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Crickets Chirping Hallelujah: Mystery and Everyday Life in the Short Stories of Chekhov and O'Connor

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Crickets Chirping Hallelujah:

Mystery and Everyday Life in the Short Stories of Chekhov and O'Connor

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by

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Introduction – Meaninglessness

In 1959 Flannery O'Connor wrote to John Hawkes, a friend and fellow fiction writer, in anticipation of her upcoming novel *The Violent Bear it Away*. In the letter she expresses concern that the text will be poorly received (or perhaps misunderstood) because of a disparity between her own beliefs and those of her audience –

“I don’t think you should write something as long as a novel around anything that is not of the gravest concern to you and everybody else and for me this is always the conflict between an attraction for the Holy and the disbelief in it that we breathe in with the air of the times. It’s hard to believe always but more so in the world we live in now.”¹

O'Connor’s “attraction for the Holy” could refer to Catholicism, but her language seems purposefully broader than that. The use of “Holy” instead of “God” or “Christ” extends the sentiment beyond any particular religion, implicating a general sense of spirituality as her “attraction.” She’s worried this will alienate her from the modern fiction reader, for whom “disbelief” is pervasive as “air.” Presumably this disbelief is just as broad, applying not just to anti-theism or atheism, but to an extensive cultural distrust in the sacred. She notes that believing is always difficult but especially “in the world we live in *now*,” that there has been a shift in our societal presuppositions which has made the modern world especially skeptical of realities beyond the physical.

O'Connor is not alone in finding the spiritual an increasingly less viable “attraction.” Max Weber addresses this subject in a 1917 lecture titled “Science as a Vocation” – in weighing the benefits of a career in the sciences versus the humanities, Weber remarks upon the “increasing intellectualization and rationalization” of modern society, and characterizes the consequences of this process. “It means principally that there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.

¹ O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, (New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), p. 349

This means that the world is disenchanted.”² This “disenchantment” seems applicable to the state of O’Connor’s reader who “breathes” disbelief, not in any particular entity or faith, but in the world as “enchanted” with spiritual force. Weber adds that disenchantment does not necessarily “indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives,” only “that if one but wished one *could* learn.”³ Disenchantment and its prerequisite “intellectualization” are not synonymous with universal enlightenment. The everyday person is reliant on faith now just as they once were, only of a different sort; instead of believing in magical or spiritual forces underlying and governing the world, one believes in “calculation” and “mastery.” The notion is that humanity possesses all of the information necessary to explain these previously “mysterious” phenomena in physical terms, and that such explanations are theoretically accessible to us “if one but wished.” Though this is a kind of faith in the capability of science without actually possessing the knowledge first hand, its place in culture is more akin to fact.

The deference to scientific explanation, a modern inclination in a disenchanted world, fills a certain God-shaped hole left over from a previous iteration of human society. The question is the same one asked by Charles Taylor in the opening chapter of *A Secular Age*: “why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?”⁴ We might define “secularism” thusly, as the absence of belief in God, with this shift Taylor marks between 1500 and 2000 denoting a larger cultural process of “secularization.” In opposition to this Taylor marks three features of the non-secular society which made belief in God as infallible as unbelief today: “the natural world they lived in” with its “acts of God,” the “implication” of God in societal forms, and the

² Max Weber, *Science as a Vocation*, (New York, Free Press, 1946), p. 8

³ *Ibid.*, p. 8

⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007) p. 25

previously “enchanted world” of “spirits, demons, and moral forces.”⁵ The first two seem to have corresponding disciplines in modernity, namely biology and political science, but the “enchanted world” is somewhat more difficult to position. That Taylor employs the term only in retrospective “negation” to Weber is telling;⁶ the possibility of “spirits” or “demons” roaming around our shared physical environment is so unfeasible that one can hardly conceptualize it.

Part of the modern discomfort with something like a demon (beyond superficialities such as form) is that it is a physical embodiment of a “moral force,” namely evil. The enchanted world has no qualms wedding entities in nature to a metaphysical, “moral” significance. In opposition, Taylor identifies disenchantment with the mind/body dialectic which strictly limits metaphysics to the internal. The disenchanted world is one “in which the only locus of thoughts, feelings, spiritual élan is what we call minds; the only minds in the cosmos are those of humans... and minds are bounded, so that these thoughts, feelings, etc., are situated ‘within’ them.”⁷ The assumptions that “thoughts” and “feelings” are “bound” to minds, and that “the only minds in the cosmos are those of humans,” carry serious ethical ramifications. Good and evil are now disembodied ideas which exist only in “minds” rather than as operative forces in the world, and the plurality of minds necessitates the dissolution of universal ethical standards.

The dominant attitude in this age of “intellectualization and rationalization” is one of “progress.” Weber traces a line from disenchantment to the disorientation of meaning formerly suggested by the limits of physical existence –

“Abraham, or some peasant of the past, died ‘old and satiated with life’ because he stood in the organic cycle of life; because his life, in terms of its meaning and on the eve of his

⁵ Ibid., p. 25-26

⁶ Ibid., p. 25: “People lived in an ‘enchanted’ world. This is perhaps not the best expression; it seems to evoke light and fairies. But I am invoking here its negation, Weber’s expression ‘disenchantment’ as a description of our modern condition. This term has achieved such wide currency in our discussion of these matters, that I’m going to use its antonym to describe a crucial feature of the pre-modern condition.”

⁷ Ibid., p. 29-30

days, had given to him what life had to offer; because for him there remained no puzzles he might wish to solve; and therefore he could have had ‘enough’ of life. Whereas civilized man, placed in the midst of the continuous enrichment of culture by ideas, knowledge, and problems, may become ‘tired of life’ but not ‘satiated with life.’ He catches only the most minute part of what the life of the spirit brings forth ever anew, and what he seizes is always something provisional and not definitive, and therefore death for him is a meaningless occurrence. And because death is meaningless, civilized life as such is meaningless.”⁸

The pre-modern human had a notion of life as an “organic cycle” and death was a meaningful moment in this larger system. Life had the capacity to “sate” because there was something to “offer” beyond what an individual mind can provide itself: “puzzles” to be solved. Disenchanted, “civilized man” regulates such offerings of meaning to the internal, and these can never be “definitive” because they lack a tangible counterpart to render meaning in reality as humans experience it. Weber’s invocation of “seiz[ure]” is apt for its physicality, as though the modern human is grasping at meaning without ever fully holding it in their palm. With moral value siphoned off into metaphysics there may be only “provisional” meaning, and without a sense of closure, “death is meaningless, civilized life as such is meaningless.”

But Taylor is hesitant to answer his original question – “what happened between 1500 and 2000?” – solely with disenchantment. “The key difference we’re looking at between our two marker dates is a shift in the understanding of what I called ‘fullness,’ between a condition in which our highest spiritual and moral aspirations point us inescapably to God... to one in which they can be related to a host of different sources, and frequently are referred to sources which deny God.”⁹ Taylor conceives of “fullness” as a “place” in which “life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be.”¹⁰ The stakes of this search for fullness hardly require explanation; every one of us has a vested interest in bringing our lives

⁸ Weber, *Science as a Vocation*, p. 9

⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 26

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5

closer to what we feel they “*should* be.” In an enchanted world this fullness would be attained through contact with God, but in a disenchanted and secular world we look for it in “a host of different sources,” many of whom “deny God.” Weber is adamant that the empirical sciences are not included here. He quotes Tolstoy, who puts it bluntly: “Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important for us: What shall we do now and how shall we live?” That science does not give an answer to this is indisputable.”¹¹ “Science” can tell us what things look like, but not how they *ought* to look. For “meaning,” a set of guidelines for ethical action in the world, Weber suggests we turn to philosophy, calling it a “special discipline” which “can force the individual... to give himself an account of the ultimate meaning of his own conduct.”¹² If philosophy really can “force” one to give an “account... of his own conduct,” then this seems a fruitful spot to search for Taylor’s “fullness.”

From whence we derive the source of ethics has a profound impact beyond the limited scopes of philosophy or literature. Though ethical paradigms may be exemplified through the work of these disciplines, it is ultimately a question of “how shall we live?” In antiquity this information was given to us by God, but as O’Connor notes, the secularity of our modern world often makes faith difficult (if not impossible). In the absence of an ethical standard we run the risk of succumbing to either apathy or nihilism, thus blocking ourselves off from the thoroughly desirable “fullness” Taylor describes. The challenge, not only of fending off meaninglessness, but also of locating a source of morality is pressing and imperative. Two popular modern responses (explored in the following pages) come from the romantics and the naturalists; the former generate ethical action from a benevolent internal conscience, the latter from man’s struggle against an inherently meaningless world. These solutions certainly bear some truth, but

¹¹ Weber, *Science as a Vocation*, p. 11

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 18

both are bogged down by a reductive dialectic of subjectivity and objectivity, and as a result neither can cohesively link their ethics to a condition of the world which would elevate them beyond a human projection of meaning where there is really none. Still, to see where these philosophical and literary disciplines come up short is valuable in that they might expose the boundaries which must be dissolved in order to discover a truly universal ethical standard.

Rousseau, the “inspirer of romanticism in literature,”¹³ provides us with one such paradigm. His philosophy recalls the enchantment in its reverence for worldly beauty, but ultimately situates “meaning” in the mind. Taylor elucidates Rousseau’s understanding of “nature” in *Sources of the Self*:

“In the orthodox theory, the source of the higher love is grace; it is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For Rousseau (without entirely ceasing to be God, at least of the philosophers) it has become the voice of nature. The doctrine of original sin, in its orthodox understanding, has been abandoned. Nature is fundamentally good, and the estrangement which depraves us is one which separates us from it.”¹⁴

The “higher love” which formerly originated from God is attributed by Rousseau to “nature” – and like divine grace “nature” is “fundamentally good.” It’s important to note that Rousseau’s nature is not the various tangible contents of the external world, but rather a certain “inner impulse”¹⁵ which inclines us towards righteousness. He finds humanity irrevocably separated from this nature by societal relations and dependency on other people, though we may still have contact with it through consciousness. “Nature is likened to a voice within. Conscience, our inner guide, ‘speaks to us in the language of nature.’”¹⁶ Our knowledge of nature comes through an individualized lens – even if its source is not within us, it becomes our “inner guide” through an the voice of “conscience.” Rousseau finds meaning, a “guide” for the world, in the mind.

¹³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Essential Rousseau*, (New York, Penguin Group, 1975), p. vii

¹⁴ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1989) p. 357

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 357

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 357-358

Objectivity usurps Rousseau's romanticism as the prevailing philosophical attitude in late modernity with literary realism as its primary medium. Wayne Booth remarks upon this dialectical shift in his *Rhetoric of Fiction*, noting that "a surprising number of writers, even those who have thought of their writing as 'self-expression,' have sought a freedom from the tyranny of subjectivity... at least until recently, the predominant demand in [the 20th] century has been for some sort of objectivity."¹⁷ Rousseau's philosophy of subjective nature mutates into "the tyranny of subjectivity," from which even authors with similar goals of internal elucidation seek refuge. Contemporary literary trends "demand" the very opposite: a view of the external world which minimizes the role of subject. Flaubert this position as early as the mid-19th century; "for him the model is the attitude of the scientist."¹⁸ The appeal to science implies neutrality or disinterestedness, but it also denotes observation as the objective mode. Flaubert's ideal novelist notates and archives but does not figure himself into the work.

The ideological extreme of literary realism can be seen in naturalism. The term is traceable to Émile Zola, whose 1880 essay "The Experimental Novel" runs with Flaubert's concept of author as scientist, describing this new form of novel as "naturalistic." By the second page Zola warns us that he will occasionally replace the word "novelist" with "doctor," "to make my meaning clear and to give it the rigidity of a scientific truth,"¹⁹ demonstrating that the objectivity he aims for is bound only by the limits of empirically verifiable "truths." For Zola, romanticism is rendered obsolete by "the scientific evolution of the century" from which his new form will arise:

"The experimental novel is a consequence of the scientific evolution of the century; it continues and completes physiology, which itself leans for support on chemistry and medicine; it substitutes for the study of the abstract and the metaphysical man the study

¹⁷ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 67

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 68

¹⁹ Émile Zola, *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays*, (New York, Cassell Publishing, 1893), p.1-2

of the natural man, governed by physical and chemical laws, and modified by the influences of his surroundings; it is in one word the literature of our scientific age, as the classical and romantic literature corresponded to a scholastic and theological age.”²⁰

This novel is not only the successor of romanticism; Zola traces its lineage back through “physiology” and on to “chemistry and medicine.” It’s an odd trajectory for a literary form, but Zola finds that our current “scientific age” necessitates it. Perhaps most telling is the man studied by this form – “the abstract and the metaphysical man” correspond, to the “classical and romantic” literatures, the “scholastic and theological” ages, while the experimental novel directs its scientific method towards “the natural man, governed by physical and chemical laws.” Zola is concerned with tangible and practical realities, *not* “abstract” reflection.

It’s ironic that Zola’s new genre is dubbed naturalism since his nature is such a far cry from Rousseau’s. The two iterations of the term have virtually no overlap: naturalists use it to refer to a set of steadfast laws which govern empirical reality, while Rousseau means an internal “nature” informing an individual’s consciousness. Their disagreement is along the lines of the split between objectivity and subjectivity. Subsequently, the literary trends they each represent have drastically different responses to the problem of disenchantment: while romanticism encourages an internal retreat towards a “fundamentally good” nature, naturalism dwells in the external, finding no inherent moral value other than stoic persistence in the face of an indifferent universe.

A fervent exemplification of this naturalistic attitude arrives via Jack London’s “To Build a Fire.” The protagonist is an unnamed man wandering through the Yukon in freezing weather with only his dog to keep him company. The story is unflinchingly bleak – intense moments, like the man’s attempt to kill and hollow out his dog in order to stay warm, are detailed with clinical indifference. London reduces the narration to a passive cataloguing of the protagonist’s mental

²⁰ Ibid., p. 23

and physical circumstances. The man's experience of travelling through such ungodly cold is rendered simply and without emotion: "Once in a while the thought reiterated itself that it was cold and that he had never experienced such cold."²¹ This spare assessment is totally lacking in subjectivity; we know nothing of how the man reacts to the cold, only that it is unfamiliar to him. At the end of the story he dies of hypothermia; the dog observes him for a moment, "then it turned and trotted up the trail in the direction of the camp it knew, where there were other food providers and fire providers."²² The instinct for survival is positioned as the most crucial aspect of animal existence; there is not even a trace of Rousseau's guiding, moralistic "nature." The dog only recognizes his companion's death insofar as it constitutes a break from normalcy. "There were no signs of a fire to be made, and, besides, never in the dog's experience had it known a man to sit like that in the snow and make no fire."²³ London whittles subjectivity down to mere remarks on whether this moment differs from that moment. The reader is made to remain on the surface of things, where there is no subjective presence at all, only the perpetuity of the natural world. As the dog trots away from the frozen corpse there is a lingering sense of nature as brutally indifferent to the man's life.

The ethical stakes of "To Build a Fire" are heightened by the reader's awareness that the man's journey is impossible. Not even a paragraph after he has successfully built his first fire, the narrator interjects to acknowledge the futility of his efforts. "This man did not know cold. Possibly all the generations of his ancestry had been ignorant of cold, of real cold, of cold one hundred and seven degrees below freezing point. But the dog knew; all its ancestry knew, and it had inherited the knowledge."²⁴ The altered article – "*this* man" instead of "*the* man" – suggests

²¹ Jack London, *The Collected Jack London*, (New York, Dorset Press, 1991), p. 7

²² *Ibid.*, p. 14

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 14

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8

a shift in perspective, that the narrator is now drawing from the dog's "knowledge." From this vantage point the reader sees that despite his confidence the man does "not know cold." The exact number of degrees below freezing is inconsequential here; what matters is that the readers knows what the man doesn't, that his journey is doomed. He will spend the story toiling to no avail, valiantly fighting a battle he can't win. The man is a stoic secular hero in the vein of Camus' Sisyphus; he lives by "his courage and his reasoning... Assured of his temporally limited freedom, of his revolt devoid of future, and of his mortal consciousness, he lives out his adventure within the span of his lifetime."²⁵ Despite a secularized and indifferent world in which there can be no "future" compensation for suffering, the values of "courage" and "reasoning" emerge from the man's struggle. His life's meaning is "revolt" against this world, an "adventure" which is sure to end at the close "of his lifetime" but one worth having all the same. Even if we agree that the narration satisfies Zola's insistence on "the rigidity of a scientific truth," presenting events and characters without necessarily linking them to moral content, meaning is generated by abstracting from the man's direct experience and seeing his "revolt" in a larger context. London's vision is of a man remaining persistent despite nature's cruel apathy – the impossibility of the man's struggle is exactly its ethical substance.

But Camus' "revolt," despite constituting a value judgment, still occurs in an inherently meaningless world. Zola and London, by their philosophical and literary naturalism, run into the same issue as Rousseau and his romanticism: one generates meaning within themselves. These reactions to the meaninglessness resultant from disenchantment find a way to create an ethical standard, but neither are bold enough to locate that standard outside of the self, and so neither possess a "fullness" comparable to the word of God in antiquity. In order to establish a more robust conception of ethical action we must transcend the dialectic of subjectivity and objectivity

²⁵ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, (New York, Vintage Books, 1955), p. 66

– and for this we turn to Chekhov and O’Connor. These authors may differ in setting and style, but they share an emphasis on humility and compassion as values which provoke an affinity between the individual and the world around them. Both locate the external component of morality in a realm parallel to that of empirical reality, one characterized by mystery. Their conceptions of mystery may not align completely – I identify O’Connor’s with the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel, Chekhov’s with David Cooper – but regardless, the presence of this separate layer of reality allows for a solution to meaninglessness which weds subjective experience to an external ethical imperative. Mystery, brought into contact with human subjects through humility, provides “fullness” and a sense that life is in fact meaningful.

Chapter I – Redemption

To read the short stories of Flannery O’Connor is a defamiliarizing experience. They are replete with extreme violence, racism, and all sorts of affronts to the values which constitute the modern American sensibility – yet she writes this brutality with such straightforwardness and nuance that her depictions feel more investigative than punitive. O’Connor aims to communicate the world around her honestly but with an attention to what may be lacking or overlooked. In an essay on her own writing she asks “what makes a story work,” gazing beyond logic towards an understanding predicated on “mystery” –

“I have decided that it is probably some action, some gesture of a character that is unlike any other in the story, one which indicates where the real heart of the story lies. This would have to be an action or a gesture which was both totally right and totally unexpected; it would have to be one that was both in character and beyond character; it would have to suggest both the world and eternity. The action or gesture I’m talking about would have to be on an analogical level, that is, the level which has to do with Divine life and our participation in it. It would be a gesture that transcended any neat allegory that might have been intended or any pat moral categories a reader could make. It would be a gesture which somehow made contact with mystery.”²⁶

O’Connor purposely aims to complicate “any neat allegory... or any pat moral category” which seems applicable – characters exist (as real people do) in a state of flux, neither wholly good or evil. These actions which are “both in character and beyond character” are exactly the features of her fiction which defy understanding; they must fit within the environments O’Connor renders so vividly in her work, but they must also “suggest... eternity.” This is on “the level which has to do with Divine life and our participation in it,” which many of O’Connor’s characters either flee from or actively ignore. The shock value of her stories originates in a resistance to “mystery” which signals the spiritual “level,” and the “contact” made with this parallel reality is where “the real heart of the story lies.”

²⁶ O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, (New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), p. 111

Openness to mystery is the central ethical imperative O'Connor puts to her characters. They begin in disenchanted worlds which is to say that, in Weber's words, "there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play." This can be the product of a secular inclination to reduce life to the merely empirical or, in the case of characters who *do* profess some belief in the divine, the aversion to mystery may arise from the feeling that one has a special knowledge of their place in the world. The latter tendency often manifests itself as an imagined social order of which the subject is at the top (or at least above the people around them) and they are actively opposed to a sense of mystery which would serve to disjoin them from such a comfortable schema. By O'Connor's standards this is a moral failure. To receive mystery involves the kind of "anagogical" awareness she describes, of spiritual and physical realities running parallel with and acting upon one another. This interdependence manifests itself tangibly in the form of sacraments – objects, beings, or places in O'Connor's writing where some aspect of the knowledge contained in mystery is made apprehensible to sense. Her sacraments extend beyond the context of any Christian church; they are more generally participants in physical reality which make "real" the mystery of spiritual reality. Often they are detested or minimized by characters, but their undeniable presence demonstrates that for O'Connor mystery does not belong purely to the "Divine" realm. Reception of mystery is the first step, the second is to incorporate it into one's everyday life in a way that elevates physical reality.

The notion of mystery underlying our everyday experience of the world runs throughout her collected prose (aptly titled *Mystery and Manners*) and appears central, not only to O'Connor's poetics, but more broadly to her understanding of life. She speaks of a "respect for mystery,"²⁷ elsewhere of "the mystery of our position on Earth."²⁸ This is in contrast to

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31: "In the greatest fiction, the writer's moral sense coincides with his dramatic sense, and I see no way for it to do this unless his moral judgment is part of the very act of seeing, and he is free to

naturalists like London, for whom human action is determined by a fixed set of parameters such as physical environment, psychological profile, etc. They too begin with sense perception, with the “texture of existence,” but their determinism prevents them from moving any further. “On the other hand, if the writer believes that our life is and will remain essentially mysterious... then what he sees on the surface will be of interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself.”²⁹ Mystery is key to the meaning of O’Connor’s stories, but without a surface through which to pierce, we would have no context for it.

This surface is the level of physical reality which renders a story accessible to readers and gives a familiar grounding for mystery. Take this description of a sky which occurs towards the end of “The River”: “[It] was a clear pale blue, all in one piece – except for the hole the sun made – and fringed around the bottom with treetops.”³⁰ I can easily frame this cloudless blue picture in my head, and the trees “fringed around the bottom” give it a realistic grounding that resists abstraction; but “the hole the sun made” gives me pause. The image is no longer two-dimensional. The “hole” suggests a depth I’m not expecting, and to have it also be the source of light infuses this natural scene with a degree of strangeness. Perhaps this is what O’Connor intends when she posits that “fiction should be both canny and uncanny.”³¹ She terms the “canny,” realistically sensual aspect of her fiction “manners,” which O’Connor says are derived from “the texture of existence that surrounds you.”³² “Manners” is a curious way of putting “the texture of existence” – I’m more inclined to call it “the everyday,” but O’Connor’s term also

use it. I have heard it said that belief in Christian dogma is a hindrance to the writer, but I myself have found nothing further from the truth... it affects his writing primarily by guaranteeing his respect for mystery.”

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 68

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41

³⁰ Flannery O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, (New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971), p. 173

³¹ O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 79

³² *Ibid.*, p. 103

captures the sense of implicit public agreement that precedes our perception. When she writes a “clear pale blue” sky she is purposefully invoking a popular phrase like “not a cloud in the sky,” which conjures a sort of stock image we associate with this natural setting. The reader experiences the image in its sensuality while maintaining an awareness of something more elusive below this surface. “No reader who doesn’t actually experience, who isn’t made to feel, the story is going to believe anything the fiction writer merely tells him. The first and most obvious characteristic of fiction is that it deals with reality through what can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted, and touched.”³³ If mystery is what O’Connor has to “tell” the reader, it requires a dimension of sense in order to communicate by “experience.” Though this empirical aspect of fiction may not have the profound depth of mystery, the two are equally important to the transmission of a story’s meaning.

It is far more difficult to pin down a definition of mystery than for “manners.” Moments like the description of the sky from “The River” are clearly mysterious but they can be hard to contextualize in the plot of the story, especially when they arrive at a crucial turn. The ending of “A Good Man is Hard to Find” is a particularly notable instance of this – as the grandmother sinks feebly into a ditch, her conversation with the Misfit coming to a close, “she murmured, ‘Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!’ She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest.”³⁴ It’s unclear why the grandmother makes this final gesture; she could be extending compassion towards the Misfit, or she may simply be trying to save herself. In either case her sudden claim that the Misfit is “one of [her] own children” is simply not true, and this imagined familial connection (after she’s watched him orchestrate the murder of her actual

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 91

³⁴ O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, p. 132

family members) leaves me puzzled. The Misfit's reaction is no less opaque. He has so many opportunities to kill the grandmother, but he waits until this moment. Her death is not as calculated as the rest of her family members'; instead the Misfit seems to kill her almost accidentally, his surprise at her touch likened to a snake bite. The grandmother's reaction, but even more so the Misfit's, are difficult to place in the context of the story, leaving the reader to wonder what exactly lies beyond the "texture" of the work.

Around the same time O'Connor is grappling with themes of mystery in her writing, the Christian existentialist Gabriel Marcel publishes a collection of his lectures on the same topic titled *The Mystery of Being*. O'Connor describes herself as "an old fan" of Marcel's, and highlights these particular lectures as having "meant a lot to [her] at one time."³⁵ His own explication of mystery begins from the standpoint of human experience. "Nothing can give us a more intense feeling of insecurity and strangeness than this human situation of ours; the situation of being placed at the point of juncture or of co-articulation, of the vital and the spiritual."³⁶ The "mystery of being" asserted in the title arises from this "juncture" between "the vital and the spiritual," two distinct layers of the "human situation." Marcel finds this "feeling" most clearly articulated by interactions in the world which provoke what he calls spiritual "presence."³⁷ He gives the example of a stranger who, though physically present and verifiably real by sense, actually estranges one from their own experience of the world:

"By a very singular phenomenon indeed, this stranger interposes himself between me and my own reality, he makes me in some sense also a stranger to myself; I am not really myself while I am with him.

³⁵ O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, p. 463. The first mention of Marcel in her correspondence is dated 1953, two years after *The Mystery of Being* was published, and the same year in which she published "A Good Man is Hard to Find," "The River," and "The Life You Save May Be Your Own."

³⁶ Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, (Chicago, Henry Regnery Company, 1951), p. 203

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 216: "It is very doubtful whether the word 'mystery' can really be properly used in the case where a presence is not, at the very least, making itself somehow felt."

The opposite phenomenon, however, can also take place. When somebody's presence does really make itself felt, it can refresh my inner being; it reveals me to myself, it makes me more fully myself than I should be if I were not exposed to its impact. All this, of course, though nobody would attempt to deny that we do have such experiences, is very difficult to express in words; and we should ask ourselves why."³⁸

The latter case describes presence, the manifestation of mystery, in a positive sense. The effect is to "refresh" or "reveal," to make one feel "more fully" themselves. This occurs "when somebody's presence does really make itself felt" in another consciousness; but this presence can also alienate the subject from "[their] own reality." The literally *mysterious* aspects of this phenomenon are the fact that it is universal though "very difficult to express in words" and what Marcel calls its "intersubjectivity."³⁹ He uses this term in contrast with objectivity to express that presence is felt by an individual in response to their particular experience of the external world. This presence is sensed but not understood, only partially "glimpsed" at, and its "evocation" is "fundamentally and essentially magical."⁴⁰

Marcel's understanding of mystery as a self-clarifying (if only partially grasped) force, which can at times induce "insecurity and strangeness," may help to understand the ending of "A Good Man is Hard to Find." The Misfit appears deeply comfortable throughout the violence he enacts on the family, despite their repeated and desperate pleas for respite. The grandmother's final words do seem to elicit "insecurity" from him, evidenced by his jumpy reaction. She makes her presence felt in his psyche by asserting herself as one of his family members, but the Misfit has no interest in the clarifying effect of mystery as Marcel describes it; that would only serve to expose his extreme and apathetic violence, and so he eliminates her presence. The grandmother

³⁸ Ibid., p. 205

³⁹ Ibid., p. 207. Marcel is not fully satisfied with this term, and worries that it may give rise to "misunderstandings, for one might conceive of a content – still an objective content – that could be, as it were, transmitted from subject to subject." I've used "intersubjectivity" here because I find it implies a break in dialectic of subjectivity and objectivity by occupying a space between the two, and that mystery is generated precisely within this gap.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 208-209

does the opposite: instead of reducing the Misfit's presence she allows it to manifest itself in her, and claims him as one of her children. As O'Connor says, "her head clears for an instant and she realizes, even in her limited way, that she is responsible for the man before her and joined to him by ties of kinship which have their roots deep in the mystery she has been merely prattling about so far. At this point, she does the right thing, she makes the right gesture."⁴¹ The moment is mysterious for the reader, but it's also an example of a character who makes the "right gesture" by opening herself to mystery.

The "strangeness" Marcel highlights as a product of mystery arises from a confluence of "the vital and the spiritual" – and this is not far from the language O'Connor uses to describe her role as an author. "The kind of vision the fiction writer needs to have, or to develop, in order to increase the meaning of his story is called anagogical vision, and that is the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or situation."⁴² This particular "vision," employed by an author "to increase the meaning of his story," links both mystery and manners "in one image or situation." In O'Connor's fiction these two levels often run parallel with one another, and characters choose to inhabit one of the two spaces. This is especially visible in reading "The River" – the titular feature is both a literal river and a site for faith-based healing, a locus of physical *and* spiritual reality. Though O'Connor is able, from an authorial standpoint, to provide the reader with "anagogical vision" through the arrangement and phrasing of the story, her characters are not so fortunate.

The immediate reality which Harry inhabits is so bleak and spiritually impoverished that he is driven completely out of it. The undesirability of this world comes through clearly in the depictions of physical spaces. We first see the interior of Harry's home as he stands "glum and

⁴¹ O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 112

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 72

limp in the middle of the dark living room,”⁴³ his parents eagerly awaiting their babysitter Mrs. Connin. Later we see the apartment with greater detail, in the aftermath of a party. Their refrigerator contains no more than “some shriveled vegetables that she had forgot were there and a lot of brown oranges that she bought but didn’t squeeze; there were three or four kinds of cheese and something fishy in a paper bag; the rest was a pork bone.”⁴⁴ This sad list runs the gamut of sense: I recoil picturing the “shriveled” vegetable skin, and the stink of “fish” and “cheese” rises up and off the page. The “brown oranges” offer a depressing touch of contradictory color and the most enticing item, the “pork bone,” is not edible at all. This unappetizing assortment is provided by an ambiguous “she,” which is actually Harry’s mother. The narrator only refers to his parents as such while introducing them; they’re otherwise designated simply by male and female pronouns. After perusing the fridge Harry returns to the living room, overturning ashtrays for fun and rubbing them into the carpet so his parents will think some houseguest knocked them over the previous evening. The sheer dilapidation of his home borders on child abuse.

This is the environment Harry finds himself in, and the people around him are no less inviting. It’s unclear why his parents hire a babysitter in the first place – Mrs. Connin picks him up at six A.M., while the two are still half asleep – but it’s implied that it has something to do with his mother’s “sickness” (read: hangover). When Harry arrives at Mrs. Connin’s house he’s greeted by her three boys, who trick him into letting a hog loose from the pen. After seeing pain inflicted upon young Harry, “their stern faces didn’t brighten any but they seemed to become less taut, as if some great need had been partly satisfied.”⁴⁵ This cryptic “great need” may arise from sheer boredom, but suggests an inclination to generate suffering in others. The boys share this

⁴³ O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, p. 157

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 171

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 162

urge with a man named Mr. Paradise who Mrs. Connin says they will see at the healing by the river; but she says he only comes to show that he hasn't been healed. Indeed, Paradise is in the crowd at the river, heckling the preacher: "Pass the hat and give the kid his money. That's what he's here for."⁴⁶ Whether or not the preacher is just there for money is irrelevant (and the narrator leaves this unclear) – many in the crowd believe Bevel with conviction. Even if they can't be physically healed, Paradise aims to rob them even of the *possibility*, and for no reason other than pleasure taken in cynicism.

Beyond these antagonistic actions, the members of Harry's community are associated distinctly with death. Skeletons are a recurring image in "The River," and these are likened to the characters' appearances. Paradise's face is "all bone," with "sideburns that curved into the hollows of his cheeks."⁴⁷ The preacher is equally petrified; "his bony face was rigid and his narrow gray eyes reflected the almost colorless sky."⁴⁸ His appearance is drained, "colorless" as the sky behind him, and "rigid." His lively, vigorous speech is betrayed by his face. Even Mrs. Connin, arguably the figure in the story who cares the most actively for Harry, is likened to a dead body. As Harry watches her sleep on the train, "her mouth fell open to show a few long scattered teeth, some gold and some darker than her face; she began to whistle and blow like a musical skeleton."⁴⁹ Her portrait is somewhat more vivacious, with the "gold" teeth providing a splash of color and her breath being "musical," but the description is still frightening. Everything that surrounds Harry is marked by death, decay, and evil. The world as he knows it lacks any sort of vital structure – it's no wonder he's compelled towards the spiritual reality depicted by the preacher.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 166

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 164

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 167

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 160

Harry is immediately and instinctively attracted to the preacher and his “healing” capabilities. When Mrs. Connin asks his name he tells her Bevel, same as the preacher. This is a lie and an unexpected one at that since, as the narrator remarks, “his name was Harry Ashfield and he had never thought at any time before of changing it.”⁵⁰ Mrs. Connin is quite pleased at this, and “stood looking down at [Harry] as if he had become a marvel to her.” Harry wants so badly to be healed, to engulf himself in spiritual life, that he adopts a personality which does not belong to him. This is our first indication that he may be overzealous. The real Bevel, the preacher, suggests that his own capacity to heal is less immediate. Though people in the crowd say they’ve seen him achieve magical feats – one woman says he straightened someone’s limp just by dipping them in the river – Bevel never explicitly endorses these claims. At one point, while recounting the various towns and communities he’s visited, Bevel says ““Them people didn’t see no healing... I never said they would.””⁵¹ He speaks of two rivers: the “river” and the “River.” The former is what the crowd sees in front of them, and Bevel is clear that they will not be healed here. ““If you just come to see can you leave your pain in the river, you ain’t come for Jesus. You can’t leave your pain in the river,’ he said. ‘I never told nobody that.””⁵² Bevel can’t promise a quick fix for anyone’s ailment; he knows better than to tell people that they can just “leave [their] pain in the river.” The true healing takes place in the “River” with a capital “R,” and this is a feature of a separate, spiritual reality. ““If you believe, you can lay your pain in that River and get rid of it because that’s the River that was made to carry sin. It’s a River full of pain itself, pain itself, moving toward the Kingdom of Christ, to be washed away, slow, you people, slow as this here old red water river round my feet.””⁵³ Though Bevel speaks of this River as an

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 159

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 166

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 165

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 165

immediate truth, as though it were the very “old red water river round [his] feet,” its healing effects are *not* instantaneous but “slow.” This healing is eschatologically oriented, “moving toward the Kingdom of Christ” with patience. You can in fact “lay your pain in *that* River,” but Bevel’s language doesn’t line up exactly with Mrs. Connin’s characterization of him as a miracle-maker. He emphasizes that healing is gradual, that the intense “pain” felt by each member of the crowd can be absolved, though perhaps not in this life.

But Bevel’s insistence on the “River” as a spiritual site may actually overshadow physical reality; Harry certainly takes it this way. Mrs. Connin offers him to be baptized, and just before he’s plunged under the river, Bevel asks his permission:

“‘If I baptize you,’ the preacher said, ‘you’ll be able to go to the Kingdom of Christ. You’ll be washed in the river of suffering, son, and you’ll go by the deep river of life. Do you want that?’

‘Yes,’ the child said, and thought, I won’t go back to the apartment then, I’ll go under the river.’”⁵⁴

Bevel’s language here is puzzling. Harry is not *going* to the “Kingdom of Christ,” rather he’ll “be able to go.” He will be “washed” in this “river” here and “go by the deep river of life,” but in what sense does he use “go by?” “By” could be a synonym for “through,” but it could also mean to skip over entirely. The absolute importance of the baptism is also open to misinterpretation; Bevel tells Harry that after the process is complete he “‘won’t be the same again,’” that he’ll “‘count now,’” and that he “‘didn’t even count before.’”⁵⁵ Bevel encourages the separation of physical and spiritual realities, privileging the latter as one in which Harry “counts.” Harry takes this separation literally, and just before the baptism decides to fully extinguish his physical existence in favor of Bevel’s spiritualized river. “I won’t go back to the apartment then, I’ll go under the river.” Harry wants swift relief from his parents, their dreary apartment, the morbidity and decay that is all around him. Bevel’s sermon frames spiritual life as an alternative to

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 168

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 168

physicality rather than as a co-extension, thereby encouraging (or at least opening the possibility of) Harry's eventual suicide.

The next morning Harry wanders around looking for food; his parents had friends over the previous evening, and the kitchen and living room are in shambles. His breakfast is “two crackers spread with anchovy paste, that he found on the coffee table” and a “half jar of peanut butter” between two “raisin bread heels.”⁵⁶ Eventually he starts to think of the river, and his plan resurfaces. “Very slowly, his expression changed as if he were gradually seeing appear what he didn't know he'd been looking for. Then all of a sudden he knew what he wanted to do.”⁵⁷ Harry steals a bus token from his mother's purse and heads straight for the river. The journey would likely appear insurmountable to any other child his age, but Harry is undeterred. When he finally arrives he doesn't even notice Mr. Paradise fishing upstream; “he only saw the river... he intended not to fool with preachers any more but to Baptize himself and to keep on going this time until he found the Kingdom of Christ in the river.”⁵⁸ His inclination “not to fool with preachers” recalls Connin's attraction to Bevel, a “preacher” who wanders aimlessly from town to town offering “healings.” The spirituality Harry has been fed by these two lacks form or nuance; he sees it as a means of transitioning from a detestable life to a more peaceful one. Indeed, when he finally does go under the river, the narrator suggests nothing of his death other than that it is rapid and welcomed. “He plunged under once and this time, the waiting current caught him like a long gentle hand and pulled him swiftly forward and down. For an instant he was overcome with surprise; then since he was moving quickly and knew that he was getting somewhere, all his fury and fear left him.”⁵⁹ The fact that Harry is “overcome with surprise” is

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 171

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 172

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 173

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 174

itself surprising – what else does he expect but to be sucked in by the current? The reaction shows that he’s not conceptualizing this act as a suicide. Bevel has caused him to forget the physical dimension of this sacrament; Harry sees the river not as an *actual* river, but purely as a site for healing. His movement downstream is imagined to be “getting somewhere,” presumably the “Kingdom of Christ,” and this gives Harry a false peace of mind in his final moments. This willingness to quell fear in the face of unfamiliar circumstances demonstrates that Harry is receptive to mystery in a way that few of O’Connor’s other characters are, but unfortunately it goes to waste.

“The River” closes with Harry’s inability to link physical and spiritual realities. Though O’Connor puts this conjoinment as a sort of ethical imperative – she says “we must” recognize that “appearance is not the same thing as reality”⁶⁰ – Harry’s death is certainly no failure of his own moral compass. He’s only a child, driven out of reality by his uncaring parents and confused by Bevel’s abstract language. This particular story is far more tragic than grotesque, but O’Connor’s adult characters tend towards the latter, especially those who cower in response to the “insecurity and strangeness” Marcel describes as the first effect of mystery. “The Displaced Person,” published two years after “The River,” revolves around a feeling of mystery provoked by a Polish immigrant (Mr. Guizac) who comes to work on a Southern farm in the wake of World War II. Mrs. McIntyre, who owns the farm, and the Shortleys, the only white farmhands, feel deeply threatened by Guizac’s presence despite his meekness. Guizac represents a sort of moral challenge O’Connor places on these people: they can either sympathize with and help the man who has been displaced from his home by the violence of war (which, it turns out, requires very little effort on their part) or they can dispel the mystery of his presence in favor of the familiar, dull lives they’ve already carved out for themselves. Mrs. McIntyre and the Shortleys

⁶⁰ O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 98

eventually choose the latter by eliminating Guizac in much the same way that the Misfit does the grandmother in “A Good Man is Hard to Find.”

The story only gives glimpses of what life has been like before Guizac’s arrival, but the reader sees that each character thinks themselves superior to the other, creating a certain comfortable social order. Mrs. McIntyre has the impression of being in charge of the entire operation and loathes the various help she’s had to hire over the years. ““Before you all came,”” she says to the Shortleys, ““I had Ringfields and Collins and Jarrells and Perkins and Pinkins and Herrins and God knows what all else and not a one of them left without taking something off this place that didn’t belong to them.””⁶¹ Though she barely lifts a finger on the farm, McIntyre sees herself as a burdened individual with a tough life, even tougher than her laborers. “She had had a hard time herself. She knew what it was to struggle. People ought to have to struggle.”⁶² The Shortleys see themselves in a similar way. Mr. Shortley sleeps through much of his workday after tending to his still in the evenings and Mrs. Shortley spends her time talking about people behind their backs, but the two understand themselves as a cunning pair led by Mrs. Shortley in secretly overseeing the goings-on of the farm. She is always hiding in bushes or around corners, monitoring conversations; and as for Mrs. McIntyre, “Mrs. Shortley respected her as a person nobody had put anything over on yet – except, ha, ha, perhaps the Shortleys.”⁶³ Each side thinks they’re putting one “over” on the other, re-affirming their false sense of superiority.

The first one to feel threatened by Mr. Guizac is Mrs. Shortley. She phrases her discomfort to herself morally, as though she has an obligation to “expose” Guizac to Mrs. McIntyre for what he really is – but this is quickly shown to be a product of her own insecurity. Mrs. Shortley remembers seeing a newsreel, presumably of German concentration camps, which

⁶¹ O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, p. 202

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 219

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 197

shows “a small room piled high with bodies of dead naked people all in a heap.” The image recurs throughout the story, and Mrs. Shortley takes it as proof that all Europeans are complicit in such evil. “This was the kind of thing that was happening every day in Europe where they had not advanced as in this country... [the Guizacs] could have carried all those murderous ways over the water with them directly to this place.”⁶⁴ The painful irony of this concern is that the Guizacs are Polish; we later find out that many of their family members died in concentration camps like the one Mrs. Shortley sees on the newsreel. Her version of moral reality is completely disconnected from physical reality. She ceaselessly repeats the claim that the Guizacs, and Europeans in general, are “not as advanced” as Americans – but Mr. Guizac’s arrival marks a technological update for the farm. Mrs. McIntyre goes out and buys a “silage cutter” because, “for the first time, she had somebody who could operate it. Mr. Guizac could drive a tractor, use the rotary hay-baler, the silage cutter, the combine, the letz mill, or any other machine she had on the place.”⁶⁵ Mrs. Shortley’s claim is the exact opposite of the truth; with respect to the mechanisms of the farm Guizac is far *more* advanced than they or anyone else on the property. These changes to her environment encroach on Mrs. Shortley’s sense of superiority over those around her, and she is forced to make increasingly outlandish assertions to compensate for this.

The fact that Mrs. Shortley’s inner and outer lives are irreconcilable comes through clearly in the narrator’s characterization of her eyesight. She is consistently described as “unseeing,”⁶⁶ and her vision often narrows or expands based on what she’d like to be seeing, rather than what is actually in front of her. We first meet Mrs. Shortley as she is suspiciously eyeing the road into the farm. “She ignored the white afternoon sun which was creeping behind a ragged wall of cloud as if it pretended to be an intruder and cast her gaze down the red clay road

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 196

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 201

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 200

that turned off from the highway.”⁶⁷ The sun, which should illuminate and aid her sight, is “an intruder.” Mrs. Shortley obscures the full scene to fix her “gaze” on the road in anticipation of Mr. Guizac’s arrival, foreshadowing her fixation on him throughout “The Displaced Person.” At other times her vision passes through objects in her line of sight like they aren’t there at all, “piercing” and “penetrating” on a whim.⁶⁸ Eventually Mrs. Shortley’s gaze turns completely inward; she has a “vision” of a frightening figure which only further radicalizes her attitude towards Guizac.

“Suddenly while she watched, the sky folded back in two pieces like the curtain to a stage and a gigantic figure stood facing her... She was not able to tell if the figure was going forward or backward because its magnificence was so great. She shut her eyes in order to look at it... she stood there, tottering slightly but still upright, her eyes shut tight and her fists clenched and her straw sun hat low on her forehead. ‘The children of wicked nations will be butchered,’ she said in a loud voice.”⁶⁹

At first this image unfolds directly in front of Mrs. Shortley, but “its magnificence [is] so great” that she paradoxically closes her eyes “in order to look at it.” Suddenly it is not a vision at all but rather Mrs. Shortley’s own internal prophecy, completely closed off from anything outside of her consciousness. As it subsides her eyes remain “shut tight” and she again blocks out the sun with “her straw sun hat” sitting “low on her forehead.” Seemingly from nowhere she materializes that eerie phrase: “‘The children of wicked nations will be butchered.’” This prediction (if I may call it that) has no connection to what Mrs. Shortley has just witnessed, or at least the parts of that vision which have been described to the reader. Though she doesn’t know it her statement will eventually come true at the hands of her husband; in the process Mrs. Shortley becomes a kind of false prophet, willfully shaping her own disembodied spiritual reality and communicating it in a way that suits her immediate interests.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 194

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 203 and 205

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 210

Though Mrs. Shortley so fiercely detests Mr. Guizac, it is Mrs. McIntyre who bears the brunt of his presence. The Shortleys leave the farm after discovering McIntyre plans to fire them, and she is left to grapple with Mr. Guizac's otherness by herself. His puzzlingly relentless work ethic begins to worry Mrs. McIntyre: "She had given him a job. She didn't know if he was grateful or not. She didn't know anything about him except that he did the work. The truth was that he was not very real to her yet. He was a kind of miracle that she had seen happen and that she talked about but that she still didn't believe."⁷⁰ Mrs. McIntyre is concerned that Guizac is not "grateful," regardless of the fact that he's now doing the work of three people all by himself; and though she describes him as a "miracle," it's one that she doesn't "believe," despite having actually "seen" it. Mr. Guizac has been living on the farm for at least three weeks⁷¹ but he still isn't "very real" to Mrs. McIntyre, recalling Marcel's stranger who interposes himself between the subject and their own reality. Guizac's tireless efforts can't save him from being a threatening mystery to Mrs. McIntyre. This conflict comes to a head when Mr. Guizac offers his cousin to marry Sulk, a young black man whom Mrs. McIntyre employs. She fumes at the prospect of this interracial marriage; Guizac gives up the idea with a "little shrug" and returns to work, but the damage has been done. Mrs. McIntyre "stood there, a small black-hatted, black-smocked figure with an aging cherubic face, and folded her arms as if she were equal to anything. But her heart was beating as if some interior violence had already been done to her. She opened her eyes to include the whole field so that the figure on the tractor was no larger than a grasshopper in her widened view."⁷² The description is comical; McIntyre is "small... with an aging cherubic face," increasingly upset over a situation which was unlikely to materialize in the first place, like a wrinkly child throwing a temper tantrum. She enlarges her vision so that in her

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 219

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 201

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 224

imagination Mr. Guizac is just as small as she is, but clearly he has gotten inside her head. The “interior violence” is yet another effect of the mystery he symbolizes, but Mrs. McIntyre either can’t or won’t make an attempt at compassion, and can only feel his presence as an affliction.

Mr. Guizac comes to be a scapegoat for both Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. Shortley. They project onto him their fear of relinquishing a feeling of superiority over their surroundings, and this is veiled under the (equally reprehensible) names of nationalism or xenophobia. Shortley expresses this as concern that Guizac is “not as advanced,” and McIntyre insists repeatedly that her “moral obligation [is] to her own people”⁷³ rather than Europeans. But there is another mysterious presence in this story which is not so easy to dispel: the peacock Mrs. McIntyre keeps on her farm. O’Connor frames this peacock as a point of conjunction between physical and spiritual realities, a sacrament which can make the close-mindedness of certain characters even clearer. We’re introduced to it in the second paragraph of the story, just after Mrs. Shortley has narrowed her vision on the clay road Guizac will be approaching from. “The peacock stopped just behind her, his tail – glittering green-gold and blue in the sunlight – lifted just enough so that it would not touch the ground... his head on the long blue reed-like neck was drawn back as if his attention were fixed in the distance on something no one else could see.”⁷⁴ The description of the bird stands in stark contrast to Mrs. Shortley; she ignores the sun and focuses in completely on the road, whereas the peacock’s physical body dazzles brilliantly in the sunlight. Its “attention” is also “fixed,” but “on something no one else could see,” as though the bird possesses some special knowledge which is unavailable to the rest of the world. Tellingly Mrs. Shortley detests the peacock, calling it ““nothing but a peachicken””⁷⁵ without explanation. Later,

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 228

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 194

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 198

when she has her first “vision,” Shortley’s ignorance of the peacock’s spiritual content coincides with her impaired sight –

“Then she stood a while longer, reflecting, her unseeing eyes directly in front of the peacock’s tail. He had jumped into the tree and his tail hung in front of her, full of fierce planets with eyes that were each ringed in green and set against a sun that was gold in one second’s light and salmon-colored in the next. She might have been looking at a map of the universe, but she didn’t notice it any more than she did the spots of sky that cracked the dull green of the tree. She was having an inner vision instead.”⁷⁶

The peacock’s tail becomes a “map of the universe,” the sunlight shifting its color from “gold” to “salmon” in-between moments, and its physical body somehow contains the grandeur of “planets.” This creature is brimming with both “the world and eternity” which O’Connor says is at the heart of mystery, but Mrs. Shortley cannot see it. She and her “unseeing eyes” deliberately ignore this “map” in favor of her own “inner vision” which has no connection to the world around her. The peacock’s mysterious beauty remains untapped.

The priest who initially brings Mr. Guizac to McIntyre’s farm is the only character whom the bird attracts, and coincidentally he’s also the only white southerner in the story without a crippling narcissism. The peacock appears during his first visit to the farm, and while Mrs. McIntyre dismisses it as “another mouth to feed,” the priest immediately remarks upon the bird’s mysterious appearance: “‘A tail full of suns...’ The peacock stood still as if he had just come down from some sun-drenched height to be a vision for them all.”⁷⁷ The priest notices the celestial bodies that Mrs. Shortley misses, and though the peacock has “come down... to be a vision for them all,” only the priest actually *sees* the bird for what it is. The imagery of the peacock emanating “suns” recurs later in the story, and this time the priest links it explicitly with the divine. “Tiers of small pregnant suns floated in a green-gold haze over his head. The priest stood transfixed, his jaw slack. Mrs. McIntyre wondered whether she had ever seen such an

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 200

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 198

idiotic man. ‘Christ will come like that!’”⁷⁸ The “suns” have now lifted from the peacock’s tail to orbit its head – the priest is appropriately “transfixed” by this incredible sight while Mrs. McIntyre doesn’t even glance at it, opting instead to ruminate on how “idiotic” he appears to her. The priest says emphatically that “Christ will come like” the peacock, a mysterious body which joins the natural and the divine in its “green-gold haze.” This reinforces the ethical connotations latent in the peacock’s presence and also connects it to Mr. Guizac; Mrs. McIntyre says at one point that, “‘As far as [she’s] concerned... Christ was just another D.P.’”⁷⁹ Guizac and the peacock are both Christological figures, which places (beyond the immediate responsibility to take in refugees) a deeper spiritual responsibility on Mrs. McIntyre to accept these beings into her life. She refuses, and by the end of the story she pays for it.

The murder of Mr. Guizac, organized by Mr. Shortley and silently approved by Sulk and Mrs. McIntyre, is these characters’ final ethical failure. She comes close to objecting but is so entrenched in her own thinking that she can’t bring herself to do it. “Later she remembered... that she had started to shout to the Displaced Person but that she had not. She had felt her eyes and Mr. Shortley’s eyes and the Negro’s eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever.”⁸⁰ In this moment the eyesight of all three characters becomes “frozen... forever,” stagnant and undiscerning for the rest of eternity. Mrs. McIntyre’s last chance to display even an inkling of compassion for Mr. Guizac has passed, and her complicity in the murder will take its toll on her consciousness. She can only stare blankly at the priest, “for she was too shocked by her experience to be quite herself. Her mind was not taking hold of all that was happening. She felt she was in some foreign country where the people bent over the body

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 226

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 229

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 234

were natives, and she watched like a stranger.”⁸¹ The trauma of this experience has dissociated Mrs. McIntyre from herself, leaving her in the negative space of mystery Marcel describes as making one a “stranger” to themselves. O’Connor uses that same word for McIntyre, reversing her place with Mr. Guizac’s – she is now the foreigner on her own property, an outsider in her own body. In the wake of this event Mrs. McIntyre sells her farm “at a loss” and her health deteriorates, making it difficult for her to feel superior to anyone. “Her eyesight grew steadily worse and she lost her voice altogether. Not many people remembered to come out to the country to see her except the old priest. He came regularly once a week with a bag of breadcrumbs and, after he had fed these to the peacock, he would come in and sit by the side of the bed and explain the doctrines of the church.”⁸² The physical reality she has so desperately clung to is drained of its vitality. Mrs. McIntyre can neither speak nor see and she has no companions left, save the priest whom she hates so much. When he visits he makes sure to feed the peacock first; and only then does he lecture McIntyre on “the doctrines of the church.” If she had listened before and treated Mr. Guizac like a believer is compelled to treat Christ, she wouldn’t be in this situation at all; instead her life is reduced to virtually nothing.

The ethical foundation of “The Displaced Person” is not at all sympathetic to Mrs. Shortley or Mrs. McIntyre. The pair display an astounding lack of self-awareness, and assume that they possess spiritual knowledge which makes them superior, despite the fact that their own visions are so deeply impaired. The final act, which attempts to fully eliminate the force of Mr. Guizac’s mystery, backfires on Mrs. McIntyre, who is condemned to a miserable existence which enforces the humility she profoundly lacks. McIntyre never has the opportunity to experience the clarifying power of mystery because she actively works to dispel it from her life,

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 235

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 235

whether by encouraging the murder of Mr. Guizac or by letting the peacocks on her farm die out.⁸³ On the other hand, if she had allowed either of these presences to manifest themselves in her consciousness, she might have been able to see where she went wrong. O'Connor is a bit more generous in one of her later stories, "Revelation," which turns on this difference: unlike Mrs. McIntyre, the violence experienced by Ruby Turpin opens her to mystery. Though it still provokes intense "insecurity and strangeness," Turpin receives the awareness of spiritual reality which mystery communicates, and in the finale of the story she is able to transcend and unite her tangible reality with the spiritual in a moment of self-clarity.

Turpin begins the story with a deceptively optimistic attitude. She thinks of herself as compassionate and humble, and strives towards positivity in demeanor. "To help anybody out that needed it was her philosophy of life. She never spared herself when she found somebody in need, whether they were white or black, trash or decent. And of all she had to be thankful for, she was most thankful that this was so."⁸⁴ The distinctions she makes, especially between "trash or decent" folk, hints at an underlying hierarchy in her thinking – but in Mrs. Turpin's mind she is helpful to those "in need" and "thankful" for what has been given to her. At times she does display generosity for other characters in the story. When she first meets Mary Grace (who will later attack her) in a doctor's waiting room, Mrs. Turpin does her utmost to be unassuming and understanding. "The poor girl's face was blue with acne and Mrs. Turpin thought how pitiful it was to have a face like that at that age. She gave this girl a friendly smile but the girl only scowled harder."⁸⁵ Mrs. Turpin, who is herself noticeably overweight, is likely picturing Mary

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 198: Mrs. McIntyre says, "There used to be twenty or thirty of those things on the place but I've let them die off. I don't like to hear them scream in the middle of the night."

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 497

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 490

Grace being harassed by other kids for her appearance. Her “friendly smile” is met by a scowl, but the sentiment is well-placed and decidedly sympathetic.

It quickly becomes clear to the reader that Mrs. Turpin is not quite as virtuous as she'd like to imagine. Our first hint is her tendency to judge based on appearance, a trait she shares with Mrs. Shortley. The three characters in the waiting room with whom Mrs. Turpin interacts most frequently are given labels: the “pleasant lady,” the “white-trash woman,” and Mary Grace, “the ugly girl.” She makes these character assessments based on speech and mannerisms, but more importantly, on their shoes. “Without appearing to, Mrs. Turpin always noticed people’s feet. The well-dressed lady had on red and gray suede shoes to match her dress. Mrs. Turpin had on her good black patent leather pumps... the white-trashy mother had on what appeared to be bedroom slippers, black straw with gold braid threaded through them – exactly what you would have expected her to have on.”⁸⁶ Using clothing as an estimation of character in this way is thoroughly ridiculous, especially in a doctor’s office. Mrs. Turpin has dressed up for the occasion in her “good” shoes, as though someone other than her will be handing out judgments based on footwear. The difference between the “well-dressed lady” and the “white-trashy mother” is more indicative of income than anything else, especially the fact that the former’s suede shoes “match her dress.” Mrs. Turpin is apparently more superficial than she'd like us to believe.

All of these descriptors play into a social hierarchy Mrs. Turpin has imagined for herself. Before going to bed at night she likes to busy her mind with “naming the classes of people” –

“On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them – not above, just away from – were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the

⁸⁶ Ibid., p.490-491

complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud... by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head, and she would dream they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven.”⁸⁷

This system is reminiscent of what Mrs. Shortley pictures for herself in “The Displaced Person,” but is distinct in that Mrs. Turpin and her husband do not sit atop the social pyramid. She certainly finds herself “above” both “colored people” and “white trash,” who occupy the same level. This assures some degree of superiority for Mrs. Turpin – but as she tries to frame this blueprint she runs up against a wall in her own thinking. She seems to have an instinct that, despite how she makes her classifications, money does not always equal virtue, since “some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud.” It’s hard to extract this inkling of clarity from such a thoroughly irksome image, but it shows that Mrs. Turpin does not bear quite the same degree of rampant hubris that Mrs. Shortley does. In the end she gives up trying to make exceptions, and imagines all the classes “crammed... in a box car” headed towards a “gas oven.” It’s unclear whether this violent ending implies the collapse of this hierarchy or if it’s just Mrs. Turpin’s strange way of ensuring her own self worth, but in either case, she seems uncertain that this “dream” is the full story.

Mrs. Turpin tries to figure herself comfortably into this hierarchy in the waiting room but is unable to. Mary Grace (literally) sees through her facade, and her gaze is felt by Mrs. Turpin as a personal attack. “The ugly girl’s eyes were fixed on Mrs. Turpin as if she had some very special reason for disliking her,”⁸⁸ as though she can see the racism and classism of Turpin’s hierarchical dreamscape. Mary Grace’s sight is inescapable and deeply unsettling. “She was looking at her as if she had known and disliked her all her life – all of Mrs. Turpin’s life, it

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 491-492

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 493

seemed too, not just all the girl's life. Why, girl, I don't even know you, Mrs. Turpin said silently."⁸⁹ Mary Grace appears to have a special knowledge of Mrs. Turpin, one that stretches beyond the temporality of her own life. Her gaze is mysterious both in its suggestion of eternity and its capacity for knowledge which stretches beyond the character's limited life span. Mrs. Turpin offers a feeble rebuttal – "I don't even know you" – but clearly Mary Grace *does* know her. When their eyes meet again, the presence of this knowledge becomes real. "Her eyes were fixed like two drills on Mrs. Turpin. This time there was no mistaking that there was something urgent behind them."⁹⁰ Mary Grace's cold stare carries the "urgency" of "two drills" pointed right at Mrs. Turpin's skull; though she may resist there is "no mistaking" that a kind of awareness is being imparted here, or that Mary Grace's presence has taken root in Mrs. Turpin's psyche.

When Mary Grace finally snaps and assaults Mrs. Turpin we see the latter dissociate from herself as Mrs. McIntyre did in the violent conclusion of "The Displaced Person." "Mrs. Turpin felt entirely hollow except for her heart which swung from side to side as if it were agitated in a great empty drum of flesh."⁹¹ Her personality is drained, and without any sense of herself Turpin is only a "heart" bouncing around a "great empty drum of flesh." In this physical emptiness she makes room for the content of Mary Grace's stare. "The girl's eyes stopped rolling and focused on her. They seemed a much lighter blue than before, as if a door that had been tightly closed behind them was now open to admit light and air... there was no doubt in [Mrs. Turpin's] mind that the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition."⁹² The infinite character of this "know[ing]" is reinforced; the

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 495

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 497

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 500

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 500

effect of mystery is “intense” and “personal” beyond the confines of time or space. The moment is distinguished from Mrs. Shortley’s vision in that it is the product of an external rather than a wholly internal presence. Like Mr. Guizac Mary Grace occupies the role of Marcel’s stranger. Her eyes become “lighter,” and the “tightly closed” door which is now “open to admit light and air” is a reflection of Mrs. Turpin. In an instant Turpin receives what Mary Grace has been trying to communicate to her, and is left “open” by the experience.

The thing that sticks most effectively with Mrs. Turpin is an insult – Mary Grace tells her to ““Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog.””⁹³ It’s admittedly a bit funny, but to Mrs. Turpin there could be nothing more piercing. The utterance leaves her silent and disturbed, but rather than brush it off she takes it quite seriously. Once back at her house with her husband Claud she insists that it’s untrue, “but the denial had no force. The girl’s eyes and her words... brooked no repudiation. She had been singled out for the message, though there was trash in the room to whom it might justly have been applied.”⁹⁴ Mrs. Turpin falls back on her old hierarchy and tries to shift the weight of the insult onto the “trash” in the room (presumably the “white-trash lady”) but her rebuttal has “no force.” She has taken the words to heart and her social order has been confused; Mrs. Turpin is now on the bottom tier with the “trash” she loathes. Eventually she starts speaking directly with Christ, as though it were Him and not Mary Grace who hurled the phrase. ““What do you send me a message like that for?... How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?””⁹⁵ Her whole world is reorganizing itself in front of her eyes. She takes the insult earnestly, calling it a ““message”” from Christ, grappling with the realization that she is both ““saved and from hell.”” This conversation quickly turns to an argument, and Mrs. Turpin clings to any semblance of structure in the fleeting seconds before

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 500

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 502

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 506

her final revelation. “Call me a wart hog from hell. Put that bottom rail on top. There’ll still be a bottom and a top!”⁹⁶ The desperation is apparent in her tone; she is arguing with no one and losing. Mrs. Turpin’s identity is being torn apart by Mary Grace’s insult, which she has by now internalized and understood as a direct line from spiritual reality. She insists that there will “still be a bottom and a top,” but this reversal depletes the classifications of whatever ethical value they previously implied, and Mrs. Turpin’s own place in this hierarchy is now lost.

The revelation featured in the title comes as a response to Mrs. Turpin shouting towards the sky, “Who do you think you are?”⁹⁷ The question, like the image of the open door in Mary Grace’s blue eyes, is reflected back at Mrs. Turpin; she is actually asking this of herself. She can’t figure out whether she’s wart hog or human, damned or saved – after experiencing the defamiliarization of mystery she beckons for the second stage, its ability to “reveal.” The response to her question comes as a vision which merges physical and spiritual reality to deliver her “some abysmal life-giving knowledge.” A “purple streak” cuts across the sky, and as a “visionary light [settles] into her eyes,” she sees “the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven.”⁹⁸ These ascending souls are the various classes of “trash” Mrs. Turpin has thus far dismissed. At the end of the line are people “who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything... they alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead.”⁹⁹ This vision has a much more substantial depth than the visions in “The Displaced Person.” Besides having its

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 507

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 507

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 508

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 508-509

foundation in physical reality (as opposed to the wholly “inner” vision of Mrs. Shortley) it constitutes a re-ordering of Mrs. Turpin’s sense of self, which imparts an awareness that her judgments do not line up with the values she espouses – “even their virtues were being burned away.” Turpin’s sight is not at all impaired; she fixes her eyes “unblinkingly” on the “abysmal” sight in front of her, frightened and perhaps even repulsed by it, but unable to turn away from this supreme “knowledge.” She looks through to “the very heart of mystery,”¹⁰⁰ and in this act her life is irrevocably altered. Mrs. Turpin’s vision subsides as the sun goes down, but her reality remains tinged with a spiritual vitality beyond the empirical. “In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.”¹⁰¹ Even after the the fantastic sight has dissipated Mrs. Turpin can still hear the “voices of the souls climbing upward,” evidence that she has taken this “knowledge” to heart. This revelation has given new life to her environment and reframed her understanding of the world.

O’Connor ends “Revelation” on the chirping crickets, but we see that Ruby Turpin’s spiritual condition has been reversed; she is now legitimately closer to the virtues she claims as her own. This comes about by a process which is necessarily painful and dissociative; Mary Grace pries Turpin open and transmits mystery into her. She is made, in Marcel’s words, “a stranger to [herself],” and consequently through her revelation, “more fully [herself].” This puts her in contrast to the protagonists of both “The River” and “The Displaced Person” – Mrs. McIntyre is completely closed off to mystery (her violent reckoning *only* serves to estrange) and Harry, though certainly receptive to mystery, lacks “anagogical vision” and meets his tragic end by confusing an actual river with a divine river. The latter case demonstrates the true nature of

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 508

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 509

the river, the peacock, Mr. Guizac, and Mary Grace – these sacraments are mysterious first and foremost in their rendering of spiritual knowledge into immediate and tangible realities.

O'Connor touches on this interplay in a now infamous letter detailing a dinner she had with Mary McCarthy:

“The conversation turned on the Eucharist, which I, being the Catholic, was obviously supposed to defend. Mrs. Broadwater said when she was a child and received the Host, she thought of it as the Holy Ghost... now she thought of it as a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one. I then said, in a very shaky voice, ‘Well, if it’s a symbol, then to hell with it.’”¹⁰²

Though themes like vision or color certainly carry symbolic importance in O'Connor's stories, the sacraments themselves are never purely symbolic. They are aspects of the reality her characters live in, and though they often fail, their task is to reconcile physical reality with the mystery which is always on the periphery. O'Connor's fiction is bleak and tough, and it would be an overstatement to say that Harry, Mrs. McIntyre, or even Mrs. Turpin experience the fullness which results from Marcel's conception of mystery – but in fleeting moments of transcendence they all have contact with it. Whether they empty themselves to receive it or run and hide is their own prerogative.

¹⁰² O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, p. 125

Chapter 2 – Life

Chekhov's most famous contribution to the field of literature may be his concept of the "gun." The writer Ilia Gurliand paraphrases him on the subject: "If in Act I you have a pistol hanging on the wall, then it must fire in the last act."¹⁰³ This device speaks to the purposiveness of images chosen by an author, but there's also a faint whiff of determinism. When the visibly unstable Trigorin lays down a rifle and a dead gull at Nina's feet in Act I of *The Seagull*, it seems a foregone conclusion that he will turn it on himself by Act III. A gunshot offstage relays his suicide to the audience; the characters themselves don't know the gravity of this noise when they hear it, but those watching certainly do. The viewer observes Trigorin's mental health gradually worsening, and as time passes his fate only becomes more certain, his death more inescapable.

Given the fatalistic attitude conveyed by the Chekhovian gun, it's no wonder he is often construed as a materialist. The bulk of his plots are decidedly unsympathetic portrayals of provincial Russian life; protagonists die inconsequential deaths, heinous immorality goes unchecked, and suffering abounds. Chekhov is himself a vocal advocate of literary objectivity, and at times he intimates a similar philosophical position. He writes in an 1889 letter that "nature reconciles man, that is, makes him indifferent. And in this world one must be indifferent."¹⁰⁴ Both nature and man are "indifferent." This term is unspecific, but read in the context of objectivity it might be likened to moral neutrality. Nature has no conscience – if it did it might spare Trigorin, who loves so unabashedly that his own emotions get the better of him. But this is not the world we find ourselves in, and Trigorin's death is simply part of the scheme of physical reality, towards which we "must" render ourselves "indifferent." This stance is not unlike that of

¹⁰³ Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life*, (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1997), p. 203

¹⁰⁴ Anton Chekhov, *Letters on the Short Story, the Drama and Other Literary Topics*, (New York, Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1964), p. 62

London's in writing "To Build a Fire," which depicts a world devoid of any inherent ethical constraints, including those the author puts to his own characters.

Can Chekhov really be grouped in with Zola and London as a naturalist who throws up his hands at the question of ethical imperatives in the world? One would hope his eye is too keen to be so reductive. A moment from "The Lady With the Little Dog" (which will later be revisited) comes to mind: "In this constancy, in this utter indifference to the life and death of each of us, there perhaps lies hidden the pledge of our eternal salvation."¹⁰⁵ If this does not constitute an imperative per se, it is at the very least evidence that Chekhov's vision of "life and death" is not purely material. The "pledge of... eternal salvation" is a clear parallel with O'Connor – both authors observe a metaphysical current beneath the disenchanting universe, and for both this serves as a foundation to erect a way in which life can become meaningful. For Chekhov as well as O'Connor this has to do with mystery, though the former's conception shares more with the philosophy of David Cooper than Gabriel Marcel. Cooper links mystery to humility, a trait which is conspicuous in Chekhov stories either for its presence or lack. Despite striving towards objectivity in literary form, Chekhov does in fact endorse humility as an ethical ground from which to act in the world, demonstrating that his position is not as "indifferent" as he says. This humility is derived from the underlying mystery of life, and constitutes a rebuke of the world as secular and disenchanting.

Though Chekhov and O'Connor agree on the reality of mystery, they differ in the degree to which they infuse moral imperatives into the worlds they create. In O'Connor, moments of extreme violence (and likewise moments of true "revelation") serve to expose characters' immorality to themselves. This is more than a sly nod from the author to the reader; O'Connor deliberately exaggerates so as to communicate her own moral vision. "The novelist with

¹⁰⁵ Anton Chekhov, *Selected Stories of Anton Chekhov*, (New York, Modern Library, 2000), p. 366-367

Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural... to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.”¹⁰⁶ Here the “almost-blind” is directed at the modern reader who sees such offensive “distortions... as natural” – but it could also refer to the poor eyesight of Mrs. McIntyre, for whom the “large and startling” figure is not just drawn but enacted in reality. O’Connor makes McIntyre’s own “distortions” “appear” to her as she watches Mr. Guizac die, but also through the purgatorial life she is condemned to in the final paragraph of the story.

Chekhov would never be so bold. Compare O’Connor’s quote to one of his own regarding morality in the story form:

“You abuse me for objectivity, calling it indifference to good and evil, lack of ideals and ideas, and so on. You would have me, when I described horse-thieves, say: “Stealing horses is an evil.” But that has been known for ages without my saying so. Let the jury judge them; it’s my job simply to show what sort of people they are... Of course it would be pleasant to combine art with a sermon, but for me personally it is extremely difficult and almost impossible, owing to the conditions of the technique... When I write, I reckon entirely upon the reader to add for himself the subjective elements that are lacking in the story.”¹⁰⁷

The approaches are nearly flipped. Where O’Connor is skeptical of her readership’s ability to properly observe “distortions,” Chekhov defers the moral content of his stories *entirely* to the reader. It’s their job to add “subjective elements” which he admits are “lacking” in his work; to include them would amount to confusing “art with a sermon.” Chekhov is more concerned with depicting reality than judging it, to “show what sort of people” horse-thieves are rather than wagging his finger at them. This comes through clearly in his fiction; where O’Connor’s style can be fantastic and replete with embellishment, his is more often judicious and reserved. He calls this attitude “objectivity” and, though he leaves space for the “jury” to “judge,” Chekhov

¹⁰⁶ O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 34

¹⁰⁷ Chekhov, *Letters on the Short Story, the Drama and Other Literary Topics*, p. 64

notably abstains from disputing that he as author maintains an “indifference to good and evil.” He is the judge in this paradigm, an impartial figure presenting facets of reality. If this statement is to be believed he seems to share more as a writer with London than O’Connor.

But Chekhov’s claim to objectivity as moral neutrality is patently false. Wayne Booth, in his *Rhetoric of Fiction*, explores how an author may be seemingly objective while still making their subjective presence felt. Though Booth notes the pervasive literary desire for objectivity, calling it “the predominant demand in this century,”¹⁰⁸ he quickly clarifies that the neutral objective stance advocated by hardline naturalists like Flaubert or Zola is an impossibility. Booth remarks on Chekhov specifically, claiming he “begins bravely enough in defense of neutrality, but... cannot write three sentences without committing himself.”¹⁰⁹ Booth characterizes Chekhov’s style not as neutrality but impartiality: “much of what... Chekhov wrote about objectivity is really a plea to the artist not to load the dice, not to take sides unjustly against or for particular characters” (Booth 77). This is a far less grandiose claim than total neutrality. If Chekhov’s objectivity is really just the requirement not to frame a story “unjustly,” that leaves ample room for judgment in a positive sense.

This is not to say that Chekhov’s fiction really is a “sermon” as he fears, rather that it is possible to be verisimilar without completely detaching morality from a story. Towards this end Booth coins the term “implied author” –

“As [the author] writes, he creates not simply an ideal, impersonal ‘man in general’ but an implied version of ‘himself’ that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men’s works... Whether we call this implied author an ‘official scribe,’ or adopt the term recently revived by Kathleen Tillotson – the author’s ‘second self’ – it is clear that the picture the reader gets of this presence is one of the author’s most important effects. However impersonal he may try to be, his reader will inevitably construct a picture of the

¹⁰⁸ Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 67

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68. Quoting Flaubert: “Art must achieve ‘by a pitiless method, the precision of the physical sciences.’ It should be unnecessary here to show that no author can ever attain to this kind of objectivity.”

official scribe who writes in this manner – and of course that official scribe will never be neutral toward all values.”¹¹⁰

The implied author gives Chekhov a bit of breathing room. It is he whose “values” enter the text, not the author himself but a “version.” If we find Booth’s theory plausible then we needn’t be so concerned with a conflict between value judgment and an impartial depiction of reality, since this author is “implied;” it is the reader’s own prerogative to “construct a picture of the official scribe.” Furthermore, this “second self” is not just a proxy for the author¹¹¹ – the text exists in tandem with the implied author, and they act upon each other. If Chekhov considers himself an objectivist, that’s fine. He can take notes on reality as neutrally as he pleases, but it is “inevitable” that these details will be filtered through the lens of the implied author, who will “never be neutral towards all values.” The frame of a Chekhov story will suggest certain “values” and, as long as this ethical content is present, whether it’s latent in the story or if the author himself takes a position seems an inconsequential distinction. The subtle balance Chekhov strikes between objectivity as a stylistic choice and the conveyance of certain ethical values comes through most clearly in “Peasant Women.” The story is unrelentingly bleak and features various characters whom the reader comes to find detestable, only to see the story end with no retribution. Chekhov makes the reader feel this world’s profound lack of moral structure and emphasizes that lack through the implied author. By subtly framing descriptions and images he invites the reader to make a judgment; and this in itself is a sort of ethical content.

Chekhov begins equitably enough, specifying individuals and the environment in the objective style he’s known for. “In the village of Raibuzh, just across the street from the church, stands a two-storied house with a stone foundation and an iron roof. The owner, Filipp Ivanovich

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 71

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 70: “The argument in favor of neutrality is thus useful in so far as it warns the novelist that he can seldom afford to pour his untransformed biases into his work.”

Kashin, nicknamed Dyudya, lives on the lower floor with his family, and on the upper floor, which is usually very hot in summer and very cold in winter, he lodges passing officials, merchants, and landowners.”¹¹² This scene is firmly grounded in reality with virtually no speculation on the narrator’s part. The village is named and the house is given physical definition by its “stone foundation” and “iron roof.” The reader can even picture the surrounding area, with the church “across the street” and the bustling crowd of “passing officials, merchants, and landowners.” The name is firmly realistic too; Chekhov gives the complete “Filipp Ivanovich Kashin” before reducing him to the slightly more comical (and, on its own, much less believable) “Dyudya.” While erecting a concrete space and fleshing out characters Chekhov also adds a sensory dimension by his description of the upper floor as “very hot in summer and very cold in winter.” In the context of the story’s exposition this detail seems somewhat superfluous, but it invites the reader to place themselves in the landscape Chekhov creates, to imagine what it’s like to live as a passerby in Dyudya’s house.

On a subtler level Chekhov is already making room for judgment from the reader. The story’s third sentence gives Dyudya clearer dimensions. He “rents out plots of land, runs a pothouse on the high road, trades in tar, honey, cattle, and sable, and has already saved up some eight thousand, which he has sitting in the bank in town.”¹¹³ Of course these details serve the story’s realism, giving the reader an understanding of how Dyudya spends his time and what spaces he occupies – but isn’t a little odd that he has all these business ventures, *and* “eight thousand” “sitting in the bank,” *and* he rents out the (apparently quite uncomfortable) upper level of his home? The language itself is quite precise and lacks overt commentary. To use a modern analogy, it is like Chekhov places a camera in this village, near these characters, at this time, and

¹¹² Chekhov, *Selected Stories of Anton Chekhov*, p. 123

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 123

writes as close as he can to exactly what he sees, but the implied author is the one *pointing* the camera. When the reader sees Dyudya, despite having all the trappings of wealth, continue toiling relentlessly to acquire capital, is it farfetched for us to find him a bit greedy?

The implied author's frame is only elaborated as more characters appear. We're introduced to Matvei and Kuzka, a middle-aged merchant and a young child respectively, and Chekhov gives Matvei the same sparing exposition he gave Dyudya. Before we've even met the character we see how he "washed, prayed facing the church, then spread out a rug by the cart and sat down with the boy to have supper; he ate unhurriedly, gravely, and Dyudya... recognized him by his manners as a practical and serious man who knew his own worth."¹¹⁴ The first half of the quote only shows Matvei's actions, which are ordinary enough, but the semicolon represents a tonal shift – after it we get adverbs ("unhurriedly" and "gravely") which constitute an assessment from Dyudya's perspective rather than the author's. Dyudya's own judgment that Matvei is "a practical and serious man who knew his own worth" implies an affinity between the two. The qualities Dyudya praises say something about his character: he values "practicality" and "seriousness," and the reader can assess him based on the ethical judgments he makes. Once again the implied author enters through neither text nor tone but frame. Dyudya ties himself to Matvei, and the reader begins to think of them in a similar class.

As the story progresses and we see how these characters act it becomes increasingly easy for the reader to make judgments, even as Chekhov's descriptions remain democratic. Matvei explains how he got Kuzka, involving an affair with a young woman named Mashenka whom he later blames entirely for the adultery, and the merciless beating she suffers at the hands of her husband Vasya. In court Matvei justifies his action by the conviction that women are more sinful than men: "There's a lot of evil and all sorts of vileness in this world from the female sex. Not

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 124

only us sinners but even holy men have been led astray. Mashenka didn't do anything to turn me away from her."¹¹⁵ Most readers are apt to find this sentiment thoroughly admonishable; in an O'Connor story Matvei might get run over by a female truck driver. But even if the reader has foreclosed judgment, the world of the text hasn't; Dyudya treats women rather poorly himself so he won't be raising any concerns, and the court sides with Matvei, sentencing Mashenka to "hard labor in Siberia for thirteen years."¹¹⁶ One wants to scream at the unfairness of it all – and as we know from his well-documented visits to Sakhalin, Chekhov himself would have been rather sympathetic to this punishment – but the story's world is one of misogyny, and Chekhov aims to depict it on its own terms. For him to punish the characters would be to forfeit the impartial style which elicits such a strong response from the reader in the first place.

Once Matvei has finished his story and all the characters are asleep, the implied author takes a more active role. We return to the broad view of the street we began with, this time "flooded with moonlight... the long shadows of poplars and birdhouses stretched across the whole street, and the shadow of the church, black and frightening, lay broadly, having swallowed up Dyudya's gate and half the house."¹¹⁷ The image is in no way fantastic or implausible. We know the church is across from Dyudya's house and it's easy to imagine the moon hanging low behind it, casting a long shadow over the rest of the street. But those few words, "black and frightening," characterize the atmosphere ominously – and the act, not of covering or casting but "*swallowing*" Dyudya's house implies an agency on the part of the shadow, as though it wants to gulp down the house and never see it again. The fact that it's a church seems significant too; my mind goes to faith and moral culpability, the church as a place where sin is cleansed. The image is so effective because Chekhov grounds it in realism, and after witnessing Dyudya and Matvei

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 126

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 130

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 131

commit horrendous acts and get off without so much as a harsh word, it feels like an affirmation of the reader's moral outrage. Whether or not he intends this scene to stretch beyond the empirical reality, I can't help myself from adding an ethical significance to Chekhov's image, from searching in it the retribution I so deeply wish upon Matvei and Dyudya.

While the text of "Peasant Women" is not expressly judgmental the implied author manifests judgment through the sequence of events and the frame by which we see particular actions and characters. The reader's relationship to the implied author allows us to orient ourselves morally within the text, to know where we stand in relation to the characters. As Booth notes, "our sense of the implied author includes not only the extractable meanings but also the moral and emotional content of each bit of action and suffering of all of the characters. It includes, in short, the intuitive apprehension of a completed artistic whole."¹¹⁸ Without this metaphysical dimension the "moral and emotional content" of the characters' "action and suffering" would be unrealized; through the implied author's framing the church's shadow takes on an ethical personality which transcends the reality of the image. The reader's judgment is generated in this space, and thus Chekhov's purported "objectivity" actually gives the story its ethical arc. "Peasant Women" ends with a return to the noisy bustle of daily life; Dyudya overcharges Matvei for oats, and Matvei threatens Kuzka. The final image is the child's "face twisted in terror."¹¹⁹ Kuzka is so pitiable, so wholly innocent in the story, that the fear Matvei causes him is totally unfathomable. Chekhov forgoes a moralizing addendum and leaves us here: a child's "terror." That in itself is more powerful than an overt statement.

The form and style of "Peasant Women" are betrayed by its content. Chekhov clearly sets out to document reality through the lens of "objectivity," and he does a fine job – every detail in

¹¹⁸ Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 73

¹¹⁹ Chekhov, *Selected Stories of Anton Chekhov*, p. 135

the story is firmly realistic. But through the framing and arrangement of Booth's implied author the plot takes on a different light in the reader's eyes, and we are invited to infer (or activate our own) moral judgment where there seemingly is none. By technique Chekhov is nearly naturalistic, but there may be a disparate metaphysical element at play. The ending of "Peasant Women" is a far cry from "To Build a Fire," in which the dog leaves the man's decaying corpse in search of other "food providers and fire providers." London puts an emphasis on the sheer act of survival, but Chekhov suggests a much more substantial ethical vision in the "terror" of Kuzka's face. There is something mysterious underlying the story which floods Chekhov's descriptions with meaning.

In his text *The Measure of Things*, David Cooper elaborates an understanding of "mystery" which allows for Chekhov's formal "objectivity" without compromising a story's latent moral framework.

"Whatever we can meaningfully express requires an inexpressible, mysterious 'background' as the 'measure' of what we say and believe. There is no discursable way things stand independently of 'the human contribution' to provide this measure, and the thought that 'the human world' may provide it is unlivable."¹²⁰

Cooper's "measure" equates roughly to my use of "meaning" as a way of making moral judgments, of assessing "what we say and believe." He notes that the "'human world'" cannot provide this measure because this would be "unlivable," which is to say it contradicts the realities of lived experience. "Peasant Women" certainly agrees; the story's world withholds judgment, and any definitive measurement of its characters is left up to the reader. At the same time, this measure cannot "stand independently of 'the human contribution'" while remaining "discursable" (rendered through discourse) as is necessary for any practical application of an

¹²⁰ David Cooper, *The Measure of Things: Humanism, Humility, and Mystery*, (London, Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 287

ethical standard. Mystery can provide a link between these two realms, giving us a “background” against which we may “meaningfully express” ourselves and the world around us.

Still, the question remains as to how mystery can provide “discursable” meaning if it is itself “inexpressible.” Cooper says explicitly that mystery is “undiscursable,” that one “cannot have a genuine idea of it in the way that... I have the idea of gold or snow.” We can picture these things in our minds and apply to them certain descriptors such as color, weight or texture, as opposed to mystery which is inherently ineffable. “But it will not follow from this, of course, that I cannot have the idea of mystery in the sense of intelligibly supposing that there is mystery, that there is the undiscursable.”¹²¹ Even though mystery may not be directly accessible through language, it is still a space whose existence we can have an “idea” of. Instead of speaking directly about mystery Cooper describes “emptiness” as both the mode in which mystery is viscerally felt and as “something to answer to.”¹²² It may provide measure for our actions because it is “the necessarily inexplicable source of the possibility of a world, and hence that to which the being of the world and of ourselves owes.”¹²³ In this way emptiness mimics the frightening “insecurity and strangeness” in Marcel’s conception of mystery; once one is made receptive to mystery there is a stage of defamiliarization which will eventually bring us closer to that “which the being of the world and of ourselves owes.” Cooper uses the phrase “things are empty” to prompt an understanding of the word based on our everyday use of it; one “association” he makes is with “places or spaces that, because empty or open, allow for entry—perhaps an ‘open house’, where people may come and gather.”¹²⁴ After emptiness is experienced one is left “open” so as to “allow for entry.” Besides an obvious affinity with O’Connor’s

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 281

¹²² Ibid., p. 302: “Emptiness is intended to play a role akin to the provision of measure, of something for us to answer to.”

¹²³ Ibid., p. 311

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 309

“Revelation,” in which Mary Grace’s eyes reflect in Ruby Turpin the opening of a “tightly closed” door to “admit light and air,” the example begins to show how emptiness can provide measure for the individual as what we choose to fill this empty space.

For Cooper the experience of emptiness, as a means of accessing the “indiscursable” mystery of the world, leads inevitably to humility. He isolates “two discernible components of humility: respect for the integrity of things and what [Iris] Murdoch calls ‘unselfing’ ... it means abandonment of hubristic claims on behalf of human beings’ capacities to, inter alia, know how things are, plan and control the future, and ‘dominate the world.’”¹²⁵ These two qualities are closely related; a “respect for the integrity of things” would be to divorce an individual’s own agency or intention from “things” which are equally indebted to the “inexplicable source” of emptiness. This would consequently entail the “abandonment of hubristic claims,” not only of manipulating “things” for our own ends, but also of illusory “control” over the world. This is the aspect of Cooper’s mystery which is most closely related to Marcel’s – he even quotes directly from *The Mystery of Being* on the givenness of our existence which exposes such “hubristic claims” as false.

“What we are, as much as what the world with which we ‘co-arise’ is, owes to a mysterious ‘giving’. The association of this point with humility is made explicit by Marcel. We should speak of our own being with humility, since ‘this being is something that can only be granted to us as a gift’. Humility is a ‘mode of being... incompatible with... the claim that... we are, or have the power to make ourselves, dependent only on ourselves.’”¹²⁶

Marcel and Cooper overlap in that humility becomes the operative state of “being” in which one is finely attuned to mystery. This “mode” directly counters the claim of disenchantment that we can exhibit “mastery” of the world and its constituents; instead we ought to view our existence as a “gift,” which means practically that we are not “dependent only on ourselves.” As with

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 360-361

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 334

O'Connor, there are moments of Chekhov's stories wherein a character exposed to mystery corrects their own behavior in recognizing a capacity for humility.

"The Lady with the Little Dog," one of Chekhov's most renowned stories, depicts a man named Gurov who recognizes the reality of mystery through the very ordinary act of falling in love. In turn he becomes the humble man as Cooper defines him, as one who "does not mould and distort things to suit him, recognizes proper limits that it is not for him to transgress, and does not judge everything from within the orbit of his own particular aims."¹²⁷ For such a transition to occur Gurov must begin in the opposite state, demonstrated most pointedly through his misogyny. Like Matvei, Gurov "almost always spoke ill of women," labelling them as an "inferior race."¹²⁸ Ironically Gurov still yearns for frivolous affairs as an escape from his unhappy marriage. When he initially meets Anna he is attracted to her as another possible escapade: "He remembered those stories of easy conquests, of trips to the mountains, and the tempting thought of a quick, fleeting liaison... suddenly took possession of him."¹²⁹ Gurov is clearly "mould[ing]" reality according to his own whims; in conversation with men he professes to hate women, and yet he manipulates them for "his own particular aims" of "easy conquests."

Through the beginning of his relationship with Anna, Gurov continuously displays a lack of humility. After they first meet he returns to his hotel room still thinking about her, even comparing Anna to his own daughter in a compassionate moment. "Quite recently she had been a school girl, had studied just as his daughter was studying now... he recalled her slender, weak neck, her beautiful eyes." Gurov likens Anna to a family member, implying that his relationship with her is perhaps deeper than a "fleeting liaison," but quickly dismisses this thought in keeping

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 361

¹²⁸ Chekhov, *Selected Stories of Anton Chekhov*, p. 362

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 362

with his entrenched misogyny. ““There’s something pathetic in her all the same.””¹³⁰ Gurov does not want to admit that Anna may mean more to him than he expects, as this would only dislodge his comfortable worldview. When they first have sex Anna, unlike Gurov, is distressed at her own adultery. As she sits, “dejected” and forlorn, Gurov “cut himself a slice [of watermelon] and unhurriedly began to eat it. At least half an hour passed in silence.”¹³¹ He is emotionally uninvolved, avoiding the sort of conversation which might lead him to recognize his actual feelings. Literary critic Virginia Llewellyn Smith connects this detachment to Chekhov’s own experiences with women. “That in his work he should suggest that women are an inferior breed can be to some extent explained by the limited knowledge of women his self-contained attitude brought him,”¹³² in other words, a failure to observe the “proper limits” of his own “knowledge.” Whether or not we buy that Gurov is an analog for Chekhov in this direct way, the sentiment could certainly apply to the former alone. He lacks the humility not only to “respect the integrity” of the woman before him, but also to observe where his own “limits” are.

Gurov’s hubris is reversed in a thoroughly mysterious moment on an embankment in Oreanda, near where he’s staying in Yalta. It’s here that for the first time, prompted by the quiet beauty of the setting, Gurov recognizes the depth of his own feeling and brushes up against the unfathomable depths of the world around him.

“The leaves of the trees did not stir, cicadas called, and the monotonous, dull noise of the sea, coming from below, spoke of the peace, of the eternal sleep that awaits us. So it had sounded below when neither Yalta nor Oreanda were there, so it sounded now and would go on sounding with the same dull indifference when we are no longer here. And in this constancy, in this utter indifference to the life and death of each of us, there perhaps lies hidden the pledge of our eternal salvation, the unceasing movement of life on earth, of unceasing perfection... Gurov reflected that, if you thought of it, everything was

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 363

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 365

¹³² Virginia Llewellyn Smith, *Anton Chekhov and the Lady with the Little Dog*, (London, Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 213

beautiful in this world, everything except for what we ourselves think and do when we forget the higher goals of being and our human dignity.”¹³³

At first glance this seems a bizarre and thoroughly non-Chekhovian sentiment. He abstracts the narrator from the direct action in order to comment on the possibility of “unceasing perfection.” The sentence stands on its own with no reference to a particular character, so it’s unlikely that Gurov himself is thinking these thoughts. These lines become intelligible when we bring Cooper into the conversation – as he says, “to talk about mystery is, impossibly, to describe what cannot be described,”¹³⁴ so it would make sense that none of the characters are actually speaking or thinking here. If we consider the sentence as an act of the implied author, communicating the underlying mystery of Gurov’s experience to the reader while leaving that direct awareness inaccessible to the man himself, mystery retains its ineffability. Gurov understands the moment in a somewhat more trite but no less significant way as exposing the fundamental beauty of the world. This becomes a self-imposed ethical imperative not to “forget the higher goals of being” which Gurov apparently aspires to. Not only this experience but his repeated outings with Anna “seemed to transform”¹³⁵ Gurov.

When Anna returns to St. Petersburg and Gurov to Moscow, the latter tries to forget what should have been a “fleeting liaison” only to find out that he is more seriously attached to her than he previously thought. “A month would pass and Anna Sergeevna... would only appear to him in dreams with a touching smile, as other women did. But more than a month passed, deep winter came, and yet everything was as clear in his memory as if he had parted with Anna Sergeevna the day before.”¹³⁶ Gurov thinks he will forget Anna like all the “other women,” but the interaction with mystery has altered him. This time he cannot “distort” reality; Anna remains

¹³³ Chekhov, *Selected Stories of Anton Chekhov*, p. 366-367

¹³⁴ Cooper, *The Measure of Things*, p. 286

¹³⁵ Chekhov, *Selected Stories of Anton Chekhov*, p. 367

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 369

as “clear” to him as if they had seen each other “the day before.” Gradually Gurov’s hubris vacates his consciousness, leaving him open to the humility he has been lacking. He becomes dissatisfied with life in Moscow despite the narrator proclaiming that he is a “Muscovite”¹³⁷ and heads to see Anna in St. Petersburg, though he admits “he did not know”¹³⁸ why. Gurov is coming closer to a state of emptiness, leaving behind his former convictions and chasing an experience which has brought him closer to “human dignity.” He arrives and goes to the theater in hopes of finding Anna; upon seeing her, “he realized clearly that there was now no person closer, dearer, or more important for him in the whole world; this small woman, lost in the provincial crowd, not remarkable for anything, with a vulgar lorgnette in her hand, now filled his whole life.”¹³⁹ The person who is “more important” than any other to Gurov is someone he has met briefly and barely knows. That he finds Anna “not remarkable for anything” isn’t a remnant of his hubris, but rather a demonstration of his newfound humility in that he can admit this and still feel “his whole life” is indebted to her.

Gurov’s final act of humility is in regard, not to Anna, but to himself. Some time has passed since their meeting in the theater; she has been coming to see him in Moscow for an undetermined amount of time. In a hotel room (their usual meeting spot) Gurov sees himself in the mirror and experiences an instant of remarkable clarity. “His head was beginning to turn gray. And it seemed strange to him that he had aged so much in those last years, had lost so much of his good looks... He felt compassion for this life, still so warm and beautiful, but probably near the point where it would begin to fade and wither, like his own life. Why did she love him so?”¹⁴⁰ Here Gurov finally embraces the two aspects of humility Cooper names,

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 369

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 370

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 372

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 375

“respect for the integrity of things” and “unselfing.” He feels “compassion” for Anna’s life in its actuality, not as one of his various “conquests” but as an individual with agency in the same sense that he is. He would never ask “why” of the other women he has been with; Gurov was assured that they were simply “grateful to him for their own happiness,”¹⁴¹ but in this case he admits that Anna has her own emotion independent of her relationship to him. The question may have to do with the “unselfing” – once and for all Gurov does away with the notion of himself as a womanizer and sees his image for what it is. Perhaps most humbly he acknowledges, within the same sentence as his “compassion” for Anna, his own mortality. Death is the aspect of our lives which cannot possibly be subject to our control, and by confronting it realistically Gurov feels love (and humility) “for the first time in his life.”¹⁴² Chekhov leaves us on Gurov’s continuing challenge to live humbly: “It seemed that, just a little more – and the solution would be found, and then a new, beautiful life would begin; and it was clear to both of them that the end was still far, far off, and that the most complicated and difficult part was just beginning.”¹⁴³ Gurov feels a renewal of his life, recalling Cooper’s assertion that emptiness is the “inexplicable source of possibility in a world.” Gurov is now experiencing this boundless “possibility” despite being near the end of his life, and with a profound sense of hope that “the solution would be found.” The deep mystery of his relationship with Anna has left him completely changed, emptied of his former proud self and imbued with humility.

“The Lady with the Little Dog” bears various substantial parallels to O’Connor’s “Revelation.” Gurov and Mrs. Turpin both begin entrenched in assumptive worldviews, they’re both opened to mystery by the effect of another presence on themselves, and they both emerge from their experiences with a renewed outlook on life. But in comparing the details of each

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 364

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 375

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 376

character's interaction with mystery (to use O'Connor's term, their "revelations") subtle differences begin to emerge. Turpin's final vision transforms physical reality into something completely foreign, whereas in "The Lady with the Little Dog" mystery and spiritual reality remain "below" the surface. The content of these metaphysical realities also differs; in "Revelation" Turpin's vision enacts a frightening and didactic scene which is geared at her particular ethical missteps. Conversely, the narrator in Chekhov's story repeatedly emphasizes the "indifference" of the world, that there "*perhaps* lies hidden the pledge of eternal salvation" – but the jury's still out. Turpin's personality, her empirical reality, and mystery all fuse together in one single event; Gurov remains separated from mystery and though he may sense it, the possibility of "eternal salvation" stays just outside of his sight.

The split between O'Connor and Chekhov's uses of mystery mirrors the divergence of Marcel and Cooper's philosophies. Though they agree on awareness of mystery as a guiding ethical principle by its cultivation of humility, the two disagree on how directly mystery may be accessed. Marcel warns us to "avoid all confusion between the mysterious and the unknowable," that mystery is felt by us at "the co-articulation of the vital and the spiritual."¹⁴⁴ One such "co-articulation" would be Turpin's revelation; mystery becomes knowable in an empirical sense as a vision which manifests the "spiritual." But for Cooper, mystery "should not be assimilated to perceptual experience of some object. Mystery is not an entity accessed by some mystical analogue to visual perception. To experience mystery is to experience the world in certain ways — those gestured at by the rhetoric of emptiness."¹⁴⁵ The preclusion of a "mystical analogue to visual perception" contradicts Marcel's "vital and... spiritual" realities combining in a single object or experience. Cooper thinks of mystery not as "perceptual experience" but rather as an

¹⁴⁴ Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, p. 212 and 210

¹⁴⁵ Cooper, *The Measure of Things*, p. 340

“experience [of] the world” mediated by “emptiness.” Again, Gurov does not actually perceive the mystery described by the narrator, but the physical experience he does have prompts the “unselfing” process. The underlying spiritual reality in Chekhov’s story is outlined to the reader but never directly accessed by the characters. Instead of transcending the physical, Cooper places an importance on our everyday interactions with the world as the means to mystery: “experience of mystery is not of something disjoint from or transcendent of the ordinary, familiar world.”¹⁴⁶ Although mystery in O’Connor is not totally “disjoint” from “ordinary” reality, Ruby Turpin’s revelation is certainly a “transcendent” one in that her spiritual vision transforms the “familiar world” into something irregular. For both Cooper and Chekhov it is crucial to leave this “familiar world” as it is; even if the characters themselves become defamiliarized in experiencing mystery, the world remains the same in their eyes. Mystery takes on a different form in the way that physical and spiritual reality interact. Rather than O’Connor’s combination of the two in the form of sacrament, for Chekhov they remain separate but mutually informative.

There is still a notion of “transcendence” in Chekhov, the surpassing of physical reality, but this remains outside the lived experience of the characters. Such a moment arrives at the ending of “Gusev,” a story written after Chekhov’s journey to a penal colony on Sakhalin island. The plot follows the title character as he returns by sea from internment at a similar facility; it quickly becomes clear that he is sick and dying. Gusev begins the story from the position of humility Gurov strives towards, and his eventual death breaks from the ship’s stifling atmosphere into a beautiful and mysterious moment. The scene prompts a sense of meaningfulness which has been missing from the story; Chekhov implicates Gusev’s suffering and humility in this transcendence but leaves the meaning between the narrator and the reader.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 346

The story generates value from its final scene by first characterizing Gusev's life as agony and inhumanity. The facets of everyday life which typically ground us in reality – temporal routine, free movement, and empirical observation – are either obliterated or seriously constricted. The ship tosses constantly, and when it does, “it is impossible to stand up, or have tea, or take medicine.”¹⁴⁷ All activity ceases; not even sleep is an option. “He is totally exhausted by the tossing and closes his eyes; his head gets thrown back then falls on his chest. He tries several times to lie down, but nothing comes of it: suffocation prevents him.”¹⁴⁸ Gusev is torn between “exhaustion” and the “suffocation” which “prevents” substantive rest. When the ship isn't tossing violently, “it is stifling and hot as a steambath; not only talking, but even listening is difficult.”¹⁴⁹ He can't stand, he can't sleep, he can't *listen*; even this minimal sensory act is invaded by the ship's unbearable atmosphere. Gusev's suffering eclipses his human existence.

The formal aspects of the story reflect the environment's smothering of everyday life. “Gusev” does not begin (as many Chekhov stories do) with a succinct backstory to acquaint us with the character or a somber natural setting. Instead the spare opening sentence reads: “It has grown dark, it will soon be night.”¹⁵⁰ This darkness hangs over the story, a mysterious backdrop which serves to obscure rather than illuminate meaning. It has been said that in a Chekhov narrative, someone is always asking what time it is – not here. The familiar and comforting passage of time is replaced by inconsistency, and the few images which recur eventually subside. The ship's tossing is replaced by a stagnant heat, and the passengers' card game comes to an abrupt end when one of the players lies down on the ground and dies. Time itself is referenced only in passing and comes in the form of days and months instead of hours. At one point Pavel

¹⁴⁷ Chekhov, *Selected Stories of Anton Chekhov*, p. 112

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 113

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 116

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 109

Ivanych, another passenger, says it will be “another month or so”¹⁵¹ before they reach Russia, but a few pages later a soldier tells Gusev it will be about “seven days.”¹⁵² More precise divisions of time seem impossible in such conditions. “Time runs fast. The day passes imperceptibly, darkness comes imperceptibly... The ship is no longer standing still, but going on somewhere.”¹⁵³ Night and day pass “imperceptibly” so there can be no natural rhythm, only the vague notion that “time runs fast.” Even the mundane familiarity of passing minutes or hours is unavailable to Gusev.

Movement is particularly limited aboard the ship. Most of the story takes place on or near Gusev’s cot; he only moves to stand up or sit down. Anything more dramatic than that is left to the ship: “The cot under Gusev slowly goes up and down, as if sighing – it does it once, twice, and a third time... something hits the floor with a clank: a mug must have fallen.”¹⁵⁴ Any sensory details like the “sighing” of the cot or “clank” of the mug are attributed to the ship. Even when Gusev demands to be taken to the ship deck (“it seems to him that if he spends another minute in the sick bay, he will surely suffocate”)¹⁵⁵ the soldiers have to carry him – he can’t even walk for himself. When they emerge topside they find “discharged soldiers and sailors... lying asleep on deck; there are so many of them that it is hard to pick your way.”¹⁵⁶ With both time and physical motion completely out of Gusev’s control, his entire existence is suffocated. The everyday is obscured and any remaining ties to physical reality are severed.

Unsurprisingly, Gusev’s consciousness moves out of his present misery and into a dream space. This is not a “transcendence” of physical reality; it is more so a reaction to the extreme

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 114

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 119

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 116

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 119

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 118

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 118

senselessness of his present circumstances, and his dreams become more like everyday life than his *actual* life on the ship. The story is sprinkled with visions of his family and home – in the first, “he pictures an enormous pond covered with snow... on one side of the pond, a porcelain factory the color of brick, with a tall smokestack and clouds of black smoke... out of a yard, the fifth from the end, drives a sleigh with his brother Alexei in it; behind him sits his boy Vanka in big felt boots and the girl Akulka, also in felt boots.”¹⁵⁷ In contrast to the ship, this imagined space is expansive. There’s a pond with a factory on one side, a village on the other, and all the way from the “fifth” yard comes Alexei in his sled. There’s vertical space as well, marked by the “tall smokestack and clouds of black smoke,” gesturing towards the sky. This dream is a far more familiar picture of human life than the claustrophobic ship; space is clearly demarcated and Chekhov invokes various sensory details like the temperature, “felt boots,” and the “brick” color of the factory. This dream is the complete opposite of his current reality, but in a sense it is even more real by its likeness to everyday life as most know it.

Gusev comes away from his vision feeling humbled. “He is glad to have seen his family. Joy takes his breath away, gives him gooseflesh all over, quivers in his fingers.”¹⁵⁸ The “joy” he derives simply by imagining his family has a tangible effect on him, giving him “gooseflesh” and causing his fingers to “quiver.” The dream space provokes sense and instills in him an optimism which he can use to cope with the senselessness of the ship. Gusev remains humble throughout the story despite the trying circumstances. While describing his work in Eastern Russia as an orderly, he lists the tasks that constitute his days: polishing boots, making tea, cleaning. “The lieutenant draws his plans all day, and you can pray to God if you want, read books if you want,

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 110

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 110

go out if you want. God grant everybody such a life.”¹⁵⁹ What he requires to be happy is really just the baseline of everyday life: mundane acts like reading and prayer, the freedom to “go out if you want.” Gusev’s humble attitude contrasts with Pavel Ivanych, who only speaks of how terrible life is and how intelligent he must be to face it bravely. “You are ignorant, blind, downtrodden people, you don’t see anything, and what you do see you don’t understand,” Pavel says of Gusev and his ilk. “I live consciously, I see everything, like an eagle or a hawk when it flies over the earth, and I understand everything. I am protest incarnate.”¹⁶⁰ Pavel’s claim to “understand everything” recalls Cooper, whose humble man “recognizes proper limits that it is not for him to transgress.” Pavel is a man just like Gusev; he is not “an eagle or a hawk.” His boast of “see[ing] everything,” of living so much more “consciously” than the other passengers on the ship is ironic in that he is doomed to the same fate they are. He says to Gusev and anyone else who will listen that “your doctors put you on a ship to get rid of you... You don’t pay them anything, you’re a bother to them, and you ruin their statistics by dying – which means you’re brutes!”¹⁶¹ But of course Pavel is himself aboard this ship, sailing side by side with these “brutes.” While Gusev acknowledges the perpetual agony of his condition and copes with it through humility, Pavel fails to recognize the facts of his own reality and chooses to fight it bitterly.

Pavel proudly battles life until he dies. He wakes up one morning looking particularly emaciated; the narrator remarks that “his nose seems to have grown sharper” overnight. When Gusev asks about his health, Pavel lies through shortened breaths. “Not at all... on the contrary... I’m better... You see, I can lie down now... It’s eased off.”¹⁶² Unlike Gurov towards

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 112

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 115

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 111

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 116

the end of “The Lady with the Little Dog,” Pavel is afraid to admit the extent of his own sickness and the proximity of death. He passes moments later – the soldier removing his body rightly remarks that “he was a restless man.”¹⁶³ For Pavel, whose life purpose resides in “protest,” the eternal stillness of death is a frightening prospect. Gusev takes the opposite perspective: the soldier asks him if it is “frightening to die” and he replies affirmatively, but with a caveat. “It is. I’m sorry about our farm... Without me it’ll all be lost, and my father and the old woman, for all I know, may have to go begging.”¹⁶⁴ Gusev is not frightened for *himself*, but rather the people in his life for whom he plays a crucial role. His fear of death arises from the unraveling of a greater interpersonal system rather than the loss of his own individual consciousness. One of Cooper’s requirements for humility, to see each thing in the world with “integrity,” is equivalent to seeing it as “an open place or an intersection in a web of relations where the world as a whole ‘gathers’, is ‘con-centrated’. It is what it is – has the integrity it does – precisely as such a place or intersection.”¹⁶⁵ Gusev has the humility to see in death not the passing of his own consciousness, but rather of the “web of relations” which his life constitutes. This orientation readies Gusev for his imminent end, but the full extent of his interconnectedness with “the world as a whole” is not revealed until afterwards.

Gusev dies aboard the ship, and after the passengers slip his body bag into the ocean Chekhov exposes us to the mystery which been dwelling quietly below the story’s surface. The narrator describes the canvas bag swaying past the marine life: “He meets on his way a school of little fish... in less than a minute, swift as arrows, they rush back at Gusev, piercing the water in zigzags around him.” This environment is a drastic change from the stuffy ship, characterized (like the dream space) by free movement instead of constraint. “After that another dark body

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 117

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 119

¹⁶⁵ Cooper, *The Measure of Things*, p. 361

appears. It is a shark. Grandly and casually, as if not noticing Gusev, it swims under him and he comes down on its back, then it turns belly up, basking in the warm, transparent water, and lazily opens its jaws with their twin rows of teeth. The pilot fish are delighted.”¹⁶⁶ The shark is like a subaquatic sunbather “basking in the warm, transparent water,” turning around on its back. Gusev enters this environment seamlessly, so much so that the shark doesn’t notice him; his corpse is not a disturbance to this ecosystem but a fluid part. Just a page earlier the narrator remarks that “the sea has no sense or pity,”¹⁶⁷ but perhaps this is spoken from a limited perspective – there seems to be a great deal of both here.

All of this activity occurs as Gusev floats downwards. Just as one of the iron bars falls out of the bag and smacks the seafloor, shedding the last of Gusev’s physical baggage, Chekhov turns our attention upward to an expansive space so far only dreamt about. “The sky turns a soft lilac. Seeing this magnificent, enchanting sky, the ocean frowns at first, but soon itself takes on such tender, joyful, passionate colors as human tongue can hardly name.”¹⁶⁸ The “frowning” ocean completely refutes the narrator’s description of the sea as senseless; it reacts directly to the “magnificent, enchanting sky” with a sublime display of mystery. The ocean “takes on... such colors as human tongue can hardly name,” a dig at Pavel Ivanych’s claim to total knowledge but also an invocation of ineffability. His own death is meaningless, not only to the reader but also to Pavel, since he already understands “everything.” He lacks humility in that he can’t see the value in a space which reaches beyond what is intelligible to him. The measure of Gusev’s humility – exemplified by the fluid motion of the narratorial perspective, following his body downwards through the ocean and then back up to the sky as the weight is dropped – is that his death has prompted this deeply mysterious and beautiful scene. As I’ve already quoted from Cooper,

¹⁶⁶ Chekhov, *Selected Stories of Anton Chekhov*, p. 121

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 119

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 121

“whatever we can meaningfully express requires an inexpressible, mysterious ‘background’ as the ‘measure’ of what we say and believe.” The air of meaninglessness provoked by Gusev’s extreme and unnecessary suffering throughout the story is rebuked in this moment; the “enchanted sky” is the “mysterious ‘background’” against which meaning may be projected. Gusev is dead and cannot sample these “joyful, passionate colors,” but the absence of human presence may be the very reason they exist. Chekhov is probing the boundaries of Cooper’s thought, who has said that mystery is “what cannot be described.” Indeed, in the world of the story it has not been, since there is no observing consciousness to view the sky. But Chekhov has in fact rendered mystery accessible to the reader through a space which is technically emptied of human presence, but synthesized by the narrator. Mystery and the measure or meaning it provides are out of our grasp – but the reader now knows that they exist somewhere.

Chekhov and O’Connor both unearth a sense of meaning from the world as it now appears, secular and disenchanted. The space of meaning is that of mystery, and the two overlap in their conceptions through an emphasis on humility – but perhaps the difference in style is indicative of a larger philosophical dispute. Humility is imposed by forces outside of the self in both authors, but for O’Connor mystery actually *enters* empirical reality and transfigures it into something divine. This likely has to do with her own religious convictions. “It makes a great difference to the look of a novel,” she writes in *Mystery and Manners*, “whether its author believes that the world came late into being and continues to come by a creative act of God, or whether he believes that the world and ourselves are the product of a cosmic accident.”¹⁶⁹ Indeed it does make a “great difference,” but not only in the “look” of a work – O’Connor’s notion of God’s “creative act” implicates the human subject in that creation, and by it the individual and God are linked in the space of mystery.

¹⁶⁹ O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 156

The worlds Chekhov writes may be closer on O'Connor's spectrum to "a cosmic accident" than "God," but hopefully by now it's clear that he is no philosophical naturalist. Mystery may be "ineffable" and heavily mediated by the natural world but it's still there, dwelling with a quiet potency beneath all of human experience. Chekhov himself possesses an intimate knowledge of the mystery just outside his grasp; an 1890 letter depicts his impression of the Amur river, which he reached as the endpoint of a long and arduous voyage undertaken as his health failed him.¹⁷⁰ "The Amur is a very fine river; it has given me much more than I ever expected. I've been meaning to share my raptures with you for a long time now, but the damn boat vibrated seven days straight and kept me from writing. Besides, I lack the skill to describe anything as beautiful as the banks of the Amur; I am at a loss and concede my impoverishment. How can it be described?"¹⁷¹ Chekhov is "at a loss," humbled in the face of something so supremely "beautiful" – the experience is beyond words. The Amur prompts in him "raptures," perhaps even a sense of "fullness." To retain the humility he feels at the foot of something so much larger than him is certainly challenging (and might be likened to the relationship between believer and God), but it's a challenge worth undertaking. The world and the individual are joined for a fleeting instant, cocooned in the mystery which has brought them there. One ought to replicate this state in themselves.

¹⁷⁰ Anton Chekhov, *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, (New York, Harper & Row Publishers, 1973), p. 159: "My journey may be trifling, hardheaded, capricious, but think a while and tell me what I stand to lose by going. Time? Money? Will I suffer hardships? My time is worth nothing and I never have any money anyway. As for hardships, the horse-drawn part of the trip won't last more than twenty-five or thirty days... Granted, I may get nothing out of it, but there are sure to be two or three days out of the whole trip that I remember all my life with rapture and bitterness."

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 167

Conclusion

In the last three years at Bard I've done my utmost to challenge the presuppositions I carry with me at all times, and this project represents the culmination of that goal. To say that my own world is "secular" would be an understatement; I pulled Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great* off of my dad's bookshelf in fourth grade and, until recently, never thought about looking back. The only other book which has impacted me as viscerally as Hitchens' did at the time is Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace*, which I read for Matt Mutter's "Religion and the Secular in Literary Modernism." Her system of thought was more akin to my own than any other religious thinker I had previously encountered – there's even a chapter titled "Atheism as a Purification." Weil speaks of God's radical absence in the world while still insisting on the truth of His being, at times sounding more like an existentialist than a mystic. I ultimately decided not to include *Gravity and Grace* in this project, perhaps because I am too close to the text to dissect it... but I must credit Weil with expanding the limits of what I thought possible in the world, and with exposing to me the boundaries of my mind.

I've asked myself what the "meaning" of life is more times than I'd care to admit. I know from experiences like Chekhov's upon seeing the banks of the Amur that this question is slightly idiotic – my limited interactions with the world have taught me that I am involved in something much larger than myself which seems to prohibit the possibility of my individual life having a discernible purpose. But as I've tried to show in these (admittedly quite imperfect) seventy-five or so pages is that this "something much larger," whether it be God or mystery, ought to show us that human thought is a profoundly narrow and egoistic vantage point. I vehemently dispute that we can be responsible for our own conduct; we lack the grace necessary for such self-awareness.

I have jokingly described this project to my friends as my best argument for believing in God. I think I had an idea, after reading *Gravity and Grace*, that sometime after I had digested the whole thing I would become faithful. That didn't happen. I can't call myself a believer, it simply wouldn't be honest; but at the very least I can say that I have a respect and admiration for those who do believe, and I'd like to think that my own worldview has become less narrow. I strive to cultivate in myself the same humility which I have identified in the works of O'Connor and Chekhov, prompted by unknowable spaces which I can be aware of if not inhabit. I think that "meaning" lies in the care we take with such spaces.

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