash-ing and exclaiming, Wilson rams these writers’ visions with ironic “if only” clauses. He saves Eliot for last, the *coup de grâce*: “T. S. Eliot’s...is a world of seventeenth-century churchmen, who combine the most scrupulous conscience with the ability to write good prose—if it were only not so difficult nowadays for men who are capable of becoming good writers to accept the Apostolic Succession!” (440). The intent of such sentences is to run fantasies aground on rough reality. The sailing image is Wilson’s: “New York, in particular, just now, is like the great glass mountain of the *Arabian Nights*, against

which the barques of young writers are continually coming to grief” (440). A reef of skyscrapers, New York becomes a synecdoche for the modern American reality these writers ignore at their peril. For part of the problem with these writers is that they look to Europe for cultural wisdom, and in so doing stand athwart historical progress. “Europe itself is becoming more and more like America every day,” Wilson concludes, and “it is up to American writers to try to make some sense of their American world—for their world is now everybody’s world” (440).

It was in the preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928), the book under review, that Eliot infamously declared his allegiance to classicism in literature, royalism in politics, and Anglo-Catholicism in religion, with a pithiness he came later to regret. Wilson assures his readers that such a viewpoint has nothing to offer modern ills. Under Manhattan’s glass mountain, he could see clearly what the London fog must have obscured for Eliot: the signal modern realities of democracy and religious pluralism undercut any moral authority to which a royalist and high-churchman pretended. Secular intellectuals, Wilson writes, are instead thrown back “for our new ideals on a study of contemporary reality and the power of our own imaginations”—as long as those imaginations are applied only to the aforementioned contemporary reality (441). Wilson lays out his judgments with the cool assurance of his cultural authority, slipping into the first-person plural at the end of his essay. His review set the tone for the puzzled, dismissive reception of Eliot’s post-conversion critical output. Eliot, however, was not alone in turning to religion at the end of the 1920s. The evidence for this shared turn is right in Wilson’s essay. Beneath his ebullient confidence in the secular metropolis, Wilson indeed seems bothered by the encroachments of the City of God.

This is to say that the problem for Wilson, and his review’s greater *raison d’être*, is just how many writers—some of them capable, even, of good prose—in fact found it in them to

believe in the apostolic succession in the last days of the roaring decade. In Eliot, Wilson “recognizes a point of view which is by way of becoming fashionable among certain sorts of literary people,” though usually with more “sentiment” and less “real and living belief” than Eliot evinces (437). The twentieth-century renaissance of Thomas Aquinas’ philosophy, typified by French Catholics Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson, troubles Wilson (438). He derides poet, novelist, and filmmaker Jean Cocteau’s recent Catholic conversion, which occurred under Maritain’s counsel (439). Wilson’s essay constructs a secular literary mainstream beset by a befuddling crosscurrent of newfound traditional Christianity. But Wilson is unsure whether to pay this resurgent religious tendency the compliment of refutation or to content himself with its easy dismissal.

Precisely six months after Wilson published his review of *For Lancelot Andrewes*, the stock market crashed. The onset of the Depression made the search for more sustainable forms of community, for alternatives to liberal capitalism, into a live issue of practical life, not a mere diversion for windy fabulists. “The future is as blank in the United States today as the situation is desperate,” Wilson wrote in a January 1931 editorial for the *New Republic* (530). In the same article, even that most hard-headed and realistic of critics made clear that he had joined his fantasies to those of Dos Passos, calling in a frankly “utopian” fashion for “socialism” (529). The dire economic context, where the need for new social ideals was felt so acutely, lent fresh urgency to efforts to imagine new forms of art and life. Wilson’s turn to a European-inflected utopian social imagination makes the writers he condemned in his review of *For Lancelot Andrewes* look prescient by comparison. In this respect, T. S. Eliot was an exemplary Christian antimodernist who looked to sacred history to shape the blank future described by Wilson.

Eliot's Anglo-Catholic conversion connected him to a larger wave of American religious intellectuals who, in their disgust with modern capitalist society, turned to European Christendom in order to imagine other forms of life. As we have seen in Chapter 1, the Anglo-Catholic writers Vida Scudder and Ralph Adams Cram looked back to the European Middle Ages, conceived imaginatively, for what I'm calling social icons: images of community that speak to the anomie attending what the historian Jackson Lears calls the loss of "larger loyalties outside the self" under industrial capitalism (xix). Lears identifies this turn to the religious past with American antimodernism, and he traces it through thinkers working at the end of the nineteenth and into the first two decades of the twentieth century. Where Wilson saw only acedia, Lears sees critical vitality: "[F]ar from encouraging escapist nostalgia, antimodern sentiments not only promoted eloquent protest against the limits of liberalism but also helped to shape new modes of cultural authority for the oncoming twentieth century" (6). Antimodern energies were unruly, and Lears shows how they motivated fascism and therapeutic liberalism as well as more communitarian ideologies. But at its best, antimodernism preserved "a vein of deep religious longing...an enduring witness against the flatulent pieties of our progressive creed" (Lears 58). Like Lears, and unlike Wilson, I see great potential in the antimodern imagination, agreeing that "the most powerful critics of capitalism have often looked backward rather than forward" (Lears xx). But where Lears argues that by the 1920s, antimodernism had been incorporated into and neutralized by a later stage of capitalism—consumer capitalism—I argue that the Depression decade revitalized antimodern dissent.

The particular form of antimodernism that I consider here is one that draws on the resources of Christian sacred history to articulate its criticism of the liberal capitalist order. It is a mode of Christian antiliberalism as well as American antimodernism. The American religion

scholar Jason C. Bivins defines “Christian antiliberalism” as a “mode of critical action” that “self-consciously uses religious protest—rituals, symbols, narratives, and communities grounded in Christian traditions—to denounce features of American liberalism as it is understood by the practitioners” (Bivins 3). Christian antiliberalism cuts across the political grain. Antiliberalism does not equal conservatism; for Bivins, religious protests on the Left or Right are equally capable of calling “into question the very legitimacy of the [liberal] system” (9).³⁴ When I use the term “Christian antimodernism” throughout this chapter, I mean to invoke both Lears’ American antimodernism and Bivins’ Christian antiliberalism.

This chapter drills down into the literary and intellectual history of the 1930s, the central decade in the story this dissertation tells about the literary development of American Christian radical thought. It shows how the turn-of-century medievalist socialism of Cram and Scudder was inherited and transformed into an elitist mode by Eliot and an anarchist mode by Dorothy Day’s Catholic Worker movement. I pursue this latter trend into the next chapter, which also takes Catholic Worker writers for its subject. The present chapter also introduces, through a discussion of John Crowe Ransom’s social criticism, a Southern Protestant antimodernist tradition. This tradition cross-pollinated with Day’s Left Catholicism in the thought of Walker Percy, and, as I show in Chapter 4, this combination influenced his approach to the Civil Rights movement. What principally tied Roman and Anglo-Catholic antimodernisms together with

³⁴ Bivins places his account in a different historical frame from my own, contending that “Christian antiliberalism is most distinctively a response to the religious and political watershed of the 1960s” (9). Though I would dispute Bivins’ claim that the Catholic Worker movement of the 1930s represents a less total rejection of the liberal order than the post-sixties movements he analyzes, I take his point that the sixties changes things for Christian modes of critique. The “dramaturgical public style” of Bivins’ case studies, for instance, is a striking development in Christian antiliberal critical practice, though the dramatic rhetorical poses assumed by the thirties writers I consider here presage this sixties dramaturgical style (9).

Southern Protestant antimodernism in the 1930s was a shared theological vocabulary of orthodoxy.³⁵

Christian antimodernists in the 1930s developed the discourse of orthodoxy—which construes religion as historically and creedally specific, as the beliefs and practices of a particular community, i.e. the Christian church—as a fit idiom for the social criticism of atomized modernity, a grammar for articulating an antiliberal politics. Orthodoxy, in this sense, was anticommunist and antifascist as well as antiliberal; it emerged during the Depression years as a kind of political “fourth way.” As a tool of political rhetoric, the discourse of orthodoxy allowed Christian antimodernists to construe liberalism, fascism, and communism as “heresies” against which their communitarian alternatives claimed theological superiority. This invocation of orthodoxy had religious stakes in addition to its political ones. Christian antimodernists largely rejected the American Protestant heritage in favor of self-consciously liturgical traditions such as Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, which emphasize the visible church community and its public worship practices. The public and ecclesial character of orthodoxy distinguished these antimodernist critics from the technocratic moralism of Protestant liberals, for whom the liberal (American) state had largely superseded the Christian church as the site of God’s redemptive work in the world. The discourse of orthodoxy also distinguished these critics from the private moralism of Protestant fundamentalists, who had little to say about social and economic structures and instead focused their preaching on vice and conversion. In the 1930s, orthodoxy limned the radical middle pioneered by traditionalist socialists Cram and Scudder.

When Christian antimodernists claimed to be orthodox, however, they did so ironically, because

³⁵ These various Christian antimodernisms were bound by personal and institutional connections as well as discursive ones. Eliot and Scudder were both involved in Anglo-Catholic and ecumenical gatherings of religious intellectuals to debate social problems throughout the 1930s. White Southern writers Alan Tate and Caroline Gordon, eventual Catholic converts who were married for two different periods, form a central node of personal connection between Maritain, Ransom, Eliot, Day, and Percy.

their orthodoxy named not an actually regnant political or religious ideology but the idiosyncratic protest of a minority.

The implicit task taken up by Christian antimodernist critics such as Eliot, Day, and Ransom in the 1930s was to construct social icons fit for the Great Depression. From the materials of the religious past, they assembled an image or set of images to lend concreteness to their social criticism, a vision against which to measure the deficiencies of the present and towards which to strive in the future. This image of religious community inherent in “orthodoxy” functioned much as the image of socialism did for Lewis Coser and Irving Howe in the 1950s, when they wrote in *Dissent* magazine that “*Socialism is the name of our desire*...it is a vision which objectifies and gives urgency to...criticism of the human condition in our time” (“Images of Socialism” 83). (It is significant in this regard that Coser and Howe were riffing on a phrase of Tolstoy’s: “God is the name of my desire.”) This is to say that for Christian antimodernists in the 1930s, orthodoxy discourse constituted an aesthetic, both exceeding and preceding discursive formulation—a kind of prolegomena to politics rather than a fully formed political theory. The aesthetic both mediates and complicates the relationship between the religious and the political; the social icon disrupts simple translations of religious dogma into political doctrine and frustrates easy classifications of particular writers into theological schools or political ideologies. There is no direct passage from theological conservatism to political conservatism, nor vice versa for liberalism. There is instead a shadowy middle realm where religious belief and practice become metaphor before becoming political conviction. This imaginative process often gets left out of accounts of religion and politics in the twentieth century. It is perhaps unsurprising that writers of imaginative literature with deep religious and political concerns—poets in particular—best illustrate the importance of this aesthetic borderland. At the point of the aesthetic translation

of the religious into the political, literary scholarship can demonstrate the necessary complexity of turning religious experience into collective action.

Edmund Wilson's review of *For Lancelot Andrewes* illustrates what happens when this complexity is discounted. Wilson rightly points out the difficulty posed by religious pluralism to the critic with definite religious convictions, and he warns against the naïve romanticizing of any past epoch as a golden age. But the failure of imagination in the essay is Wilson's, not T. S. Eliot's. Wilson reads Eliot's creedal pronouncement of classicism, royalism, and Anglo-Catholicism with the grim literality of a six-day creationist, neglecting the aesthetic and metaphorical dimension of Eliot's religious criticism. I argue instead that Eliot's seemingly stodgy declaration is actually a gesture of revolt, a mini-manifesto, a cry "launched in the anterior future...a hope, a claim, a pose, a desire" (Puchner 24). Eliot's declaration attempts to bring into being a mode of resistance that doesn't yet exist; it's not an uncomplicated call to return to the past. Edmund Wilson relies on a false opposition between imagination and tradition when he restricts imagination's diet to a meager ration of "contemporary reality." Why shouldn't imagination draw sustenance from the richer fare of historical fantasy when conceiving social relations otherwise? Tradition is imagination's contrary collaborator, not its sworn enemy, for traditions themselves are not given but must be constantly imagined anew.

This chapter examines the reimagination of tradition in Christian antimodernist social criticism by examining a variety of texts from the 1930s by three authors: John Crowe Ransom's book *God Without Thunder: An Unorthodoxy Defense of Orthodoxy* (1930), a quirky intervention in the religion-science debate staged on the terrain of economics, as well as his contributions to *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930); T.S. Eliot's theological criticism, especially *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (1934) and

“Catholicism and International Order” (1933); and Dorothy Day’s early articles for *The Catholic Worker* (1933-1936). All three writers deploy the discourse of orthodoxy to criticize modern industrial capitalist society in similar ways. They sketch social icons, expressive of desire more than doctrine, beginning the work of imagining a new political order. (In Dorothy Day, however, we do glimpse some distinctive political *practices* in addition to images and ideas.) Formally and stylistically, this sketchy, politically desirous quality emerges most clearly when these writers use the projective style of the manifesto.

Developing their images of community from the religious past, these writers follow a logic of typology borrowed from biblical hermeneutics. Strictly defined as a method of Christian interpretation that construes events, institutions, and people from the Hebrew Bible/Christian Old Testament as foreshadowings of New Testament realities, typology has also functioned from the Puritans forward in American writing as a means by which biblical precedent directs and authorizes contemporary politics. As Emory Elliott writes, “applied more liberally and figured more broadly [than in biblical hermeneutics], typology expanded into a more elaborate verbal system that enabled an interpreter to discover biblical forecasts of current events. Thus, the Atlantic journey of the Puritans could be an antitype of the Exodus of the Israelites; and the New England colony, a New Zion, to which Christ may return to usher in the Millennium” (188). After independence, American nationalism took up this typological logic and figured the United States as a New Israel or as, in Herman Melville’s words, a “political Messiah” (qtd. in Cavanaugh *Migrations* 91). “[I]n the late nineteenth century,” the theologian William Cavanaugh argues, “it became increasingly common to wed biblical notions of providence to the progress of the world toward American-style democracy and free-market capitalism” (*Migrations* 92). At the same time, nineteenth-century religious radicals rejected typological nationalism and attempted

to incarnate “the Primitive Christian Church” in communitarian alternatives to the state in places like Oneida (“Oneida Community”).

However, for Ransom, Eliot, and Day, typology allows them to think politics outside the boundaries of the American nation-state, in contrast to the nationalist usage of typology in American political theology. The crisis of capitalism and the breakdown of the ideology of Americanized progress during the Depression made legible alternative modes of political typology which rejected the American nation-state as antitype and were anticapitalist in spirit. All three of these writers were well placed by biographical circumstance to look askance at American nationalism. Ransom’s loyalty ran regionally to the South against the nation; Eliot became a British subject in 1927; Day was both a Roman Catholic convert when Catholicism was, in historian James Terence Fisher’s phrase, “a sign of contradiction,” and a devotee of the down-and-out dregs of American society (1). At the same time, unlike nineteenth-century religious radicals, these Christian antimodernists did not reject postbiblical history as a mistake. Instead, they drew their ideals from a more proximate past than the New Testament. In the history of biblical interpretation, the type is an inexhaustible form that gives shape to history over and over again through multiple fulfillments. For example, the Puritans would have recognized the Babylonian exile and return, the resurrection of Jesus, and the Reformation, as well as their own Atlantic journeys, as antitypes of the Exodus, and they would have expected further fulfillments of the Exodus type in the future. The typological logic of their social icons offered Christian antimodernists not a static ideal from the past, not a golden age to recreate, but a fertile and precedented political form. As in the case of Vida Scudder, when Dorothy Day looked back to the Middle Ages, it wasn’t because she saw medieval Europe as the last word on

the good society. Rather, she sought to realize medieval forms in a distinctly modern way, to instantiate a modern fulfillment of the medieval.

By grounding their social criticism in religious tradition, all three writers invited the sort of challenges raised by Edmund Wilson: How can an antiliberal political vision gain traction in a democratic society? And what does a religiously specific social ideal have to offer to a religiously plural culture? Where Wilson saw these challenges as points of dismissal, I construe them here as interpretive and practical problems. Ransom's response to the problem of pluralism exhibits some bad faith; he attempts to shore up the cultural authority of traditional Christianity with apologetics, even while admitting his own declining faith. Speaking in a British context of a legally-established church, Eliot emphasizes orthodoxy as a matter of culture rather than belief. He accords the power of inculcating and enforcing a Christian culture to an imagined Christian State. Day negotiates the problems of democracy and pluralism by totally rejecting the State, with its powers of coercion, as the institution by which to realize her social ideals, favoring instead the church, especially as incarnated in local Catholic Worker communities.

Taking the mutual constitution of religious and political meaning seriously can shake up our conceptions of the political alignments of Day, Ransom, and Eliot. Ransom and Eliot are generally considered incorrigible conservatives; Day's bona fides as a woman of the Left, on the other hand, are unquestioned. Yet Ransom/Eliot and Day only appear to be on different political teams when we subject them to a secularizing hermeneutic that makes the political, shorn of any transcendent significance, the ultimate horizon of meaning. The political thus becomes the key by which to decipher other forms of meaning, a master language into which the religious or the aesthetic must be translated. By recontextualizing these three writers in a tradition of Christian antimodernist social criticism, and by focusing on the aesthetic as mediator between the religious

and the political, I bring to light aspects of their politics that don't map neatly onto the Left-Right spectrum. Ransom, Eliot, and Day authored profound religious-social-aesthetic critiques of industrial capitalist modernity, flouting the Marxian dictum that all criticism begins with the criticism of religion. To read them for their guidance as well as for their limitations—for what they have to say of utopia as well as for their ideology—is only to read them dialectically. It is also to read them charitably.

3.1 John Crowe Ransom's Marginal Orthodoxy

In some ways, John Crowe Ransom's career embodies the process of secularization. "I am the son of a theologian, and the grandson of another one, but the gift did not come down to me," he avers in the "letter of apology" prefaced to *God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy* (ix). His father indeed was a Methodist minister, a pillar of the Southern Protestant establishment. Ransom became a soldier, a poet, and later a critic and a professor—immensely influential in the last two roles as a model and mentor to many midcentury American writers. As one generation of Ransoms gave way to another, they instantiated a larger cultural changing of the guard. While his father was a member of the clergy, John Crowe Ransom was a member of the new secular clerisy, one of the unsanctified sages of the modern world.

On the other hand, in his early work Ransom was always pushing back against secularizing forces. He was a peculiarly and ambivalently God-besotted writer, from his 1919 collection *Poems About God* until the 1940s, by which time Ransom had distanced himself from his Southern Protestant heritage (Quinlan 4).³⁶ A counter-secular logic inheres in Ransom's early

³⁶ On this score, Kieran Quinlan's book *John Crowe Ransom's Secular Faith* (1989) too often reads Ransom's late secularism back into his early career. Quinlan naturalizes Ransom's late secularism as the maturation of his philosophical outlook, but the ideological assumption of Quinlan's argument—that religiosity is a kind of intellectual adolescence—is just the sort of thing I wish to challenge in this chapter. In the thirties, it was far from clear that Ransom's development would take a secular turn, and his earlier, more religious work may be a richer legacy than his later, quasi-scientific approach to criticism.

material, launching out from institutionalized scientific expertise back toward the unmolested mystery of Creation. As a professor, Ransom points away from the institution of the university to the activity of the critic. As a critic, he points away from the critic's analyses to the poem's "desperate ontological or metaphysical manoeuvre" ("Criticism, Inc."). As a poet, he points toward the "inexhaustible fullness or particularity" of the details of the world, which is for him "the body and manifestation of an inscrutable God" (*God Without Thunder* 68). Ransom had a peculiar vantage from which to contest secularization as an English professor and man of letters. He wasn't quite one of the technocratic social scientists that Eugene McCarragher identifies as the new moral arbiters of therapeutic consumer culture (14-15). But neither was he a priest of the old faith. The early Ransom saw it as his duty in this in-between vocation to uphold the claims of mystery against the too-clear vision of the social scientists, and for this purpose he creatively appropriated the authority of Christianity.

Taking Ransom's reputation-making critical output of the 1930s as a whole, we can see that its keynote is a rebuke of industrial modernity on behalf of the religious past. His Agrarian writings look back to the Old South in search of a religious sensibility; it is the religiousness of the past that makes the past particularly valuable to Ransom. Even his early articulation of a New Criticism that preserves the poem's unique ontological status engages directly with secular historiography by resisting the secularization of literature, making the poem an arena of transcendent readerly experience rather than an artifact to be explained away by historically-trained experts. Ransom's 1937 essay "Criticism, Inc." marks an important turning point in this respect, for even while it seeks to shield the poem from professorial historical explainers, it delivers poetry to a new class of technical experts versed in the complexities of literary form. Ransom's model here is explicitly industrial (the "Inc." in "Criticism, Inc."). Applied science,

always art's foe in his earlier work, had by 1937 become criticism's older brother, regarded with jealous admiration.

Ransom's earlier religious criticism, the key text of which is *God Without Thunder*, published in 1930—the same year as the much more well known Agrarian collection *I'll Take My Stand*, which Ransom edited—took theology for its model rather than science. But theology was more than *just* a model for Ransom. Just as he considered his post-“Criticism, Inc.” formalist approach to be an actual science of poetry, not merely science-like, similarly, in writing *God Without Thunder*, Ransom was actually doing theology, though as a layman. His argument in the book proceeds from claims about the nature and character of God. Across his career, Ransom moved from criticism *as* theology to criticism *as* science.³⁷

What is perhaps more interesting is how explicitly engaged with current cultural and political questions Ransom's early religious criticism is. No one reading *God Without Thunder* could come away with the stereotypical picture of the New Critic as a man wrapped up in the formal play of high literary art, disdaining the cultural conflicts of his own day as well as the historical context of the poem. *God Without Thunder* presents itself as an intervention in the religion-science debate of the 1920s as well as the fundamentalist-modernist controversy in Protestant theology, and it packs a critique of industrialism to boot. Ransom draws on all kinds of textual resources with no particular literary pedigree to make his argument. He gives an interpretation of the Scopes trial as part of his sympathetic account of Protestant fundamentalism, and he disputes the “anthropological view” of religion represented by H.L. Mencken's “Treatise on the Gods” (97-109). The alliance between scientists like R.A. Millikan and liberal clergymen like Harry Emerson Fosdick embodied in the Washington Agreement of 1923, a document

³⁷ But perhaps criticism is essentially an ulterior genre, rather than a form-in-itself or a form-for-itself. Criticism is often something “by other means”—whether political theory or poetry, science or theology.

expressing a religion of human moral betterment by technocratic means, comes in for even harsher treatment. “As a religious scheme,” Ransom writes, “this is ‘Hamlet’ without the Prince of Denmark” (14). In *God Without Thunder*, Ransom covers a vast cultural territory from the pronouncements of popular preachers, to *Paradise Lost*, to then-contemporary philosophical polemics.

Ransom’s religious criticism engages with popular forms and political conflicts because on his definition of “religion” it could do nothing else. He defines religion thus: “*The religion of a people is that background of metaphysical doctrine which dictates its political economy*” (*God Without Thunder* 116, emphasis in original). This definition, which entangles religion, economics, and politics at their roots, prepares the way for a critique of industrial capitalism on behalf of the religious past:

There are in the main just two economies: the one is the religious, and the other is the secular. The former is the conservative and the latter is the progressive. [...] Philology represents religion as looking backward rather than forward: *re*, back, plus *ligo*, bind. Religion enlarges the God and limits the man, telling the believer incessantly to remember his limits, and be content with his existing condition. [...] [Secularism] is defined by a total attitude, which abandons the idea of limitations. Secularism is a wartime economy, and the war is the one which man has declared against nature. (116-117)

Alongside crotchety platitudes about contentment with one’s “existing condition,” which likely rang hollow in the book’s early-Depression publication context, we should be careful to hear the more radical notes in this passage. When Ransom criticizes “progress,” he takes aim at the insanity of a capitalist economy premised on limitless growth. Indeed this passage brings to light the common roots of “conservatism” and “conservation”: in Ransom’s language of embracing limits and his metaphor of a war against nature there’s a premonition of the new “green” ecological critique of capitalism, the watchword of which is “sustainability.” More than a premonition, there’s a genealogy here that runs back to Ransom through the contemporary neo-

Agrarian poet, farmer, and essayist Wendell Berry—an inheritance I trace in this dissertation's Chapters 5 and 6.

Ransom's critique of industrial capitalism in *God Without Thunder* binds itself back to the religious past primarily by recovering the Hebrew Bible/Christian Old Testament. He recommends especially the book of Job for a bracing tonic of the inscrutability of God. Modern scientists and theologians have concocted a tame new God in their own image to authorize their industrial pursuits: "God as a Great Man...is the modern scientist glorified and apotheosized," friendly, rational, and humane (20). This new God has made nature immediately knowable and infinitely malleable for human good; under his dispensation industrial man can rest easy in his control over the world and its resources. "The God of Israel," as Ransom puts it, however, is not so easily reckoned with. Ransom focuses on this God's qualities "which seem most peculiarly Hebraic, and the most foreign to the temper of our Occidental modernism" (28). The God of the Old Testament is mysterious; he demands sacrifices which brook no compromise with economic efficiency; and he brings evil as well as good of his own accord. Acquaintance with such a God darkens the easy dream of ceaseless progress in human knowledge and welfare, instilling what Ransom calls "the tragic spirit" (47). "Tragedy exhibits always the inevitable failure of the secular enterprise," he writes (47). "In tragedy the mind makes the critical confession that human goodness, and intelligent work, a combination popularly supposed to be the sufficient cause of prosperity, do not actually produce their triumphant effect upon the material world" (47). The tragic spirit is the rebuke of the religious past to a modern temper overconfident in the certainty of industrial progress, and it expresses a skepticism apposite to the dire economic situation of 1930.

Appealing to the Old Testament, Ransom had to deal with the objections to biblical authority leveled by biblical criticism since the early Enlightenment period. Particularly the “higher criticism,” which flourished in Germany in the nineteenth century and had a lively and hotly debated Anglophone reception in the second half of that century, presented a major stumbling block to intellectuals of Ransom’s generation. The 1908 *Catholic Encyclopedia*, for instance, found the higher critics’ two most Bible-shaking claims to be the multiple authorship of biblical books (especially the Pentateuch, traditionally ascribed to Moses), and the historical implausibility of many biblical narratives (Reid). Splintering the author-figure who mediates God’s authority and undermining the text’s relationship to historical fact, the higher criticism joined psychological and ideological explanations of faith, along with evolutionary biology, to form a phalanx of modern challenges to religious belief. To rescue biblical authority in light of these challenges, Ransom invokes a theory of “myth.” Myth, for Ransom, is a general category for nonliteral discourse, embracing everything from lovers’ outlandish declarations to poems to sacred texts. “The myth of an object is its proper name, private, unique, untranslatable, overflowing, of a demonic energy that cannot be reduced to the poverty of the class-concept. The myth of an event is a story, which invests the natural with a supernatural background, and with a more-than-historical history” (65). Within this category, myths vary widely in significance; the myths with the most staying power and social clout are, by Ransom’s lights, religious.

Ransom’s invocation of “myth” closely parallels the contemporary search by Protestant neo-orthodox theologians like Karl Barth and the Niebuhr brothers for a hermeneutic alternative to Scripture’s evisceration by liberal theologians and literalization by fundamentalists. Both Ransom and the neo-orthodox theologians diverge from the fundamentalists by rejecting empirical history in favor of a kind of spiritual history as the ground of Scripture’s meaning

(Brackney 214). Reinhold Niebuhr used the category of myth to denote “a foggy but creative zone between fiction and literal truth” in which religious symbols could motivate political action (McCarraher 66). In his 1937 address to the ecumenical Oxford Conference on Life and Work, Niebuhr argued that “all orthodox Christian theology has been guilty of the sin of profanity. It has insisted on the literal truth of its myths, forgetting that it is the function and character of religious myth to speak of the eternal in relation to time, and that it cannot therefore be a statement of temporal sequences” (Niebuhr 89).³⁸ Niebuhr criticizes the “orthodox” who insist on the “literal truth” of the Bible—that is, Protestant fundamentalists—from the neo-orthodox position of those who correctly understand that the mythic history of the Scriptures is more-than-historical. Ransom and the neo-orthodox were equally contemptuous of liberal theologians’ winnowing of Scriptural content to a few moralistic principles. H. Richard Niebuhr’s famously biting epitome of liberal theology from 1937 paraphrases Ransom’s title: “A *God without wrath* brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross” (*The Kingdom of God in America* 193, my emphasis). According to Ransom, this liberal attitude spelled death for a myth. “[A] myth which has flourished once will perish when its devotees become too squeamish, and begin peeling off its wrappings of concrete detail, saying that they are interested only in the ‘heart’ of its mystery—but finding in the end that the heart which they arrive at is only an abstract essence that has no blood in it” (*God Without Thunder* 88). Despite this polemic against squeamishness, I contend that Ransom was himself too squeamish in his very use of the category of myth.

When presenting his criteria for “religious myth,” Ransom kowtows to the logic of authenticity (85). In the middle of his argument against them, this ornery producerist capitulates

³⁸ Niebuhr’s talk was later published in the magazine *The Student World* and then printed in Niebuhr’s essay collection *Christianity and Power Politics* (1940). This quote is taken from the latter version, anthologized in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr* (1986).

to individualism and consumerism. In a revealing passage under the heading “*But the myth, on the whole, must be in keeping with our taste,*” he writes that

we cannot hope to find our religious expression in a religion which causes us to blush. And this is most embarrassing. I do not know of situations much more painful than that of wishing to take part in a religious institution and feeling not quite able to go through with it, because of some massive but indistinct repulsion or disgust, which comes we do not know why. (88-89)

It takes the fire out of his defense of an inscrutable and wrathful God if, when asked why one should accept this myth, Ransom can only say, “Because it is in keeping with my taste.” As the critic Denis Donoghue puts it, “Ransom, too, becomes a psychologist of religion in his dealings with God the Father, even if the psychology he practices is a grim one” (27). The book’s most striking chapter “Christ as Science” reveals, tellingly, that Ransom’s most treasured theological forebear is Milton, that latter-day Arian heresiarch. Despite its rhetorical bluster, its warm account of fundamentalism, and its jibes at technocratic optimists, there’s an incipient theological liberalism at work in *God Without Thunder*.

The book’s seemingly most contrarian moment, Ransom’s Job-inspired apologia for “the tragic spirit,” bears out this liberalism. Ransom can only make Job a tragedy by excising the book’s “happy ending,” undoing the redemptive arc of its narrative and divesting it of eschatological hope on the far side of tragedy (50-51). He picks and chooses his way through the biblical canon just like any higher critic looking for the authentic core of scripture; he’s just a biblical critic with particularly dour taste. And it is this taste for tragedy that’s at the root of his most conservative pronouncements in the book, his insistence on accepting one’s lot despite injustice. Hewing to the dictates of his taste, Ransom refuses the kind of eschatological hope that motivated Civil Rights agitation. Ransom could not bring himself to believe that, as Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” (“Our

God Is Marching On”). Ransom’s morbid delectation of tragedy belongs more to what Walker Percy called “Southern Stoicism,” which Percy bemoaned as the besetting sin of Southern writers of Ransom’s generation, than to the Christian orthodoxy Ransom ostensibly defends. The irony is that if Ransom had been more theologically conservative, he may have been more politically radical.

The religious past invoked in *God Without Thunder* is not so much the time of the Old Testament itself as a time when the Old Testament could still be believed—that is, a time before the higher criticism of the Bible threw its authorship in doubt in the later nineteenth century. It was the young Ransom’s encounter with the higher criticism that profoundly shook his naïve faith and pointed him to poetry instead of the ministry as a vocation (Quinlan 4-7). Ransom tries to get around the higher critics, as I’ve shown, through the category of myth, arguing that the higher critics have missed the point of the scriptures. “They have assumed that the myths tried to be scientific and failed, or that they pretended to be scientific and lied,” when they were not scientific documents at all (*God Without Thunder* 64). In Ransom’s judgment, to go back before the higher criticism would be to return to the orthodox Protestant South of the early 19th century—that is, the antebellum South, as the breakdown of Protestant orthodoxy roughly coincided with the Civil War and Reconstruction. But this wished-for return is of course impossible for Ransom, born in 1888, even in memory. An historical rage at having been born *now*, into modernity, with its diminished moral prospects, where even sins are meaner than before: this is the dark, roiling heart of Ransom’s “Southern Renaissance.” Out of that rage come the Renaissance’s most powerful protest and its most childish petulance.

It is at this juncture that Ransom’s two publications from 1930 link up into one larger critical project that leverages the religious past against industrial modernity in the name of both

spiritual and ecological health. The Old South sketched in the pages of *I'll Take My Stand* is, in the terms of *God Without Thunder*, a myth. Where *God Without Thunder* attempts to ground a “religious” economy of human limitations in crucial Christian myths like the Fall and the doctrine of the Trinity, *I'll Take My Stand*’s introductory manifesto “A Statement of Principles” projects a social icon of a “religious” economy as both a yardstick for the present and a program for future.³⁹ In “A Statement of Principles,” Ransom, speaking on behalf of the Twelve Southerners, sets “a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way” (xxxvii). From Ransom’s point of view, both “Americanism” and “the Communists,” far from being opposed, share the same problem (xl-xli). Each ideology proposes “more industrialism” as the solution to social ills for which industrialism is responsible in the first place (xli). Because it rejects the industrial system wholesale, agrarianism is the truly radical alternative.

“A Statement of Principles” announces its aspiration to a more dynamic genre than the essay by its distinctive visual appearance. “A Statement of Principles” is laid out on the page in thematic paragraph-blocks, each separated by a triple-space on either end—a typographical acknowledgment of limitation, like the margins a careful farmer, bent on caring for the land rather than maximizing productivity, leaves at the edges of a field. Pages have always had margins, too, but here the margins vie for consideration with the text itself. This space, like the *Selah* that punctuates the Psalms, invites the reader to pause and reflect, to imagine the communal past into the present crisis. Such a measured pace contrasts sharply with the breakneck cadences of the manifestoes of the avant-garde; “A Statement of Principles” is an unmanifestic manifesto. The literally conservative act of imagination called for by this spacious

³⁹ Although the “Statement of Principles” has often been called a manifesto, my thoughts on what is at stake in this designation owe much to my colleague Hannah Wakefield, who has written on the subject. The specific claims here, however, are my own.

document nevertheless required a radical spirit. Reading *I'll Take My Stand* together with *God Without Thunder* reveals that, for Ransom, industrialism's error is ultimately theological. As industrial systems, both liberal capitalism and communism are species of "secular" economy that make humans into gods, beings without limits. Industrialism is life without margins, and margins are necessary to creaturely flourishing. Industrialism, thus, is heresy; agrarianism is orthodoxy. But it is a paradoxically unorthodox orthodoxy—a marginal orthodoxy.

That Ransom drew the same basic lessons from the myths of both the Bible and the Old South suggests the both the narrowness and the single-minded power of his critical practice. Despite his insistence that industrial society take account of its environmental and cultural costs, Ransom's incisive synthesis of historical fantasy, theology, and economics fails to adequately reckon with the depredations borne by black Southerners both before and after the Civil War in order for white Southerners to enjoy what they did of grace and leisure. Whatever an imaginative recovery of Southern civilizational virtues that *does* reckon with these costs might look like, it must offer more than Ransom's evasion that "slavery was a feature monstrous enough in theory but, more often than not, humane in practice" (*I'll Take My Stand* 14). It could begin by worrying more about being Christian than being Southern, and it might involve something like the practice of penance. As I show in Chapter 5, Walker Percy and the Committee of Southern Churchmen assumed this challenge.

What is most compelling in Ransom's religious criticism is also that which is most characteristic of the Christian antimodernism of the thirties: his recognition that religious life is economic life, and vice versa, and his attempt to find a theological alternative to both liberalism and fundamentalism that's more than just milquetoast moderation. Most importantly, Ransom reminds us of the value of "political genius," the intellectual will to conceive social relations

differently from the status quo and the courage to try to change them (“Introduction” xlviii). “To think that this cannot be done,” he writes, “is pusillanimous” (xlviii). Yet Ransom seems to dodge the questions that trouble Eliot and Day: Is there something essentially exclusive about the discourse of orthodoxy? Is narrowness a necessary consequence from a politics of limitation? We have to look beyond Ransom’s Protestant regionalism to the Catholic perspectives of Eliot and Day for a response.⁴⁰

3.2 T. S. Eliot’s Elitist Orthodoxy

T. S. Eliot developed “orthodoxy”—and its attendant concepts of “heresy” and “blasphemy”—more extensively as a critical vocabulary than any other Christian antimodernist writer during the 1930s. This new vocabulary was an extension of his invocation of “tradition” and of the critical binary of classicism vs. romanticism throughout the 1920s. The two main differences between Eliot’s traditional-classical criticism and his orthodox criticism are the latter’s explicit theological content and its recognition of literature’s entanglement in wider social, political, economic, and religious histories and discourses. “Tradition” in 1919’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” for example, names an exclusively literary tradition, a procession of great poets. But the later criticism involves what Eliot called in 1939 “the operation of a social-religious-artistic complex” (*Christianity and Culture* 49). Across the Depression decade, dissatisfied with a merely literary criticism, Eliot showed how aesthetic judgment was bound up with ethical and political judgment. Yet, acutely aware of “the danger of suggesting to outsiders that that the Faith is a political principle or a literary fashion,” Eliot insisted that his particular judgments were not to be taken as the only possible positions for a

⁴⁰ Denis Donoghue claims that “by orthodoxy Ransom evidently meant the Eastern church from which the Western churches had lapsed” (14). While Ransom does hold up Eastern Orthodoxy as exemplary to Western Christendom for its reluctance to tame God, in the end he suggests, “We had better work within the religious institutions that we have, and do what we can to recover the excellencies of the ancient faith,” for to “go into the Greek communion” would be “not in the least practicable” (*God Without Thunder* 325).

Christian, though they were rooted in Christian theology (*After Strange Gods* 28). Criticism, he believed, was a Christian duty, but committed coreligionists could legitimately disagree in their applications of theology to life and art. By the eve of the Second World War, Eliot had articulated the rudiments of a Christian antimodernist social theory.

Later critics have not looked favorably on this phase of Eliot's critical output. As Eliot scholar Ronald Schuchard notes, they have tended to see Eliot's moral-religious criticism as at worst "sins against literature," at best "a post-conversion indulgence" (52, 146). By examining two documents from 1933, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* and "Catholicism and International Order," as well as 1939's *The Idea of a Christian Society*, I hope to show that Eliot offers an antimodern religious critique of liberal-democratic capitalist society offered in explicit contradistinction to the fascist and communist critiques of that society. More damning are the criticisms by Marjorie Perloff and others that allege that this material shows Eliot at his most racially and religiously bigoted. And this is true. Eliot's religious and racial intolerance is not ancillary to his social theory. His remarks in *After Strange Gods* about the supposed undesirability of "free-thinking Jews," point up the deeper problem that religious pluralism, the variety of belief and unbelief in a democratic society, presents for orthodoxy as a discourse of social criticism—a problem made all the more acute for Eliot by his mixing of ecclesial and political power (20). Yet, as I will show, Eliot's nativism and elitism compete in these texts with an impulse towards an embracing catholicity.

From contemporaries like Edmund Wilson and Virginia Woolf forward, Eliot's 1927 conversion to an Anglo-Catholic iteration of Christianity has been a stumbling block—the beginning of the end, the start of the radical poet's decline into a crotchety conservatism. But the Anglo-Catholic tradition Eliot embraced mixed liturgical traditionalism with social radicalism, as

the examples of Ralph Adams Cram and Vida Scudder witness. Cram and Scudder's English counterparts were more numerous and influential. According to historian Bethany Kilcrease, "While Christian socialists ranged the theological spectrum, the majority of well-known activists [in England] were Anglican High Churchmen" (3). Eliot's social writings never recommended Christian Socialism, but they do belong to this Anglo-Catholic tradition of radical Christian social thought. Eliot works the seams of conservatism and radicalism. *After Strange Gods*, originally the 1933 Page-Barbour Lectures at the University of Virginia, begins with an acknowledgement of the Twelve Southerners' *I'll Take My Stand* and indicates Eliot's intellectual comradeship with Ransom (15-16). In his footnotes, Eliot likewise acknowledges G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936) as an ally (21). A British Catholic novelist and journalist, Chesterton developed "distributism" as a scheme of property redistribution and anti-usury economics in response to the teaching of papal social encyclicals like 1891's *Rerum Novarum*. Eliot's "Catholicism and International Order" was originally delivered as a lecture to the Anglo-Catholic Summer School of Sociology at Oxford and later published in *Christendom: A Journal of Christian Sociology*, which also published essays by Scudder. This school and journal were headed up by the Anglo-Catholic social thinker and sometime guild socialist M. B. Reckitt (1888-1980) (Jarrett-Kerr). Eliot developed his social ideas within this matrix of religious radicalism.

The stated aim of *After Strange Gods* is the moral criticism of contemporary literature, prosecuted in the name of orthodoxy. By "orthodoxy" Eliot doesn't exactly mean theological correctness. For him, orthodox writing is more but also somehow less than Christian—writing informed by the Christian tradition, communitarian rather than individualistic, that takes seriously the relationship between metaphysics and morals, the question of objective Good and

Evil. But the lectures are incoherent at this crucial point of definition. In the first lecture, Eliot says that “tradition” must be supplemented by “orthodoxy” because while the former is a matter of feeling, the latter is a matter of intellect. Without the rational discipline of orthodoxy, tradition may become mere prejudice (29-30). In the second lecture, however, he seems to make orthodoxy the substratum of belief rather than belief itself: “We are not concerned with the authors’ *beliefs*, but with orthodoxy of sensibility and the sense of tradition” (38, emphasis in original). This tendentious shift in definition that de-emphasizes belief in favor of sensibility is part of an argument claiming James Joyce, Catholic apostate, for the side of orthodoxy against D. H. Lawrence as representative heretic. By “heresy” Eliot means “extreme individualism in views” and the fetishization of artistic originality as an end in itself (32). Eliot envisions “good” artistic innovation as a conscious dialogue with the past, while “bad” innovation glorifies the ego of the individual genius. The spiritual-artistic libertarianism that Eliot calls “heresy” was more favorably named “spirituality” or “religious experience” by Protestant and post-Protestant liberals.⁴¹

When Eliot designates an author orthodox or heretical, he insists that this is not a judgment of literary merit. “In my sense of the term,” he declares, “perfect orthodoxy in the individual artist is not always necessary, or even desirable” (Eliot *After Strange Gods* 32). Orthodoxy by definition can only reside in an entire community, while every heresy contains a core of truth that a great artist may illuminate. The two terms give Eliot a way to talk about the mixed moral effects of an author’s works in the wider culture—to determine whether, on balance, they promote conversation with the past and the community or the wanton expression of the individual personality.

⁴¹ Nevertheless, Pericles Lewis exempts Lawrence from his study of religious experience and the modernist novel because Lawrence doesn’t “share the bemused detachment characteristic of the other modernists in their treatment of the church” (18).

In his third lecture, Eliot complicates the communitarian-individualistic binary of orthodoxy versus heresy by introducing a third term—"blasphemy." Here he takes up the theological recuperation of blasphemy begun in his 1930 essay "Baudelaire," originally the introduction to the English translation of Baudelaire's *Journaux Intimes*. In the Baudelaire essay, Eliot argued that "Genuine blasphemy, genuine in spirit and not purely verbal, is the product of partial belief, and is as impossible to the complete atheist as to the perfect Christian. It is a way of affirming belief" (*Selected Essays* 373). In *After Strange Gods*, he takes this a step further, figuring literature as a field of dire spiritual conflict where the Devil exercises his influence through the heretic, the liberal individualist. In this battle, the blasphemer is a reluctant partisan on the side of the orthodox:

[M]y point is that blasphemy is not a matter of good form but of right belief; no one can possibly blaspheme in any sense except that in which a parrot may be said to curse, unless he profoundly believes in that which he profanes [...] Where blasphemy might once have been a sign of spiritual corruption, it might now be taken rather as a symptom that the soul is still alive, or even that it is recovering animation: for the perception of Good and Evil, whatever choice we may make—is the first requisite of spiritual life. (*After Strange Gods* 52-53)

While the orthodox upholds the claims of the community over the individual and the heretic makes the individual ego the sole locus of value, the blasphemer lives in paradox: blasphemy is the anguished cry of an individualized soul that nevertheless affirms the ethical and theological standards of the community. Ronald Schuchard probably overstates the case when he says that Baudelairean blasphemy "delimited the center of [Eliot's] moral theory," since Eliot's anatomy of the blasphemous speech-act locates that act structurally at the periphery of orthodoxy (131). Nevertheless, the positive prominence Eliot gives to blasphemy should warn us not to dismiss *After Strange Gods* as simple moralizing or crude theological reductionism. Rather, it's a rough and sometimes contradictory attempt to sketch out a communitarian ethical theory of literature.

With “Catholicism and International Order,” the political stakes of Eliot’s theory of orthodoxy become explicit. No longer merely completing “literary criticism...by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint,” as he put it in “Religion and Literature,” Eliot consummates his ethical approach with an account of international politics (*Essays Ancient and Modern* 93). In “Catholicism and International Order,” orthodoxy and heresy name political theologies rather than literary sensibilities—though the two are, of course, connected. Political heresy derives from the inappropriate application of spiritual truths in the temporal sphere:

The ideas of authority, of hierarchy, of discipline and order...may lead us into some error of absolutism or impossible theocracy. Or the ideas of humanity, brotherhood, equality before God, may lead us to affirm that the Christian can only be a socialist. Heresy is always possible; and where there is one possible heresy, there are always at least two; and when two doctrines contradict each other, we do not always remember that both may be wrong. And heresy may extend, of course, into affairs of this world which people do not ordinarily judge according to such standards: we might expect to find it, for instance, in some forms of Fascism as well as in some forms of Socialism. (*Essays Ancient and Modern* 118-119)

Here Eliot associates fascism with what we might call the “authoritarian heresy” and socialism with what we might call the “humanitarian heresy.” Both are partial truths that become dangerous when made the whole of politics. For example, when humanitarianism becomes the whole of politics it can turn into a kind of authoritarianism—the “genuine oppression of human beings in what is conceived by other human beings to be their interest” (119). The alternative to these heretical approaches is not simply liberal-democratic capitalism, however. Eliot offers a sarcastic assessment of globalized market society that would almost sound at home in the mouth of an anti-globalization protestor. “The conquest of space has made it easier for people to fight from greater distances.... [I]n America...you can get fresh vegetables and fruit at any time of the year, and none of it has any flavour” (125). Commerce and technology, which were supposed to

unite the world in bonds of mutual advantage under liberalism, have failed to deliver on their promises.

Eliot is loathe to offer a specific positive program for international order. He makes some approving remarks about John Maynard Keynes's economics and gestures towards a few movements with which he has sympathy: "the yearning towards regionalism," as in Ransom's Southern Agrarianism; "some kind of credit-reform"; and Chesterton's "distributism" (127). This reservation about the proper response to the crisis of liberalism is not an oversight but a keynote of Eliot's argument. "[T]he Catholic cannot commit himself utterly and absolutely to any one form of temporal order," he argues, because his or her ultimate loyalty is to "the Kingdom of God" (128). Not only can the Catholic not commit himself or herself wholly to secular projects of renewal; he or she also ought to be skeptical of the efficacy of those projects. "The Catholic should have high ideals—or rather, I should say *absolute* ideals—and moderate expectations: the heretic, whether he call himself fascist, or communist, or democrat or rationalist, always has low ideals and great expectations" (122). Joining with others in social betterment, Eliot's skeptical Catholic activist brings a theological reality principle to bear on the proceedings, a recognition of human sinfulness and limitation that discourages belief in immanent salvation through social organization. Nevertheless, Eliot's is not a counsel of despair. "There is a certain saving egotism," he writes, "which prevents us from despair so long as we believe that there is anything we can do which may possibly help to improve matters" (132). Eliot avoids Ransomesque morbidity by rejecting narratives of civilizational decline. He moves from tragedy to tragic optimism by tempering his gloominess with slow hope.

That slow hope for social justice is the hope of orthodoxy, which Eliot invokes by name for the first time in the lecture's final sentence. Though living in a discredited political and

economic order and beset on every side by heretical alternatives, there is another way, Eliot argues, for the Christian: “There must always be a middle way, though sometimes a devious way when natural obstacles have to be circumvented; and this middle way will, I think, be found to be the way of orthodoxy; a way of mediation, but never, in those matters which permanently matter, a way of compromise” (134-135). A middle way, a way of mediation but not of compromise—this sums up the alternative that the critical discourse of orthodoxy offered in the troubled decade of the thirties. In his acknowledgment that orthodoxy must needs be sometimes “devious,” Eliot echoes his approbation of literary blasphemy. *The Idea of a Christian Society*, delivered on the eve of war in 1939, puts the matter even more starkly: “If you will not have God (and He is a jealous God) you should pay your respects to Hitler or Stalin” (*Christianity and Culture* 50).

“Catholicism and International Order” is long on the criticism of political heresy and short on description of the orthodox alternative. That alternative is only gestured at and hinted toward. Its development waited for *The Idea of a Christian Society*, Eliot’s most sustained work of constructive social theory. But even here, as the “idea” of his title suggests, Eliot contents himself with sketching a social icon, projecting a vision of religious community inspired by the British past but not beholden to any previous epoch in particular: “I shall confine myself to a slight outline of what I consider to be essential features of this society, bearing in mind that it can neither be mediaeval in form, nor be modelled on the seventeenth century or any previous age” (20). In this, he departs from the unabashed medievalism of his predecessors Scudder and Cram. Eliot proposes a society constituted by the Christian State, the Christian Community, and the Community of Christians. By the Christian State, Eliot means a national government that recognizes Christianity as its official religion and proclaims its intent to rule in accordance with Christian principles (*Christianity and Culture* 21). By the Christian Community, Eliot indicates

the renewal of the parish system, where the mass of proximate believers are united by religious practices (23-25). By the Community of Christians, Eliot means an elite of religious intellectuals who guide the Christian Community (28-29).

In *The Idea of a Christian Society*, Eliot leaves behind the vocabulary of orthodoxy and heresy, for the most part, but the structure of his argument, which identifies the turn away from liberalism to a Christian social order as the only alternative to totalitarianism, places it firmly within the social-critical discourse of orthodoxy. Indeed the terms “Christian” and “pagan” come to take the place of orthodoxy and heresy as Eliot’s terms of analysis and evaluation: “I believe that the choice before us is between the formation of a new Christian culture and the acceptance of a pagan one” (*Christianity and Culture* 10). Eliot goes on to claim that “[t]he fundamental objection to fascist doctrine...is that it is pagan” (15-16). This shift in diction represents an escalation of orthodoxy discourse, not a break with it. In 1933-4, at the time of *After Strange Gods*, Eliot saw the literary field as an in-house squabble between different literary styles still belonging to the same overall tradition; he categorized his heretical writers by the sort of dysfunctional Protestant upbringing each had. But with the Second World War in the offing, Eliot came to view cultural politics in terms of a clash between altogether different religions.

To frame political conflict as religious conflict like this immediately raises the question of what would happen to non-Christians in Eliot’s “Christian society.” Eliot answers that they would be tolerated. At best, this may be construed as a condescending response to the problem of religious pluralism. But this is not Eliot’s last word on the subject. When confronted with pluralism of various stripes, Eliot is forced to work through his simultaneous commitments to the values of particularity and universality, a conflict inscribed in the ambivalently nationalist and internationalist signifier—“Anglo-Catholic”—of the Christian tradition he embraced. Eliot’s

lament for the standardization of culture consequent with the spread of global markets can quickly take on an ugly nativist cast. But an embracing rhetoric of Catholic internationalism also leavens Eliot's social writings, as in this passage from "Catholicism and International Order":

Catholics should, in any questions of foreign relations, be able to feel a sympathy with foreign points of view which is much better worth having and more effective than diffuse good-will. I believe that there is a Catholic habit of thought and of feeling, which is a bond between Catholics of the most diverse races, nations, classes and cultures....
(*Essays Ancient and Modern* 131)

In *After Strange Gods*, Eliot acknowledged that the calcified, instinctive prejudice of tradition needs the theological discipline of orthodoxy to keep it flexible. As with Ransom, more orthodoxy on this point may have made Eliot more liberal-minded. And even Eliot's internationalism is a *Christian* internationalism, as he goes on to say that he's been made cognizant of his Catholic sympathy with foreigners when talking with his non-religious countrymen. In Eliot's vision, limits—the limits of creed, the boundaries of orthodoxy—simultaneously connect coreligionists across state borders and drive wedges between citizens.

During the Second World War, in a regular ecumenical gathering of antitotalitarian religious intellectuals known as "The Moot," Eliot pressed the claims of catholicity further than he had before.⁴² In a paper delivered in 1944, ten years after *After Strange Gods*, Eliot prescribed the following sentimental education for "clerics" like himself and the members of his audience:

The cleric himself should be partly, though not altogether, emancipated from the class into which he is born; an out-caste. He should, to some extent, be able to look upon, and mix with, all classes as an outsider; just as he should, to some extent, get out of his own country. These are counsels of perfection, to which none of us attain. He should also have a supra-national community of interest with clerics of other nations; so as to work against nationalism and racialism (provincialism) as he does against class. (qtd. in KojECKy 243-244)

⁴² This group was convened by Scottish Protestant missionary J. H. Oldham (1874-1969), frequented by intellectuals such as Roman Catholic historian Christopher Dawson (1889-1970) and Hungarian-born Jewish sociologist Karl Mannheim (1893-1947) and visited by Reinhold Niebuhr, among others. Mannheim's death led to the cessation of its regular meetings. For more on Eliot's involvement in The Moot and related groups, see KojECKy 156-197. KojECKy's study is a sympathetic general overview of Eliot's social thought with valuable biographical insight.

Equipped with such sympathies, the “clerical elite” as envisioned by Eliot is a force for social change, while social class “is an influence for stability” (qtd. in Kojecky 241). By this point, Eliot’s vision of the good society required both the persistence of class structure and clerical incitements to change, played off one another in a balance of powers. If this would be a good arrangement for the clerics, it promises less for those Eliot terms “the lower orders” (qtd. in Kojecky 248).

In his life, Eliot persisted in the unresolved tension between the competing claims of particularity and catholicity. But in his social theory, the desire to align the boundaries of Church and nation makes itself felt in his idea of a Christian State. The problem of religious pluralism is particularly acute for Eliot because of this Constantinian mingling of church and state.⁴³ Like Eliot, Dorothy Day relentlessly insisted on the ethical bankruptcy of liberal individualism and proffered a chastened-but-not-despairing view of social reform. She, too, called for a communitarian and robustly Christian alternative to communism, fascism, and liberalism. But Day rejected the alignment of church and nation-state and the claim of Christians to a kind of divine right of the leadership of state power. Her Catholic Worker movement offered a post-Constantinian, Christian anarchist vision for social renewal and advocated a mystical resolution to the problem of pluralism.

3.3 Dorothy Day’s Anarchist Orthodoxy

Dorothy Day was a literary radical first—before she became a Catholic, before she became a social reformer, before she became a Servant of God (that is, a candidate for canonization). Day was born in Brooklyn, but her father, a sportswriter, moved the family to San

⁴³ Constantinianism, named for the first Roman Emperor to convert to Christianity, is “the complex of institutional changes and alliances that led Christians in the West to see churches and nation-states to be aligned within a God-given order within which Christians would exercise leadership” (Cartwright 629).

Francisco in 1903 (Allaire and Broughton). The 1906 earthquake destroyed her father's newspaper plant, forcing the family to move to Chicago. After a couple of desultory years at the University of Illinois, spent mostly reading Russian novelists and U.S. radical writers, at eighteen years old she returned to New York (Elie 15-16). Day soon made a name for herself as a journalist writing for radical publications and as a rounder in the Greenwich Village bohemian scene. She plays a small role in her friend Malcolm Cowley's Lost Generation memoir *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (1934, 1951). At a Village dive called the Hell Hole, "the gangsters admired Dorothy Day because she could drink them under the table; but they felt more at home with Eugene O'Neill, who listened to their troubles and never criticized" (Cowley 69). It was in the back room of the Hell Hole, Day recounts in her 1938 conversion story *From Union Square to Rome*, that O'Neill, with whom she was at one point romantically entangled, read to her Francis Thompson's Christ-haunted poem "The Hound of Heaven," and she "was moved by its power" ("Chapter 1: Why," 4).⁴⁴ Day would describe this period of her life as at times "Baudelairean...choosing 'the downward path which leads to salvation'" ("Chapter 1: Why," 1).

Day not only ran in literary circles; she also nurtured literary ambitions. After a harrowing love affair that issued in a pregnancy terminated by an abortion, Day married a wealthy man and went "to Europe to write a novel" about her experiences—traumatic autobiography gilded with a touch of fiction, after the early-twenties fashion exemplified by Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (Elie 36). The marriage didn't last long, but the novel, *The Eleventh Virgin*, was published in 1924. When Hollywood gobbled up the salacious tale's movie rights, Day was comfortably well-off for a short time (Elie 38-39). Day later wished the novel

⁴⁴ Day hated the title, picked out by her publishers, with its implication of opposition between radicalism and Catholicism (Elie 114).

unwritten and all copies destroyed, but a remnant still lingers today on Amazon and Alibris. Though it curdled her affections for *The Eleventh Virgin*, her conversion did not destroy her literary ambitions. Into the 1930s, “she ‘still dreamed in terms of novels,’” and plotted a work of Catholic social realism (Elie 66). She never finished this second novel, though she published excerpts from it over the years in *The Catholic Worker*. In the late twenties, Day moved into a cottage on Long Island where she would eventually give birth to her daughter Tamar and convert to Catholicism. Malcolm and Peggy Cowley moved into another cottage next door and drew Day into a wider literary milieu that included Kenneth and Lily Burke, Hart Crane, John Dos Passos, Allen Tate, and Caroline Gordon (Elie 44). Later, she would attract the poets Robert Lowell and W. H. Auden (Fisher 48). Day poured her writerly talents into her eloquent memoirs and her tireless journalism for *The Catholic Worker*, the penny paper published by the movement of the same name, which, along with French holy man Peter Maurin (1877-1949), she helped found in 1933. Day led the movement until her death in 1980.

But *The Catholic Worker* was (and is) much more than just a cheap paper, just as the Catholic Worker movement was (and is) much more than a homeless shelter or a soup kitchen. In her January 1970 “On Pilgrimage” column, Day made clear the larger aims of the Catholic Workers, writing of the early days that “we were a revolutionary headquarters rather than a Bowery mission, as most newspapers like to picture us.” *The Catholic Worker* as well was a strange hybrid of avant-garde little magazine and newspaper for the unemployed. With its integration of the religious, the social, and the aesthetic, *The Catholic Worker* was a primary site for the literary practice of Christian antimodernism in the 1930s.

While much has been written about Day and the Catholic Worker Movement in the history of social and religious activism and in American Catholic culture, only Paul Elie has

sought to accord Day her place in literary history, deftly weaving her story in with those of Walker Percy, Thomas Merton, and Flannery O'Connor in his literary group biography, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (2004). I place Day in a earlier historical moment than Elie, situating her in an interdenominational context of thirties Christian antimodernism, rather than his fifties- and sixties-focused narrative of American Catholic literary emergence. I also pay more attention to literary form and its political stakes than Elie does. Work on *The Catholic Worker's* aesthetics has focused on its illustrations, rather than its literature; analyses of Day's writings interpret her in theological and ethical contexts rather than literary-historical ones.⁴⁵ In a letter to Dorothy Day, the novelist Caroline Gordon reported Catholic publisher Maisie Ward's striking assessment of Day: "the truth about Dorothy is that she is a great poet" (Fisher 47). Though Day did not, to my knowledge, write in explicitly poetic genres, Ward here points up the evocative style of her spiritual and social writings. In her talent for social *poeisis*, Day was indeed great.

Day's first editorial for *The Catholic Worker*, published May 1933 and entitled "To Our Readers," opens with the following lines:

For those who are sitting on park benches in the warm spring sunlight. For those who are huddling in shelters trying to escape the rain. For those who are walking the streets in the all but futile search for work. For those who think there is no hope for the future, no recognition of their plight—this little paper is addressed.

Though it points to other "radical sheets" as its near neighbors, "To Our Readers" is not radical reportage, or even a stirring editorial statement. The first three sentences especially, with their anaphoric syntax ("For those who are... For those who are... For those who are...") and their

⁴⁵ For an example of the former, see Rachel Norton's Master's thesis on Ade Bethune's *Catholic Worker* illustrations, the "hieratic" style of which combined modernist abstraction, medievalism, and representationalism. For the latter, see Maureen O'Connell's essay on the "harsh and dreadful beauty" of Day's ethics—in practices of mothering and social care and in writing, which Day refused to separate—in *She Who Imagines: Feminist Theological Aesthetics*. (Be advised, however, that the latter essay is strangely riddled with errors of typography and detail.)

concrete imagery, are poetry or prose-poetry, the cadences not too far removed from those of, say, Carl Sandburg (a favorite of Day's).⁴⁶ In the invocation of the cruel spring rain, there may even be an oblique reference to the opening of Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

If it seems too fanciful to liken these plain-spoken lines to modernist poetry, "To Our Readers" fits the major genre of revolutionary poetry—that is, the manifesto. In his study of the manifesto form, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestoes, and the Avant-Garde* (2006), Martin Puchner documents the manifesto's roots as a sermonic and catechistic form of radical religious communities (12-17). In the pages of *The Catholic Worker*, the manifesto gets back in touch with those roots. Where T. S. Eliot was given to dramatic pronouncements of allegiance and John Crowe Ransom wrote a willfully quiet antimanifesto on behalf of agrarianism, Day's "To Our Readers" looks more like the self-conscious rallying cry of a religious avant-garde. The editorial's bullet-point structure and its statements of aims recall the founding documents of many a modern artistic sect. It prods its reader with rhetorical questions:

It's time there was a Catholic paper for the unemployed. The fundamental aim of most radical sheets is the conversion of its readers to radicalism and atheism. Is it not possible to be radical and not atheist? Is it not possible to protest, to expose, to complain, to point out abuses and demand reforms without desiring the overthrow of religion? In an attempt to popularize and make known the encyclicals of the Popes in regard to social justice and the program put forth by the Church for the "reconstruction of the social order," this news sheet, *The Catholic Worker*, is started.

In the fiat-like passive voice of that final sentence ("this news sheet...is started") there's a curious elision of the sentence's subject, for the "Catholic Worker," as the communal subject that could authorize the pronouncement, does not yet exist except as the vision of a couple of ragged journalists. This marks the article as what Puchner calls a "Marxian speech-act": "The speech acts of the manifesto...are launched in the anterior future, claiming that their authority will have

⁴⁶ These lines most resemble the style of co-founder Peter Maurin's "easy essays," which I treat extensively in the next chapter.

been provided by the changes they themselves want to bring about. But this future perfect construction is nothing but a hope, a claim, a pose, a desire that often comes to naught” (24). The words of Day’s editorial are community-creating words, but their effect is uncertain, a gamble.

In other ways, “To Our Readers” differs from the typical manifesto, stretching the boundaries of the form. Like Scudder, Cram, and Henry Adams, Day drew on the medieval past in particular when she put forth her hopes and claims for the future. The idea for the Catholic Worker movement’s most enduring institution, for example—“houses of hospitality” where the urban poor could receive food and shelter—was explicitly derived from the model of the medieval hospice (“Maurin’s Program”). This historical debt sets the Catholic Worker movement at odds with other avant-gardes. Most modernist manifestoes come to bury the past not to praise it, as in F. T. Marinetti’s “Futurist Manifesto” (1909), which condemned museums as cemeteries. Just where you would expect to find the manifesto’s central ideological content, “To Our Readers” points away from itself to church tradition—“the encyclicals put forth by the Popes” and “the program put forth by the Church.” This sets it apart from the “self-authorizing” character of Marxian speech-acts on Puchner’s account (19). The Catholic Worker movement was not a self-authorizing community; it was more like a new and semi-autonomous religious order within the Roman Catholic Church—what Day called a “lay apostolate”—that depended on the Church’s authority. Despite these differences owing to its distinctly religious character, the family resemblance between this editorial and other manifestoes is strong. In short, “To Our Readers” is a manifesto that connects its reader to the past and then takes her to church.

The Catholic Worker movement is often criticized, even by sympathetic observers, for its failure to “translate the sacramental vision into a durable politics of work, technology, and social relations” (McCarraher 88). While these criticisms address the movement’s political technique, I

want to focus on its aesthetic significance, since, as I've argued, the aesthetic is the crucial place where religious meaning is transubstantiated, as it were, into politics. Through writings like "To Our Readers" Day crafted a social icon that we might call "the idea of the Catholic Worker," a creative project drawn from the materials of the religious past but imbued with future hope—like Ransom's myth of the orthodox Old South and Eliot's "idea of a Christian society"—that helps us to imagine social relations differently, abetting the visionary gumption Ransom calls "political genius." But unlike Eliot or the Agrarians, Day's idea was enlivened by a community life of entwined political and religious practice in Catholic Worker houses of hospitality and farms. It is perhaps this practical experience of common life that helps the Catholic Worker idea get free from the golden-age problem with more success than other Christian antimodernist ideals. Though the Catholic Worker ideal owes a debt to the medieval past, it isn't stuck in the past. Historian James Fisher alleges that "an air of deconstruction and death hung over the [Catholic Worker] movement," that its embrace of suffering and holy foolishness predisposed it to failure and to count failure as success (46). But a politics of self-destruction was perhaps a fit alternative to the various politics of self-fulfillment and other-destruction that surrounded the Catholic Workers in the 1930s—a prophetic alternative that still speaks today.

Peter Maurin, French immigrant to the U.S. by way of Canada, unwashed eccentric and itinerant laborer, philosopher-poet and co-founder of *The Catholic Worker*, was Day's strongest link to the medieval past, and, for her, the incarnation of the idea of the Catholic Worker. Expressly identifying as a "peasant" and "a medievalist," Maurin brought with him ideas from turn-of-the-century French Social Catholicism, propounding what he called a "Green Revolution" of farm communities, an anti-industrial vision not unlike that of Ransom and the Twelve Southerners (Maurin; Fisher 38, 41). Unlike the Twelve Southerners, however, the

Catholic Workers *did* actually start some new, if sometimes ill-fated, farms.⁴⁷ Meanwhile Maurin indoctrinated anyone he could corner with his “phrased essays” of homespun poetry, the style of which I analyze at length in the next chapter. Peter Maurin was the Catholic Worker movement’s gnostic ideologue and untidy exemplar. In his ramshackle person he effected an astounding synthesis of intellect and labor, of ideology and piety, of history and modernity, in an aesthetic form designed not to please but to shock. Or at least Dorothy Day’s textual Peter Maurin effects such a synthesis.

Whenever Day wrote about Maurin, she composed his life typologically, writing him as a repetition of figures from sacred history. Whether as “another St. Francis of modern times,” a Mary who “brought to us Christ in the poor, as surely as the Blessed Mother brought Christ to Elizabeth,” or a homeless and suffering Christ himself, the idea of Peter Maurin in Day’s writings takes on a paradoxical relation to Peter Maurin the historical person (qtd. in Fisher 34). Other Catholic writers soon adopted what James Fisher calls this “figural method” when speaking of Maurin; in a 1938 essay for *Commonweal*, for example, journalist Joe Brieg figured Maurin as a new St. Peter presaging a reborn church (Fisher 35). From 1939 on, as he increasingly absented himself from the Catholic Workers’ Bowery headquarters on unannounced rambles, Maurin took on a fully fictionalized life in the pages of the movement’s newspaper. First Day and then other Catholic Workers wrote stories about a “present day working class saint” called Ben Joe Labray, an Americanized Peter Maurin figure (Fisher 64-66). Day held up Maurin as the prophet of a new, but also very old, kind of subjectivity, one that reversed the traditional American script of the self-made man. Indeed, Day’s Peter Maurin was an unmade man. “The essential difference between Maurin and the classical model of American selfhood

⁴⁷ The “Left Agrarian” Fellowship of Southern Churchmen also started farm cooperatives in the South in the 1930s, as I discuss in Chapter 4. Some Catholic Worker farms still operate today.

was in his acceptance of poverty as a goal in itself, even as one to be worked toward. [...] Day introduced American Catholics to a prophet in their own midst who emulated not the leadership qualities or moral excellence of Christ but his vocation to suffering” (Fisher 34).

In Peter Maurin, Day put forward a Christian antimodernist alternative to fascist and communist critiques of the bourgeois self of American rugged individualism. Maurin was the Catholic Worker model of what French communist philosopher Alain Badiou calls the “new man,” a type which “haunted” the twentieth century (8). This idea of the new man “circulates between the various fascisms and communisms,” and “their statues are more or less the same”:

Creating a new humanity always comes down to demanding that the old one be destroyed. A violent, unreconciled debate rages about the nature of this old humanity. But each and every time, the project is so radical that in the course of its realization the singularity of human lives is not taken into account. (Badiou 8)

The language of the “new man” is biblical in origin; it comes from the writings of St. Paul, whom Badiou elsewhere takes as the archetype of the political subject, the one who bears militant witness to an overwhelming Event. Day explicitly invokes the passage from the book of Ephesians from which the concept of the new man is taken in her obituary for Maurin:

The fact was he had been stripped of all,—he [*sic*] had stripped himself throughout life. He had put off the old man, to put on the new. He had done all that he could to denude himself of the world, and I mean the world in the evil sense.... He loved people, he saw in them what God meant them to be. He saw the world as God meant it to be, and he loved it. (“The Story of Three Deaths” 2)

Day’s rhetoric interiorizes the violence of political transformation into the “stripping” of the self. Day merges her subjectivity with Maurin’s in this rhetoric of gracious self-unmaking and self-making. She struggled throughout her life to put off the “old man” of her middle-class all-American upbringing and put on the “new man” of the poor Catholic immigrant sufferer. Day’s Maurinesque “new man” is however also an “old man”—an anachronism, a medievalist: the Catholic Worker’s orientation to history itself is ultimately nonviolent. Taking Maurin as a

model of subjectivity, Day imagined “the Catholic Worker” as a self-in-community productively engaged with history, voluntarily subject to poverty, absolutely committed to pacifism, and relentlessly considerate of what Badiou calls “the singularity of human lives” (Badiou 8). For this reason, both she and Maurin used the term “personalism” to describe their political ideology (“Day After Day” 2).⁴⁸

The idea of the Catholic Worker was also intimately bound up with Day’s all-embracing concept of “the Mystical Body of Christ”—a vision of universal religious community. As James Fisher explains, the doctrine of the Mystical Body was a kind of invented tradition of doctrine, posing as an inheritance of the medieval church but in fact a modern Catholic polemical response to Protestant individualism (48-51). Again drawing on Pauline texts like the book of Ephesians, the doctrine of the Mystical Body indicates the individual Christian’s intimate communion with Christ which is always immediately supra-individual; all Christians are caught up as members in the greater unit of Christ’s body. In her writings, Day equivocates on the denotation of the term, often stretching it radically. Sometimes it seems to mean the Church worldwide; sometimes it seems to mean all humanity, as in her article “The Mystical Body and Spain” (1936). But perhaps this discrepancy is best understood not as an equivocation but as an analogy. Day saw the Church as united to all humanity in the humanity of Christ, and she saw every human being as a bearer of Christ’s image and a potential part of the Church. For Day, the Worker is the Sufferer, and the Sufferer is Christ.

The values of particularity and catholicity that jostle uneasily in Eliot’s theological criticism find paradoxical concord for Day in the universal Mystical Body of the one Christ. This paradox offers not a discursive but an imagistic resolution to the problem of pluralism for

⁴⁸ Day and Maurin borrowed the term “personalism” from French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier. See John Hellman, *Emmanuel Mounier and the New Catholic Left, 1930-1950*, Toronto: U of Toronto Press (1981).

Christian antimodernism, one embodied in the Ade Bethune-designed masthead of the *Catholic Worker*, showing black worker and a white worker shaking hands within Christ's embrace (Fig. 3.1):⁴⁹



Figure 3.1: Ade Bethune's masthead for *The Catholic Worker* (1936).

Here, too, however, Day's political vision of universal connection is predicated upon theological limits. It depends upon seeing people as members or potential members of a body in which they may not desire to share. The doctrine of the Mystical Body disciplines the *Catholic Worker's* perceptions to see each person as connected to Christ, but it also privileges that perception over the perceived person's self-understanding. Yet these limits were at the same time the conditions of possibility of the *Catholic Worker* movement.

⁴⁹ This revision to the original masthead was actually suggested to Day by a black Chicago doctor, Arthur Falls (Johnson 55).

3.4 The Implicit Icon of Orthodoxy

Ransom, Eliot, and Day encourage their readers to imagine political communities and political practices beyond the pale of liberalism. Following in the tradition of Cram and Scudder, these Depression-era critics approached sacred history in a more fragmentary fashion than their medievalist forebears. Implicit in their shared discourse of orthodoxy is a splintered social icon—a set of images and aesthetic concepts for imagining a different kind of social order. From sacred history, they gather pieces of an image of community and set them into a mosaic—a rude, flawed, and consciously artistic image. It is an image more like a stained glass window than like a blueprint, intended to inspire and direct action but not to prescribe that action meticulously.

For all three writers, orthodoxy names an historically-grounded, doctrinally-specific theological tradition—tradition, that is, in Alasdair MacIntyre’s sense of “an historically extended, socially embodied argument” rather than a dormant body of knowledge—that supplies the normative warrant for Christian antimodernist social critique (222). MacIntyre goes on to write that “an adequate sense of tradition manifests itself in a grasp of those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present” (223). Each critic relies upon an historical touchstone as a synecdoche for tradition, a pointer to those future possibilities the past potentiates. For Ransom this is the antebellum South; for Eliot it is seventeenth-century England; for Day it is a vaguely medieval European peasant society. The strength of such a touchstone as an image of community is that it is concrete and knowingly flawed; it is an ironic symbol pointing to an ideal at some distance from the historic community itself.

Ransom, Eliot, and Day all insist on limits or margins as crucial to human flourishing. Margins signify the embrace of creaturely limitations, the denial of the Promethean impulse to control. They are an ecological brake on the maximizing behavior that comprises rationality under the paradigm of *homo economicus*. Margins conjure an Aristotelian definition of the good

as mean rather than maximum.⁵⁰ A skeptical reserve toward any particular social arrangement or plan for betterment follows from the espousal of margins. This reserve is tempered, however, by slow hope, the conviction that no act of charity is wasted. Along with the assurance of success, they counsel the renunciation of the assurance of failure.

Like Cram and Scudder, these antimodernist critics also embraced typological time as a Christian form of historical consciousness. Against civilizational narratives of linear progress (or decline), they portray a history where all times inhere in all other times, and time is consummated in the Event of Christ. For Day in particular, typological time militates against the personal development narrative of the self-made man, offering instead the narrative of Christ-like *kenosis* (self-emptying) of the unmade woman or the unmade man—the one who embraces suffering, poverty, and peril alongside others while working for their good—as the *telos* of political subjectivity. Day also furnishes the final piece of the mosaic of orthodoxy’s implicit icon: the paradoxically universal-and-particular image of the Mystical Body of Christ. A form of ultimate community that displaces the pretended authorities of nation, race, class, or even creed, the image of the Mystical Body suspends the tension between doctrinal commitment and religious pluralism. For the Catholic Workers, it gave theological license to social action in a pluralistic culture.

The sort of skepticism towards progress inherent in this Christian antimodernism can, however, be just as mindless and instinctive as progress boosterism. An intelligent criticism of progress requires reasons, not mere prejudice, just as Eliot says that neither Liberalism nor Conservatism constitutes a political philosophy, because both are usually just habits of feeling (*Christianity and Culture* 13). “Progress” is itself a relatively abstract image—just like

⁵⁰ “Eliot was often an Aristotelian in that he found the truth to lie between two differing, perhaps opposite, tendencies” (Kojewky 216). In this, Eliot was representative of Christian antimodernists in the 1930s.

“tradition” or “margins”—that guides and gives sustenance to the moral-political imagination. Many progressives today are in the position of having rejected teleological accounts of history while holding onto the term “progressive” as a political banner. The question is rarely put and more rarely answered: “Progress towards *what?*” With notable exceptions, the answers generally appear in vague or local terms. This relative silence on the question of the end of progress owes both to doubt—the aforementioned suspicion of teleology—and to strategy. Leaving undefined the social goods that constitute the aim of progress maintains the firm, smooth surface of a left-liberal consensus, under which the claims of myriad allegiances and identities may well be incommensurable. What remains in this notion of progress evacuated of any substantive account of the social good, then, is a process of ceaseless development towards no definite end, a process where growth—moral and political growth—has become an end in itself. In short, “progress” is a social icon made in the image of the ceaselessly and pointlessly growing market of neoliberal economics.⁵¹

The search for a substantive account of the social good draws the authors I consider here back into the religious past. To the naively optimistic progressives of their day, these Christian antimodernists gave a stiff tonic of human limitation. To the desperately optimistic progressives of our day, they might offer a heartening draught of political hope. The least progressive aspects of these writers’ intellectual style—their religious commitment and their deference to historical tradition—lead them to affirm the substantive account of the social good embodied in their antimodern images of community. Paradoxically, such an account of the good makes true

⁵¹ “Once we recognize the profound differences between the Christian view of history, prophetic or millenarian, and the modern conception of progress, we can understand what was so original about the latter: not the promise of a secular utopia that would bring history to a happy ending but the promise of steady improvement with no foreseeable ending at all. The expectation of indefinite, open-ended improvement, even more than the insistence that improvement can come only through human effort, provides the solution to the puzzle that is otherwise so baffling—the resilience of progressive ideology in the face of discouraging events that have shattered the illusion of utopia” (Lasch 47-48).

progress possible by establishing a *telos* at which the *polis* may aim. Abandoning progressivism, whether the old hubristic variety or the new nihilistic kind, just might be the price of progress.

These Christian antimodernists' critique of industrial modernity displays their courage to imagine social relations differently, their instinct for the mutual constitution of religious and economic life, and their rejection of simple conservatism or liberalism whether political or theological. Far from smothering the revolutionary imagination, as Edmund Wilson would have it, the antimodern aesthetics of Ransom, Eliot, and Day fueled the fires of political genius. At Day's Catholic Worker movement, those fires would continue to burn throughout the twentieth century, even as new writers and new situations broadened its political concerns beyond the fortunes of labor to also address issues of race, gender, and sexuality. In the next chapter, I trace the literary impact of the movement into the postwar period by analyzing the work of three poets connected to the Catholic Workers—French-born co-founder Peter Maurin, black Catholic convert Claude McKay, and gay English emigrant W. H. Auden—who shaped, and were shaped by, the movement's medievalist aesthetics.

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Chapter 4:

Midcentury Medievalisms with a Difference: Peter Maurin, Claude McKay, W. H. Auden, and the Catholic Worker Movement

Tout commence en mystique et finit en politique.
(Everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics.)
—Charles Péguy, *Notre Jeunesse* (1909)

An attraction to the medieval past is often a symptom of reactionary thought in an intellectual. It can signify an unproductive nostalgia for the lost glories of Christendom. Or it can provide an aesthetic code for a white, male, and aristocratic politics of grievance—one more often pursued by bourgeois connoisseurs of aristocratic privilege than actual aristocrats. But medievalism can also be a progressive force. In the first two chapters, I’ve challenged the association of medievalism with reactionary politics by showing how socialists and anarchists such as Ralph Adams Cram, Vida Dutton Scudder, and Dorothy Day wrote medievalist texts that criticize the capitalist order and imagine democratic futures. I’ve also demonstrated that radical energies persisted in the antimodern writings of conservative religious intellectuals such as Cram, John Crowe Ransom, and T. S. Eliot. In this chapter, I push my reconsideration of the politics of medievalism into the middle decades of the twentieth century. I show how medieval social icons functioned along vectors of class, race, and sexuality for three writers more or less associated with the Catholic Worker movement. Peter Maurin (1877-1949), the Franco-American co-founder of the Catholic Workers and the movement’s ideological dynamo, offers a working-class medievalism. Claude McKay (1889-1948), the globetrotting, Jamaica-born Afro-modernist sonneteer, develops a black medievalism in his final Catholic poems, many of which were published in *The Catholic Worker* newspaper. W. H. Auden (1907-1973), the celebrated

English writer who spent most of his career from 1940 until his death in the United States—and a friend and associate of Dorothy Day—demonstrates in his poetry and essays the fortunes of queer medievalism in the postwar period.

All three writers were poets; all three immigrated to the United States; and all three experienced religious conversions as adults that profoundly impacted their subsequent writing. In McKay's and Auden's cases, critics have often considered their postconversion output of lesser quality than their early works. Maurin only began writing after his conversion, but his poems have been almost completely excluded from the attentions of literary scholars. In what follows of this chapter, I argue for the stylistic and philosophical significance of all three of these bodies of work by reading them in the historical context of the writers' connections to the Catholic Worker movement. Each writer transformed, and was transformed by, the modern medievalist ethos of the Catholic Worker movement as they reckoned with new political realities in their writing.

4.1 Péguy in the Bowery: Peter Maurin's Working-Class Medievalism

Peter Maurin carried his poems in the pockets of his overcoat. Like the books and papers and broken eyeglasses that also filled those pockets—and like the tattered thirdhand overcoat itself—the poems seemed a part of him, all the more inseparable from the man for their down-at-heels ephemerality. Maurin would lose the poems or the coat or the glasses, or he would give them to someone who needed them worse than he did. But he never really lost any of these possessions; he held them more durably in his tenuous way than a more grasping man would have. He memorized his poems, declaimed them during lulls in radical meetings, or recited them to willing and half-willing listeners in New York's Union Square. He printed them on mimeographed sheets and handed them out on streetcorners. Born in France in 1877, he came to North America in 1909 and began writing in English in the 1920s. After 1933, he published his

poems in the *Catholic Worker* newspaper and in Catholic Worker books and in related publications as far afield as Germany, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Maurin was never remunerated for this work. A beggar and a prodigal, he gave his writing as a gift—just as he gave all his labor from the late 1920s onward. But the more he gave his poems away, the more they were his. The logic of his authorship is the paradoxical logic of the Gospels: “Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it” (Luke 17:33). The life he gave away was in the poems he gifted.

Maurin’s life and his poems are so indissolubly connected that to analyze them apart from his biography would be impossible. But just for this reason, his poems have not received the attention they deserve as art. The literature on the Catholic Worker movement co-founder Dorothy Day dwarfs that on Maurin (although Day studies almost always have something to say about him in connection with her). Biographical and ethical studies of Maurin tend to treat the poetry as an adjunct to his life and philosophy, to be mined for illustrative quotes rather than closely analyzed. By contrast, I am interested in Maurin’s life and philosophy primarily as they illuminate his technique. I’ve chosen to call his writings his poems to emphasize his writerly craft, even though he called them “phrased essays.” If Maurin’s adjective “phrased” suggests that the pieces push what T. S. Eliot once called “the borderline of prose,” his noun “essays” accents their philosophical content rather than their poetic form. By reading Maurin as a poet, I read him against the grain of his own self-understanding. But such a reading is necessary to appreciate his achievement as a writer and thinker in the tradition of sacramental radicalism I trace in this dissertation.⁵²

⁵² There are three biographies of Maurin: his disciple Arthur Sheehan’s testament *Peter Maurin: Gay Believer* (1959), Marc Ellis’ *Peter Maurin: Prophet in the Twentieth Century* (1981), and Francis J. Sicius’ arrangement and expansion of Dorothy Day’s notes toward a biography, *Peter Maurin: Apostle to the World* (2004). In her Maurin-inspired ethical study, *The Fear of Beggars: Poverty and Stewardship in Christian Ethics* (2007), Kelly S. Johnson

The subordination of Maurin's poems to his life makes sense given their distribution as gifts. Sociological theorists of gift exchange point out that gifts carry the personality of the giver with them.⁵³ Personal presence was the keystone of Maurin's practical philosophy, which he called "personalism."⁵⁴ All three planks of his social "program of action" depend upon it (Day, "Maurin's Program"). At "roundtable discussions for clarification of thought," people met face-to-face to work through philosophical and political questions together. In "houses of hospitality," people living among the poor personally ministered to their needs. In "agronomic universities"—communal farms and study-centers—scholars and workers lived, farmed, and studied together. Maurin's bedrock principle of personal exchange made face-to-face gift distribution his favored channel for his writings.

Maurin's commitment to personal presence also complicated his attitude towards traditional publishing. When he first began writing, he was reluctant to publish his poems at all "because that crystallized what should be open to further clarification" (Ellis 35). By 1933, however, the desire to give his ideas a wider reach overwhelmed his qualms, and he began searching for Catholic publishers to print his poems. An editor at *Commonweal* connected him to Dorothy Day, and soon after they "broadcasted his ideas through the new medium" of the *Catholic Worker* newspaper (Day, "On Peter Maurin" 42). Through the paper, Maurin and Day

claims that Ellis' biography is "the most complete" (191); I agree with her assessment and largely rely on Ellis for details. Ellis' approach might be termed intelligent hagiography. For a non-hagiographical take on Maurin, the first three chapters of James T. Fisher's *The Catholic Counterculture in America, 1933-1962* (1989) are invaluable. My own method in this chapter, it will become clear, proceeds from the position that is within the purview of the literary critic and historian to look for signs of saintliness—that the perception of (or desire to perceive) the holy is compatible with critical attention to texts and their contexts. While there is some scholarship that liberally quotes Maurin's poetry, there is none, to my knowledge, that closely analyzes it as I do here. This aim constrains me not to quote extensively but rather to choose a few examples and read them in depth against a thick background. Maurin's poems are collected in various Catholic Worker books, of which the most recent is *The Green Revolution* (1961). A selection of his work can be found on the Web here: <http://www.catholicworker.org/petermaurin/easy-essays.html>.

⁵³ See Hyde, esp. 56-73, for a helpful digest of this aspect of gift theory in a literary context.

⁵⁴ Maurin adopted this term from the French thinker Emmanuel Mounier. Maurin quoted Mounier in his poetry and arranged for the English translation of his *Personalist Manifesto* in 1938 (Fisher 45). On Mounier's personalism, see Hellman, esp. 5-11.

sought to extend Peter's personal presence, rather than depersonalize his message. Putting their antimodern personalist message into the modern mass medium required some modifications to the newspaper form. The *Catholic Worker*, as published in New York in the 1930s, looked different from other papers. Where you might expect to find cartoons or photographs, the Workers printed woodcut icons of saints dressed as modern working people.⁵⁵ Picking up an issue of the paper was almost like picking up one of Maurin's castoff overcoats, each column a pocket filled with some unexpected, and potentially holy, thing.

If Maurin's personalism influenced his publishing practices, it also definitively shaped his poetics. Maurin proclaims his commitment to Catholic tradition in a startlingly original style. He praises the Middle Ages in the plainest of modern speech—the vernacular English the Frenchman learned only as an adult. His rural peasant roots sprout up through cracks in metropolitan concrete. His poems incarnate an imagination formed by his brief and unsuccessful discernment of a monastic vocation, his experience in turn-of-the-century French Social Catholicism, and his mid-life conversion to a Franciscan ethic of voluntary poverty. Ultimately, I argue that Peter Maurin forged a distinctive poetic voice by adapting the ideology and style of fin-de-siècle French Social Catholicism to the twentieth-century American urban vernacular.

Peter Maurin was born in a village in the Languedoc region of southern France in 1877. One of twenty-four children, he lived a traditional peasant life on his family's ancestral farm. He grew up on a rustic diet chiefly of vegetables and cured pork and bread baked in the village's communal oven (Day, *The Long Loneliness* 176). Later, his course took him to wealthy Paris suburbs, to the Canadian wilderness, and finally to the New World megalopolises of Chicago and New York City. But village life was never far from his mind. "I was always interested in the land

⁵⁵ Not that the paper didn't also print cartoons. Maurin suggested portraying the saints in this manner to illustrator Ade Bethune (Day, "On Peter Maurin" 19).

and man's life on the land," he told Day ("On Peter Maurin" 4). His agrarian and communitarian criticisms of isolated urban capitalist existence grew out of this early farm experience. In his Languedoc childhood, Maurin lived a form of life still in touch with the Middle Ages at the edges of the modern world.

As a young man, Maurin sought a vocation that would enable him to bring the medieval peasant life of his childhood into the modern world in a new and durable form. He hoped to reconnect the immiserated industrial proletariat to Christ and to the land. Maurin spent five years discerning a vocation with the Lasallian Christian Brothers, a monastic order devoted to teaching and building schools. Though he left the novitiate without becoming a Brother, he always remained an educator. He repeatedly indoctrinated Dorothy Day and many other Catholic Workers in "a Catholic outline of history" and in the three-part social program he trumpeted in person and published in the paper (Day *The Long Loneliness* 172). Maurin's poems likewise take a frankly instructive tone. Day attributed their technique of repetition, on which I expand below, to his pedagogical training. Peter "was the kind of teacher who believed in repetition, restatement, and the continual return to first principles," she recalled ("On Peter Maurin" 5).

After leaving the Christian Brothers, Maurin found his footing among the writers, activists, philosophers, and cranks of turn-of-the-century French Social Catholicism. This "romantic milieu" featured a wealth of strong personalities, including "the bourgeoisie-hating 'ungrateful beggar and author,' Léon Bloy; the Maritains, Jacques and Raissa, who dramatically converted on the brink of carrying out a double suicide pact; [Charles] Péguy; and later Gabriel Marcel" and Emmanuel Mounier (Fisher 44).⁵⁶ Two generations of French Christian thinkers

⁵⁶ The internal quote here, though the wording isn't exact, appears to be from Hellman 22. I expand on Péguy below. For brief background on these fascinating figures, see Hellman 21-35. Fisher 43-47 is an enlightening comparative study of Maurin and Mounier. He concludes that the personalism of the Catholic Workers "had less in common with

bristling with manifestoes, they presented a challenging aspect of radical holiness. Bloy refused to work; the Maritains lived in a celibate marriage; Péguy published long righteous screeds against his ideological enemies and died a martyr's death on the battlefield early in the Great War. In their extremities, each of these representative Social Catholics followed medieval exemplars. Bloy strove to become a beggar-saint in the mold of Francis of Assisi (only more irascible). In his numerous philosophical works, Jacques Maritain recapitulated the thought of Thomas Aquinas for the modern world. Péguy folded his passions for nationalism, socialism, and Catholic mysticism into his devotion to Joan of Arc.⁵⁷

In many respects, Peter Maurin was cut from the same cloth as these writers. But he was attracted to the democratic rather than the reactionary side of Social Catholicism. Maurin worked for five years for *Le Sillon* ("The Furrow") of Marc Sangnier, a movement that attempted to integrate Christianity with the French Republican tradition (Ellis 25-28). Among other duties, Maurin helped to distribute *Le Sillon's* newspaper. In its educational and political aims, Sangnier's group foreshadows the American Catholic Workers. As *Le Sillon* increasingly emphasized political over spiritual goals—a shift that earned it a papal condemnation in 1910—Maurin became disenchanted with the movement. By 1908, he was adrift (28-29). His mandatory military service loomed. Unlike the martial Péguy, Maurin was a confirmed pacifist. To escape the requirement, he left for Canada to join a homesteading project in rural Saskatchewan (29-30).

It was in North America that Maurin made his own romantic move toward radical holiness. After his homesteading partner died in an accident, Maurin, "still speaking only French," came to the United States in 1911 (31). Over the next twenty years, he lived as an

the European philosophy of that name than with the pressing need to define a new American Catholic vision of selfhood" (43).

⁵⁷ Péguy wrote two different long plays about Joan of Arc: *Joan of Arc* (1897) and *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc* (1910).

itinerant laborer, working a succession of manual jobs across the country, with the exception of one crucial period. In the early 1920s, he achieved a comfortable level of prosperity working as a French teacher in Chicago (33). In 1925, he moved his teaching practice to upstate New York. Soon after, he underwent a religious conversion (34). He never spoke about this experience directly, though his close associates recognized it as the crux of his vocation (Sheehan 83). Apparently motivated by the example of St. Francis of Assisi, Maurin ceased to accept payment for teaching or any other labor, though he did accept return gifts of food, clothing, and shelter (Ellis 35). He involved himself in labor activism and began composing his phrased essays for delivery at radical meetings. Eventually he found work as caretaker of a Catholic boys' camp in return for room and board. On the weekends, he came down to Manhattan, where he harangued listeners in Union Square and slept in Bowery flophouses (35-44). He was living in this manner when he met Dorothy Day in 1933 and together they launched *The Catholic Worker*.

When he arrived in Canada in 1909, Maurin spoke not a word of English. Twenty years later, he composed his life's work as a writer in his adoptive language. The residue of his history as a French speaker and adult English learner always clung to Maurin's English, though it was fluent and stylized (and even, at times, stylish). Even after almost forty years in America, his heavy Languedoc accent, Day noted, made him difficult for other New Yorkers to understand (Day, "On Peter Maurin" 37). This accent shaped the form of his poetry, which was originally composed for spoken delivery, not written publication. Maurin's "short phrased lines" allowed him to pause frequently for breath (Day, Foreword 7). This afforded him maximum clarity and power when speaking in loud radical meetings or in outdoor public settings like Union Square. In this light, I understand Maurin's short lines as experiments in form determined by breath, a staple source of innovation in modern American poetry at least since Whitman's long line.

Speaking these short phrased lines in loud public places, Maurin had to keep the ears of his listeners despite his frequent pauses. So he packed each line with jokes, puns, and wordplay. Often these devices play out across breaks in lines that are end-stopped or only subtly enjambed. In this way, they carry the listener from line to line despite the frequent pauses in which Peter was vulnerable to shouting-down. The constraints of his situation as a second-language speaker in loud public fora helped to shape his distinctive poetic voice.

Maurin's short line and skillful wordplay feature prominently in the following excerpt, taken from a piece Maurin delivered orally at a Catholic Worker "Round Table Discussion" at the Manhattan Lyceum in 1933 and subsequently printed in the *Catholic Worker* newspaper:

Two years ago, I went to see Professor Moley,⁵⁸
Former head of President Roosevelt's Brain Trust,
and said to him:
"I came here to find out
if I could make an impression on the depression
by starting a rumpus on the Campus.
But I found out
that agitation is not rampant on the Campus.
Only business is rampant on the Campus.
May be, said I
history cannot be made on the Campus.
And turning toward his secretary, Professor Moley said:
"That's right, we don't make history on the Campus,
we only teach it."
And because history is taught but not made
on the Campus of our Universities,
THE CATHOLIC WORKER is trying
to make history on Union Square,
where people have nothing to lose. (Maurin, "Legalized Usury" lines 1-19)

Maurin constructs the poem through opposition and parallelism, near-parallel, and parallels with a difference. Even its prosy opening implicitly (and when delivered in person, explicitly) opposes Maurin to Moley—trochee vs. trochee, M vs. alliterative M—to point up the

⁵⁸ Raymond Moley was a Columbia law professor and advisor to FDR who first championed, and then turned against, the New Deal (Rosen).

contrast between the shabby provocateur and the academic bigwig. An irregular metrical rhythm kicks in at line 5 with “*impression* on the *depression*,” a galumphing dactyl-pyrrhus (a metrical foot of two unstressed syllables)-dactyl. The syntactically parallel “rumpus on the Campus,” trochee-pyrrhus-trochee, makes line 6 a sort of rhythmical slant rhyme with line 5. “Rumpus on the Campus” itself rhymes rhythmically with the syntactically not-quite-parallel phrase “rampant on the Campus” that ends lines 8 and 9. The polyptoton (repetition of different forms of the same root word) and internal rhyme at lines 5 and 6, respectively—“impression” and “depression,” “rumpus” and “Campus”—serve to highlight through sonic similarity the opposite affective qualities of the nouns: the hopeful impression made by the agitator contrasts the desperate depression of the economy, as the boisterous rumpus contrasts the sedate campus. Maurin repeats the phrase “rampant on the Campus” outright at lines 8 and 9—once positively, once negatively. The alliteration and assonance of **C**ampus of our **U**niversities, **C**atholic Worker, **U**nion Square at lines 16-18 cut to the heart of the poem’s otherwise implicit message: the Catholic Worker movement is actually an educational institution, a parallel opposite to the University. The movement offered a rumpus education, not a campus education—one founded upon agitation rather than business, for making history rather than studying history, led by a Maurin rather than a Moley. Here we can see the sympathy of the teaching vocation of the Christian Brothers with Maurin’s Catholic Worker program of Round-Table Discussions, Houses of Hospitality, and Agronomic Universities where “scholars must become workers so the workers may be scholars” (Maurin *The Green Revolution* 27).

Despite its rhetorical density, “Legalized Usury” is not a difficult poem at the level of words or sentences.⁵⁹ It represents the speech of a common person for common people. Maurin incorporates the slang words (“rumpus”) and everyday American idioms (“nothing to lose”) of which he was notoriously fond into the poem (Day, “On Peter Maurin” 20). In another education-themed poem, Maurin makes his commitment to vernacular language explicit:

[E]ternal principles
must at all times
be presented
in the vernacular
of the man on the street.
Emerson says
that the way
to acquire the vernacular
of the man of the street
is to go to the street
and listen
to the man of the street.
The way to become dynamic
and cease to be academic
is to rub shoulders
with the men on the street. (“Agronomic Universities,” lines 9-20, in *The Green Revolution* 127)

When Dorothy Day wrote, near the end of his life, that “Peter is a Frenchman (for those of you who do not know him) and a peasant, and he has his own way of saying things,” she summed up the language and class determinants of Maurin’s style (“On Peter Maurin” 28). At the same time, she acknowledged that those very constraints helped to produce his unique voice. “The content of Peter Maurin’s program was not original” but drawn from a host of medieval and modern social thinkers (Novitsky 87). Maurin always telegraphed this. He often set others’ ideas (especially those of Eric Gill and Jacques Maritain) in his phrased essay form. His goal was to

⁵⁹ Maurin’s poetic campaign against usury recalls Ezra Pound’s similar political animus. But Maurin was philo-Semitic rather than anti-Semitic (Ellis 146-154). This positive, if fraught, stance was common in French Social Catholicism: Péguy was an ardent Dreyfusard, and Maritain and Bloy each cultivated a Catholic mystique of the Jews.

articulate “a philosophy so old that it looks like new” (Maurin, *The Green Revolution* 83). This insight about content also applies at the level of form. Many of his poetic tricks are rhetorical commonplaces, devices attested from antiquity. But they feel strange in modern writing—so old they sound like new. Beyond his old-new originality, Day also gestured to something else in Maurin’s language, something more affective, perhaps more fundamental. Beyond the concentrated rhetoric of the propagandist and the class-conscious diction of the working-class agitator, I hear pleasure in Peter Maurin’s unmistakable voice, “his own way of saying things.” The delight of linguistic discovery, as experienced by someone learning the language even as he wrote in it, expresses itself in the irrepressible humor of the verse.

Maurin’s style also testifies to his mysticism. Historian James T. Fisher contends that “Maurin’s essays and sayings often resembled Zen koans; he loved puns and American idioms, and used language to suggest a mode of consciousness beyond the reach of ordinary discourse” (Fisher 36). Yet Maurin’s “puns” and idiomatic expressions were the very stuff of “ordinary discourse.” His words and sentences are not difficult to decipher. And just because these linguistic building blocks are ordinary, “the vernacular of the man on the street,” Maurin found them fit, when arranged in his characteristic way, to express “eternal principles.”⁶⁰ Maurin’s mysticism is emphatically sacramental in its perception of spiritual meaning in and through the ordinary—in this case, through ordinary language. So what is it in “ordinary discourse” that Maurin resists if not ordinary words, the speech of the common person? How did his arrangements fit common language to his purpose?

What sets Maurin’s appropriation of ordinary discourse apart from ordinary discourse itself is repetition. His poetic style relies heavily on repetitive rhetorical devices. In “Legalized

⁶⁰ In a similar way, Dorothy Day (and many others since) saw Peter himself in his humble poverty as a proper vessel of Christian holiness. The analogy between Peter Maurin’s person and his poetry is all but irresistible.

Usury,” I’ve already indicated many such techniques: polyptoton, alliteration, assonance, and syntactical and rhythmical parallelisms. The poem’s most prominent repetitive device is epistrophe: five lines end with the phrase “on the Campus.” In “Wealth Producing Maniacs,” a pocket history of the spirit of capitalism from the Reformation through the Great War to the Great Depression, Maurin deploys syntactical repetition in a prosier vein. Anaphora shades over almost into anadiplosis, in which successive sentences begin with the last phrase of the preceding sentences, as the first five of its stanzas begins with the word “when,” followed by a version of the last phrase of the preceding stanza:

1. When John Calvin legalized money lending at interest, he made the bank account the standard of values.
2. When the bank account became the standard of values, people ceased to produce for use and began to produce for profit.
3. When people began to produce for profit they became wealth-producing maniacs.
4. When people became wealth-producing maniacs, they produced too much wealth.
5. When people found out that they had produced too much wealth, they went on an orgy of wealth destruction and destroyed ten million lives besides. (1)

The last stanza omits the “when,” but still begins with a version of the last phrase of the fifth stanza, approximating anadiplosis:

6. And fifteen years after a world-wide orgy of wealth and life destruction, millions of people find themselves victims of a world-wide depression brought about by a world gone mad on mass production and mass distribution. (1)

Interlocking the stanzas syntactically lends the inevitability of catastrophe to Maurin’s narrative.

But Maurin only tells this story in order to insist that its inciting event—the legalization of usury—can, and should, be reversed.⁶¹

⁶¹ Maurin also, in effect, repeated entire poems by publishing them over and over in successive issues of *The Catholic Worker*. “Wealth-Producing Maniacs,” for example, was published four separate times in the paper’s first three years. “Wealth-Producing Maniacs” appears in *Catholic Worker* 1.1, p. 8 (May 1933) with unnumbered stanzas; 1.7, p. 1 (Dec. 15, 1933) as part of longer piece “To NRA Officials—Is Inflation Inevitable?,” the version from which I quote here; 3.1, p. 6 (May 1935) as part of longer piece “Feed the Poor—Starve the Bankers” under an Ade Bethune icon of Jesus driving the moneychangers—in tophats!—from the temple with a whip; 4.2 pp. 1, 4 (June 1936) as part of longer piece “Banking on Bankers.”

“Big Shots and Little Shots,” first published on May Day 1934, is Maurin’s *tour de force* of repetition:

1. America is all shot to pieces
 since the little shots
 are no longer able
 to become big shots.
2. When the little shots
 are not satisfied
 to remain little shots
 and try to become
 big shots,
 then the big shots
 are not satisfied
 to remain big shots
 and try to become
 bigger shots.
3. And when the big shots
 become bigger shots
 then the little shots
 become littler shots.
4. And when the little shots
 become littler shots
 because the big shots
 become bigger shots,
 then the little shots
 get mad at the big shots.
5. And when the little shots
 get mad at the big shots
 because the big shots
 by becoming bigger shots
 make the little shots
 littler shots
 they shoot the big shots
 full of little shots.
6. But by shooting the big shots
 full of little shots
 the little shots
 do not become big shots;
 they make everything all shot.
7. And I don’t like
 to see the little shots
 shoot the big shots
 full of little shots,
 that is why

I am trying to shoot
both the big shots
and the little shots
full of hot shots. (lines 1-46)

This is Maurin's authorial mission statement—his *ars poetica*—and the single best example of his style of “logic with cracks” (Day, “Background for Peter Maurin” 7).⁶² The line-breaks mark pauses for breath. They hammer home, visually and aurally, the repetition of “shots.” The mesmerizing alternation of “big shots” and “little shots” waxes both ridiculous and sublime: the poem feels like a slang litany. But the ceaseless univocal repetition of these phrases in the first five stanzas builds a weight of significance behind the moment when their meaning shifts. Structurally, the poem turns on the antanaclasis (repeating the same word but changing the meaning) at line 32, where the “little shots” of the proletariat metamorphose into bullets. It turns for last time at line 43, where Maurin's rhetorical shooting emerges as the pacifist alternative to violent class warfare. When the poem's punchline trades little shots and big shots for Maurin's poetic “hot shots,” the form clicks into place with all the finality of a Shakespearean sonnet's ending couplet.

Maurin's reliance on repetition led some readers, including Day, to compare him to Charles Péguy (Day, Foreword 7). Because of the two writers' similar style, as well as their shared concerns and provenance, I appeal to some recent work on Péguy in order to illuminate what is at stake in Maurin's repetition. Though he knew Péguy's work, Peter disclaimed any

⁶² “Cracks” here is itself a pun, meaning jokes, fragmented sentences, and off-kilter perceptions. “Background for Peter Maurin” is the best thing Day ever wrote about him; it's one of the best things she ever wrote, period. She interviews him over lunch at a Bowery dive, and the atmospherics are amazing. It's a sort of Doestoyevskeyan vignette replete with imagery of fragmentation and infestation. Peter talks about the sources of his thought in Benedictine, Franciscan, and Jesuit monasticism, French, English, and American literature, contemporary clerics and labor-leaders, and emerging postcolonial activists. In the final sentences, faithfully recorded by Day, he becomes incomprehensible. What comes through to me in this interview, and in poems like “Big Shots and Little Shots,” is Maurin's modernism: the proximity of his linguistic experiments to the deceptively plainspoken iterative weirdness of Gertrude Stein, the sing-song grammatical distortions of e.e. cummings, and the linguistic *destruktion* of the ending of Wallace Stevens' “The Man on the Dump.”

direct influence or acquaintance with the man, and we can take this denial at face value (Day, *The Long Loneliness* 177). Nevertheless, even Jacques Maritain, who knew both men, wrote to Maurin that “it seemed as if I had found again in the Catholic Worker a little of the atmosphere of Peguy’s office in the Rue de la Sorbonne” after he visited the Catholic Worker in November 1934 (qtd. in Ellis 79).⁶³ A couple of brief quotations from Péguy will be sufficient to establish the stylistic resemblance. First, an extract praising sleep (and implicitly criticizing the capitalist work ethic) from Péguy’s long poem *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*:

I don’t like the man that doesn’t sleep, says God.
 Sleep is the friend of man.
 Sleep is the friend of God.
 Sleep is perhaps the most beautiful thing I have created.
 And I myself rested on the seventh day.

 But they tell me that there are men
 Who work well and sleep badly.
 Who don’t sleep. What a lack of confidence in me.
 It is almost more serious than if they worked badly and slept well.
 Than if they did not work but slept, because laziness
 Is not a greater sin than unrest,
 It is not even so great a sin as unrest
 And despair and lack of confidence in me. (*Basic Verities* 209, lines 1-5 & 12-19)⁶⁴

Maurin shares Péguy’s breezy tone, anaphoric syntax, and tendency towards aphorism. Péguy’s prose relies on many of the same repetitive techniques as his poetry, though it comes out gnarly and difficult as a result:

And she [The Church] will not reopen the door of the work-room and she will not be open once more to the people, unless she too she like the rest of the world, unless she too pays the price of an economic revolution—a social revolution, an industrial revolution, in short, a temporal revolution for eternal salvation. Such is, eternally, temporally, the mysterious subjection of the eternal itself to the temporal. Such is properly the inscription of the eternal itself in the temporal. Economic expenses, social expenses, industrial expenses, temporal expenses must be met. Nothing can evade it, not even the eternal, not even the spiritual, not even the inner life. (*Basic Verities* 119)

⁶³ It seems that Maritain and Maurin spoke in English. Maritain’s letter is in English, and in it he laments his lack of fluency that hampered their conversation.

⁶⁴ My Péguy translations are from Ann and Julian Green’s anthology *Basic Verities* (1943).

Péguy's "inscription of the eternal itself into the temporal" finds its echo in Maurin's demand that eternal principles be put into the vernacular of the man on the street.

In a recent essay on Péguy, the French philosopher and anthropologist of modernity Bruno Latour connects Péguy's repetitive style to his polemical campaign against "the temporal power of capitalism" ("Charles Péguy" 51).⁶⁵ Capitalism, according to Latour, "nullifies the discontinuity of time...by making us believe that what will happen in the future is already so determined by the past that we can always calculate its *yield*" (51). The model for this "temporal logic" is compound interest: "a bank savings account...causes the past to be propelled toward the future like a ball rolling down an inclined plane" (51). In this connection, we can recall Maurin's "Wealth-Producing Maniacs," with its Calvin-approved bank accounts that produce an inexorable history of economic disaster the poem both recounts and refuses. Against the capitalist temporality that joins past and future by skipping over the present, Péguy appeals to the Christian dogma of the Incarnation. This inscription of the eternal into the temporal, of God made into a human being—paradigmatic in its historical uniqueness—insists on what Latour calls "the irreducible hiatus of the present" (54-55). The Incarnation allows Péguy to think in terms of the repleteness of the now, rather than a future rate of return.

It was in his poetic style, "*by means of repetition alone*," that Péguy "was able to communicate the hiatus of the present for the time-dimension of the world," Latour argues (56). Yet he maintains that Péguy's repetitions do philosophical, and not only stylistic, work; repetition is no mere "effect" but a "concept generated by style" that makes it "possible to

⁶⁵ This essay appeared in *New Literary History* in 2015, with translation and introduction by Tim Howles. Howles notes a recent resurgence in Péguy studies.

inhabit an entirely different space-time from the rest of the moderns” (57). In an earlier piece on Péguy, Latour describes in greater detail just how repetition forces this temporal rift:

An author who does not repeat himself short of one phrase or another, in a progressive fashion, heals over transitions, and imposes in this way upon the reader the image of a temporal flow or of a movement of meaning that proceeds straight through from the beginning to the end. An author who repeats himself suspends this movement, deflects this current, and weakens the confidence habitually put in the temporal framework of progress. Further, if he repeats arguments and restarts incessantly, he produces an effect of breathlessness and restlessness, specifically to serve other purposes than those of the world of representation. (“Pourquoi Péguy se Répète-t-Il?” 2, my translation)⁶⁶

According to Latour, Péguy’s repetition disrupts the effortless flow of the past into the future demanded by the temporality of compound interest. His sentences confront the reader with a non-progressive “temporal framework”; their syntax argues that thinking in terms of progress is no more inevitable than progress itself. Though he was preoccupied with medieval themes, Péguy’s style in this way forces an existential confrontation with the present.

These insights may readily be applied to illuminate the effects of Maurin’s repetition. By reordering ordinary discourse, Maurin challenges the assumptions about time that structure ordinary discourse. The repletion of his poems frustrates the smoothly consequent progression from one item to another that Latour identifies as the syntactical form of the temporal logic of the bank account. Maurin’s poetry argues that the past does not inevitably determine the future, that causes can be unraveled, that the history of capitalism’s rise can be rewritten. By going back in various senses—to medieval subjects, to first principles, to reiterated arguments, even to the same words—over and over again, Maurin’s “logic with cracks” cracks the temporal logic of capitalism.

⁶⁶ This was actually Latour’s first published piece of scholarship. I takes his final cryptic reference to the “purposes” of “the world of representation” to mean that the repetitions are philosophically, and not only stylistically, significant.

Lamenting Péguy's early death in the Great War, Latour complains that when the Catholic Church needed "a new Francis of Assisi, what they ended up with was a Jacques Maritain!" ("Charles Péguy" 54). This is an uncharitable assessment of Maritain, to be sure, but it throws light on the historical significance of Peter Maurin. A new St. Francis—a repetition, with a difference, of the Poor Man of Assisi—is exactly what Dorothy Day saw in Maurin. As she put it in his obituary, "We have written this before, and we repeat it again. Peter was the poor man of his day. He was another St. Francis of modern times" ("On Peter Maurin" 47). While Day's writings help us to see the medieval saint in Maurin, Latour's commentary on Péguy enables us to grasp Maurin's newness, his modernity. And that newness has nothing to do with progress but rather with a relentless, repeated confrontation with the present. Maurin's repetitive style is a poetics of that confrontation, just as his personalism is a philosophy of that confrontation—a theory for the practice of shared personal presence with the poor and suffering in space and time.

On the streets of Chicago and New York City, Maurin's Péguyan sensibility picked up new influences in his new language. Along with the American slang he incorporated into his poetry, Maurin also engaged deeply with Anglophone religious intellectuals. He often published digests, in phrased essay form, of their works in *The Catholic Worker*. These connections fix his crucial place in the literary history of American Christian radicalism. Maurin quotes the nineteenth-century British social prophets—Carlyle, Ruskin, and Williams Morris—so dear to Vida Scudder, as I noted in Chapter 1. He also appeals to his English Catholic contemporaries, such as historian Christopher Dawson and Distributists G. K. Chesterton, Hillaire Belloc (himself Anglo-French), and the designer and typographer Eric Gill. "The best of all / is Eric Gill," Maurin affirmed (*The Green Revolution* 215, lines). To help translate his vision into the

twentieth-century American vernacular, Maurin incorporated voices from the American tradition of social idealism as well, from the Puritans to Emerson (*The Green Revolution* 127, 202). Maurin likewise drew upon American antimodernist intellectuals including Henry Adams, the Nashville Agrarians, and Ralph Adams Cram. “Back to Christ!—Back to the Land!,” first published in the November 1935 *Catholic Worker*, argues for farm communes as an antidote to the ills of industrialism (1, 8). The poem quotes from a wide variety of sources, including Carlyle, Gill, Cram, and the novelist and essayist Andrew Lytle, one of John Crowe Ransom’s Twelve Southerners. Maurin appended a recommended reading list to the piece, as he often did; this one includes the Southerners’ *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930), which I treat in Chapter 2 (“Back to Christ!” 8). This same poem appeals to Lenin, Gandhi, and another person identified only as “a Chinese,” according them the same authority as Cram, Lytle, Carlyle, and Gill. Cram—and Lytle, too—would have been scandalized to keep such company. But the pockets of Peter Maurin’s overcoat joined strange bedfellows, their disparate insights held together by the intensity and catholicity of his vision.

This same catholicity of vision led Peter Maurin to take Social Catholicism uptown to Harlem in May 1934 (Ellis 82). In a donated storefront on Seventh Avenue, Maurin launched an educational outpost of the Catholic Worker to counter the growing Communist influence in the Black Metropolis. Maurin displayed a Black Madonna in the window, recruited black speakers, and held classes on French, art, theology, and personalist agitation. In the Harlem context, Maurin appealed especially to the example and theology of the North African bishop and Doctor of the Church, St. Augustine of Hippo (83-84). Despite these efforts, the Harlem branch of the Catholic Worker never gained much traction. When the Second World War approached, a patriotic landlord kicked the pacifist Peter Maurin back to the Bowery (86). As quixotic and

short-lived as his Catholic Worker farming communes, the Harlem experiment was vintage Maurin.

In his long poem “Peter Maurin,” contemporary poet David Craig imagines the 1937 visit of Jesuit priest and racial justice activist John La Farge to the Catholic Workers’ Seventh Avenue storefront. La Farge is looking for a visionary prophet:

He wondered “What scrolls had Peter eaten?
what honey tasted?” (12, lines 40-41)

La Farge seeks someone with the authoritative appeal of St. John the Apostle, who eats a scroll in Revelation, or St. John the Baptist, who lived on honey and locusts in the desert. But in person, the priest finds Maurin’s poverty embarrassing:

His heart sank.
There was no electricity no money
for candles.
But then in the streetlight,
he could make out a finger Peter’s
and a faint sound like voices.
The stirring of reeds
along a Babylonian canal. (12, lines 47-49)

La Farge’s disappointment at the meanness, the meagerness of the Workers’ uptown outpost stands as a gloss on Maurin’s entire life. It could also serve as a judgment on his writing. What is his slim assembly of slogans straining at prophecy but a poor, fleeting gesture against the implacable darkness? But David Craig knows that disappointment is the beginning of wisdom when it comes to Peter Maurin. The poet alludes to Christ’s sermon on John the Baptist—delivered, in the King James, with all the insistent repetition of a Maurin poem:

What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind?
But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses.
But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? (Matthew 11:7-9)

Disappointment begins a true reckoning with Maurin's poverty. It is a portal of the mystery of hope, that virtue most beloved of Péguy. If a prophet were to appear in the modern world, would he appear as anything but a fool—a small man in a shabby coat speaking ceaselessly into the night, his rough accent like the sound of wind rattling the reeds?

Maurin's hope for a Harlem beachhead did not remain disappointed for long. In 1938, the year after his underwhelming visit to the Catholic Worker storefront, Fr. La Farge invited the Russian émigré Catherine de Hueck to establish a house of hospitality in Harlem (Karen Johnson 55). De Hueck's Toronto-based Friendship House apostolate, allied but not formally affiliated with the Catholic Workers, had opened several such houses in Canada before conservative pressures forced them to close. The Harlem Friendship House would go on to minister to one of the greatest poets of Harlem's Renaissance, Claude McKay, in a time of great need. McKay's contact with Friendship House workers facilitated his eventual conversion to Catholicism. Soon after, his sonnets appeared alongside Maurin's easy essays in the pages of *The Catholic Worker*.

4.2 Dark Like Me: Claude McKay's Black Medievalism

Claude McKay was in a bad way when, in 1942, his friend Ellen Tarry found him alone in his Harlem apartment. A terrible case of the flu, complicated by his longstanding high blood pressure, congestive heart failure, and poverty, had left him unable to care for himself (Cooper, *Rebel Sojourner* 351). A proud man, McKay would not reach out for help. He had alienated many former allies in years of intellectual combat and, contrary to his pride, by repeatedly asking them for money. In such straits, Tarry, an African-American journalist and writer of children's books, was a good person to have in his corner. A devout Catholic laywoman, she called on her fellow volunteers at de Hueck's Harlem Friendship House to help nurse McKay back to health. He "was grateful for the help, and he was extremely impressed that they offered their assistance

without asking him to accept their religion” (351). Nevertheless, these Catholics made an impression on a weary sojourner longing for community. By June 1943, McKay wrote to Mary Jerdo Keating, a white Catholic intellectual friend he had met at Friendship House, that he was considering joining the Church. “I am quite aware that my act would be of more social than of religious meaning, if you can differentiate between both,” McKay hedged (qtd. in Cooper, *Rebel Sojourner* 357). He went on to compare his motivations to those of “T. S. Eliot, who became an Anglo-Catholic from purely intellectual and social reasons” (357). But McKay, like Eliot, found it finally impossible to differentiate the religious and the social—especially as his health continued to deteriorate.

On Jun 25, 1943, just ten days after writing to Keating, McKay “suffered a disabling stroke while on the job” as a riveter at the federal shipyard in Port Newark (356). Friends had warned him off the physically demanding work, but McKay took the job anyway. After his hospitalization, Keating and her husband put McKay up in their Connecticut cottage to recover. He lived there through the summer and into the fall, mulling over his religious questions and working up his venomous sonnet sequence, “The Cycle” (357-358). While never published as a whole in his lifetime, some of these poems eventually appeared in *The Catholic Worker*. Through the Keatings, a partially recovered McKay secured a research position with the activist Bishop Bernard Sheil in Chicago, where he moved in April 1944 (359-360). Along with de Hueck and, for a time, Tarry, the Keatings had moved to Chicago to establish a Friendship House there. The Catholic Workers already had a house in Chicago as well. In these circles, McKay joined a vibrant, if not always harmonious, community devoted to interracial, anticapitalist, anticommunist Catholic action (Karen Johnson 55-64). He began taking instruction from local priests. Months later, McKay announced his conversion in a letter to his friend and

editor, the unyielding agnostic Max Eastman: “On October 11, 1944, the Feast of the Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, I was baptised into the Catholic (Roman) Faith” (Cooper, *Passion* 304).⁶⁷

A few weeks after his baptism, Dorothy Day reconnected with McKay and invited him to a Christmas retreat at the Catholic Worker farm in Easton, Pennsylvania (306).⁶⁸ It is likely that McKay met Peter Maurin at this retreat. Maurin had been living primarily at the farm since the summer of 1938, and he continued to live there at least through the winter of 1945 (Ellis 123, 159). But McKay was most struck by the changed religious aspect of his old friend Day. He described her to Eastman as “something like a saint” and floated the idea of profiling her for the socialist and anticommunist *New Leader* (Cooper, *Passion* 306-307). It is no wonder if Maurin made less of an impression. He was but a shell of the fiery agitator who had held court in Union Square in 1933. Returning to him in October of 1944 after a sabbatical, Day determined that Maurin had suffered a stroke in the preceding months (Ellis 159). Dispossessed at last, he began to forget his essays. In January of 1945, Maurin handed in a number of phrased settings of Eric Gill and announced that he was finished writing for good (160).

Their mutual endurance of strokes and subsequent physical (and in Maurin’s case, mental) deterioration were but the final acts in the parallel lives of Maurin and McKay. Both men grew up in contact with agrarian peasant societies that indelibly shaped their mature imaginations. The communal life of Languedoc was always the implicit background of Maurin’s “Green Revolution.” Similarly, McKay often hymned the simplicity of rural Jamaica from his

⁶⁷ See also Cecelia Moore, “The Sources and Meaning of the Conversion of Claude McKay,” *Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium* 2 (2008), pp. 59-80.

⁶⁸ Eastman, McKay, and Day were old radical colleagues from their Greenwich Village days, when Eastman published both of them as editor of *The Liberator*. But Eastman was anything but pleased with the Catholic company McKay was joining. In his letters, he took potshots at Day’s character that McKay repudiated (Cooper, *Passion* 312).

later urban vantages. He was to return to the landscape of his childhood one last time in his final autobiographical manuscript, “My Green Hills of Jamaica.” Both men lived itinerant transnational lives that braided together improvised labor, political activism, and literary production. Both increasingly depended on others’ generosity for their livelihood: Maurin willingly, McKay unwillingly. And both underwent religious conversions later in life. These profound experiences spurred each man to write a body of social-critical poetry that scholars have tended to regard as less than literary—especially, in McKay’s case, by comparison with the sharp, sparkling lyrics and pioneering novels he wrote earlier in his career.

It is difficult to separate critical evaluations of McKay’s changed (or diminished) late style from critical judgments on his religious conversion. In a recent article in *Callaloo*, Madhuri Deshmukh argues that “critics have been wary, to say the least, of McKay’s final conversion to Catholicism, suspecting him of an intellectual abdication or exhausted rejection of his nomadic and radical youth” (148). “[E]ven the most serious among them” she charges, “have either ignored or dismissed his unusual and fascinating years as a Catholic” (148-149). Deshmukh overstates critical hostility to McKay’s Catholicism. Of his major interpreters, only biographer Tyrone Tillery follows the trail blazed by the skeptical Eastman by dismissing McKay’s “religious convictions” as “suspect” (Tillery 180). Nevertheless, it’s undeniable that these late poems have not enjoyed the prestige of earlier collections such as *Harlem Shadows* (1922).⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Deshmukh alleges that critics like Wayne Cooper, Barbara Griffin, and Tillery have demystified McKay’s conversion “by looking for the psychological or material ‘reality’ *behind* his conversion, or worse, by impugning his motives” (150). She is wrong about the first two at least. Cooper works from sound evidence in McKay’s letters and “My Green Hills” when he connects McKay’s Catholicism to his desire for patronage from the Church and his rebellion against his fundamentalist Protestant father (*Rebel Sojourner* 368-369, 364-365). Cooper effectively distances himself from those “who have questioned the authenticity and sincerity of McKay’s conversion”; he merely attends, as a biographer should, to the material circumstances of that conversion (368). Griffin, for her part, emphasizes the importance of the care McKay received at Friendship House, but not to cast doubt on his sincerity (41-43). Deshmukh’s is an important and enlightening argument, but the essay is overly defensive, almost apologetical, in tone and prone to small but not inconsequential errors, e.g.: she refers to Griffin as “Griffith” and destroys the Maurinesque pun of McKay’s sonnet entitled “The Pagan Isms” by rendering it “Paganism” (149-150).

Taking a balanced view, William J. Maxwell acknowledges the continuities as well as the changes in McKay's outlook after his conversion: "McKay's turn to Catholicism, though prodded by [a] paranoid anticommunism developed in the late 1930s, was no negation of a life of political insurgency," as he continued to "mix socialism and anti-imperialism into his censure of the godless Soviet Union" (*Complete Poems* xxv). Maxwell points out that *Catholic Worker* readers gave the late poems a much more positive reception than Eastman did, again (and for the last time) affording the poet "an audience" and even sending him "fan letters" (385).

Reading McKay's late poetry in the context of *The Catholic Worker*, I argue that these poems expand the stylistic and political significance not only of McKay's important oeuvre but also of a particular genre of twentieth-century Catholic poetry tied to the paper: a critical, highly rhetorical, but plainspoken working-class medievalist poetry. If Peter Maurin was the genre's archetypal practitioner, McKay expanded its technical range to encompass rhyme and meter and shifted its thematic focus to foreground race. Seeing McKay's late poems in this light as Maurinesque rhetorical "hot shots" goes some way to investing them with their own generic independence and dignity. If the poems of "The Cycle," for example, seem to suffer when compared with those of *Harlem Shadows*—to Wayne Cooper they come off as "satiric prose summaries," rather than lyrics (*Rebel Sojourner* 358)—they seem precisely crafted by comparison with Maurin's bumptious phrased essays.⁷⁰ McKay's poems of the 1940s lent literary weight to *The Catholic Worker*.

On the other hand, the qualities of the late poems that seem most unexpectedly different when compared to McKay's early work—namely, their unalloyed religiosity and reliance on medievalist tropes—only maintain McKay's longstanding penchant for rebellious traditionalism.

⁷⁰ Maxwell notes the poems' "unadorned satiric diction" with appreciation and emphasizes the extent of "the impulse to turn hatred to lyric account" across McKay's career (368).

In the author's note to *Harlem Shadows*, McKay explains his seemingly anachronistic attachment to meter and rhyme over free verse: "I have adhered to such of the older traditions as I find adequate for my most lawless and revolutionary passions and moods" (xx). Such a revolutionary spirit would not be subject even to then-expected poetics. McKay's adoption of the Elizabethan sonnet form in radical declarations such as "If We Must Die" trades on that form's history of political intrigue, Maxwell argues, evincing a poetics of "resonant historical correspondences" rather than *ex nihilo* innovation (*Complete Poems* xxxix). The poet's commitment to what Maxwell terms "the old-made-new logic of cultural renaissance" (xxxix) helped make him receptive to the *Catholic Worker* vision. As Maurin expressed that vision: "to create a new society within the shell of the old," with "a philosophy so old that it looks like new" (*The Green Revolution* 83). In a similar vein, Deshmukh argues that "the need for Church dogma, Church doctrine, to help mediate one's way in the world is akin to the need for traditional poetic form. Both provide structure, moderation, and the wisdom of the past to help organize the teeming disorder of the modern present" (164-165). But McKay would emphasize revivifying over relying on such forms, inspiration over need, "Church-as-intuition" over "Church-as-institution," to borrow Bruno Latour's terms ("Charles Péguy" 54). If *Harlem Shadows* employed "old...poetically overworked and dead" words whenever McKay "could make them glow alive by new manipulation," his late poems newly manipulate medievalist tropes to reckon with race ("Author's Word" xxi). In McKay's hands, Maurin-style *Catholic Worker* poetry confronts the problem of the color line, resulting in what I want to call a black medievalism.

Nowhere is this black medievalism developed in a more striking fashion than in McKay's sonnet "The Middle Ages," published in the "Cult :: Culture :: Cultivation" section, named for one of Maurin's favored alliterative phrases, of *The Catholic Worker* on May Day 1946:

The Middle Ages which they say were dark
 Like me, were lit up with Thy grace, oh Lord!
 And rare with music like a singing lark
 Rising with notes of Thy divinest word!
 Averrhoes, Aquinas and Maimonides,
 Mohammedan and Christian and Jew,
 Interpreted the richness of their creeds,
 Thy Church brooding over all points of view,

Like a grand tree, rooted in faith supreme,
 Its glory and its strength protecting all,
 Illuminating earth with heaven's beam
 Of the Brotherhood of Man without the Fall!
 Hermits and princes, men with wisdom's rods
 With which they walked abroad and talked to gods. (lines 1-14)

The stunning enjambment of the first two lines—"dark / Like me"—dramatizes the collision of medievalist speech with McKay's black body. Not the poet's persona, his lyric "I," but the poet-as-object (like *me*), the poet's body. Under its title, printed in blackletter Gothic script, the poem's first line could be understood to announce an abstract, Maurinesque defense of the Middle Ages against the moderns' chronological snobbery (Fig. 4.1):



Fig. 4.1: Claude McKay's "The Middle Ages" (1946) in its *Catholic Worker* context.

But the sense of the poem turns (if there is a volta in this sonnet, it is here, rather than at the end of the octave or before the couplet), and the second line makes medievalism personal: dark are these ages, and beautiful in their darkness, as McKay's skin is beautiful—dark, “they say,” with the presumption of ignorance, but in truth as bright with art and learning as a McKay lyric. In the same breath, McKay unites two great prejudices of the enlightened rationalism of the modern white West—against the Catholic Middle Ages and against the savage black body—and, by combining them, disposes of them simultaneously. Medievalism ought to imply antiracism, McKay suggests, and antiracism ought to occasion a second look at the discredited medieval.

Yet the lines' enjambment resists a too-quick assimilation of the plight of the Middle Ages to that of the black body, instituting a visual and sonic rift between the two as well as a connection. McKay seems to be trying on a medievalist discourse, unsure whether it suits him. The remainder of the first quatrain comes too easily; the images of the light of grace and the ascending lark are conventional in the extreme, lacking any new manipulation to set them aglow. But things get interesting again at line 5, where a mouthful of philosophers tumbles out in sprung rhythm, breaking with (mostly) iambic pentameter of the first quatrain. These names limn McKay's medieval vision, not of a unified Christian Europe, but of a multicultural Mediterranean of Abrahamic “creeds,” plural, and even, as the last word of the poem has it, of “gods.” Twelfth-century contemporaries Averroës and Maimonides were both products of the Al-Andalus, the medieval Islamic empire that stretched from North Africa into present-day Spain, a fact McKay perhaps acknowledges by naming the “Mohammedan” philosopher first. Born in the Andalusian intellectual center of Cordova (Córdoba), each thinker spent considerable portions of their careers in North Africa (Seeskin, Hillier). McKay also lived in North Africa during “his mature expatriate decade, 1923-1933,” a choice he made under FBI pressure as well

as affinity for the place (*Complete Poems* xvii). A few months before he was baptized, McKay even confessed to Eastman that if he had “remained in Morocco” he “most certainly would have become a Moslem” (qtd. in *Complete Poems* 384). Sensitive to exclusion based on race and political affiliation and alive to differences of culture and religion because of his travels, McKay shifts Catholic Worker medievalism into an insistently cultural-pluralist register in this sonnet.

But the poem also struggles to contain pluralism within Catholicism by putting the Church at both its center and its boundaries. “Aquinas” and “Christian” take the middle spot in its list of philosophers and their creeds. This placement at once relativizes and accentuates the favored philosopher of Maritain and the neo-Thomists. In its original home in the *Catholic Worker*, “The Middle Ages” is printed above a translated excerpt from Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* condemning usury. On the facing page, a fragment from the French Social Catholic Léon Bloy under the title “Spiritually We Are All Semites” appears in English translation as well (Fig. 4.1).⁷¹ Bloy insists on the Jewishness of the bodies of Jesus, Mary, and the apostles, and this insistence lights up McKay’s invocation of the Jewish philosopher Maimonides. The rhetorical effect of juxtaposing McKay’s text with Bloy’s is complex; it acknowledges Jewish difference while also claiming a special Catholic kinship to the Jews. Together, these texts subtly assert Christian superiority by privileging Gentile Catholic thoughts *about* Jewishness over Jewish self-understandings. But *The Catholic Worker* was of course a Catholic newspaper.

⁷¹ The same issue features an extract on the difference between (holy) poverty and (evil) destitution from Ann and Julien Green’s translations of Charles Péguy, complete with Ade Bethune illustrations of the seven corporal works of mercy. On the front page, a reprint of Maurin’s “Wealth Producing Maniacs” appears again below an editorial condemning the atomic bomb. These coordinates situate McKay firmly in a Social Catholicism morphing to meet the challenges of the American midcentury. Deshmukh argues that “McKay’s attempts to bring the stridently rebellious, emancipatory ideals of his radical Marxist youth into dialogue with the humility, compassion, and non-violence of his newfound religious sensibilities anticipate the prophetic non-violent Christianity of the Civil Rights era” (151). In this connection, McKay appears as a crucial link in literary and social history between the French-sourced personalism of the Catholic Workers and the “Boston personalism” imbibed by Martin Luther King, Jr. during his graduate work at Boston University. I hope to explore this connection in a new chapter as I expand and revise this dissertation towards publication.

McKay's cultural pluralism helped to push its reckoning with difference to the edge of what was possible within the frame of the paper's confessional commitment.⁷²

This is to say that McKay's grappling with difference in "The Middle Ages" fits in with, and advances, the larger pattern of Catholic Worker responses to problem of pluralism highlighted in the previous chapter. There I argued that the Day of the 1930s, increasingly sought to resolve the conflict between specificity and catholicity in the doctrine and image of the mystical body of Christ:

We believe that we are all members or potential members of the mystical Body of Christ . . . *All* men are our brothers, Jew or Gentile, white or black, since God created us *all* and since His Son died to atone for the sins of *all* men. Since Christ is our Brother, *all* men are our brothers, the communist, fascist, the red baiter and the "capitalist." ("Catholic Worker Celebrates" 1)

McKay also appealed to the Mystical Body to at once resolve and suspend religious difference. In the same June 30, 1944 letter in which he admits to Eastman that he would have become a Muslim had he stayed in North Africa, McKay affirms his belief "in the mystery of the symbol of the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, through which all humanity may be united in brotherly love" (qtd. in Cooper, *Rebel Sojourner* 361).

The sonnet "The Middle Ages," however, imagines the corporeal Catholic Church, and not the Mystical Body of Christ, as the vehicle of universal reconciliation. A sheltering tree "brooding over all points of view," like a mother bird on her nest, McKay's idealized Church nurtures and protects religious intellectuals in their engagements with secular wisdom. (Averroës, Aquinas, and Maimonides are all known for synthesizing the teachings of their respective religious traditions with the philosophy of Aristotle.) But the idiomatic sense of "brooding" as melancholy thought unsettles the comforts of the matronly image; it recalls

⁷² For more on the Catholic Worker movement and the Jews, see Myles Werntz, "Many Roots, One Tree: Dorothy Day on the Mystical Body of Christ, Judaism, and War," *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 14.1 (June 2015).

McKay's years of difficult consideration leading up to his conversion. The image of the brooding tree speaks less to any actually existing medieval society than to McKay's efforts to reconcile his attraction to the Church with his intellectual and material needs while recognizing the intractability of cultural differences.⁷³ In a September 1946 letter, he reminds Eastman that "there is a formidable left wing within the Catholic church [*sic*] because it can accommodate all, even you" (Cooper, *Passion* 314).⁷⁴ Whether or not the Church could truly accommodate all, writers in *The Catholic Worker*, from Day's early editorials onward, strove to imagine ways in which it could. McKay's poetic efforts to imagine a Catholic "Brotherhood of Man" went further than nearly all of his contemporaries.

As he broadened the purview of Catholic radicalism, McKay also strove to explain his religious transformation to himself and to his readers. In the process, he renarrated both his life story and vast sweeps of world history. He had some practice with the former. After falling out with the Communist Party, he had written his anticommunism back into his autobiography *A Long Way From Home* (1937) (Tillery 75). Now he perused his past for signs of divine presence, and experiences he had glossed one way now took on new shades of meaning, as the following sonnet illustrates. Originally published in Alain Locke's *Survey Graphic* in 1925 under the title "Russian Cathedral," McKay published a slightly revised version as "St. Isaac's Church,

⁷³ If there was religious pluralism in the Middle Ages, it was in Andalusia and was Muslim-, not Christian-sponsored: "Medieval Andalusia . . . provided a venue for Muslims and Christians, along with Jews, to live in proximity and even mutual appreciation. It was a time of great opulence and achievement, and social intercourse at the upper levels was easy . . . Medieval Andalusia has often been cited as an ideal place and time of interfaith harmony. To some extent that claim may be justified. If so, however, it was fairly short and was soon supplanted by the tensions, prejudices, and ill treatment of minorities by both Muslims and Christians that more often have characterized relationships between the communities. By the 10th century the Iberian Peninsula was characterized by hostilities" between Christians and Muslims (Smith).

⁷⁴ In the same letter, McKay revealingly compares the early-Cold War spread of Communism to the Muslim conquest of Spain. Then as now, he argues, corrupt Christians deserve to be defeated by their ideological competitors (Cooper, *Passion* 313).

Petrograd” in the October 1947 *Catholic Worker* (*Complete Poems* 346). Here is the original text:

Bow down my soul in worship very low
And in the holy silences be lost.
Bow down before the marble man of woe,
Bow down before the singing angel host.
What jewelled glory fills my spirit’s eye!
What golden grandeur moves the depth of me!
The soaring arches lift me up on high
Taking my breath with their rare symmetry.

Bow down my soul and let the wondrous light
Of Beauty bathe thee from her lofty throne
Bow down before the wonder of man’s might.
Bow down in worship, humble and alone;
Bow lowly down before the sacred sight
Of man’s divinity alive in stone. (*Complete Poems* 209-210, lines 1-14)

In its *Survey Graphic* form, the poem hymns the divine ingenuity of human art and suggests that the proletariat—those men and women of woe—are the modern antitype of Christ. However, in its *Catholic Worker* iteration, “beauty” is demoted to lowercase, while “Man of Woe” and “Divinity” are capitalized, focusing the praise on Christ himself, God incarnate as suffering man (*Complete Poems* 346). The poem’s new title pointedly returns the eponymous church—in fact converted, in 1931, into the Soviet State Antireligious Museum—to its ecclesial origin as a Russian Orthodox cathedral (“Museum History”). Likewise, it rewinds the city of Leningrad to its pre-Stalinist name of “Petrograd.” The republished version of the poem thus laments the suppression of Russian Christianity under Soviet rule. But it also locates the first inklings of McKay’s faith in his aesthetic experiences of Christian architecture during his expatriate decade.

To his Catholic audience, McKay presented these experiences as a propaedeutic to his conversion. In the Catholic magazine *The Epistle*, he pointed especially to the cathedrals of Western Christendom he visited in England, France, and Spain. During his 1919-1921 trip to

England, the agnostic writer George Bernard Shaw had schooled McKay in medieval aesthetics and Fabian socialism, training his perceptions for his later Continental travels:

Years before in London, Bernard Shaw had impressed me with a long talk about the beauty of medieval cathedrals and how to look at them. Now on the continent of Europe, in France and in Spain, I had leisure for visiting and contemplation in the cathedrals. I lifted my head up at the great Gothic arches and was overwhelmed by their beauty. It was in Europe that I saw the vision of the grandeur and glory of the Roman Catholic religion. ("On Becoming a Roman Catholic" 106)

Here McKay's life story takes on tropes of the Catholic Socialist conversion story familiar from the experiences of Vida Scudder and Ralph Adams Cram in Chapter 1. These earlier writers had found medieval art and architecture an aesthetic door into the faith; however, in the aftermath of their conversions, they struggled to synthesize their newfound religious and political convictions. Whether or not McKay found his own European experiences similarly provocative and elusive in their import at the time is questionable but ultimately unimportant. In the 1940s, McKay retrospectively appropriated the sacred-architectural conversion story to make his transformation understandable to other Catholics and to himself. Or, more accurately, this renarration itself constitutes his conversion.

If McKay's conversion was a renarration of his life story, it was also a reorientation to world history. McKay had long been disillusioned with the optimistic progressivism that undergirded the Fabians' gradualist approach to social change. His alienation from the Communist Party later weakened his confidence in the Marxist-Leninist idea that progress could be secured through the efforts of a revolutionary vanguard. In the Catholic faith, McKay sought an historiography that would support social radicalism without buying into the pretensions of progress—again, much as Cram and Scudder had done before him. He projects this historiographic quest back onto his Spanish travels: "As a pagan I had always accepted without thinking clearly about it, that Catholic countries were the most backward and un-progressive in

the world. But Spain taught me that progress was not with the ‘progressives’” (“On Becoming a Roman Catholic” 106).⁷⁵ When Friendship House led him to seriously investigate Catholicism, McKay’s main intellectual objection to the faith was a historical one: the Nietzschean idea that Christianity had repressed the glory and freedom of pagan Rome. He tested this objection by reading books about “the Roman Empire in its decadence” and “the [medieval] society that developed under Christianity” (107). McKay’s medievalist poems testify to the conclusion he reached. Like Henry Adams, he found the Middle Ages to be the height of human achievement amid a yet uncertain history, rather than a long setback in the story of rational, enlightened progress.

McKay’s medievalist turn, much like his primitivist appeal to rural Jamaican life, exemplifies a signature move in the discourse of the Black Atlantic that Deshmukh, drawing on Paul Gilroy, calls “a backward glance that carves out space for a critique of the modern present” (163). But why, at this point in his career, did McKay’s backward glance take on a specifically Catholic form? The crucial factors leading to his conversion emphasized by previous scholars—the care that he received at Friendship House and his troubled history with Protestantism—cannot be discounted. But on my reading, it was the approach of Catholic radicals to history that sealed the deal for McKay. Social Catholicism filled the historiographical void that had opened in McKay’s intellectual outlook when he departed the Communist Party. In one essay about his conversion, McKay calls himself “a fanatic lover of the truth in history” (“Why I Became a Catholic” 32). This craving for historical truth was the deepest intellectual need satisfied by his conversion.

⁷⁵ In this Catholic magazine, McKay elides his North African experiences as well as Spain’s Islamic past. He attributes the qualities of Spain that he loved to its Catholic heritage rather than the Al-Andalus.

Social Catholicism—the Catholic critique of capitalist modernity initiated in late nineteenth-century France and brought to the U. S. by Maurin and de Hueck, among others—supplied McKay with a master narrative that rooted modern dysfunction in the Protestant Reformation, a narrative that Alan Jacobs calls “the Neo-Thomist Story of Modernity” (“The Three Big Stories of Modernity”). This is the same powerful historical shorthand that allowed Peter Maurin to connect John Calvin to the Great Depression in seven short stanzas in “Wealth Producing Maniacs.” In McKay’s late manuscript “Right Turn to Catholicism,” unpublished in his lifetime, he emphasizes the story’s intuitive appeal: “As I continued to get enlightenment, it just flashed upon me that Agnosticism, Atheism, Modernism, Capitalism, State Socialism and State Communism were all the children of the Pandora’s Box of Protestantism” (qtd. in Deshmukh 158). Enlightened by this Counter-Enlightenment story, McKay found historical ground on which to stand, and from which to launch his unceasing mental fight against the “isms.” The Neo-Thomist Story of Modernity explains so much for McKay—too much, it might seem. In the end, did he merely trade “the pagan isms,” as he called them in a *Catholic Worker* sonnet, for a Christian “ism” (*Complete Poems* 270)? Not quite. Catholicism gave McKay a genealogy of modernity that he, equally opposed to capitalism and communism, could get behind. But it didn’t give him a simplistic solution to human misery—the kind of cheap fix he accused the “isms” of proffering. Rather, as he reported to Max Eastman, the Church provided “an outlet for my mystical feelings” in “the symbol of the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, though which all of humanity may be united in brotherly love” (qtd. in Cooper, *Rebel Sojourner* 361).

McKay was not so enamored of the Neo-Thomist Story of Modernity that he received it passively. As he had done with radical ideologies throughout his career, he revised this story to better account for the concerns of black people. This comes through clearly in his essay “Why I

Became a Catholic,” published as part of a feature on black Catholics in *Ebony* magazine in 1946. He chides his largely Protestant African-American audience for what he terms their ignorance “about the early growth and traditions of the Christian religion” and their “naive acceptance of the materialistic Protestant god of Progress” (32). McKay asserts that “like the Mohammedan religion today, there never was any race and color prejudice in the Roman Catholic Church from its beginning up until the Reformation”—a tendentious claim that nevertheless demonstrates his ongoing penchant for connecting Catholicism to Islam. He also highlights the role of people of color in pre-Reformation sacred history, pointing out that “three of the early popes” and “early church fathers, such as St. Athanasius and St. Augustine[,] were Negroid in the American sense of the word” (32). An untitled sonnet McKay published in the October 1945 *Catholic Worker* adds to this roll of black saints:

Oh, one was black of the wise men of the East,
Who came with precious gifts to Jesus’ birth,
A symbol all men equal were at least,
When Godhead condescended to the earth.
The Ethiopian in Jerusalem
Was human to the preacher of our Lord,
Who drawn to him as to a precious gem,
Bestowed on him the message of the Word.

Yes, and a great Black Empire was the first,
To change itself into a Christian nation,
Long before Rome its pagan fetters burst
And purged itself for Jesus Christ’s oblation.
From the high place where erstwhile they grew drunk
With power, oh God, how gutter-low have black men sunk! (lines 1-14)

Here McKay depicts the black Magus of medieval iconography of the Epiphany alongside the Ethiopian eunuch converted by the Apostle Philip (Acts 8:26-40). He further elevates Ethiopia over Rome as the first Christian Empire.

McKay's most trenchant revision of the Neo-Thomist Story in "Why I Became a Catholic" ties the rise of Protestantism to the institution of black chattel slavery:

There were three great events which coincided to give impetus to the rise of Protestantism in the 15th and 16th centuries: (a) the looting of the Roman Catholic Church, (b) the discovery of America, (c) the transportation of African Negroes as slaves to America. There were slaves, white and black, in ancient times and in the feudal ages. The seven-centuries old Mohammedan conquest of Spain had introduced African slavery in Europe. But such slavery was mild and the slaves had certain rights. It was the Protestant-Anglo-Saxon-American system of slavery which brutalized the Negro and reduced him to a subhuman being. (32)

In his haste to commend his new faith to *Ebony* readers, McKay downplays the role of individual Catholics, Catholic nations, and Catholic theologies and ways of reasoning in the construction of the Atlantic slave system.⁷⁶ All the same, it seems to me that McKay is on to something when he attributes the particular brutality inflicted by Anglo-American slaveholders to the ruthless efficiency of the Protestant work ethic. Most importantly, however, McKay shifts the Neo-Thomist Story to account for racism and slavery *at all*—matters not usually within the purview of the white defenders of Western Christendom who have most often espoused it. Indeed, as invoked by thinkers such as Ralph Adams Cram, this narrative has often shored up a conscious or unconscious commitment to white supremacy. Claude McKay drafted medievalism into service for black liberation.

4.3 Monasticism Versus Empire: W. H. Auden's Queer Medievalism

In January 1956, the New York City Fire Department slammed Dorothy Day with a \$250 fire-safety fine for the Chrystie Street Catholic Worker house. When she appeared in court empty handed, the judge gave her five days to raise the funds. "Miss Day will pray to St. Joseph, whom

⁷⁶ On this point, see Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, New Haven: Yale UP (2011). McKay's postconversion writings prefigure the efforts of black theologians such as Jennings and his Duke Divinity School colleague J. Kameron Carter to bring the whole theological tradition of Western Christianity to account for its complicity in the formation of modern racism while also seeking the unrealized potential in the tradition for countering racism. See also Carter, *Race: A Theological Account*, New York: Oxford UP, 2008 and Jonathan Tran, "The New Black Theology," *The Christian Century* (Jan. 26, 2012).

she credits with meeting the bills through good-willed people all these years, for the money,” *The New York Times* reported (Lissner 25). Her friend W. H. Auden, an assiduous reader of and sometime contributor to the *Times*, was the answer to her prayer. Neither rich nor particularly goodwilled (at least by his own exacting standards), the poet nevertheless hatched a beguilingly bizarre plan to foot the bill, only recently rediscovered by archival research. At the time, “NBC Television was producing a broadcast of *The Magic Flute*, for which Auden, together with Chester Kallman, had translated the libretto” (Mendelson, “The Secret Auden”). Auden “stormed into the producer’s office, demanding to be paid immediately, instead of on the date specified in his contract. He waited there, making himself unpleasant, until a check finally arrived” (“The Secret Auden”). When Day left again for court, still lacking the money, Auden was waiting outside in a group of needy men, dressed shabbily enough to pass unnoticed by the preoccupied woman. Day felt someone press “something into her hands, muttering, ‘Here’s two-fifty.’ Only on the train did she discover she’d been handed a cheque, not for \$2.50 but \$250, and that the hobo [who’d given it to her] was the pre-eminent poet of the age” (N.M.).

Almost a poem in itself, this stunt offers a window onto an underappreciated facet of Auden’s postconversion aesthetics—a queer medievalism of a piece with the other midcentury medievalisms to which *The Catholic Worker* gave expression.⁷⁷ His abrasive act of gift-giving is downright Maurinesque. Begging, after a fashion, for the wages he was owed, Auden turned those wages into a gift by endorsing the check, translating the money as if by magic from the postindustrial media economy to the economy of personal exchange. Auden enters into what Kelly Johnson identifies as the voluntary beggar’s “creative...cycle of gift which does not

⁷⁷ Auden never published in the paper, though he was Day’s friend and one of several writers in her orbit of influence. He did originally publish “The Garrison,” which I analyze below, in *The Third Hour*, the eponymous magazine of a theological discussion group he attended with Day and Reinhold and Ursula Niebuhr, among other luminaries (Bustion 11).

exclude work or exchange, but orders them to serve the good of proclaiming Christ” (36). This cycle was launched at the Catholic Worker by Peter Maurin and continued by Dorothy Day’s appeal in the *New York Times*. But where begging was a vocation for Maurin, it was a costume for Auden—something he slipped into, obscuring his identity, then slipped out of. Auden flips the hierarchy of need by reversing the roles of beggar and donor, blurring the distinction between them. This Catholic carnivalesque, this camp Franciscanism, finds echoes in his poetry and essays.

After Auden broke with Marxism in the late 1930s and returned to Christian faith, following an ideological trajectory similar to Claude McKay’s, he found himself in need of a new political reckoning with time—and space. Auden found medieval monasticism the most useful source of political imagination in his reclaimed tradition, much like his queer Anglo-Catholic predecessors Cram and Scudder. Monasticism allowed Auden to think of history outside what Latour calls “the temporal framework of progress.” It also enabled him to conceive of political community outside the classical model of “the City” and the ideal of citizenship it implies. Ultimately, monasticism gave Auden a new model for political action that cultivated what he called “the suburb of dissent”: a community located at a friendly but critical distance from the City, constituted by the personal bonds of friendship rather than the impersonal laws of citizenship, and equipped to intervene in the present by its communion with the past rather than its vision of the future.

Auden isn’t usually considered a medievalist poet. Edward Mendelson, in his introduction to Auden’s *Selected Poems*, argues that it’s one of the marks of his greatness that Auden, unlike T. S. Eliot, wasn’t given to romanticizing any historical age (xv). Yet the later Auden consistently identified his temperament as Arcadian in contrast to Utopian; a partisan of a

beautiful past rather than a perfect future, he dreamed of the Garden of Eden and not the Radiant City. Auden took medieval Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse as the model for his long dramatic poem *Age of Anxiety* (1947) and was the most prominent literary booster of Catholic fantasist J. R. R. Tolkien's medievalist fiction (Mendelson, *Later Auden* 243, 294). In 1941, he identified the thirteenth-century poet William Langland, of *Piers Plowman* fame, as one of his top three poetic influences (Auden, "Criticism" 132). While Alan Jacobs asserts that it would be impossible draw a concrete connection between Auden's verse and Langland's, I don't propose anything so specific here (*What Became of Wystan* 35). Instead, I suggest that Auden's general interest in medieval monasticism can help us rethink what is probably the most recognizable commonplace of Auden criticism: what I'll call the "Two Audens Thesis."

The Two Audens Thesis holds that Auden's career ought to be understood in halves divided by the watershed period of 1939-1941, when Auden moved to the United States, fell in love with Chester Kallman, and returned to the Anglo-Catholic Christianity of his youth. The basic design of Mendelson's monumental two-volume literary biography of Auden embodies the Two Audens Thesis. But it was established much earlier by poets under Auden's influence such as Randall Jarrell and Philip Larkin. In a review of Auden's 1960 collection *Homage to Clio*, Larkin defined the two Audens this way: the pre-1940 Auden was "a tremendously exciting English social poet full of energetic unliterary knockabout and unique lucidity of phrase," while the post-1940 Auden was "an engaging, bookish, American talent, too verbose to be memorable and too intellectual to be moving" (24). That split judgment—a vexed and limited appreciation for Auden's later work combined with a clear preference for the earlier stuff—has been widely shared up to the present, even by critics who hold Auden's later work in higher esteem than Larkin did.

One big reason critics have had for insisting on The Two Audens Thesis is to affirm the Leftwing politics of the early Auden while distancing themselves from the supposed conservatism of the later Auden. This political value judgment is implicit in Larkin's review: the early Auden is "energetic," "unliterary" and "social" (not to mention "English") while the later Auden is merely "engaging" and "bookish"—that is, intellectually rich but disconnected from the working-class. He's no longer "social," and he's thoroughly Americanized. As Aidan Wasley sums it up in his recent book *The Age of Auden: Postwar Poetry and the American Scene* (2010), the later Auden of much academic criticism is "a devoutly apolitical aesthetic and cultural conservative" (164). "*Devoutly* apolitical": Wasley nestles that tricky adverb next to the adjective. Does it mean that Auden was devoted to not-being-political? Or does it mean that Auden was apolitical in a devout—that is, in a *religious*—manner? Wasley's ambiguity at this point seems paradoxically precise, even poetic. He suggests that Auden, by devoting himself to Christianity, ceased to challenge and indeed implicitly endorsed the social status quo. Auden's later poetry is often explicitly religious in content, devoted to the ethical scrutiny of the individual, and devoid of confidence in the eventual victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie. But to describe it as "conservative" would be wrong, especially if one takes "conservative" to mean "apolitical," as Wasley glosses the term.

Monasticism offers a good lens through which to see the later Auden's politics afresh because the charges that Auden faced during this period, and which his work from this period continues to draw—of irrationality, frivolity, and withdrawal from the social project—are precisely those faced by monks from the third century until today. In his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1789), for example, Edward Gibbon eloquently derided the monks as "unhappy exiles from social life...impelled by the dark and implacable genius of

superstition” (qtd. in Brown 1). But as the historian Peter Brown notes, by and large contemporary historians no longer think of monasticism in Gibbon’s contemptuous terms. “Far from being weird and wonderful drop-outs,” Brown explains, monks are now seen to act “as a catalyst for the social imagination of an entire society” (Brown 1). The social imagination of the later Auden is ripe for a similar reappraisal.

Auden presents his idea of monasticism most clearly in “The Fall of Rome,” an essay written in 1966 for *LIFE Magazine* but later rejected by it. This essay completes Auden’s comparative study of life in late imperial Rome and in the modern West—a project that preoccupied him throughout the later part of his career, from the watershed of 1940, when he first read Charles Cochrane’s *Christianity and Classical Culture*, onwards. “The Fall of Rome” enumerates parallels between late-antique and modern cultural institutions with crotchety vigor: “Instead of gnostics, we have existentialists and God-is-dead theologians, instead of neo-platonists, devotees of Zen, instead of desert hermits, heroin addict and beats (who also, oddly enough, seem averse to washing),” and, instead of the colosseum, television (227-228). This list recalls Auden’s poetic technique of collapsing modernity and antiquity through stylistic anachronism. His re-telling of the Christmas story *For the Time Being* (1942), for example, has the Christ-child arrive just when “Committees on Fen-Drainage / And Soil-Conservation will issue very shortly / Their Joint Report” (*Collected Poems* 374, “The Summons” IV.4-6). Auden’s 1947 poem “The Fall of Rome”—quoted in full at the end of the rejected essay with which it shares a title—observes that “Caesar’s double-bed is warm / As an unimportant clerk / Writes I DO NOT LIKE MY WORK / On a pink official form” (“The Fall of Rome” 228, lines 17-20). Both poetic works re-write Roman decadence in the language of mid-twentieth-century bureaucracy. What Mendelson calls Auden’s “historical double focus”—his quality of keeping

late antiquity and the present in vision simultaneously—determined both the themes of his prose and the aesthetics of his poetry during these decades (*Later Auden* 184).

The two points of Auden's historical double focus are linked by what the great humanist Erich Auerbach calls a "figural interpretation of history." In *Mimesis* (1953), one of Auden's principal sources for his Fall of Rome essay, Auerbach defines figural interpretation as a hermeneutical method practiced by early Christians which forges "a connection between two persons or events...such...that the first [in Auden's case, the fall of Rome] signifies not only itself but also the second [in Auden's case, the demise of technological civilization], while the second involves or fulfills the first" (Auerbach 73). Another term for figural interpretation is typological hermeneutics, as discussed in the last two chapters. For Auden, as for Ransom, Eliot, and Day, "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, something omni-temporal, something already consummated in the realm of fragmentary earthly event" (Auerbach 74). Auden's figural interpretation posits a non-causal relationship between his own midcentury moment and that of late antiquity in order to criticize the former. Although Auerbach's *Mimesis*, as its title implies, concerns itself with imitation, its sense of imitation is *the literary representation of historical reality*, rather than the ethical sense of *following a moral exemplar*. But Auden's late-imperial typology turns on imitation as a basis for social critique and prescription. As Auden saw it, modern technological society imitates, and in some way *participates in*, the hubris and corruption of the late Roman Empire. As a result, modern people of goodwill—and Christians in particular—ought to imitate, and thus participate in, the monastic revolt against Empire.

Another late-imperial typology crucial to Auden's thinking appears in his opposition to the "Constantinian" project of Christian Empire that fuses spiritual and temporal power (Jacobs, "Auden's Theology" 174-177). Auden thought the adoption of Christianity by the Empire was a grand historical debacle for the faith. At the same time, Constantine's conversion symbolizes for Auden the disastrous attempt for Christians to wield state power in any historical circumstance, not excepting the present. Auden's embrace of monasticism, the theological concomitant of his anti-Constantinian stance, has gone unremarked by critics. "[T]he eremitic movement, and the monastic movement which succeeded it," Auden points out in "The Fall of Rome," were "movements of protest not against Paganism but against worldly Christianity"—against, that is, the complacent, prosperous life made possible by the Constantinian collaboration of Church and Empire (225). Monasticism is thus for Auden the shape political resistance takes in the late-imperial context. As such, it provides him a durable model for responding to the political problems of "our whole world-wide technological civilisation" in its own late-imperial moment (227).

The call to imitate the monastics as moral and political exemplars is implicit in the language Auden uses to describe monastic life in "The Fall of Rome":

The problem [of the monastic movement] was one of devising a kind of social organisation which would be neither totalitarian, based on collective egoism, nor competitive, based on the egoism and ambition of the individual. At its best, the monastic movement solved this problem better than any other social form before or since. (226)

These anachronistic monks with twentieth-century political concerns are close kin to the Herodian bureaucrats of *For the Time Being* or the Roman clerk with his "pink official form" in the poem "The Fall of Rome." Auden presents monasticism as an alternative political tradition that should appeal to anyone on the postwar, post-Stalin, mid-Cold War scene disenchanted with the consumer capitalism of the so-called free world but unwilling to countenance Soviet-style

Communism. By diagnosing liberalism and totalitarianism as suffering from variants of the same moral malady—"egoism"—Auden cements political systems to ethical failings. He urges that "more attention" be given to the monastic project of building a religious community of mutuality without the dubious benefit of state coercion (227). In this respect, Auden's monastic "idea of a Christian society" departs from that of fellow-Anglican T. S. Eliot, who demanded a neo-Constantinian "Christian State." Instead, Auden draws nearer to Day's Catholic anarchist vision.

The monastic vow of celibacy, however, presents an obstacle to widespread imitation of the monks. For Auden, as for Cram and Scudder, celibacy challenges family life as much as active sexuality; it is the *queerness* of celibacy that makes it a stumbling-block to latter-day would-be monastics with family ties. Auden speculates that this obstacle may, however, be a productive one: "perhaps family life and communal life are incompatible, except under catastrophic conditions" (226-227). The contexts in which Auden had himself experienced "communal life"—such as "February House" in Brooklyn Heights where he lived for a year with Benjamin Britten and Carson McCullers—were groups of friends bound not by a vow of celibacy, nor even by common faith, but instead by their shared difference from sexual and social norms.⁷⁸ Behind Auden's conjecture that community is best found outside the heteronormative family, then, lies the question of the relationship between his queerness and his Christian radicalism.

Beginning in the late 1940s, Auden described himself as an orthodox Christian, "doctrinally and liturgically conservative" (Niebuhr 116). At the same time, his marginal position as a gay man enabled him to apprehend radical political implications in this conservative theology. As he put it in a 1963 letter to Christopher Isherwood, "though I believe it sinful to be

⁷⁸ See Sherill Tippins, *February House: The Story of W. H. Auden, Carson McCullers, Jane and Paul Bowles, Benjamin Britten, and Gypsy Rose Lee, Under One Roof in Brooklyn*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005.

queer, it has at least saved me from becoming a pillar of the Establishment” (qtd. in Mendelson 455-456). Auden imagined queerness as a mixed blessing—or what Olivia Bustion calls an “enabling disability”—that keeps his theology and his politics in their properly paradoxical relationship (Bustion 100). One way that queerness did this is by making Auden feel askew of progress narratives like the heteronormative bourgeois family script of job, marriage, children, house, etc. By engendering a sense of anachronism or belatedness, Auden’s queerness offered him a special receptivity to the forms of counter-imperial community traditionally enacted in the same-sex celibate communities of monasticism. Bustion indeed argues that “Auden’s work gets *queerer, more radical* after he converts” to Christianity (24n74). One way this claim seems true to me is in the matter of time: the progressive temporality of his 1930s poetry seems awfully chrononormative compared with the temporality of recurrence on display in “The Fall of Rome” and elsewhere.⁷⁹

Auden’s political poetry of the 1930s discloses a progressive theory of history that underwrites political action. “Spain” (1937) is the most noteworthy example: stanzas beginning “yesterday” and “to-morrow” enumerate the small victories of science, art, and learning over superstition (*Selected Poems* 54-57). The normal order of things is steady, if uneven, progress. However, the poem’s stanza-ending refrain “but to-day the struggle,” repeated three times in the opening sequence of the poem and twice more at its end, announces a crisis in the temporal order of advancement: the Spanish Civil War. Progress is a rational order—“To-morrow... / the gradual exploring of all the / Octaves of radiation” (57, lines 78-80)—but the crisis is irrational, an aberration in which “our” fever-dreams and “fears” are incarnate as “invading battalions” of Fascists (56, lines 69-72). The middle section of the poem, a dialogue between “History the

⁷⁹ Elizabeth Freeman defines chronormativity as “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity”; it “is a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts” (3).

operator, the / Organiser, Time the refreshing river” and “the nations” that are at History’s mercy, labors to reconcile progress and crisis (55, lines 35-37). The poem defines political action by conflating individual choice in the moment of crisis with the necessity of historical progress. “I am your choice, your decision,” History declares to the nations (56, line 56). This identity between necessity and choice effaces individual ethical responsibility: a line Auden would later disown avows “the conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder” (57, line 95). The price of serving progress, of bringing something really new into the world, is the forfeiture of morality.

Auden’s later writings similarly reveal a vision of history that motivates political action. But it is a vision of recurrence rather than progress, and it preserves the unity of politics and ethics, rather than severing them, through the principle of imitation. Auden works out his typological temporality of recurrence in perhaps the most celebrated of his later poetic works, the sequence “*Horae Canonicae*” (1947-1954). The formal device that structures this sequence—a poem for each of the “canonical hours” of prayer in the Daily Office—is itself monastic in origin. The monks developed the Office as a scheme for partitioning the day into periods of prayer pegged to the time of crucial events in Christ’s passion. Auden had read about this in *The Shape of the Liturgy* (1945) written by the Anglican Benedictine monk Dom Gregory Dix, a particularly influential book for Auden’s theology and a likely inspiration for “*Horae Canonicae*” (Dix 323-328; Mendelson, *Later Auden* 279-279).⁸⁰ As in Dix, each section of Auden’s poem demonstrates how everyday human actions—waking up, working, feeling bored, walking home—are implicated in the death of Christ.

⁸⁰ Dix’s book is dedicated to the Cowley Fathers, who were important mentors for Ralph Adam Cram. Auden briefly mentions the monastic origin of the offices in *The Dyer’s Hand* (1962) (140).

In its philosophy of time and of human action, “Horae Canonicae” is a sort of extended rejoinder to “Spain.” This emerges most clearly in the prose-poem section titled “Vespers,” where two men meet one another while walking the streets of “our city” at evening (*Selected Poems* 234). Their meeting is close to a cruising encounter, except what the two men wordlessly recognize in one another is not their shared sexual orientation but their opposed political temperaments. The poem’s speaker is “Arcadian,” and his opponent “Utopian.” “[B]etween my Eden and his New Jerusalem,” the speaker explains, “no treaty is negotiable” (235). With Auden’s political history in mind, the poem seems to dramatize a meeting between two of his selves—not a past and a present self so much as two competing tendencies always within himself, with the Arcadian lately taking the upper hand.

Whereas in “Spain” “to-day” is a unique crisis within the regular progress of “yesterday” and “to-morrow,” in “Horae Canonicae” today—just like yesterday and tomorrow—reenacts the crux of Good Friday. And whereas “Spain” originally avowed “the conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder” as the unique political imperative of “to-day,” “Horae Canonicae” makes the recognition of one’s shared guilt in the un-necessary murder of the Christ, “on whose immolation...arcadias, utopias, our dear old bag of a democracy, are alike founded,” as the imperative of every day (“Vespers,” *Selected Poems* 237). By making ever-present this sense of shared guilt, the typological time of the Daily Office disarms the righteous anger of political opponents so that, “for a fraction of a second” at “civil twilight,” the possibility of a civil exchange opens up between them (237, 235). In the poem’s final section, this possibility blossoms. “Lauds,” named for an office in the middle of the night or early morning, is written as an antiphonal communal prayer over the sleeping city. “God bless the Realm, God bless the

People,” the speakers intone; may they become “sensible of” each other as “neighbors”—each with the obligation to love the other—rather than opponents (239, lines 11, 5).

In its spatial dimension, “*Horae Canonicae*” deconstructs the walls of The City in the hope that neighborhood can be found outside.⁸¹ “Vespers” begins by naming “our city” and ends with the admission that “without a cement of blood...no secular wall will safely stand” (237). This marks a shift in Auden’s spatial imagination. Previously, Auden had relied upon the figure of The City as his recurring poetic abstraction for human community (Deer 24). The great hope of “Spain,” for example—a hope put forward and then retracted in its dialogue between History and the nations—is “to build the just city” (line 53). But “Vespers” denies the possibility of building “the just city” altogether, since all such building is premised on violence. If “*Horae Canonicae*” abrogates building, it does not, however, abrogate justice; it relocates critical energies from the city to what Auden elsewhere calls “*the suburb of dissent*” (*Nones* 7, line 28). In “Lauds,” neighborhood becomes possible in a community of prayer outside the city and its economy of ambition.

Auden’s monastic spatial imagination, which imagines retreat as a form of engagement—a political rather than anti-political act—emerged from his reading of Charles Cochrane’s account of monasticism in *Christianity and Classical Culture* (1940). According to Cochrane, monasteries in the fourth century became centers of “Christian democracy,” even of “Christian communism” (341-342). Under the leadership of St. Basil the Great, the monasteries were “organization[s] embodying principles which made it a model, not so much of, as for the *polis*,” proximate utopias where “economic and moral interdependence,” “equality of the sexes,”

⁸¹ Auden’s 1949 poem “Memorial for the City” performs a similar action (*Selected Poems* 196-201).

“communal self-sufficiency,” and “hospitality” were practiced (341-342).⁸² In other words, in these religious communes, the relationship between the monastery and the City was pedagogical rather than oppositional.

A quasi-monastic pedagogical community at the margins of the City is the subject of Auden’s very late poem “The Garrison” (1969). In the poem, a group of friends gather to eat, drink martinis, listen to (and perhaps sing along with) music, and talk. Among friends, “personal song and language / somehow mizzle,” or confuse, “Time” and “Nemesis” in their slow but ineluctable destruction (*Collected Poems* 845, lines 7-8; 5). Eating and drinking, singing and talking: when *personal*—neither propaganda nor advertising copy—these acts open a rift in deterministic time, which, in this poem, advances not towards universal beneficence but universal ruin, for “Time crumbs all ramparts” (line 5). These time-shattering personal acts echo the liturgical actions of Christian worship—the eating and drinking of the Eucharist, the singing of psalms and hymns, the speech of prayer and preaching—transferred here to the context of a party.⁸³

The first word of “The Garrison”—“Martini-time”—announces a temporal rift by invoking a repeated, ritualized act of martini-drinking in deceptively light-hearted language (*Collected Poems* 845). There’s a certain brashness or even decadence in according political significance to such genteel pleasures as drink and records. But, as Bustin notes, “the community elevates fun...to a serious ethic” (10-11). “The Garrison” is more than a cozy shelter from the storms of history. The personal acts of the gathered friends make it

possible for the breathing
still to break bread with the dead, whose brotherhood
gives us confidence to wend the trivial

⁸² It should be noted that this is intellectual history; Cochrane is relating the monastic ideal.

⁸³ The later Auden often cloaks religious seriousness in light humor; “The Love Feast,” for example, also makes a Eucharist out of a dinner party, or perhaps vice versa (*Collected Poems* 614-615; cf. Mendelson, *Later Auden* 279).

thrust of the Present.... (*Collected Poems* 846, lines 9-12)

The friends' communion with each other and with the dead—"break bread" intensifies the poem's Eucharistic allusion—arms them to change the present. The verb "wend" means to change, but it also carries connotations of turning or twisting, which brings the word into the semantic orbit of "crookedness," a consistent figure of queer sexuality in Auden's poetry (Bozorth 223). In "The Garrison," then, to make the Present less trivial is to make it more queer. The Present's "trivial thrust" is its emphasis on or trend towards the trivial, but "thrust" also names a violent forward motion that the friends' communion forestalls. The poem cracks open the linear-progressive time of technological civilization to let the past come rushing in, and it understands this temporal sabotage as at once queering and sacralizing time. At this belated moment, in line 14, the poem reveals its addressee as "Chester": Auden's longtime companion and sometime lover Chester Kallman. "The Garrison" communicates its political theology through the vectors of same-sex love and friendship.

The poem's titular figure embodies both retreat from and engagement with "the City" (line 17). The queer couple and their friends "have been assigned to / garrison stations," enclaves which house soldiers within a city's boundaries for the purpose of defense (lines 15-16). But these soldiers' way of defending the City is to practice "loyal opposition" to its leaders, no matter who is in power (line 18). Rejecting capitalist greed and the desire for celebrity ("never greening / for the big money, never neighing after / a public image" [lines 18-20]) but also abstaining from "rebellions" (line 21), the friends' political vocation is that of Cochrane's monastics: modeling human flourishing from the City's margins. Having already opened the present to communion with the dead, in its closing lines the poem breaks fully into Auerbach's vertical dimension of history, where past, present, and future are co-present to each other: "to

serve as a paradigm / now of what a plausible Future might be / is what we're here for" (lines 22-24). In the queer temporality of martini-time, the present sacraments of personal song, language, food, and drink give the dead a flourishing life in a plausible future. Auden's word "paradigm" invokes a typology in which the friends' community is both modeled on the past and provides models for the future, in a dialectic of example and improvisation.

The historical example of radical community that remains implicit in "The Garrison" is monasticism. The poem's impulse to save the City by retreating from and even opposing it is the same one that animated the monastic protest against Empire that Auden identified in his essay on "The Fall of Rome." The politics of friendship and abundance modeled in "The Garrison" match Auden's description of monasticism "at its best" as neither totalitarian nor competitive. And by serving as a social paradigm for the City, the community of "The Garrison" fulfills the pedagogical function of the monastery identified by Cochrane. What's missing in "The Garrison," compared to Cochrane's monasteries, is hospitality. Auden's friends neglect to share their abundance with anyone outside the circle of friendship. It's in this failure of hospitality, rather than in the religiosity of the poetry, its rejection of linear-progressive time, or its monastically-inspired strategies of withdrawal, that we can find a true limit to the later Auden's social imagination.

4.4 Medievalism and the Politics of History

Medievalist tropes provided Auden with a language for his shift from a politics of mass movements to a politics of personal friendship. In this, he is representative. The function of medievalism for many of the writers I study in this dissertation was to cement their shifting political ideologies to their changed understandings of history. Cram and Scudder turned to the Middle Ages to mark their break with optimistic Social Gospellers; Maurin's neo-Franciscanism

replaced the Christian-Republican synthesis of Le Sillon he adopted during his French activist years; McKay's black medievalism took over from his race-conscious Communism. After their mid-career course corrections, these writers appealed to the force of historical example, rather than the direction of historical progress, to legitimate their political ideas. They rejected violent means of political change in favor of non-violent means. In many cases—though not for Scudder—they began to see the State itself, with its coercive powers, as essentially violent.

In their skepticism towards optimistic progress, violent means, and the justice of the State apparatus—as well in their broadening of Christian radical concerns to address categories of identity beyond class—these writers can be seen as forerunners, in many important respects, of the political style of the Civil Rights movement and subsequent New Left movements. In the next chapter, I make these links more explicit by studying the Committee of Southern Churchmen, an ecumenical Christian Civil Rights organization with an anarchist bent. The Churchmen, including the Louisiana Catholic novelist Walker Percy and the Mississippi Baptist orator Will Campbell, brought French personalism and American Social Catholicism into dialogue with a specifically Southern Protestant radicalism. Their in-house critique of Southern Christianity attempted to move their brethren towards social justice with the lever of a shared cultural-religious tradition.

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Chapter 5:

Tradition Beyond Tragedy: Walker Percy, James McBride Dabbs, and Will D. Campbell's Committee of Southern Churchmen

What thou lovest well remains,
the rest is dross
What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee
What thou lov'st well is thy true heritage
—Ezra Pound, “Canto LXXXI” (1948)

On September 2, 1965, the Mississippi Baptist preacher and Civil Rights activist Will D. Campbell (1924-2013) asked the Louisiana Catholic novelist Walker Percy (1916-1990) to join the Committee of Southern Churchmen (CSC). “I think you know who we are,” wrote Campbell, the Committee’s founding Director. “We think the issues [of race] are theological, not just social or political. We do not oppose the invading moral carpetbaggers (we had it coming) except as we are aware of history and try to understand that love means trust and that if we are to follow our Lord we must hope and work also for white Southerners – not just seek to force them” (1). Calling Northern activists “invading moral carpetbaggers” immediately before conceding the justice of the invasion was exactly the kind of humor, at once barbed and self-deprecating, that appealed to Percy. When it came to Reconstruction, Campbell was “aware of history” in at least two senses: he knew the white supremacist version of history implied by the term “carpetbagger,” used as a slur against Northern interlopers, but he also knew the ways in which that version was false.

By invoking moral, rather than immoral, carpetbaggers in a tone of ironic humor instead of bitter invective, Campbell changed the shape of the historical narrative implied by the term. The carpetbagger was originally part of the conceptual armory of the “Lost Cause,” a tragic story

of irreparable loss (of the Old South) and unbridgeable division (between North and South and between white and black). But Campbell's joke turns that tragedy into an incomplete comedy, a version of history that licenses present "work" towards the hoped-for reconciliation of black and white, North and South, believer and skeptic. Nevertheless, Campbell believed that reconciliation could be achieved only by God's grace, not human efforts. In his comic worldview, events are unpredictable and human schemes always on the brink of unraveling. The worst theology (in his estimation) often produced the best ethics, while the best intentions frequently had the worst results. "We're all bastards, but God loves us anyway" was Campbell's credo (qtd. in Houston 142). He thought Northern activists could stand to benefit from the skepticism towards human efforts and the faith in God's grace bred by this comic outlook.

Campbell and Percy actively supported the African-American struggle for civil rights and, at the same time, fiercely disputed any presumption of Northern cultural superiority. Reviewing a book of letters by the young volunteers of the Freedom Summer project of 1964 in Mississippi, Percy observed that "earnest, well-disposed boys and girls from such places as Swarthmore and Westchester County . . . equipped mainly with the post-Christian piety of the sociology major" had found the robust Christianity of black Southerners a "stumbling block" ("The Fire This Time"). Campbell tied this cultural chauvinism to a theological lacuna: the sociology of integration (a legal requirement) lacked a theology of reconciliation (a spiritual reality). The centerpiece of his theology, Campbell's doctrine of reconciliation was a Protestant cognate to the Mystical Body of Christ professed by Day, Maurin, McKay, and indeed by Percy, too. Reconciliation meant for Campbell that all people were already reconciled to God and one another in the death of Christ, whether they liked it or not and whether they lived like it or not. Campbell thought the reconciliation envisioned by his homegrown variety of Southern Christian

dissent had a better chance to win the “trust” of moderate or even segregationist white Christians than the “force” of Northern sociology. He hoped to convince white believers in the South to join their black brothers and sisters—or, to use his vocabulary, to help them see that God had already joined them together in Christ.

To distinguish his theology of reconciliation from secular activism on the one hand and Christian quietism on the other, Campbell adopted the discourse of orthodoxy earlier deployed by Scudder, Eliot, and his fellow Southerner, Ransom. “We are concerned with the primitive and heretical socio-theology of the crusaders as well as the crawl of the church but we do not see ourselves as having the answers in our hands,” Campbell wrote to Percy, insisting on theological soundness and ideological openness while affirming the necessity of political engagement (1-2). Elsewhere, he contended that Christian social action should be “based on a well-defined orthodoxy. And it must be an orthodoxy which takes it into the streets” (“The Day of Our Birth” 5). By aligning orthodoxy with humor and reconciliation—that is, with comedy instead of tragedy—Campbell revised the dour scheme of Ransom’s *God Without Thunder* (1930), discussed in Chapter 3. Where Ransom’s tragic orthodoxy instructed you to “be content with [your] existing condition,” Campbell’s comic orthodoxy insisted that you be reconciled with your neighbor (*God Without Thunder* 116). Comedy was Campbell’s way of expressing a commitment to religious tradition that longed for the future more than it mourned for the past. This turn to comedy marks an important shift in the Christian radical politics of history this dissertation chronicles. To make a radical traditionalism salient in his midcentury Southern context, Campbell not only had to oppose the progressivism of lukewarm liberals (represented by his sometime employer, the National Council of Churches) but also had to break the virtual

monopoly over the past held by reactionary segregationists. The discourse of orthodoxy helped him steer a course for the radical middle.

When he received Campbell's letter, Percy had already committed to write an essay for the Committee's journal *Katallagete: Be Reconciled!*. (In the journal's oddly insistent title, the English to the right of the colon translates the transliterated Greek to left of the colon, an imperative verb enjoined by St. Paul in Second Corinthians.) Percy had joined both the Committee and *Katallagete*'s editorial board by the time the promised essay appeared in the December 1965 issue. In the piece, Percy crystallized the ethos of the Churchmen: "[A]t least in one Southerner's opinion, the ultimate basis for racial reconciliation must be theological rather than legal and sociological, and in the South, perhaps more than in any other region, the civil and secular consciousness is still sufficiently informed by a theological tradition to provide a sanction for racial reconciliation" ("The Failure and the Hope" 18).⁸⁴ In Percy's view, the breakdown of the old Southern Stoic tradition, which had authorized a personal ethic of *noblesse oblige* among select upper-class whites but stultified the widespread development of a Christian social conscience in the region, offered Southern Christianity a new opportunity to flourish—but only if the churches repented of their long failure to stand for racial justice. Percy limned this "new and somewhat unmannered order of things," this racial interregnum, in the novel he was finishing in late 1965 (25). Entitled *The Last Gentleman*, it was published in mid-1966.

During one sixty-page stretch in the second half of the novel, protagonist Will Barrett, the afflicted young scion of a Mississippi Delta planter family, lately returned to the South after failing out of Princeton and working as a janitor in Manhattan, takes off on an unhinged picaresque romp that unexpectedly confronts him with the darkest elements of his personal

⁸⁴ The essay was vintage Percy and one of the strongest ever published by the Churchmen—a fact Campbell and his editor acknowledged by making it the lead and title piece in an edited collection culled from the pages of their magazine. Its title, "The Failure and the Hope," adumbrated a shift from tragedy to comedy.

Southern past. Barrett stumbles into a race riot on the campus of the State University—an event modeled on the reaction to James Meredith’s integration of Ole Miss in 1962—during which he’s hit in the stomach with the pole end of a Confederate flag, trips, and knocks his head on a Civil War monument. He comes to in a fugue state in the cab of a Trav-l-Aire camper truck, with nothing but a scribbled-in notebook and a highway map to guide him. The map points unaccountably to New Mexico; the notebook’s jottings on pornography and theology leave Will curious but in the dark. In his snug little self-contained home-on-the-go, the amnesiac Barrett, shorn of his past, his relationships, and his “place,” becomes a kind of Anti-Southerner. (Indeed, Barrett is already something of an Anti-Southerner: he has let his inherited plantation go to seed and draws his only farm income from Soil Bank checks. He’s a plantation owner paid, by the federal government, *not to farm*.) But Barrett’s heritage is not so easily escaped. Will is out of cash, his wallet stolen while unconscious. As his memory gradually returns, he realizes he must go down to Ithaca, his hometown on the Delta, to retrieve some savings before he can proceed. In order to fund this existential pilgrimage, Will has to face his father’s suicide, the painful trauma at the root of his recurrent dissociative episodes.

All the major themes of classic Southern literature are here: racism, family, suicide, mental illness, sex, religion, and the legacies of slavery and the Civil War. Percy handles these weighty and familiar matters with a light touch, his style at once beguilingly oblique and hilariously harebrained. By means of joke and indirection, *The Last Gentleman* transposed white Southern traditions from a tragic to comic key, just as Campbell did. And this treatment is representative of Percy’s larger body of work. As his biographer Jay Tolson aptly puts it, “[i]f, to paraphrase Karl Marx, history repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce, Faulkner has given fine literary shape to its first repetition and Percy (among others) to its second” (15). Percy once

remarked that he wanted to begin where Faulkner left off, with a living Quentin Compson, and none of his characters fit that bill more closely than erstwhile Princetonian Williston Bibb Barrett, who, unlike Quentin (and unlike Barrett's own father, Ed "Lawyer" Barrett), "will bear it"—"it" being the vaunted burden of Southern history—without succumbing to suicide.

Walker Percy had good reason to hope that Quentin Compson could live. His grandfather, also named Walker Percy, shot himself in the chest with a shotgun in 1917, and his father, LeRoy Pratt Percy, shot himself in the head with the same kind of weapon in 1929 (Tolson 32, 45). Rumors of suicide shadowed the 1932 death, in a mysterious automobile accident, of his mother, Mattie Sue Phinizy Percy, as well (99-100). "Much of Walker Percy's concern with Christian faith," Ralph Wood contends, "springs from his desire...for a more liberating vision of life than a venerable past can itself supply. The comic freedom implicit in the Gospel will provide Walker Percy an alternative" to the tragic vision he inherited from his forebears (143).⁸⁵ That the tragic past had determined his future because the future would merely repeat the past was perhaps Percy's deepest fear. Percy fought to glimpse Southern history as divine comedy rather than ineluctable tragedy in order to dodge its seeming decree of personal doom.

⁸⁵ This chapter's argument owes much to Wood's two chapters on Percy in *The Comedy of Redemption: Christian Faith and Comic Vision in Four American Novelists* (1988). In limpid, witty prose Wood argues, following Karl Barth and contra Reinhold Niebuhr, that the Christian faith's response to post-Enlightenment Western culture is best presented as comedy rather than tragedy, and that novelists Percy, Flannery O'Connor, John Updike, and Peter De Vries point the way in comedic evangelization. Reinhold Niebuhr is an important historical figure for my argument in this chapter and in this dissertation as a whole; Wood's analysis highlights the important overlap between Niebuhr's theology and that of Southern tragic modernists like John Crowe Ransom (a connection I explore in Chapter 3, "The Ways of Orthodoxy") and William Alexander Percy. Wood is especially good on the biographical circumstances that led Walker Percy to embrace a Christian comedic outlook over the Stoic tragic outlook of his "Uncle Will." Wood's literary analysis focuses on Percy's novel *The Moviegoer* (1960), while mine takes up *The Last Gentleman* (1966). Where I depart from Wood in my analysis is in taking the conflict of tragic vs. comic outlook as primarily a political or political-theological issue; for Wood this conflict is a "religious" issue which is "deeper" than problems of politics or ethics, though it inflects one's politics (143). The primary historical context shaping Percy's embrace of comedy is, for my purposes, the Civil Rights movement. The larger aim of Wood's book, "to sketch a new theology of culture that would open a way beyond both conservatism and liberalism," is very close to the heart of this dissertation (280).

Percy's novels are an important marker of the emergence of comedy—both in the lower, slapstick sense and the higher, Dantean sense of spiritual pilgrimage—in the white Southern literary tradition. This generic development in turn reflects a redemptive reading of Southern history as ultimately comic, though riven with ironies and losses, that sets Percy apart from the earlier tragedians of white Southern literature: in fiction, the aforementioned early Faulkner; in poetry and belles lettres, Ransom and Percy's second cousin William Alexander Percy (1885-1942), the eccentric Delta planter and writer who raised Percy and his brothers after their parents' deaths. The comic conception of Southern history that Percy shared with Campbell and the other, mostly white and male Christian intellectuals—both Protestant and Catholic—who comprised the Committee of Southern Churchmen and contributed to *Katallagete* during the mid-1960s and early 1970s, had both political and personal implications.⁸⁶ It is on the political implications that I focus in this chapter. For these intellectuals, the irruption of a black-led nonviolent revolution in the South gave a comic-Christian twist of redemption to the tragic-Stoic Lost Cause narratives on which they had been raised.⁸⁷

This chapter analyzes the comic vision of Southern history of the three most prominent spokesmen of the Committee of Southern Churchmen's public theology in the 1960s: the Roman Catholic novelist Percy; the Baptist "Jack-Leg Preacher and Hack Guitarist" (as the jocular title at the top of his letterhead has it) Campbell, the Committee's organizer and animating genius; and the Presbyterian philosophical essayist James McBride Dabbs (1896-1970), President of the

⁸⁶ The Churchmen were not *all* white and male; a 1971 list of Committee members includes, for example, leading Civil Rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977), an African-American woman (Holloway/Katallagete papers). *Katallagete* published writing by black Christian intellectuals as well, such as Baptist SNCC founder (and, later, Georgia congressman) John Lewis (1940-) and Mennonite historian Vincent Harding (1931-2014)—both of these in the same Summer 1967 issue. Publishing white and black Southern Christian intellectuals side by side was one of *Katallagete*'s strongest equalitarian statements.

⁸⁷ The failure of the Stoic philosophy of white Southern elites is dramatically adumbrated by Quentin Compson's suicide, following his sister's loss of "virtue," in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Percy inveighed against Southern Stoicism at length in his essay "Stoicism in the South," originally published in *Commonweal* in 1956 and collected in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, Patrick Samway, SJ, ed. (New York: Picador, 1991), pp. 83-88.

Committee. This comic vision undergirded the Churchmen's public theology of reconciliation. To speak of the CSC's having a coherent public theology—a theology that speaks to human concerns beyond the walls of the church—belies the Committee's true character as a loose affiliation of Campbell's friends, as opposed to a strict school of political-theological thought. Nevertheless, a real unity of outlook obtained among the Churchmen, consisting in their conservative but ecumenical Christian theology, their antiracism, and their skepticism towards capitalist technological society. But what made them peculiarly *Southern* Churchmen was their reading of Southern history as divine comedy. This comic approach to history, I argue, grounded the more hopeful, activist political orientation of the Churchmen compared with the earlier white Southern tragedians.⁸⁸ Indeed, the Churchmen looked back to the socialist Fellowship of Southern Churchmen (FSC) of the 1930s to claim a Southern tradition of “prophetic Christianity” to the Left of Ransom's tragic Agrarians.⁸⁹

Redemptive history is an invaluable asset in social conflict and social thought, because it licenses the belief that things can change for the better. But the Churchmen's comic vision was

⁸⁸ I've specified that the Churchmen rejected the *early* Faulkner because they greatly admired the later “humanist” Faulkner, epitomized in his Nobel acceptance speech (1950), and they tended, like many midcentury American literary types, to read back into the Faulkner of the 1930s the novelist's more optimistic, and more Christian, postwar philosophy. The Churchmen appended an excerpt from Faulkner's *The Town* (1957) to the Spring 1968 issue of *Katallagete*, and they introduced the Summer 1967 issue with an excerpt from *Light in August* (1932). On the two Faulkners, see Greif 116-121.

⁸⁹ Percy's novels are known for their criticisms of American consumer culture and for their transmission of European existential philosophy, less so for their civil rights advocacy. At the same time, Percy's support of civil rights—both as an essayist and as a citizen of Covington, Louisiana—is well attested. Nevertheless, when Percy is put to explicit political use by his interpreters and disciples, he's often imagined as a resource for reinvigorating conservatism: see, for example, David Brooks, “The Conservative Future,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 19, 2012, (http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/20/opinion/brooks-the-conservative-future.html?_r=0). See also the contributions to *A Political Companion to Walker Percy*, ed. Peter Augustine Lawler and Brian A. Smith (Lexington: U of Kentucky Press, 2013). In their contribution to the *Political Companion* volume, Brendan P. Purdy and Janice Daurio consider Walker Percy's Civil Rights advocacy in the context of his “conversion” from “a segregationist Southern moderate to an integrationist Southern moderate” (207). By taking for its context Percy's membership in the Committee of Southern Churchmen and his place on the editorial board of *Katallagete*, this chapter seeks to claim Percy for a more radical tradition. Percy's Christian radicalism could be mistaken a kind of centrist liberalism, but his association with Campbell clarifies his stance. After his conversion, Percy sought a radical middle rather than mere moderation, just as the other Christian intellectuals in the tradition this dissertation chronicles.

difficult to maintain in the latter half of the 1960s when, despite the passage of Civil Rights legislation, the partisans of Jim Crow continued to oppose black and white activists alike with violence, while white moderates persisted in dragging their feet on racial justice. The Churchmen responded to white intransigence and the subsequent radicalization and de-Christianization of the Civil Rights struggle by doubling down on their own radically Christian commitments. They pleaded that Southerners, black and white, be reconciled in a spiritual fraternity beyond what laws could guarantee. Theirs was a public theology with a Southern accent, furthering what historian Steven P. Miller calls “a very Southern tradition of relational politics and grace theology” (2). Despite its foundation in deeply-held religious beliefs, the politics of the Churchmen are apprehensible as *public* theology in part because Percy, Dabbs, and Campbell wrote without a trace of conventional piety—with more than a trace of conventional impiety, in fact. In short, this chapter shows how a bad Catholic, a pagan Presbyterian, and a bootleg Baptist transformed the idea of Southern heritage, so often a sword and shield of reaction, into rhetorical weaponry to fight for social justice.⁹⁰ They came not to destroy that heritage but to bring it to a radical new fulfillment.

5.1 Improvising on Tradition: Walker Percy’s *The Last Gentleman*

Walker Percy’s youngest brother Phin was in the car with their mother Mattie Sue when, in 1932, the Buick she drove leapt off a bridge outside of Greenville, Mississippi and plunged twenty feet into the bayou below. As the car filled with water, Phin tugged and tugged, trying to pull his mother free from the driver’s seat. When her hand went limp, Phin pushed through the

⁹⁰ Percy subtitled his novel *Love in the Ruins* (1971) as *The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World*; while Percy is not to be identified with the novel’s protagonist, Dr. Tom More, they shared proclivities for prurience, shock, and bad manners. Dabbs’ paganism emerges in a letter to Campbell, from which I quote below. Theologian Timothy George called Campbell a “Bootleg Baptist” in an article remembering his legacy. See Timothy George, “Will D. Campbell, Bootleg Baptist,” *First Things*, Jun. 17, 2013 (<http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2013/06/will-d-campbell-bootleg-baptist>).

open back window towards the surface. The ten-year-old boy swam to shore and ran for help, but by the time he returned, others had already pulled a lifeless Mattie Sue from the car. “Uncle Will” Percy, Phin and Walker’s second cousin and surrogate (and soon adoptive) father, took command at the scene and had Phin taken home. It was Will Percy—poet, memoirist, semi-closeted gay man, lawyer, and paternalistic planter of the old school—who principally cared for Phin in the aftermath of the accident. When the boy woke in the night, “screaming and crying, terrified by strange, almost metaphysical dreams about the nature of time,” Uncle Will “would get up and read to Phin, usually from the Greek myths, including the myth about Chronos and the beginning of time” (Tolson 100). It’s not clear from Jay Tolson’s account, based on an interview with Phin, what Chronos myth Will read to the boy; there isn’t, strictly speaking, a particular “myth about Chronos” in the Greek tradition. The most likely candidate is Hesiod’s *Theogony*, in which the father of Zeus, the Titan Cronos or Cronus—often conflated, even by the ancient Greeks, with Chronos, the personification of time—castrates his abusive father, Ouranos, with a scythe and, later, devours his own children (lines 139ff., 453ff.). As a response to questions about the nature and origin of time, the *Theogony*’s account of Cronos is unlikely to allay anyone’s nightmares. For Hesiod, domestic violence inaugurates time, which unspools from there in a tragic cycle of escalating damage.⁹¹

If Walker Percy was less outwardly affected than Phin at the time of their mother’s death, as an adult, the novelist wrestled with the same questions about the nature of time that haunted his brother’s boyhood nightmares. The traumatic deformation of time into an inescapable cycle of familial violence marks the narrative technique of Percy’s second novel, *The Last Gentleman*, especially the section in which Will Barrett returns to Ithaca for money and faces up to his

⁹¹ Phin found a better treatment for his terrors when Uncle Will sent him up to Johns Hopkins to be analyzed by the eminent American Neo-Freudian psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan (Tolson 138).

father's suicide. What's particularly interesting about this sequence is that it also contains the 1966 novel's only explicit treatment of Civil Rights activism, when Will helps to spring a small interracial group of "outside agitators" free from trouble with the Ithaca police. I read this concatenation of comic plot, political theme, and time-bending technique as Percy's argument for what a novelist such as himself—white, Southern, and Christian—could do in the mid-sixties on behalf of the struggle for black rights: foster a true and healthy reckoning with the violent Southern past on behalf of educated white moderates like his protagonist, Will Barrett.

In 1965, Percy published an essay in *The New York Review of Books* entitled "The Fire This Time," riffing on James Baldwin to announce that, in the wake of the violence of 1964's Freedom Summer, judgment for the South was now at hand. In the essay, Percy postulates an alliance between Southern blacks and educated whites as "the only doorway out of the closed society" of the Deep South. When *The Last Gentleman* re-writes as comedy an historical narrative handed down by white fathers as tragedy, it moves towards solidarity across the lines of race and class. Working in a tragic literary tradition that exalted particular great souls and licensed the paternalistic performance of aristocratic virtues in the face of certain defeat, Percy turned to comedy to encourage the recognition of common humanity, a democracy of faults and foibles, with an expectation of ultimate reconciliation. For Percy, this distinction between tragedy and comedy maps onto the distinction between Stoic and Christian morality. Percy's divinely comic approach to history counsels neither wholesale embrace nor total disavowal of the past. Instead, Percy balances partial embrace against partial disavowal, selectively plundering the Southern heritage for equipment for reconciliation.

In the Ithaca episode,⁹² Percy merges past and present events to emphasize Will Barret's anxious relationship to his heritage. At some points, this temporal conflation is presented as an effect of Will's dysfunctional psyche. When Barrett arrives in the town at evening, his memory has begun to return after his accident at the State University, but this state of near-amnesia only renders him more unstable. Heading into town from his Trav-l-Aire the next morning, Will remembers how he would walk the levee "with his father and speak of the galaxies and of the expanding universe and take pleasure in the insignificance of man in the great lonely universe," while Lawyer Barrett recited the doleful poetry of Matthew Arnold or told great tales about Will's grandfather (309). The memory provokes "a little fit" during which Will has a vision of "old men...in a circle around him, looking at him from the corners of their eyes" (310). All of Will's transactions in Ithaca are carried out under the sidelong looks of his fathers, looks that seem both to acknowledge and to deny Will's family resemblance. Barrett's forebears, whether attorneys, sheriffs, or politicians, are men devoted to law, aristocratic opponents of the lawless Ku Klux Klan, and defenders of "Negroes"—provided that the latter intend to keep their place. The Barrett men's moral rectitude—like that of gun-toting Atticus Finches—is premised on their aristocratic sense of themselves as a cut above the rabble, whether black or white. They are always prepared to back up this supposed superiority with violence: almost every memory Will recalls includes at least the threat of gunfire. In Will's father's case, the assurance of one's own moral superiority, liable as it is to morph into doubt of the same, and the willingness to demonstrate that moral superiority at gunpoint, made for a deadly combination. But even if this

⁹² There's a running joke at the Homeric machinery of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in *The Last Gentleman*. One character nicknames Barrett's Trav-l-Aire trailer "Ulysses," and the journey to Ithaca is a false homecoming for Will. But *The Odyssey*, too, ends not with a homecoming but with another journey, and the Homeric tale's episodic nature is a fit analog for Percy's rather plotless structure. Will Barrett, like Joyce's Leopold Bloom, is both a send-up and an antitype of Odysseus the wily wanderer.

heritage damaged Will psychically and deprived him of a father, he still longs in some way to imitate his forefathers.

At other points in the Ithaca episode, Percy runs events from the narrative past directly into the narrative present without presenting this as an effect of Will's consciousness. This technique marks a kind of disorder in the novel itself, produced in a time of cultural upheaval, rather than a psychological difficulty peculiar to the character of Will Barrett. After he retrieves his money from the Ithaca bank, Will stops in "a Negro district" to call his fiancée on a payphone (313). In the space between the phone's ringing and its being picked up, Will's great-uncle walks into the narrative from thirty-five years previous:

The telephone was ringing in the purple castle beside the golf links and under the rosy temple of Juno.

The sheriff put his hands in his back pockets so that the skirt of his coat cleared his pistol butt. "I respectfully ask yall to go on back to your homes and your families. There will be no violence here tonight because I'm going to kill the first sapsucker who puts his foot on that bottom step. Yall go on now. Go ahead on."

"Hello." It was David. (313-314)

Will's fiancée Kitty Vaught lives in this faux castle on a golf course overlooked by a pastiche Roman temple—a comfily commodified Old South fantasy actually located in the suburban New South. However, it's not Kitty but David, a mixed-race young man employed by the Vaught family, who picks up the phone. Just as his great-uncle's character was made by standing between Ithaca's black community and the white rabble, Will's character will be made by his response to his black neighbors like David.

But where the sheriff's showdown with an apparent lynch mob is a life-or-death drama of high moral seriousness, Will's resistance to racist power is rife with low physical comedy. Barrett hangs up the payphone, and a man yanks him into a bar nextdoor. When his eyes and memory adjust, Barrett recognizes the man as Forney Aiken, a Northern journalist who picked

up Will earlier in the novel when he hitchhiked southward from New York. Aiken artificially darkens his skin in order to write investigative journalism “under the ‘cotton curtain,’” a plan which earns him the epithet “the pseudo-Negro” in the novel’s free-indirect narration (130-131).⁹³ Aiken also directs an interracial troupe of actors to perform antiracist morality plays in small towns throughout the South, and they’ve just finished up a festival in Ithaca. The Ithaca sheriff picked up one of the troupe; the rest—Aiken, a white Hollywood actor, his white mistress, and a gay black New York playwright—are hiding from the police in the bar. Will gives the actors the keys to his Trav-l-Aire and sends them out the back door when the deputies barge in. Will sweet-talks one deputy, an old football buddy, out of chasing the actors, convincing him to bring charges against himself instead.

With the other deputy, Will takes actions that are at once his most radical and his most faithful to his forefathers’ violent legacy. Will knocks the deputy unconscious: “For once in his life he had time and position and a good shot, and for once things became as clear as they used to be in the old honorable days. He hit Beans in the root of his neck as hard as he ever hit the sandbag in the West Side Y.M.C.A.” (325). Will practices his fathers’ violence in the name of justice, but, ironically, rather than violently *enforcing* the law, Will violently *opposes* the law. In his improvisatory imitation of the moral tradition he inherited, Barrett radically revises its politics. For Will, faithfulness to “the old honorable days” requires a sort of genteel anarchism. He becomes a half-willing radical, not in spite but because of his aristocratic heritage. Importantly, this revision of his inherited moral tradition is vectored through Will’s alienating sojourn in Manhattan, signified by reference to his boxing practice at “the West Side Y.M.C.A.”

⁹³ Aiken may be a reference to John Howard Griffin and *Black Like Me* (1961). But Griffin was a fellow Catholic and colleague in the Committee of Southern Churchmen. Griffin was a Texan, not a Northerner like the fictional Aiken (though not a Southerner, either, at least in Percy’s estimation; Percy’s writerly animus against Texans is rivaled only by his grievance with Ohioans—though one suspects neither is wholly serious). If Griffin is being sent up here, the criticism is being leveled by a friendly co-belligerent.

Though he bravely stands up to a racist deputy, Will Barrett is no remarkable hero like his great-uncle, the sheriff. Barrett is rather an almost disposable cog in the hijinks machinery of the actors' escape. Aiken and the actors leave Will stranded in Ithaca, forcing him to find another way to reach their backup rendezvous across the river in Louisiana.

To escape Ithaca, Will must confront the violence of his past and literally take from it the equipment that he needs. When darkness falls—Barrett, laziest of rebels, naps away the afternoon in a clump of willows—Will sneaks up on his old house. A comically large number of Will's aging aunts sit on the wraparound porch, where they watch *The Price Is Right* and read books defending Jim Crow. Here, in an inverse image of Will's creative imitation of his fathers' just violence, all the worst elements of the white Southern tradition collude with televisual consumption society. *The Last Gentleman* presents Will's heritage as a politically unstable resource, liable to co-option for a host of competing interests.

At this moment, the violent past once again careens into the narrative present, as Will relives in full a memory the novel has so far replayed only in fragments: his father's death. The boy Will Barrett sits on the porch tending to a Brahms record on a Philco while his father paces under the streetlamp. On the levee before them, white couples park and neck, much to Ed Barrett's chagrin. From the black neighborhood down the road come music and laughter and the "ham-rich smell of the cottonseed oil mill" (328). "Father, why do you walk in the dark when you know they've sworn to kill you?" the boy Will asks (330). A policeman stops and gives the lawyer a piece of news and leaves; no one comes to kill Ed Barrett. Because Ed, unlike Will, can only imagine a repetition of, rather than an improvisation upon, the Barrett tradition of just violence, the showdown's failure to materialize deprives him of his shot at moral selfhood. The lawyer speaks cryptic words of defeat to the boy, walks inside the house and climbs the stairs to

his office, where he loads both barrels of a twelve-gauge shotgun and fires them into his chest with his thumbs. At the sound of the blast, Will snaps back to the present. “A young man his own age,” black, stumbles upon Will in the clump of trees and pauses “for a long half second. They looked at each other. There was nothing to say. Their fathers would have had much to say.... But the sons had nothing to say” (332).

This is among the saddest passages Percy ever wrote, and not only for the boy Will’s plaintive cry to his father—“*Don’t leave*”—and the grisly details of the father’s suicide (331). The adult Will’s silent failure of communication with the young black man in the trees adumbrates the tragic failure of educated whites to support the black struggle for Civil Rights, as Percy wrote about in “The Fire This Time.” Yet the “nothing” the two young men share in this moment is neither empty nor insignificant, but a freighted absence, a pregnant pause. It is not the “silence” that Percy considered the “peculiar” sin of “the twentieth-century Christian South” (“The Failure and the Hope” 17). On the contrary, having “nothing to say” is always meaningful for Percy. He repeats the phrase twice at this point in *The Last Gentleman*, and rings changes on it three times in his essay “The Fire This Time”: twice at the beginning—“There is not really a great deal to be said about Mississippi now” and “there is not much to say now”—and, after quoting one African-American woman’s account of police injustice, in the essay’s final line—“It is somewhere along here that it comes over you that there is not really much to say.” A related sentence closes the main text of *The Moviegoer*, before that novel’s epilogue, as well: “It is impossible to say” (235). At this moment in *The Last Gentleman*, we catch Will at a crisis of moral awakening, a moment where the old Stoic-Jim Crow script for race relations longer fits, and he is left with nothing to say. It is just possible that here, in a small way, the tragedy of race relations in the South might turn towards comedy, towards reconciliation.

But it doesn't—at least not yet. It would be a mistake to think that Will Barrett, or the educated white moderates he represents, could move in a straight line to brotherhood. First, Will must press into this nothing, this lack: his wound. Looking at the young black man, Will thinks: "You may be in a fix and I know that but what you don't know and won't believe and must find out for yourself is that I'm in a fix too and you got to get where I am before you even know what I'm talking about and I know that and that's why there is nothing to say now" (*The Last Gentleman* 333). Invoking a racist paradigm of cultural development, Will thinks that this black man has to progress, to get on Will's level, before there can be commerce between them. But what Percy's novel finally shows us is that *Barrett* must change before there can be communion between the two young men. Will must go backwards, must enter into his past, in order to get out of his "fix" and exorcise the demons of his suicidal aristocratic heritage—a heritage founded on the deadly assumption that white people are more advanced than blacks. Barrett begins this exorcism by entering his haunted old house. Will climbs to the attic office, breaks the breech of the very shotgun with which Ed Barrett shot himself to make sure it's unloaded, and beds down in his father's old World War I army cot. In the morning, Barrett takes from the attic his father's collapsible duck-hunting boat and escapes across the Mississippi. In the very sanctum of his father's suicide, Barrett finds the tools that spring him free from the Ithaca police and carry him into Louisiana, where he secures safe passage north for Forney Aiken and his actors. Will Barrett emerges as a kind of Stephen Dedalus who weaves his wings from the very nets of family and country that meant to capture him.

There's a great difference between not saying anything, and saying, publicly and repeatedly, in your well-read novel and in the *New York Review of Books*, that *there's really not much that can be said right now*. If the former silence is quietistic (or, for Percy, sinful), the

latter is invested with political meaning. In “The Fire This Time,” when Percy insisted that nothing could be said about Mississippi right now, he meant that conversations on what the good society of the South might look like could not even begin until white Southerners could no longer kill Civil Rights activists and black citizens with legal impunity. Percy thought there were indispensable resources in Southern culture for living as a human being in resistance to consumer society, but he also thought that, in light of the increasingly national struggle for black rights in the 1960s, there was a time to keep silent about peculiarly Southern forms of goodness. For its part, “The Fire This Time” locates the form of Southern goodness that might be worth preserving—a Southern Christian humanism—in black Southern Christians rather than white.

In the essay, Percy invites the Northernization and suburbanization of the South in order to save it: “Yankees, don’t go home. If a dislocated and depersonalized suburbia can assist a society which is losing its soul through depravity and brutality, it is for us in the South to be grateful. Perhaps some day the favor can be returned” (“The Fire This Time”). The South must become “dislocated and depersonalized” to save it from “depravity and brutality” before it can take hold of its true heritage, a heritage which just might save North and South alike from dislocation and depersonalization. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard argued that only through alienation and despair can one be saved; for Percy, Kierkegaard’s disciple, only through mass alienation and despair can the South be saved. If, in the mid-1960s, the “ravenous particles” of consumerist Manhattan could help put out the fires of Mississippi, then, someday, perhaps a Southern Christian vision of fraternity could banish those ravaging particles for good (*The Last Gentleman* 26). Percy proposes that the entire South follow the way of Will Barrett, journeying through the purgatory of displacement and deracination to a new apprehension of just what aspects of the Southern tradition are worthy of creative imitation. As Barrett’s example shows,

the politics of that tradition could be utterly changed—radicalized, in fact—through this process of alienation and re-apprehension.

But as the example of Will's porch-bound aunts, watching game shows and reading *Race and Reason*, reminds us, the Southern tradition could more easily license conservative retrenchment than erstwhile radicalism. That tradition could also lend its mythopoetic powers to something even more politically nefarious than retrenchment. As Will skitters down the Mississippi in the inflatable duck boat towards his uncle's house, he catches a familiar sight on the Louisiana shore: a Confederate fort, captured during the Civil War and converted into a Federal prison, and since become a kind of historic site. Will knows intimately the geography of the entire place, its personnel and its history. He sees the Stars and Bars flying on the battlement and people moving on the grounds; Barrett assumes a re-enactment is on. A closer look reveals a new hurricane fence and inmates—men and women, black and white—in sweatsuits. In this startling image, Percy, writing just at the moment of the old Jim Crow's demise, seems to anticipate the mass incarceration regime that legal scholar Michelle Alexander has recently called "the New Jim Crow"—an arrangement in which North and South collude, with Southern segregation meeting Yankee discipline in the worst of institutional combinations. And there flying over it all is a Confederate flag, giving the prison the imprimatur of that Southern heritage Percy tried with all his writerly cunning to re-signify.

5.2 Heritage of Dissent: Will D. Campbell's Southern Churchmen

Percy's colleagues in the Committee of Southern Churchmen founded their antiracist politics on just the sort of radical re-apprehension of the Southern heritage for which Percy hoped. When Campbell founded the Committee in 1964, he was actually rebooting the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, an organization with its roots in the Depression Era. James

McBride Dabbs' article in the inaugural June 1965 issue of *Katallagete*, "Southern Churchmen: Fellowship to Committee," cemented the new group's radical patrimony even as it explained the change in the organization's name and its renewed emphasis on racial justice. This essay simultaneously claims and renovates a heritage, deciding, like the Pound of "Canto LXXI," what to "love well" so that it "remains" and what must be rejected as "dross." Dabbs' article highlights, in small compass, the larger task the three writers in this chapter set themselves as Southern churchmen. As Southerners, they bore the various burdens of Southern history: the violence against and exploitation of Southern blacks under the slave system and the Jim Crow regime, the ignominious defeat of the Confederacy in the Civil War and Reconstruction, and the ongoing manipulation of poor whites by agricultural and industrial elites. As Churchmen they took on yet another weight. In what Percy calls "the egregious moral failure of Christendom," Southern churches had aided and abetted slavery, segregation, and capitalism, defending the interests of wealthy white Christians against black and poor white Christians ("Notes for a Novel" 14). Nevertheless, the Churchmen sought within sacred history and Southern history the antidote to the Southern churches' poisonous ills. Indeed, they thought they summoned in their creative appropriation of the past a revitalized Christian humanism that could bring to heel all of Western technological society.

Katallagete reveals a radical alternative to the canonical genealogy that runs from 1930s Southern Christian antimodernism of the Nashville Agrarian stripe to the postwar resurgence of American intellectual conservatism (Murphy 5-7). Rather than simply sacralizing Southern history, as Lost Cause apologists had long done, Dabbs, Campbell, and Percy wrote a typological history of the South, one that salvages from the wrack of irremediable violence some essence of goodness, some model for imitation. To quote a favorite passage of Dabbs' from the Spanish

philosopher Ortega y Gasset, they scoured the South for the durable, buoyant stuff that would survive the “tragic, ruthless glance” of the shipwrecked person, drowning in the history into which he or she is thrown (*The Revolt of the Masses* 157). As Dabbs’ essay illustrates, the CSC claimed a Southern heritage of dissent from its predecessor organization, the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen. In the Fellowship, the *Katallagete* writers located “a radical critique of twentieth-century Southern civilization” within Southern Protestant Christianity, the very religious tradition known for propping up rather than poking at dominant Southern values (Martin 66).

The Fellowship of Southern Churchmen began on May 27, 1934, when a group of Protestant clergymen, educators, and social activists gathered at Monteagle Sunday School Assembly in Monteagle, Tennessee for the Conference of Younger Churchmen of the South.⁹⁴ A sleepy-sounding affair, to be sure: in all the organization’s incarnations, from Conference to Fellowship to Committee, this bumptious band of prophetic Southern orators lacked a flair for naming and branding. They did better, or perhaps worse, with the journals they published. In the thirties, the portentous *Prophetic Religion* was birthed on Executive Secretary Howard “Buck” Kester’s and his wife Alice’s mimeograph machine (Burgess 4). Later, *Katallagete: Be Reconciled!* was a garbled Greek mouthful. Despite a name redolent of wood-paneled ecclesiastical bureaucracy, the 1934 Conference of Younger Churchmen was not an affair of church politics alone. It was instead an attempt to articulate the church’s political witness against the world in the context of capitalism’s seeming collapse. The “Findings” published by the

⁹⁴ The exact number of attendees is unclear. John Salmond (1999) and Robert F. White (1983) both report approximately 80 attendees (Salmond, “Depression Decades” 115; White 67). In *The Encyclopedia of Religion in the South* (2005), Anthony Dunbar reports 180, but in his earlier book-length treatment *Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets 1929-1959* (1981), he clarifies that while 180 people responded to James Dombrowski’s invitation to the Conference with interest, “only about 40” attended the meeting (60). Fellowship member and Conference attendee David Burgess, reflecting on the event nearly twenty years after, refers to the Churchmen in attendance as “the little band,” which seems to make 40 the most probable number (Burgess 1).

Conference after this first meeting made manifest, from both a Christian theological and a Southern regional perspective, that New Deal programs were half-measures in a time of total social crisis. But the Conference not only witnessed against the dysfunctions of secular economy and the federal government's attempts to patch it up. It also reflexively criticized the church in the South for its failure to take the part of marginalized blacks and poor whites—and for its ostracism of Left-leaning leaders. According to historian Robert F. Martin, the Conference and subsequent Fellowship “fostered a much needed sense of community among a small group of radical Christians who otherwise might have labored in isolation and eventually have been silenced by loneliness and frustration” (66). They were Southern voices crying together in a Southern wilderness.

Situating the 1934 Monteagle Conference of Younger Churchmen of the South in space and time reveals its entanglement with the people, institutions, and ideas already highlighted in this dissertation. Monteagle lies hard by the Cumberlands, right on the border of Middle and East Tennessee—legal as well as geographical distinctions in that state. Middle Tennessee is Fugitive/Agrarian country; Nashville is its cultural as well as political capital. East Tennessee is more densely populated than Middle Tennessee, a country of both heavy industry and Appalachian wilderness, where the Tennessee Valley Authority set up in the 1930s. The Monteagle Conference brought the hard-nosed neo-orthodox Protestant theology that was developed in the urban North together with Southern practices of rural farm radicalism. Neo-orthodoxy came to Monteagle in person, as it were: the conference hosted that theology's most famous exponent Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), a New Yorker by way of Detroit, as its keynote. The Fellowship of Southern Churchmen promulgated a sort of Christian Left

Agrarianism as a rebuke both to capitalism and to the New Deal programs that were attempting to mitigate capitalism's failure.

The Churchmen's first "Executive Secretary" and lead exponent of this Left Agrarianism was Buck Kester, who made an unsuccessful bid for Congress on the Socialist ticket in 1932 and organized for the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU) (Salmond "Depression Decades" 115). Through their "Friends of the Soil" arm, the Churchmen distributed informational and liturgical documents to Southern ministers that "proclaimed the sacred trinity of God, man and the earth and called upon the church of the living God to practice good husbandry, to stop the wanton waste of human and natural resources and to give the children of men their immemorial 'earthright'" (Burgess 4). FSC member Sam H. Franklin headed up Mississippi's Delta and Providence Farm Cooperatives, and a "Friends of the Soil" talk by Kester influenced Clarence Jordan to begin Georgia's Koinonia Farm—all interracial experiments in communal life and work, in a similar spirit to the Peter Maurin-inspired "agronomic universities" of the Catholic Workers up North (Burgess 2, 5; Jacklin 308). Fellowship members helped to organize Southern textile workers, and they supported, through writings, speeches, and financial contributions, the efforts of the STFU to organize agricultural laborers on the industrial model (Martin 72, 75). Taking a radicalized and Southernized version of the Social Gospel from the city to the country, the FSC attempted to awaken the Protestant churches of the South to their responsibility to build a humane agrarian-industrial order. While their efforts did not produce a widespread liberalization of Southern Protestantism, they did foster an important strain of religious dissent in the Southern tradition.

The moving spirit behind the 1934 Monteagle Conference was James Dombrowski (1897-1983), a Christian Socialist and a Methodist minister from Tampa, Florida (Dunbar,

Against the Grain 59).⁹⁵ Dombrowski held degrees from Emory University in Atlanta and Union Theological Seminary in New York City, as well as a Ph.D. in philosophy from Columbia University. He came to Monteagle to help direct and teach at the Highlander Folk School alongside Myles Horton, another active member of the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen (Salmond “Depression Decades” 115, Martin 68). Highlander would later become crucial to the Civil Rights movement, hosting workshops that “helped lay the groundwork for many of the movement’s most important initiatives, including the Montgomery bus boycott, the Citizenship Schools, and the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee” (Highlander Research and Education Center). At Columbia, Dombrowski wrote his dissertation under Herbert Schneider (1892-1984), a close colleague of liberal pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, with additional advising from Union Seminary’s Harry F. Ward (1873-1966), a fellow Methodist and socialist and the first chairman of the board of the American Civil Liberties Union, and Reinhold Niebuhr, the aforementioned famous neo-orthodox theologian and, in 1932, founder of the Fellowship of Socialist Christians (Dombrowski vii; Waggoner; Duke 109; Rice 22).

Published as a book in 1936, Dombrowski’s dissertation *The Early Days of Christian Socialism in America* is a critically charged intellectual history of late-nineteenth-century Social Christianity in the United States. It devotes a chapter to the Rev. W. D. P. Bliss of Boston’s Church of the Carpenter, on which he quotes Vida Scudder as an authority, and Scudder herself plays a bit part in the book’s narrative (Dombrowski 97, 138, 160, 200).⁹⁶ Like Scudder,

⁹⁵ Dombrowski is perhaps best known as the defendant in the landmark Civil Rights/civil liberties Supreme Court Case *Dombrowski v. Pfister* (1965), the case which produced the “chilling effect” on First Amendment rights as a civil liberties doctrine (Adams 3).

⁹⁶ It seems to me that Scudder deserves a much larger role in this work; certainly she merited a chapter of her own. Her relative obscurity in the book is probably attributable to the fact that she was still a living and somewhat actively writing scholar at the time. Dombrowski’s book takes Scudder as an established academic peer, rather than a subject of historical-philosophical inquiry. Scudder’s major statement of social theory, *Socialism and Character*, did not appear until 1910, after the endpoint of Dombrowski’s study.

Dombrowski found fault with the liberal theological thinness and bourgeois political timidity of the Social Gospel; its “optimistic interpretation of history” and “dependence on good will alone as a technique of social change,” he complained, “led to futility” (Dombrowski 22, 24). As a result, “the Social Gospel exhibited less political realism than either proletarian radicalism or profound prophetic religion” (25). Dombrowski’s invocation of the criterion of “political realism” here evinces Niebuhr’s influence. The realist, Niebuhr argued in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), must face up to “the fact...that political opinions are inevitably rooted in economic interests...and only comparatively few citizens can view a problem of social policy without regard to their interests” (5). This tough-minded acknowledgment of self-interest, both as economic fact and as sinful failure, disqualifies an optimistic reliance on good will or the mere progress of time to bring positive political change. In its “confidence that God will form a better society out of the ashes of the present world,” realistic, prophetic religion, according to Dombrowski, is at once more pessimistic and more durably hopeful than Social Gospel optimism (Dombrowski 26).

While holding Social Gospel thinkers accountable for their often-tepid politics of charity, Dombrowski’s *Early Days* nevertheless sought out the prophetic potential in the Christian Socialist tradition, even to the point of countenancing “revolution by violence, provided it promised a more just society” (193). For Dombrowski, though, the accent does not fall on violence *per se* but rather on the rejection of automatic social progress through the passage of time alone and the recognition of ineluctable class conflict. By means of the 1934 Montegale Conference, Dombrowski aimed to galvanize Southern church leaders who shared his paradoxically dour-but-hopeful vision to pursue economic and racial justice without the luxury of easy optimism. The “prophetic Christianity” of Dombrowski and his fellow Churchmen in the

1930s underwrote a tragic sensibility like that of John Crowe Ransom and Reinhold Niebuhr. Yet like another contemporary, T. S. Eliot, the Churchmen leavened their tragic sense with slow hope, taking up their political task with tragic optimism.

Niebuhr was the invited keynote speaker for the Monteagle Conference and “the spiritual father of the Churchmen” (Martin 69).⁹⁷ His keynote address to the 1934 gathering on “Religion and the New Social Order” electrified the gathering (Dunbar, *Against the Grain* 60). The performance earned Niebuhr the nickname “Judgment Day in britches” from Churchman T. B. “Scotty” Cowan, “a flamboyant preacher and recent arrival from Scotland” (Burgess 1; Salmond, “Depression Decades” 115; cf. Dunbar, *Against the Grain* 60). Besides Kester, Dombrowski, Horton, Burgess, Cowan, and their Northern guest Niebuhr, the other well-known Southern Churchman who attended the Monteagle Conference, unfailingly mentioned by historians of the event, was James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938), author of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and *God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927), Harlem Renaissance dynamo, Field Secretary of the NAACP, former diplomat, and, at the time, Professor of Creative Literature and Writing at Nashville’s Fisk University (Burgess 1, Martin 66). Johnson was one of a handful of African-American leaders at this integrated event.

The principal accomplishment of the Monteagle Conference, besides bringing a sense of community to lonely and beleaguered radical churchmen, was drafting the Conference’s “Findings,” which were “published in nearby papers under the caption ‘Politics Needs Radical Party, Churchmen say. Program of Socialism Urged by Young Ministers at Monteagle’” (Cowan). The Conference’s “Findings” recall Dorothy Day’s Catholic Worker manifesto “To Our Readers,” written a year previous to the Monteagle Conference, as a projective document of

⁹⁷ David Burgess, distancing the relation a bit, calls Niebuhr “the spiritual godfather of the Fellowship” (1). Niebuhr was also on the advisory board of Highlander Folk School (Adams 306), and he was active in the founding of Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms (Smith).

Depression-era Christian radicalism (although the Churchmen did not match Day's lyricism). "Findings" begins by damning the New Deal with faint praise, singling out the Tennessee Valley Authority for particular approbation. The document goes on to criticize federal programs as insufficient to the economic crisis and sometimes damaging to the most vulnerable Southerners. The Churchmen claimed that the New Deal "discriminates unjustifiably in the wages of northern and southern workers" and that the Agricultural Adjustment Act "led to the dispossession of share croppers [*sic*] in the South" ("Findings"). It was just this dispossession that provoked Churchman Sam Franklin's Delta Farm Cooperative experiment. According to the Churchmen, the New Deal's biggest shortcoming was that it regulated capitalism instead of rejecting it: the New Deal's "objectives," they wrote, "can not [*sic*] be achieved under the profit economy, and...these short-comings of the New Deal are inherent in the capitalistic system."

The New Deal also failed to adequately address racial inequalities. In their "Findings," the Churchmen enumerate a Jeffersonian declaration of persisting anti-Negro outrages:

We condemn the manifest injustices to the Negro, as evidenced in discrimination by employers and trade union [*sic*] in the matter of wages, in the exclusion from skilled trades and in the courts, in the disproportionate sums expended for education, in restricting the right of suffrage, in the operation of Jim Crow laws, and the inadequacy of housing, recreation, and health facilities.

Having made clear their anticapitalism and antiracism, as well as their sympathetic but critical assessment of the New Deal, the Churchmen then swing over to constructive proposals. Like many manifestoes, "Findings" is stronger at articulating what its authors execrate than what they support. Nevertheless, the first positive statement of the "Findings" exalts the churches, rather than the state, as potential sites of political and economic transformation: "We call upon the church groups to make the principle of brotherhood concrete in the relationships between the races, especially in the economic area" ("Findings"). Here, the Churchmen envision a time where

churches in the South would no longer give ideological aid and comfort to segregation, but would instead become fields for the cultivation of interracial friendship and channels for a more equitable distribution of resources. They are never more truly churchmen—prophetic, on the ground leaders of Christian communities—than at this moment.

The Southern Churchmen, like Vida Dutton Scudder before them, emphasize the designation of churchman/churchwoman as a political identity. Frequently ordained ministers, but more often academics or parachurch principals than parish pastors, churchwomen and churchmen exercised commitment to and leadership of the churches from their margins rather than their centers.⁹⁸ In this sense, churchwomen or churchmen constitute something like what T. S. Eliot, in *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939), would call “the Community of Christians,” a church-within-the-church of elite intellectuals who help to clarify and direct the cultural and political life of regular churchgoers (28-29). But churchmen and churchwomen often found themselves an elite on the fringes. From his or her position on the edge of the church, the churchman or churchwoman mediated between the church and other groups fighting for their own vision of justice. While Scudder negotiated principally with the Socialist Party, the FSC navigated alliances with the STFU and other unions, cooperative farms, and New Deal agencies. In Scudder’s time and case, of course, only the churchwoman’s role of unofficial intellectual and moral suasion—not a formal clerical position—was open to her. But Scudder made a virtue of this necessity. Like her, the members of the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen creatively leveraged their positions of marginal leadership to argue and act on behalf of forms of social justice that formal ecclesiastical positions might have precluded.

⁹⁸ Scudder titled an essay collection *The Church and the Hour: Reflections of a Socialist Churchwoman* (1917), and she often referred to herself as a churchwoman in her other writings.

Alongside their vision of ecclesial politics, the Churchmen articulated a broadly democratic party politics. “We are convinced of the need of developing a radical political party of all races, composed of farmers, industrial workers, and members of the middle class,” a Popular Front with a Southern accent, espousing a kind of minimal socialism (“Findings”). In this closing paragraph of the document, the Churchmen traverse the church/state divide, and, as a result, some confusion troubles their vision. “Findings” concludes that “[s]uch a party should recognize the revolutionary tradition of America, and the higher values of patriotism and religion.” This talk of “higher values,” which nests “patriotism” and “religion” so cozily together, threatens to hollow out the Churchmen’s prophetic Christianity into a bland socialist civil religion.

The 1934 Monteagle Conference of Younger Churchmen of the South and the subsequent Fellowship of Southern Churchmen brought together church leaders—men and women, black and white, ordained and lay—to pursue social justice with a consciousness of the South’s particular economic and racial dysfunctions, epitomized by the sharecropping system, and its particular virtues, especially a living religious tradition and a love for the land.⁹⁹ The Fellowship offered support to radical church leaders facing hostility from mainstream Southern Protestants. At the same time, FSC members hoped to exert their powers of marginal leadership to transform Southern churches, by means of parachurch pressure, from hostile to hospitable to prophetic Christianity. At a time of deep social crisis, when government intervention had proved insufficient and had indeed, in the Agricultural Adjustment Act, exacerbated injustice towards

⁹⁹ Robert F. Martin reports that by 1949, 20 percent of the Fellowship’s 400 members were black and 41 percent were women (67). Theologian Nelle Morton, a white woman, was one of the FSC’s three executive secretaries during its existence; she served from 1945-1950 (Martin 68). As the story I’ve told here indicates, however, the organization’s leadership at the time of the Monteagle Conference was overwhelmingly white and male.

tenant farmers, the FSC sought to instill deeper cultural and economic changes than legal means could provide by cultivating Christian brotherhood in Southern churches.

When Will Campbell, a native son of Mississippi educated at Yale Divinity School, revived the FSC under the new moniker of the Committee of Southern Churchmen, he renewed the vision of the Churchmen for his generation. Faced with another social crisis, in the form of what he and other *Katallagete: Be Reconciled!* writers called “the Negro revolution,” Campbell saw that Civil Rights legislation had failed to stem Southern white violence against both blacks and white activists. And legal changes could not bring about the fraternal “reconciliation” that the New Testament Greek verb “katallagete” invoked. This reconciliation, in Campbell’s understanding, had already been won by Christ on the cross, though it remained to be laid hold of practically by faithful Christians. Meanwhile, white-dominated churches across the South were still centers of reactionary hostility; isolated radical churchmen and churchwomen still needed community and support. The Committee of Southern Churchmen, composed, this time around, of both Protestants and Catholics, continued the FSC’s commitment to criticizing Southern culture and society from a position at once robustly theological and friendly to the best aspects of the Southern tradition. *Katallagete* provided “a radically Biblical critique of social and political institutions” while also furthering “a very Southern tradition of relational politics and grace theology” (Miller 2). In the 1960s as in the 1930s, the Churchmen leveraged their marginal but committed positions of leadership within the church and within Southern culture. Campbell and the CSC sought to renovate the Southern heritage and put it to work for Civil Rights. But they also sought a reconciled state of Christian brotherhood that went beyond the recognition and enforcement of legal rights.

The CSC published their manifesto-like “Statement,” equivalent to the 1934 Conference “Findings,” inside the front cover of the first issue of *Katallagete* in June 1965. The magazine’s cover sported a striking black-and-white design: on a black field, a subtly Gothicized white cross, the vertical bar of which terminates in a circle punctuated by a black equals sign (Fig. 5.1).



Figure 5.1: Cover of the inaugural issue of *Katallagete: Be Reconciled!*.

In the image, the Christian tradition, represented by the cross, seems to rest on racial unity and equality, inverting the expected relationship between the two. Instead of offering a theology of racial equality based on Christian teaching, this image argues that Christianity itself stands or falls on racial equality. “The Church is the Church,” the CSC Statement claimed, only when

“worldly standards...cease to count in relationships among men, or Christ’s death and resurrection are mocked” (n.p.). The Churchmen lamented the Church’s support of the Jim Crow regime as just such a mockery:

But, we in the South have counted worldly standards and have made distinctions of our own creation between men. Most grievously, men of one race have set themselves apart from men of another, and we in the Church have connived and acquiesced in the profanation of God’s will for human life. Thereby, we have contradicted in our faith and life the unity of all men created by God’s act in Christ; we have crucified Christ anew; we have led the Church to become like the nations, instead of being a light to the nations. (n.p.)

The “Statement” partakes of several familiar traditions of American theopolitical criticism, mixing a New Testament register of Pauline moral instruction with an Old Testament rhetoric of prophetic denunciation. Arguing that segregation repeats and travesties the crucifixion, it recalls the Christological attack on slavery mounted by New England abolitionists such as Harriet Beecher Stowe. Bemoaning the Southern church’s failure to be “a light to the nations” on the issue of racial justice, it takes up the exemplarity discourse of Massachusetts Bay Governor John Winthrop’s “City on a Hill” sermon.

But other aspects of the Statement’s style make Scripture and its requirements strange to its readers. Campbell’s jeremiad hits the existentialist note of neo-orthodox theology when it speaks of “God’s act in Christ.”¹⁰⁰ By emphasizing God’s creative action, this formulation resists the reduction of the Gospel to innocuous truth-statements which may be rejected or affirmed without consequence. The Statement begins by quoting in English translation St. Paul’s second epistle to the Corinthians, from the Greek text of which *Katallagete* derived its name (itself an estranging device). The passage pleads for men and women to be reconciled to God and to one another: “[O]ne man died for all and therefore all mankind has died. [...] With us therefore,

¹⁰⁰ The “Statement” is unsigned, but its style is recognizably Campbell’s.

worldly standards have ceased to count in our estimate of any man. [...] In Christ's name, we implore you, be reconciled to God!" In the Statement, this passage appears in the New English Bible translation, only three years old at the time. This contemporary translation put the Bible in plain English words unfamiliar even to such a thoroughly churchied audience as the educated Southern white moderates the Churchmen targeted. To be at once familiar and strange; to bring its readers to admit the contemporary political and ethical implications for racial justice of the ancient Christian doctrines they already held; to move them from what Vida Scudder once called conservative "surface orthodoxies" to a deep orthodoxy that radically re-apprehends the tradition; to speak the language of Southern heritage but to spin that vocabulary for radical ends: these were the rhetorical goals of the "Statement" in particular, and of the CSC and *Katallagete* in general.

In his editorial for *Katallagete*'s first issue, Will Campbell mapped out the theological and social context for the formation of the CSC and the publication of its journal in terms that echo the founding of the FSC in the 1930s. Despite Supreme Court decisions and Civil Rights legislation outlawing segregation, violence and injustice still reigned in the South, just as the New Deal had not, by 1934, mitigated all the effects of the Depression. Campbell's relentlessly ecclesial attack on segregation in the CSC "Statement" takes up that part of the Montegale Conference "Findings" that imagines Southern churches at sites of on-the-ground social activism, while leaving the earlier document's political socialism behind. But when Campbell moved the Churchmen away from socialism, he did so in the name of a politics of love rather than legality—in the name of a kind of Christian anarchism, rather than Christian socialism.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ *Katallagete* was probably the most important early American reception point for the writings of the French Christian anarchist theologian Jacques Ellul; one special issue was devoted to Ellul's writings. The journal published other Christians with anarchist sympathies, too, such as New York attorney William Stringfellow. "While he did not

Campbell called the churches of the South to a more thoroughgoing radicalism than even liberal mainline Protestants sympathetic to the Civil Rights struggle were ready to countenance at the time. In the first half of the 1960s, the churches' response to black demands for racial equality ran from outright hostility towards change to tepid support for reform. The latter response, though better than opposition, was both too little and too late. "Today there is every indication that more than social reform is in the offing," Campbell prophesied, pointing to the radicalization of groups like the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee ("The Day of Our Birth" 3). By the time that mainline Protestants had warmed up to racial reform, racial revolution was nigh. Engaged Southern churchmen now faced a dilemma: "The alternative would seem to be that we either once again serve as Chaplain to the Status Quo...or else equate the revolution with the Kingdom of God and join it uncritically and with abandon. Much 'white church' is apt to do the first. Much 'Negro church' is apt to do the latter" (4). Both of these positions had historical precedent. "Southern revivalism," Campbell contended, had "for two centuries" taken up the chaplaincy of the status quo. On the other hand, like Dombrowski before him, Campbell found fault with a "social gospel which did go into the world but took so little of the Church with it [that it] cannot be its present help" (5). In the face of this dilemma, *Katallagete* offered a radical third way, a theological politics that Campbell—like Vida Scudder, John Crowe Ransom, T. S. Eliot, and Dorothy Day—represented as the orthodox alternative among heresies: "a well-defined orthodoxy...an orthodoxy which takes it into the streets" (5). The Churchmen would preach Christ's reconciliation, by his death, of all people with each other and with God, and they would plead with their churches to be true to this accomplished act of God.

use the term 'Christian anarchy,' Campbell's reflections on the 1960s activism of the churches nevertheless reveals an anarchist perspective" (Hawkins 80). On Campbell and Christian anarchism, see Hawkins, 75-86.

What distinguishes the florid Committee of Southern Churchmen in its initial public statements from the dour Fellowship of Southern Churchmen in the 1930s is Campbell's sense of humor. "There is a sense in which the birth of a journal such as this hopes to be absurd," Campbell opened his first editorial for *Katallagete* ("The Day of Our Birth" 3). Absurdity was a mode of life and rhetoric Campbell treasured; it was his ethos. Where Reinhold Niebuhr was "Judgment Day in britches," Campbell was Judgment Day in motley—or, more accurately, in cowboy boots and an "Amish sombrero" (Houston 135). In his dress and in his shocking speech, Campbell presented himself as a kind of backwoods holy fool, "St. Francis of the Rednecks" (Clancy 229). Not for nothing was he the cousin of Jerry Clower, the well-known comedian with whom Campbell grew up in Liberty, Mississippi (Clower 11-13).

But Campbell's sense of humor did not come at the expense of his sense of tragedy. Campbell defined "Southern tragedy" in a 1972 interview in terms of the conflict between blacks and poor whites, whose political interests ought to coincide. These "two groups of people, one black, one white, living side-by-side, both in the same boat, both having come here as servants or slaves, who if they had banded together could have taken over the country. But instead they have continued to this very day to be the enemy of each other" (Clancy 228). Campbell's vision of the tragedy of Southern history wrests tragic language from the planter class, with its Lost Cause of the Civil War, and substitutes in its place the lost cause of failed interracial working-class cooperation: Campbell's is the tragedy of redneck history. For Percy, true to his class position as a disaffected son of the plantocracy, the tragedy of Southern history was that educated whites, who by reason of their education ought to know better, failed to support the Negro revolution. For Campbell, by contrast, in keeping with his redneck roots, the tragedy of Southern history was

that race trumped class for poor whites, whose true interests aligned with those of black Southerners.

Tragedy was the penultimate movement of Campbell's theology, just as it was for Percy's. Reconciliation—that comic theological truth, at once accomplished fact and ethical injunction, for which Campbell named his magazine—was its ultimate movement.

Reconciliation is what comes after tragedy, what transmutes tragedy into divine comedy. But Campbell founders on this: is reconciliation a *fait accompli* or a command? For Campbell, it is indissolubly both. The tension between these truths, between the indicative and the imperative, constitutes his “orthodoxy.” Campbell's fidelity to this orthodoxy forced him to break with his former employer, the mainline Protestant National Council of Churches, and its liberal gradualist approach to racial justice (Houston 139). These three elements of Campbell's comic orthodoxy, his practical theology of reconciliation, all hang together: first, his insistence on reconciling with the poor white racist, the redneck, and the Klansman, and not merely with the timid if good-hearted educated white moderate; second, his insistence on using biblical-theological gospel vernacular rather than the sociological technical vocabulary to approach the Southern white person in their native idiom; and third, his insistence that reconciliation is primarily a theological reality, an accomplishment of Christ on the cross, rather than a social reality, and thus a task to be performed. For Campbell, reconciliation was a matter of gospel/grace, rather than of law/works. This message was foolishness to some, a stumbling block to others, but to Campbell and the Churchmen it was God's own bootleg wisdom.

5.3 Fortunate Fall: James McBride Dabbs' *The Southern Heritage*

In an almost unreadable May 17, 1970 letter to Will Campbell—one of the last he ever wrote—James McBride Dabbs subjected his friend to some good-natured ribbing: “I look at this

type and figure and I've got to clean it before I write any important letters--I mean to important people--oh, you know what I mean." On his Rip Raps Plantation letterhead—Rip Raps was the South Carolina farm Dabbs inherited and to which he retired from an academic career in the 1940s—Dabbs explained why the type was so bad: "I've about worn out this portable on my book on Southern culture and religion. Tentative title, oh, so tentative, HAUNTED--BY GOD." He had just finished drafting the book and begun revising it. The revision would be his last accomplishment before his death on May 30; *Haunted by God* was published posthumously, sans double-dash, in 1972. Also excised from the manuscript was its brash final sentence as reported in the letter to Campbell: "If this be paganism, make the most of it."

The letter's ragged type testified to the seventy-four-year-old author's weariness. But if Dabbs had worn out both himself and his typewriter in composing *Haunted by God*, he had also worn out his subject, for, in a sense, he wrote the same book three times. *The Southern Heritage* (1958), *Who Speaks for the South?* (1964), and his final volume all work the same ground—"Southern culture and religion"—to the same ends. By retelling Southern history, they give the etiology of Southern crimes and Southern virtues so that the former may be condemned and the latter continued. Dabbs' other two book-length works—a memoir, *The Road Home* (1960), and the critical study *Civil Rights in Recent Southern Fiction* (1969)—likewise treat the same subject on the comparatively smaller canvases of Dabbs' own life and of literary history. James McBride Dabbs may have been haunted by God, but he was also haunted by segregation—a subject he turned over obsessively in his mind and on paper.

That obsession made Dabbs a key member of the Committee of Southern Churchmen. He served as president of the Committee from 1966 to 1968, and, along with Walker Percy, he sat on *Katallagete*'s editorial board and contributed multiple essays to the journal. Dabbs had been a

member of the waning Fellowship of Southern Churchmen in the 1950s; a generation older than Percy and Campbell and a veteran of the Great War, he was the Committee's living link to the Fellowship's peculiar brand of modern Southern dissent and its 1930s combination of political and religious radicalism. In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (1963), Martin Luther King, Jr. named Dabbs among his few "white brothers in the South" who "have grasped fully the meaning of this social revolution and committed themselves to it." A South Carolina planter, Presbyterian elder, Thoreauvian nature mystic, past president of the integrationist Southern Regional Council and former English professor, Dabbs probed Southern history in order to prick the Southern conscience.

But that cultural work meant exposing Dabbs' own history and conscience. Walker Percy likened his literary persona to a Quentin Compson who lived; Southern literary historian Fred Hobson pegs Dabbs with a different Faulkner allusion: "Dabbs, in his musings on the southern past, in his essentially religious view of southern history, resembles no southerner living or dead so much as he resembles Faulkner's Ike McCaslin, who in 'The Bear' sits in the commissary of *his* family's plantation and tries to come to terms with the southern past and his family's role in it" (82). Hobson locates Dabbs in a tradition of white Southern explainers of whom Quentin Compson, haranguing his Canadian roommate Shreve McCannon in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), is the fictional "prototype" (Hobson 83). Real-life explainers in this vein produced nonfiction either defending or excoriating the South and its racist legacy. "It would be to oversimplify to say that the apologists, after 1865, belong to a southern party of remembrance, and the critics to a party of shame and guilt, although something of the sort comes close to the truth," Hobson avers (80). For Hobson, Dabbs unites the two schools of Southern explainer as "the only major native southern critic—the only member of the party of shame and guilt—who

saw more good than ill in the southern tradition” (95). Dabbs is more Ike McCaslin, who repudiates his inherited plantation but lives, than Quentin Compson, the tortured suicide, because over the course of his life, Dabbs achieved a hard-won equanimity in his relationship to the past. But even McCaslin was more alienated from his Southern inheritance—literally—than Dabbs, who kept Rip Raps and farmed and lived and thought and wrote on the plantation until his death. Despite his social liberalism, “Dabbs was as fully a traditional southerner as one could find, was that purest of traditional southerners, an agrarian,” with a better claim to that title, as a working farmer, than Ransom’s college-centric Nashville Agrarians (Hobson 94). Like Percy and Campbell, Dabbs prosecuted an in-house critique of Southern Christianity, one that drew selectively on the better elements of the Southern heritage in order to undermine Southern racism and hypocrisy.

Dabbs’ most penetrating and widely read book refiguring the Southern tradition, though not his most systematic, is his first: *The Southern Heritage*, published in 1958 by Alfred A. Knopf. Dabbs establishes his position as a faithful critic of the South by recounting his family history. His mother grew up “rooted in the past” outside of Mayesville, South Carolina, on the plantation Dabbs would later inherit (6). His father, a Scotch-Irish Calvinist and a newcomer to the Mayesville area, was “on the make,” a “man of the future” and “pioneer” without inheritance who raised his family on a small farm bought with his own money, located a mile down the road from his wife’s childhood home (4). At the plantation, which he called his “second home,” Dabbs imbibed the myth of the Lost Cause from his mother’s family. But the influence of Dabbs’ father, with his puritanical morality (he was elected to the state legislature in 1906 on a Prohibition ticket) and forward-looking embrace of “new methods of farming,” leavened the young Dabbs’ sense of nostalgia with an instinct of criticism (5).

Dabbs summed up the sensibility that undergirds *The Southern Heritage* this way: “Certainly the lost past never drew me from the vital present—or, at least, not for long. It was rather like a poem in which, strangely, my people had taken part, a tale ‘of old, unhappy far-off things, And battles long ago.’ Perhaps because of the combined spirit of my father and mother, I criticized it without condemning it, and loved it without being lost in it” (8). The quotation is from Wordsworth’s “The Solitary Reaper,” in which the poem’s English speaker overhears a Highland Scottish woman singing in her fields in Gaelic and cannot understand the sense of her words, though they seem to him intensely melancholy; battle is only one of several possible subjects the speaker surmises for her song. Dabbs’ book plumbs a Southern past that, like the song of Wordsworth’s Highland reaper, is one of obscure sadness and unclear import, a past beset by a welter of conflicting interpretations. In *The Southern Heritage*, Dabbs sets out to vindicate an integrationist interpretation of that heritage against a segregationist interpretation. His criterion for assigning meaning to the poem of the past is its usefulness for future social growth—a pragmatic criterion drawn from the ethos of his forward-looking father. On this ground, Dabbs pits his antiracist reading of the Southern heritage against that of segregationists.

This early passage introduces *The Southern Heritage*’s key trope of the Southern past, and of segregation itself, as a poem or literary symbol in need of interpretation, critique, and replacement—a trope Dabbs shared with his better-known Agrarian/New Critic contemporaries, Ransom included. Poetic interpretation was high ground for Dabbs, who wrote his English dissertation on “The Poetic Experience” at Columbia University in the 1920s, although he was never awarded the Ph.D., and worked as an English professor from 1921 to 1942, first at the University of South Carolina and later at Coker College, a girls’ school near his native Mayesville. In *The Southern Heritage*, Dabbs developed a theory of “practical poetry,”

communally-authored social symbols that direct the life of a culture, specifically of the South (189). Such symbols “function...to clarify and focus life for effective action” (190). Dabbs’ method of analyzing Southern practical poetry resembles the then-emergent “myth and symbol school” of American Studies, and he would rely heavily on Perry Miller’s studies of New England in his later book *Who Speaks for the South?*.¹⁰² Dabbs’ definition of practical poetry likewise recalls Ransom’s polemic on behalf of “religious myths” in *God Without Thunder*. Dabbs shared Ransom’s skepticism towards the excesses of industrialism, but whereas for Ransom religious myth counseled passive contentment with one’s present circumstances Dabbs’ practical poetry inspires and directs action. Dabbs knew that the Jim Crow regime did not maintain itself, and that either maintaining or transforming the racial status quo would require human efforts galvanized by images.

Dabbs’ poetic criticism of Southern life interprets the symbol of segregation, locating its meaning by pointing back to two phases of Southern history. First, segregation symbolized the overturning of Reconstruction, and second, beyond that, the antebellum Old South. When white Southerners defended segregation, this is what they understood themselves to be defending: a connection to the past salvaged from a brutal war and its punitive aftermath. Dabbs acknowledged that such a connection to the past is vital to the flourishing of a culture, but he disputed whether segregation was a true and useful symbol of the Southern heritage:

We are the products of the entire past. Moved by piety, we wish to preserve that past. Yet, for all his piety, every man has ideals that, though rooted in the past, point toward the future. Some of them he cherishes, others he discards. [...] The problem for us now is simply this: to what degree does segregation as a symbol, partly of Reconstruction, partly of the Old South, aid us in interpreting and living in our world? Any obligation we have to the past must be expressed in the present and directed toward the future. We cannot

¹⁰² One way to think about Dabbs’ works as a whole is to see them, along with W. J. Cash’s *The Mind of the South* (New York: Knopf, 1941), as among the first quasi-scholarly entries of Southern cultural studies.

change the past, we can change the future. What help can the symbol of segregation give us as we face the future? (129)

Dabbs answered that segregation can give no help to future flourishing in the South. Some of his reasons are “progressive” in nature, rejecting segregation as outdated. For example, Dabbs argued that segregation made less and less sense as the South became more industrialized and Americanized (130). But beyond these forward-looking arguments, Dabbs went on to claim that segregation is a faulty symbol of the Southern heritage itself, one that “does not focus correctly our own memories” but rather blurs and blinds them (131). “To hold on to segregation as the essential truth of our past,” he averred, “is to make a sad mistake” (131). *The Southern Heritage* criticized this practical poetry of segregation in order to prepare the way for an alternative symbol.

According to Dabbs, the practical poetry of segregation gets both of its historical referents, Reconstruction and the Old South, wrong. The wrongness in question here is not historical inaccuracy, for Dabbs is frankly invested in what Ransom calls “more-than-historical history,” a history consciously mythified and idealized for useful political purposes. Rather, segregation as a selective symbol of historical meaning fails to pick out the values useful to life and cultural flourishing in either of the epochs to which it refers, because segregation privileges the abstraction of race over the concreteness of “production” (132). Bringing a sort of sacramental, agrarian materialism to bear on his analysis—in keeping with the tradition of Buck Kester and the FSC’s “Friends of the Soil”—Dabbs argues that “spiritual values” arise organically from “man’s necessary relation to the earth,” and that therefore “one has to consider the mode of production of primary importance, not only as livelihood but as life” (133).

In this farmer’s ideology-critique, Dabbs concludes that the meaning of the poem of segregation is “confusion of race relations with labor relations,” justified by a pathetic appeal to

a vanished past (155). By playing black and white workers off one another, middle- and upper-class Southerners depressed wages to their own profit (112-113). As an artifact of so-called “Redemption,” the white reconquest of political power in the South that put an end to Reconstruction, segregation redefined Southern virtues in terms of racial division *per se*—a spurious virtue, an ideological screen that allowed well-off whites in the rapidly industrializing South at the turn of the century to prosper at all other Southerners’ expense. Dabbs anticipates Campbell’s definition of Southern tragedy as failed interracial working class cooperation when he notes that the practical poem of segregation erased the memory of the late nineteenth-century Populist revolution that almost-was: “We permitted the unhappy events of Reconstruction to distract us from the basic problem of production and to confuse us with the pseudo-problem of race” (206-207). On Dabbs’ understanding, segregation then went on to destroy those Old South values actually worth preserving that had emerged organically from farm life: love of the land, neighborliness, hospitality, leisure, a sense of place and, above all, manners (133-134, 136-137).

For Dabbs to be consistent in his agrarian-materialist method of interpretation, he must acknowledge that the Old South values he defends arose organically from a mode of production dependent on the black chattel slavery that he abhorred. To his credit, Dabbs did not shy from this challenge, especially with regards to manners. “We ought not to have had slavery; but, given slavery, one either develops the manners suited to it or becomes a barbarian” (139). The elaborate Southern code of manners developed alongside, or even as a byproduct, of verbal techniques of slave control: “Finding force relatively unprofitable, [the South] developed persuasion. [...] Therefore the South developed words; it developed manners. From this point of view, the manners of the ladies and gentlemen were in part the fine flower of that rough courtesy which got the cotton picked and the cane ground” (140). For Dabbs, however, rooting Southern

manners in slave power did not invalidate the value of manners; the code of manners was rather a social good that arose paradoxically out of social evil.

Dabbs even suggests that the social good of manners may even be inextricable from the evil of slavery by comparing the slave system to the industrial free-labor North.

The Southerner had to get along with people all the time; the Northerner mainly in off hours after he'd quit fooling with machines.

Now, I suppose our chief necessity in the world, and also perhaps our chief happiness, is to get along with people. [...] The Southern mode of production, however paradoxical it may seem, did prepare for that necessity better than the Northern. (142)

The argument here, tendentious in the extreme, falls apart under logical pressure. The claim that practice in verbal techniques of control, on the part of Southern whites, and deference, on the part of Southern blacks, would suit those same Southerners for relationships of equitable, flourishing human intercourse—or, at least, would better prepare Southerners for such relationships than Northern practices of mechanical manipulation—is at best unproven. The opposite case seems just as likely to be true: if the Northern industrial economy was more impersonal than the Southern slave economy, at least it spared personal relations from blatant verbal manipulation undergirded by the threat and the practice of violence. At this point, Dabbs veers perilously close to the bankrupt arguments of antebellum apologists for the slave economy, who insisted that the Southern slavery was morally superior to Northern wage-slavery.

Dabbs' claim that positive Southern virtues were paradoxically nurtured by the wicked Southern slave economy exposes the deep theological structure of *The Southern Heritage*. Fred Hobson, noting Dabbs' Presbyterian heritage, has remarked on the influence of a Calvinist theology of providence on Dabbs' narration of Southern history. "It was impossible for Dabbs to discuss the South and race without finally coming around to the role of Providence in Southern affairs. The South was destined, he suggests, to show the way to the rest of the world," to be a

Winthrop-esque city on a hill in race relations (Hobson 88). “The South is a pilot plant, set up under fortunate circumstances, where the white and colored races can learn how to settle the frontier that now divides them,” Dabbs writes in *The Southern Heritage*. “Those who are Calvinists might well believe that the South, like Queen Esther, has come to the kingdom for such a time as this” (215-216).¹⁰³ To be sure, such lines betray Dabbs’ early-Civil-Rights-movement confidence that eroded over the course of the 1960s, not to mention a powerful ideology of Southern exceptionalism. But Dabbs stuck to the general outline of this providential story when he re-narrated Southern history in darker tones in his subsequent books.

Hobson downplays the function that Dabbs accords slavery in preparing those Southern virtues that suited the region for its new leading role. “Even slavery, [Dabbs] maintains, may have contributed to some Southern virtues—manners and leisure among them,” Hobson admits (88). But since, for Dabbs, spiritual values arise organically from the mode of production, in *The Southern Heritage* Southern manners and leisure unequivocally owe their existence and character to slavery. A Calvinist theology of divine providence does shape Dabbs’ narrative of Southern history, but the rod and staff of that providential guidance are rough tools. In Dabbs’ recounting, the South commits its original sin by enslaving Africans, receives God’s punishment in the Civil War and Reconstruction, then, finding itself endowed by grace with a personable way of life as a paradoxically good byproduct of its vile economy of human manipulation, faces the possibility of redemption in the Civil Rights movement: a chance to become an example to the world by building a humane hybrid agrarian-industrial economy and nurturing interracial understanding. It is a hopeful vision, and from a contemporary perspective an almost laughably romantic one. Dabbs would shed, mostly if not entirely, his more grandiose claims for the

¹⁰³ Dabbs was acutely conscious of the global context of decolonialization in which the Civil Rights movement was carried out; he has in mind here race relations in the South as an exemplar for relations between the developed and the newly decolonial developing world.

South's world-historical mission in later books. *Haunted by God* ends with the possibility that "the church," rather than the South, "might then become a city set upon a hill, a light unto all the people" (251).

Whatever the success of Dabbs' arguments about the roots of Southern virtues in the slave economy, his narration of the complex moral inheritance of Southern history relies for its coherence on foundational narratives of Christian theology. Dabbs tells the story of the South as a type of *felix culpa*, or fortunate fall, the theological idea that Adam's sin, by making possible the redemption of humanity in Christ, ultimately brought more blessing than his continued innocence would have. Milton's Adam, in Book XII of *Paradise Lost*, expresses the idea most pithily:

O goodness infinite, goodness immense!
That all this good of evil shall produce,
And evil turn to good; more wonderful
Then that which by creation first brought forth
Light out of darkness! full of doubt I stand,
Whether I should repent me now of sin
By mee done and occasiond, or rejoyce
Much more, that much more good thereof shall spring,
To God more glory, more good will to Men
From God, and over wrauth grace shall abound. (lines 469-478)

This typological rhetoric of the fortunate fall allowed Dabbs to claim a good heritage from a flawed lineage. Stories in which God's providence "good of evil shall produce"—whether through Adam's fall or Christ's death, to take the two most prominent examples—were familiar to Dabbs, and to his Christian readers, from hearing sermons, singing hymns, and reading their Bibles (and their Milton). That an evil history, like the history of Southern slavery, might produce real goods that ought to be preserved and passed on would not be surprising to readers whose moral sensibilities were shaped by long rehearsal of theological narratives like the *felix culpa*.

It was through this narrative typology of the fortunate fall that Dabbs brokered the relationship between tragedy and comedy, with the emphasis landing ultimately on comic redemption. In this, Dabbs drew deeply upon his own experience: the fortunate fall narrative profoundly shaped the way Dabbs told his own history as well as the history of his region. In a 1936 article titled “Beyond Tragedy,” Dabbs explained his conversion from a tragic to a Christian view of life through reading the Gospels: “The curtain that falls on the last, awe-inspiring scene of tragedy rises, if at all, on the first scene of Christianity. Jesus begins where the tragic hero leaves off” (454). “One goes from tragedy to Christianity, and it is but a step,” he went on to claim, “but it is not an easy step” (462). To make this argument, Dabbs leaned on the exiled Russian Christian existentialist philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev (1874-1948): “It is through tragedy that man makes his way to Christianity in which tragedy is finally resolved” (qtd. in Dabbs, “Beyond Tragedy” 454). With Percy and Campbell, Dabbs shared the sense that redemption or reconciliation can only be approached through alienation, despair, or failure—that fortune comes only after the fall. In his autobiography *The Road Home*, Dabbs reveals the personal tragedy underlying the Bible-as-literature meditations of “Beyond Tragedy”: the long-term illness and eventual death, in 1933, of his first wife, Jessie. In 1932, during the summer of Jessie’s final illness, Dabbs absorbed the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno’s book *The Tragic Sense of Life* (1912); he calls this period “the summer of Unamuno” (*The Road Home* 138-139). As he began almost preemptively to grieve his wife in the midst of the global immiseration of economic depression, Dabbs felt himself “initiated into the brotherhood of sorrow, to which as I felt, all men, consciously or unconsciously, belonged. From the depth of my own self-pity, as from the depth of Othello’s, there welled a pity for mankind” (138). As the

death of her son had galvanized Harriet Beecher Stowe's abolitionism in the 19th century, Dabbs began to draw a politics of solidarity out of his experience of personal loss.

In applying the narrative typology of the fortunate fall to his life and to Southern history, Dabbs did not merely gloss over evil and suffering. Dabbs refused to call evil "good" when he subjected the past to his ruthless glance. When grieving Jessie, Dabbs "rebelled at the loss; not bitterly, I think, but persistently. I accepted the fact of death without approving of it. So far as I could see, all things were not for the best, for a flower had been crushed. [...] Yielding to the logic of events, I yet refused to admit their rightness" (172-173). Persisting in this attitude of Stoicism cut with hope, sixteen days after Jessie's death, Dabbs underwent a mystical experience that transcended Stoicism. "I went to bed; and in a few minutes, without warning, and with no surprise, I realized that [Jessie] was with me, a warm and living presence. I had a mental image of her then, asleep and smiling in a still room, and the room was myself" (169). Jessie's resurrection and indwelling came to Dabbs as a deliverance of grace, unearned and unexpected, straining the limits of grammar as well as of belief: "Now, without effort on my part (for how could I strive for what I could not imagine?) she had become I yet had remained herself, I had become she yet had remained myself" (170). Dabbs' constant refrain is "by the grace of God," and he almost rescues the phrase from cliché by intending it literally. For Dabbs, as for Campbell, only God's grace can turn tragic loss towards comedic redemption. The same quality of double vision that allows him to rebel at Jessie's death while holding her disembodied presence dear to him also allowed him to see a personable Southern culture as the unexpected fruit—by the grace of God—of an oppressive Southern history.

In *The Road Home* (1960), Dabbs' inward image of Jessie emerges as a social icon that, by turning contemplation towards action, guides him to his later Civil Rights work:

Wishing my life to consist in and of hers, I wished to think of her all day. Yet I remembered that thoughts which do not pass into actions lose their vigor. I remembered also that she had lived an active social life. Therefore, if I really *thought* her, I should find myself living an active social life, myself a cementing force in the world. My analysis of myself and of the world would be made only that I might come to a more perfect synthesis with the world. My work would not be complete until I had done all that I could to bring men together in that union which is God. (183)

Dabbs' memory of his wife—and not a mere memory, but one animated by her real presence—functions as his own practical poem, a symbol salvaged from a painful past that motivates social action towards reconciliation, “to bring men together in that union which is God.” On the personal level, then, Dabbs' image of Jessie is the inverse of the practical poem of segregation, a symbol salvaged from a painful past that motivates social action to maintain division and oppression along the lines of race and class. “I had finally to oppose all division and separation, both within myself and within that picture of myself, the world. When finally I realized what a division segregation was, I had to oppose it too” (228). Because Dabbs understood the social world and the inner world as analogically connected, keeping faith with Jessie's presence required him to project her unifying influence outward, in action and in writing.

In *The Southern Heritage*, Dabbs proposes that Southerners develop a new practical poetry, a public symbol to replace segregation that would function, on the social level, just as his inward icon of Jessie functioned for Dabbs personally. This new poetry would bring Southerners together across the lines of race and class, rather than driving them apart. And it would enable them to conceive of the future in terms of creative imitation, not mere repetition, of the past. The practical poetry of the South, Dabbs argued, from the antebellum plantation through to midcentury segregation, enabled Southerners to imagine the future only as a “continuation or extension of the past. The South was a conservative society...because it was a slave society that, so far as slavery was concerned, had to repeat in the future what had been in the past” (182).

After slavery's demise, "the South simply retreated from the lost line of slavery to the next, and last, line of segregation" (182). Southerners needed instead a symbol that would encourage them to "warp the desirable old into the desirable new" (190). This new poetry would push past the ideological obfuscations of racism and address itself to the mode of production, and it would be flexible enough to connect a usable past to a vital future.

Dabbs crystallized his Southern symbol in a phrase: "the diesel at sundown, rolling home" (206). The image came to him while driving home one evening:

One of those big ten- to twenty-ton jobs passed me and, swinging into the lane ahead, loomed against the sundown sky. It wasn't speeding, it was just rolling easy, the pale smoke drifting from the stack. As I watched it, there came to me the words: "the diesel going home at sundown," and, with the words and with a shock of delighted surprise, a remembered picture, seen many times in the quiet countryside, a heritage of our Western past, immortalized by the Latin poets two thousand years ago: the smoke rising from the peasant's hut at evening. (198)

Here Dabbs references the Latin pastoral tradition as embodied by Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics*; later, he reaches even further back, nodding to the Greek poet Sappho's fragment in praise of evening as "the time that brings all things home, even diesels" (206). Dabbs knew that the actual diesel he encountered was not rolling home, that its driver would soon switch on his headlamps and plunge down the dark highways through the night. But what if the earthy rhythms of farm life—of the seasons, of daylight and darkness—could tame industrial production? What if Southerners could bring the diesel home?

Dabbs' proposal for a new practical poetry is a sort of industrial pastoral. Pastoral, as in the case of Virgil—or, for that matter, Ransom's Nashville Agrarians—is often written by sophisticated urban poets, criticizing the corruptions of the city with a romanticized picture of country life. In his industrial pastoral, however, Dabbs, the Columbia-educated country boy, long since returned to the farm, imagines a territory in between metropolis and countryside. In the

image of “the diesel at sundown, rolling home,” Dabbs’ industrial pastoral aesthetically arranges human dwellings and productive mechanisms to connect livelihood to life. To bring the diesel home, Dabbs proposed a setup not unlike the neo-medieval Walled Towns of Ralph Adams Cram: “the factory set in the open country or beside a village; the workers settled within that countryside in an area stretching for miles, in homes with gardens and perhaps small farms” (*The Southern Heritage* 203). Like Cram’s imagined Beaulieu, Dabbs’ industrial pastoral resists the progressive imperatives of economic development—to be always bigger, better, and more profitable—in favor of the imperative of harmonious contextual fit with the environment.¹⁰⁴

Dabbs didn’t recommend getting rid of factories. But he did demand conscious ethical responsibility over unquestioned adherence to the dogmas of industrial progress. He warned against the dangers of “merely grab[bing] the offered factories and plant[ing] them in the fields,” of industrializing the South willy-nilly, without considering the historical and geographical particularities of Southern contexts (*The Southern Heritage* 197). If his proposed arrangement of home and factory recalled the exploitative mill-villages of the nineteenth century, little better than the plantations, Dabbs claimed that the problem with the mill-villages lay in economic rather than geographical relations. If workers owned their homes and factories, then setting the structures hard by one another would be a blessing, not a curse. A redistribution of ownership, together with careful, conscious planning, could preserve homelike relations of time and space, mitigating the human displacement that characterized previous phases of global economic transformation.

¹⁰⁴ There is an interesting overlap between Dabbs thinking on development and the contextualist theories of Vienna-born architect Christopher Alexander (1936-) and his Center for Environmental Structure, “a non-profit organization dedicated to the shaping of our built environment so that it becomes deeply comfortable, beautiful and supportive for all human beings” (Center for Environmental Structure). Alexander’s most well-known book is *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* (New York: Oxford UP, 1977). The same overlap obtains for many of the writers in this dissertation when they turn their thoughts to architecture and design, not least Ralph Adams Cram.

Dabbs' industrial pastoral smuggles in some relatively radical political proposals under the guise of countrified nostalgia. This runs counter to the usual "implied politics" of the pastoral form, which, as William Empson famously noted in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), by associating poor, simple people with unchanging nature, allows the pastoral poet to bemoan social injustice while melancholically forestalling efforts to improve the lot of the oppressed (4-5). Delivering midcentury liberal boilerplate, Dabbs contended that safe labor practices and strong unions could help make industrial work more "homelike" and preserve workers' sense of group membership (*The Southern Heritage* 204). But beyond these measures, Dabbs also called for increasing the workers' share of ownership:

This probably means some sort of co-operative venture. The workers must be drawn more closely into both the conduct and the ownership of business. A man must feel that his place is his own, but partly by free gift of the others: something that in some sense he hasn't to deserve. How can he feel this about a mere wage or salary job? He must have ownership in it. (204-205)

Just as Dabbs derives his materialist interpretation of the ideology of segregation from his agrarianism, here he leverages the vaunted Southern sense of place to argue for workers' direct control of the means of production. (Or, at least, he militates for increasing workers' share of control). Dabbs introduces this argument with apologetic good manners—"this probably means some sort of," etc.—a characteristic rhetorical technique he once called "Southern indirection" ("Southern Indirection/The Southerner and Time" 22). But by following his mealy-mouthed opening with a sequence of hard imperatives—"A man must feel that his place is his own...he must have ownership in it"—Dabbs exposes his more radical edge. His fidelity to his Southern heritage culminates in a kind of genteel anarchism, just as it did for Will Barrett.

It may seem that by turning his imagination to labor relations rather than race relations, Dabbs abandons the ostensible purpose of *The Southern Heritage*: to show that segregation

betrayed that heritage, and that a South dedicated to racial equality would better preserve true Southern virtues than the Jim Crow regime. But if Dabbs' argument that the ultimate meaning and political function of segregation was to preserve the profit margins of the white middle and upper classes is true, then his industrial pastoral strikes at segregation's heart. His substitution of a practical poetry of economics—of production or livelihood, as he called it—for a practical poetry of race is his strongest volley against segregation. However, when Dabbs asserts that after redressing economic injustice “racial problems will tend to solve themselves,” he shows himself to be something of a vulgar agrarian materialist, underestimating racism's power to sustain oppression beyond its function as economic ideology (207).

“The diesel at sundown,” though it activated some widely shared Southern cultural values, was the invention of a single eccentric, bookish farmer and ex-professor. How could it compete with the symbolic juggernaut of racism or the collectively-authored myth of the Lost Cause? Dabbs puts his finger on a real need in the South for a new social symbology, a new canon of practical poetry. But Dabbs himself could not supply that need; probably no one writer could. Soon after he published *The Southern Heritage* in 1958, Dabbs appeared on the prime-time ABC television program *The Mike Wallace Interview*. When asked what his neighbors thought of him, Dabbs couldn't help but snicker. With a wry cock of his head, he replied, “Perhaps I belong to the aristocracy of the damn fools in the South. That's one way of putting it.” As his friend Will Campbell knew, however, there's a certain kind of holy witness that only damn fools can bear.

5.4 Beyond Tragedy?

Walker Percy's skill with practical poetry, with crafting and interpreting social symbols, gave him his own opportunity to punch Deputy Beans in the root of the neck, so to speak. Like

his doddering, dislocated protagonist Will Barrett, Percy was never a willing social activist. An intellectual moralist by temperament, he supported the Civil Rights Movement in print but, unlike Will Campbell, Percy was not to be found marching or protesting. Nevertheless, Campbell recognized from the beginning that in his Covington, Louisiana home—just across Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans—Percy had founded “a family residence and base of operation and not a permanent retreat from the world” (Letter to Walker Percy, 1). In the semi-rural suburb, Percy established what Auden called a “suburb of dissent.”

Especially after the “long hot summer” of race riots in 1967, Percy felt compelled to step up his on-the-ground actions in support of social justice in his adopted hometown. With several of his neighbors, “black and white,” Percy helped to form the Community Relations Council of Greater Covington “in early 1968” (Tolson 347). Percy discreetly funded some of the Council’s projects, and personally spearheaded the founding of a credit union and a Head Start program, for which he also served as a substitute bus driver. Conservative factions in Covington opposed the Council’s actions—sometimes through legal channels, sometimes through extralegal violence.

In the summer of 1970, Percy found himself on the receiving end of this conservative ire, including a Klan bomb threat, when he opposed racist power in Federal court. As he told his friend, the novelist and historian Shelby Foote, in a letter,

This summer I reached the nadir of my popularity here in Covington: testified in federal court as an expert witness (an observer of the culture) in a dispute about flying the Confederate flag at the high school. The blacks want it out. I said they were right. So I got threatened by the Klan: bomb the house etc—we slept in the attic for 2 weeks—not that I thought there was one chance in 1000, but didn’t want Ann and Bunt [Percy’s daughter and wife] to get blown up. Then I accused the local Catholic school of getting rid of the niggers, running a seg school with holy water thrown on it. Now the Catholics (most) are mad at me. And I do believe they’re more unpleasant than the Klan. (Foote and Percy 142)

In his testimony, Percy argued that whatever it may once have meant, in 1970 the Confederate flag symbolized none other than “segregation, white supremacy, and racism,” and for that reason had no place in Covington’s integrated school system (qtd. in Tolson 353). The flag that Will Barrett saw flying over the prison just before his escape into Louisiana had to come down. These incidents also demonstrate Percy’s leadership from the margins as a churchman, taking his fellow-Catholics to task for capitulating to the world’s racist logics.

But in the privacy of his good-ole-boy epistolary exchange with Foote, Percy felt free to use the word “nigger” to refer to the black neighbors for whose good he was ostensibly working. As used here, the word is part and parcel of Percy’s satirical provocation to his co-religionists—which is to say that in the moment sheer provocation eclipses human concern for his black neighbors as people; it even eclipses plain good manners. Percy’s irascibility—“sometimes I think the creative urge comes from malice,” he confided to Foote in another letter (Foote and Percy 128)—gives his art much of its charm and its moral force. But his blithe dropping of a word weighty with the bodily and spiritual sufferings of black people raises the question of whether, when applied to Southern history, the lightness of this sort of comedy becomes truly unbearable.¹⁰⁵

Events in the past year seem to show that the efforts of Percy and the Committee of Southern Churchmen to make the Southern heritage a help rather than a hindrance to social justice were for naught. In Dabbs’ South Carolina in April 2015, a white policeman murdered black Charlestonian Walter Scott during a routine traffic stop; in June, a young white supremacist terrorist killed nine parishioners of Charleston’s Emanuel African Methodist

¹⁰⁵ As early as 1960 (or earlier, because he wrote the book earlier, though that’s when it was published), James McBride Dabbs had expressed grave doubts about the possibility of a divinely comic approach to history. “When one passes beyond tragedy what else is there? *The Divine Comedy* perhaps? I read it once, but it told me very little. Perhaps I should read it again. Perhaps not. Perhaps I’ve never become really a Christian, nor has the drama of life become for me a divine comedy. I don’t know” (Dabbs, *The Road Home* 117).

Episcopal Church after sitting in on their prayer meeting. The most prominent media image of the perpetrator of the latter crime showed him brandishing a gun and several Confederate flags. These two tragedies amplified for many Southerners the importance of the nationwide struggle—carried on principally by the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri—against persistent racism, inequality, and threats of violence (in particular, from police) faced by black people in the United States today. Subsequent calls for the Confederate flag to be removed from the Civil War monument on the grounds of the South Carolina capitol were met with anxious protests from some white Southerners that the flag represented “pride and heritage, not hatred” (Jones). In response, several journalists questioned whether the two could be separated—whether the Southern heritage was anything else but hate.¹⁰⁶

In this light, the efforts of Percy and the Churchmen to redeem Southern tragedy seem woefully misguided. How can anyone say anything positive about the white Southern heritage, much less imagine it as a resource for a solidaristic, democratic, antiracist politics? Perhaps the idea of a Southern heritage ought to be retired rather than redeemed, taken down like the bankrupt symbol that Walker Percy helped remove from Covington schools in 1970 and that South Carolina governor Nikki Haley eventually withdrew from the capitol grounds in 2015.

These and similar events have prompted a wider conversation among journalists and historians about whether it is legitimate to look to history for any sort of political inspiration.¹⁰⁷ In the essay “Letter to My Son” from the National Book Award-winning *Between the World and*

¹⁰⁶ See the contributions of Kareem U. Crayton, Brenton Mock, and Barbara Combs to “Does the Confederate Flag Breed Racism?” *The New York Times*, June 19, 2015 (<http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2015/06/19/does-the-confederate-flag-breed-racism>).

¹⁰⁷ See Tim Tyson, “Can Honest History Allow for Hope?” *The Atlantic*, Dec. 18, 2015 (<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/can-hope-and-history-coexist/420651/>).

Me (2015), journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates levels a tragic-atheistic critique of any narrative—especially the religious kind—that attempts to redeem a history of suffering. Coates counsels that

[y]ou must struggle to truly remember this past. You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law, toward fairy tales that imply some irrepressible justice. The enslaved were not bricks in your road, and their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history. They were people turned to fuel for the American machine. Enslavement was not destined to end, and it is wrong to claim our present circumstance—no matter how improved—as the redemption for the lives of people who never asked for the posthumous, untouchable glory of dying for their children. Our triumphs can never redeem this. Perhaps our triumphs are not even the point. Perhaps struggle is all we have. (“Letter to My Son”)

Elsewhere, Coates has written that an historian “wedded to ‘hope’ is divorced from ‘truth’” (“Hope and the Historian”). The proximate targets of Coates’ critique of hope are the Civil Rights movement-inspired liberal tradition embodied by President Barack Obama and the Black Nationalist tradition in which he was raised. But Coates’ arguments react all the more strongly against the comic vision of a white Southern Calvinist like James McBride Dabbs.

I won’t dispute Coates’ claims that history *is* tragedy, and that to narrate it otherwise is to falsify the facts. Such claims, as bracingly put as they are by Coates, seem to me by nature unknowable and unchallengeable. But I would contend that *either* tragic or comic histories can license struggle *or* acquiescence, and that particular historical narratives take on their political meanings in the historical contexts of their own production. After all, the tragic paradigm has been invoked for very different political ends by Coates in 2015 and by Ransom in 1930. Percy, Campbell, and Dabbs worked in a white Southern literary tradition that had narrated the Southern past tragically in order to own the evil of slavery and its legacy without opposing the injustices black Southerners faced. The tragic sensibility of the Southern Renaissance thus underwrote the same melancholically conservative implied politics that William Empson ascribed to the pastoral form. When the Churchmen reframed the Southern heritage as divine

comedy, the shift was politically momentous because it “corrected” the tragic view of a previous generation of Southern writers. This comic history motivated Civil Rights activism, but it came at the peril of redeeming the sufferings of black Southerners too lightly—a charge to which Dabbs’ “fortunate fall” narrative is particularly vulnerable. It may be that Coates is right and that today is a time for tragedy, not comedy.

The wily re-signifying strategies of Percy, Campbell, and Dabbs wagered on a bet that the demands of justice could be put in the Southern theological vernacular. Yet the Christian white moderates they targeted remained by and large, in the words of Governor Felix to St. Paul, “almost persuaded” by their message of reconciliation. Campbell’s response to this failure was to practice preemptive reconciliation, ministering to all who would have him—white or black, Klansmen or Black nationalist—by burying their dead and “emptying the bedpans of their sick” (Houston 145). The faith that is “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” enabled Campbell to persist in the hope of reconciliation where none was apparent, because he believed it was already accomplished in Christ. If this was damnfoolery, he made the most of it.

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Chapter 6:

Coda: Wholeness in an Age of Fracture; or, The Home Economics of Wendell Berry and Marilynne Robinson

To have good farming or good land use of any kind, you have got to have limits. Capitalism doesn't acknowledge limits. That is why we have supposedly limitless economic growth in a finite world. Good agriculture is formal. You can have limits without form, but you can't have form without limits.

—Wendell Berry, interview with *Dissent* magazine (2012)

Can the Christian radical writers I've examined in this dissertation still speak? If they spoke, could they still be heard? The appeal of their ideas, and of the imaginative forms in which they cast those ideas, largely depends on the widespread currency of Christianity in the surrounding culture. At the beginning of the history I've recounted, Vida Scudder was already conscious that Christianity's cultural hegemony could no longer be taken for granted. Her first book, *The Witness of Denial* (1895), quarried the austere veins of Victorian atheism for a literary-critical apologetic for Catholic faith. By the 1930s, the plurality of religious and non-religious viewpoints on offer in American culture gave Edmund Wilson license to dismiss T. S. Eliot out of hand, even as it gave Dorothy Day one of her most abiding and productive intellectual challenges. The 1960s breakup of the Christian consensus underlying early Civil Rights activism helped lead Will Campbell to form the Committee of Southern Churchmen. Yet all of these writers, while speaking from the edges of American cultural Protestantism as Roman or Anglo-Catholics, ambivalent post-Christians or radical pariahs, could depend on their primary audience to feel the normative force of the biblical, church-historical, liturgical, and theological terms they invoked. By the mid-1970s, when the Committee of Southern Churchmen's activism cooled off, the religious landscape of the country had begun to change, even in the South.

Moreover, these writers' arguments in favor of the cultivation of community, the authority of tradition, and the force of historical examples were buttressed by a wider matrix of ideas, not necessarily religious, about human nature and society. As historian Daniel Rodgers notes, by the mid-1970s, this matrix was also fragmenting, opening onto a new "age of fracture":

[C]onceptions of human nature that in the post-World War II era had been thick with context, social circumstance, institutions, and history gave way to conceptions of human nature that stressed choice, agency, performance, and desire. Strong metaphors of society were supplanted by weaker ones. Imagined collectivities shrank; notions of structure and power thinned out. Viewed by its acts of mind, the last quarter of the century was an era of disaggregation, a great age of fracture. (3)

The intellectual atmosphere of the late twentieth century occluded the social icons crafted by the authors in this study, whether monasticism, orthodoxy, the Mystical Body of Christ, or Dabbs' "diesel at sundown, rolling home." Of course, even now, radical writers still undertake the tasks that spurred the creation of these icons, such as countering capitalism's depredations, discrediting white supremacy, and making space for queer life. But on this side of Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and *Obergefell*, it is obvious that the terms of engagement on these issues have shifted over the last forty years. It would be only a little surprising if now the discourses developed by Cram and Scudder, Day and Ransom, Auden and McKay, Percy and Campbell, continued to resonate only within narrow ecclesiastical confines.

But new writers have in fact secured a wide hearing for these discourses by fitting them to the challenges of our contemporary age of fracture. Among these writers are two of the most popular and recognizable literary artists and public intellectuals of the past two decades: Wendell Berry (1934—) and Marilynne Robinson (1943—). Berry's Christian Agrarianism has produced a thoroughgoing ecological critique of capitalism expressed in his essays, fiction, and poems. Robinson's Protestant liberalism emerges in her essays and novels as a self-conscious tradition of its own—no longer the given cultural background of American discourse, but instead one

tradition among others, with its distinctive political genius. She speaks for liberalism as a tradition, not a liberalism inimical to tradition.

Berry and Robinson have devoted their fiction to building richly imagined fictional small towns. A Kentucky farming community much like the one he calls home, Berry's "Port William Membership" unfolds over eight novels and a number of short stories and poems.¹⁰⁸ Robinson sculpts the landscape of Gilead, Iowa, across her three novels *Gilead* (2004), *Home* (2008), and *Lila* (2014). Both writers give particular attention to the crucial role of outsiders in recognizing and naming both the virtues and faults of their fictional communities. By tracing and retracing connections among people, families, the land they inhabit, and the wider world, their work resists the shrinking of imagined collectivities Rodgers identifies as characteristic of the age. The result, as Berry puts it in his novel *Jayber Crow* (2000), is "a vision of the gathered community...imperfect and irresolute but held together by the frayed and always fraying, incomplete and yet ever-holding bonds of the various sorts of affection" (205). Port William and Gilead emerge in these works as flawed but vital social icons, at once models of virtuous affection and examples of failed affection.¹⁰⁹

Even more than his fiction, Berry's poetry reveals his continuity with the Christian radical traditions I've considered here. His lyrics shuttle back and forth between quietly attentive observations of nature and acid political satire—sometimes within the same poem. They add up, on the one hand, to a vision of wholeness of people in place, an economy of communal abundance rather than individualized scarcity—a vision patched together by "a gatherer of fragments, a cobbler / of pieces" (*This Day* 4, lines 32-33). On the other hand, they constitute a

¹⁰⁸ In 1965, Berry left New York City to return to his native Kentucky and bought a farm near his family homestead where he still lives and works today.

¹⁰⁹ Modeling democratic community on the American small town is part of Berry and Robinson's heritage from the old Protestant Left, as Mark Thomas Edwards shows (20-24).

series of critical volleys against the forces of fragmentation—principally against the industrial capitalist transformation of American agriculture in the decades following World War II. These two affective poles of Berry’s poetry are best captured by his Sabbath poems and his Mad Farmer poems, respectively. The formal, reserved Sabbath poems model a way of being at rest in time that resists the temporal logic of capitalism as it comes home to farm life. The Mad Farmer poems enunciate a backward avant garde, a religious revolution against capitalist existence.

The half-parodic, self-mythifying figure of the Mad Farmer first appears in Berry’s 1970 collection *Farming: A Hand Book*. The Mad Farmer poems—some narrated in the first-person, some in the third—recount the legend of a persona that is part Piers Plowman, part Jeffersonian revolutionary, part Southern Agrarian, and part anarchist saboteur. “The Mad Farmer Revolution,” subtitled “a fragment of the natural history of New Eden,” shows Berry at his most mythic and humorous (*New Collected Poems* 137-138). The Mad Farmer “threw a visionary high / lonesome on the holy communion wine” and went on a drunken spree of plowing and planting (lines 3-4):

He plowed the churchyard, the
minister’s wife, three graveyards
and a golf course. In a parking lot
he planted a forest of little pines. (lines 9-12)

Filled up with “the blood of a god” from the Eucharistic table, the Mad Farmer disestablishes, as it were, the church and liberates the minister’s wife, even as he rolls back the ugly and unproductive suburban developments of the golf course and the parking lot (line 7). Berry presents the Mad Farmer, and not the bloodless institutional church or its ministers, as the true bearer of divine prophetic vision. This vision is of a reenchanting world of “goddesses” and “spirits,” one where “flowers sprang up in his tracks / everywhere he stepped” (lines 15, 37, 22-23).

To represent this reenchanting world, Berry introduces medievalist tropes. With his farming rampage quieted, the Mad Farmer turns once more to the minister's wife, who claims him as her true husband:

[H]is planter's eye fell on
that parson's fair fine lady
again. "O holy plowman," cried she
"I am all grown up in weeds.
Pray, bring me back into good tilth." (lines 24-28)

If the alliteration on "p" and "f" in these lines recall Middle English prosody, the diction is even more emphatically medievalist. The minister is renamed as a Chaucerian "parson," while the Mad Farmer is dignified as a "holy plowman," a latter-day avatar of William Langland's farmer-Christ. "Tilth," the only example of truly archaic diction in the poem, is its most important word; it gathers the whole meaning of the poem into itself. According to the *OED*, the word carries senses of "labor, work, or effort directed to useful or profitable ends"; "agricultural work, husbandry"; "the cultivation of knowledge, morality, religion, the mind, etc."; and "plowing"—and Berry exploits this last sense for its sexual pun ("tilth, n."). "Tilth" resonates with economic, agricultural, cultural, and sexual meaning; it binds all these domains of meaning together in ways that can only seem strangely anachronistic to modern readers. It is a fragment of wholeness, a shard of Berry's vision—a poem in itself. The *OED* references no uses of the word after 1884. Its passage out of modern English usage—the very fact that this word presents as archaic—stands as Berry's condemnation of the twentieth century.

In other Mad Farmer poems, Berry welds the rhetoric of the sixties and seventies avant gardes—"Revolution," "Manifesto," and "Liberation Front" all appear in the titles of the poems—to that of Southern rebellion. "The Mad Farmer Manifesto: The First Amendment" (1973) begins by quoting that Virginian declarer of independence, Thomas Jefferson (*New*

Collected Poems 177). In a 1994 poem, the Mad Farmer “Secedes from the Union” in

Maurinesque repetitions:

From the union of power and money,
from the union of power and secrecy,
from the union of government and science,
from the union of government and art,
from the union of science and money,
from the union of ambition and ignorance,
from the union of genius and war,
from the union of outer space and inner vacuity,
the Mad Farmer walks quietly away. (“The Mad Farmer, Flying the Flag of Rough
Branch, Secedes from the Union,” lines 1-9)

Midway through, the poem shifts into first person, and the Mad Farmer cries out to his
neighbors:

From the union of self-gratification and self-annihilation,
secede into care for one another
and for the good gifts of Heaven and Earth. (lines 35-37)

Like Campbell, Dabbs, and the Committee of Southern Churchmen, Berry radically resignifies
the practical poetry of Southern cultural history—in this case, the notion of secession.¹¹⁰ Instead
of a Confederate flag, the Mad Farmer flies “the Flag of Rough Branch,” his own local place
(326). The idea of “The South,” to the Mad Farmer, is just another abstraction, and a distraction
from the real bonds of neighborhood that neighbors must either recognize or neglect.

Another name in Berry’s poetry for the space into which the Mad Farmer quietly secedes,
the neighborly place where “the good gifts of Heaven and Earth” are given and received, is the
Sabbath. The practice of regularly observing a day of rest within the rhythms of work opens a

¹¹⁰ In 1983, James Y. Holloway, the editor of the Churchmen’s magazine *Katallagete*, invited Berry to give the commencement address at Berea College, the tuition-free liberal arts school founded by Kentucky abolitionist Cassius Marcellus Clay where Holloway was a Professor of Philosophy and Religion. Berry’s address was subsequently published under the title “Higher Education and Home Defense” in the Summer/Fall 1983 issue of *Katallagete*—one of the last issues before the Committee and the magazine parted ways. Like the Churchmen, Berry has also written penetratingly on racism in American life, especially in his book-length essay *The Hidden Wound* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010 [Second revised edition; first published 1970]). His poem “My Great-Grandfather’s Slaves” (1968) closes with these lines: “I am owned by the blood of all of them / who ever were owned by my blood. / We cannot be free from each other” (*New Collected Poems* 61-62, lines 39-41).

space within time that is outside of the demands of the workday. For Berry, this is a favorite space of poetic composition, and he marks its sanctification by collecting his Sabbath poems in a different volume from the rest of his work. The cyclical temporality of the Sabbath, Berry writes in his introduction to the collection, connects the poems to the cyclical but not repetitive time of the natural world, its seasons of growth and decay. Nature's "ways are cyclic, but she is absolutely original. She never exactly repeats herself, and this is the source equally of our grief and our delight. But Nature's damages are followed by her healings, though not necessarily on a human schedule or in human time" (*This Day* xxiii). This natural time serves as a limit to the all-too-human reckoning of time in terms of capitalist development. In Berry's eyes, "the 'creative destruction' of industrialism, by contrast, implies no repayment of what we have taken, no healing, but is in effect a repudiation of our membership in the land-community" (xxiii). "The fundamental conflict of our time," he concludes, "is that between the creaturely life of Nature's world and the increasingly mechanical life of modern humans" (xxiii). Who else would define basic social conflict in these terms? Most thinkers today would counterpose the 99% and the 1%; or Islam and the West; or workers and capitalists; or populist nationalism and neoliberal internationalism; or people of color and white supremacy; or secular rationalism and religious tradition. Berry seems a man out of time, a mid-twentieth century man, in his political framework.

Berry's agrarian criticism of technology evidences his intellectual debt to Christian antimodernists including Cram, Ransom, Eliot, Day, and Maurin. His criticism of "industrialism," in particular, comes straight out of the 1930s, an old way of wishing equal

plagues on the houses of communist and capitalist.¹¹¹ As if to confirm this link, Berry follows his claim about “the fundamental conflict of our time” by quoting two of Eliot’s 1930s texts, “Choruses from ‘The Rock’” (1936) and *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939). The most important idea he takes from these sources is that of limits or margins—key concepts that I expand on in my reading of Ransom’s “A Statement of Principles” from *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930) in Chapter 3. “My work as a writer...is intimately related to my work as a marginal farmer,” Berry affirms (*This Day* xxiv). By “marginal,” he means equally that he is a small landholder; a farmer off to the side and out of the way of the industrialist mainstream; and one who intentionally preserves margins of land against ecological depletion. Keeping the Sabbath is, for Berry, protecting a temporal margin, the analogue in time of the way he farms in space. “The idea of endless economic ‘growth’” is inimical to Sabbath because “to rest, we must accept Nature’s limits and our own. When we come to our limit, we must be still” (xxiii).

Berry’s poems of this Sabbath stillness record his perceptions of a material world saturated with spiritual meaning. They argue for the indissolubility of matter and spirit. Like Cram, Scudder, Maurin, Day, and Percy, Berry insists on a sacramental metaphysics. But where these earlier Catholic writers saw themselves raging against materialism—whether as an atheistic monism or a dualism that elevated material values over the spiritual—Berry combats the spiritualism endemic to his Baptist heritage. “In the earlier poems, I used . . . ‘spirit’ . . . conventionally and complacently. Later I became unhappy” with this usage, he confesses (xxv).

I resolved, first, to avoid “spirit.” This was not because I think the word itself is without meaning, but because I could no longer tolerate the dualism, often construed in sermons and such as a contest, of spirit and matter. I saw that once this division was made, spirit

¹¹¹ In a 2012 interview with radical magazine *Dissent*, in response to the question of whether he is a socialist, Berry said, “From what I’ve read and heard, socialism and communism have been just as committed to industrial principles as capitalism. My own inclination is not to start with a political idea or theory and think downward to the land and the people, but instead to start with the land and the people, the *necessity* for harmony between local ecosystems and local economies, and think upward to conserving policies” (Leonard).

invariably triumphed to the detriment, to the actual and often irreparable damage, of matter and the material world. Dispensing with the word “spirit” clears the way to imagine a live continuity, in fact and value, between what we call “spiritual” and what we call “material.” (xxv)

A related concern not so much to defend spiritual values against materialism as to reinvest the material itself with spiritual significance motivated Dabbs to write *The Southern Heritage* (1958). More recently, a similar motivation propels Marilynne Robinson’s fiction and nonfiction.

For Berry, reinvesting the material world with its native spiritual significance is principally a matter of cultivation or care—of tith—because the earth itself has been profaned by industrial capitalist agriculture. For Robinson, by contrast, the reenchantment of the material world is principally a matter of seeing—more specifically, of learning a nonreductive way of seeing. As John Ames, the aging preacher and narrator of her novel *Gilead* puts it, “Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don’t have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?” (280). The line paraphrases the best-known English translation of the French Reformer John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*: “[W]herever you turn your eyes, there is no portion of the world, however minute, that does not exhibit at least some sparks of beauty; while it is impossible to contemplate the vast and beautiful fabric as it extends around, without being overwhelmed by the immense weight of glory” (51). Robinson, like her narrator, is a deep reader of Calvin’s works. Her invocation of Calvin in *Gilead* is representative of her efforts to recuperate the Reformed Protestant theological tradition. Drawing from Calvin himself all the way to the New England Puritans and their inheritors, Robinson seeks to rehabilitate Calvinism as primarily a metaphysics

and an aesthetics, rather than an economy of salvation. Her Calvin is a theologian of perception and beauty as much as divine sovereignty and predestination.¹¹²

Unlike Peter Maurin's historical villain and ur-usurer, Robinson's Calvin is also a forerunner of the welfare state. In a sharp-witted critique of the Bush-era Christian Right, Robinson argues that although Calvin's doctrine of predestination might seem to encourage "a stoical passivity relative to the things of this world," historical Calvinism is in fact "strongly associated with social reform as well as with revolution" ("Onward Christian Liberals"). The contemporary United States plays host to a strange contradiction in which those of Calvin's ecclesiastical descendants who claim allegiance to the literal meaning of Scripture—Robinson calls them "neo-fundamentalists"—deny the plain requirements of its moral teachings. "In other words, our anti-Darwinists are social Darwinists," she quips ("Onward"). Her essay sketches the historical reasons for the nineteenth-century split between Evangelicals and liberals in American Protestantism. In the wake of the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening, the former insisted that salvation occurred in a discrete and knowable conversion event, while the latter abjured any claims to certainty over who was saved. The Evangelical passion for knowing who is in and out of God's family translates, in contemporary economic terms, to discrimination between the deserving and undeserving poor. Robinson argues that the liberal Protestant embrace of uncertainty fosters a way of seeing the world and other people suffused with "liberality," openness of mind and heart, that is more consistent with the ethical teachings of the Old and New Testaments, and more faithful to Calvin's theological legacy, than the neo-fundamentalist

¹¹² A member of the United Churches of Christ, Robinson is herself a denominational inheritor of the Puritan Congregationalists. So is President Barack Obama, who considers Robinson one of his favorite writers and awarded her the National Humanities Medal. The admiration is mutual. See "President Obama and Marilynne Robinson: A Conversation in Iowa," *The New York Review of Books* (Nov. 5, 2015) <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/11/05/president-obama-marilynne-robinson-conversation/>>. See also Robert Long, "Christian, Not Conservative," *The American Conservative* (Oct. 15, 2013) <<http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/christian-not-conservative/>>.

emphasis on discerning moral worth that leads many adherents to embrace laissez-faire economics (“Onward”).

With this argument, Robinson counters the longstanding historiography, famously expounded by Max Weber, that makes Protestant individualism and concern with personal holiness the breeding grounds for the spirit of capitalism. In place of the Weber thesis, she posits that an individualism properly faithful to Calvin’s vision produces care for other individuals who are each an instance of the *imago Dei*. Robinson explicitly sets her sacred individualism against “capitalism” and its “grasping materialism” (*When I Was a Child* xiv). Her Protestant liberalism is thus a rebuke to neoliberalism. But reclaiming the virtues of the liberal Protestant tradition requires her to present it *as* a tradition, one stream of thought flowing across the American religious landscape rather than the erstwhile common sense of the nation’s intellectual classes. “I am speaking from the perspective of American liberal Protestantism,” she declares in “Onward, Christian Liberals,” just before she narrates its historical emergence. That sentence could not have been written in *The American Scholar* many years before 2006, because liberal Protestantism would have appeared as a default perspective rather than a marked one.

Robinson’s liberalism also involves a tough-minded defense of progressive optimism—the one ideological enemy shared by every writer in this study from Cram to Berry. “The liberation of the human individual as a social value required optimism, which it also amply justified,” she claims with some circularity (*When I Was a Child* xvi). Social progress, she suggests, requires a Jamesian will-to-believe in the possibility of its achievement. In her view, social pessimism is not radical resistance but instead cynical capitulation to “the economics of the moment,” with its ungenerous—essentially illiberal—conception of human nature as meanly

self-interested (xv). She argues the point with such polite ferocity that each time I read her I am almost persuaded.

Berry and Robinson eloquently denounce the dogmas of neoliberal capitalism, and they offer beautiful alternative visions fired by Protestant faith. Their fictional settings place these visions in the post-World War II decades dominated by “context, social circumstance, institutions, and history” in their conceptions of the social, according to Rodgers (*Age of Fracture* 3). Along these lines, the Catholic critic Paul Elie criticizes Robinson’s *Gilead* for being a kind of historical fiction (“Has Fiction Lost Its Faith?”). I understand their appeal to midcentury Protestantism differently in light of the previous radical appropriations of sacred history I’ve recounted here. Berry and Robinson are doing just what their predecessors have done throughout the twentieth century: breaking bread with the dead. Far from constructing a golden age to be nostalgically mourned, they instead seek the virtues necessary to the present in the religious past. Berry and Robinson aim to reignite certain elements of the Cold War Protestant imagination—its conceptions of historical context, communal bonds, moral individualism, neighborly responsibility, and unflinching attention to economic change—without turning back the clock on the lessons in the politics of race, gender, sexuality, and religious pluralism delivered by the sixties and their aftermath. Berry’s *Mad Farmer Revolution* stands alongside Scudder’s *Christian Revolution* and Maurin’s *Green Revolution*. Robinson’s revitalization of Northeastern and Midwestern Protestant traditions belongs to the same class as Campbell’s radicalization of the Southern Protestant heritage.

Berry and Robinson are writers uniquely positioned by their religious commitments to appeal to educated middle-class and lower-middle-class readers in the Southern and Midwestern heartlands these writers call home. For readers in this demographic, Christian categories by and

large still carry cultural and existential weight. That weight can be leveraged to encourage a more just and historically informed reckoning with the deleterious effects of capitalism and racism than the fractious marriage between religious conservatives and the Republican Party have so far provided to them. With quasi-populist nationalisms currently picking up steam in the United States (and also in Europe), the need is pressing for a language of democracy that disavows the progressivist pedantry that labels political opponents as backward and benighted. Like Will D. Campbell and his Churchmen, Berry and Robinson find in the theological vernacular just such a language. Whether they will be any more successful than Campbell remains to be seen. But there is some evidence—admittedly, mostly anecdotal—that they can sway minds.

For instance, both authors are popular among otherwise conservative evangelical Christians. Searching for the two authors' names at the neo-Calvinist evangelical online hub *The Gospel Coalition* produces dozens of hits—in-depth articles as well as passing mentions.¹¹³ Over the past ten years, Berry and Robinson have become household names within these circles. At Jim Wallis' *Sojourners* magazine, an organ of the evangelical Left, the two writers appear equally popular.¹¹⁴ Given this, it seems plausible to me that the writings of Berry and Robinson may serve a conduit for moving from one side of the political aisle to the other within a shared set of religious commitments. They criticize politically conservative positions by inviting their

¹¹³ A search for “Wendell Berry” produces “about 67” hits (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/search/results/V2VuZGVsbCBCZXJyeQ>). A search for “Marilynne Robinson” produces “about 98” hits (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/search/results/TWFyaWx5bm5lIFJvYmluc29u>). The Gospel Coalition announces no particular political allegiance but appears to be dominated by a kind of “compassionate conservatism.”

¹¹⁴ A search for “Wendell Berry” produces 142 hits (<https://sojo.net/search/site/%22Wendell%20Berry%22?page=14>). A search for “Marilynne Robinson” produces 22 hits, including an interview conducted by and published in the magazine. (<https://sojo.net/search/site/%2522Marilynne%2520Robinson%2522?page=2>).

Christian readers to dig deeper into their theological traditions rather than to abandon those traditions.

I tend to believe in these authors' persuasive power for this demographic because I have experienced it. I grew up in a middle-class family in rural Texas in a mostly white evangelical milieu, politically as well as religiously conservative. In college, reading *Gilead*—and subsequently, Robinson's essays—helped to awaken me from the dogmatic slumbers of a libertarianism I had embraced with youthful zeal. I was willing to give Robinson a hearing because she seemed to understand Calvinism so much better than I did, and being faithful to that tradition was important to me. Later, reading Berry's essays gave me a way to talk anticapitalism with my dad—not a highly ideological man but a Republican voter as long as I've known him—since he grew up on a family cotton farm and saw the agricultural transformations Berry mourns happen at first hand.

These shifts in personal politics adumbrate my larger hopes that this dissertation might serve as an imaginative and historical resource for a Christian democratic movement in the U.S. that can contribute to a broad religious-secular coalition on the Left.¹¹⁵ That this may be an opportune moment for the emergence of such a movement is suggested by a recent event at the Vatican. Pope Francis, the first pontiff to take the name of the Poor Man of Assisi so important to many writers in this study, invited to a conference Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, a secular Jew and a tireless social democrat whose recently unsuccessful presidential campaign has helped bring socialism back into American political discourse as something other than a pejorative.¹¹⁶ In

¹¹⁵ On European Christian democratic movements, see Stathis N. Kalyvas and Kees van Kersbergen, "Christian Democracy," *Annual Review of Political Science* 13 (2010), pp. 183-209.

¹¹⁶ Pope Francis is also the first Latin American pope. His 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'* (On Care for our Common Home) extends the tradition of Catholic social thought to address the challenges of climate change and puts forward his papal namesake saint as a holy exemplar of care for nature. Theologian R. R. Reno has argued that *Laudato Si'*

his address, Sanders praised the contributions of Catholic social thought from *Rerum Novarum* forward—the papal teachings that inspired the Catholic Worker movement—to the struggle for what the senator called “a moral economy.” He closed his statement with this admonition:

The challenges facing our planet are not mainly technological or even financial, because as a world we are rich enough to increase our investments in skills, infrastructure, and technological know-how to meet our needs and to protect the planet. Our challenge is mostly a moral one, to redirect our efforts and vision to the common good.

From Scudder to McKay to Berry, the writers in this dissertation attempt “to redirect our efforts and vision to the common good” through an encounter with sacred history. Faced anew with the challenge of building a more just economy—a challenge that is religious and political as well as moral—these writers show us a way forward by going back.

6.1 Works Cited

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