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Our Fanatics: Figurations of Religious Fanaticism  
in Ian McEwan, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Marilynne Robinson

By

Jerilyn Sambrooke

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

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in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge:

Professor Colleen Lye, Co-Chair  
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Professor Wendy Brown  
Professor Namwali Serpell

Fall 2017



## Abstract

Our Fanatics: Figurations of Religious Fanaticism  
in Ian McEwan, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Marilynne Robinson

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University of California, Berkeley

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*Our Fanatics: Figurations of Religious Fanaticism in Ian McEwan, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Marilynne Robinson* examines how three contemporary novelists complicate oft-repeated accounts that oppose religious fanaticism to reasoned argumentation and secular politics. My dissertation features novels that focus intently on the interiority of protagonists who encounter figures of religious fanaticism, portraying religious fanaticism as something to be negotiated rather than defended against. By analyzing twenty-first century novels that variously figure religious fanaticism in oppositional, paradoxical, and genealogical terms, this project examines how religious fanaticism is constitutive of—rather than external to—the worlds of these novels.

The first chapter reaches back to Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* (1998), comparing it to his 9/11 novel, *Saturday* (2005), and, more recently, *The Children Act* (2014). I argue McEwan's novels frame religious fanaticism as a form of irrational certainty that generates epistemological uncertainty for the novels' protagonists. These texts frustrate a simple triumphant narrative whereby secular rationalism prevails over religious fanaticism. More recently, however, McEwan's fiction resolves such tensions with increasing authority, gradually eliminating the experimental dimensions of McEwan's early work. Chapter two features Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), which develops an apparently paradoxical religious fanatic—politically admirable but privately violent. I investigate this paradox by analyzing the novel's cyclical plot, which echoes the Catholic liturgical calendar and which distinguishes it from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), a comparison that has dominated Adichie's critical reception. The third chapter reads Marilynne Robinson's Gilead trilogy—*Gilead* (2004), *Home* (2008), and *Lila* (2014)—as an extended meditation on the lingering effects of religious fanaticism across the generations of a small mid-Western town. The trilogy's genealogical figuration of religious fanaticism ties abolitionism to civil rights activism, delivering a resounding critique of “mainline” Protestant disavowals of such fanaticism.

The religious fanatics that appear across this dissertation cannot be described in any easy sense as “ours.” My title draws attention to the smaller, subtler way that these novels approach religious fanaticism through intimate relationships and private spaces, positioning religious

fanaticism as internal to communities, to families, and, particularly in Adichie and Robinson, to Christian traditions.

## **Dedication**

In the shadow of this dissertation  
lies a tale of sorrow and loss.

I wrote you and rewrote you, Mom,  
on each page, every day.

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## Acknowledgments

The journey of writing a dissertation is, in many ways, a search for one's audience. Working at the intersection of several disciplines, I soon learned the difficulty of this task. After arriving at Berkeley, I found my intellectual home at Berkeley in the seminars of Saba Mahmood and Wendy Brown. The community of graduate students they have cultivated is a remarkable gift, and one that I will cherish through many seasons of my life. The struggle, however, to tie together my intellectual curiosities in political theory and secular studies with my profound respect for literary texts has been real. I am thankful for my dissertation co-chairs, Colleen Lye and Ramona Naddaff, who have patiently but insistently called me back to my commitments to literary texts and inquiries. Conversations with Namwali Serpell and Daniel Boyarin have similarly helped me braid together these various strands of my intellectual life.

Beyond Berkeley, I have been delighted to find a warm audience for my work at the annual national conventions of the American Comparative Literature Association. Amy Hollywood and Kris Trujillo have made these meetings particularly welcoming and generative over the years, and I am thankful for our conversations that have strengthened both me and my work.

"Write for your friends," Michael Allan once advised me, citing his own advisor. Perhaps more than I fully realize, I have written this dissertation in conversation with Mike. His gentle insistence that literature refers both to the text and the manner in which it is read opens out onto questions I have found intriguing and important. Through his scholarship and his friendship, he has encouraged a sensitivity to reading otherwise, and I am deeply grateful.

As I have written for my friends, they have kindly read and commented on my work. Megan Macdonald, Marilyn McEntyre, and Janneke Van Hofwegen read drafts of the project and, over the years, have sipped countless cups of coffee as I untangled the messes in my mind. Women of such brilliance, generosity, and creativity are a true delight.

One's audience, I have learned, is not always where one expects it to be. Isabel, you and "Auntie" learned to write together. On my visits, you would sit on the floor next to the desk, singing as you typed, blissfully ignoring the inconvenient fact that words have letters and spaces. You would crawl into my bed, commandeering my computer to write your "sight words." You reminded me of the joy that words can bring, and in some profound way, you were always my true audience.

Of course the person who sets out on a journey of this magnitude is not the same person who returns. I am not who I once was. In the same way, if my mother, Lorraine, sent me off, it is my husband, Matt, who welcomes me home. It is these almost invisible acts of love that make the journey possible at all.



## Introduction

“How to Roll Back Fanaticism,” a recent opinion piece in *The New York Times*, offers a bold diagnosis of what David Brooks describes as the contemporary “age of fanaticism” (2017, n.p.). Fanaticism, he argues, gives people a “quick pass out of anxiety,” offering an easy source of clarity, certainty, and meaning. While the article was published specifically as a commentary on the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville (August 11-12, 2017), Brooks frames this outburst as symptomatic of a growing acceptance of irrational and lazy habits of thought. He links fanaticism to a “breakdown of intellectual virtue”—a “breakdown in America’s ability to face evidence objectively, to pay due respect to reality, to deal with complex and unpleasant truths.” To “roll back” fanaticism, we must resist the temptation to “blast” these fanatics and confront the disintegration of these “virtues.” Brooks advocates intellectual “modesty and moderation”—“an epistemology” that has the courage to understand the world is “too complicated to fit into one political belief system.” Now is a good time, he concludes, “for assertive modesty to take a stand.”

By describing the problem of fanaticism in terms of failing “intellectual virtue” and advancing a solution in terms of “modesty,” Brooks echoes a longstanding perspective on fanaticism and religious fanaticism that privileges literature and literary reading. Nothing cultivates intellectual modesty, so the story goes, quite like the experience of reading a novel. “In a small way, in a cautious way,” Amos Oz writes in *How to Cure a Fanatic* (2006), “I do believe that imagination may serve as a partial and limited immunity to fanaticism” (62). The paradigmatic act of imagining “each other” (66) for Oz is writing a novel (67). This presumption that literary writing and reading—and the novel in particular—has the peculiar power to inoculate people against religious fanaticism also has a vocal and influential proponent in Salman Rushdie.<sup>1</sup> His influence on questions of literature and religious fanaticism has been significant, the Rushdie affair regaining visibility in the wake of 9/11. In Ian McEwan’s words, the Rushdie affair is the “opening chapter in a new unhappy book of modern history” (2012, n.p.).<sup>2</sup>

In the chapters that follow I make no effort to enlist the novel in an effort to “roll back” or “cure” fanaticism. I set aside the narrative that novels—producing them and reading them—cultivate the kind of intellectual modesty that guards against religious fanaticism. Instead, I

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<sup>1</sup> In 1990, Rushdie delivered a lecture, “Is Nothing Sacred?”, addressing the fatwa issued in response to *The Satanic Verses* (1988). The speech offers an extended analogy to describe how this experience of reading forestalls madness and is essential to collective life. “Literature,” he explains, “is the one place in any society where, within the secrecy of our own heads, we can hear *voices talking about everything in every possible way*” (Rushdie 1990, n.p., emphasis original). Rushdie’s most recent novel reinvigorates such claims. *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* (2015) (i.e. a thousand and one nights) draws on the figure of Scheherazade who literally tells stories to save her life: “Stories told against death, to civilize a barbarian” (Rushdie 2015, 11). The fictional landscape makes explicit reference to Rushdie’s experience of the fatwa and the importance of literature to life itself: “Rushd’s” (the character’s unsubtle name) liberal ideas were “unacceptable to the increasingly powerful Berber fanatics who were spreading like a pestilence across Arab Spain” (5).

<sup>2</sup> Commentary on the Rushdie affair resurfaced again in response to Rushdie’s memoir recalling this experience, *Joseph Anton* (2012).

consider how contemporary novelistic representations of religious fanaticism complicate simplistic (but oft-repeated) accounts that oppose religious fanaticism to reasoned argumentation and to secular politics. I work with a more capacious definition of religious fanaticism as “inappropriate religion,” presenting thick descriptions of what constitutes this “inappropriateness” in the work of these contemporary novelists. How do these authors variously frame and develop the practices, beliefs, attitudes, and sensibilities that constitute “inappropriate religion” in their work? In each case study, these attitudes and sensibilities emerge through encounters, conflicts, and relationships with figures of religious fanaticism. These novels present religious fanaticism as something to be negotiated rather than “cured” or “rolled back,” and while the terms of these negotiations shift across the case studies, each chapter analyzes how these negotiations unfold within these novels. What kinds of injuries do the novels’ protagonists experience (or think they experience) through their encounters with fanaticism? How do they describe and address such injuries? What are the effects (intended or otherwise) of these negotiations—both for the characters and for the novels? These narratives usher us deep into the worlds of the protagonists—into their minds, their homes, their communities, their histories.

This dissertation features three novelists who approach religious fanaticism in relational terms. Their work not only demonstrates the complex and varied figurations of religious fanaticism in contemporary fiction, but by situating these figures within families, homes, and intimate relations, their writing explores how fanatical figures actively shape the worlds of the protagonists in myriad ways. By developing figures of religious fanaticism in these terms, these novelists present figures who elicit admiration but also fear and who generate anxiety alongside attraction. These are not figures simply to be “guarded against”; they are not so easily dismissed from the worlds of these novels and the minds of these protagonists. These novels closely consider what it means to characterize someone’s religion as “inappropriate”—particularly when this person is your neighbor, father, grandfather, husband.

### **Coupling Religion and Fanaticism**

This dissertation—the texts it features, the reading practices it demonstrates, the arguments it advances—has been written against a backdrop of competing conceptions of fanaticism and religious fanaticism in particular. For some, the adjective “religious” implies the religious fanatic might be studied in the same manner as a sports fanatic, a fitness fanatic, or even an opera fanatic.<sup>3</sup> In this framework, one might align “secular fanatics” with “religious fanatics” (but not investigate the grounds of the distinction). Fanaticism appears here as a form of obsession, and the object of one’s obsession (whether sports, music, or religion) is less important than the state of being obsessed. Others approach fanaticism by seeking to identify its essence, which, as Amos Oz asserts, “lies in the desire to force other people to change” (Oz 2006, 57).<sup>4</sup> The fanatic insists on change regardless of the process whereby it is secured. The fanatic, here, is impervious to persuasion and “outside the domain of negotiation” (Toscano 2010, xi). Understood in this way, religious fanaticism is often taken to be the paradigmatic case of fanaticism: negotiation and persuasion seem particularly ineffective in the face of religious

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Claudio E. Bezencry, *The Opera Fanatic: Ethnography of an Obsession* (2011).

<sup>4</sup> Alberto Toscano insightfully analyzes this ahistorical tendency in the discourse of fanaticism (2010).

beliefs, experiences, and structures of authority. Fanaticism is seen as an inherent tendency in religion, one to which Islam is thought to be particularly prone.

The conflation of religious fanaticism with Islamic fundamentalism or Islamic terrorism has become increasingly commonplace post-9/11 and constitutes a significant component of the backdrop of this dissertation.<sup>5</sup> The “forces of fanaticism” re-emerging in the Muslim world have been portrayed as one of the greatest threats to the “modern liberal West” (Harris 2007, xxi). Recently, scholars have presented their studies of fanaticism as explicit critiques of this anti-Islamic rhetoric that conflates fanaticism with Islamic fundamentalism. For example, William Cavanaugh, building on Dominique Colas’s *Civil Society and Fanaticism: Conjoined Histories* (1997), offers an historical rebuttal. He traces how “fanaticism” migrates from an “accusation against heretics [Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon] to an accusation against intolerance [Locke],” and from an “indictment of false prophecy and belief [Melanchthon] to an indictment of an irrational and violent passion [Immanuel Kant]” (Cavanaugh 2011, 234). In the course of these migrations, he concludes, “fanaticism” becomes increasingly associated with “religion,” such that, “as it is today, adding the qualifier ‘religious’ to ‘fanaticism’ became almost unnecessary” (234). He concludes by confronting the presumption that “Muslim societies” are “peculiarly prone to fanaticism” because they are insufficiently secular—meaning they have “not yet learned to separate religion, which is inherently volatile, from politics” (235).<sup>6</sup> Cavanaugh’s historical narrative analyzes how fanaticism describes different kinds of problems that emerge within Christianity, foregrounding how the coupling of fanaticism and Christianity shifts over time. What work, he asks, does the discourse of fanaticism *do*, in each instance? With the jump to the contemporary moment, however, Cavanaugh suggests the work of this discourse changes: it no longer signals struggles within Christianity but, now, within secularism. He suggests the discourse of religious fanaticism has become symptomatic of underlying assumptions about who is (and can be) appropriately secular, which is to say, religious in the right way. While Cavanaugh insightfully notes this shift in the concluding section of his article, he stops short of theorizing it or analyzing it more thoroughly.

Alberto Toscano’s *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (2010), like Cavanaugh’s work, recuperates a more sophisticated account of fanaticism in order to disrupt the tendency to conflate religious fanaticism with Islam. Focusing more explicitly on Enlightenment uses of fanaticism, Toscano returns to figures like Voltaire, Kant, and Hegel to push back against contemporary calls to revitalize Enlightenment values in the face of “religious fanaticism” (98-101).<sup>7</sup> He argues that the rigid opposition between reason and fanaticism so often asserted in

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<sup>5</sup> Lee Harris, for example, in *The Suicide of Reason: Radical Islam’s Threat to the Enlightenment* (2007), argues “the West,” to its own peril, has denied the “reemergence of fanaticism in the Muslim world” (62). The “profound underestimation of the forces of fanaticism” constitutes one of the greatest threats to the “survival of the modern liberal West” (xxi). In a similar vein, see Sam Harris’s chapter “The Problem with Islam” in *The End of Faith* (2004).

<sup>6</sup> Gary Gutting’s opinion piece in *The New York Times*, “How Religion Can Lead to Violence” (August 1, 2016), offers a particularly bald statement of this line of thinking. Islam, he argues, “has not yet tamed, to the extent that Christianity has, the danger implicit in any religion that claims to be God’s own truth” (Gutting 2016).

<sup>7</sup> He writes against work like Stephen Eric Bronner’s *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Towards a Politics of Radical Engagement* (2004), for example, which boldly claims that “critical theorists concur that the need remains for an unrelenting assault on religious fanaticism” (14).

today's polemics was contested during the Enlightenment, and that these debates have been forgotten, to the detriment of contemporary political discourse. He recalls them to recover a tension internal to the concept of reason. Toscano traces two opposing philosophical approaches to fanaticism, exemplified by Voltaire and Kant, arguing the former treats "philosophy as the nemesis of fanaticism" but the latter views "fanaticism as a potentiality inherent to reason" (xviii). By attending more carefully to this latter approach, Toscano draws out the threads that tie fanaticism to universalizing, emancipatory politics.<sup>8</sup> Using the rhetoric of fanaticism to investigate the instability of reason, Toscano challenges the shrill cries to defend Enlightenment values against the perceived encroachment of religious fanaticism. While Toscano does a great deal to complicate simplistic accounts of fanaticism, particularly as it is opposed to reason, he shies away from theorizing more precisely how his work intervenes in the reactionary discourse of specifically *religious* fanaticism. Toscano positions his work as a critique of those who shore up the Enlightenment to defend contemporary secularism, but he has very little to say about how fanaticism is tied to religion in our current moment. Writing in the wake of scholars like Colas, Cavanaugh, and Toscano, I begin with an awareness that neither fanaticism nor its coupling with religion can be approached as problems of definition. They are not terms to be defined but, rather, discourses to be understood, and so rather than asking what they are, I ask what work they are doing.

### **Secularism and its Shadows**

The contemporary discourse of religious fanaticism, I have been suggesting, entails a particular worry about the frailty of secularism—a worry that generates calls to defend it in the face of religious fanaticism. The historian Joan Wallach Scott notes this worry as well, and, in response, she emphasizes that secularism is a "political discourse, not a transcendent set of principles" (9). She argues the discourse of secularism has shifted from signaling a "progressive alternative to religion" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to, in our current context, "a practice threatened by the return of religion, specifically Islam" (Scott 2017, 9). This project shares Scott's discursive understanding of secularism, which she draws from Talal Asad. Rather than asking whether secularism really *is* as frail as some worry it is, I am more curious about how the discourse of religious fanaticism works to further an understanding of secularism as a practice that could be threatened. Or, to turn the question around, how might we think about religious fanaticism in ways that do not oppose it to this particular conception of secularism?

Concretely, this project builds on a line of inquiry Asad sets out in *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (2003). For Asad, the study of secularism presents particular challenges: how does one study that which is so much a part of our modern life? How might we begin to question the "self-evident character" of what he calls "the secular" (2003, 16)? Precisely because of these difficulties, he suggests that the study of secularism be pursued through "its shadows" (ibid). The metaphor is an insightful one: a shadow bears an imperfect and unstable relation to the object that casts it. A shadow shifts, moves, and alters, sometimes suddenly and other times imperceptibly. To pursue secularism through its shadows is to acknowledge, at the outset, the indirect way the objects of observation relate to the critical

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<sup>8</sup> Toscano advances this argument by building on Hegel's claim (made in *Philosophy of History*) that fanaticism is "enthusiasm for the abstract" (Toscano 2010, xi). Fanaticism, Toscano suggests, "comes to inhabit as a possibility any politics of conviction wedded to 'abstractions' such as equality and emancipation" (xxv).

endeavor of understanding how secularism, in its current form, has come to be. To pursue such an inquiry, Asad investigates “attitudes to the human body,” including things like “pain, physical damage, decay, death, physical integrity, bodily growth, and sexual enjoyment”: “[w]hat structures of the senses—hearing, seeing, touching—do these attitudes depend on?” (17). “How,” he asks, “do all these sensibilities, attitudes, assumptions, and behaviors come together to support or undermine the doctrine of secularism?” (ibid). Asad makes an important distinction here between the “doctrine of secularism” and the “sensibilities, assumptions, and behaviors” that undergird it (i.e. the secular). He insists that the political arrangements we have come to recognize as secularism—such as the neutrality of the state toward matters of religion and attendant concepts of religious tolerance and religious freedom—only become possible and appear reasonable once we come to see religion along particular lines.

Since Asad posed his question, scholars in the burgeoning field of secular studies have repeatedly returned to the distinction it names.<sup>9</sup> Approaching these questions from a different angle, Charles Taylor’s influential *A Secular Age* (2007) focuses on secularity rather than secularism in an effort to identify a shift in “conditions of belief”: how is it, Taylor asks, that at one time it was virtually impossible not to believe and yet now faith appears as “one human possibility among others” (Taylor 2007, 3)? At stake here is a “whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual, or religious experience and search takes place” (ibid). Taylor resists a narrow focus on the marginalization of religion by modernity, and instead advances a more expansive thesis, “explaining how the conditions of secularity come to shape both contemporary belief and ‘unbelief’ alike” (Warner et al. 2010, 5). Taylor’s notion of secularity and Asad’s concept of the secular, while different in important ways, both make an analytical distinction between secularism as a political arrangement and its conditions of possibility.

Once we accept this distinction, it is no longer meaningful to contrast the “religious” and the “secular,” as in “religious fanaticism” and “secular fanaticism,” positioning them as parallel options. Instead, the critical questions animating this dissertation proliferate along the lines suggested by Taylor and Asad. What, we might begin by asking, are the conditions of possibility of making such a distinction? What marks some forms of fanaticism as specifically religious? More precisely, what kinds of practices, sensibilities, and attitudes come to be construed as inappropriate to religious life and practice in a “secular age”? This latter question comes much closer to the concerns of this dissertation. The critical focus turns to what constitutes religion and how people engage in those activities. “Secularism,” as John Lardas Modern puts it, “is about the conditions and processes that generate religion. These conditions are not immediately present to consciousness and these processes structure more than matters of religious adherence. The ‘location’ of these conditions—perhaps even their ontology and mechanics—is a matter of contention (informed as it is by disciplinary location)” (Modern 2012, n.p.). Asad describes these “conditions” as “self-evident” and Modern discusses how they form an environment in which certain understandings of religion appear as “common sense.” The challenge for contemporary

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<sup>9</sup> While the distinction between secularism and the secular or secularity is not always sharp, it has become important in the burgeoning field of secular studies. See the final chapter in Saba Mahmood’s *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (2015). See also the 2012 exchange on *The Imminent Frame* blog between Michael Warner and John Lardas Modern, following the publication of Modern’s *Secularism in Antebellum America* (2011).

scholars of secularism is, as Modern suggests, to devise methods by which these “conditions” become visible and locatable.

While Asad poses his questions with an eye to the contributions anthropology can make to the study of secularism, I return to them to reflect on the contributions literary analysis might make. The following chapters analyze novels that develop sophisticated accounts of how minds and bodies perceive, sense, judge, and discern, and I demonstrate how these accounts develop through figurations of religious fanaticism. Where McEwan’s novels sharpen their focus on the minds of his protagonists through their encounters with religious fanaticism, Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* crafts a portrait of its protagonist by dwelling on her specifically embodied responses to her father’s fanaticism. Robinson’s trilogy reflects on a form of religious fanaticism that reverberates and echoes through a social world, offering detailed accounts of how characters wrestle with family histories intertwined with religious fanaticism. In each case, insights into the sensibilities and attitudes of the protagonist are generated by situating the figure of religious fanaticism at a distance (variously configured as a social, physical, temporal, or generational distance) from the protagonist. These novels focus on the effects this figure has on these protagonists—affecting how they think, move, see, read, and feel. As I emphasize how these novelists foreground the relational dynamics between these characters, this dissertation renders inadequate any simple opposition between religious fanaticism and secularism. What emerges instead are intricate descriptions of the “sensibilities, attitudes, assumptions, and behaviors,” recalling Asad, that constitute religious fanaticism and, at the same time, that emerge in response to it.

### **Secularism and the Novel**

By approaching the study of secularism in this way, this dissertation diverges from longstanding approaches to the novel, and particularly the twentieth-century novel, as a distinctly secular genre. Pericles Lewis, reflecting on this history, astutely describes the modernist novel as “doubly secular” (2010, 23).<sup>10</sup> The rise of the novel is often narrated in relation to the fall of religious forms like the saint’s life, the epic or the spiritual autobiography. Traces of this story feature in the works of Walter Benjamin, Erich Auerbach, Mikhail Bakhtin, Ian Watt, and Georg Lukács. Watt, for example, declares Daniel Defoe, author of *Robinson Crusoe*, to be “our first novelist” (1957, 80), as opposed to John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, precisely because of “the relative impotence of religion in Defoe’s novels...[which suggest] not insincerity but the profound secularisation of his outlook” (82).<sup>11</sup> Lukács, similarly, describes the novel as “the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God” (1971, 88). This characterization of the novel as a uniquely secular genre continues to influence studies of the European novel from Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* (1981) to Franco Moretti’s *Modern Epic* (1994).

Literary critics who engage questions of secularism and secularization have often reinforced such histories of the genre, debating how literature might more precisely be described as secular (or not). Vincent Pecora (2006) and John McClure (2007), for example, argue the process of secularization—both its historical reality and the novel’s attachment to it—has been

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<sup>10</sup> “If the novel,” Lewis argues, “is indeed the characteristic art form of secularization, in Lukács’s words, ‘the representative art-form of our age,’ and if modernity is indeed a secular age, we might expect the modernist novel to be doubly secular” (2010, 23).

<sup>11</sup> On this point see also Amardeep Singh’s *Literary Secularism* (2006, 4-6).

non-linear or incomplete.<sup>12</sup> Pericles Lewis's *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (2010) claims to intervene in these debates, arguing that secularization "is a misleading term for what happened to art's relation to the sacred in the twentieth century" (24). Lewis contends that the modernists were not the "devout secularists that most critics portray; rather, they sought, through formal experiment, to offer new accounts of the sacred for an age of continued religious crisis" (24). Lewis persists in asking how and to what extent the "sacred" can be said to "persist" in modernist fiction—the very argument that critics of the secularization thesis like Taylor contest.<sup>13</sup>

It is a central claim of this dissertation that to restrict literary criticism in this way—asking whether or to what extent a given author, text, or genre is secular—severely limits the contributions literary scholarship might make to investigations and theorizations of secularism. Many of the authors and novels featured in the following chapters are frequently read in precisely these limited terms—for example, through their individual religious commitments. Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and *Home* have been read as examples of "religious fiction" (Hungerford 2010, 130), and critics continue to debate how to read McEwan's atheism in his fiction (Banville 2005; Dancer 2012; Neuman 2014), a point to which I return in chapter one. My work focuses instead on how a text operates, often bringing into question the assertions an author claims to be advancing.<sup>14</sup>

The chapters that follow pursue a reading practice that approaches religion and religious fanaticism as a "critical problem" in literature rather than a "stable topic" (Stein and Murison 2010, 1).<sup>15</sup> I am not interested in asking whether a text, character, or author is religious or

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<sup>12</sup> Pecora, in *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity* (2006), argues that secularization is "something bound to take a more circuitous, partial, and uneven path, one filled with digression that periodically calls its basic (Weberian) premises into question" (22). McClure analyzes a canon of contemporary American writers in *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (2007) and highlights how these texts construct plots in which "secular-minded characters [turn] back towards the religious" (3). He emphasizes, however, that this is not a reappearance of the conversion narrative where one coherent religious tradition triumphs over another (4). He takes care to show how both this return and religion itself are only ever partial, incomplete, and plural.

<sup>13</sup> This language of translation or persistence—in which the religious valence is shed and left behind and the essence of a concept or experience remains unchanged—is the hallmark of secularization narratives. While "faith" and "religion" are left behind, the "sacred" persists. While Lewis claims to be building on Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007), I would argue that Taylor critiques precisely the logic that Lewis here rehearses.

<sup>14</sup> This discussion goes some way to explaining why I would not describe my practice of reading as "post-secular," which suggests that a renewed focus on religion in literature is symptomatic of a change in (or even crisis of) secularism. Michael Warner phrases it well: "The currently fashionable talk of the 'post-secular' ...rests on a conflation of secularity with a specific program of political secularism; the latter may be in crisis, but there is no way of telling how deep that crisis is without understanding how political secularism is only one manifestation of secularity" (Warner 2012, n.p.).

<sup>15</sup> In this, I am drawing on work by literary scholars of other periods who share this critical goal. See the special issue, cited here, of *Early American Literature*, "Methods for the Study of Religion in Early American Literature," edited and introduced by Jordan Alexander Stein and

secular, as if such a classification would more accurately account for how these texts work. By reading the works of McEwan, Adichie, and Robinson—authors with divergent religious commitments—alongside one another, I do not ask what constitutes religious fanaticism in and across these novels (as if I were in search of a definition) but, rather, what does a given figuration of religious fanaticism do within a particular text and among a set of texts (an author’s oeuvre, a literary tradition, a trilogy)? What kinds of conflicts does it incite? What sorts of dynamics does it engender? As each chapter answers these questions slightly differently, each also examines how religious fanaticism, in these novels, persistently provokes conflicts on the terrain of reading. The question of *how* one reads recurs in each chapter, and in each chapter I examine not only how figures of religious fanaticism are marked by their reading practices but also how they elicit peculiar—and often innovative—reading practices in those whom they encounter.

### Reading Religious Fanaticism

It is not only the case that figures of fanaticism read voraciously in these novels—counter to the tendency that ties religious fanaticism to an inability to read. These novels also situate struggles with figures of religious fanaticism on the terrain of reading.<sup>16</sup> In these novels, practices of reading have histories, and they carry political consequences. Characters are trained or want to be trained to read. They disagree about how a person should read. People are reprimanded, punished, and excluded for reading. Insofar as these novels figure religious fanaticism in relation to reading, they do so with careful attention to the sensibilities that make certain kinds of reading possible.

McEwan’s fiction is populated with characters who insist they know how to read. The protagonist of *Enduring Love* (1998) predicts the violence of the religious fanatic by carefully reading his letters—a literary practice of close reading the police explicitly reject, to the peril of the protagonist and his partner (a Keats scholar). The climax of *Saturday* (2005) turns on the successful recitation of poetry—generating the appropriate change of heart in the novel’s antagonist. *The Children Act* (2014) explains a young man’s suicide (which some characters

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Justine S. Murison. For a collection that moves across different time periods and languages but is conceptually connected, see “Reading Secularism: Religion, Literature, Aesthetics,” in *Comparative Literature*, edited by Michael Allan.

<sup>16</sup> The tendency to tie religious fanaticism to an inability to read is central to the Rushdie affair. Rushdie’s lawyer, Geoffrey Robertson, insists the instances of blasphemy alleged to be in *The Satanic Verses* are based “either on a misreading or on theological error” (Robertson 2012, n.p.). In a different context, the first chapter of Michael Allan’s *In the Shadow of World Literature: Sites of Reading in Colonial Egypt* (2016) analyzes how Egyptian students protesting a Syrian novel (published in 2000) deemed blasphemous were similarly cast as not knowing how to read. His book traces, more broadly, the emergence of “world literature” in nineteenth century Egypt by focusing on the “putative opposition between a practice of reading based on memorization, embodiment and recitation in Qu’ranic schools and another practice based on reflection, critique, and judgment, increasingly integral to what gets defined as literacy in the modern Egyptian state” (3). Allan focuses on how literature is tied to a particular understanding of what constitutes literacy. “Not only does literature come to demarcate new modes of being recognizably civilized,” Allan argues, “but it does so against those deemed products of religious zealotry and hidebound fanaticism” (7).



“mistakenly” read as a martyrdom) by recounting the protagonist’s reading of his poem. In each case, though, the novel puts pressure on these critical moments of reading. Even as Ian McEwan’s novels narrate attempts to constrain fanaticism through reading, they formally rehearse the impossibility of doing so.

Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) also features an exemplary reader—in the figure of the religious fanatic. Eugene (the narrator’s father) is a staunch defender of the free press and insists on the political value of reading. When it comes to reading religiously, though, his principled reading causes problems: he throws the words of the liturgy at his children and violently punishes his family for not reading them correctly. The novel follows young Kambili as she learns to read differently. She observes her grandfather’s praying body, and she reads Catholic liturgies in new, literal ways. The novel ends with an image of her carrying letters in her dress, allowing the text to “dwell on her,” thus distancing herself from her father’s violent throwing of texts.

In Robinson’s Gilead trilogy, the religious fanatic is marked at the outset by the contentious way he reads a vision he had as a young man. His son and his grandson—Ames, the narrator of *Gilead* (2004)—reject and reframe the old man’s memory of his experience. The trilogy, however, persistently returns to visions, linking them to reading. *Lila* (2014) closely follows the barely literate protagonist as she reads the prophet Ezekiel’s visions, hearkening back to the grandfather’s visions. Lila, like Kambili, develops an embodied practice of reading, and the novel traces how her literal readings counter Ames’s constraining theologies, products of his seemingly more sophisticated modes of reading.

In these novels, figures of religious fanaticism read in many ways and to various ends. Some are expert readers while others yearn to read. Those who encounter these fanatics similarly exhibit a wide array of reading practices and are motivated by diverse goals: they read to defend against and critique figures of religious fanaticism but also to reconcile with and return to them. These novels confound any simple narrative about how reading fends off or inoculates against religious fanaticism. Instead, these novels construct worlds in which reading is a contested practice, and they create portraits of people who wrestle with themselves and others as they read and learn to read in new ways.

### **Figurations of Religious Fanaticism**

I highlight this particular thread that is woven through the following chapters because it emerges out of the project’s larger inquiry which examines figurations of religious fanaticism in contemporary fiction. This dissertation features three contemporary novelists—Ian McEwan, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Marilynne Robinson—whose work configures religious fanaticism in contrasting ways. McEwan’s novels return us to Brooks’ call for intellectual modesty and moderation, exploring more explicitly the grounds on which religious fanaticism is opposed to secular reason. While I demonstrate how such an oppositional account of fanaticism does not hold in McEwan’s novels, it consistently provides the initial framework within which his novels present their conflicts. The second and third chapters feature Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Marilynne Robinson, respectively, whose work opens up alternative accounts of fanaticism that move increasingly further away from the oppositional one so central to McEwan’s fiction. Adichie develops a paradoxical figuration of religious fanaticism, locating the tension between rational political action and religious fanaticism within a single character. Robinson, in her Gilead trilogy, moves still further from such oppositional figurations and

presents religious fanaticism in genealogical terms as internal to the history of a family and a small, mid-Western town.

By featuring three novelists who each present religious fanaticism within a distinctive framework, this dissertation aims to expand what we imagine religious fanaticism to be and to do. These novelists share a curiosity about how people respond to religious fanaticism, experimenting with how characters make sense of it and fashion themselves in relation to it. Finally, by selecting contemporary novelists who imagine religious fanaticism within Christian contexts, this project frustrates tendencies to conflate religious fanaticism with Islam. This dissertation steps aside from, on the one hand, the legacy of the Rushdie affair in which religious fanaticism stems from problems of Muslim immigration and assimilation, and, on the other hand, post-9/11 literary debates that see religious fanaticism as akin to forms of radicalization that spawn terrorism. The novelists featured here situate religious fanaticism as internal to and constitutive of the worlds of their protagonists.

### Chapter Outlines

The dissertation begins by analyzing the work of Ian McEwan, a particularly vocal supporter of “New Atheism” and sharp critic of religious belief. Over his lengthy career, McEwan has repeatedly introduced figures of religious fanaticism in his novels, consistently figuring them as intrusions into the secular, rational (and often scientific) world of his protagonists. How, I ask, do *Enduring Love* (1998), *Saturday* (2005), and *The Children Act* (2014) frustrate a triumphant narrative whereby secular rationalism prevails over religious fanaticism—a narrative that McEwan himself frequently espouses? While these novels all frame religious fanaticism as a form of irrational and inappropriate certainty that generates epistemological problems for the novels’ protagonists, the novels present and resolve such problems with increasing authority, gradually eliminating the experimental dimensions of McEwan’s early work.

Critics tend to describe the figure of the religious fanatic in *Enduring Love* as a foil for the novel’s protagonist, but I emphasize how the novel builds a dynamic relation between Jed and Joe. As Jed’s advances appear increasingly aggressive, Joe becomes increasingly confident he can predict and thwart the threat Jed poses. As the tension mounts, Joe’s calculative response becomes progressively suspect, and I demonstrate how Jed’s religious fanaticism gradually elicits Joe’s paranoia, thus destabilizing the narrative voice of the novel. The figure of the religious fanatic, in this early work, generates a conflict that Joe presumes to win (Jed is finally imprisoned) but that the novel, I argue, reveals to be irresolvable. *Saturday*, known as McEwan’s 9/11 novel, intensifies this focus on the mind of its protagonist, Henry Perowne. Early in the novel, religious fanaticism is revealed to be an effect of Henry’s imagination: there are no “fanatics” in the burning plane that Henry sees early one morning—the fire was caused by a “simple, secular mechanical failure” (McEwan 2005, 17)—and yet Henry struggles to concede this point. The novel recounts how fears of religious fanaticism haunt him, coloring his perceptions and actions throughout the day. *Saturday*, echoing *Enduring Love*, employs religious fanaticism (albeit differently configured) to provoke a sustained inquiry into the workings of the protagonist’s mind, but it does not generate the instability that marks the earlier novel. *Saturday* examines the cognitive effects of Henry having imaginatively constructed these figures of religious fanaticism. The novel falls short, however, of suggesting that such lingering effects render him unreliable.

*The Children Act*, I suggest, departs from McEwan's earlier work along several lines: it figures religious fanaticism in collective rather than individual terms and its narrative arc traces the transformation rather than the containment of the fanatical figure. The protagonist, Judge Fiona Maye, experiences religious fanaticism as intrusive, but the novel recounts how her interactions with this figure transform Adam from a young martyr to a suicidal teenager. If the opening scene describes Adam's death as horrific, the final scene renders it merely unfortunate. The novel achieves this transformation, I argue, by appealing to Fiona's aesthetic sensibilities rather than to her rational capacities. As Adam says, she has drawn him to "something really beautiful and deep" that he cannot name or describe (145). The novel presents this "something" through their musical and literary encounters, but the narrator more explicitly explains how Adam comes to her "wanting what everyone wanted and what only free-thinking people, not the supernatural, could give. Meaning" (220). The meaning Fiona offers, both in her court rulings and in her encounters with Adam, is not grounded in principled arguments but in aesthetic capacities. *The Children Act* forecloses inquiry into the peculiar instabilities that figures of religious fanaticism elicit in *Enduring Love* and, to a lesser extent, *Saturday*. The chapter thus traces an arc across McEwan's fiction, demonstrating how religious fanaticism is increasingly called on to stabilize rather than inquire into the focalizing consciousness of the novel.

The second and third chapters focus on authors who situate religious fanaticism within domestic spaces and investigate it through familial relations. Where McEwan's figures of religious fanaticism intrude into the protagonists' world and disrupt familial life, Adichie's and Robinson's figures of religious fanaticism are constitutive of these spaces. The second chapter turns to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), which frames religious fanaticism in paradoxical terms: Eugene, the young protagonist's father, is recognized internationally as an influential democratic activist in Nigeria even as he violently punishes his family for failing to observe perfectly Catholic liturgical practices. This paradoxical predicament—how could a character so actively resist oppression in the public sphere, yet act so tyrannically in the private sphere?—has dominated the critical reception of the novel, leaving unexamined how the novel relates his democratic political activism and religious fanaticism. To investigate this uncomfortable imbrication, I analyze how the novel presents them in opposing cyclical terms. While Eugene works to disrupt the degenerative political cycle of violent coups in postcolonial Nigeria, he violently punishes any disruptions of the cyclical rhythm of Catholic liturgical practice. The novel builds on these cyclical dynamics by structuring the novel according to the Catholic liturgy, beginning on Palm Sunday and building to Easter. By emphasizing Adichie's formal use of liturgy, this chapter contrasts *Purple Hibiscus* with Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1954)—resisting the common critical tendency to align the two texts and read Adichie's oeuvre as an extension of Achebe's. Where Adichie employs ritual to develop a cyclical plot, Achebe employs ritual to develop a plot that pivots toward decline.

Traditional anthropological readings of *Things Fall Apart*—in which the novel is seen as representing pre-colonial Igbo social, political, and religious life—centrally feature rituals like the killing of Ikemefuna, presenting what it might "mean" (Moses 1995). While Ato Quayson (2003) focuses on the formal dilemma of how to represent "enchanted time" within the novel, his reliance on Dipesh Chakrabarty's theoretical framework limits his inquiry to representations of agency. I offer my own reading of the role the *egwugwu*—the elders of the clan and the rituals they perform—to trace the shift that occurs in Umuofia through the novel. Things "fall apart" as a position emerges from which to judge the rituals and "customs" like the *egwugwu*. To ask what these rituals mean is to overlook how the novel centrally employs them to narrate the story of

Umuofia's decline. This reading of *Things Fall Apart* both challenges a prominent critical tendency to foreground the meaning of rituals represented in novels—a point I bring to bear on Adichie's work—and it also provides the grounds on which I distance Adichie's work from Achebe's.

While the opening line of *Purple Hibiscus* directly references *Things Fall Apart*, I read the citation as introducing the cyclical rhythm of liturgical time and language. The chapter foregrounds how Eugene's religious fanaticism is figured through these liturgical cycles. Kambili—the first person narrator—draws on liturgical images and practices to describe the cycles of Eugene's violence and its effects on the family. While her mother eventually poisons him, breaking the cycle of Eugene's violence with her own, the novel traces how Kambili develops an alternative to the binary options of either breaking or imitating the repetitive, cyclical forms of her father's violence, of Catholic liturgy, or of corrupt politics. As Kambili reimagines Catholic liturgical practice, she refuses a simple politics of liberation that the novel portrays as intent on breaking cycles of tyranny and oppression. The purple hibiscus provides an appropriate image: the usually red hibiscus becomes purple through an experimental process that generates change through iteration and repetition. Catholic liturgy, in *Purple Hibiscus*, is not simply an index of religious fanaticism but its cyclical rhythms and temporality generate possibilities for change that Kambili pursues. Recalling the paradoxical framework in which Eugene is often read, this chapter challenges any simple contrast between his private, fanatical religious practice and his public, activist political agenda. Insofar as the novel figures both in cyclical, iterative terms, *Purple Hibiscus* imagines, through Kambili, ways of loosening and experimenting with repetitive patterns.

The three novels of Marilynne Robinson's Gilead trilogy share with McEwan's and Adichie's novels a tight focus on the interiority of characters who encounter figures of religious fanaticism. As in *Purple Hibiscus*, the trilogy situates this figure within the family and places the protagonist at a generational remove. While Adichie develops this generational relationship to interrogate the apparently paradoxical relationship between Eugene's political and religious commitments, Robinson's Gilead trilogy expands this generational frame to situate religious fanaticism in genealogical terms—investigating not only the history of a family, but of a town, and, more broadly, of American Protestantism. The figure of the religious fanatic—an old abolitionist preacher—dies long before the trilogy begins in the early years of the civil rights movement, and yet each novel traces how his influence lingers among the families of the small, mid-Western town Gilead, Iowa. Rather than telling one family's story through the generations, the novels reiterate one another, each presenting different genealogies, including lost, forgotten, disavowed, and unrecognized ones. As each novel reaches back to the old abolitionist preacher, the trilogy builds a genealogy of Gilead that shows, in Michel Foucault words, “the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself” (Foucault 1971, 82). To advance this argument, the chapter analyzes each individual novel as well as the relations between the novels.

The narrator of *Gilead* (2004), Rev. John Ames, sets out to write his son's “begats” (9), telling a literal family genealogy that reaches back to Rev. Ames senior, the abolitionist preacher. Ames, like his father before him (also named Rev. John Ames), distances himself from his grandfather by contesting the old man's inflexible understanding of a vision he had as a young man in which Christ appeared to him in chains, inspiring his abolitionist politics. The vision fuels much familial discord over the years and, according to other characters, constitutes his fanaticism. Ames presents his own conception of “visionary experience” as a critique of his grandfather's. While critics (and arguably Robinson herself) have celebrated Ames's more

capacious account of religious experience, I argue the trilogy works in the opposite direction, gradually revealing what Ames has overlooked, misunderstood, ignored, and forgotten.

*Home* renarrates the same summer of 1956 from across town in the Boughton home. *Home* focuses on John Ames Boughton, Ames's namesake, who has suddenly returned home after many years away. At the end of *Gilead*, we learn Jack has had a child with Della, a black woman, and although Iowa never had anti-miscegenation laws (a legacy of abolitionists like Rev. Ames senior), Jack realizes Gilead cannot provide the refuge for which the town was established. Unable to marry, Jack and Della form an invisible genealogical branch, a point that Ames and Boughton repeatedly misunderstand. I focus on a brief but poignant exchange between Jack and his father in *Home* that highlights this genealogical problem with which Jack struggles. They both make reference to the Old Testament story of Isaac blessing his sons, Esau and Jacob, in which the younger son steals the older's rightful blessing, unjustly securing his family's dominion over his brother's. Boughton hears Jack as misquoting the story, even though he does not, and I read the novel as a commentary on this inability to hear Jack's words as citation.

If *Home* presents Jack's invisible genealogy, *Lila* (2014) presents another kind of unusual genealogy. Lila, Ames's much younger wife, is deeply bothered by the Calvinist theology espoused by Boughton and Ames that excludes her "family" of fellow migrant workers that raised her during the drought and depression. The novel closely follows Lila's thoughts as she works out this theological problem by copying out passages that describe the visions of the Old Testament Prophet Ezekiel. Ames worries about her reading "just at that place"—a barely literate woman tackling such a "difficult" section (125)—and, indeed, her conclusions differ wildly from Ames's and Boughton's. *Lila*, I argue, rounds out the trilogy with a resounding critique of the limits of Ames's theology, politics, and, more significantly, the practices and sensibilities that undergird them.

Recalling the dissertation's title, the fanatical characters that appear across this dissertation cannot in an easy sense be described as "our fanatics." There is no simple "us" that claims them as American, Protestant, or democratic fanatics, and this project does not point out characteristics, commitments, or identities these fanatical characters might share with this study's own readers. My title draws attention to the smaller, subtler way that these novels approach religious fanaticism through intimate relationships and private spaces. Ames still carries in his Bible (after seventy years) the note his grandfather left on the kitchen table when he angrily returned to Kansas, the site of his abolitionist work. Kambili speaks a secret "eye language" with her brother, fearing her father's punishment if she were to speak her words out loud. During Fiona's unusual visit to Adam in the hospital, she sings along as he plays his violin, creating an exceedingly awkward situation for her legal attendant. As these novels develop figures of religious fanaticism, they bring us as readers into such moments of fear and anger, but also at times, of admiration and respect, even love. These texts represent religious fanaticism primarily through these intimate relationships and their attendant affects, attitudes, and sensibilities. In this sense, these novels foreground the struggle of acknowledging these characters as "our fanatics"—as constitutive of the families, communities, nations, and histories at the centers of these novels.

## Chapter 1

### Religious Fanaticism and the “Vagaries of Thinking” in Ian McEwan

The opening line of Ian McEwan’s *Enduring Love* (1997) is striking for its brevity and unabashed confidence: “The beginning is simple to mark” (2). The declaration of simplicity identifies a posture of certainty that will be questioned over the course of the novel. Is the beginning so simple to mark? What kind of certainty is requisite for making such a claim? The narrator specifies this bold declaration as he identifies the exact moment of this beginning: “We were in sunlight under a turkey oak...I was kneeling on the grass with a corkscrew in my hand, and Clarissa was passing me the bottle—a 1987 Daumas Gassac. This was the moment, this was the pinprick on the time map: I was stretching out my hand, and as the cool neck and the black foil touched my palm, we heard a man’s shout” (1). This precise description reveals as much about the narrator as it does about the story that will unfold in the novel: who is this character who so confidently identifies a “pinprick on the time map”?

Joe later reflects on—and defends—his audacious opening comment. He acknowledges that a beginning is an “artifice,” and explains that “what recommends one over another is how much sense it makes of what follows” (20). His confidence in marking this moment as the beginning rests on a clear understanding of precisely what that moment signifies: “The cool touch of glass on skin and James Gadd’s cry—these synchronous moments fix a transition, a divergence from the expected” (20). Joe is not only confident that he can correctly identify the beginning but also that he can accurately evaluate how much sense it makes of what follows. As the novel narrates what follows, it interrogates how well Joe is able to measure the “divergence from the expected.” To what extent, when confronted with the particularities of what these novels mark as religious fanaticism, can protagonists like Joe remain reliable in measuring this divergence? If his reliability depends upon a degree of objectivity—of separation from the events that transpire—what happens to the possibility of such separation when confronted with Jed’s peculiar form of religious certainty?

*Enduring Love*, a novel that foregrounds and explores the rational confidence of its protagonist, is exemplary rather than exceptional within McEwan’s extensive corpus. Looking back to *The Child in Time* (1987) and *Black Dogs* (1992) and forward to *Atonement* (2001), *Saturday* (2005), and *The Children Act* (2014), McEwan’s novels consistently investigate the certainty with which a character perceives the world and makes sense of it. This preoccupation with epistemological certainty constitutes a significant aspect of McEwan’s corpus and its reception, and divergent readings of his novels often diverge on precisely this point.<sup>17</sup> Critics have been quick to tie this aspect of his work to his prominent interest in science: quantum physics, Darwinian biology, and neuroscience all provide grounds on which to complicate

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<sup>17</sup> The critical discussion of *Enduring Love* is exemplary in this regard. David Malcolm (2002) and Peter Childs (2006) read *Enduring Love* as a meditation on how one makes rational decisions in the face of uncertainty. As Childs argues, “the rational is a function of knowledge [...] choice cannot always be based on certainty” (Childs 2006, 109). Thom Dancer challenges this reading, arguing that the “philosophical problem” at the heart of *Enduring Love* “is not how to combat the uncertainties of a random and confusing world but how to combat the desire for certainty that most of us cling to against all empirical evidence to the contrary” (Dancer 2012, 206).

traditional scientific rationalism in his novels.<sup>18</sup> Critics have noted that McEwan's novels interrogate naïve, scientific certainty, but they have been less attentive to how such interrogations are advanced through encounters with various forms of religious certainty.

Problems of epistemological certainty intrigue McEwan, and he understands religious belief to present a peculiar case of such certainty. In his fiction and non-fiction, he reaches for the language of religious fanaticism to describe a particularly dangerous form of religious certainty. In the aftermath of 9/11, he condemned the hijackers' "fanatical certainty" and "misplaced religious faith" (McEwan 2001b). In a more equivocal statement a year later, he continued to frame the problem in terms of belief and certainty: "I don't know, quite honestly, whether the world suffers from people not believing enough in things, or believing too much in things" (McEwan 2002, n.p.). This spectrum of belief—where one believes too much or not enough—does not specify the content of these beliefs, religious or otherwise, but it draws attention to *how* one believes. If the hijackers and their "fanatical certainty" provide the paradigmatic example of believing "too much in things," McEwan wonders about the implications of "not believing enough in things." This rhetoric of excess and lack gestures toward a tension that animates much of his fiction writing. Even as McEwan calls for less "crazed certainty" (2002, n.p.) and more skepticism and doubt, his fiction returns us to the problem of not believing enough. How does one counter the radical certainty espoused by the figure of the religious fanatic? More to the point, how does one do this without imitating and reenacting "fanatical certainty" in the process? McEwan's novels do not simply present the religious fanatic as a foil for the committed rationalist—thereby rehearsing the tired binary of a religious and secular conflict—but they explore how these secular figures attempt to triumph over figures of religious fanaticism.

The outcomes of such attempts vary across McEwan's corpus, and they open up complex critical questions. Even as novels like *Enduring Love*, *Saturday*, and *The Children Act* suggest the victory of secular, scientific rationalism over religious fanaticism, such victories are unstable and ambiguous. In *Enduring Love*, Joe Rose meets Jed Parry in intense circumstances involving a man's accidental death. Jed behaves oddly, and Joe becomes increasingly obsessed with the possibility that Jed is a "vengeful fanatic" (62), eventually convincing himself Jed suffers from a psychological disorder. While Joe may be correct, his obsession brings his narrative authority into question. Similarly, in *Saturday* the "fanatics" (2005, 13) Henry Perowne imagines to be in the cockpit of a burning plane (which he chances to glimpse early one morning) turn out not to be real, yet their imagined existence reverberates in his mind throughout the novel. His struggle to accept their non-existence constitutes a main plotline of the novel. In *The Children Act* (2014), the threat of "total religion" (14) presents legal challenges to the protagonist, Judge Fiona Maye, but she consistently finds legal grounds to insist on a less totalizing form of religious practice—saving Adam, a young leukemia patient, from becoming a "martyr" (127). After recovering, Adam struggles to make sense of his experience and seeks out Fiona, who realizes too late what he wants. Each of these novels brings the protagonist into a direct, unexpected encounter with a figure characterized in terms of religious fanaticism. While the configuration of religious fanaticism varies across these novels—alternately framed in terms of psychology or authority—they retain a precise focus on the effects of these encounters on the protagonists.

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<sup>18</sup> Both Jonathan Greenberg (2007) and Thom Dancer (2012) both situate Darwinianism centrally in their readings of *Enduring Love* and *Saturday*, respectively.

In this chapter, I trace these effects both thematically and formally. At the level of the plot, these novels explore ways of achieving “victory” over diverse figurations of religious fanaticism, and I also demonstrate how these attempts to gain power over these fanatical figures generate formal instabilities within each novel. Joe’s growing obsession with Jed’s fanaticism and Henry’s inability to accept the *absence* of religious fanatics bring into question the grounds on which they claim to triumph over these threats posed by religious fanaticism. Joe’s narrative voice, I argue, becomes increasingly unreliable and Henry’s reliability becomes restricted. *The Children Act*, by contrast, develops Fiona’s encounter with Adam in aesthetic terms: he is drawn to her literary and musical sensibilities. Their confrontation is less foreboding than those of the earlier novels, and the conflict is resolved with less ambiguity. While Fiona may end the novel sad, rather than triumphant like Joe, her narrative voice through which the novel explores religious fanaticism remains authoritative and unquestioned. By analyzing these figurations of religious fanaticism and the particular confrontations they incite, I am asking how these competing forms of certainty produce formal effects within the novels. Even as these novels vary in their thematic presentation of what constitutes religious fanaticism, they consistently frame the problem as one of perception, knowledge, and certainty.<sup>19</sup> If figures of religious fanaticism believe too intently (whether this stems from a psychological condition or a deference to religious authority), how do the novels explore the unique pressures such certainty places on those who encounter and engage it?

To venture an answer to this question, we must contend with a feature of McEwan’s figuration of religious fanaticism that distinguishes his work within this dissertation. While Adichie and Robinson similarly focus on the relationships main characters have with figures of religious fanaticism, McEwan consistently figures religious fanaticism as an intrusion into the social and mental world of the protagonist. His novels begin with an intrusion—whether real or imagined—of a threatening religious figure, disrupting the protagonist’s life. Zadie Smith highlighted this element of McEwan’s fiction in an interview shortly after *Saturday* was published. The novel deals “obliquely” with 9/11, and comparing that event with his fiction, Smith suggested that “something about the nature of what happened on [9/11] was already a McEwanesque incident” (McEwan 2005b, np). She then clarifies her odd formulation: the “burst of irrational into the rational was [McEwan’s] *modus operandi*” (ibid). These moments of interruption recur throughout McEwan’s fiction, and they imply a profound lack of connection between the protagonist and the intruding character. The social and physical distance between the two enables the opening scenes of intrusion where this distance suddenly collapses, and the

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<sup>19</sup> In *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (2014), C. Namwali Serpell develops a reading of *Atonement* that specifically inquires into phenomenological rather than epistemological uncertainty. This distinction allows her to move away from questions about the plot twist at the end of the novel—a much-discussed moment of “narrative retraction” (81). She focuses on what it means to reread *Atonement*, knowing in advance how the “narrative ruins its own romance” (ibid). At stake in this distinction, she argues, “is how we experience the novel’s truths and untruths, rather than whether we distinguish them” (ibid). Serpell’s reading attends to the nuanced ways that the epistemological uncertainty of the novel (what really happened?) opens out onto a phenomenological certainty that “lingers beyond it” (ibid). The relation between these forms of uncertainty is what Serpell’s reading highlights. Similarly, my reading practice asks after the effects of epistemological uncertainty (and certainty), particularly when it is generated through encounters with religious fanaticism.



arc of the novels follows the protagonists as they attempt to rebuild their world. They become preoccupied with reinstating this distance: Joe wants Jed restrained by the police; Henry wants to know there were no fanatics in the plane; Fiona wants Adam to lose interest in her.

Considering this prominent structural motif of intrusions—particularly by religious figures—McEwan’s fiction is often read as reinforcing a staunchly secularist paradigm in which one must defend one’s home, family, and self against a religious figure that threatens these things. Particularly in a post-9/11 moment, the religious fanatic is frequently marked as unknown, foreign, unpredictable, and, echoing Zadie Smith, “irrational.” By situating the fanatic as something outside that bursts into the world of the protagonist, McEwan’s fiction appears to reproduce this conception of religious fanaticism. This chapter complicates such readings by investigating more precisely how these novels employ religious fanaticism to inquire into the focalizing consciousness of the novel. Rather than asking what constitutes religious fanaticism in McEwan’s work, I ask what are the effects of these figurations of fanaticism? What do they uniquely allow us to observe in the protagonists? How do these novels develop and employ figures of religious fanaticism to investigate the focalizing consciousness of the novel?

### **Defending Secularism**

By investigating how McEwan employs figures of religious fanaticism in his fiction, this chapter resists the dominant rhetoric of defense—whether defending secularism against the encroachment of religion, specifically Islam, or defending religion against atheists who would eagerly disabuse them of their religious belief. McEwan himself, however, does not shy away from such rhetoric, and neither do his literary critics.<sup>20</sup> McEwan’s protagonists are also often outspoken about their atheist commitments. As I analyze the particularly confrontational configuration of religious fanaticism in McEwan’s fiction, I distinguish between the effects of the novel and the aims of its author. By highlighting McEwan’s experimentation with narrative technique, I suggest that the complexities of the narrative voice in these texts create more

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<sup>20</sup> He is vocal about his atheist commitments, and he is frequently aligned with the “new atheist” movement. His article, “End of the World Blues,” published in Christopher Hitchens’ *The Portable Atheist* (2007), addresses the phenomenon of the “apocalyptic mind,” which tends to be “totalitarian...immune to evidence or its lack” (McEwan 2007, 352). His analysis of this “apocalyptic mind” in the singular (whether Christian, Islamic, or secular) is distressingly simplistic, but I mention this article here for its remarkable ending. He stresses the futility of posing the “engines of reason” against “immoveable faith”: instead, he turns to curiosity, “the hallmark of mental freedom” (363). Hitchens’ own introductory comments to the essay completely miss this important point. McEwan argues that curiosity, not reason, can counter the fanatical certainty of the “apocalyptic mind.” In *The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic after 9/11* (2010) Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate read McEwan alongside other contemporary writers such as Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie, and Philip Pullman who, they argue, similarly explore in their fiction the “New Atheism” expounded by figures such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris. What distinguishes Ian McEwan’s work, they suggest, is a peculiar “profession of faith...of faith in fiction itself” (16). My own choice to focus on Ian McEwan in this chapter does not stem from an argument about secularized faith or how faith in art might be said to replace faith in God. I focus on McEwan in this chapter because his novels concertedly explore forms of certainty that, perhaps surprisingly, are held in common by religious figures and those that seek to hem them in.

nuanced relations between McEwan's atheism and his protagonists' and narrators' commitments than critics have noted.

These issues are most clearly observed in recent debates about *Saturday*, McEwan's "9/11 novel." While some critics have argued that McEwan's endorsement of the protagonist Henry Perowne's perspective is precisely why the novel is a distressing failure (Banville 2005), others have argued that the proximity of the author and protagonist necessitate reading the text against the grain (Neuman 2014). The tendency to conflate author and narrator, particularly when religion is at issue, reduces McEwan's novels to elaborate (if failed, as Neuman suggests) defenses of his atheist commitments.

The debate turns on the similarities between Ian McEwan and the novel's protagonist Henry Perowne, particularly as regards their shared suspicion of religious belief. Early in the novel, Henry voices his disdain for the "primitive thinking of the supernaturally inclined" (McEwan 2005, 16) and ruminates that "shopping and all that it entails" (rather than rationalism) will "overcome religious zealots" (127). He declares an unabashed preference for "the pickiness of pure chance and physical laws," which "seemed like freedom from the scheming of a gloomy god" (129). In *Fiction Beyond Secularism* (2014), Justin Neuman emphasizes how Henry's atheism in the novel echoes McEwan's. Neuman argues that the novel works to "undermine the dyad of personal atheism and political secularism to which both Perowne and McEwan are openly committed" (Neuman 2014, 99). Henry maintains, "in place of religion," Neuman argues, a "thoroughgoing atheism grounded in scientific, materialist positivism" (100), a characterization that resonates with his professional life as a widely-respected neurosurgeon. Neuman aligns Henry's atheism with McEwan's commitment to the school of new atheism. This move prompts Neuman to read *Saturday* "against the grain of the novel's critical reception and authorial intent," demonstrating the tension that emerges between Henry's "creedal and political secularity" and his "somatic practices" (103). Despite his avowed rationalism, Henry frequently makes split-second decisions and is portrayed as remarkably at home within his own body. The novel's "celebration of intuitionism" is most clearly demonstrated in the confrontation with Baxter, a street thug suffering from a degenerative neurological disorder. The scene, which begins with a car crash and ends with a tense showdown, "simultaneously asserts the power of medical science, one of the secular achievements celebrated by both protagonist and narrator, and affirms and valorizes somatic confidence and intuitionist judgments over rational reflection" (103). This scene is indicative of the larger operation of the novel, according to Neuman, and he claims "the novel and its protagonist offer alternatives to the rationalist ontology and deliberative forms of public reason to which Perowne and McEwan pledge their allegiance" (102).

While Neuman builds on an important tension within the text between rational thought and intuition, he overlooks how this tension is explicitly framed in the opening scene, rendering this tension the subject of the novel itself rather than an unintended effect of it. This tension is articulated, furthermore, through the figuration of religious fanaticism. I will return to this point in my own reading of *Saturday* below, but I present Neuman's argument in some detail here because it demonstrates a difficulty that critics frequently encounter when analyzing representations of religion and religious figures in McEwan's fiction. Neuman's reading relies heavily on the argument that the author and protagonist both have secularist commitments, and the distinctions amongst the author, the protagonist, the narrator, and the novel become blurred in Neuman's reading. While such categories may resonate with one another, McEwan has throughout his career demonstrated a keen sensitivity to precisely such distinctions, as I noted in his early writing. Instead of collapsing the distinctions amongst author, narrator, character, as

Neuman does, I analyze their operation in order to demonstrate how these novels establish and explore various forms of certainty.

Thom Dancer offers a contrasting reading, particularly as it relates to the critical representation of religious life in McEwan's fiction. In his article "Toward a Modest Criticism: Ian McEwan's *Saturday*" (2012), Dancer demonstrates that McEwan's novels consistently advance a critique of "epistemological immodesty"—the inability or unwillingness to grasp the truth that, citing *Atonement*, "'other minds are equally alive' and 'other people are as real'" (202). Dancer argues that McEwan's novels repeatedly return to figures who fail to grasp this truth, particularly to those who "conceal (consciously or not) their unwillingness behind a rhetoric of objectivity, neutrality, or nature (scientists, doctors, professors, and environmentalists, for example)" (202). In contrast to Neuman, Dancer reads *Saturday* as actively critiquing immodest conceptions of politics that aim to reduce thinking and argument to cognition alone (203). The novel, in other words, does not endorse Henry's viewpoint but instead creates a critical perspective on it. According to Dancer, the scene that exemplifies Henry's epistemological immodesty occurs early in the novel when he looks down to the city square from his second story bedroom window. He sees a couple having a fight, and as he watches them, he enters into the "diagnostic mode of a physician" (210) becoming increasingly certain that the girl is experiencing a form of drug withdrawal. "These are addicts, surely," he concludes; the fight is about a "missed score" (McEwan 2005, 38). Dancer points out how Henry's medical explanation extends beyond diagnosing the symptom: it provides an explanation for the entire event. It is this "unilateral application of a single explanatory model, without attention to the density of the matter at hand, that McEwan wants us to see as immodest" (Dancer 2012, 211).

Dancer's reading helpfully demonstrates how *Saturday* brings into focus the unsustainability and instability of Henry's certainty. By framing this as a problem of immodesty, Dancer emphasizes how McEwan's critique targets these instances in which one overreaches, mistaking belief for knowledge. A critique of epistemological immodesty, in other words, focuses on *how* people like Henry hold their beliefs and theories—"reverently, piously, taking as natural what are only hypotheses and ignoring or explaining away any view that does not fit" (214). Dancer's invocation of religious language here is important; it implies that the religious believer is the ultimate example of someone who is inappropriately certain of what they cannot verify or know. Indeed, he makes this point explicitly in his opening argument, suggesting that "contemporary readers are accustomed to seeing such attacks [of epistemological immodesty] levied at religious believers and political ideologues" (202). He then emphasizes that McEwan traces such immodesty "into the heart of literary criticism, science, and secularism" (ibid). While I take this latter point to be Dancer's main contribution (and an insightful one), Dancer overlooks the centrality of these "religious believers" to the critiques of certainty that McEwan's novels develop. Aside from whether or not contemporary readers are accustomed to seeing such attacks levied at religious believers, the more significant point is that McEwan's novels rely on figures of religious fanaticism in order to elicit and examine the particular forms of certainty espoused by the protagonists.

Each of the novels analyzed here—*Enduring Love*, *Saturday*, and *The Children Act*—introduces the figure of the religious fanatic in a scene that explores the inner mental workings of the protagonist's mind. The texts achieve this focus on the protagonist's consciousness by slowing down time to work through the simultaneous desires, impulses, and associations that

generate an action, a thought, or a relation.<sup>21</sup> “Best to slow down,” as Joe says, justifying his own narrative choices in *Enduring Love*: “The best description of a reality does not need to mimic its velocity” (19). In each novel featured in this chapter, the opening scene slows time down, and develops the grounds on which religious fanaticism is figured in the novel. Jed Parry’s subtle glances, gestures, and actions throughout the opening rescue scene set the groundwork for a religious fanaticism that is figured in psychological terms. *Saturday* opens as Henry Perowne observes a burning object traverse the skyline, and the scene traces the myriad mistaken mental associations he rapidly makes: “Only three or four seconds have passed since he saw this fire in the sky and changed his mind about it twice” (McEwan 2005c, 13). Religious fanaticism is configured within this process of (mis)understanding, which proves central to the main events of the novel. *The Children Act* opens with a calmer scene but similarly turns inward into the mind of the protagonist—through the act of writing. The narrator follows Judge Fiona’s thoughts as she reviews a draft of her own legal judgment about a court case on which she must rule. As she engages with her text, she reflects on the precedents, arguments, and objections that have produced her ruling. In each of these novels, the focus remains, in McEwan’s own words, on the “small print of consciousness, the corners and vagaries of thinking” (McEwan 2008).<sup>22</sup> Even more precisely, these texts interrogate how meaning is made, and it is the figure of the religious fanatic that opens up this exploration in each of these novels.

### **The “Vengeful Fanatic” of *Enduring Love* (1997)**

Joe Rose, *Enduring Love*’s first person narrator, and Jed Parry are developed as symmetrical and opposing figures: the figure of the scientific rationalist foils the figure of the religious fanatic.<sup>23</sup> Jed’s fanaticism is figured in psychological terms, and it is specifically the erratic and unpredictable pattern to his behavior that prompts Joe to develop strategies to predict Jed’s actions. The novel narrates how their relationship escalates over the weeks following their initial encounter: Jed’s fervent religiosity spirals into stalking; Joe’s suspicions about Jed intensifies; and the novel culminates in a violent stand-off. The distinction between Joe the narrator and Joe the character becomes increasingly difficult to maintain as the novel progresses. Even as Joe the narrator goes to great lengths to provide the “best description of reality” as he experienced it some years prior, teasing out what occurred simultaneously or in quick

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<sup>21</sup> Many scenes throughout McEwan’s fiction similarly slow down narrative time in an effort to describe the mental dimensions of an experience. In *The Child in Time* (1987), the narrator describes a truck crash with a rather heavy-handed emphasis on time: “Now, in this slowing of time,” the narrator explains, “there was a sense of a fresh beginning” (94).

<sup>22</sup> McEwan’s commitment to psychological realism and the nuances of consciousness have led to critical comparisons between McEwan and modernist writers, most notably Virginia Woolf (Marcus 2013). While the similarities between *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Saturday* are particularly striking and developed well by Laura Marcus, I am suggesting here that McEwan employs these temporal shifts insofar as they allow the novel to explore these “vagaries of thinking.”

<sup>23</sup> Critics have not been shy in describing Jed Parry as a religious fanatic, but they do not investigate what such a description entails. Dancer notes the novel “foils Joe Rose the rationalist and Jed Parry the religious fanatic” (206). Timothy Bewes emphasizes the novel “concludes with an overwhelming endorsement of Joe’s scientific rationalism against both Jed’s religious fanaticism and Clarissa’s sympathetic literary sensitivity” (430). Neither critic investigates more precisely what constitutes religious fanaticism or how it operates in the novel.

succession, the qualities that make Joe an excellent narrator are the same qualities that bring his reliability increasingly into question. Joe's ability to observe events closely and attribute significance to them is demonstrated in the opening scene and then—through Joe's increasing contact with Jed—is precisely what marks his decline into paranoia over the course of the novel. By analyzing the symmetrical relation between these figures of paranoia and fanaticism, I will demonstrate how the novel confronts the challenge of countering religious fanaticism. Joe (as both character and narrator) attempts to counter Jed's view of the world by appealing to rational calculation, and, in the end, triumphs. This triumph of rational calculation and psychological diagnoses is undermined, however, by the paranoia that secures Joe's success.

*Enduring Love* opens with a dramatic hot air balloon rescue attempt in which Joe makes a series of highly consequential, split-second ethical decisions that set the novel into motion and that crucially configure Joe and Jed's relation. A young boy is trapped alone in the balloon: the boy's grandfather, the balloon's pilot, has fallen out of the basket and is being dragged along the hillside where Joe and his long-standing girlfriend are out for a picnic. They are romantically reuniting upon her return from a research trip. Joe runs towards the basket along with three other men who observe the impending disaster. They each grab a rope to tether the basket to the ground, but they cannot reach the boy. When a gust of wind suddenly inflates the balloon, the basket lifts off the ground, leaving the men dangling on the very ends of their ropes. Joe recounts in great detail the struggle that ensues in the following seconds. Should he hang on, in the hopes that the wind will calm down and their collective weight will bring the basket back to the ground? Should he let go, saving himself while he is still close enough to the ground to survive the fall? One man lets go. The decision becomes more urgent for the remaining three, and two more, including Joe, apprehend this immediately and let go. (The question of who let go first echoes throughout the novel.) The balloon, now six hundred pounds lighter, ascends rapidly with the fourth man still clinging to his rope. The hillside drops away as the balloon rises, and he is soon three hundred feet above the ground. The group watches him rise still further. The image of his fall closes this opening scene:

We watched him drop. You could see the acceleration. No forgiveness, no special dispensation for flesh, or bravery, or kindness. Only ruthless gravity. And from somewhere, perhaps from him, perhaps from some indifferent crow, a thin squawk cut through the stilled air. He fell as he had hung, a stiff little black stick. I've never seen such a terrible thing as that falling man. (17)

The entire chapter is told from Joe's first person point of view, reconstructing this scene from his memory. The meticulous description—who was on which rope, who looked which way at which moment, who might possibly have let go first—creates a sense of Joe's perception of the world. When Joe describes the experience of watching a falling man, he notes the absence of any “special dispensation for flesh”: the world is ruthless in its indifference to imminent death. Joe seems to appreciate gravity's indifference, and he seeks to emulate this objectivity, confident in his ability to observe and understand the world in this way.<sup>24</sup> His confident grip on the world,

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<sup>24</sup> McEwan understands this opening scene to portray Joe as “someone who has a fairly confident grip on the world” (McEwan in Childs 2002, 105). Joe's extended analysis of the few seconds when the four men are in the air suggests “something out of game theory and evolutionary psychology, a Darwinian way of looking at the world” (ibid). While I do not dispute this effect of the opening scene, McEwan does not seem aware of the tensions in the narrative voice that develop in what follows.

however, is precisely what comes under scrutiny in the novel that unfolds in the wake of this traumatic event.

“Best to slow down,” begins the second chapter. The moments immediately following John Logan’s fall warrant careful consideration, Joe explains, but not because of the man’s death: “So much followed from this incident, so much branching and subdivision began in those early moments, such pathways of love and hatred blazed from this starting position, that a little reflection, even pedantry, can help me here” (20). Joe goes on to explain what he “see[s] now” in these crucial moments: he glances at Jed, holding his gaze for a second or two; he reassures Jed that “it’s all right”; finally, he vaguely invites Jed to go down to Logan’s body (20). Reflecting on the accumulation of such moments, Joe the narrator emphasizes that “[e]verything, every gesture, every word I spoke, was being stored away, gathered and piled, fuel for the long winter of his obsession” (23). The ensuing events of the novel bear this out, but the irony is that Joe must have done the same, storing every gesture, every word, recalling them repeatedly in order to narrate the story and provide an explanation of the events that are about to unfold. If the early indications of Jed’s fanaticism are presented here in terms of close observation and rigid ascriptions of meaning, Joe’s narration provides its echo.

Jed does follow Joe down to the site of the fall where he asks and then begs Joe to pray with him. Joe adamantly and repeatedly refuses in the face of Jed’s pleading. The police officers, Joe reflects, arrive to “deliver [him] from the radiating power of Jed Parry’s love and pity” (29). The animating impulse of this love—whether erotic, religious, or delusional—comes increasingly into question as the novel progresses. The situation intensifies when Jed phones Joe late that night with a strange message: “I just wanted you to know, I understand what you’re feeling. I feel it too. I love you” (40). Jed begins to stalk Joe, waiting outside his house, leaving thirty messages on his answering machine, and then writing a series of long letters. Jed’s messages oscillate between God’s love and his own love for Joe. The novel follows Joe’s attempts to make sense of these advances and his attempts to deal with them. The hot air balloon incident creates an unusual and unpredictable bond between the two men on which Joe reflects early in the novel:

This wasn’t “some poor fellow.” It was a man bound to me, like the farm laborers, by an experience, and by a shared responsibility for, or at the very least a shared involvement in, another man’s death. This was also a man who wanted me to pray with him. Perhaps he felt insulted. Perhaps he was some kind of vengeful fanatic. (62)

The novel is structured around the question that this passage articulates. What is the nature of the bond between these two men and how might one account for it? Is Jed a “vengeful fanatic,” a frustrated lover, an aggressive stalker, or a psychological case study? These possibilities, pursued by Joe, are countered by his partner Clarissa. Perhaps Jed is not a “vengeful fanatic” but only a “harmless fellow,” she suggests. She, for one, doubts that he poses the threat that Joe seems to imagine. She begins to wonder if he has “translated farce into indefinable menace” (65).

This seems less likely to be the case, however, when Jed phones and asks to meet. Jed dances around the question of why he wanted to meet Joe until he finally blurts out his answer: “You love me. You love me, and there’s nothing I can do but return your love” (67). Jed goes on to explain that this love (which Joe apparently started but Jed now reciprocates) is “just the means...to bring [Joe] to God, through love” (70). This confession, combined with Jed’s thirty calls that afternoon, prompts Joe to call the police and urgently report this as an instance of harassment. He is met with a bureaucratic series of questions meant to ascertain the degree of potential harm. Joe’s clearest articulation of the problem emerges as one of religion: “He wants

to save me... You know, convert me. He's obsessed. He simply won't leave me alone" (79). The police officer reminds him that this is not only insufficient grounds for arrest but, more significantly, would constitute an infringement of Jed's religious freedom if the police were to get involved:

"I'm sorry, caller. This is not a police matter. Unless he harms you or your property or threatens the same, he's committing no offense. Trying to convert you is not against the law." Then he terminated our emergency conversation with his own little stricture. "We do have religious freedom in this country." (79)

This passage presents a central challenge that Joe faces: how is he going to convince the police—as well as Clarissa and the novel's audience—that Jed constitutes a threat before he acts out violently? This is a problem of prediction: on what grounds can one predict violent activity such that state intervention is warranted to forestall such activity? The officer's "little stricture" reminds Joe that such an intervention is certainly not permitted on the grounds of religion. The officer insists that Jed's behavior must first constitute harassment—a legal category pertaining to person and property with no regard for religion. There is no argument, the officer implies, that would warrant state intervention into Jed's life on the basis of his religious belief or practice.<sup>25</sup>

Joe addresses this problem of prediction in two specific ways. First, through the claim of a psychological diagnosis, and second, through a reading of Jed's letters that might best be described as paranoid, recalling Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of paranoid reading.<sup>26</sup> His diagnostic and reading practices are both future-oriented, aimed at predicting Jed's erratic behavior.

Joe decides that Jed is exhibiting a classic case of "de Clérambault's syndrome," a psychological state in which the "patient" has the unshakeable delusional belief that someone is in love with him/her. Religious beliefs only serve to intensify this love. Any objections to this by the "lover" (Joe) are read as insincere or paradoxical since the love itself remains unquestionable. Such a state often culminates in violence, since the beloved (Jed) becomes increasingly frustrated with the lover's refusal to come to him/her. The novel suggests that such a

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<sup>25</sup> It is this same legal question to which *The Children Act* returns and resolves in the opposite manner. This recent novel configures the figure of the religious fanatic and the threat this figure poses in a manner that legitimates precisely this kind of intervention into the fanatic's private religious practice. It is the characterization of the fanatic in psychological terms in *Enduring Love* that renders Jed erratic and unpredictable, foregrounding the problem of prediction that the law refuses to address but on which Joe fixates. By figuring religious fanaticism in institutional terms, *The Children Act* shifts away from this problem of prediction to a problem of authority.

<sup>26</sup> My following analysis of Joe's practice of paranoid reading owes much to Sedgwick's essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so paranoid, you probably think this essay is about you," in which she develops a concept of "paranoid" reading to analyze a practice of suspicious reading that she argues became dominant through the 1980s and 1990s. Her argument is an *ethical* one. She argues that critics must hold open the gap between what one knows (or could know) and the critical project that one undertakes in light of that knowledge: is a person *obligated* to expose a known conspiracy plot, for example? Such a decision would be ethically fraught, but she insists that the "choice is not self-evident" (124). Joe certainly is committed to exposing Jed's plot, and in many ways, Joe acts as a paradigmatic paranoid reader. The question remains, however, as to how the novel either supports or questions the narrator's reading practices.

“syndrome” may actually exist: Joe recalls the historical details of previous “cases” and an Appendix at the end of the novel appears to offer a reprinted article from *The British Review of Psychiatry*, entitled “A homoerotic obsession, with religious overtones: a clinical variant of de Clérambault’s syndrome” (249). While early critics took this appendix to be factual, more recent readings have clarified its fictional status, emphasizing its centrality to the novel’s operation. Joe latches on to this self-proclaimed diagnosis: “The name was like a fanfare, a clear trumpet sound recalling me to my own obsessions. There was research to follow through now, and I knew exactly where to start. A syndrome was a framework of prediction, and it offered a kind of comfort” (134). This “framework of prediction” provides a way for Joe to legitimate his suspicions about Jed even as it simultaneously undermines such legitimation. As Joe becomes increasingly confident in his ability to predict Jed’s erratic and violent behavior, those around him wonder if this “framework” itself is imagined.

Clarissa, for her part, never sees Jed in the street and remains unconvinced by the evidence at hand. Joe has, ostensibly, erased all thirty messages Jed left on the answering machine, and as for the handwritten letters, Clarissa notes that Jed’s “writing is rather like [Joe’s]” (108). As Joe’s obsession becomes more private and more intense, Clarissa begins to question it as something verifiable at all. Joe becomes convinced that Jed is not only a violent but also an unpredictable threat: “The logic that might drive [Jed] from despair to hatred, or from love to destruction in one leap, would be private, unguessable, and if he came at me there’d be no warning” (154). The suspense of the novel escalates through both Jed’s increasing instability and Joe’s increasing anxiety about it. Clarissa responds to this rising intensity by moving into the spare room and suggesting that she and Joe separate for a time.

Joe’s reliability as a narrator, through this passage, comes increasingly into question. Is he reading the situation correctly? Is his diagnosis of Jed plausible? If Clarissa is not convinced by his arguments, why should the reader be?<sup>27</sup> Joe’s appeal to his rational demeanor, as opposed to Clarissa’s emotional one, only renders his position more tenuous: “Clarissa thought that her emotions were the appropriate guide, that she could feel her way to the truth, when what was needed was information, foresight, and careful calculation. It was therefore natural, though disastrous for us both, that she should think I was mad” (161). Joe’s appeal to calculation, at this point in the novel, does not necessarily secure the superiority of his perspective. “Madness” is not opposed to “careful calculation,” particularly in the case of paranoia.

My point is not simply that Joe emerges at the end of the novel as an unreliable narrator. The novel develops a finely tuned tension on this point: the text introduces doubt into Joe’s

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<sup>27</sup> Critics have ranged widely in their readings of the narrative voice in this novel. While David Malcolm describes narration in this novel as “deeply traditional” and the first-person narrator as “substantially reliable” (2002, 160), many critics have analyzed how Joe becomes increasingly unreliable as a narrator. Jonathan Greenberg’s technical discussion of first-person narration in this novel, working with Dorrit Cohn’s concept of “dissonant self-narration,” astutely notes how Joe the narrator often withholds qualifications of aberrant judgments made by Joe the character. If the novel developed a greater degree of mental distance between narrating Joe and narrated Joe, Greenberg argues, the reader would be more inclined to trust the narrator’s judgments (2007, 117-118). Sean Matthews (2007) provides an excellent reading of the novel that analyzes seven forms of unreliability in the novel, concluding with a discussion of Joe’s reading of Jed’s letters that, unfortunately, does not consider the reading practice itself in much detail and certainly not in terms of paranoia.



reliability while still suggesting that he could turn out to be correct about the matter. This ambiguity features prominently in the account of Joe's second visit to the police. Joe has fastidiously compiled all of Jed's letters and excerpted the sections that indicate, on his reading, that Jed presents a violent and imminent threat. Duty Inspector Linley obligingly reads the argument but remains unconvinced:

"He loves his God, he loves you, and I'm sorry about that, but he hasn't broken the law. [...] I mean, where's the threat, exactly?"

"If you read carefully and think logically, you'll see he's implying that he can get someone, hire someone, to beat me up."

"Too weak. You should see what we get in here. He hasn't trashed your car, has he, or waved a knife at you, or tipped the dustbin over your front path. He hasn't even sworn at you. I mean, have you and your wife considered asking him in for a cup of tea and a chat?" (169)

In an effort to avoid the tautological formulation in which the violent act proves the tendency towards violence, Joe presents a reading of the letters, which the inspector rejects. Only action—not potentiality—is sufficient to trigger the law, according to the inspector. Careful and logical reading, Joe insists, is able to look beyond the surface events (annoying but not dangerous behavior) and detect a violent tendency before it manifests itself in a violent act.

Joe's conflation of "careful" and paranoid reading in this passage is one that critics and McEwan tend to accept, but one that I contest. By prying apart these two modes of reading (à la Sedgwick), we can see more clearly how Joe's strategy to understand and confront Jed's fanaticism emerges as paranoia. Joe regrettably notes that Jed's letters "needed the skill of a literary critic like Clarissa to read between the lines of protesting love" (162), but since she thinks he is paranoid, she refuses to lend her "literary skills" to his project.<sup>28</sup> Sedgwick's insistence that paranoid reading is only one kind of "literary" reading prompts us to rethink the climactic confrontation between Joe and Jed and the end of the novel. As it turns out, Joe was right. Jed does indeed become suddenly violent; he enters the house and holds Clarissa at knife-point. One might be inclined to take this ending as a validation of Joe and a triumph of his careful, calculating approach.<sup>29</sup> The fact that Joe is right and Jed does indeed turn out to be violent does not make Joe himself any less paranoid in how he comes to know this.

By configuring Jed's religious fanaticism as erotomania, *Enduring Love* grapples with the effect of this on the narrator and on the text itself. As the novel reaches its climax, the text confronts what David Trotter has described as the anti-mimeticism of paranoia:

The consistency of [a paranoiac's] system or structure depends on its ability to eliminate randomness: to convert the material trace an event leaves in the world into a sign which only ever has one meaning, one value. Once delusion has taken shape, it absorbs accident

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<sup>28</sup> The novel offers a detailed representation of Joe's reading practice (161-6). Arguably, the literary character Clarissa also reads paranoiacally. Her academic research focuses on the search for a lost love letter by Keats. She argues it exists because she already knows what it would say.

<sup>29</sup> This reading aligns with the comments that Ian McEwan himself offers on the novel. He explains that he wanted "to write a book... in praise of rationality" which he thinks gets a "very poor showing in western literature" (McEwan cited in Childs 109). Rather than extolling the one who discovers that "her heart or his intuition [will] see him through," he wanted to show that "there are many situations or most situations in life where in fact clear thinking and the rational sees you through" (ibid).

into itself. For the paranoid, there is no event which does not already possess a meaning and a value. Paranoia, one might say, is anti-mimetic: it puts meaning and value *in place of* the world. (Trotter 4-5)<sup>30</sup>

As the novel progresses, Joe assumes particular events will provide “confirmation of an absolute kind” (192), definitively proving Jed’s fanaticism. For Joe, there is no event that does not already possess meaning. While the law refuses to engage in this paranoia, it is proven wrong in the end. Does the novel, then, question this anti-mimetic tendency that its narrator exhibits? While the novel opens up this possibility, the final pages uphold Joe’s role as narrator, minimizing his paranoia. This happens, significantly, through the literary critic Clarissa.

Toward the end of *Enduring Love*, Clarissa writes a letter to Joe and apologizes for not “having faith in [his] powers of rationality and deduction” (233). She admits that she thought of Jed as “a creature of [Joe’s] imagining” and would never have guessed he would become so violent (233). The novel concludes, in Timothy Bewes words, with an “overwhelming endorsement of Joe’s scientific rationalism against both Jed’s religious fanaticism and Clarissa’s sympathetic literary sensitivity” (2000, 430). Clarissa mistakes, in the final analysis, Jed’s real threat for Joe’s imaginary conflict.<sup>31</sup> This “endorsement” of Joe’s perspective over and against Jed’s religious fanaticism is achieved, I have argued, by conflating paranoid and “careful” reading. In order to triumph over Jed, Joe must successfully “read between the lines” and play the part of the suspicious reader *par excellence*. The novel secures Joe’s victory at the expense of his reliability. The achievement of *Enduring Love* is not representing this ostensible victory but offering a sophisticated exploration of how paranoia emerges in response to Jed’s psychologized form of religious fanaticism. The novel presents a starkly symmetrical relation in which paranoia appears as the only rational reaction to religious fanaticism.

### **A simple, secular, mechanical failure: *Saturday* (2005)**

*Saturday* diverges from the psychologized form of religious fanaticism in *Enduring Love* but continues to focus on the effects that figures of religious fanaticism have on the mental life of the protagonist. The novel closely follows Henry Perowne’s thoughts and perceptions as he attempts to comprehend and respond to the threat he perceives as religious fanaticism. In contrast to *Enduring Love*, the figure of the religious fanatic in *Saturday* never speaks, never acts, and is

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<sup>30</sup> In his book, *Paranoid modernism: literary experiment, psychosis, and the professionalization of English society* (2001), Trotter develops the relation that he observes between paranoia and modernist aesthetics. He traces the emergence of paranoia within psychiatry, noting how it was conceived as a disease to which the professional classes of society were particularly prone. Such a view was also held within literary circles, and Trotter focuses on how modernist writers such as Wyndham Lewis, D.H. Lawrence, and Ford Madox Ford both wrote about professional identities under extreme pressure and were themselves experiencing such pressure, being confronted with a rapidly changing literary marketplace. Trotter analyzes the literary experimentation that characterizes modernism within this context.

<sup>31</sup> Many critics highlight how Clarissa qualifies Joe’s success in this letter: “your being right is not a simple matter” (233). I do not read this, however, as a critique of Joe’s paranoia but rather of his isolation. He “went it alone” and “forgot how to confide” (234). She offers a reading of his obsessive behavior and the novel does grant her voice, as a literary critic, a privileged position of commentary. The question remains, however, to what extent she criticizes Joe’s paranoid reading practice and the critique of the law that is implied through Joe’s victory.

never even seen. In short, the religious fanatic is revealed not to exist; it is a function of the protagonist's imagination. The opening scene in which Henry Perowne observes a burning object moving across the sky explores how the figure of the religious fanatic comes to occupy such a central place in his imagination. Without observing such a figure or receiving confirmation that there ever was such a figure in the burning plane, how does Henry's mind remain haunted by this figure in ways that prove mysterious even to Henry himself? *Saturday* is not concerned with the question of the fanatics' existence, as was *Enduring Love*, but is rather preoccupied with their effect on a person's mind when they are imagined to exist. By analyzing how this figure of the religious fanatic is conjured up even as it is excluded from the representative frame of the novel, *Saturday* explores first how the figure of the religious fanatic enters the protagonist's imagination and then how this figure lingers in his mind, affecting his thoughts, perceptions, and actions throughout the novel.

The figure of the fanatic is presented in the opening scene as a function of a problem of scale. How does one make sense of a simple observation—a burning object in the sky? While critics often jump to the moment when Henry correctly identifies the object as a plane (Neuman 2014) or disregard this scene entirely (Dancer 2012), I read this scene in its entirety as central to the inquiry of the novel. This scene does far more than provide an oblique reference to 9/11. Echoing the rescue scene of *Enduring Love*, it slows down time so that the narrative can represent the mental process by which an observation is granted meaning. It is this mental process itself that provides the main subject of the novel that follows, and it is also this process that accounts for the crucial (if spectral) role of religious fanaticism in this novel.

The protagonist, Henry Perowne, awakes in the early hours of the morning “to find himself already in motion” (2). As he climbs out of bed, he notes it is three forty and is surprised at feeling so unusually alert. “With no decision made, no motivation at all,” we are told, he moves towards the window. He momentarily wonders if he is dreaming or sleep-walking, and in this effort to clarify the state of mind of the protagonist, the narrator authoritatively describes both Henry's thoughts and attitudes: “If it is the case [that he's dreaming], he'll be disappointed. Dreams don't interest him; that this should be real is a richer possibility. And he's entirely himself, he is certain of it, and he knows that sleep is behind him: to know the difference between it and waking, to know the boundaries, is the essence of sanity” (2). Such boundaries—and with them, Henry's certain knowledge of them—come into question at several points in the opening scene that follows. By drawing attention to Henry's confident assertion that he is fully awake, the narrator suggests the naivité of such certainty.

This tension between the narrator and the protagonist features prominently only a few pages later as the burning object enters the scene. As Henry momentarily turns away from the open window to locate a dressing gown, he notes something “bright but colourless, smeared across his peripheral vision” (12). He turns back to look at it directly, and the narrator emphasizes the gap between what he sees and what he thinks he sees: “He doesn't immediately understand what he sees, though he thinks he does” (12). Henry “assumes proportions on a planetary scale” (12), and in his “eagerness and curiosity,” he thinks it is a meteor. He almost immediately realizes the motion is much too slow for a meteor, and he “revises his perspective outwards to the scale of the solar system” (13). Now the ball of light seems like a comet; “this object is not hundreds but millions of miles distant” (13). He goes to wake up his wife to witness this wondrous event, and only then does he hear the noise: “the sound holds at a steady volume while he revises the scale again, zooming inwards this time, from solar dust and ice back to the local” (13). “Horried,” he realizes the burning object is an airplane.

This rapid zooming in and out that is narrated over several pages occurs, we are reminded, in only three or four seconds (13). This expansion of time draws attention, as in *Enduring Love* and *The Child in Time*, to the mind of the protagonist, exploring here a process of perception. This entails a series of mistaken judgments and eager assumptions that associate this burning plane with planetary and cosmic events. As it turns out, this object is not in “timeless orbit around the sun” but is travelling a route that Henry himself has frequently travelled—the final approach to London Heathrow airport. These opening pages rehearse a series of mental moments that complicate Henry’s insistence that he is entirely awake and “knows the boundaries.” The point of this opening scene is not whether he correctly or incorrectly identifies the object in the sky but that he himself does not have a privileged perspective on the process by which he does so.

This process of perception remains the focus of this opening scene even after the plane has been “correctly” identified. Now that he knows the scale on which the object is moving, Henry attempts to make sense of this image, filling in the details by imagining what is occurring in the plane. He finds the “spectacle has the familiarity of a recurrent dream” (14).<sup>32</sup> He means this in two related senses. First, he means that he himself, while flying, has often dreamed what a crash would be like. Air travel depends upon the people in the plane maintaining a collective belief that all will turn out well. “Air travel,” Henry reflects, “is a stock market, a trick of mirrored perceptions, a fragile alliance of pooled belief” (14). As he stands in his bedroom, watching this plane in the sky, he recalls his own imagined scenes of such “failure.”

The second “familiar element” of this dream-like moment similarly emerges around imagined scenes. As Henry stands at the window of his bedroom watching this plane, he imaginatively bridges the distance between him, the removed observer, and the plane in distress. In this moment, he relives “the horror of what he can’t see” (15) and recalls other times, notably 9/11, when he felt compelled to watch, only to find that there is nothing to see. This generates a peculiar role for the imagination. The horror of such a moment is found in the observer’s imagination rather than in the events themselves:

Catastrophe observed from a safe distance. Watching death on a large scale, but seeing no one die. No blood, no screams, no human figures at all, and into this emptiness, the obliging imagination set free. The fight to the death in the cockpit, a posse of brave passengers assembling before a last-hope charge against the fanatics. To escape the heat of the fire, which part of the plane might you run to? (15)<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> This notion of familiarity has been central to much of McEwan’s thought and writing on the terror attacks of 9/11, referenced in this passage of the novel, and also to his writing on the London terror attacks of July, 2005, which occurred shortly after the publication of this novel. In his article for *The Guardian*, he describes feeling out of joint with time in this way: “In fact, now the disaster was upon us, it had an air of weary inevitability, and it looked familiar, as though it had happened long ago. In the drizzle and dim light, the police lines, the emergency vehicles, the silent passers by appeared as though in an old newsreel film in black and white. The news of the successful Olympic bid was more surprising than this. How could we have forgotten that this was always going to happen?” (McEwan 2005, np).

<sup>33</sup> Responding to the 9/11 attacks, Ian McEwan wrote “Beyond Belief” on September 12<sup>th</sup> for *The Guardian*. This article similarly emphasizes the distance between those observing and those dying: “Always, it seemed, it was what we could not see that was so frightening. [...] The screaming, the heroism and reasonable panic, the fumbling in semi-darkness for mobile phones -

The figure of the fanatic is introduced here as an actor in a scene that Henry imagines precisely because he is witnessing something that he cannot see. The figure intrudes into the text at the limits of visibility and perception. Significantly, even as the novel draws attention to Henry's imaginative foray, explicitly naming the fanatic, the text refuses to "oblige" the imagination. *Saturday* does not explore the question posed in this passage—what would it be like to be in that plane in this moment? The novel does not shift point of view and transport the reader into the plane. Instead, it retains its close focus on the mind of Henry Perowne and asks what it is like to live with having imagined this moment, with having confronted the peculiar problem produced by watching but not seeing.

As Henry watches the plane disappear behind the ominous "Post Office Tower" (16), he reflects on the unlikely fact of witnessing such an event. He thinks about the various ways that one might explain the relation between him and the event that he has witnessed. If he were "inclined to religious feeling, to supernatural explanations" he could entertain the thought that he had been "summoned" by an "external intelligence" (16). He summarily rejects such a thought:

A simple anthropic principle is involved. The primitive thinking of the supernaturally inclined amounts to what his psychiatric colleagues call a problem, or an idea, of reference. An excess of the subjective, the ordering of the world in line with your needs, an inability to contemplate your own unimportance. In Henry's view such reasoning belongs on a spectrum at whose far end, rearing like an abandoned temple, lies psychosis. (16)

The problem of scale analyzed above has already introduced the problem described here: how does someone observe the world without conflating one's own consciousness with the events observed? Henry is intensely critical of reasoning that makes this error: such reasoning produces an "excess of the subjective," an inability to see the world as distinct and separate from oneself. Having suggested the similarity between this view of the world and fanatical religion, Henry makes the connection explicit: "And such reasoning may have caused the fire on the plane. A man of sound faith with a bomb in the heel of his shoe" (16-17). The figure of the religious fanatic and the figure of the terrorist are conflated in this moment, but the emphasis of this passage falls on the "reasoning" that Henry thinks underlies the terrorist act. The problem posed by the figure of the religious fanatic is a problem of reference: the world is not permitted to exist independently of the observing consciousness. Henry acknowledges that not all such reasoning

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it was our safe distance from it all that was so horrifying. No blood, no screams. The Greeks, in their tragedies, wisely kept these worst of moments off stage, out of the scene. Hence the word: obscene. This was an obscenity. We were watching death on an unbelievable scale, but we saw no one die. The nightmare was in this gulf of imagining. The horror was in the distance." *Saturday*, I suggest, focuses on this "gulf of imagining" and its effects. McEwan's interest in how distance affects one's observation of disaster is not limited to 9/11, however, and also features in *Enduring Love*. Joe speaks about his recurring nightmare in which he watches the unfolding of a disaster from a distance: "I could see helpless people, reduced by distance to an undifferentiated mass, scurrying about in panic, certain to die. The horror was in the contrast between their apparent size and the enormity of their suffering. Life was revealed as cheap; thousands of screaming individuals, no bigger than ants, were about to be annihilated, and I could do nothing to help" (20-21). The passage in *Saturday* is unique, however, for how the imagination *compensates* for the limitations of the observing mind, and in this moment conjures the figure of the religious fanatic.

produces religious fanaticism. “Alongside the unreason and slaughter,” he concedes, there are also “decent people and good deeds, beautiful cathedrals, mosques, cantatas, poetry” (17). However, he concludes, “the best hope for the plane is that it’s suffered simple, secular mechanical failure” (17).

Jed’s fanaticism and Joe’s paranoia, let me recall, were rendered symmetrical in *Enduring Love* precisely through this “excess of the subjective” that Henry here identifies with the “thinking of the supernaturally inclined.” Joe’s calculating rationality, as it slipped towards paranoia, was no guarantee against Jed’s fanaticism, which similarly refused to admit that the world was not aligned with his perception of it. *Saturday*, I am suggesting, presents Henry with a similar challenge: how does one counter the “reasoning” of the fanatic? If one does not wish to “order the world in line with [one’s] needs,” how does one maintain an objective, distanced view of the world? While Henry prides himself on maintaining such a perspective, *Saturday* produces a more ambiguous answer to this question.

The conclusion of the opening scene foregrounds this question of perception. The plane disappears from view and Henry recalls a thought experiment advanced by Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger in 1935. “Schrödinger’s cat” is in a box, hidden from view, and either a tiny hammer has broken a vial of poison, thereby killing the cat, or the cat remains alive. It is impossible to know whether the cat is alive or dead until the observer lifts the cover off the box. Until that moment, both possibilities are equally real and could be said to exist simultaneously.<sup>34</sup> The thought experiment—which brings into question the independence of reality from the observer—makes little sense to him: “To Henry it seems beyond the requirements of proof: a result, a consequence, exists separately in the world, independent of himself, known to others, awaiting his discovery. What then collapses will be his own ignorance” (18). In the context of the burning plane and the preceding analysis, either the plane was being flown by fanatics as it burned or it suffered a “simple, secular mechanical failure.” “Whatever the score,” he thinks, “it is already chalked up” (18). The passengers, whether alive or dead, “will have arrived by now” (18), and it only remains for him to find out. While Henry baldly asserts the radical independence of reality from the observer, it remains an open question as to how the novel resolves this question. Does Henry’s “ignorance” collapse like a “quantum wave of probability” once he observes the “cat in the box,” as it were? I would argue that it does not.

Henry turns to the news media to learn the status of the plane (hardly an innocent detail in light of the importance of televised coverage of 9/11). There is no coverage of “his main story of the hour” on the four o’clock news, and so he passes half an hour with his son, Theo, just returned from a late night on the town.<sup>35</sup> The four thirty news covers the story: a fire broke out in

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<sup>34</sup> Schrödinger’s point was that such a possibility is ridiculous: a cat cannot be simultaneously alive and dead. The thought experiment was designed to point out an error in previous theories of quantum physics.

<sup>35</sup> This half-hour interlude allows the narrator to reflect further on Henry’s understanding of fanaticism: “But that’s not quite right [to compare the IRA to the radical Islamists, contrasting hatred and “the purity of nihilism” with the political cause of a united Ireland]. Radical Islamists aren’t really nihilists—they want the perfect society on earth, which is Islam. They belong in a doomed tradition about which Perowne takes the conventional view—the pursuit of utopia ends up licensing every form of excess, all ruthless means of its realisation. If everyone is sure to end up happy for ever, what crime can it be to slaughter a million or two now?” (McEwan 2005, 34).

an engine of a Russian cargo plane, and they successfully landed at Heathrow. No one was hurt. “Schrödinger’s dead cat is alive after all,” thinks Henry (36).

At this point, the novel provides definitive answers to the questions that have animated this opening scene: what is the burning object in the sky? Were there actually fanatics in the burning plane?<sup>36</sup> How does one correct, adapt, or change one’s perceptions of the event? This question, which echoes the emphasis on perception in *Enduring Love*, resonates throughout the novel. As Henry asks himself, how can he account for his misunderstanding, for having leaped to the conclusion of the fanatics’ presence? He reprimands himself for having been in such a “state of wild unreason” (40). In light of such misunderstanding, he ruminates, “how can we trust ourselves?” (40). From this point forward, the novel investigates why the simple fact that there were no “fanatics” inside the plane proves to be inadequate. A return to objective reality appears insufficient and naïve in light of this opening scene.

As the day progresses, Henry continues to be confounded by his own mental state. That afternoon, as he goes to meet his friend for a squash game, he is “bothered by his peculiar state of mind, this happiness cut by aggression” (78). He tries to account for this strange aggression as he drives to his game. On the one hand, he lists the reasons (inescapably masculine and heteronormative) why he should be happy—he enjoyed sex that morning, he loves his car, it’s Saturday, no one died in the plane, his daughter is coming home, his patients are stable. “And on the other hand? On the other hand, he’s touching the brake.” (78). The passage leaves this question unanswered for several pages as the narrative recounts the details of Henry crossing a road that had been closed to traffic to facilitate the Iraq war protests. As he navigates this scene, he has enough time to “think, or sense, without unwrapping the thought into syntax and words, that it is in fact the state of the world that troubles him most, and the marchers are there to remind him of it” (80). There are people around the planet “who would like to kill him and his family and friends to make a point” (80). The narrator emphasizes that Henry does not spell out the assumptions and questions that produce such an idea; he experiences them as a “mental shrug,” as a peculiar language of “mentalese” (80). It is within this vague “matrix of shifting patterns” (81) that the text pivots to introduce Baxter, a street gang member who literally crashes into Henry’s world. The car crash that sets Henry’s confrontation with Baxter into motion is articulated in terms of Henry’s “mentalese”:

Even with a poet’s gift of compression, it could take hundreds of words and many minutes to describe. So that when a flash of red streaks in across his left peripheral vision, like a shape on his retina in a bout of insomnia, it already has the quality of an idea, a new idea, unexpected and dangerous, but entirely his, and not of the world beyond himself. [...] It’s from this line [of parked cars on his left] that the thought springs, and with it, the snap of a wing mirror cleanly sheared. (81)

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<sup>36</sup> Many critics have minimized the significance of the opening scene precisely because “in the end,” as John Banville phrases the matter in his early, influential review, “the threat the plane seemed to represent turns out to have been nonexistent” (2005, np). Elizabeth Wallace describes the event as a “red herring” (2007, 466) and suggests the “anxiety of personal safety” introduced in this opening scene ought not to be the focus of a critical account of the novel. Such accounts misunderstand what is at stake in this opening scene. The question is not whether the threat to one’s safety is real: the question is under what circumstances does one imagine such threats and what are the effects of having done so?

This passage represents a mental state in which there is a strange—and consequential—blurring between the objects that Henry sees and his comprehension of them. The “flash of red” triggers the vision of the burning plane of that morning, which lends this vision the quality of an idea—“unexpected and dangerous.” Henry is certainly not cognizant of making any association between the car crash, the character of Baxter, and the fanatics he imagined in the plane, but such a connection is made nonetheless. It is done at the level of “an idea,” one that is, the narrator emphasizes, “entirely his, and not of the world beyond himself.”

This scene returns us to the earliest moments of the novel in which Henry describes fanatical reasoning (and indeed, religious reasoning more generally) as an “excess of the subjective,” an inability to see the world as separate from oneself. This scene interrogates the idea of such an “excess.” What lends this “idea” of Henry’s dangerousness is neither any experience of danger nor even any verifiable possibility of danger. The idea is dangerous because Henry had imagined such a possibility in the figure of the fanatic, an idea that lingers in his mind, despite all evidence to the contrary. The novel neither represents Baxter as a kind of religious fanatic nor frames him as a substitute for such a figure. The novel goes to great lengths to show how the imagined figure of the religious fanatic lingers in Henry’s mind and colors this encounter with Baxter later in the day.<sup>37</sup> It now seems evidently clear that Henry’s “quantum wave of ignorance” is strikingly slow to collapse, even though he was so certain it would in the rational light of day.

Henry reflects on his inability to accept the simple truth that “Schrödinger’s cat” is alive, as it were. He is bothered by his preoccupation with the story of the plane. He is participating in a “new order,” he thinks, characterized by a “narrowing of mental freedom” (184): “It amounts to a consensus of a kind, an orthodoxy of attention” (185). He worries that he has “lost the habits of scepticism” (185). On a more literal level, we might say that Henry has lost the ability to acknowledge an accident, to accept contingency. Recalling David Trotter’s description of paranoia as anti-mimetic, Henry sees his reluctance to allow a sign to have multiple or contested meanings, but he accounts for this as a loss of his skepticism. Can skepticism, the novel prompts us to ask, counter the dynamics of paranoia that arises in reaction to fanaticism?

The concluding scene of the novel remains ambiguous on this point: “Beware the utopianists,” Henry warns, “zealous men certain of the path to the ideal social order. Here they are again, totalitarians in different form” (286). He then questions his own warning with a thought that refers us back to the narrative we have just read: “But this [fear] may be an indulgence, an idle, overblown fantasy, a night-thought about a passing disturbance that time and good sense will settle and rearrange” (286). The novel demonstrates the difficulty, indeed the impossibility, of rearranging a “night-thought”—which emerges at the boundary between a dream and a cognizant thought, the boundary of which Henry was so certain that morning. Henry’s own “good sense” has proven unable to “settle” his own “overblown fantasy” of religious fanaticism, and it is not clear that more time will help. The novel ends with one more

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<sup>37</sup> Critics have discussed at length the connection between the vision of the burning plane with the violent figure of Baxter. Magali Cornier Michael sees Baxter as a solution to a problem of scale: Baxter represents a “graspable form of violence” in contrast to the “terrorist violence on a large scale” that Henry is “unable to conceptualize” (Michael 2009, 39). I am explicitly countering such a reading that substitutes one form of violence for another. The question this novel investigates is their relation, which is articulated on the grounds of perception, memory, and understanding.



attempt to “rearrange” such fantasies. Henry adjusts the scale of his attention to find a point of certainty in this midst of this uncertainty. “But one small fixed point of conviction holds Henry steady” (287), namely that he will not pursue charges against Baxter for having broken into his home and violently threatened him and his family. Henry’s certainty is reestablished in the final pages of the novel, but in relation to what he can see, know, and control.

### **“Wanting what everyone wanted”: *The Children Act* (2014)**

McEwan’s fiction, I have been suggesting, explores the difficulty of maintaining a strictly objective view of the world: a view that radically separates the observer from the world being observed is as illusory as the “religious feeling” in *Saturday* that orders the world in line with one’s needs. Both, it seems, are problematic, and their inadequacies are made particularly evident through confrontations between hyper-rational characters and figures of religious fanaticism. The resolutions of these conflicts shift over the course of McEwan’s corpus (a point to which I return below), and the distinctive narrative arc of *The Children Act* departs from his earlier work. This more recent novel traces the transformation rather than the containment or the “rearrangement” of the figure of the religious fanatic. Such a transformation is effected through an appeal to aesthetic judgment rather than rational calculation.

The main premise of *The Children Act*, referencing the British Children Act of 1989, concerns the ethical challenge the law encounters when a child’s welfare is seen to be put at risk by religious beliefs and practices. Does the law uphold the parents’ right to practice their religion freely or does the law intervene in the private sphere of religion and family to protect the child? *The Children Act* (2014), is animated by a question that has become increasingly central to political discourse in the Euro-Atlantic: how do we respect the freedom of religion—increasingly shored up to be a pillar of liberal democracy—even as we regulate, govern, and contain those forms of religion that are marked as inappropriate or fanatical?

Adam Henry, not quite 18, will die from leukemia if he does not receive a blood transfusion. He and his family are refusing such treatment because they understand it to violate their beliefs as Jehovah’s Witnesses. The hospital appeals to a British court under The Children Act because a minor’s life is at stake. State intervention, they insist, is warranted and urgently required. The novel recounts the story from the point of view of the judge who must decide whether—and on what grounds—the state can legitimately overrule the parents’ and Adam’s religious beliefs and practices. The second half of the novel narrates the effects of the judge’s decision. Adam lives, much to the relief of all involved, but he struggles to make sense of this experience. He seeks out Judge Fiona Maye, sending her letters and eventually stalking her. When she confronts him, he struggles to explain why he is drawn to her, noting simply that she has “a way of thinking and talking” (169). The ending of the novel turns on the outcome of Adam’s peculiar attraction for her, grounded as it is in her legal authority as much as in her musical and literary sensibilities. In the final pages of the novel, Fiona learns that Adam’s leukemia has returned. Since he turned eighteen in the intervening months, there is nothing the hospital can do when he once again declines the blood transfusion, and he dies. In the final scene of the novel, Fiona names the shift that has occurred over the second half of the novel: Adam’s death, she confidently asserts, was not a martyrdom but rather a suicide. The figure of the religious fanatic—a young man who would willingly die for his faith—is replaced with the secular figure of a confused, suicidal teenager.

The novel recounts how the legal case and its resolution, which structure the first half of the novel, fail to secure Adam’s future. In a significant divergence from McEwan’s source

material, the novel does not attribute this failure to Adam's religious fervor or fanatical devotion but rather to his desire for aesthetic experience, which has been awakened through his exposure to the law in the first half of the novel.<sup>38</sup> Even as Adam seeks out aesthetic experience by approaching Fiona directly, the novel recounts the impossibility of such a relationship (the representative of the law cannot provide such training for its subjects). While the law can protect Adam from the consequences of religious fanaticism (i.e. insist that he live), it cannot provide an aesthetic training to counter that which had generated such fanaticism.

The novel introduces the protagonist, Fiona Maye, a leading family law judge, by recounting two court cases on which she has recently ruled. Early reviews of the novel have been drawn to these "mini-tales," finding them to be "by far the most compelling elements of the novel" (Scholes 2015).<sup>39</sup> These introductory cases perform two different kinds of work. First, they introduce the legal questions of individual autonomy and religious authority that animate Adam's case. Second, they introduce the form of the legal case. McEwan's earlier novels, as I have noted, also prominently feature the form of the case. Joe determines that Jed constitutes a case of de Clérambault's syndrome in *Enduring Love*, and in *Saturday*, Henry asserts diagnostic mastery over his medical cases and also, as Dancer argues, in his observation of daily situations. By working within the framework of the case—whether psychological, medical, or legal—these characters consistently determine how and when a given principle (or diagnostic category) can be applied to the particularities of a given situation. Both Henry and Joe exhibit great certainty in their diagnostic abilities, and it is precisely this certainty that the novels bring into question through the figure of the religious fanatic.

Fiona diverges from this pattern. While she is no less certain in her judgments than Henry or Joe, the novel frames her certainty in aesthetic rather than rational or epistemological terms. The form of the legal case is central to how the novel frames the confrontation with religion and then resolves it. How, I ask, does *The Children Act* construct the figure of the religious fanatic through the specific form of the legal case? In what follows, I demonstrate how the text secures the triumph of the law over religion without appealing to principles, which is the defining characteristic, in this novel, of religious fanaticism.

The first case is described as Fiona proofreads the final version of her judgment. It is a custody battle for two Jewish girls. Their father is a committed member of a traditional, Haredi community, and their mother has left the community but not Judaism (12). If the girls stay with

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<sup>38</sup> McEwan has been forthcoming about his sources for these introductory cases as well as the main case about Adam that follows. Both in interviews (McEwan 2014b) and in his own essay in *The Guardian* at the time of the novel's publication (McEwan 2014c), he credits a former appeal court judge Sir Alan Ward with the stories of all three cases. McEwan encountered these cases while reading through a collection of the judgements Sir Ward had written and delivered over the course of his legal career. Ward is referenced in the novel (28).

<sup>39</sup> While the novel presents the details of these two cases, it simultaneously introduces Fiona's marital problems. Her husband, approaching sixty, wants to have one more exciting sexual encounter before he gets too old. While marital and familial conflict is a common theme of McEwan's fiction, it is overshadowed in *The Children Act* by the legal cases that parallel the story of her marriage. As one reviewer noted, "[n]othing in the writing of Fiona's private life is as interesting as the legal arguments" (Hadley 2014). I find the marital subplot to be stereotypical, serving primarily as a way to justify Fiona's need to reflect on and articulate the effects of these court cases on herself.

their father, they would be raised within a familiar, secure environment which is disciplined but loving. They would also attend a strict Haredi school in which boys and girls are separated and would most likely be cut off from their mother. If they stay with their mother, they would have to live with a certain degree of conflict between their new world and the one with which they are most familiar. They would begin to attend a mixed school with encouragement from their mother to go on for further education. As Fiona understands it, the court must choose, on behalf of the children, “between total religion and something a little less. Between cultures, identities, states of mind, aspirations, sets of family relations, fundamental definitions, basic loyalties, unknowable futures” (14). This first case clarifies the specific challenge that questions of religion pose to the court. Even as the court aims to act in the interests of the children, enabling them to “come to adulthood and make their own decisions about the sort of life they want to lead” (39), the novel suggests that such a goal is itself problematic, even illusory. To rule in favor of one parent is to set the children on a path from which it becomes increasingly difficult for them to diverge. To protect the children until the “age of autonomy” may be the stated aim of the court, but Judge Fiona acknowledges that in order to secure this choice for these girls, the court must rule in favor of their mother.

At stake in this case is a question of autonomy, choice, and agency—particularly as it relates to children and religious life. How does one secure the freedom of religion for a child? This case brings into view the conditions of possibility of such a freedom: what must be in place in order for children to be able to make choices about their religion once they reach the “age of autonomy”? By opening with this particular case, the novel foregrounds how religion is a matter of training, relations, aspirations, loyalties, etc.—a way of life, not a set of propositions. In this case, Fiona acknowledges that the ability to choose one’s religion must be cultivated. This case does not present a conflict between “secular” and “religious” visions for these girls’ lives; the case turns on the law’s ability to insist on cultivating the conditions of possibility of choosing. The freedom of religion is acknowledged to be a distinctly secular freedom that does not exist in the abstract but must be nurtured.

As Fiona finalizes her verdict on this case, she reflects on an earlier case about twins born joined at the pelvis and sharing a torso. This case about infants has nothing to do with the “age of autonomy,” and instead turns on a question of medical treatment with life and death consequences. Neither Matthew nor Mark would survive if left unseparated, but to separate them means that Matthew would certainly die. A London hospital seeks permission to separate them, since Mark has given every indication of being able to survive on his own. The parents—devout Catholics, backed by the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster—withhold their consent, maintaining that only God could give or take away life: they “refused to sanction murder” (27). The surgery is too invasive to be compared to a withdrawal of life support or of medical treatment (29), and so Fiona’s challenge is to present a legal argument that justifies the surgery, which will inevitably lead to Matthew’s death. How can the law legitimate the decision to allow Matthew to die without appearing to value one life over another?

At stake in this case are the limits of religious authority: how does the law ascertain and set the limits of religious authority? Can a parent refuse, on religious grounds, a medical procedure that would save a child’s life? This question places the court in a situation where it intervenes to insist on life. Fiona’s argument secures Mark’s life and carefully reframes Matthew’s death: “Matthew would perish after the separation not because he was purposefully murdered, but because on his own he was incapable of flourishing” (29). While this argument proves compelling and Mark thrives following the surgery, the novel concludes this opening

section by commenting on the effect of Fiona's argument on herself. Her decision left her "numb" and "squeamish about bodies" (32). With "its sadness, its visceral details and loud public interest," this case left "scar tissue in [her] memory": "She was the one who had dispatched a child from the world, argued him out of existence in thirty-four elegant pages" (32). The novel highlights how this judgment has lingered in Fiona's imagination and in her body. These concluding reflections foreground the violence authorized by her words, and they demonstrate that at stake in this particular case—as in Adam's—is above all the authority to let someone die.

While these early court cases introduce the legal questions that will animate Adam's case—a young man remarkably close to the "age of autonomy" whose case is about the authority to let die—they also demonstrate the importance of the legal case for the structure of the novel. The logic of the case generates narrative suspense. What will Fiona decide, and, even more importantly, how will she argue her decision? This suspense, which propels the first half of the novel, is generated by the apparent commensurability of authorities that are respectively marked as religious and secular (i.e. medical, scientific, or educational). The archbishop, for example, seems to have just as strong an argument as his counterpart, the surgeon: "Separating the twins would be to kill Matthew. Not separating them would, by omission, kill both. The legal and moral space was tight and the matter had to be set as a choice of the lesser evil" (28). The closer these positions are made to appear, the better the plot. The structure of the narrative depends on their commensurability, and this is not incidental. The law is called in to referee this tight game, and the key question becomes what kind of legal argument will prove sufficient to contain the religious beliefs and institutions that would threaten to harm Mark and Matthew and, later in the novel, Adam. The legal case provides the framework for the narrative confrontation: two opposing yet commensurable positions are mediated by the judge, the focalizing consciousness of the novel.

The novel draws attention, through Fiona's drafted judgment about the young Jewish girls, to the logic of the legal case. "Our task," Fiona writes, citing Lord Justice Ward's precedent, "has been to find, and our duty is then to apply, the relevant principles of law to the situation before us—a situation which is unique" (28). Cases, in other words, mediate the particularities of the situation and the relevant general principles. Of course, this is not unique to the law, and Fiona acknowledges that it is precisely on these terms that religion and the law are similar:

That churchmen should want to obliterate the potential of a meaningful life in order to hold a theological line did not surprise or concern her. The law itself had similar problems when it allowed doctors to suffocate, dehydrate or starve certain hopeless patients to death, but would not permit the instant relief of a fatal injection. (30-1)

While religious authorities defend "theological lines," legal authorities defend similarly principled positions. The distinction between religion and the law, when characterized in terms of such cases, is established by how and when these positions are defended. If the law insists on the superiority of a secular principle in opposition to a competing religious principle, it risks committing the same error religion commits when it tends toward religious fanaticism—insisting on someone's death for the sake of a principled position.

The novel highlights these questions as it moves through these opening cases: "Courts should be slow to intervene in the interests of the child against the religious principles of the parents. Sometimes they must. But when?" (18). Fiona's response clarifies what is at stake in how such instances are determined: "In reply, she invoked one of her favorites, wise Lord Justice

Munby in the Court of Appeal. ‘The infinite variety of the human condition precludes arbitrary definition.’ The admirable Shakespearean touch” (18). The law, in other words, cannot insist on definitions that apply to all cases, regardless of their specificities. The challenge of the legal argument is to mediate persuasively between the general principle and the case’s particularities. The rigid commitment to the principle emerges as the distinctive mark of religious fanaticism here, and the challenge of the law, which this novel narrates, is to limit such a commitment without, in the process, succumbing to the same error. At stake in this struggle between religious and legal authority is not only a question of who has authority but by what logic it is attained and asserted. The authority of the law is not grounded on principle—which would place it in a tug-of-war relation to religion—but on Fiona’s ability to judge. The novel aligns legal judgment with aesthetic judgment: by appealing to aesthetic judgment, it seems, the law runs no risk of degenerating into fanaticism.

*The Children Act* develops this emphasis on aesthetic judgment by recounting the process by which Fiona decides Adam’s case. In a spontaneous and unusual decision, Fiona visits Adam in the hospital. Ostensibly, she goes to ascertain whether Adam could be said to have sufficient understanding of the decision that he and his parents are making, and during this time, she reaches her legal decision. The visit includes a theological inquiry into blood transfusion, an enthusiastic recitation by Adam of his own poetry, and a modest demonstration of his attempts to learn violin. The scene ends with the boy playing “The Salley Gardens” with the judge singing along. It is a powerful aesthetic experience for Adam that features centrally in the second half of the novel. As for Fiona’s legal opinion, she decides it in the hospital room: “To take up the violin or any instrument was an act of hope; it implied a future” (119). Adam’s poetic and musical abilities signal his vitality, his potential. Fiona’s decision turns on the knowledge that his aesthetic sensibility could only be served by insisting that he live. He clearly demonstrates rational competence, understanding the principles taught by the Jehovah’s Witness community, but these are in tension with his aesthetic inclinations. Fiona determines that these are to be honored over his religious principles because (as was discussed in the case of the Jewish girls), his upbringing has rendered him incapable of making such a decision for himself. When Fiona returns to the courtroom, she rules that

[h]is childhood has been an uninterrupted monochrome exposure to a forceful view of the world and he cannot fail to have been conditioned by it. It will not promote his welfare to suffer an agonizing unnecessary death, and so become a martyr to his faith. [...] He must be protected from his religion and from himself. [...] In my judgment, his life is more precious than his dignity. (126-7)

Fiona intervenes, as the *Children Act* is designed to facilitate, to argue that Adam’s decision to die according to his religious precepts is not in his own interests.<sup>40</sup> It is a classic case of false consciousness: he cannot know what is in his best interests, and so someone must intervene on his behalf.

It is implied that immediately following this pronouncement Adam will be held down to his bed and forcibly be given a blood transfusion, which Adam briefly describes much later in

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<sup>40</sup> In the earlier case of the twins, Matthew and Mark, Fiona’s argument was similarly grounded in this concept of interest. She argued, “in a novel formulation which the Court of Appeal accepted, that Matthew [for whom life was not an option], unlike his brother [whose interest is to live], had no interests” (29). She not only determines what a child’s interest is but also on what grounds a child can be said to have interests.

the novel. Fiona's legal judgment transforms this violent act from an illegal assault to a life-giving intervention. The ruling reframes but does not change the violent act itself. The ability of the judge to insist that Adam will live—against his own will and hence not in the language of rights—is at stake in this opening half of the novel. This conflict is not about violence per se but the authority that administers such violence. Only the state, not a religious institution, can insist that Adam live or allow him to die.<sup>41</sup> The question that the second half of the novel poses and answers is what life can Adam live in the wake of such a proclamation? What kind of life has been rendered livable and what kind of death is permissible? The answer to this question returns us to aesthetics.

The second half of the novel follows Adam's life in the wake of this judgment. He returns to school, he improves on the violin, he writes more poetry. He also experiences significant clashes with his parents as he refuses to participate in the Jehovah's Witness community. He writes letters to Fiona, thanking her for her intervention, which returned his life to him and, more importantly, introduced him to aesthetic experience: "I feel you've brought me close to something else, something really beautiful and deep, but I don't really know what it is" (145).<sup>42</sup> In an attempt to draw close to this "something," Adam follows Fiona to a run-down mansion where circuit judges are hosted on their cross-country tours. In the midst of a rainstorm, the boy is discovered and Fiona confronts him. He wants to live with her and her husband; she assures him this is impossible. She insists that he contact his mother, and she packs him off to a hotel for the night. When she says goodbye, she goes to kiss Adam on the cheek and "accidentally"—in an exceedingly ambiguous moment—kisses him on the lips.

He stews on this and sends her a poem. "The Ballad of Adam Henry" casts her as Satan, seducing him away from Jesus and towards freedom. The poem ends in a "skein of spidery lines that looped around second thoughts" (189), and when Fiona receives the letter, she does not bother to tease out the mess of circled words, stricken phrases, and connecting arrows. She thinks it better not to reply and waits for it to pass: "She would fade in his thoughts, become a minor figure in the progress of his sentimental education" (189). She miscalculates. In the final scene of the novel, Fiona performs piano (rather exquisitely) at a well-attended concert. On her way to the stage, someone whispers in her ear something about Adam, but the narrator withholds this information while she plays. Immediately following her acclaimed performance, she escapes the crowd, returns home, and rereads Adam's poem. The narrator finally reveals Adam's leukemia had returned, he had again refused the blood transfusion, and this time the hospital was powerless because he had since turned eighteen. She strings together the final line from the

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<sup>41</sup> At stake in these proceedings is an understanding of sovereignty as Michel Foucault articulates it. As he explains it in *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, the ancient right to "take life or let live was replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death" (138, emphasis original). He goes on to explain how such a shift in understanding sovereignty has altered our modern concept of suicide. Once a crime (because it usurped the power of death over which the sovereign alone had the right to exercise), suicide now testifies to the individual and private right to die. "Death is power's limit" (138). McEwan's novel, as I read it, provides quite a strong representation of Foucault's argument. The problem of religious fanaticism in this novel is that religion claims the right to "let die," which constitutes a serious infringement on the authority of the law.

<sup>42</sup> This novel presumes rather than reflects upon the opposition between religious and aesthetic experience. My own arguments do not aim to reiterate or rely on this distinction.

scribbled words on the draft: “May he who drowns my cross by his own hand be slain” (212). When Fiona’s husband arrives, she shares the news of Adam’s death, and their exchange names the important shift that has occurred over the course of the novel. He states the obvious: “So he died for his faith.” Fiona corrects him: “I think it was suicide” (217).

The concluding pages of the novel do not question this shift from “martyrdom” to “suicide.” Neither Fiona nor the narrator figure Adam’s death in terms of religious fanaticism. The narrator boldly asserts that Adam “came to find her, wanting what everyone wanted, and what only free-thinking people, not the supernatural, could give. Meaning” (220). This meaning, the novel suggests, could not be derived from principles—whether religious or legal—but instead must be found in the practice of judging. *The Children Act* brings together the ability to judge aesthetically and legally within the character of Fiona, and her judgments are questioned neither by the narrator nor by the form of the novel. Adam dies not through a fault of Fiona’s but because he is, unfortunately, unable to find his way out of the “forceful view of the world” (126) cultivated by his religious community. *The Children Act* tells the story of how the law is legitimately able to refuse religious authorities the freedom to watch a young man die. The ostensible horror invoked by the image of a child martyr is replaced, over the course of the novel, with the sadness precipitated by a young man’s suicide. While the law cannot force Adam to live, it can set the rules by which he dies. Submission to religious authority, the novel suggests, violates such rules.

## Conclusion

Insofar as *The Children Act* narrates Adam’s transformation from a young man eager to serve as a martyr into a suicidal teenager, the novel primarily traces how such a transformation occurs, emphasizing Adam’s desires (for meaning, for aesthetic experience) over Fiona’s intentions. The interactions between Adam and Fiona do not generate the tensions we observed between Jed and Joe in *Enduring Love*, and Fiona is not haunted by figures of religious fanaticism like Henry in *Saturday*. *The Children Act* stands out, in McEwan’s corpus, for its narrative stability.

The contrast becomes even more vivid when one looks back to McEwan’s experimentations with narrative voice in his earliest short stories, collected in *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) and *In Between the Sheets* (1978), and his first novel, *The Cement Garden* (1978). These texts explore a range of perversions without providing a narrative framework that judges such deviations from social norms of (usually sexual) behavior.<sup>43</sup> Such unflinching explorations of incest, abuse, and sexual fantasy earned young McEwan the nickname “Ian Macabre.”

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<sup>43</sup> A strong example of this is found in “Butterflies” in *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) in which the young male protagonist is involved with the death of the nine-year-old neighbor girl who ostensibly slipped into the canal and drowned. He tells the police he was unable to reach her in time to save her. The short story recounts his memory of the day: she follows him along on his walk, he becomes increasingly sexually attracted to her, and at the furthest point of the canal, he forces her to touch him. He ejaculates, she turns to run, falls into the canal, and he lets her drown. “Over and over again I ran through what had happened,” he reflects at the end of the story, “and what I should have done.” These comments, however, refer not to the girl’s death but his inexplicable reluctance to stop and play with a group of boys kicking a rock around that afternoon. The story produces an intense discomfort by focusing on the mind of this young man without providing an omniscient point of view that sets this young man’s abusive world into relief.

Scholars often emphasize the shift away from such suspensions of judgment in his more mature work. David Malcolm, for example, argues McEwan's career "shows a trajectory from quite extreme moral relativism toward a clear moral focus" (2002, 15).<sup>44</sup> This chapter offers a more detailed account of this trajectory, reaching beyond the language of relativism. What, I ask, might McEwan's evolving figurations of religious fanaticism tell us about his shifting political anxieties and commitments?

One axis along which McEwan's work evolves concerns the figurations of religious fanaticism this chapter has presented. *Enduring Love* frames Jed's fanaticism as exceptional and unusual, and his threat to Joe is an individual, isolated case. In *Saturday*, Henry's encounter with religious fanaticism is constructed as an effect of his own mind, but the novel takes care to situate his unfounded imagining in a climate of pervasive fear. While the fanatics' threat is not real, the novel considers how fear of it generates effects in the minds of people like Henry. *The Children Act* figures religious fanaticism as both real and expected. Religious fanaticism is no longer the function of an individualized psychological illness but, instead, of devout (if also naïve) obedience to religious authorities—whether Catholic, Jewish, or Jehovah's Witness. McEwan figures religious fanaticism in increasingly collective terms: it comes to pose problems of authority and governance rather than diagnosis and treatment.

As these novels develop increasingly collective figurations of religious fanaticism, McEwan's work shifts along a second, related axis—the novels' representations of legal intervention into religious life and practice. The religious fanatic, in McEwan's fiction, presents a limit case in which legal intervention appears warranted. If Joe is reprimanded in *Enduring Love* for requesting such an intervention, Fiona is celebrated in *The Children Act* for eloquently legitimating such interventions. This recent novel constructs a world in which the law must regulate religious practice; without such interventions, children will die. These legal dilemmas, furthermore, are no longer generated by the impulsive actions of irrational individuals but by the carefully considered actions of loving parents. The authority of religion, rather than its purported irrationality, now threatens those whom the law ought to protect. Put another way, the law no longer aims to protect people from unpredictable actions of religious fanatics—the premise of both *Enduring Love* and *Saturday*—but to protect people from themselves and their families.

If the threat of religion—and the law's response to that threat—shift over McEwan's corpus, so too do his novels' formal treatments of such questions. McEwan's curiosity about the peculiar ability of religious fanaticism to elicit paranoia gives way to approbation of aesthetic sensibility and its ability to transform religious fanaticism. The narrative instability of *Enduring Love* and ambiguity of *Saturday* give way to the narrative predictability of *The Children Act*. These changes over McEwan's corpus do not so much indicate an increasingly clear "moral focus" as they signal a decreased willingness to examine the confidence with which religious fanaticism is alternately diagnosed, contained, and transformed.

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<sup>44</sup> Lynn Wells contests Malcolm's linear model, arguing that "his growing sophistication as a writer has rendered his moral vision both more complex and more problematic" (2010, 12). McEwan himself often reflects on his development in interviews. He acknowledges the pessimism of his early work and while he sees echoes of this in novels like *Enduring Love* and *Saturday*, he also stresses that as he ages, he hopes that things will "flourish": "You don't want to take a stick to it" (2008).



## Chapter 2

### Experimental Freedom: Ritual Practice in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

In the previous chapter, I traced how several of Ian McEwan's novels pit figures of religious fanaticism against protagonists whose rational, secular commitments come under scrutiny through these confrontations. As social theorist Alberto Toscano notes in *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (2010), fanaticism—and particularly religious fanaticism—frequently serves as a foil “against which to define the proper path of politics” (xxv). I argued, however, that McEwan's fiction does far more than represent this foil. His novels demonstrate why this foil is, in Toscano's words, “difficult to control” (ibid). Religious fanaticism challenges the certainty with which McEwan's protagonists encounter their worlds, and even as each protagonist triumphs, a kind of instability lingers in each case. This instability emerges in McEwan's novels precisely because they figure religious fanaticism in confrontational terms. In this regard, his work is unique in this dissertation.

The following two chapters consider authors who figure religious fanaticism in less intrusive terms. The novels of Chimamanda Adichie and Marilynne Robinson present figures of religious fanaticism who are, specifically, within the family of their protagonists, and therefore internal to their worlds. Religious fanaticism is not a matter of private religiosity intruding into the public sphere, even though both Adichie and Robinson are deeply invested in thinking through the relation between religious fanaticism and political action. Figures of religious fanaticism in these texts are intimately known by other characters, and this opens out onto more ethically ambiguous terrain as they investigate how religious fanaticism is perceived as simultaneously hurtful and yet, somehow, admirable.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), presents this oddly admirable religious fanaticism through a man whom Adichie herself has described as a “fanatical believer” but who, she quickly adds, also has a “sense of social consciousness that is expansive and proactive and *useful*” (Adichie n.d., emphasis hers). While aptly described as a religious fanatic, Eugene is also widely celebrated in the novel as a hero of democratic activism in Nigeria of the 1990s. Readings of this apparently contradictory character have dominated the reception of this novel, but critics have largely overlooked the centrality of religious fanaticism to the development of this character. By examining how, precisely, the novel formally represents this “fanatical believer,” I demonstrate that the novel employs certain devices to advance a trenchant critique of naïve postcolonial political activism.

Eugene's ability to elicit admiration and fear simultaneously from both characters and readers is a central feature of *Purple Hibiscus*. On one hand, Eugene is a successful businessman who spends a good deal of time and money running a newspaper that boldly calls out corruption within the postcolonial Nigerian regime. Amnesty International has acknowledged his progressive political stance with a human rights award, and it is no coincidence that his newspaper is called *The Standard*. On the other hand, Eugene is a devout Catholic and insists that his family observe Catholic rituals as fastidiously as he does. Deviations from the norm are severely punished. One Sunday, his wife Beatrice has a bout of morning sickness and asks to stay in the car, rather than greet the priest after mass as usual. That afternoon, Eugene beats her so badly that she miscarries (33-5). While the father's commitment to freedom of the press produces a flashy career resisting political corruption, his commitment to Catholic standards of holiness leads to a painful scene of domestic violence.

Critics have tended to politicize this paradox, asking how a character could so actively resist oppression in the public sphere, yet act so tyrannically in the private sphere. While Susan Andrade has helpfully noted how Eugene frustrates any simple allegorical reading of the relation between the family and the nation, she, like other critics, fails to take into account his devout Catholicism.<sup>45</sup> The novel juxtaposes, she argues, the father as “dictator of the family” to the father as “progressive-minded citizen who genuinely disapproves of and acts against political tyranny” (Andrade 2011, 94). Heather Hewitt similarly describes Eugene as a “domestic tyrant” and reads him as a “figure for the novel’s unnamed political tyrant” (2005, 89). For Hewitt, the “paradoxical predicament” of Eugene’s “oppression of his own family while he fights for political freedom” suggests “the pervasiveness of despotism and the way it can ensnare even those who resist it” (ibid). By describing Eugene as a family “dictator,” critics like Hewitt and Andrade read the private realm as an inverted mirror image of the public, political realm. These readings do not inquire into Eugene’s religious practice; situating him as a parallel figure to the unnamed political dictator overlooks many central features of the novel and perpetuates a simplistic view of religious oppression.

If one considers the centrality of Eugene’s Catholicism to his family life, the paradoxical dynamic of his character then appears to be generated from the contrast between his progressive politics and ostensibly regressive religion. But the assumption that democratic political activism stands opposed to religious fanaticism—such that combining them within one character produces critical consternation—is precisely, I am suggesting, what this novel interrogates. If contemporary critics and readers are inclined to find Eugene’s religiosity and his political activism mutually exclusive, *Purple Hibiscus* shows this not to be the case. The novel crafts an image of an “amazing patriarch” whom Michael Ondaatje has described as “devastating and complex” (2005). This complexity stems from the apparent imbrication of his political action and his religious fanaticism.

One way to account for this imbrication is to understand both Eugene’s political activism and his religious fervor (even his violence) as expressions of his principled commitments. He insists on operating an independent newspaper despite pressure from the state to stop. After receiving violent threats, he moves the operation to an undisclosed location and continues publishing critical views of the government with a persistence that eventually costs the life of his editor. Similarly, his commitment to holiness and perfection refuses any compromise, and he disciplines his family to achieve such standards as well. After Beatrice’s request to stay in the car and her subsequent punishment, Eugene insists the whole family pray for her forgiveness. Kambili, our young narrator, notes that if she or her brother Jaja begin to “drift off,” they must start all over: “We had to get it right” (36). If one emphasizes Eugene’s insistence on perfection without regard for consequences, his political and religious life both seem animated by this commitment to standards, absolute truths which cannot be compromised.

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<sup>45</sup> Susan Andrade speaks of Eugene’s “disciplinary zeal” (2011, 97) but does not examine what this “zeal” entails or how it is represented in the novel; the article emphasizes the “parallels between family repression and national repression” (96). Cheryl Stobie describes Eugene as “zealous,” and she notes how Adichie ties masculinity and “absolutist religion” (2010, 423). The article, however, does not go on to explore how this “absolutist religion” is articulated and operates formally. Stobie aims primarily to illuminate Adichie’s own “progressive and reformist” (422) views of religion by analyzing the thematic events of the novel.

While such a reading is not without textual evidence, it overlooks how the novel articulates both Eugene's activism and his devout Catholicism in terms of cycles and repetitions. The text frames his violent outbursts towards his family (another cycle of abuse and regret) as reactions to breaks in liturgical observances. Furthermore, these liturgical practices are presented, at least in part, as repetitions of colonial practices. Eugene's political activism is similarly articulated in cyclical terms. When a coup erupts early in the novel, Eugene declares the importance of interrupting a degenerative political cycle in which coup follows coup. Characters repeat and contest such formulations throughout the novel. The text, however, opens up a broader inquiry into the limitations of articulating political action as the disruption of cycles of tyranny or oppression. *Purple Hibiscus* presents Eugene's religious and political sensibilities in parallel but opposed cyclical terms.<sup>46</sup> Eugene's perspective on both of these cyclical rhythms—the liturgical and the political—is principled and rigid. In as much as the sacred cycle must never be broken, the political one urgently must be broken. Distinguishing carefully between Eugene's view of these cycles and the novel's creative development of them, how, I ask, do the cyclical rhythms operate within the novel? I will suggest that this model of the perpetuated or disrupted cycle generates a perspective on religious fanaticism that cannot be subsumed within the framework of paradox that has dominated the critical discussion of Adichie's novel.

The cyclical liturgical rhythm is central not only to the representation of Eugene's character but also to the formal structure of the novel, as signaled by the title page for the novel's first section—"Breaking Gods: Palm Sunday." The novel briefly tells the story of this particular Palm Sunday and then the bulk of the novel, in a section entitled, "Before Palm Sunday," tells the story leading up to this moment. Returning to "Pentecost" a year prior, we learn the rhythms of the family and of the political coup Eugene so vehemently opposes. Jaja and Kambili visit their Auntie Ifeoma, a university lecturer in Nsukka, for the first time. The aftermath of this visit culminates in the violence of the opening scene. The novel then moves to "After Palm Sunday" and concludes in the present tense with a section entitled "The Present: A Different Silence." By using Palm Sunday as a definitive moment in a linear timeline, the novel's events are set in a temporal sequence (we know that Easter Sunday comes precisely one week after Palm Sunday, for example) and yet it remains unclear when these events take place. In other words, *which* Palm Sunday does the novel reference? The text holds this framework of historical time (in which the political events of the novel occur) in tension with the liturgical time that is marked by specific days in the Christian calendar like Palm Sunday, Easter Sunday, or Christmas Day. By using references to Palm Sunday and, later, Pentecost, as structuring devices, the novel draws on a cyclical temporality even as it sets out to tell the story of one particular Palm Sunday in Nigeria, as experienced by a young girl named Kambili.

By attending to the complex role liturgy plays in both figuring and critiquing religious fanaticism in *Purple Hibiscus*, my reading also aims to resituate Adichie in relation to the Nigerian literary giant to whom she is so frequently compared: Chinua Achebe. The opening line of *Purple Hibiscus* explicitly references *Things Fall Apart*, a point which has drawn significant

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<sup>46</sup> While other contemporary novels like Teju Cole's *Every Day Is For The Thief* (2007, 2014) similarly reflect on the oppressive cyclical dynamic of corruption, Cole's narrator references the widespread religious enthusiasm only to demonstrate how such dynamics exacerbate the situation. Adichie shares some of this critique but, as she says herself, she thinks that the "god-fearing public in Nigeria can learn a bit from [Eugene] as well" (Adichie n.d.).

critical attention. Comparisons, however, have often remained at the thematic level and emphasize how Adichie furthers but does not challenge Achebe's literary legacy. Some read Adichie's novel as a rewriting of Achebe's (Hewitt 2005), and others read Adichie's work as extending and adding to Achebe's (Vanzantan 2015; Tunca 2012; Ouma 2009).<sup>47</sup> The gendered dynamic of this relation is readily apparent: already in 2004 Adichie was described as the "21<sup>st</sup> century daughter... of Chinua Achebe" (Broun).<sup>48</sup> I read these two texts in conversation with one another specifically through the language of liturgy, ritual, and custom. How, I begin by asking, do these two texts employ liturgy and ritual within the novel form? This line of inquiry looks beyond intertextual references to focus on the formal innovation of the two texts, advancing the critical conversation about Adichie's relation to Achebe along a new vector. I first situate my reading of both authors within critical literature on the role of ritual, then demonstrate how Adichie innovatively uses liturgical form in her work to articulate the peculiar attraction and repulsion that characterizes religious fanaticism.

### **Ritual: The Things That Fall Apart**

A consideration of how critics have read ritual in *Things Fall Apart* sets into relief Adichie's complex use of Catholic liturgy in *Purple Hibiscus*. Early, canonical studies tended to read *Things Fall Apart* as presenting the Igbo clan's way of life, including their religion, in the novel's first half, and then narrating its conflict with Christianity in its second half.<sup>49</sup> Simon

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<sup>47</sup> It is important to note, in this context, that *Things Fall Apart* is part of a trilogy with two sequels of its own, a point that receives little treatment in the critical literature that situates Adichie's work as an addition, extension, or sequel to Achebe's. *Purple Hibiscus* most closely resonates with *No Longer at Ease* (1960), which focuses on how individual characters negotiate the differences between Christianity and their Igbo traditions in the late 1950s. The novel tells the story of Nwoye's son (Okonkwo's grandson) who grows up during the 1940s, enters the colonial civil service in the late 1950s, and then, surprising both his peers and the colonial administration, succumbs to corruption. The novel combines this overtly political narrative of a Nigerian in the colonial civil service with a private narrative in which the main character wishes to marry his girlfriend who is *osu*, an outcast within the Igbo clan structure. The novel stands as a sequel to *Things Fall Apart* in the sense that it investigates, in a new historical moment, how families and individuals become divided against themselves in a later colonial moment. I do not pursue this comparison here because I want to emphasize the formal differences between the texts rather than the historical continuities between their storylines.

<sup>48</sup> This comparison has not escaped critical commentary (Ouma 2009, 49). Daria Tunca (2012) emphasizes its specific context in the Bill Broun's original review of 2004: "As Adichie later suggests... political truth has limitations. In this thinking, she is very much the 21st-century daughter of that other great Igbo novelist, Chinua Achebe." Neither Broun nor Tunca follow up with this comment about the limitations of "political truth," exploring how each text represents and critiques these limits.

<sup>49</sup> David Carroll includes an overview of "Igbo religion" in his introductory chapter of his well-known study of Achebe's works (1980, 17). According to Carroll, Achebe tells Okonkwo's story in a way that reveals the "radical contradiction between human and divine values" (49). Carroll emphasizes how this kind of contradiction between one's "human" loyalties (also explored in terms of family and the private sphere, 46-7) and "divine" demands leads to such moments of suffering. The psychic "cost to the individuals" who must bridge these two contradictory worlds

Gikandi reframes this traditional analysis and astutely argues the novel's complexity is generated instead by "Achebe's ability to bring competing *cultural* systems and their languages on to the same level of representation, dialogue, and contestation" (1991, xiii). I would add that the novel achieves this specifically through the representation of "customs" and "rituals."

Generally understood as "symbolic activity," ritual is contrasted with "instrumental behavior of everyday life" (Asad 1993, 55). The predominant question scholars bring to ritual, understood in this way, is one of meaning. As Talal Asad notes in "Toward a Genealogy of the Concept of Ritual" (1993) anthropologists seem to know "symbolic activity" when they see it, and the scholarly debate turns on how such activity is interpreted: what does this particular action *mean*? Ritual, understood in this way, operates within the paradigm of interpretation and explanation.<sup>50</sup> Asad's historical inquiry investigates how our contemporary concept of ritual became plausible. He notes that modern definitions (ca. 1910) conceptualize ritual primarily in terms of signifying behavior, contrasting it with practical or technically effective behavior (58). This differs from earlier definitions (ca. 1771) that conceptualize ritual as a manual primarily concerned with the apt performance of liturgical services (62). Noting this shift from "a script (a text to be read and performed) to an action (a social fact to be observed and inscribed)" (ibid), Asad argues there is a corresponding shift from understanding the skills required to perform the actions to interpreting the meaning of the actions in question. The first approach focuses on "abilities to be acquired," not "symbols to be interpreted" (ibid).<sup>51</sup>

Michael Valdez Moses, in *The Novel and The Globalization of Culture* (1995), provides a reading of "the ritual human sacrifice" of Ikemefuna early in *Things Fall Apart*. Ikemefuna is originally brought as compensation from a neighboring village where a man from Umuofia had been killed. The negotiation deters the two clans from warring with one another, and Ikemefuna

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is exorbitant. C. L. Innes similarly begins his analysis by noting that the first section of *Things Fall Apart* focuses on two things: "the portrayal of Okonkwo and his psychology, and the portrayal of the social, political and religious life of Umuofia" (1990, 22-23). Achebe himself, even recently in his autobiography largely about the Biafran war *There Was A Country* (2012), highlights the importance of growing up in an environment that allowed him to explore Christianity alongside the "religion" of his Igbo family: "I can say that my whole artistic career was probably sparked by this tension between the Christian religion of my parents, which we followed in our home, and the retreating, older religion of my ancestors, which fortunately for me was still active outside my home" (2012, 11).

<sup>50</sup> Catherine Bell's extensive work on ritual (Bell 1992, 1997) maps out the myriad theoretical debates within this paradigm and questions the universality of ritual activity, but it also demonstrates how deeply indebted the field is to the distinction between symbolic and instrumental behavior that Asad notes.

<sup>51</sup> When Asad goes on to focus on the *Rule* of Saint Benedict in the chapter, he discusses the "routine performance of the liturgy" (62): it is "a practice among others essential to the acquisition of Christian virtue" (63). For Asad, liturgy opens up a way of thinking the relation between "concepts of apt utterance and behavior" and "moral structures of the self" at a time when "ritual" is not yet understood exclusively in terms of expressive behavior. Asad distinguishes liturgy and ritual in historical terms, emphasizing that ritual has not always been understood as social action to be decoded. Liturgy (and the *Rule* of Saint Benedict in particular), as he presents it, offers an alternative way of understanding what constitutes ritual action, why it is undertaken, and how it weaves into the social fabric.

lives for three years with the protagonist Okonkwo and his family. When the clan decides he must, finally, be killed, an elder advises Okonkwo to stay at the back of the group and not “bear a hand in his death...He calls you father” (Achebe 1958, 49). In the end, Okonkwo is the one who “cut[s] him down” for fear of being thought weak (53). Moses takes up this scene because it poses such a clear ethical challenge to Achebe’s contemporary readers, whether African or Western (Moses 1995, 114). Citing Achebe’s “interest in functional anthropology” (ibid), Moses argues that Achebe intends to demonstrate how “traditional Igbo society, with all its limitations, shortcomings, and injustices, was nevertheless grounded upon an ethical foundation is at least comprehensible, if still antipathetic to a contemporary reader” (ibid). Moses relies on René Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) to explain that “ritual violence” has a “political and social function within premodern communities” (115). “In ritual terms,” Moses explains, “the innocence of the victim is understood as a sign of his *purity*,” which is central to his “symbolic identity” as “both inside and outside the community” (116). Ikemefuna, by staying with Okonkwo, becomes the “‘pure’ ritual victim” necessary for an “effective sacrifice” so that revenge (and war) is no longer required (ibid).

Moses’s reading of Ikemefuna’s death does not address the form of the novel but Ato Quayson’s reading of *Things Falls Apart* in *Calibrations: Reading for the Social* (2003) focuses on ritual action in order to foreground a broader problem of novelistic representation. Quayson identifies a foundational tension in *Things Fall Apart* between the novel’s engagement with “enchanted” and “disenchanted” time—a distinction drawn from Dipesh Chakrabarty’s essay “The Time of History and the Times of Gods” (1997).<sup>52</sup> Chakrabarty’s distinction articulates the problem of representing an enchanted world—in which the supernatural or the divine have agency—within a disenchanted world in which only humans have agency. After reflecting on the history of labor of the subaltern classes of India (Chakrabarty 1997, 40), Quayson considers the specific relevance of this problem to Achebe’s novel.<sup>53</sup> Quayson locates the “disenchanted” aspect of the novel in its narrator, who often functions as a “scientific ethnographer...translating the times of the gods into the time of history” (Quayson 2003, 143). In these moments, the novel submits the events and characters to an objective rather than mythical causality: supernatural factors are reported rather than displayed.

Quayson reads a scene featuring the *egwugwu*, the revered ancestor spirits that serve as the final authority of the Umuofian clan, suggesting that this authority is made possible through a “tacit social pact” followed by both the men who dress up and play the part of these spirits, and the women who recognize the disguised men (144). By calling attention to how this social pact

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<sup>52</sup> The essay, largely unaltered, returns as the third chapter, “Translating Life-Worlds into Labor and History,” of *Provincializing Europe* (2000). The citations refer to the essay. This essay prompted Ato Quayson to reconsider how *Things Fall Apart* might be read with more attention to how the Umuofian clan lives within a world inhabited by forces and spirits that cannot be easily dismissed as symptoms of false consciousness.

<sup>53</sup> Chakrabarty articulates the problem as an ethical one that historians confront when deciding how to treat the “presence” of the divine in academic prose: “How do we—and I mean narrators of the pasts of the subaltern classes in India—handle this problem of the presence of the divine or the supernatural in the very history of labor as we render this enchanted world into our disenchanted prose, a rendering required, let us say, in the interest of social justice? And how do we, in doing this, still retain the subaltern (in whose activity gods or spirits present themselves) as the subjects of their histories?” (40).

operates, the narrator “translates” the time of the gods into the time of history. Quayson contrasts this “ethnographic” aspect of the novel with the Igbo notion of *chi*, akin to the idea of a personal god or personal fate.<sup>54</sup> When Okonkwo’s gun accidentally goes off at a funeral, killing the dead man’s son, Okonkwo must go into exile. This event is explained in terms of his *chi*: “it seems that his *chi* has begun to say ‘no’ to his self-affirming ‘yes’” (144). For Quayson, this idea of *chi* “undermines the idea of a fully autonomous being that is so much an implicit assumption of modern historiography” (145). Achebe’s text thus maintains the tension between “disenchanted” time (i.e. the ethnographic representation of *egwugwu*) and “enchanted” time (i.e. the invocation of Okonkwo’s *chi*).

“The beauty of Achebe’s representation of historical configuration,” Quayson argues, “is that he respects this dichotomy [of enchanted and disenchanted time] as part of the problem of historical and ethnographic representation” (146). Quayson’s reading highlights the dilemmas of a fictional exploration of an historical past, while showing how literature holds open a dialectical relation between enchanted and disenchanted time (which history cannot do). Quayson argues that Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* provides a way of dissolving these dichotomies altogether, “raising in their place the possibility of dialectically grasping enchanted and disenchanted time in their simultaneity and inextricable codependence as mutually reinforcing understandings of the processes of transformation of cultures in the first place” (141).

Quayson’s argument, insofar as it remains indebted to Chakrabarty’s, is primarily concerned about the representation of agency. What forms of agency, he asks, can be articulated through the novel form? He concludes that compared to historical discourses, the novel offers a fuller representation of these other, “enchanted” ways of knowing. Quayson’s reading falters, however, when he emphasizes the “reality” and “unreality” of the *egwugwu*. As Quayson notes, the narrator suggests the women “might have noticed” the “springy walk” of an *egwugwu* and they “might also have noticed” Okonkwo’s absence among the elders, “but if they thought” this, they said nothing (Achebe 1958, 79). But these speculative remarks are immediately followed by an explanation for why these women remain silent: “The *egwugwu* with the springy walk was one of the dead fathers of the clan. He looked terrible with the smoked raffia body, a huge wooden face painted white...” (79). The narrator continues on describing his terrifying eyes, teeth, and horns. In other words, the broader passage operates in the language of transformation rather than representation. Okonkwo does not fail to disguise himself but rather is transformed into this *egwugwu*. The narrator speculates on what the women “might have” thought, but then makes a more authoritative claim about why such thoughts are notably absent from this scene in Umuofia.

This early reference to the *egwugwu* in terms of transformation in fact fits one of the principal narrative arcs of the novel. *Things Fall Apart* is centrally concerned with the conditions of possibility of such transformations, investigating them at the level of the individual, Okonkwo, and his clan. Rather than interpreting the meaning of ritual actions like the *egwugwu* processions, I want to consider how the novel employs them. What kinds of conflicts and confrontations are made possible through the novel’s presentation of rituals? In what follows here, I trace the development of the *egwugwu* and demonstrate how the climactic confrontation of the novel emerges out of these early scenes of ritual. At stake are precisely the issues of masking, disguise, and transformation which we have already encountered.

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<sup>54</sup> Achebe writes about “chi” as an important concept in “Igbo religion” in essay, “Chi in Igbo Cosmology” (1972) published in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*.

The entire tenth chapter describes the “communal ceremony” in which they participate: large crowds gather in the center of the village, the titled men and elders sit on stools in the center of the crowd, and nine empty stools are positioned slightly in front of them. A gong sounds repeatedly, a flute plays loudly, the tribe hears the spirits greeting one another in their “esoteric language,” and then the spirits appear from their house, which faces the forest away from the crowd, then process to their seats. Each of the nine *egwugwu* represents one of the nine villages that has grown out of the nine sons of the clan’s first father. The leader, Evil Forest, addresses “Uzowulu’s body,” as is the custom. Uzowulu touches the earth with this right hand as a sign of submission, and a trial proceeds. Uzowulu explains that his wife has gone back to her family and refuses to return to him. Her brother, Odukwe, explains the violent beatings his sister suffered in her marriage. The spirits dismiss claims of the woman’s infidelity: “What kind of lover sleeps with a pregnant woman?” Odukwe threatens to “cut off [Uzowulu’s] genitals” if he beats her again (81). After hearing witnesses, the *egwugwu* discuss the case in their house, and Evil Forest announces their verdict: they scold Uzowulu for beating his wife and tell him to bring wine to his in-laws and request his wife back; Odukwe and his brothers should let her go.

The final word on the matter is a brief exchange between two elders: “I don’t know why such a trifle should come before the *egwugwu*,” says one to the other. “Don’t you know what kind of man Uzowulu is? He will not listen to any other decision,” replies the other (83). The next case, we learn, concerns a great land dispute. This conclusion reveals a great deal about the role of the *egwugwu*. Their primary aim, as they themselves say, is to “settle the dispute,” not allocate praise or blame (82). The chapter provides insight into how such conflicts—and such characters—within the tribe are handled. Quayson’s point that the spirits are represented within the realist constraints of the novel (and hence do not fly or metamorphose) may be true, but misses the mark. One purpose of this chapter, I would counter, is to juxtapose this conflict with the later ones that the *egwugwu* are called to mediate.

The second scene in which they feature prominently occurs in Part three of the novel after Okonkwo returns from his 7-year exile. “He knew,” the narrator tells us, “that he had lost his place among the nine masked spirits who administered justice in the clan” (147)—a point readers would not have understood had we not learned about his “springy walk” in the earlier scene. He discusses the state of the clan with his good friend Obierika, specifically the white men’s church, government, and legal system. When Okonkwo insists that “we must fight these men and drive them from our land,” Obierika replies that it is already too late: “Our own sons have joined the ranks of the stranger.” Even if the clan could drive out the white men (there are only two of them, after all), the real problem lies with “our own people who are following their way and have been given power” (151). This division of the clan is evident in how a land dispute has been decided in the “white man’s court,” the land given to a family “who had given much money to the white man’s messengers and interpreter” (151). In the context of land disputes, this well-known exchange featuring the novel’s title takes place:

“Does the white man understand our custom about land?”

“How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.” (152)



The “things” referenced by the novel’s title are, quite specifically, the “customs” like the *egwugwu* trial with which the novel opens.

Pushing back against critical tendencies to equate such customs with “Igbo religion,” I want to ask more precisely how the central conflict of the novel is represented through these customs. By this point in the novel, there have been plenty of instances in which characters judge or question customs either of their own clan or of other clans. In the case of Ikemefuna’s death, Ezeudu advised Okonkwo that he should go with them outside Umuofia, “as is the custom” (49), but not participate in the killing. Earlier, a character describes a “bad custom” of a neighboring clan where they cast out the corpse of a man who dies during the “Week of Peace” (27). Men of title cannot tap palm trees in Umuofia, and while Okonkwo insists the “law of the land must be obeyed,” Obierika questions it, referring to other villages where it is done differently: “I don’t know how we got that law” (60). When Obierika is negotiating the bride price for his daughter, he criticizes other clans with “upside-down” customs where they “haggle... as if they were buying a goat or a cow in the market” (64). The novel thus makes it clear that there are differences between clans and disagreements within them about which customs ought to be observed and how they ought to be practiced. The novel as a whole does not stage a debate about which customs are good or bad, but rather about the fact that a position *outside* the clan has become available for those who wish to pronounce judgment on those customs. As the novel progresses, the negotiations between the clan and those who have taken up a position outside it—the converted—become more complex and more vexed and suspense mounts.

The climax erupts when two groups in the clan confront each other. The annual festival to honor the earth goddess falls on a Sunday when the Christian clan members have gone to church. The *egwugwu* are abroad in the village, preventing the women (who cannot gaze on the ancestral spirits) from returning home. The *egwugwu* have agreed to retire for a time to allow the women to pass by when Enoch, a young boisterous convert, boasts that “they would not dare to touch a Christian” (160). The *egwugwu* return to give him a good “stroke of the cane.” During the tussle, Enoch unmask[s] one of the spirits, thereby killing him. The conclusion of the novel traces how the clan responds to this unprecedented act. That night the Mother of the Spirits mourns for “her murdered son”: “Not even the oldest man in Umuofia had ever heard such a strange and fearful sound, and it was never to be heard again. It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming—its own death” (160). Okonkwo is the character who senses most acutely what is at stake in this moment; he is “deeply grieved” with the state of the clan when he returns from exile, and his grief is “not just a personal [one]”: “He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart” (157). The novel narrates the downfall of a great man alongside the disintegration of the clan. Both narratives are told through the “customs” of the *egwugwu* and pivot on Enoch’s unmasking of the *egwugwu*.

To address the killing of the ancestral spirit, the masked *egwugwu* of Umuofia “reduc[e] [Enoch’s compound] to a desolate heap” (162) and then proceed to the church in the forest to confront the priest and his interpreter. The masked spirits surround the two men, and the ensuing exchange clearly echoes the trial recounted earlier in the novel. The leading *egwugwu* addresses Mr. Smith in the customary manner: “The body of the white man, do you know me?” Neither the missionary nor the interpreter, who comes from a distant village, know how to respond. Ajofia laughs, “They are strangers ... But let that pass” (163). He continues with the ceremony as best he can, alternately addressing his fellow spirits and the missionary, and eventually delivering the verdict: the Christian men will not be harmed but the “shrine” must be destroyed since it has “bred untold abominations.” He turns to the missionaries and makes an offer: “You can stay with

us if you like our ways. You can worship your own god. It is good that a man should worship the gods and the spirits of his fathers” (164). This remarkable passage draws on the language of religious tolerance, distinguishing between the clan’s “ways” and their “gods.” The missionary does not accept their offer, insisting he will not see the “house of God [...] desecrated” (ibid). The interpreter, however, speaks “wisely to the spirits and leaders of Umuofia”: he thanks them for coming with their grievances and asks them to “leave the matter in [the missionary’s] hands” (164). The *egwugwu* insist: “We cannot leave the matter in his hands because he does not understand our customs, just as we do not understand his. We say he is foolish because he does not know our ways, and perhaps he says we are foolish because we do not know his” (164). They burn the church to the ground, leaving the men unharmed, and return to the village.

The novel thus develops a conflict about understanding ritual and customs practiced by other groups. The shift in Umuofia—which precipitates the clan’s dissolution—is the emergence of a distinct position from which to judge the clan’s practices. This reading of *Things Fall Apart* highlights the centrality of “customs” and, particularly, the practices of the *egwugwu*. It investigates neither what the rituals signify nor their social effects. By observing how the main conflict of the novel is articulated through the language of customs, we see that it is not just the clan that generally falls apart. Certain negotiations become impossible, too: land disputes cannot be settled, shared use of space cannot be negotiated, and, in the final scene, war cannot be declared. Insofar as the novel traces the decline and gestures toward the death of the clan, this decline is narrated specifically through the disintegration of these customs.

### **Palm Sunday**

If *Things Fall Apart* employs the language of customs and rituals to narrate a story of decline, *Purple Hibiscus* employs the language of ritual, specifically Catholic liturgy, to narrate a story of cyclical repetition. In the opening paragraph of *Purple Hibiscus*, we encounter, in a few sentences, the complex arrangement of time and language that liturgy creates in this novel. Significantly, these opening words are also a citation of *Things Fall Apart*:

Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère. We had just returned from church. Mama placed the fresh palm fronds, which were wet with holy water, on the dining table and then went upstairs to change. Later, she would knot the palm fronds into sagging cross shapes and hang them on the wall beside our gold-framed family photo. They would stay there until next Ash Wednesday, when we would take the fronds to church, to have them burned for ash. (3)

The paragraph opens by stating the particular violation—a refusal to go to communion—and a reaction to it—throwing the missal at Jaja. Both the offense and the punishment are articulated in liturgical terms, and the paragraph formally rehearses the cyclical rhythm of the liturgical calendar, moving from immediate present action (returning from church with wet palm fronds) to subjunctive future action (hanging the palm fronds and taking them to church almost a year later). The novel thus begins by projecting into the future, but this sense of futurity is precisely what Jaja interrupts and calls into question by not going to communion. Eugene’s violence is framed as a reaction to this kind of temporal interruption.

Immediately following this opening paragraph, Kambili goes on to recount what “Papa always did” at church. He “always” sits in the front pew” and is always the first to receive communion (4). He always kneels and “would hold his eyes shut so hard that his face tightened into a grimace” (ibid). The British priest insists that the Credo and the kyrie be recited in Latin—

“Igbo was not acceptable” (ibid)—but he allows “native songs” during the offertory. In his sermons, Kambili goes on to explain, the priest usually refers “to the pope, Papa, and Jesus—in that order” (ibid). Eugene has “a blank face” (5) during these sermons until he takes communion, after which he watches the congregation walk to the altar, reporting to Father Benedict when a person misses communion on two successive Sundays (6). These pages not only describe the regular Catholic liturgical practices for an uninitiated reader, they offer a detailed picture of what “Papa,” this priest, and this congregation do each Sunday in a continuous past tense—“would.” Although Kambili does not provide much explanation of what she describes, the Latin creed and prohibition of “native” songs indicate Eugene’s unwillingness to accept changes made to the Catholic liturgy (particularly those of the Second Vatican Council of 1963).<sup>55</sup> I will return to this point below, but Kambili’s early description of what her father “always does” already opens the question of how liturgical practices are established, maintained, and transformed.

This perspective on Eugene’s routine practices establishes the significance of Jaja’s refusal to take communion, and at this point, the novel circles back to the opening moment in which Eugene’s missal flies across the room. Jaja’s defiance is now understood to be operating on multiple levels simultaneously. In this second iteration of the opening scene, our focus is drawn more directly to Eugene’s missal—a book that contains the complete readings of the Catholic liturgy. When he flings it across the room, he does not violently launch just any object at his child, but the literal text of the liturgy. When Eugene confronts Jaja, he dramatically reminds him of the consequences of refusing to receive communion: “It is death, you know that” (7). Jaja replies coldly, “Then I will die....Then I will die, Papa.” This exchange, again with a nod to Achebe, precipitates violence:

Papa looked around the room quickly, as if searching for proof that something had fallen from the high ceiling, something he had never thought would fall. He picked up the missal and flung it across the room, towards Jaja. It missed Jaja completely, but it hit the glass *étagère*, which Mama polished often. It cracked the top shelf, swept the beige, finger-size ceramic figurines of ballet dancers in various contorted postures to the hard floor and then landed after them. Or rather it landed on their many pieces. It lay there, a huge leatherbound missal that contained the readings for all three cycles of the church year. (7)

Following the missal in its destructive flight through the room, this second description emphasizes the substantive weight of words. The liturgy not only has a specific temporality as it is practiced and observed, but it also exists as a book with heft, one that can be carried with devotion or thrown with rage. This opening act of violence is predicated on the literal power of words. When the action of the scene finally ceases, the “huge leatherbound missal” lies on top of the many pieces of the figurines, which, we later learn, Beatrice polishes to comfort herself each

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<sup>55</sup> This detail indicates that Father Benedict and Eugene were not supportive of the changes to the Catholic liturgy issued by the Second Vatican Council in 1963, which included dropping Latin in favor of vernacular languages. Vatican II is referenced but not developed in some critical literature (Stobie 2010, 423), and Adichie has referred to herself as a “Vatican II enthusiast” (Adichie in Adebani, n.d.). Catherine Bell points out in *Ritual* (1997) that such changes to the liturgy assume an ability to distinguish between those aspects of the liturgy which are “accidental” or human and those which are divine and revelatory. The former are legitimately alterable, while the latter are not (Bell 1997, 220). In *Purple Hibiscus*, Eugene implicitly rejects this distinction and the liturgical changes that followed from it.

time Eugene beats her. The words of the liturgy have broken the bodies of the dancers, and this renarrated opening image introduces a motif of words breaking bodies that resonates throughout the novel, in both liturgical and political cycles.

As the first section of the novel concludes, the text turns to investigate the *absence* of words and the *inability* to speak. The section's closing scene emphasizes how words erupt from the body—a point reiterated throughout the novel as we learn Kambili has never heard herself laugh and frequently stutters (77, 88, 148). The family is having lunch and we learn that a new flavor of juice has been released from one of Eugene's factories. Sisi, the cook, serves it to the family and Eugene awaits their compliments. Kambili notes the "faded-looking label" and finds the juice "watery" (12). However, she dutifully assures her father "it's very good," and Beatrice says it "tastes like fresh cashew" (13). Jaja says nothing, even though he is "supposed to...compliment Papa's new product [like] we always did" (ibid). Beatrice nervously adds that it tastes "just like white wine." Eugene thunders at Jaja, "Have you no words in your mouth?" Jaja simply replies, "I have nothing to say," refusing to follow the rigorous rules for family dialogue, just as scripted as the Sunday words of the missal.

Kambili notes the "shadow" of fear in Jaja's eyes is now in "Papa's." At this point, she recognizes the import of what is happening but cannot react with speech. Rather than filling her mouth with words, she grabs her glass of juice, "watery yellow, like urine," pours "all of it down [her] throat," and chokes herself (14). That evening, she vomits and develops a cough, a fever, and a headache: "Inside my head, thousands of monsters played a painful game of catch, but instead of a ball, it was a grown leatherbound missal that they threw to each other" (ibid). Words—and their absence—have physical effects in *Purple Hibiscus*: Jaja refuses to speak them, Eugene throws them, they make Kambili sick. In its first section, *Purple Hibiscus* thus emphasizes practices, words, and effects of time in its articulation of rituals both familial and liturgical.

*Purple Hibiscus*, with its multiple and varied uses of liturgy and ritual, draws simultaneously on what Asad describes as "script" and "action."<sup>56</sup> Eugene is deeply concerned

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<sup>56</sup> By speaking quite specifically of Catholic liturgy, I have, to this point, been concerned to demonstrate how Adichie's novel approaches liturgy in a more capacious sense than is traditionally associated with the term ritual. The distinction between ritual and liturgy has a lengthy and contentious history, which this chapter cannot avoid. Catherine Bell, in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (1992), insists on the benefit of the disciplinary shift from the older category of liturgy (which is often opposed to "their" magic) to ritual (6). She acknowledges the problem of the presumed universality of "ritual," and she challenges the ways that ritual is sometimes thought to offer "a key to culture" (7). In *Ritual* (1996), Bell focuses more explicitly on mapping theoretical approaches to ritual, attending to the histories of academic conversations. In this context, she notes how "liturgical studies [rarely] concern themselves with the idea of ritual in general" (89). By using both terms liturgy and ritual in my argument, I am highlighting my specific focus on Catholic liturgy and investigating how both *Purple Hibiscus* and *Things Fall Apart* articulate the relationship between these liturgical practices, concepts, and stories and those practices, concepts, and stories of traditional Igbo life. Both novels investigate this relation, and my critical language means to highlight how each text does this differently. Rather than solving the problem in advance through my terminology, I hold liturgy and ritual in tension through this chapter to see how these novels develop and employ the categories and, more importantly, the practices, texts, and temporalities that are taken to constitute these categories.

about the “apt performance” of the liturgy—gravely warning his son “it is death” if he does not take the Eucharist correctly and regularly. Later in the novel, he punishes Jaja, Kambili, and Beatrice for helping Kambili break the Eucharistic fast, eating some cereal so she can take a painkiller for her menstrual cramps. Eugene carries the missal in his hands, treating the liturgy quite literally as script—a text to be revered deeply and followed precisely. The novel carefully describes and formally employs collective practices like communion and liturgical holidays like Palm Sunday and Pentecost. Liturgy orders time, on the small scale, as when one goes to communion, and on the large scale, as when one burns the palm branches for next year’s ash. By conceiving of liturgy in terms of practices, texts, and time, *Purple Hibiscus* employs liturgy and ritual to innovative ends.

The novel’s use of Palm Sunday and, later, Pentecost as structuring devices, opens up the question of the symbolic meaning of these liturgical holidays. To what extent, we might ask, must a reading of the novel account for what Palm Sunday and Pentecost “mean” or “represent”?<sup>57</sup> Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week, which culminates on Easter Sunday the following week. The day celebrates Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem a week before his crucifixion, marking a misplaced and, ultimately, ironic praise and celebration. It offers a meditation on misrecognition: Jesus the spiritual king is mistaken for a political king.<sup>58</sup> Palm Sunday, then, becomes part of a story of necessary disillusionment: political emancipation from Roman rule was never Jesus’ aim, the story goes, and so people must be taught that spiritual emancipation is possible even under political oppression. The victory of Easter occurs in a spiritual, not political register. Palm Sunday turns on questions of political and spiritual emancipation, and specifically how they prompt misrecognition, confusion, and violence.

The particular events of Palm Sunday, insofar as they entail the ostensible misrecognition of spiritual emancipation for political emancipation, thus return us to the broad outlines of the paradoxical relation so frequently asserted between Eugene’s repressive religion and progressive politics. There is no simple parallel between Eugene or Kambili and the actors involved in the day that Palm Sunday commemorates (i.e. an allegorical reading), but as the novel progresses, the text employs a complex idea of liturgy to investigate the limits of Eugene’s conception of political change.

### **Circling Back**

The second section of *Purple Hibiscus*, entitled “Speaking With Our Spirits: Before Palm Sunday,” introduces a counterpoint to the liturgical elements of the novel—namely, the military coup and political events that preoccupy Eugene, events which are also configured in cyclical terms and temporalities. The narrative picks up shortly before Pentecost—a liturgical holiday seven weeks after Easter and almost a year before the Palm Sunday to which the novel repeatedly returns. The reference to Pentecost, like Palm Sunday, operates on several levels.

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<sup>57</sup> The question itself indicates how central a critic’s theory of ritual proves to their reading of a novel in which ritual is represented. I am wary of developing an allegorical reading that interprets the novel’s events through a determined meaning of Palm Sunday, and yet I recognize that the novel builds on the significance of these liturgical holidays.

<sup>58</sup> Kurt Vonnegut captures this point well in a sermon he gave on Palm Sunday in which he comments on the satirical tone of the day. He had asked an Episcopalian priest what he should say about Palm Sunday itself: “She told me to say that it was a brilliant satire on pomp and circumstance and high honors in this world” (Vonnegut 1981, 325).

First, it emphasizes the centrality of language and speech to the novel. The story of Pentecost marks the giving of the Holy Spirit to Christ's apostles after his ascent to heaven. It is told in the New Testament in Acts, a passage that provides the section's title: "And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other languages, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:3-4). If Pentecost recalls the early success and excitement of fledgling Christianity (the New Testament story recounts how many were converted as they heard the story of the resurrection in their own language), *Purple Hibiscus* moves in the opposite direction. The "other languages" in Eugene's home are notably *unspoken* as Jaja and Kambili speak with their eyes. Their father writes out precise, daily routines, indicating when each child eats, studies, plays, and sleeps. Kambili and Jaja's "eye language" revolves around this schedule. Jaja now attends a different school: "*I wish we still had lunch together*, Jaja said with his eyes" (22). When they learn that Eugene will be in a meeting, Jaja says "with his eyes," "*We can spend time together then*" (59). This "eye language" (108), spoken through their "spirits," is only possible within the context of the rigid family schedules that Eugene maintains. For example, when Aunt Ifeoma, Eugene's sister, invites Jaja and Kambili to visit her in Nsukka, Kambili nervously notes it will be the first time she and Jaja sleep away from home without their father. While she is eager to go, "I could not find the words in our eye language to tell [Jaja] how my throat tightened at the thought of five days without Papa's voice, without his footsteps on the stairs" (108). As the father's control over the family is challenged, particularly through Jaja's actions, this "language" becomes even more difficult to speak. Kambili's desires continue to outgrow it (252) and Jaja's eyes become "blank" (289) and "hardened" (305). As the novel progresses, their eye language falters, and Kambili must forge new ways of speaking.

By foregrounding Pentecost, the novel draws on the liturgical calendar to open up questions of what it means to speak in "other languages," particularly those of the "spirit." And as I emphasized in my reading of Palm Sunday, *Purple Hibiscus* weaves the detailed liturgical practices together with the family's experience of Eugene's violence. Beatrice shares the news of her pregnancy with Kambili, and "by Pentecost Sunday," Kambili notes, "Mama's belly" has grown, "elevat[ing] her red and gold embroidered church wrapper" (28). The altar is decorated in the same color: "Red was the color of Pentecost" (ibid). Colors are paired with liturgical seasons (purple for Advent, white for Christmas, green for the time after Pentecost, etc.), but the red of Pentecost comes to haunt Kambili when, after her mother refuses to greet the priest because of her morning sickness, she hears "swift, heavy thuds" from her parents' room (32). Kambili and Jaja emerge from their rooms to see their father carry their mother down the stairs, "slung over his shoulder like the jute sacks of rice his factory workers bought in bulk at the Seme Border" (33), a trickle of blood trailing down the stairs. They rush to clean it up: "Jaja scrubbed while I wiped" (ibid). Days later, Kambili cannot focus on her textbooks. The letters change "to a bright red, the red of fresh blood" (35), and throughout the term, the words in her textbooks keep "turning into blood" (37). Kambili describes her experience of her father's violence through these embodied liturgical practices with their highly symbolic colors.

In the presentation of Palm Sunday and Pentecost, *Purple Hibiscus* draws on the Catholic liturgy to frame religious fanaticism as an insistence on apt liturgical performance. On the one hand, Eugene understands himself to be punishing his wife and children for neglecting these liturgical practices. On the other hand, the novel also represents his physical violence as perversions, reversals, and reiterations of these practices. Kambili cannot stop seeing red and describes her headache as a missal being thrown in her head. The novel literalizes her perception

of Eugene's violence, and this eventually becomes a way to counter Eugene's religious fanaticism.

If Eugene reacts violently to disruptions of liturgical practice, he has the opposite response to the degenerating political cycles that he sees plaguing postcolonial Nigeria. When a coup is announced early in the novel, Eugene warns his children of the coming cycle of violence:

Coups beget coups, he said, telling us about the bloody coups of the sixties, which ended up in a civil war just after he left Nigeria to study in England. A coup always began a vicious cycle. [...] what we Nigerians needed was not soldiers ruling us, what we needed was a renewed democracy. *Renewed Democracy*. It sounded important, the way he said it, but then most of what Papa said sounded important. (23-24)

Eugene works to bring about this renewed democracy through his newspaper, *The Standard*, and the narrative oscillates between his efforts to disrupt the "vicious cycle" of this political coup and the painful cycle of his own domestic violence. Eugene, of course, sees no contradiction here; he believes he is pursuing pure, committed, ethical behavior in all his actions. It is Kambili's narrative perspective that opens up this question to more nuance. As a young fifteen-year-old who has grown up in the shadow of her father, Kambili presents these parallel cycles without extensive commentary. But the novel itself employs these parallel cycles in a more sophisticated manner than Kambili, generating a critique of the naïve theories of political activism so readily celebrated by the international community.

The novel advances by moving back and forth between the political controversy surrounding the *Standard* and the increasingly unsustainable relationship between Eugene and his family. As the novel progresses, it builds suspense within these political and the familial cycles, each becoming increasingly violent. Eugene and his editor, Ade Coker, publish a story that proves the leaders of the coup are deeply involved in the drug trade and have concealed this by falsely charging and executing men for drug trafficking. The government becomes increasingly angry with Eugene's and Ade's refusal to back down. Meanwhile, Jaja and Kambili visit Eugene's sister Ifeoma in Nsukka, where she is a university professor. During this visit, their grandfather becomes ill and Ifeoma brings him to Nsukka to care for him. Her father has emphasized that the colonial missionaries saved him from his heathen family: "My father spent his time worshipping gods of wood and stone. I would be nothing today but for the priests and sisters at the mission" (47). Because his father still worships "wood and stone," Eugene forbids him from entering his large, luxurious compound in the village. Eugene generally forbids Jaja and Kambili to have any interaction with his "heathen," "idol-worshipping" father beyond one fifteen-minute visit each Christmas. When Kambili and Jaja stay twenty-five minutes one year, she worries that Eugene will slap them "and his palm would make that sound, like a heavy book falling from a library shelf in school" (69). Throughout their extended visit to Nsukka, Kambili and Jaja come to know their grandfather for the first time. The suspense of the novel builds simultaneously on these two stories: one, will the state, in its effort to bolster its power in the wake of the coup, turn its violence onto the newspaper's staff or Eugene himself? Two, how severely will Eugene punish his children when he finds out they have not told him their "heathen" grandfather is staying with them at Ifeoma's house? The plot relies on the expectation that these conflicts will be resolved according to the cyclical patterns established.

The political escalation is narrated indirectly through overheard conversations and reported telephone calls. When Ade Coker is arrested, Jaja sneaks downstairs and listens through the living room door, reporting back to Kambili what he hears. While Jaja and Kambili are visiting Ifeoma, Beatrice calls to explain that the police have shut down the editorial offices of

the *Standard*, smashing the printers and furniture, then boarding up the office (146-7). After Jaja and Kambili return home, Kambili overhears a debate between Ade Coker, another editor, and Eugene about whether or not they should run a story about the murder of a prominent democratic activist.<sup>59</sup> When it gets heated, they retire to Eugene's study and Kambili's access to details is cut off (199-200). When the paper arrives, the story is on the front page (200-1). The next chapter tells the story of Ade Coker's death: he is having breakfast with his family and opens a package from the government at the table: it turns out to be a bomb. Kambili has nightmares about "Ade Coker's charred remains spattered on his dining table, on his daughter's school uniform, on his baby's cereal bowl" (207). These events threaten Eugene's own safety even as the novel escalates the danger Eugene poses to his own family.

While these political events are narrated indirectly, the main narrative follows Kambili as she develops a relationship with her grandfather even while "pray[ing] that Papa would never find out" (149). Inevitably, Eugene does find out when Papa-Nnukwu dies and Ifeoma calls to inform her brother. He arrives immediately, furious with them all. He takes Jaja and Kambili home and, as expected, punishes them. The ensuing scene is the most explicit representation of violence in the novel—violence which is directly tied to the colonial missionary history that Eugene reenacts. The scene generates horror by emphasizing the unpredictability of Eugene's actions: "I did not know what he was going to do to me" (193). He calls Kambili upstairs and tells her to get into the bathtub. He questions her: did she know her grandfather was coming, that she would "sleeping in the same house as a heathen" (194)? She "saw the sin clearly and...walked right into it" (ibid)? He then pours boiling water onto her feet and as she screams, he says, "That is what you do to yourself when you walk into sin. You burn your feet" (ibid). Beatrice picks her up and bandages her feet, and later that night, Eugene comes in to speak with Kambili. He tells her the history of his terrible punishment. As a young man he stayed with a priest while attending school, and the priest found him "commit[ting] a sin against [his] own body" (196). The priest asked him to boil water for tea and then soaked Eugene's hands in it. *Purple Hibiscus* frames Eugene's violence in terms of a colonial history that remains entangled with his contemporary observation of Catholic liturgical practice.

The novel thus presents multiple, interlocking cyclical dynamics. Eugene strictly observes Catholic liturgical practice—itsself characterized through cyclical texts and temporalities—in a way that repeats and reiterates Nigeria's colonial missionary history. Political events of postcolonial Nigeria too appear to repeat themselves in discouraging cycles of corruption and tyranny, but characters' involvement in and reaction to these dynamics cannot be equated with the novel's treatment of them. Such a distinction is key to my reading of the climactic scene, a violent confrontation between Eugene and Kambili, which could easily be read as the culmination of these ever-intensifying cycles. Several characters—Beatrice in particular—read it in this way, and the final third of the novel traces their efforts to break the cycle of Eugene's violence, echoing his own approach to the violence he observes in the political realm. Kambili's experience and description of this confrontation, however, opens the novel out into a larger discussion about these "cycles" and how one might disrupt them differently.

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<sup>59</sup> Critics often note the similarities between the character of Ade Coker and the historical figure of Dele Giwa, the editor of the respected Nigerian *Newswatch*, who in October 1986 was killed by a letter bomb (Andrade 2011). The political activist whose murder also features in the novel is loosely fashioned on the environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa who was killed in 1995, a murder for which Nigeria was temporarily suspended from the British commonwealth.



## Painted Bodies

The violence erupts when Eugene discovers a secret painting of Papa-Nnukwu—Kambili's parting gift from her older cousin, Amaka. Jaja's parting gift—shoots from Ifeoma's purple hibiscus plant—accounts for the title of the novel: Ifeoma's friend, a lecturer in botany, has done "a lot of experimental work" (128) at the university and creates hibiscuses that have purple rather than the standard red blooms. Jaja is struck by their beauty no less than the experimentation that produces them. Kambili's gift is more artistic: a paper rolled up and wrapped in black cellophane, Amaka's unfinished painting of Papa-Nnukwu as he is dying. Kambili describes the "delicate" silence in the room while Amaka paints, their low voices "twining together" (165). The intimacy between them creates a "longing for something I knew I would never have" (*ibid.*), and when Kambili enters the kitchen, Auntie Ifeoma asks her why she has tears in her eyes. The next morning Ifeoma wakes Kambili early and urges her to go watch her grandfather on the verandah.

What follows is Kambili's precise description of Papa-Nnukwu's morning Igbo prayer, without any knowledge of what it means. Written in an anthropological style of observation, she describes his body and his gestures in great detail. With each prayer he offers, he draws a line on the ground, "quickly, with a fierce determination that shook the flesh on his arms, which was hanging low like a brown leather pouch" (167). She notes the transformation in his body when he finishes—"the rumples in [his] belly did not seem so many now" and his "navel rose higher" (168). He is smiling as she quietly leaves, and she compares this with her family's practice of reciting the rosary: "I never smiled after we said the rosary back home. None of us did" (169). While Ifeoma and Kambili both make explicit comparisons between Papa-Nnukwu's Igbo practice and the Catholic rosary, the scene does not equate these ostensibly comparable forms of ritualized prayer. The emphasis falls, instead, on the transformative effect Papa-Nnukwu's prayer has on his body—an effect notably absent from her experience. The fact that Amaka's unfinished painting is, above all, a representation of Papa-Nnukwu's body holds particular significance for Kambili—and also, we learn in the crucial scene of its discovery, for Jaja and Eugene.

One afternoon a few weeks after Coker's death, while their father is visiting with the priest, Jaja comes into Kambili's room and asks to see the painting. He runs "his deformed finger over the paint, the finger that had very little feeling," the result of a particularly vicious beating years prior. He comments to Kambili that he has "Papa-Nnukwu's arms [...] Can you see? I have his arms" (209). Kambili says her brother sounds like "someone in a trance... as if he had forgotten that his finger had little feeling in it" and they stare at the painting together silently, "for a very long time" (*ibid.*). Kambili knows their father will come in, "wearing his wine-red pajamas" and Jaja will not have enough time to "slip the painting back in the bag" (*ibid.*), which is exactly what happens. When Eugene asks who brought the painting into the house, both of them claim it. Eugene grabs it from Jaja and rips it up: "The painting was gone. It already represented something lost, something I had never had, would never have. Now even that reminder was gone, and at Papa's feet lay pieces of paper streaked with earth-tone colors" (210).

Kambili's reaction at this point intensifies Eugene's anger still further. She "suddenly and maniacally imagined Papa-Nnukwu's body being cut in pieces that small and stored in a fridge" (210). She shrieks and "dash[es] to the pieces on the floor as if to save them, as if saving them would mean saving Papa-Nnukwu" (*ibid.*). She lays on the pieces of the painting, curled tightly around them "like the picture of a child in the uterus" (*ibid.*) in her textbook, and her father begins to kick her. Like Jaja as he touches the painting, Eugene now enters a trance as he

punishes Kambili: “He talked nonstop, out of control, in a mix of Igbo and English, life soft meat and thorny bones. Godlessness. Heathen worship. Hellfire. The kicking increased in tempo, and I thought of Amaka’s music...” (210-11). As all three characters enter into a non-linguistic space, Kambili loses consciousness, and the narrative breaks off.

Critics have read Kambili’s action here as “defiant” (Hewitt 2005, 83) or “rebellious” (Andrade 2011, 95), and they have emphasized the trance-like state Eugene enters when he beats his family.<sup>60</sup> Wallace also notes how this scene functions as a “climax” but describes it as a “confrontation between Eugene’s patriarchal authority and Kambili’s newfound voice and agency” (2016, 177). I am reluctant to adopt the language of agency, resistance, and defiance which has dominated the critical reception of this scene. Kambili lays on the floor like “a child in the uterus” (210); her act is neither conscious nor premeditated. She proves unable (either as character or as narrator) to explain or account for her own actions in the language of agency or resistance. These readings overlook Kambili’s own infantile, pre-linguistic posture and, even more significantly, her sudden slip into a kind of literalism.

Kambili “suddenly and maniacally” substitutes the body of her grandfather for the painting of his body. She reacts to the destroyed body-image, not to Eugene as an authority to be defied. It is important to emphasize here that Kambili is the one who reads the painting literally. The scene does not present literal reading as a feature of religious fanaticism but rather as an act by which such fanaticism is confronted and, possibly, countered. The peculiar shift to the literal in this climactic scene resonates with my earlier analysis of the red of Pentecost. Kambili describes how the liturgical color blurs with the drops of her mother’s blood, and she finds herself unable to read. The letters of the texts turn red and all she sees is blood. In both the Pentecost and painting scenes, Kambili can only see the body, not the body’s representation in text or image. Neither Kambili as a character nor Kambili as the novel’s first-person narrator looking back on these events correct or explain this experience of the body.

I am interested less in asking *why* Kambili shifts to the literal in each of these cases (her immaturity? her experience of trauma?) and more in asking what such a shift *does* within the form of the novel. In both cases, I have demonstrated, the novel arrives at this shift through liturgical and ritual practices. Liturgy and ritual are not cast as oppressive practices to be resisted. They provide concepts, images, and practices by which Kambili can, in the first case, communicate her experience of her father’s violence at Pentecost and, in the second, observe and admire her grandfather and his praying body. Through its narrative structure, the novel remains closely tied to Kambili’s experience of ritual and liturgy. *Purple Hibiscus* may encounter the limits of its restricted and cloistered young narrator, but these limits, I am arguing, allow the novel to present a distinctly different perspective on religious fanaticism and how one might respond to it. The final third of the novel increasingly contrasts Kambili’s perspective on her father with that of other characters. How does the novel, I ask, employ Kambili’s narratorial limits to critique the standard idea that one must “break” these myriad cycles of violence?

This question emerges most explicitly as Ifeoma confronts the increasingly impossible political climate at the University of Nsukka. Her name has been placed on a list of lecturers who

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<sup>60</sup> Earlier in the novel when Eugene punishes Jaja, Kambili, and Beatrice for helping Kambili take pain medication for her menstrual cramps, he beats them with his belt, all the while “muttering that the devil would not win” (102). Cynthia Wallace notes how Eugene’s violence in this scene and in the painting scene is “accompanied by an unhinged verbal refrain” (Wallace 2016, 174).

are “disloyal,” and security agents search her flat, throwing everything into disarray looking for evidence that she has been supporting student riots (protesting lack of electricity). As Ifeoma deliberates about emigrating to the United States, she has a heated debate with one of her colleagues, who finally expresses her disappointment with Ifeoma’s politics, offering a standard explanation of the cycle of tyranny: “The educated ones leave, the ones with the potential to right the wrongs. They leave the weak behind. The tyrants continue to reign because the weak cannot resist. Do you not see that it is a cycle? Who will break that cycle?” (244-5). Ifeoma’s 14-year-old son responds impetuously: “That is simply unrealistic pep-rally nonsense, Aunty Chiaku.” Ifeoma does leave, in the end, though her departure is marked by resignation. Her son names one of the key questions the novel is posing: is political change best conceived in terms of disrupting a degenerating political cycle?

The end of the novel confronts this “pep-rally nonsense” directly when it tells the story of Eugene’s death—someone who seemed to have the potential to “right the wrongs.” Eugene’s demise is anticipated throughout the novel. The state bribes him, threatens him, and even kills his editor. His resiliency and principled resistance against such coercion is widely admired, both nationally and internationally. Eugene is the model postcolonial citizen according to a certain discourse of development economics and secular politics: his successful factories contribute to the developing market economy (no black market loyalties here), he distributes his wealth among those in his home village, he acts on his ethical vision of free speech, and he contains his devout Catholicism in the private sphere. As the novel explores the practices, logics, and histories that construct such a “model citizen,” however, these qualities no longer appear to be unquestioned goods. Insofar as *Purple Hibiscus* concludes with the death of the main defender of the free press, it refuses to advance ostensibly democratic politics at any cost.

In the end, though, it is not the state that kills Eugene. Jaja is arguably correct when he reassures Kambili that their father has sufficient “foreign connections” (202) to discourage the state from killing him.<sup>61</sup> We learn that instead Beatrice slowly poisons his tea. She turns his own rituals against him, poisoning the tea that he always drank from the china tea set “with pink flowers on the edges,” always offering a “love sip” to Kambili and Jaja (8). The image of Kambili “hold[ing] the cup with both hands and rais[ing] it to [her] lips” mimics communion, the very practice Jaja refuses in the novel’s opening scene (8). The significance of Beatrice’s act is clear to Kambili who immediately thinks of the “love sips, the scalding liquid that burned his

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<sup>61</sup> By ending with the murder of such a hero of democracy, the novel confronts, on the one hand, the limits of the postcolonial state’s sovereignty and, on the other hand, the limits of the international discourse of African “development.” If sovereignty means, as Mbembe argues in “Necropolitics,” “the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not” (27, emphasis original), Adichie has created a character in Eugene who is situated at the limits of the postcolonial state’s sovereignty. He, we come to learn, is not disposable, but it is not the state who has determined this. While the danger is real to his staff, the novel suggests that there would be repercussions for the state if it were to kill him. Eugene “matters,” in brief, but this is established in spite of the state (which would eagerly eliminate him). Eugene’s life is sustained by a careful tension maintained between the Nigerian state and its international overseers. His murder surprises them both, and the end of the novel traces how his death enters the narratives of both institutions.

love onto my tongue” (290). She screams at her mother, “Why in his tea?” (ibid).<sup>62</sup> Beatrice’s violence is facilitated through the rituals that provoke Eugene to do so much harm, and Kambili responds directly to this repurposing of the rituals.

Critics have balked at the realism of such a resolution of his violence. Even within the novel, Beatrice’s confessions to the murder are dismissed by other characters. She tells people about the poison, writes letters to the newspaper, refuses to wear black, and declines to attend the “first- and second-year memorial Masses” (296). “[N]obody listened to her,” though, attributing her words and actions to “grief and denial” (ibid). Critics inadvertently reinforce this dismissal of her agency by emphasizing her passivity.<sup>63</sup> The novel, however, situates this refusal to hear Beatrice’s confession within a broader investigation of the possibility of women speaking at all in the wake of Eugene’s death. Rather than celebrating the emancipation of Kambili and Beatrice from Eugene and of Ifeoma from the police, the end of the novel presents a modest, if not pessimistic, vision of these women speaking. *Purple Hibiscus* thus does not naïvely celebrate a break in the cycle of oppression; it concludes by referring back to liturgical texts and practices, which were introduced earlier in the text, to present a more contradictory view of the effects on these women of having taken action.

### **Experimental Freedom**

The final section of *Purple Hibiscus* is narrated in the present tense and stands at a distance from the novel’s main events. Jaja, who has given himself up for arrest in the place of his mother, has been in prison for three years, Ifeoma and her family have migrated to the United States, and Kambili describes her life in these new circumstances. This shift in perspective echoes the well-known ending of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, in which a District Commissioner reflects on what he has learned “in the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa” (179). He considers how Okonkwo’s story might feature in his planned book, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. This dismissive treatment of such a complex character, of course, is dwarfed by the novel that has just told the story of Okonkwo’s life and death, of customs incomprehensible within the dominant narrative of the colonizers.

*Purple Hibiscus* employs a similar structural technique, but the dominant narrative against which the novel asserts itself is told not by the colonizers but by international, pro-democracy activists. Kambili recounts the imminent release of Jaja. During his imprisonment, the head of state against which Eugene had so adamantly spoken has been killed and a regime change has ensued. The pro-democracy groups immediately call for an investigation into Eugene’s death, insisting that the old regime killed him (297). The family’s lawyers take advantage of this political climate, and Jaja’s name is eventually added to a list of prisoners of conscience. Jaja, however, is not a political prisoner; he is serving a sentence for murder in his

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<sup>62</sup> Wallace notes that Beatrice “finally” chooses to protect herself and her children by poisoning Eugene’s “British tea with tribal medicine” (180). As for the “love sips,” Wallace focuses on Kambili’s burned tongue and the image it creates of Kambili’s inability to speak (173).

<sup>63</sup> Andrade argues that Beatrice, like Maiguru of Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, “becomes silly” (97). Beatrice’s decision to poison Eugene “runs counter to her general passivity” (ibid) but she then returns to passivity at the end, allowing Jaja to take the blame for her act. Andrade contrasts Beatrice with Ifeoma but makes no reference to Ifeoma’s letters that suggest her own declining ability to speak boldly at the novel’s end.

mother's stead, an oversight made both by the pro-democracy groups and the new regime.<sup>64</sup> The novel emphasizes Kambili's happiness rather than the ostensible error of the protestors and the disingenuous arguments of the lawyers. The ambivalence this creates towards pro-democracy activists in *Purple Hibiscus* is striking. The novel has told the story of what these protestors cannot see. They cannot see the violence that accompanies Eugene's devout Catholicism, and Beatrice's confession of guilt is patronizingly dismissed as the mad ravings of a bereaved woman. But we know Eugene's abusive violence, Beatrice's reactionary violence, and Kambili's contrasting response in detail, stories that are relegated outside the narrative of the political activists who can only see Eugene as a hero.

If the pro-democracy groups blindly persist in their efforts to break the cycle of political tyranny, the novel attends to the more subtle ways that the principal characters have responded to the cyclical rhythms that have animated the text. Kambili describes how Beatrice, Ifeoma, and Jaja enter into a different kind of silence, each unable to articulate his or her experience, while she—as our narrator—emerges as the one who can speak. These shifts in silence and speech are articulated by returning to the liturgical images and rhythms developed throughout the novel.

Of any character, Beatrice most successfully breaks the cycle of violence, but the novel concludes by emphasizing her inability to confess or claim her action in any way—not because she does not say it but because no one can hear her. Although she secures safety for her family from Eugene, the novel undermines any lasting change such a radical act may have, since her act is impossible to articulate. She eventually goes silent, only nodding and rarely replying when addressed (298). Ifeoma's bold voice is muted in a different way. She frequently writes letters from the United States to Kambili, describing the “huge tomatoes and the cheap bread,” but sometimes, Kambili says, “her letters go on and on until the ink gets smudgy and I am not always sure what she is talking about” (301). Her written voice loses the confidence and clarity that characterized Ifeoma, and while Kambili does not seem sufficiently politically aware to understand this, she mentions a passage Ifeoma writes about people in the U.S. “who think that we cannot rule ourselves because the few times we tried, we failed, as if all the others who rule themselves today got it right the first time” (ibid). Ifeoma does not frame her own actions in terms of breaking a cycle of tyranny, and her frustration with simplistic judgments of success or failure comes much closer to the broader perspective advanced by the novel as a whole.

To some extent, Kambili shares this struggle to speak and write. She can no longer speak with Jaja's eyes—“those eyes that have hardened a little every month he has spent here [in prison]” (305). She acknowledges the “silence [that] hangs over” them, but she draws on the images of Pentecost to describe its difference from the silence Eugene imposed: “I have nightmares about the other kind, the silence of when Papa was alive. In my nightmares, it mixes with shame and grief and so many other things that I cannot name, and forms blue tongues of fire that rest above my head, like Pentecost, until I wake up screaming and sweating” (305). Kambili describes the strange form of alchemy that generates these blue flames. She confronts her own inability to describe her experience of her father, but these inarticulable “things” combine with the silence to produce a distinct image of blue flames. In the story of Pentecost, the blue flames are taken to represent the Holy Spirit, and as they rest on people, they begin to “speak in other

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<sup>64</sup> The particular context of Jaja's release has received scant critical attention. Wallace sees in this news a “subtle increase of hope for mother and daughter” (2016, 182) but does not mention that Jaja's release is predicated on a repetition of the political cycles of coups that Eugene was so adamantly and (for some) admirably working to disrupt.

tongues” (Acts 2:4). The excess of communicative ability in the Biblical story is replaced in the novel with Kambili’s subconscious sweating and screaming. Her attempts to leave this kind of silence behind emerge through her relationship to another set of written texts.

The other set of letters Kambili regularly receives come from Father Amadi, a young priest with whom Kambili has fallen in love. Since western Europe is losing priests, he has moved to Germany as a missionary.<sup>65</sup> As Kambili reflects on her love for Father Amadi—how is she to understand her love for a celibate man?—she describes her relationship to his letters.<sup>66</sup> She always carries his latest letter with her, and it is not, she insists “because of anything lovey-dovey” (303). His letters, she says, “dwell on me” (ibid):

And I carry them with me, also, because they give me grace. Amaka says people love priests because they want to compete with God, they want God as a rival. But we are not rivals, God and I, we are simply sharing. I no longer wonder if I have a right to love Father Amadi; I simply go ahead and love him. I no longer wonder if the checks I have been writing to the Missionary Fathers of the Blessed Way are bribes to God; I just go ahead and write them. I no longer wonder if I chose St. Andrew’s church in Enugu as my new church because the priest there is a Blessed Way Missionary Father as Father Amadi is; I just go. (303-4)

This passage returns us to the opening image of Eugene carrying the missal with him each Sunday, but it asserts a different relation between the texts and the one who carries them. Kambili’s repeated refrain, “I no longer wonder,” marks the distance she has taken from questions of interpretation, which dominated her father’s understanding of the missal. Rather than asking what her actions mean, she “simply goes” and “just does.” If ritual activity, as Asad has argued, has come to be understood in the modern age primarily as symbolic activity that calls for interpretation, then this novel positions itself at a distance from such an understanding. The question of meaning no longer dominates Kambili’s perspective on liturgy and ritual.

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<sup>65</sup> The discussion of Father Amadi’s departure for Germany is another clear instance in which *Purple Hibiscus* engages the events of *Things Fall Apart*, in this case explicitly bringing events “full circle,” narrating the story of a priest going from Africa to Europe as a missionary. Amaka raises this with Father Amadi, arguing that “the white missionaries brought us their god [...] which was the same color as them, worshiped in their language and packaged in the boxes they made. Now that we take their god back to them, shouldn’t we at least repackage it?” (267). Father Amadi teases her in response: “We go mostly to Europe and America, where they are losing priests. So there is really no indigenous culture to pacify, unfortunately” (ibid). The reference to pacification recalls the final pages of Achebe’s novel and the terrible title of the District Commissioner’s imaginary book, which I referenced above.

<sup>66</sup> Wallace emphasizes the ethical ambiguity of the attraction between Father Amadi and Kambili (see 178-180). The novel foregrounds this ambiguity through a dream Kambili has (a passage that Wallace does not mention): “I wanted to tell [Amaka] about my dream where a man chased me down a rocky path littered with bruised allamanda leaves. First the man was Father Amadi, his soutane flying behind him, then it was Papa, in the floor-length gray sack he wore when he distributed ash on Ash Wednesday” (282). Kambili is presented as partially aware of the difficulty of distinguishing between these two “priestly” figures who are, in this dream, primarily identified by their clothing in which they perform the liturgical offices of the Catholic church.

This turn to action that refuses to justify itself provides an answer to the central question posed in the opening section on Palm Sunday. That section concludes by looking forward to this moment of freedom that Kambili has just articulated:

Jaja's defiance seemed to me now like Auntie Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves chanted at Government Square after the coup. A freedom to be, to do. (16)

These green branches symbolize the freedom that the crowds anticipated the coup would bring, echoing the green palm fronds celebrating Jesus' anticipated political rule. The novel does not simply point out the naïve hopes of these people, highlighting their quick exchange of green branches for guns. The democratic critique voiced by Eugene does not triumph either. The novel, by concluding with Kambili's reflections, ends on a much more contingent note. Kambili discovers this freedom to be and to do by moving away from the knowing what an action means. The novel articulates this freedom, I have been demonstrating, through experiments with liturgical practices and images. What liturgical action affords her is not certainty but release—not only from her father's violence but also from his logic of interpretation. Kambili's insistence on "just doing" marks the beginning of an attempt to understand freedom differently than either the coup-supporters or the democratic activists. It is "experimental": as in the case of the purple hibiscus, repetition is an essential part of the process that will eventually produce something new and surprising.

## Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have been tracing how *Purple Hibiscus* employs Catholic liturgy—particularly its cyclical rhythm—to reflect on the cyclical dynamics of postcolonial politics in Nigeria. Adichie's novel does not primarily juxtapose the realms of religion and politics or simply narrate a conflict that erupts between them. The novel presents a range of characters who engage in Catholic liturgical practices, developing a world in which such practices are negotiated in multiple ways. By focusing on how characters negotiate these practices and the frameworks within which they are understood, the novel illuminates the myriad conflicts that accompany such negotiations. Adichie's complex representation of Catholic liturgy in *Purple Hibiscus* creates a sophisticated perspective on what she has elsewhere called "colonized religion," by which she means the way that "people like [her] can profess and preach a respect of their indigenous culture and yet cling so tenaciously to a religion that considers most of that indigenous culture evil" (Adichie 2005, n.p.).

The novel gives voice to this tension, I have been suggesting, through its appeal to liturgical and ritual practice. Kambili's experiences and observations of these practices create a deep well from which she draws: both as character and as narrator, she reflects carefully on how people pray, read, sing, and speak, observing the effects of their actions. The fact, however, that the novel is structured by reference to the liturgical calendar—a point that has escaped critical commentary thus far—requires a careful distinction between the cyclical dynamics and resources of liturgy Kambili experiences, on the one hand, and how the novel employs them, on the other. My analysis of the critical scholarship on Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* demonstrates the importance of this distinction between thematic and formal critical approaches to ritual. It is also along these lines that I distance Adichie's work from Achebe's. *Things Fall Apart* employs ritual to tell a story of decline, whereas *Purple Hibiscus* employs it to tell a story of cyclical repetition. Insofar as both novels narrate climactic sequences through ritual practice, they generate conflict

on distinctly different terms. By contrasting how these two novels employ ritual practice within the novel form, I have been able to demonstrate more clearly the implications of positing that *Purple Hibiscus* figures religious fanaticism in liturgical terms.

In conclusion, I want to consider some of the broader implications of reading *Purple Hibiscus* in this way and of figuring religious fanaticism in relation to the cyclical temporalities, texts, and practices of postcolonial Catholic liturgy. What is the novel able to articulate by framing religious fanaticism in interlocking, cyclical terms? First, *Purple Hibiscus* challenges more common ways of casting religious fanaticism as symptomatic of failed postcolonial secularism. The novel positions Eugene as an exemplary secular figure whose religious practice remains contained within the private sphere of the home. By narrating the story from Kambili's perspective, the novel takes the reader into this private realm and investigates the dynamics of Eugene's violence and the religious fanaticism out of which his violence emerges. As the novel unfolds, it positions his religious fanaticism as an effect of colonial rule—an effect that does not simply disappear with the declaration of an independent Nigeria. The novel offers a strong critique of those who understand secularism as an ideal to be achieved, frustrating such a simple view of how religious practice intersects with modern governance.<sup>67</sup>

Second, and relatedly, the novel ties Eugene's secular, emancipatory politics with a form of colonially inflected religious fanaticism in a way that upsets any simple narrative of postcolonial progression toward democratic rule. Achille Mbembe astutely articulates the false opposition so often asserted between the democratic activism of someone like Eugene and a descent into war:

Against those theoretical approaches that would reduce the range of historical choices gestating in Africa to a stark alternative of either “transition” to democracy and the shift to a market economy, or descent into the shadows of war, we must stress again *the role of contingency*, and reassert the hypothesis that the organizations likely to emerge from current developments will be anything but the result of coherent premeditated plans. (Mbembe 2001, 77)

*Purple Hibiscus* complicates these “stark alternatives” by featuring a character like Eugene whose life may be politically admirable but also deeply harmful. Adichie's novel explicitly introduces Eugene's harmful religious practice so that Beatrice's (unacknowledged) act of murder becomes part of the “contingency” on which Mbembe is insisting. Insofar as Kambili emerges at the end of the novel as the one able to write and speak differently, able to “carry

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<sup>67</sup> Partha Chatterjee critiqued this logic of success/failure already in 1995. In “Religious Minorities and the Secular State: Reflections on an Indian Impasse,” Chatterjee refuses to rehearse the old debates about secularism, discussing how it is or is not being “correctly” applied in India. Chatterjee argues that “what have been taken as marks of impurity in postcolonial institutions could be read as signs of a different modernity—the attempt to find, under new historical conditions, new forms of the modern state” (12). There has recently been a return, however, among certain postcolonial scholars to thinking of secularism in terms of an ideal to be achieved. For example, in a special issue of *boundary 2*, edited by Aamir Mufti and provocatively themed “Why I am not a postsecularist” (2013), Bruce Robbins argues that if the “ideal of ‘secularism in public, religion in private’ has been imperfectly realized in practice, one need not conclude that the project should be abandoned. It could be (and I think should be) decided, rather, that more effort is urgently necessary” (257).



words” in a different capacity from her father, she stands as an example of the kind of contingent development that Mbembe articulates in organizational terms.

Insofar as *Purple Hibiscus* narrates Kambili’s growth into someone who speaks and acts differently, the novel positions the reader at a remove from the figure of the religious fanatic. In this regard, Adichie’s work resonates with McEwan’s works analyzed in the previous chapter. In all of the texts considered thus far, the novel form struggles to represent the consciousness of the figures of religious fanaticism. But where McEwan’s texts like *Enduring Love* and *Saturday* fold back on themselves, destabilizing the narrative voice even as they secure a victorious dismissal of the figures of religious fanaticism, *Purple Hibiscus* avoids this formal dynamic. This formal difference can be accounted for in two related ways. One, McEwan figures religious fanaticism in epistemological terms: religious fanaticism presents a problem of what can be known—known (or not known) with certainty. Religious fanaticism is figured as misguided certainty. In Adichie’s novel, however, the problem of religious fanaticism is not primarily epistemological; it is ethical and ontological. Eugene insists on perfect observation of Catholic liturgical practice because to do otherwise “is death” (7). The novel makes clear that such a perspective is intertwined with a colonial history and is not simply a function of religious ritual in general.

The second reason why *Purple Hibiscus* operates differently than McEwan’s work turns on how the texts position the protagonists in relation to the figure of religious fanaticism. The problem of epistemology in McEwan’s novels elicits a response that mirrors religious fanaticism in some capacity, a dynamic I described in terms of mimeticism. In the case of *Enduring Love*, this response drifts toward paranoia. In *Purple Hibiscus*, the character who responds to Eugene in this mimetic way is Beatrice, who breaks the cycle of his violence with her own form of violence. The novel, however, remains with the protagonist and narrator, Kambili, who responds to Eugene by experimenting with other ways of practicing and understanding the liturgical terrain on which the novel figured his religious fanaticism. The following chapter turns to Marilynne Robinson’s Gilead trilogy, which similarly focuses on protagonists who are intimately acquainted with the figure described in terms of religious fanaticism. As a trilogy, however, her novels introduce another level of complexity as the relationships among the protagonists of each novel constellate around the absent figure of the religious fanatic who, himself, dies long before the first novel even begins.

### Chapter 3

#### Genealogies of Religious Fanaticism in Marilynne Robinson's Gilead Trilogy

Partway through Marilynne Robinson's *Home* (2008), the second novel in Robinson's trilogy, Boughton and his son Jack have a brief conversation about the "early days" of Gilead, Iowa, a nondescript Midwestern town. "There was a lot," Boughton says, "of what you might call fanaticism around here in the early days. Even among Presbyterians" (204). This rhetoric of fanaticism emerges through a conversation between Boughton, a retired Presbyterian minister, and his estranged son, Jack, who has returned to his childhood home after a twenty-year absence. That particular evening, Jack had gone a few houses down the street for supper to Ames's—a long-time family friend family and minister at the Congregationalist church. Over the course of the evening, Ames told stories of his grandfather, a well-known abolitionist, a prominent figure from Robinson's *Gilead* (2004). Of particular interest for Jack is the familiar story of Rev. Ames senior's vision of Christ in chains, a vision that had spurred him on to move from Maine to Kansas in the 1830s. Jack knows the story well, having grown up down the street from Ames: "I'd heard the story before, of course. I always thought it sounded enviable. I mean, to have that kind of certainty. It's hard to imagine. Hard for me to imagine" (204). "Certainty," his father replies abruptly, "can be dangerous" (*ibid.*).

Boughton does not hesitate to describe this peculiar kind of dangerous certainty as fanaticism, and in so doing, he gives voice to a prominent narrative about abolitionist outposts like Gilead in Kansas and Iowa. Boughton explains to Jack how attitudes toward this history changed during his and Ames's generation. The "old families" (which did not include the Boughtons, he emphasizes) used to tell stories they thought were "just wonderful, and then I think they began to realize that the world had changed and maybe they should reconsider a few things. It's taken them awhile. Ames was pretty embarrassed about the old fellow while he lived. Always talking with Jesus. I suppose he didn't tell you about that" (2008, 204). Boughton implies these stories are not "wonderful" but rather filled with fanatical violence. As the conversation unfolds, we learn that Ames *does* tell Jack about his grandfather's visions, complete with a description of the chains that "rankled his flesh" (204). Ames is not as embarrassed as Boughton imagines him to be, and Jack is drawn to the stories of this old abolitionist in ways that confound and upset Boughton.

Robinson's trilogy does not adopt Boughton's rhetoric of religious fanaticism but inquires into it: how have characters like Rev. Ames senior come to be described in terms of fanaticism?<sup>68</sup> While the trilogy describes the idiosyncrasies of the old Reverend, the novels foreground the shifting attitudes of those who describe him as a fanatic. *Gilead* traces these shifts through several generations of Reverends, all named John Ames. Ames's father starkly rejected his own father's politics and theology, but Ames is more interested in altering, amending, and

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<sup>68</sup> By highlighting how the trilogy explores the grandfather's abolitionist politics in terms of fanaticism, I am resisting the conflation between the figures of the religious fanatic and the terrorist that some critics make, here exemplified in a review of *Lila*, the third novel in the trilogy: "The grandfather in Gilead could be called a terrorist: he's a militant fanatic willing to kill to achieve his religious vision. His son reacts with a pacifism that degrades into anodyne passivity, as he declares the struggles of the civil war best forgotten, and betrays his heritage by retiring to Florida like a car salesman. No one's position is innocent, as Robinson asks some very trenchant questions about the moral grounds on which America stands" (Churchwell 2014).

softening his grandfather's positions. Ames's father, like Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus*, rigidly opposes the fanatical character, but both characters are marginalized in the novels. Adichie and Robinson ground their work in protagonists who perceive religious fanaticism in less oppositional terms; Ames and Kambili struggle with these figures of religious fanaticism, finding them simultaneously admirable and imposing. Like McEwan and Adichie, Robinson employs the novel form to construct encounters and conflicts that require us to reach beyond reductive, oppositional accounts of religious fanaticism. Robinson's trilogy is unique in this dissertation for how it presents religious fanaticism and the conflicts it generates in genealogical terms.

This chapter traces how this genealogical figuration operates in multiple ways. On one level, it provides the framing device for the novel. *Gilead* is premised on the youngest Ames's concern that his own son will know very little about his family, and the novel is framed as a letter Ames writes to tell his son his "begats" (9).<sup>69</sup> It opens with Ames remembering the trip he took with his father to find his grandfather's grave, and Ames works hard to describe his idiosyncratic, fanatical grandfather and the deep-seated effects he had on the family and on Ames himself. On another level, though, the trilogy brings into question Ames's genealogical project. Even as Ames sets out to be a genealogist of sorts, recounting and justifying the family's response to their fanatical forefather, the trilogy tells a different kind of genealogy. Insofar as these novels narrate the complex relations between generations—including absent, missing, and abandoned generations—the trilogy slowly unravels the stories that Ames tells of himself, that the town tells of itself, and, relatedly, that mainline Protestantism tells of itself. I develop this line of argument by analyzing the relation among the three novels. The trilogy does not sequentially tell one family's story through the generations (as does Chinua Achebe's trilogy, for example), but instead, the novels reiterate one another. *Gilead* and *Home* both narrate the events of the summer of 1956—looking backward and forward from that point. While *Gilead* is told from Ames's perspective, *Home* focuses on the Boughton family and is narrated by the youngest daughter, Glory. *Lila* (2014) is set a few years prior, when Lila is pregnant with the child to whom Ames addresses *Gilead*. Together, the novels frame a season of improbable collective life, reflecting on how these individuals and families have come to Gilead and who has tried to live there and found they could not. By narrating a more complex genealogy of the town, considering its roots in the abolitionist movement, the trilogy brings into question Ames's own understanding of his grandfather. Does Ames represent an adequate or admirable engagement with his grandfather's apparent religious fanaticism? While many critics suggest Ames is exemplary in this regard, I argue the achievement of Robinson's trilogy lies with its exploration of the limits

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<sup>69</sup> The trilogy's exploration of generational dynamics recalls Robinson's first (and only earlier) novel, *Housekeeping* (1980). When asked about the relation among the characters of that novel—which are primarily familial—Robinson compared their relation to a cubist portrait: "I consider them to be related to each other along a continuum, rather than being opposed or being separate. That's how I intended it, that's what I meant. Sylvie is what Lucille forbids herself, Lucille is what Sylvie can't quite attain. That's how they relate" (Robinson 1992, 17). I focus here on the trilogy and its specific use of genealogy (a line of descent), rather than the broader concept of generations and familial relations (aunts, sisters, daughters), which grounds *Housekeeping*.

and shortcomings of Ames's understanding of his grandfather's politics, which his closest friend and confidante, Boughton, eagerly describes as fanatical.<sup>70</sup>

To distinguish more succinctly between the genealogical narrative Ames presents in *Gilead* and the trilogy's critique of that genealogy, I draw on Foucault's discussion *Herkunft*—"stock" or "descent"—in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1971). Ames sets out to write out his family's story so that his son will know it, suggesting heritage is something like an "acquisition" or "possession" (Foucault 1971, 82), and that the act of writing can give it to another person. Foucault argues, instead, that heritage [*Herkunft*] is "an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers that threaten the fragile inheritor from within or from underneath" (82). Genealogy, as Foucault presents it, neither looks for shared traits nor an "unbroken continuity": it seeks to identify the "accidents, the minute deviations [or] the complete reversals, the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us" (81). Robinson's trilogy presents those "things [that] continue to exist and have value" for Ames, and furthermore demonstrates how "reversals, errors...and faulty calculations" gave birth to these things. The trilogy does not uncritically celebrate Ames's more capacious sense of religious experience over his grandfather's narrow, fanatical one but rather demonstrates the limits of Ames's understanding of his own genealogy.

The prominent motif of visions brings these limits into view. While critics have been silent on the recurrent references to visions that span Robinson's trilogy, I am suggesting that each novel crucially turns on questions of what constitutes a vision, who has visions, how visions are shared, and how they are understood. Rev. Ames senior derives a wild kind of certainty from his vision of Christ in chains, preaching his church into the civil war (2004, 101), and his religious fanaticism is intimately tied to this vision. His son adamantly rejects any idea of visions, and his grandson Ames grows up in a household characterized by this rift between his father and grandfather. *Gilead* presents Ames's attempts to describe his grandfather's visions, his father's rejection of them, and also his own visions. Several passages that anchor the novel articulate Ames's visions as critiques of his grandfather's. *Home* explores Jack's anguish as he longs for the social reality of the old reverend's visions, even as he emerges as the only central character incapable of experiencing visions. Jack, having had a child with a black woman, struggles with his own family's bleak future. Through Jack's experiences, *Gilead* and *Home* narrate the effects of Ames and the town having forgotten Rev. Ames's abolitionist vision. *Lila* continues to ask what it means to understand visions and draw meaning from them. This third novel follows Lila's thoughts as she reflects on her past, stolen as a child from a home for migrant workers and raised on the road during the depression. Lila's thoughts about her life

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<sup>70</sup> Robinson is not entirely unique among contemporary writers and scholars expressing renewed interest in how abolitionism has been characterized in terms of religious fanaticism. Alberto Toscano (2010) takes abolitionism as an example of how the discourse of fanaticism intersects with emancipatory politics—both animated by a commitment to abstract principles of justice. Ted A. Smith (2014) notes how the abolitionist John Brown has traditionally been cast either as a religious fanatic or as a freedom fighter. Both characterizations, he argues, share a disenchantment of violence and assume the state's monopoly on violence. Smith attends to how this dominant framework obscures Brown's own articulation of his politics and its relation to his Christian theology. Boughton's invocation of fanaticism is illustrative of a trend Smith discusses in which abolitionists were described as fanatical not only by Southerners (see F. G. De Fontaine [1861]) but also, after the civil war, by Northerners.

mingle with her reflections on the visions of God she finds in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel. *Lila* is centrally concerned with what it means to *read* visions, and Lila neither reads like Ames nor wants to. As the novel explores how Lila reads these visions, the text suggests that her radically inclusive insights have more in common with the visions of old Rev. Ames than with those of Ames, his grandson.

It is through this discourse of visions that I trace the lingering effects of what Boughton describes as Rev. Ames senior's religious fanaticism. This line of argument persistently returns me to two sets of questions. The first concerns the novelistic representation of visionary experiences, particularly those that are read as markers of religious fanaticism and those asserted as critiques of such fanaticism. How do individual characters present their diverse visionary experiences? How do characters make sense of such experiences? What kinds of knowing do they validate or interrogate? How does each novel, through its unique narrative voice, open up distinct ways of understanding such experiences? As I consider such questions across the trilogy, I note how the discourse of visions appears as characters and narrators grapple with the limits of language. And even though characters struggle to understand, describe, and share their visions, they derive a peculiar confidence from such inexplicable experiences. The trilogy explores this relation between visions and language through acts of writing and reading. Particularly *Gilead* and *Lila* integrate discussions of visions so as to shed light on the limits of language. *Gilead* is framed as an exercise of writing and *Lila* as an exercise of reading.

The discourse of visions directs our attention to a second set of questions concerning race and ethics. Ames, in his critique of his grandfather's narrow conception of visions, overlooks the fact that the old man's vision was about an enslaved man. The trilogy, however, does not overlook this.<sup>71</sup> The novels explore the consequences of characters forgetting this point, a forgetting that the old reverend himself observed and grieved. When asked to speak to a town gathering on July fourth one year, the old reverend reminds the people that "the President, General Grant, once called Iowa the shining star of radicalism" (175). He goes on to challenge them: "But what is left here in Iowa? What is left here in Gilead? Dust. Dust and ashes. Scripture says the people perish, and they certainly do" (176). Rev. Ames is partially quoting Proverbs 29:18 (which is quoted in full elsewhere in the novel): "where there is no vision, the people perish." The old reverend explicitly ties the decline of Gilead to the decline of vision, and the novel further emphasizes his point through Jack's story. Both *Gilead* and *Home* puzzle over Jack's return home. Jack explains to his sister, Glory, that he had been drawn back to Gilead precisely because of this history of radicalism: "Now I'm home again in Iowa, the shining star of radicalism. It is the desire of the tattered moth for the shining star that has brought me home, little sister" (2008, 210). Towards the end of *Gilead*, we learn the particulars of Jack's situation: he shows Ames a picture of his black wife and child. He clarifies that he is married "in the eyes of God, as they say. Who does not provide a certificate, but who also does not enforce anti-miscegenation laws" (2004, 221). When Ames comments that Iowa never had such laws, Jack echoes Rev. Ames senior from years prior: "Yes, Iowa, the shining star of radicalism" (ibid). These words no longer reference a proud history but now bitterly point out the inadequacy with which Iowans have lived out this legacy.

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<sup>71</sup> It has become commonplace in critical discourse to comment on Robinson's lack of political engagement or the parochial world of her novels. Critics who read Robinson as a "theological writer" often make no mention of the texts' politics (see Latz 2011). While characters certainly exhibit such naïveté, I find such comments about the novels themselves entirely misplaced.

Jonathan Lear's critical reading of *Gilead* and *Home* pointedly investigates this inadequacy. The novels, he suggests, present what it is like when a "form of life is hollowed out from the inside" (34). He describes Gilead as a "town that over two generations has lost its formal and its final cause, its essence and guiding goal" (37). Gilead, he argues, "no longer exists; all that remains is an illusion of unity that goes by the same name" (37-38).<sup>72</sup> Lear's image of a hollowed out town astutely captures the sadness and tragedy of Gilead's story, but his readings offer little account of what this "essence and guiding goal" ever was. The novels are quite clear on that score: Rev. Ames senior's vision undergirds his unwavering political and spiritual commitment to the abolition of slavery. The rhetoric of visions must be central to any account of *how* this town lost itself over two generations. While *Lila* was not yet published when Lear offered his arguments, this most recent novel in the trilogy further contributes to the line of inquiry that I am advancing.

### **Loyalty, Love, and Mutual Incomprehension**

Throughout the trilogy, visionary experiences are marked by a paradox: they are that which one person cannot share with another and yet they are that which one *must* communicate to be understood. The desire and search for mutual understanding is an abiding theme of the trilogy, and Ames is particularly anxious on this point. He notes early in *Gilead* that "[y]ou can know a thing to death and be for all purposes completely ignorant of it. A man can know his father, or his son, and there might still be nothing between them but loyalty and love and mutual incomprehension" (2004, 7). Ames has observed the "mutual incomprehension" that characterized his grandfather's relationship with his father, and so he writes in an attempt to make himself comprehensible to his son. Having learned of his terminal heart condition, Ames begins writing his son's "begats" (9). Ames intends his son to read the extended letter as an adult, since he will grow up without knowing his father.<sup>73</sup> Ames writes a small section each day, alternately discussing events of that summer in 1956 and earlier memories he wants to share. The resulting text—the novel that we read—is presented as a replacement for the absent father. Ames strives to alter the "mutual incomprehension" that has marked the generations of Reverends in

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<sup>72</sup> He analyzes this illusion both in the Freudian and in the Kierkegaardian sense, arguing that the two are inextricably tied together in the novel. For Freud, illusion is a psychological state (he defines it as a belief caused by a wish), whereas for Kierkegaard, illusion is a whole social structure of "social institutions, cultural rituals, ways of going on that serves to keep participants deluded about the true nature of their situation." Kierkegaard uses the term *Christendom* to refer to this social structure that was a "dreadful illusion"—dreadful because the "culturally available routes for expressing one's Christian faith were actually serving to tranquilize any sense of what a Christian life required" (Lear 39). Kierkegaard's point, Lear points out, "is not merely about the degree of its [Christendom's] falsity, but about its ability to metabolize challenges to it" (41). Lear approaches the novel through this perspective to explain why, in the end, Jack has to leave rather than insisting that his father see this world as a "dreadful illusion." Gilead, according to Lear, is the "Midwestern incarnation of Christendom."

<sup>73</sup> Some critics have read the novel as a meditation on death (Tanner 2007), but such readings conflate the premise of the text with its broader inquiry. The premise of *Gilead* concerns Ames's imminent death and, consequently, his fear of abandoning his family, but the act of writing is an act of self-presentation, one that is uniquely possible through the writing out of the visionary experience.

the Ames family through the act of writing that frames *Gilead* as a novel. He writes his son's "begats" and offers an "account" of himself (44) in an effort to construct a narrative that would create a moment of understanding, however deferred.

Ames tries to "make the best of [the] situation" by telling his son things he might never have thought to say if he had brought his son up himself, "father and son, in the usual companionable way" (102). "There are so many things," he writes, "you would never think to tell anyone. And I believe they may be the things that mean most to you, and that even your own child would have to know in order to know you well at all" (ibid). In other words, Ames hopes this constraint on their relationship—that it will emerge through the act of writing—will allow his son to know his father more intimately. The "things" he *will* "think to tell" as he writes are his visions. If visions are distinguished as uniquely solitary experiences (and here the grandfather's vision is exemplary), then written texts—whether letters, Biblical stories, sermons, or even novels—seem to offer reprieve from the solitude and isolation that such visions leave in their wake. *Gilead* opens with Ames's optimistic sense of what can be achieved by offering an "account" of himself and his family, but how, I ask, does the novel complicate the "coherent identity" (Foucault 1971, 81) Ames works to construct for himself through his critical account of his grandfather's visions?

### **Visionary Capacities**

Early in *Gilead*, Ames recounts his memory of wandering with his father through drought-ridden Kansas of 1892 searching for the grave of his grandfather. The centerpiece of this scene at the old man's grave is a vision that Ames experiences and that his father vehemently denies, a conflict that opens out onto the longer story of Ames's grandfather's own visions. The *Gilead* trilogy begins at the grave of a man described in terms of religious fanaticism, his young grandson misunderstanding the sight he sees and holding onto it as a vision for the remainder of his life. If the death of the grandfather marks the end of visionary experiences that generate the kind of certainty that Jack Boughton envies but cannot imagine, the old man's death also inaugurates, in this moment of young Ames's misunderstanding, a new kind of visionary experience that Ames struggles to articulate throughout *Gilead*. The consequences of this shift resonate throughout the trilogy.

The drought in Kansas of 1892 was fierce, and the journey was difficult for Ames and his father. Ames writes of stealing food because there was none to buy; stores had closed and the money, as one lady put it, "might as well be Confederate for all the good it [could do her]" (2004, 11). They eventually find the grave in a small graveyard just outside a town that had "pretty well lost its people" (9), a "godforsaken" place that had been settled by Free Soilers who "weren't really thinking about the long term" (10). Ames and his father cut back the brush and work "a good while at putting things to rights" (13). They scatter seeds they had brought from their own garden, and Ames's father prays. His final words to his father had been spoken in anger, and he asks "the Lord's pardon, and his father's as well" (14). As a ten-year-old, Ames finds every prayer painfully long, but this one exceptionally so. He opens his eyes to look around, and he eagerly describes the peculiar sight of the sun setting in the west precisely as the moon is rising in the east. Ames and his father are standing exactly between the sun and the moon, "which seemed amazing to me at the time, since I hadn't given much thought to the nature of the horizon" (15). He gently interrupts his father, who comments on the beauty of the sight, and they return home.

Ames returns later in the novel to reflect on this experience with more specificity. He recalls his father's comments on the remarkable sunset: "You know," he tells Ames, "everybody in Kansas saw the same thing we saw" (48). At the time, Ames thought that the whole state bore witness to their particular "miracle," but he later realizes his mistake. His father "would have meant that the sun and moon aligned themselves as they did with no special reference to the two of us. He never encouraged any talk about visions or miracles, except the ones in the Bible" (48). The next sentence, however, distinguishes Ames's perception from his father's dismissal of miracles: "I can't tell you, though," he writes to his son, "how I felt, walking along beside him that night, along that rutted road, through that empty world—what a sweet strength I felt, in him, and myself, and all around us" (48). Even if Ames claims he "can't tell" his son what this experience meant to him, he tries to do just that by likening this experience to a particular kind of dream:

It was like one of those dreams where you're filled with some extravagant feeling you might never have in life, it doesn't matter what it is, even guilt or dread, and you learn from it what an amazing instrument you are, so to speak, what a power you have to experience beyond anything you might ever actually need. (48-9)

Ames addresses his son as if such dreams are commonplace and provide a shared language through which he can articulate his experience at his grandfather's grave. Such a comparison suggests such experiences are not exclusively religious; dreams and visions are not necessarily direct communications from God. Instead, they teach you that your capacity to feel and experience is greater than you had imagined. These dreams—like Ames's vision—help you know your own capacities. The important point here is that you can learn about this "power to experience" without reference to your own life. Some things, Ames suggests, can only be learned in a dream or, in this case, by a child who does not yet understand the nature of the horizon.

### **Time to Think about Kansas**

Ames moves directly from this description of his vision at his grandfather's grave to the first explicit retelling of his grandfather's own vision. The connection between the two visions is presented through the form of the novel rather than any explicit statement by Ames. The novel is punctuated by section breaks (a few blank lines) that suggest a pause in Ames's writing. Occasionally he will refer to time passing or to new thoughts about what he had previously written. The form of the novel, in this way, mirrors Ames's interiority. The associations he makes—whether conscious (observing a scene from his window) or unconscious (suggested but not acknowledged)—are what move the novel forward, but it is not always clear what these associations are or what they mean. In this case, Ames moves from his own experience of visions (48-9) to his grandfather's story about his vision (49), and the link between the two makes Ames uncomfortable. He returns to it later. He implies connections that he does not fully understand and cannot explain, creating moments that gesture to his limits as a narrator of his own experience. The structure of the novel (and, on a broader level, of the trilogy) is central to the representation of the limits of Ames's knowledge and awareness—limits at which his racial politics differ wildly from his grandfather's.

Ames recounts his grandfather's vision in sparse prose (one easily imagines he tells Jack this kind of story at the supper table in *Home*, which prompts the conversation about fanaticism with which this chapter begins). While still in Maine as a young man, he had fallen asleep by the fire: "Someone touched him on the shoulder, and when he looked up, there was the Lord, holding out His arms to him, which were bound in chains. My grandfather said, 'Those irons had



rankled right down to His bones.’ [...] He said he knew then that he had to come to Kansas and make himself useful to the cause of abolition” (49). This is precisely what he did. He became a preacher and moved to Kansas, supporting and protecting the abolitionist John Brown in the years leading up to the civil war. He was the kind of man who would ride up to the foot of the church steps on his horse, fire his gun, and begin the service. One Sunday, he even preached in a bloody shirt with a gun at his hip (108-9). Ames describes him as a man “everlastingly struck by lightning,” as “the most unrepentful human being” he ever knew (49). This restlessness, stemming from his ethical commitments, underlies his strained presence in the family.

Ames acknowledges that when his grandfather left, they “all felt his absence bitterly,” but also that he “did make things difficult” (31). Ames explains: “It was an innocence in him. He lacked patience for anything but the plainest interpretation of the starkest commandments, ‘To him who asks, give,’ in particular” (31). Ames writes about being acquainted with a “holy kind of poverty” since his grandfather “never kept anything that was worth giving away” (31): blankets, money, food, clothes.<sup>74</sup> Ames recalls a time when his mother made him wear his church clothes just so that his grandfather couldn’t give them away (32). He was “worse than a house fire,” she’d say (31).

Such stories serve well to create a picture of the home in which Ames came to know his grandfather, but after giving this impression, Ames hesitates. Looking back over what he has written, he feels uncomfortable portraying his grandfather as if he were “simply an eccentric” (34). Ames tries to articulate a more complex relation between his grandfather, his parents, and himself:

But I believe we knew also that his eccentricities were thwarted passion, that he was full of anger, at us not least, and that the tremors of his old age were in some part the tremors of pent grief. And I believe my father on his side was angry, too, at the accusations he knew he could see in his father’s unrepentfulness, and also in his endless pillaging. (34)

Ames struggles to make sense of these images of stifled, suppressed anger, which recur in several descriptions of his grandfather. Describing his grave Ames finds it “the most natural thing in the world” that it would look like “a place someone had tried to smother a fire” (50). These striking images suggest at once an internal energy without an outlet and a force restricting and hampering such energy. The anger that characterizes each generation of Rev. John Ames stems from this struggle of forces. Ames notes this strong current of anger through his family at the very outset of the novel. He warns his son: “A little too much anger, too often or at the wrong time, can destroy more than you would ever imagine” (6). As Ames writes his son’s “begats,” he increasingly confronts this anger, its roots, and its destructive impulses.

How well, though, does Ames understand this suppressed grief in his grandfather—either as a child or as an older man looking back? One scene in particular demonstrates Ames’s simultaneous sensitivity to and incomprehension of his grandfather’s stifled energies. Ames mentions only one activity he did with his grandfather, going to watch a baseball game in Des Moines. Nothing happens: no runs, no hits, and the game grinds to a halt in the fifth inning when a thunderstorm rolls in. Looking back, this lack of action strikes Ames as an excellent way to describe his grandfather. It recalls “something he had read somewhere,” namely that “a thing that does not exist in relation to anything else cannot be said to exist” (47). The absence of action parallels a kind of emptiness he senses in his grandfather’s life:

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<sup>74</sup> Betty Mensch aptly describes this impulse as “destructive selflessness” (2005/6, 228).

It seems to me that the storm had to put an end to it, as if it were a fire to be put out, an eruption into this world of an alarming kind of nullity. [...] Null. That word has real power. My grandfather had nowhere to spend his courage, no way to feel it in himself. That was a great pity. (47)

As Ames writes, he wonders if he has “made much of very little” (47). This was, he thinks, just a baseball game. It is possible, however, that he has not made nearly enough of this “very little.” His grandfather had taken him to see Bud Fowler who was “with Keokuk for a season or two” (46)—a detail which places the game in 1885, three years before the color line was established in professional baseball. Ames followed Fowler’s career in the newspapers for years, eventually “los[ing] track of him” when “they started up the Negro Leagues” (48). Ames is writing shortly after this long season of segregated baseball was ending (Jackie Robinson joined the major leagues in 1945). Ames loves baseball and remembers the joy of listening to the games on the radio (an experience which television, he thinks, cannot match), and so his silence about this history is a striking oversight. The novel places enough details for readers to note Ames’s unawareness of these racial politics, but he himself fails to see the connection between his grandfather’s inability to “spend his courage” and this history of segregation. He notes only that it was a “pity” for his grandfather.

As this baseball example illustrates, Ames’s astute observations and articulate descriptions of his grandfather are in tension with his lack of awareness of the racial politics of his own time. Ames’s distance from his grandfather’s politics is not unusual, however, within the generational dynamics of the family and of the town of Gilead. When Ames tells his father about having heard of his grandfather’s vision, his father simply nods and says, “It was the times” (49). By relegating the grandfather’s vision to an earlier time, Ames’s father distances himself from any ethical claim it might make on him. He invokes the generational gap to justify their misunderstanding and disagreement, which eventually drives the old man to return to Kansas, where he dies alone.

Ames, however, is not satisfied with this vague answer that attributes his grandfather’s vision to “the times,” and later in *Gilead*, he returns to reflect on “how the times change” (176). How can words that were so powerful at one time appear so empty at another? He describes the problem of “mutual incomprehension” that appears to be a significant aspect of the Ames family “heritage.” Ames recounts a speech his grandfather made on the fourth of July one year shortly before he disappeared. The mayor—who was Swedish and who had lived in the town “only about twenty years” (174)—invited the old Reverend to speak since he is “a sort of founder of the place” and a veteran. Ames’s mother brings out parts of his old uniform, which he refuses to wear: “I’m preaching,” he insists. In his speech (which he had written out in a sermon and which after his death had been mailed it back to Ames’s father), he tells the story of his vision. He can still feel Christ’s hand on his shoulder. “I would call that experience a vision,” he says, which was common “in those days” (175). Now those “visions are no more than dreams, and the old days are forgotten” (176). He plays with the words of Isaac Watt’s hymn “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past” (1719) as he reprimands the town for having forgotten the visions of these “old men”: “We fly forgotten as a dream...and our dreams are forgotten long before we are” (ibid).<sup>75</sup> He

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<sup>75</sup> The words of Isaac Watt’s hymn “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past” (1719) are referenced elsewhere in *Gilead* (103). The stanza that is quoted in this speech is the following: “Time, like an ever rolling stream, / Soon bears us all away; / We fly forgotten, as a dream / Dies at the opening day.” The contrast between visions and dreams that Rev. Ames senior works with here

knows that he and his vision are being forgotten, and he seizes this opportunity to remind the people of this past: “What is left here in Gilead? Dust. Dust and ashes. Scripture says the people perish, and they certainly do” (ibid). Rev. Ames articulates his politics—“Free the captives” (173)—through his experience of his religious visions, not through political principles. He preaches a sermon; he does not deliver a speech. After he finishes speaking, he eyes the crowd “with the dispassionate intensity of death itself” (176), and his son brings him off the stage. Ames’s mother thanks him, but he admits the hopelessness of his words: “I doubt it did much good” (ibid). The townspeople are mildly offended by Rev. Ames’s words, and some laugh. As Ames recalls this speech, he reflects on “how the times change”: “the same words that carry a good many people into the howling wilderness in one generation are irksome or meaningless in the next” (176). These “words” are specifically descriptions of his visionary experience, and Ames writes *Gilead*, I am suggesting, in an attempt to counter this generational tendency toward meaninglessness. The Ames family becomes a smaller scale investigation of how words become “irksome” or, more accurately, infuriating.

The grandfather’s visions provoke an anger in the family that precipitates the departure, death, and abandonment with which *Gilead* opens. This anger boils over during a confrontation that turns on the status of visions and the politics they generate, and Ames narrates the generational divide that he is writing to overcome. During a Sunday church service, five minutes into Ames’s father’s sermon, his grandfather suddenly walks out. That evening in the kitchen his father asks if his sermon had offended in some way: “The old man shrugged. ‘Nothing in it to offend. I just wanted to hear some *preaching*. So I went over to the Negro church’” (84). “You sound disappointed, Reverend,” notes Ames’s father. “My grandfather put his head in his hands. He said, ‘Reverend, no words could be bitter enough, no day could be long enough. There is just no end to it. Disappointment. I eat and drink it. I wake and sleep it’” (84). Ames’s father understands this as a reference to the civil war, and he reacts angrily: “Peace is its own justification” (ibid). Rev. Ames senior then speaks very directly about the problem of his son never having had a visionary experience: it “kills my heart...that the Lord never came to you. That the seraphim never touched a coal to your lips” (ibid). This escalates the confrontation. Recalling the old reverend preaching in that “shot-up, bloody shirt,” Ames’s father angrily replies: “I had a thought as powerful and clear as any revelation. And it was, This has *nothing* to do with Jesus. Nothing. Nothing. And I was, and I am, as certain of that as anyone could ever be of any so-called vision” (85). By questioning the reality of the old man’s vision, Ames’s father brings them to the heart of their difference: “So-called vision,” retorts the grandfather. “The Lord, standing there beside me, had one hundred times the reality for me that you have standing here now!” After a pause, his son replies, “No one would doubt that, Reverend” (ibid). “And that,” Ames notes, “was when a chasm truly opened” (ibid). Shortly after this fight, Ames’s grandfather leaves and his family surmises that he went back to Kansas. He leaves a note on the kitchen table that Ames has kept in his Bible all these years: “No good has come, no evil is ended. That is your peace. Without vision the people perish. The Lord bless you and keep you” (ibid).

The story of this “chasm” opens the important question as to how Ames situates himself in relation to this long-standing disagreement. While Ames shows a remarkable ability to

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implies a strong distinction. If dreams vanish when one wakes, visions certainly do not. Ames’s comparison between dreams and visions earlier in the novel (48-9) suggests that not all dreams do vanish when one wakes and that they are much closer than the old Reverend seemed to allow.

describe the grief and pain of his grandfather, he is also deeply influenced by his father's perspective. "All best forgotten, my father used to say" (76), in reference to the early days of Kansas leading up to the civil war. Ames explains he has "read up on those events considerably" and "decided [his] father was right. And that's just as well, because people have forgotten. Remarkable things went on, certainly, but there has been so much trouble in the world since then it's hard to find time to think about Kansas" (ibid). *Gilead* as a novel, however, moves in the opposite direction; it *is* asking us to find time to "think about Kansas." How did the old reverend's words lose their power, becoming "irksome" to the people of the town that was founded by those words? What are the implications of having forgotten these remarkable events? As the novel presents Ames's own critical response to his grandfather's visions, interrupting and juxtaposing it with Jack Ames Boughton's story, *Gilead* increasingly questions the adequacy of Ames's response to his grandfather. Might things have been better for Jack if Ames *had* found some time to "think about Kansas"?

### **Visionary Moments**

If Ames's father insists that all is "best forgotten," Ames revises rather than forgets this history. At the center of *Gilead* is a pivotal passage presenting Ames's own visions, an important scene that has not received much critical attention.<sup>76</sup> He offers a critique of his grandfather's idea of visions and then offers an alternative, recounting an experience that he has come to understand as a vision. "I believe," Ames declares, "that the old man did indeed have far too narrow an idea of what a vision might be" (91). As he reflects on "the old reverend's errors," he concludes that they "were mainly the consequence of a sort of strenuousness in ethical matters that was to be admired finally" (90). As Ames articulates an alternative to his grandfather's narrow idea of a vision, he concludes boldly, writing to his son: "Perhaps that is the one thing I wish to tell you. Sometimes the visionary aspect of any particular day comes to you in the memory of it, or it opens to you over time. [...] I believe there are visions that come to us only in memory, in retrospect" (91). Ames understands visions in temporal terms—as past events that unpredictably gain significance as one looks back on them.

The most significant example of this kind of memory-as-vision comes from his childhood. When Ames was a young boy, a church in Gilead was struck by lightning. The steeple fell into the church and much of the church burned. People came to pull it down even though it was raining that day. They placed the pulpit under a tree, covering it with a horse blanket, and salvaged the shingles and nails. They gathered the damaged hymnals into one pile, the Bibles into another, and the minister said a prayer over the burned books. The people sang as they worked: "It was so joyful and sad," Ames recalls. He describes one particular moment of that day in great detail: "I remember my father down on his heels in the rain, water dripping from his hat, feeding me biscuit from his scorched hand, with that old blackened wreck of a church behind him and steam rising where the rain fell on embers and the women singing 'The Old Rugged Cross'" (96). It is this bit of biscuit that lingers in his memory: "Grief itself has often returned me to that morning, when I took communion from my father's hand. I remember it as communion, and I believe that's what it was" (96). This memory produces a unique form of certainty for Ames, much as his grandfather's vision did for him. "I can't tell you," he writes to

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<sup>76</sup> While Todd Shy, for example, has noted this scene and its Eucharistic imagery, he comments neither on Ames's description of this experience as a vision nor on the fact that this is presented as a critique of the grandfather's visions.

his son, “what that day in the rain has meant to me. I can’t tell myself what it has meant to me. But I know how many things it put altogether beyond question, for me” (96). Ames does not immediately clarify this experience of certainty that his vision has generated. He does not explain what these “things” are that have been “put beyond question,” but the next time he references this day in the rain, we have a clearer sense of the impact it has had on him.

Thirty pages later, Ames describes a recent Sunday when Lila brings their son forward after the service, references the communion bread, and says to Ames, “you ought to give him some of that.” So Ames does, again describing the practice of communion in great detail. He notes that the minister in their tradition does not generally place the bread in the parishioner’s mouth, but on this day he does:

I broke the bread and fed a bit of it to you from my hand, just the way my father would not have done except in my memory. And I know what I wanted in that moment was to give you some version of that same memory, which has been very dear to me, though only now do I realize how often it has been in my mind. (103)

Ames knows he has misremembered this moment and that its “visionary aspect” stems from an addition to the actual events of that day. This does not, however, make it less true for Ames, and he endeavors to pass on to his son a memory of a reenactment of an event that did not happen. Where his grandfather clings to the “reality” of his vision of Christ in chains, Ames suggests that a person comes to see the “visionary aspect” of an experience. This sense that someone arrives at a visionary understanding of a memory is what prompts Ames to offer his son communion in this unusual way: perhaps this gesture will gather significance in the child’s mind. Ames plays with the idea that he (rather than God, as his grandfather would undoubtedly insist) can effect a vision in someone else. Visions, as Ames understands them, are only loosely tied to a person’s direct experience, which can be a dream, a child’s misunderstanding of the horizon, an embellished memory, or even an imagined memory.

In the final example in this section, the memory that Ames takes to be a vision is not even his own memory. As Ames tells the story of the burned church, he recalls his father’s stories of churches in disrepair after the civil war. The women would meet in them even though they were falling into ruin. The image, Ames says, is “strong and lovely” in his mind, and he “truly believe[s] it is waste and ingratitude not to honor such things as visions, whether you yourself happen to have seen them or not” (97). Visions have now become removed from one’s own immediate experience and are both collective and capable of being passed down through story.

In this series of churches in disrepair that Ames finds particularly meaningful, one burned church is strikingly absent—the “Negro church” in Gilead. Ames first mentions this church while reflecting on why his grandfather went “running off to Kansas” (35). He notes his grandfather’s loneliness as his friends “began to die off” (35). As an afterthought he adds, “That and the fire at the Negro church” (36). It wasn’t a big fire, he quickly adds, and someone had put out the flames with a shovel. Ames then includes a parenthetical note about the story of the Negro church in Gilead. It “used to be where the soda fountain is now,” and when it “sold up,” it had no more than three or four families, which later moved to Chicago. The pastor had come by with a sack of plants he’d dug up from around his church, which Ames replanted at his church. He makes a mental note to remind the deacons of this story so that they will save the flowers when they tear down his old church after he dies. The parenthetical note ends by describing his interaction with the other pastor: “I didn’t know the Negro pastor well myself, but he said his father knew my grandfather. He told me they were sorry to leave, because this town had once meant a great deal to them” (37). Ames offers no further comment on this interaction or the fire,

and when Jack brings up the story later in the novel, Ames describes it as “only a small fire” in which there was “very little damage” (171)—a “nuisance fire” that “happened many years ago” (230).

The juxtaposition between these images of churches in ruins—some transforming into visionary experiences and others forgotten as insignificant side stories—brings into view the problems with Ames’s approach to visions. If it is “waste and ingratitude” *not* to honor the image of the women praying in the old church as a vision, then how might we describe Ames’s dismissive attitude toward the Negro church that was forced out of town? While Ames’s understanding of a vision seems far more capacious than his grandfather’s—extending to include images that you yourself may not “happen to have seen”—the novel shows his process of selection to be racially inflected, something to which his grandfather was particularly attuned. Which experiences, for Ames, become visions and which become forgotten? Ames suggests that “you never do know the actual nature even of your own experience,” but it also seems that the boundaries within which an experience emerges as a vision are also unknown to “yourself.” Ames, in other words, proves remarkably unaware of his divergent understandings of these churches in ruins.

*Gilead* builds on this contradiction through the character of Jack, Boughton’s son, who demonstrates how Ames’s ostensibly capacious notion of visionary experience is far more exclusionary than Ames seems capable of acknowledging. Jack first appears in *Gilead* as a literal interruption in the midst of Ames’s reflections on his visionary experiences. Ames is writing his critique of his grandfather’s literal and narrow sense of visions, and then there is a break in his writing, followed by a description of Jack’s unannounced visit to greet Ames: “Today John Ames Boughton paid a call” (91). Jack’s intrusion disrupts more, however, than Ames’s train of thought about his revised notion of visions. Jack’s “precocious charm” (91) irritates Ames (he does not like being called “Papa”), and he wonders why the “first words out of [Jack’s] mouth would have to be prevarication” (92). Furthermore, Ames notes a peculiar “look” on his son’s and wife’s faces when Jack appeared; it was as though Robert and Lila both realized all over again how old Ames is, particularly in contrast to Jack, who is much closer to Lila’s age. Ames does not want to dwell on this, but he notes it “didn’t set well” with him. “I was speaking of visions” (92), he says, and he continues on to tell the story of his childhood vision of the burned church.

Jack’s interruption has the effect of drawing Ames’s attention increasingly into the present. Ames perceives Jack as threatening, and as *Gilead* progresses, this anxiety takes up an increasing amount of narrative space. We learn Ames’s distrust stems from Jack’s behavior years earlier. As a boy he would steal things from Ames like his baseball glove, his grandfather’s Greek New Testament from the civil war, and, more personally, his photo of his first wife when she was a child. These things of no value to anyone but Ames would eventually reappear, and their disappearance seemed to Ames instances of “sheer meanness” (183). As a young man, Jack caused the family serious hardship when he had a child with a young country woman. Jack told his father about the child and then left town. Ames watched Boughton struggle with the child’s poverty (the mother and her family did not want the Boughtons’ “charity”), and when the child was three, she stepped on a nail and died from the infection. Ames worries that after his own death, Jack, a man who is not to be trusted, will become involved with Lila and Robert, and that they will be open to such a relationship because they do not know Jack’s history. Jack continues to come around the house, and Ames’s anxiety increases. He has trouble sleeping, and things come to a head when he delivers a sermon about Abraham, Hagar, and their son, Ishmael—“one

of the only two instances in scripture,” Ames notes, “where a father is even apparently unkind to his child” (129). Jack happens to have attended Ames’s church that day, and he takes the sermon as a direct reprimand for his past. Jack returns home humiliated, and Boughton feels betrayed by Ames. He was counting on Ames to “say the words of welcome and comfort he could not say” (2008, 212). *Gilead* and *Home* narrate how this confrontation about the sermon is resolved, and since both novels address this event directly, many critics take it as a central scene through which to read the relation between the novels.<sup>77</sup>

The falling out between the Boughtons and the Ames family is best framed as part of a larger narrative of disappointment and unfulfilled desire, recalling Rev. Ames senior’s sharp words of disappointment to his son many years prior. *Gilead* narrates Ames’s misunderstanding of Jack’s desire: Ames assumes Jack desires Lila, thereby further threatening the family’s already precarious future, and the novel tells Ames’s story of coming to learn of Jack’s real reason for coming around his house so often. Toward the end of the novel, Jack tells Ames about his wife and (second) child. Could they marry and live in Gilead, he wonders? Ames remains silent but admits to himself, “Well, I didn’t know the answer to that one, either” (231). Jack makes his point stronger, reminding Ames that he has “influence here” (ibid). Ames explains he will not be around much longer, given his heart condition. Ames thinks their conversation had been “good, on balance,” but Jack’s parting words are ones of despair: “No matter, Papa. I believe I’ve lost them anyway” (232). Jack has been pursuing Ames throughout *Gilead* in order to have this conversation about his family, which Ames has persistently avoided. When Jack confides in Ames about the insurmountable challenges to a mixed race couple, explaining “[y]ou can’t imagine how many ways they make things difficult” (225), Ames cannot imagine. He himself has contributed enormously to Jack’s difficulties. *Home* reiterates this narrative from the perspective of the Boughton household, repositioning the series of small actions that Ames perceives as threatening and narrating them as part of Jack’s struggle to approach Ames. Jack is drawn to Ames, wanting something from him.

Jack wonders if Ames would be willing to use his “influence” to build a space for Jack’s family and, specifically, his biracial child. Have the old reverend’s abolitionist politics, Jack wonders, somehow remained alive in the family? Ames’s complete misreading of Jack’s desire—assuming it was directed toward Lila—demonstrates the gap that has grown between Ames and his grandfather. Ames proves unable to recognize the desire for such a political vision, let alone work toward its realization. Rather than celebrating Ames’s revision of his grandfather’s “narrow” conception of visions and his ethical “strenuousness,” *Gilead* demonstrates, in Foucault’s words, the “reversals, errors...and faulty calculations” that have produced Ames’s more capacious sense of visions. Ames thinks he has improved on his grandfather’s religious fanaticism, becoming more measured and inclusive—but thereby producing the painful conditions under which Jack’s future genealogical line ruptures and

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<sup>77</sup> Jonathan Lear’s excellent article treats this sermon in some detail, noting the details of how it is represented differently in *Gilead* and *Home*. Amy Hungerford highlights the extended conversation that emerges from attempts to reconcile the two families. The scene includes all the main characters, sitting on Boughton’s front porch, discussing theology of predestination. Hungerford argues that Jack mistakes theology for a “discourse that could *produce* individual belief rather than a discourse that *enacts* belief” (Hungerford 118). She notes in a parenthetical note that the reconciliation occurs through the act of blessing rather than conceptual agreement, but she does not analyze this moment in the novel.

becomes invisible. *Home* recounts the same events but narrates Jack's irrational hope and devastating disappointment from the perspective of the Boughton family.

### **“Bless me, even me also”**

The challenge of *Home* as a novel concerns the difficulty of representing the desire of a character as removed from familial and social life as Jack. The novel is focalized through Glory, Jack's younger sister, and our information about Jack is limited to what she observes, hears, or remembers. She notes his “wry distance” from the other five children in the family, “all of [whom] were native to their life as he never could be” (249).<sup>78</sup> Given this formal challenge, *Home*, unlike *Gilead* and *Lila*, is dominated by dialogue. Characters consistently struggle to speak to one another: sentences remain unfinished, awkward silences follow restrained conversations, and, in a climactic exchange between Jack and his father, Boughton is so ill that he is delirious, lending a fantastic dimension to the dialogue.<sup>79</sup> My focus here falls on a passing remark Jack makes quietly—almost despite himself—which his father not only misunderstands but also corrects. This brief conversation provides a glimpse of the desire that animates Jack: it is a desire for a blessing, not primarily for himself but for his family. As his own father proves unable to hear this longing, Jack attempts to approach Ames, hoping to find remnants of the old reverend's commitments in his grandson.

Critics have tended to read Jack as a prodigal son figure, emphasizing his distance from the Boughton family and analyzing him in terms of alienation (Wood 2008, Painter 2009). While Ames explicitly makes the comparison early in *Gilead* (73), he ends with an extended comparison to the Old Testament story of Jacob and his son Joseph, a reference that recurs in *Home*.<sup>80</sup> At stake in this story is the recognition of genealogical lines of families—who is blessed

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<sup>78</sup> Glory frequently describes how Jack lives at a remove from others, alienated: “There was an incandescence of unease about him” (206). At one of his lowest points, she notes that he “had fallen back on enstrangement, his oldest habit” (230).

<sup>79</sup> Throughout the novel Jack worries about how to set his father's mind at ease about the state of his soul. Jack sits down with his father but cannot, finally, lie to him and tell him he'd become “persuaded of the truth of Scripture” (293). “All I can really say,” he says, “is that I've tried to understand. And I did try to live a better life. I don't know what I'll do now. But I did try” (294). This is one of the most direct statements Jack makes about himself throughout the novel, and Boughton does not recognize him: “That's fine, dear. Have we talked before?” (294). Boughton's mental state remains unclear even as he goes on to offer the most devastating comparison between his experience of fathering Jack and the death of Jack's first child: “You see something beautiful in a child, and you almost live for it, you feel as though you would die for it, but it isn't yours to keep or to protect” (294). If the child grows into a man who has no respect for himself, this beautiful thing is destroyed. It is, Boughton says, like “watching a child die in your arms... which I have done” (295). The ability to speak openly, it seems, only occurs in moments of semi-presence in the novel.

<sup>80</sup> *Gilead* ends with a reference to the story of Jacob who, as an old man, sees his favored son Joseph, who had been sold as a boy into slavery by his older brothers. Ames cites Genesis 48:11 where Jacob says he had never expected to see Joseph's face again—and now “God hath let me see thy seed also.” Ames comments sadly on how wonderful this *might* have been for Boughton: “There was a joy in the thought of how beautiful that would have been, beautiful as any vision of



as the ruler and who is cursed as the oppressed. Reading Jack as an echo of the prodigal son suggests that his own waywardness must be forgiven by the ever-merciful father. In contrast, the story of Isaac, Jacob, and Esau is one of blindness, deception, error, and loss. By emphasizing the genealogical confusion that this story entails, Jack appears as one denied his rightful place in his family's genealogy, and Boughton and Ames appear as misguided father figures.

The references to Isaac's story are made one afternoon when Jack had been out picking mushrooms. When he comes in with his surprising harvest, Glory suggests he show their father. Jack thinks he should "clean up a little" (148) first, but Glory insists. Jack enters the room and Boughton recognizes the smell of the mushrooms immediately and quotes Isaac from Genesis: "See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which Jehovah hath blessed" (148). Watching his father inspect the mushrooms and turn them in the light, Jack rubs his bare arms and says softly, "Bless me, even me also" (149). His father corrects him: "No," his father said, "that's Esau. You're confusing Esau and Jacob" (ibid). Jack laughs and replies: "Yes, I am the smooth man. How could I forget? I'm the one who has to steal the blessing" (ibid).

Boughton and Jack are referring to Genesis 27 where Isaac plans to bless his eldest son, Esau. Rebekah, Isaac's wife, overhears the plan and sends in her favored, younger son, Jacob, disguised as Esau (with goat skin on his hands to make them seem hairy and wearing Esau's clothes). Isaac's eyesight is failing and so he confirms his son's identity by touching his hands and smelling his clothes. Isaac then blesses Jacob with the blessing that was meant for Esau. When Esau arrives from the fields to receive his blessing, he enters his father's tent only to discover that he has been tricked: "He cried with a great and exceeding bitter cry, and said unto his father, Bless me, even me also, O my father" (Genesis 27:34). His father has not "reserved a blessing" for Esau, however, and he is told that he will live in servitude to his brother: "And by thy sword shalt thou live, and shalt serve thy brother; and it shall come to pass when thou shalt have the dominion, that thou shalt break his yoke from off thy neck" (Genesis 27:40). This story ties blessings to branches within families: the blessed family dominates, persisting throughout generations, while the other family struggles in servitude.

In *Home*, Boughton and Jack cite several lines from this story, but their exchange moves quickly and they do not cite the story in a linear way. When Jack asks for a blessing, he assumes the voice of Esau, the elder son who was denied his rightful blessing. Boughton corrects Jack, assuming he is misremembering, since those words of Esau's despair come later in the story. By denying him Esau's words, however, Boughton unwittingly casts Jack in the role of Jacob—the "smooth man" who steals the blessing. Jack *is* in Esau's position, though. His child, a young black boy born in the early 1950s, will have to break the yoke of his brother from his neck. When Jack asks for a blessing, he is hoping, against all odds, that something can yet be said to remove the yoke from his child's neck. Boughton's correction attributes to Jack a form of illiteracy: he is presumed not to be conversant in the biblical language of the family. Jack is, however, fluent in this language. The problem is that he cannot be heard as speaking it correctly. His citation can only be heard as a miscitation, a point that carries consequences for Jack's family; they will not be recognized as his (a patriarchal frame that *Lila* explicitly questions).

The fact that Boughton hears Jack misciting a story about deception, falsehood, and misrepresentation of one's family identity resonates throughout the story we learn about Jack and his family. Jack's child will be raised as Robert Boughton Miles, carrying his mother's name,

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angels" (244). But Jack has left town, his son arrives after he has left, and Boughton sleeps more than ever, never hearing a word of this.

and when Jack receives word that Della's family has arranged for her to marry a black man who is willing to adopt the child, Jack realizes he will be entirely written out of his child's genealogy. The account of his family that Jack tells to Ames in *Gilead* further complicates this. Jack, we learn, has presented a rather fictionalized account of his own genealogy to Della's father (who is making these other marital arrangements). We learn that Della wanted to name the baby John Ames, which is Jack's full name. Della's father then assumes that Jack is "descended from John Ames of Kansas" (2004, 227), an error which Jack does not correct. Jack's father, when he describes the old reverend in terms of fanaticism, makes it exceedingly clear that he "would never have named [Jack] after that John Ames" (2008, 204). Boughton names his child in Ames's honor: he surprised Ames during Jack's christening ceremony, suddenly announcing the baby's name as John Ames Boughton. Coming soon after the death of Ames's first wife and child, Ames understands the gesture is kindly meant to "compensate for [his] own childlessness" (2004, 155). Such a surprise, however, is difficult to handle, and Ames remembers his first thought: "This is *not* my child" (188). He goes about the christening "coldly" and confesses that he has "never been able to warm to him, never" (ibid). Upon reflection, he realizes he would like the chance to "christen him again" (189): "John Ames Boughton is my son. If there is any truth at all in anything I believe, that is true also" (ibid). While critics frequently suggest that Jack is the true inheritor of Rev. Ames senior's abolitionist vision, such a reading overlooks the multiple valences of their relationship. Jack is named into Ames's family and then later lies about this relation (claiming a *closer* relation), even as he desperately fears being written out of his own family line. Anxieties about race are central to each of these complications that emerge around genealogical lines, whether looking back to Rev. Ames senior or forward to Jack's family.

*Gilead* ends differently than the story of Esau and Jacob: Jack does receive a blessing, and Ames is given an opportunity to redo his christening. Ames sees Jack walking to the bus stop to leave town, and as they wait on the bench for the bus, Ames asks if he could bless Jack. He offers a routine blessing of peace and then, when Jack does not lift his head, he continues and improvises: "'Lord, bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father.' Then he sat back and looked at me as if he were waking out of a dream. 'Thank you, Reverend'" (241). Ames's blessing acknowledges his family even though the law (and his own family) does not, and it seems for a moment that Ames is able to offer a better ending than the one Esau experiences in Genesis.

Reading Jack's story as an improvement on Esau's is unduly optimistic. Jack does finally leave Gilead (doing so before his father dies, angering Glory), echoing the old reverend's departure with which *Gilead* begins. As Ames walks back through town, he reflects on the "sense of irony" he saw in Jack's face as he left—"irony at having invested hope in this sad old place, and also the cost to him of relinquishing it. And I knew what hope it was. It was just that kind the place was meant to encourage, that a harmless life could be lived here unmolested" (242). To put a finer point on it, Ames references one last vision. He quotes the prophet Zechariah, describing a vision of Jerusalem: "'And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls in the streets thereof'" (ibid). Ames notes that these "little towns were once the bold ramparts meant to shelter just such peace" (ibid). *Gilead* and *Home* tell the story of decline of these "bold ramparts." Jack leaves town—blessed though he may be—and his child will not play in the streets of Gilead. Indeed, when his child does come to town, in the closing scene of *Home*, the young black boy is hardly permitted out of the car. His father is gone and left no address, and his mother fears for their safety. They have to "get back down to Missouri before dark," Della

says, “[e]specially the way things are now” (2008, 321). Della leaves a letter with Glory, but neither woman knows how to reach Jack.

Ames’s vision of Jerusalem is far from the reality of Gilead, which Jack grasped well before Ames. Insofar as *Gilead* is bookended by the departures of Rev. Ames senior and Jack, haunted by the first and fretting over the second, the novel traces the consequences of Ames’s critique of his grandfather’s ethical “strenuousness.” Jack’s sudden reappearance in Ames’s world makes apparent the contradiction between Ames’s apparently expansive notion of visions and the exceedingly narrow political world it builds. *Home* explores this narrow world from Jack’s perspective of unfulfilled desire and hope. He approaches Ames because, as he tells Glory, he has “[o]ne last glimmer of hope, a merest spark of optimism. I want to make sure it is extinguished before I leave this town” (2008, 304). His experience resonates with that of Rev. Ames senior, who similarly left Gilead in the wake of deep disappointment: “I eat it and drink it. I wake it and sleep it” (2004, 84). He and Jack share this disappointment, and their departures indicate their understanding that Gilead cannot be what they had hoped, indeed what they had envisioned.

By the end of *Home*, the trilogy has moved quite a distance from the opening premise of *Gilead*. If it begins with Ames writing his son’s begets—recounting a genealogical narrative that offers the young man a past and a sense of self—it arrives somewhere unpredictable. Ames, increasingly agitated by Jack’s presence, becomes less sure of himself, and his grandfather’s legacy is not, he realizes, what he thought it was. The “search for descent,” as Foucault reminds us, is not the “erecting of foundations,” but “on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself” (82). *Gilead* and *Home* not only disturb the “unity” of Ames’s understanding of himself and his family, but the novels also fragment the story of the town. Having forgotten the fanaticism of the old reverend and his visions, the town came to be “imagined as consistent with itself.” Jack’s desire for the old visions and certainties disrupts this imagined consistency; he insists on remembering the black church, the forgotten fires, the old dreams. As the novels narrate the genealogy of Gilead, they recall the “false appraisals, the faulty calculations” (81) that Ames, we learn, has worked to forget.

*Lila*, like *Gilead* and *Home*, begins with specific familial genealogical questions, building on them as the novel develops. In this most recent novel, Robinson’s trilogy reaches beyond presenting the heterogeneity of various families and the town of Gilead, and it more explicitly addresses the heterogeneity of “mainline” Protestant Christianity of which Ames is so often read as exemplary.<sup>81</sup> *Lila* introduces and negotiates these questions by representing an unlikely practice of reading, which differs from any of the others encountered in the trilogy thus far.

### “I got my own thoughts”

Lila sees her time in Gilead as a respite from her life that came before and, after Ames’s death, will resume. She knows that she and her son Robert will not live out their days in Gilead;

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<sup>81</sup> Recent scholarship on mainline Christianity has drawn attention to the construction of Protestant mainline Christianity as “mainline” in the 1950s, when the trilogy is set. For an excellent argument on this point, following insights from Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, see Elesha Coffman’s *The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline* (2013). Coffman advances her argument by analyzing the history of a prominent “mainline” magazine, *The Christian Century*, a publication which Ames and Boughton routinely read in the trilogy.

they will not be part of the generations of John Ameses that lie in the graveyard. She imagines herself explaining this to Robert, looking down at his father's grave. He would ask where their places were, "because the plots were all taken up, and she would say, It don't matter. We'll just wander a while. We'll be nowhere, and it will be all right. I have friends there" (2014, 251). If Jack leaves Gilead to "wander a while," the "nowhere" into which he disappears entails an intense loneliness. Lila, though, has "friends there" and knows that "it will be all right."

Jack and Lila both have families that are not recognized as their own, a problem of race for Jack and of class for Lila. While *Home* narrates Jack's disappointment, realizing his family will never be at home in Gilead, *Lila* narrates the process by which Lila integrates her family that is "nowhere" into her life and family in Gilead (the only "somewhere" of the trilogy). She negotiates this reconciliation by reading and reflecting on the visions of the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel. Formally and stylistically, the novel represents her interiority such that this mental and emotional process is clear to the reader but not to the characters around her, notably Ames. *Lila* returns to the contested terrain of visions, demonstrating how Lila comes to her own conclusions about the theological questions that plague her throughout the novel and, in the process, further illustrating Ames's own political and theological limitations.

By emphasizing Lila's reading of biblical visions, I am foregrounding the relationship between her and Rev. Ames senior, a connection that Ames himself implies in *Gilead* and that returns in *Lila*. Ames describes Lila as "so serious about everything": "I'd never seen anything like it until I met her. Well, putting aside my grandfather" (2004, 8). They share this peculiar look, "half sadness and half fury" (ibid). Ames first sees Lila when she enters his church to get out of the rain one Sunday while he is preaching, and he remembers this "seriousness about her that seemed almost like a kind of anger" (21). It is not her appearance that prompts this description but her presence in the church—"as if she didn't belong there, and at the same time as if she were the only one of us all who really did belong there" (ibid). This sense of belonging carries with it a challenge, and Ames feels as if she were insisting that he "say something with a little meaning in it" (ibid). He phrases this slightly differently later in the novel, drawing attention quite specifically to her face: "There is something in her face I have always felt I must be sufficient to, as if there is a truth in it that tests the meaning of what I say" (137). The motif of her face—and the faces of "all the women she used to know" (2014, 226)—recurs throughout *Lila*, and the novel concludes as Lila comes to understand how Ames "reads" her face (even as he himself does not seem to understand).

As a young child, Lila was stolen by a woman named Doll from a home for migrant workers. Doll raised Lila in a group of itinerant workers during the depression, and while their relationship is described in deeply intimate terms, Doll is persistently haunted by a past life of crime. Lila wonders what exactly her crimes had been beyond her (admittedly serious) theft of a child. Lila wonders if this earlier crime "was just some desperate kindness, like stealing a sickly child" (2014, 98). The novel follows Lila's thoughts and anxieties as she attempts to reconcile her former life with her current one. The problem is a genealogical one: she gets baptized by Ames because "no one seen to it for [her] when [she] was a child" (35). She then realizes, after listening to an evening of theological debate between Ames and Boughton, that she belongs to those who are saved and Doll does not. "If Doll was going to be lost forever, Lila wanted to be right there with her, holding to the skirt of her dress" (21), and the novel begins with Lila "wash[ing] the baptism off" (22). When she speaks with Ames about some of these worries later in the novel, she sounds exasperated with herself: "I just wish I'd known a little more about what I was getting into. My own fault. I should've gone to them damn classes" (99). The baptism

classes (which she stopped attending) might, she thinks, have warned her of this division between her and Doll with which she now wrestles. She tells Ames she is “trying to work something out” (127), and *Lila* presents her thoughts as she does so, but she never asks his opinion. The stories of her life, her relationship with Doll, and her theological worries unfold as the novel follows her thoughts and her conversations with her unborn child. The novel begins as she discovers her pregnancy and ends with the birth and baptism of Robert.

Lila “works out” these questions through reading and writing of visionary language. Literacy is a preoccupation of *Lila*: “there was a long time,” the narrator notes at the outset, “when Lila didn’t know that words had letters” (10). Doll saw to it that Lila attended school for one year and was literate at a basic level. When she arrives in Gilead, she steals a Bible and begins writing out sections of it on a chalkboard tablet to practice her handwriting. She copies rather than writes because she is unsure how to spell the words. She begins with passages from Genesis and then Ezekiel. The novel narrates her interaction with these texts, which she carefully copies, letter by letter. She randomly opens the Bible to Ezekiel 16:4, a verse about an abandoned child that recalls the theft of Lila in the opening scene and that echoes throughout the novel:

*And as for thy nativity, in the day thou wast born thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed in water to cleanse thee; thou wast not salted at all, nor swaddled at all. No eye pitied thee, to do any of these things unto thee, to have compassion upon thee; but thou wast cast out in the open field, for that thy person was abhorred, in the day that thou wast born. And when I passed by thee, and saw thee weltering in thy blood, I said unto thee, Though thou art in thy blood, live; yea, I said unto thee, Though thou art in thy blood, live. (42)*

The section immediately following this lengthy verse sets out the process by which she engages this text—her observations, questions, realizations, and insights. It begins with her first reaction: “She thought, First time I ever heard of salting a baby” (43). She copies out the words and begins her day, walking into Gilead to find some work. As she walks into town, she reflects on how she often walked into towns with Doane and his party of migrant workers. “Why this shame?” she wondered. “No one had ever really explained it to her, and she could never explain it to herself” (47). The words of Ezekiel, though, bring her to an explanation as they drift among her thoughts: “*Thou wast cast out in the open field*. All right. That was none of her doing” (47). This brief phrase—“all right”—encapsulates her reading practice and relation to this text. These words from Ezekiel relieve Lila of a guilt even as they open up other questions. She accepts it was not her fault that she was cast out in the field, but then she reflects on how she has worked herself “tough and ugly for nothing more than to stay alive” (47). Her thoughts bring her back around to Doll who would, she thinks, be “glad to see her no matter what” (47). Doll then speaks through the prophet: “Ugly old Doll. Who had said to her, Live. Not once, but every time she washed and mended for her, mothered her as if she were a child someone could want. Lila remembered more than she ever let on” (47). This extended meditation on the verses in Ezekiel demonstrates how Lila ties together this unusual text with her past experiences, allowing her reading to free her from a shame that had been, until now, inexplicable.

As she continues her practice of reading and copying passages in the morning, she becomes intrigued with Ezekiel and returns to the beginning of the book. It opens with his “visions of God” (67), and she copies out the description of the prophet’s vision. He sees a “*stormy wind...out of the north, a great cloud, with a fire infolding itself,*” and Lila recognizes the scene immediately: “Well, that could have been a prairie fire in a drought year” (68,

emphasis original). She continues to read and copy. Out of the midst, he says, there came “*the likeness of four living creatures*” that had “*the likeness of a man*” (ibid). Each had four faces and four wings. “Well,” thinks Lila, “she didn’t know what to make of that. A dream somebody had, and he wrote it down, and it ended up in this book” (ibid). She pauses to copy it ten times, making her letters smaller and neater each time. As she copies, she sees how this “strange” image captures very well a peculiar pattern of her life:

Her name had the likeness of a name. She had the likeness of a woman, with hands but no face at all, since she never let herself see it. She had the likeness of a life, because she was all alone in it. She lived in the likeness of a house, with walls and a roof and a door that kept nothing in and nothing out. And when Doll took her up and swept her away, she had felt a likeness of wings. She thought, Strange as all this is, there might be something to it. (68)

As Lila engages with this odd “dream somebody had,” she reflects on the peculiar notion of “likeness.” It is neither an appearance masking a deeper truth nor a fantastic image symbolizing a more real concept. She does not read to decipher the text’s symbolic or allegorical meaning, as Ames and Boughton often do in *Gilead* and *Home*. She reads for resonance, making sense of Ezekiel’s vision by noting how it reverberates with her own experience. A house or a name can have the appropriate features and yet fall incredibly short of fulfilling the need one longs for it to meet. Her house provides no shelter from the elements, and her name offers no indication of her familial line of descent.

When she returns to copying Ezekiel, she finds a further description of these curious creatures, focusing on “*the likeness of their faces*” (82). They had the face of a man, of a lion on the right side, of an ox on the left side, and also of an eagle. The oddness of this description strikes her: “Doane would be saying, What did I tell you. But it made as much sense as anything else. No sense at all” (ibid). Lila counters Doane’s skepticism of the written word (he’s particularly skeptical of religious words) and explains how a person’s face can also be read:

If you think about a human face, it can be something you don’t want to look at, so sad or so hard or so kind. It can be something you want to hide, because it pretty well shows where you’ve been and what you can expect. And anybody at all can see it, but you can’t. It just floats there in front of you. It might as well be your soul, for all you can do to protect it. What isn’t strange, when you think about it. (82)

Lila has learned that a person’s face can be read: it narrates a story, bearing the marks of a history and intimating a future. Doll had a scar on her face from a woman beating her with a hot frying pan, and her scar made it impossible to hide from Lila’s relatives who, we learn, were persistently seeking her out. Doll would carefully hide her face, standing away from the fire (108), and Lila was the only one who would ever see it. Her face shows that she had known violence and, in Lila’s words (which turn out to be true), that she could expect violence. Bodies, and particularly faces, operate as texts that can be read, open to anyone who might see them. Lila does not look for these passages to “make sense,” as Doane thinks they should and as Ames claims they do, but she recognizes in them an understanding of the nonsensical and the paradoxical—that your face “floats” in front of you, available to anyone but yourself to read.

Throughout *Lila*, Ames worries about Lila reading in the Bible “just at that place” (125). He finds those passages very “difficult,” and reminds Lila that God loved Israel, punishing them when they were unfaithful because their faithfulness was important to the “whole history of the world” (ibid). “All right,” Lila thinks. She is not interested in this grand allegorical reading of prophetic books like Ezekiel that contain such vivid imagery and incomprehensible visions. “She

was mainly just interested in reading that the people were a desolation and a reproach. She knew what those words meant without asking. In the sight of all that pass by” (ibid). She is thinking about Doll’s face and, as the Depression wore on, how it became increasingly difficult to hide her face from those who might employ her. Lila likes what she’s reading. She doesn’t want to read the book of Matthew, as Ames suggests, because Ezekiel, she says, talks a lot about “whoring” (132). (We learn that Lila worked in a whorehouse before coming to Gilead, miraculously escaping with her “virtue” intact, about which she has told Ames almost nothing.) Ames laughs and says he “could explain about that.” “Don’t worry about it,” she replies. “I got my own thoughts” (132). These “thoughts” constitute the novel’s central narrative. Ames’s well-intentioned but condescending explanations about how she ought to read these visions prove irrelevant to the story, and the trilogy brings them increasingly into question.

Ames concedes to Lila that his reading of Ezekiel has been terribly selective: “I guess I’ll have to read the whole thing over again. It is amazing how I always seem to be thinking about the parts I like best. And there are a lot of them. But there *is* all the rest of it” (132). *Lila* does not offer us Ames’s rereading of Ezekiel (which would, in this novel, make for some tedious reading). The novel remains focalized through Lila and presents a way of engaging with these biblical texts that differs wildly from that practiced by Ames and Boughton. The two men had spent years reading together, discussing their views late into the night over Ames’s kitchen table late at night. Glory grasps the seriousness of this activity, noting how “touchy” her father has become about the consistency of his theology: “If I pointed out a contradiction in his thinking, I would probably upset him” (2008, 154). The trilogy does, at various points, draw attention to the contradictions, oversights, and shortcomings. When Jack comes to Ames for advice about racial politics in *Gilead*, for example, Ames is “surprised” that he does not know how Boughton “would take all this” (221). It is an issue “we never discussed in all our years of discussing everything. It just didn’t come up” (221). The textual world shared by Boughton and Ames is one in which race did not present a problem to be addressed, and the fact that it “just didn’t come up” deeply wounds Jack and his family.

In contrast to Boughton and Ames, Lila does not distill a principle or concept from a text, situating it in a larger theological system. The novel presents her process of reading as one of recognition and recollection. She reads about a storm in Job and thinks, “She’d heard of that happening, plenty of times” (175). She reads how “*the living creatures ran and returned as the appearance of a flash of lightning*” and is pleasantly surprised at her understanding: “She never expected to find so many things she already knew about written down in a book” (176). Lila already knows, and she carries this knowledge in her female, pregnant body. She worries that her unborn child might feel her fear “down in [his] poor little bones” “because that fear has never left [her] body, has just hidden in it, waiting” (183). It is not just this fear but all of her experience that remains in her body and on her face. She repeatedly mentions her “hard hands and a face she could barely bring herself to look at in a mirror because her life was just written all over it” (241). Her body simultaneously carries her hidden knowledge of terrible things even as it presents itself as a text to be read by the world. Even as she cannot bear to look at her own face, reading its story all over again, it is precisely on this point that she understands her relationship with Ames.

*Lila* not only presents Lila’s reading practice, it also presents her understanding of how Ames reads—both how he reads texts and how he reads, as she says, her face:

And her life was just written all over her, she knew it without looking, because that’s how it was with all the women she used to know. And somehow she found her way to the one

man on earth who didn't see it. Or maybe he saw it the way he did because he had read that parable, or poem, or whatever it was. Ezekiel. The Bible was truer than life for him, so it was natural enough that his thinking would be taken from it. Maybe it never was normal thinking, since there were preachers in this house his whole life, quarreling about religion and talking to Jesus. (226)

Lila reflects on how Ames's reading of Ezekiel and his deep familiarity with visions—growing up with a grandfather who talked with Jesus—has shaped his reading of *her* as a text. He reads her differently, she thinks, because he had read “that parable, or poem, or whatever it was. Ezekiel.” She knows, furthermore, that he reads differently than he thinks he reads. While Ames talks about the allegorical meaning of the visions of Ezekiel, solving the puzzle of what these strange sights might *mean*, Lila sees the influence of his grandfather. The “Bible was truer than life for [Ames]”—the very point that made Ames's father so angry about the old man's abolitionist visions—and Ames's thinking could not be separated from it. His thinking is not “normal,” Lila says, given the visionary texts and experiences in which he is steeped, and he may be the last one to know this about himself. Lila understands their relationship in terms of such visions. It might be, she concludes, “that she seemed to him as if she came straight out of the Bible, knowing about all those things that can happen and nobody has the words to tell you” (227). Lila describes *herself* here as a prophet who has had a vision—one who knows and who struggles to find “the words to tell.” While Ames misunderstands her struggle as a mark of illiteracy (not knowing how to read Ezekiel), the novel reframes it as a struggle of communication. How can she share what she knows “about all those things that can happen”? This remarkable act of “telling” is the achievement of the book of Ezekiel, which Ames casually mentions he ought to reread.

The final line of the trilogy is Lila's, and it squarely addresses this problem of communicating one's visionary knowledge that has persisted throughout the trilogy: “Someday she would tell him what she knew” (261). The novel does not end, however, with a scene of mutual understanding: Lila never articulates to Ames what she “knows,” which is a knowledge that strains the limits of language. The novel ends with a scene in which Lila presents her knowledge to herself: she answers her own questions without reference to the systematic theologies which Ames and Boughton are constantly negotiating. She wonders about heaven: “Can a soul in bliss feel a weight lift off his heart?” (258). She decides that heaven could not be heaven without all these people she loves—Doll, Doane, the boy she met who worries he had killed his father, that boy's father. She concludes that heaven includes them all “because the boy couldn't bear heaven without [his father]” (259). As Robert Hardies says in his review of *Lila*, “[t]his is how Calvinism always undoes itself” (2015, n.p.). People cannot live with the thought that their loved ones are excluded from paradise.

With this in mind, it is important to note (which Hardies does not) that *Lila* ends with Ames confronting the same anxiety and responding entirely differently. He is baptizing his and Lila's child in this final scene, and as he does so, he quickly touches the water three times to her head, too: “I wanted you to know we couldn't bear—we have to keep you with us...” (257). He fears the same separation Lila does, but his response secures the theological system that generates the problem in the first place. He rebaptizes her without her permission (the novel emphasizes her ambivalence on this point), avoiding the confrontation within himself that Lila has been “working out” throughout the novel. What “she knows” at the end of the novel is something that Ames is not ready to know and, most likely, will never be ready to know.



As *Lila* ends, it looks forward to the events of *Home* and *Gilead* with which the trilogy begins. Robert's baptism ostensibly secures him a place in the genealogy of the Ames family, and yet, as Lila tells Glory, "[w]e'll be leaving sometime" (2008, 283). Looking ahead to what lies beyond the events of the trilogy, the families of Lila, Glory, and Jack are altering, disappearing or ending abruptly. While Jack is written out of his genealogy, Lila seems to be building a new one quite separate from the Ames men. (Let us note, in passing, that both boys in these genealogical lines are named Robert.) Glory's genealogy differs from Jack's and Lila's, ending abruptly (children seem unlikely). *Home* ends with a glance into her future and, through her, Gilead's future. She inherits the family home (her father takes pity on her, following her broken engagement), and says she could never bring herself to sell it and move, just in case Jack or his boy Robert ever come back. She remains committed to a vision of a return of "this Robert," who "will be curious" and think "[t]his was my father's house" (2008, 324-5). The final paragraph of the novel describes how Glory imagines this impossible—and racially inflected—reunion: she "will be almost old" and when she invites him onto the porch, "he will reply with something civil and Southern, 'Yes, ma'am, I might could,' or whatever it is they say. [...] He is Jack's son, and Southerners are especially polite to older women" (324). Rather than reading this as a scene of future welcome, I take it to illustrate how the racial tension that Jack and his family confront in *Home* extends into the future. Glory ties herself to the past, realizing she "could never change a thing" in the house (323), but instead of building a space of openness, she unwittingly secures the future of Gilead as one formed by assumptions about what "they say" and how "polite" they are.

Foucault, in his conception of genealogy, insists that "to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; [...] it is to discover that truth or being does not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents" (81). Robinson's trilogy, in this sense, follows the "dispersion" of the actions, the stories, the words, the practices, and even the name of Rev. Ames senior. In the process, the trilogy narrates how mainline Protestant Christianity solidifies itself *as* mainline in response to the "dispersion" of those "events" of the old abolitionist. His grandson, Ames, and his best friend across town together raise a generation of moderate, proper, distinctly unfanatical Protestants. The trilogy narrates the painful and longlasting effects of their having done so.

## Epilogue

As I have written each case study in this dissertation, I have persistently asked how do these novels figure religious fanaticism? While the diversity of these figurations is itself a key contribution of this dissertation—the religious fanatic is not simply a stock character of contemporary fiction—I would like to conclude by reflecting briefly on an aspect of these figurations that quietly persists across these chapters.

In each case study, the figure of the religious fanatic is situated at the limits of language. These characters struggle to communicate their experience, particularly as it makes demands of others. Adam and Jed struggle to express their love, unrequited as it is; Eugene struggles to convey why his family ought to pursue perfection; Rev. Ames senior says it “kills [his] heart” (Robinson 2004, 84) that his son never had a visionary experience and, thus, never understood how it compels a person. In each case, the fanatic seems to be asking, exasperatedly, “why can’t you see what I see?” It is this problem of visibility and impatience with language that gains traction within each novel, within each chapter and across the dissertation.

Notably, none of the novels address this question from the perspective of the religious fanatic. They do not narrate what the fanatic sees and experiences, employing the novel to articulate what the character could not. All of these novels narrate this frustration and exasperation through a focalizing consciousness who observes this inner turmoil from a slight distance. Given this framework, these novels are all grounded in an intimate relationship, one partner of which is characterized in terms of religious fanaticism. As I worked on this project, it became increasingly clear to me that my principle object of analysis was not so much the figure of the religious fanatic in contemporary fiction but, more precisely, the intimate relationships through which this figure is presented for the novel’s readers. On one level, this could be approached as a question of framing: we know Rev. Ames senior, for example, only through his grandson’s confusion, anger, admiration and shame. We piece together our image of Eugene from what young Kambili is able to observe and describe. The preceding chapters, however, have demonstrated that the matter is far more complex.

These novels not only describe the figure of religious fanaticism through this intermediary character but they also foreground how this figure actively shapes this character’s world in various ways. Kambili’s self-understanding (and, literally, her ability to speak) has been shaped by Eugene’s insistence on perfection, and my chapter examined how the Catholic liturgy provides the site on which Kambili describes and counters Eugene’s forcefulness. In *Gilead*, Ames reframes his grandfather’s narrow sense of visions in an effort to address the anger that has been smouldering throughout the family’s generations. The Gilead trilogy, I suggested, presents the largely negative effects that this reframing has on Ames, his town, his friends, and his family. *Enduring Love* narrates how Joe’s paranoia emerges in response to Jed’s religious fanaticism; *Saturday* similarly draws attention to the effect of (imagined) religious fanaticism on the protagonist’s own abilities to perceive the world objectively. In each case, the novel narrates how the figure of the religious fanatic does not simply interrupt or threaten the world of the novel but is constitutive of that world. The protagonists, even as they struggle to distance themselves from these figures fanaticism, do not simply negate or oppose them. The texts narrate the lengthy journey by which these protagonists refashion themselves, renarrate their histories, and reconsider their commitments.

These protagonists and narrators certainly demonstrate varying degrees of self-awareness within this process. The novels explore these limits of self-understanding—limits that are

specifically produced through intimate encounters with these figures of religious fanaticism. My analysis has highlighted moments across these texts in which these characters remain strangers to themselves, struggling to see that these religious fanatics have had more lasting, pervasive effects than these characters seem to understand.

And so when these figures of religious fanaticism ask “why can’t you see what I see,” the answers the novels provide are multi-layered and take us on various side paths that may appear tangential. On the one hand, the novels’ narrators are uniquely able to see what others cannot. Ames does see the value of visionary experience, and Kambili views her father more compassionately than her brother. Joe predicts Jed’s actions better than Clarissa or the police. The intimacy of these relationships is central to the operation of the novel. These protagonists, in many ways, *do* see what others do not. On the other hand, it is precisely this intimacy that opens up a complex picture of what is entailed in refusing to see what these fanatics see and insisting on seeing otherwise.

These confrontations occur within the most intimate spaces of these characters’ lives, often on a visceral rather than cognitive level. These novels show how religious fanaticism incites conflicts of perception and perspective. Having examined how these conflicts emerge, how they linger across time and space, how they recur and repeat, this dissertation draws on these contemporary novels to reframe how we think about religious fanaticism. These figurations offer clearer understandings of the rifts, divides, and chasms that emerge as people perceive the world differently and find themselves struggling to articulate this difference. Neither these novels nor this dissertation claim to articulate this difference on their behalf, but, more modestly, aim to present religious fanaticism as an effect of this struggle.

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