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Clark's *In the Deep Midwinter* and Hansen's *Atticus*: Examples of a Two-fold Literature of Life

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Abstract

John Paul II's "Letter to Artists" identified two ways artists, particularly literary artists, can help reveal the nature of man to himself by showing both 1) the threat to human dignity from humans themselves, as well as 2) the possibility of transcendence and redemption as achievement and divine gift breaking into this life. We offer close readings of two contemporary novels as examples. The first way is illustrated by Robert Clark's *In the Deep Midwinter*, a novel at whose centre is an illegal abortion in the 1950's. We argue that the novel's portrait of suffering and abiding loss effectively shows the devastating effects of moral evil. The characters are conflicted in their desires and chosen actions, and they defend different positions; however, the plot in particular underscores the harm humans can inflict on themselves and others. The second way is illustrated using Hansen's *Atticus*. We argue that the character of Atticus serves both as an example of a virtuous Christian everyman and as an allegorical representation of God the Father. Redemption becomes possible for the dissolute son Scott when he turns to Atticus, his loving father, for forgiveness.

Keywords

John Paul II, Robert Clark, Ron Hansen, *Atticus*, *In the Deep Midwinter*

Introduction

While the death of John Paul II has occasioned many reflections on his gifts to such varied fields as ethics, law, international relations, and ecumenism, few would cite him as an aid in writing or reading literature. While it may seem counterintuitive to some, this study intends to show that John Paul's thoughts on literature (as well as on art in general) can illuminate actual literary texts. In particular, this

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study will show how looking through a "Johannine-Pauline" lens, as found in his 1999 *Letter to Artists*, provides a deep encounter with two novels from the late 1990's: Robert Clark's *In the Deep Midwinter* and Ron Hansen's *Atticus*.[1]

The *Letter to Artists* draws on John Paul's lifelong interest in and participation in the arts: as a young man he was involved in theatre, not only as an actor but as a playwright, and he wrote poetry all his life, publishing volumes of poetry well into his pontificate. But the *Letter* also argues the Christian view that literature, indeed all art, is not simply its own hermetically sealed field of action, but is a human activity that affects and reflects how we live: in the old biblical phraseology, literature is made for man and not man for literature. How we are to live is designated by his (now popularized) phrase, "a culture of life."

A culture of life is a culture in which the dignity of the human person is respected, protected, and venerated as a unique image of God himself. Much commentary has gone into John Paul's demands for a legal end to abortion and euthanasia, as well as a stricter set of criteria for when capital punishment might be used or nations might go to war. Yet John Paul's approach to the world, signified by the terminology he used, was not primarily that of the lawyer or diplomat. His approach was that of the Christian priest and artist. Culture is based in *cultus* and thus finds its root in the worship of the Church and that of the children of the Church, but includes the myriad ways in which man mimics the creator of all, from procreation to the fashioning of technology to sculpture, painting, music, and, most important for our purposes, literature. In this *imitatio dei* man is, in a certain sense, revealed to himself and so is the source of life.

The *Letter to Artists* outlines the need of the Church for artists, and not just Christian artists, to "make perceptible, and as far as possible attractive, the world of spirit, of the invisible, of God" (§12). John Paul issues a call to writers particularly to use "the endless possibilities of images and their symbolic force" (§12). It must be emphasized that this call for a Catholic or Christian art should not be read as a call for apologetic literature in the easily derided sense. It is instead a call for art that lives up to its own potential to help reveal the nature of man to himself by showing both 1) the threat to human dignity from humans themselves, as well as 2) the possibility of transcendence and redemption as achievement and divine gift breaking into this life.

[1] Hansen has won both a Guggenheim Fellowship (1990) and American Academy of Arts Award (1989). His novel *Mariette in Ecstasy* was a *New York Times* best-seller and the novel in question, *Atticus*, was a 1996 National Book Award Finalist. Clark was also awarded a Guggenheim (2005) and his novel *Mr. White's Confession* was awarded the Edgar Allen Poe Award by the Mystery Writers of America in 1999.

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The first part of the call is described in John Paul's acknowledgment that "[e]ven when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption" (§10). A writer can express the transcendent nature of human beings by showing them at their worst, even in the most tragic and despairing situations, thus revealing a willful denial of God's presence and of an order to his creation. God's presence is revealed by absence, a sort of literary *via negativa*. We will read Robert Clark's *In the Deep Midwinter* as an answer to this first part of John Paul's call.

The second half of the call is to portray the reality of transcendence and redemption as it bursts into this life. This constructive, positive task is perhaps more difficult to accomplish. Witness the widespread view that Dante's greatest work was not the *Comedy* itself, but its first third, namely *Inferno*. In contrast, T. S. Eliot claims that one "cannot understand the *Inferno* without the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*," and, in the process, argues that the great artist moves beyond the first approach of portraying transcendence indirectly to the second, constructive task, *i.e.*, depicting transcendence and goodness directly: "The contemplation of the horrid or sordid or disgusting, by an artist, is the necessary and negative aspect of the impulse toward the pursuit of beauty. But not all succeed as did Dante in expressing the complete scale from negative to positive. The negative is more importunate" (Eliot 169). Ron Hansen's *Atticus* will be examined as an answer to this second, more difficult aspect of the call.

The Devil's Groundwork

The Kirkus reviewer of Robert Clark's first novel tells us that the central crisis in the book is one that "would be solved today without severe social consequences." That crisis is a back-alley abortion in the 1950's. In the same vein, the reviewer later concludes: "It's hard to get worked up over an issue that seems somewhat dated; Clark's overwrought style doesn't help, nor does his explicit propaganda for safe, legal abortion."[2] There are at least three errors in these few sentences quoted. First, the idea that legal abortion somehow "solves" things "without severe social consequences" does not take into account the social costs of abortion either on the larger level of society or on the level of the women who get abortions and their families, not to mention the fate of the unborn children themselves. This mistaken premise leads into the reviewer's second error: namely, that this issue is dated. If by the "issue" the reviewer means the

[2] 1996 Kirkus Associates, LP., reprinted at http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/stores/detail/-/books/0312181.../103-0670768-654861.

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legality of abortion in the abstract, a cursory glance at any of the nation's newspapers will reveal that the issue is very much alive, even if there seems only a small chance that *Roe v. Wade* will be reversed at any time in the near future.[3] If the issue is, as is proper to both the novel and real life, the physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual damage done to an individual woman pressured into abortion by a lover, then it is a pressing and devastating concern today, just as it has always been and will continue to be in any historical or legal setting. If he or she is unable to get "worked-up" over such a crisis, then it is the failure of the reviewer's historical imagination and moral vision that is really the problem. This failure could also account for the reviewer's claim that Clark's style is "overwrought."

The third error is in part due to what the reviewer calls Clark's "tidy narrative technique." This error is in thinking that *Deep Midwinter* is or carries Clark's "explicit propaganda for safe, legal abortion." There are certainly characters who deliver such "propaganda," but it is an error to simply equate their voices with the voice of the author. Flannery O'Connor explained that "a piece of fiction must be very much a self-contained unit." She elaborates:

> This means that it must carry its meaning inside it. It means that any abstractly expressed compassion or piety or morality in a piece of fiction is only a statement added to it. It means that you can't make an inadequate dramatic action complete by putting a statement of meaning on the end of it or in the middle of it or at the beginning of it. It means that when you write fiction you are speaking *with* character and action, not *about* character and action. The writer's moral sense must coincide with his dramatic sense. (O'Connor 1961, 76-7)

If Clark's position was indeed that of his characters who promote "safe and legal abortion," then he has embedded this position in a story whose plot collides with his moral sense. O'Connor may be right that this would make the fiction a wreck in some sense, but it would be a wreck eminently worth gawking at. If we were to assume that these characters did not speak for Clark, then he would have created an intriguing example of a stealth model for a literature of life, a piece of misdirection worthy of a genius. Either way, this book would be worth examining in detail.

The truth is perhaps a bit messier. Clark wrote this novel while he himself was wrestling with the moral and theological truths of Catholic Christian faith. He recalled the time of writing this book in his elegant 1999 memoir, *My Grandfather's House: A Genealogy of Doubt and Faith*. Clark has definitely not put out a piece of propaganda. Instead, Clark has used this "issue" of abortion, in both

[3] And were that decision to be reversed, it would only mean that the decision about the legality of abortion would revert to the decision of the states.

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senses named, to write a novel that John Paul II might commend as an exploration of the darkest depths of the soul and one of the most unsettling aspects of evil. This exploration indeed gives voice to the "universal desire for redemption" by provoking in the reader a crisis, in the original sense of a moment of decision, concerning the characters, their actions, and what they believe. This kind of writing may be best described by Flannery O'Connor's explanation of her own writing: "In my stories the reader will find that the devil accomplishes a good deal of groundwork that seems to be necessary before grace is effective" (O'Connor 1961, 117). Like many of O'Connor's stories, *Deep Midwinter* does not have a clear acceptance of grace, but instead ends with the completion of the devil's groundwork and the resulting crisis for the reader.

In order to understand how it is that Clark has created this collision and crisis, it is important first to understand the plot. The book begins in November 1949 with Richard MacEwan, a staid estate lawyer from St. Paul, Minnesota, traveling north to retrieve the body of his morally free-wheeling brother, James, killed in a hunting accident. In taking care of James's effects Richard eventually discovers that his wife, Sarah, nearly had an affair with James. Meanwhile, Richard and Sarah's thirty-year old daughter, Anna, a divorcée with a small son, has begun to see the almost-divorced Charles Norden, a young lawyer on the move. When Anna becomes pregnant, Charles, fearing this development might harm his chances for a partnership, arranges for an abortion. Anna nearly dies from the botched operation and Richard, reeling from the events of the last few months, nearly has an affair himself, with one of his brother's former lovers. He then regains an equilibrium of sorts. Charles leaves Anna and St. Paul and remarries out east. The book ends with Anna looking back over the years and remembering, especially, the man she loved who left her and the child who is lost to her.

What is the evidence that this is a book of pro-abortion propaganda? Mostly, it is the statements made by Richard as he regains his own equilibrium. We will deal with Richard first. As he worries over his daughter's condition, Richard gradually revises his beliefs. His new positions and rhetoric have their origins in the appeals made by the doctor who treats Anna, Ted Fields. Fields knows that Anna's life-threatening infection has been caused by a botched abortion, and he attempts to conceal this fact from Richard, who begins to discover the truth from Anna's hospital chart and is inclined to press charges. When Fields indicates he will not take any action because he does not have any "direct knowledge of any criminal activity," Richard replies that this is disingenuous. Fields jumps on Richard, telling him, "I don't care" and excusing himself by saying, "I only want to worry about Anna right now" (196). When Richard later attempts to move Fields to action, Fields calls him a "total

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ass" (perhaps an anachronistic expletive) and tells him he thinks that "the good are just insufferable" (212). Richard still does not believe Fields.

But Fields badgers Richard later, explaining why nobody bothers back-alley abortionists:

> "I suppose I'm complicit," Fields said. "It's a procedure most doctors don't want to perform. It's illegal and unpleasant and morally dubious. We don't want to be criminals. We don't want to feel the guilt, maybe burn in hell, for extracting these fetuses. But we know it's necessary, so we let someone else do it on our behalf. We settle for being hypocrites." (215)

To Richard's queries about life as a hypocrite Fields responds with some rather bizarre talk about life as "irony" where mistakes are made, people are betrayed, and someone must mediate between this "counter-world" and the world we wish to live in or else the world we do live in will become a world without "forgiveness" (215-216). Fields proposes the back-alley abortionist as an example of the kind of "angel" who could mediate these worlds. When Fields admits that he has heard of some evils that he has not personally seen, Richard says that he is surprised. Fields responds, "So am I, but that's its endless fascination" (217).

Richard, who has resisted up to this point, begins to give in to Fields's "philosophy." He begins to spout the same type of lines as Fields to his daughter who is healing. He tells her that "so much of what you think is evil is just happenstance that people fall into, that chooses them and they follow" (256–57). When Anna asks him whether abortion is like "killing someone," Richard tells her, "Well, I suppose technically something dies, but I'm not sure you can say it's a separate, independent identity. It's more like a part of yourself." To Anna's next question, if she has then killed part of herself, Richard replies that it was a sort of "sacrifice" (263).

The reader who is looking for the culture of life is at this point a little sick. Ted Fields seems to have gotten the last word through Richard, perhaps the only character who figures larger in the story than Anna. A more comprehensive interpretation of the novel, however, undermines the claims argued first by Ted Fields and more importantly by Richard. If Clark's intention was to persuade the reader of these positions, it seems unlikely that he would have sent them into a collision with the dramatic structure, as he does. But what is it about the drama of the book that puts Richard's conclusions in doubt? We would suggest four elements: the narrator's choice of terms, the dialogue between Anna and Charles, the verdict of Richard's wife, Sarah, and the ending of the story.

First, the narrator. While it is noteworthy that Ted Fields speaks of removing "fetuses" there is no such euphemism from the narrator.

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The narrator tells us that on Christmas Anna thought about being called as Mary was called: “And even now Charles Norden’s child slept inside Anna’s body” (61). Similarly, when describing Anna’s happily married pregnant friend Alice, we are told that she could “feel the weight of the child in her pelvis” (131). When the abortion takes place, the description is more graphic than most pro-life literature. Finally, at the end of the book we are told that Anna sometimes looks at an old photograph of a boat and sees a shadow falling on the lake: “She thinks it is the shadow of the child” (278). Whatever the obfuscations of Richard or the euphemisms of Ted Fields, the narrator knows and tells the reader that it is a child that died that night.

Both Anna and Charles know it is a child as well. This is what makes the character of Charles so eerily cold, and it is what makes the dialogue between the two so difficult to read and perhaps, to the Kirkus reviewer, “overwrought.” Charles is a man who, as Sarah says, is the last person in the world to know who he is (56). And this failure to know who he is makes him cruel. When Charles finds out that Anna is pregnant he blames her and insinuates that the child may not be his (103). (This after he has accused her of “using” his body when she sets a pack of cigarettes on his chest after making love [80].) He then pressures her into getting an abortion, making her feel as though he were God asking for a sacrifice, though he is only worried about his own appearance and his chances for a partnership at the law firm (108): “He telephoned her each day, reassured her, and then tried to put her out of his mind so he could work, so he could live as he once had . . . ” (113). This is the sacrifice that is demanded of Anna—her child, her dignity, and nearly her life for his career. And what does she get from this sacrifice? Even before the abortion takes place Anna no longer feels daring enough to ask if Charles loves her (109). He does say it one more time as he pushes her into the cab that will take her to the abortionist, but again the narrator intrudes, informing us that the sound of this “I love you” was like “a low gust of wind on dry snow, like satin ribbon against satin ribbon” (156). This “I love you” was only to get her to get rid of her child; when Anna had earlier summoned the courage to ask about the future, Charles had declined to make any commitment to Anna (146).

The moment of true betrayal, or rather the moment when Charles is revealed as a betrayer, is when he leaves the wounded Anna in her home and goes back to his own home, promising to come back and check on her. He drinks himself to sleep instead and doesn’t return until the next day, by which time she has gone into a coma and been taken to the hospital. He does not offer any information to the physicians for fear he might arrive in legal jeopardy, and only relents guardedly when Ted Fields slyly assures him he will not turn

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Charles over to the authorities. After Anna's near brush with death Charles lamely offers that he would have taken "half the pain" (223). He tries to argue Anna into believing that she "wanted" to get rid of the "it" (224). But Anna will not refer to "it":

> "It could have been your son, you know—"
> "Don't do this, Anna. It doesn't go anywhere, it's just punishing yourself—"
> "Or your daughter. And every time you'd look at my face, you'd see her and wonder about her—about what she might have been."
> "Anna," Charles said, and he didn't know what else to say. He wanted to stop her. It was like a curse, a blasphemy, the lunatic rant of a witch. But, he knew, it was also true." (225–26)

Anna shows signs of clear-headedness frequently, though resorts to talking about her abortion as a sacrifice, much as her father does. But this talk of sacrifice meets reality in the person of Anna's mother, Sarah. When Richard defends Anna's behavior as "sacrifice," Sarah points out that this was a sacrifice that goes "for nothing." What has Anna accomplished by this sacrifice? She aborted (note the word) "a baby." She nearly died, leaving her son motherless. She broke the law. She broke her parents' hearts. And this sacrifice of hers, "for love," still leaves her without the man for whom she sacrificed. Charles Norden has gone back east without her. Sarah's judgment is expressed perhaps coldly, but it is clear-eyed. It seems doubly penetrating since there are hints that she had an abortion herself when she was a young woman.

Finally, the plot has an ending which refutes all of Ted's and Richard's talk about good and evil being just happenstance, or perhaps two sides of a coin. Immediately after Richard's obfuscatory talk with Anna about sacrifice, he learns that his brother James actually killed himself. This dramatic point is significant because James's friend Henry Finch had told Charles Norden, as Charles contemplated action about Anna's "problem," that good and evil are simply two sides of a coin, that they need each other, a theory almost exactly like Ted Fields' theory which Richard has just embraced. After this revelation, we do not hear from Richard again. Dramatically, the point has been made that such a way of life cannot stand up to scrutiny. It leads to death.

We catch up to Anna thirty-five years later, and then once more fifteen years after that. We learn that Charles, having remarried, never attained a judgeship; that his son was killed in an accident; that his daughter moved to California and never spoke to him; and that his new wife nearly fades away. And he does not even live to be 65. Can one think of many harsher judgments? In her own old age, Anna spends her time counting how old the child would be, imagining whether its hair would be straight or wavy, and what it would be

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doing now. She sees a shadow on the lake, to her the shadow of her lost child. Where this shadow falls she sees "there is a dark spot on the ice, a fissure, a wound" (278).

Deep Midwinter does not offer easy answers or easy redemption. It does not offer condemnation, either. But it is relentless in depicting the divided wills of those who do things they believe deep down to be wrong. It is also relentless in refusing to shy away from the aftereffects of the wrongdoing, not giving condemnation, but not refusing to show the consequences of such wrongdoing, either. In this way it "renders judgment." But it is the sort of judgment that makes the reader think concretely about specific actions, particularly abortion. This is what it means to lay the devil's groundwork.

Atticus: The Father and the Prodigal

The second strategy for a literature of life is to portray characters actively pursuing redemption and Christian charity. This strategy proves to be a harder task because it requires the author to develop characters who are at once both particular individuals and iconic figures. First, on the level of literal interpretation, a character must ring true as a concrete modern person, complete with frailties and failings. Contemporary novels, with their emphasis on aspects of our interior lives, often portray the particularity of characters well; however, a literature of life cannot stop at this level. The particularity of the character should lead to reflection on the universal struggle to live the good life as a proper image of God, and, in this sense, the character serves as an iconic figure. Put differently, the literary character is an icon because this artistic creation is complete and believable as an individual but also points beyond itself to the transcendent. To what in particular might such a character point in a literature of life? A character might function as an iconic figure in two respects: first, as a Christian everyman, the virtuous person who models the Christian vocation to love as God loves and, second, as an allegorical representative of God. In Ron Hansen's novel *Atticus*, the title character functions in both respects.

A sixty-seven year-old Coloradan rancher, Atticus Cody is a devout Catholic and a devoted father and grandfather. His elder son, Frank, is a state senator and a family man. Frank and Atticus are business partners, and each is a respected member of the community. Atticus's younger son, Scott, is a troubled, forty-something artist, living a life of self-destructive excess in Mexico. After a strained Christmas together with the family, Scott returns south. News of Scott's apparent suicide brings Atticus to Mexico, where he grieves his estranged but beloved son and finds himself caught up in an amateur investigation of the increasingly mysterious details surrounding the death.

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Ostensibly, the story is a murder mystery, but the novel primarily traces the relationship of father and son.

The character of Atticus is a study in forgiveness and the enduring love of a father for the son who constantly pushes him away. He is not a perfect man, but he is an arresting model of a Christian response to sin and hurt. Twenty years ago, in a fit of youthful irresponsibility, Scott lost control of the family car, killing his mother and devastating both his father and himself. In the present day, as Atticus busies himself straightening up the house, he absentmindedly notes his surroundings: the winter wind howled against the windows, the radio played opera, and "his wife was still not there" (25). Scott arrives home for Christmas after months without contact and proceeds to tolerate and then bait his father. Atticus asks about Scott's life at present, noting that he hopes his son's judgment has improved (6). After painfully strained conversation, Atticus inquires, "Are we going to go on like this? . . . Me being your prying old man and you being my ornery juvenile delinquent?" (9) Atticus, for his part, is exasperated and awkward. He struggles between the urge to argue—or shake—Scott out of his spiraling self-destruction and the desire to embrace him:

> Were Atticus to talk honestly, he thought, he'd say he was alone all the time and this was his son whom he loved and ached for, and heaven was where *he* was, and Atticus hated himself, as he always did, for insisting and teaching and holding up standards and seeming to want Scott to be him, when all he wanted was for Scott to be happy and to know that he was loved and loved and loved. (8)

Atticus has forgiven Scott, but he reproaches himself for having distanced his son. Later, at Scott's funeral Mass, Atticus winces as he remembers his inability to comfort Scott at his wife's funeral: "Their hands happened to touch at the funeral and Atticus never forgave himself for sliding his hand away" (80). Although he is aware that Scott is responsible for his own choices, Atticus cannot help but implicate himself in Scott's apparent suicide. He is angry with Scott for killing himself and with himself for not somehow stopping his son (56). In Mexico, as he pursues the mounting clues surrounding his son's death, Atticus ruefully observes, "If it was murder, . . . Scott's father would not feel so much at fault" (121).

Atticus finds himself acting as father in Mexico as well, caring for those around him. When she greets him, Renata, Scott's love and occasional lover, "seemed as affectionate as a favorite daughter, and he found himself grinning with fatherly foolishness as he said, 'Good to see you'" (56). Later, she treats him to "silence—so daughterly that silence, as if she'd been wrongly punished and thought a sentence might heal the rift she wanted prolonged" (109). Atticus insists on finding the families of those whom Scott had harmed, directly or

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indirectly, and making what amends he can—twice the narrator tells us, "he took care of them" (245).

As part of his role as father, Atticus contrasts starkly with Scott's expatriate friends because he acts as an adult. His disciplined routine of hard work is the novel's first description of Atticus: "At five he did what he always did at five" (3), namely, returned from riding his land and checking the oil rigs to feed the animals. The first section of the book, "Colorado," works as an opposite pole to the second, "Mexico," in various ways—*e.g.*, the details of the frozen and the tropical climates, and the Christian imagery of celebrating Christmas in Colorado juxtaposed with grieving for a dead son in Resurrectión—and one of the chief shifts is between Atticus's mundane but productive work on the ranch and the empty leisure of Scott's sphere. In his journal, Scott recounts drinking and drugging himself into numbness routinely, until "[e]ventually it had become fairly ordinary" to regain consciousness "sitting there in a foul doorway in the *barrio*, fairly sure I'd had sex but not knowing with whom, blood on my shirt front, puke on my shoes, kids stealing change from my pockets . . ." (178). Most disturbing, however, is his assurance that he is far from alone in his habits. Scott describes his circle of pleasure-seeking foreigners as disoriented and spoiled children:

> You heard all kinds of reasons for being in the tropics: for their arthritis, their pensions, the fishing, the tranquil and easygoing ways, but the fact was a lot of us stayed because Mexico treated us like children, indulging our laziness, shrugging at our foolishness, and generally offering the silence and tolerance of a good butler helping the blotto Lord What-a-waste to his room . . . (178).

Scott is one of myriad prodigals who flock to the town of Resurrectión. Like children, they follow their appetitive desires, and, like children, they both resent and long for the concern and discipline of a father like Atticus.

As he did with Scott, Atticus gently tries to convince Scott's comrades to curb the wanton behavior that makes them so desperately unhappy. Atticus is the quiet, steady, Christian father among the "liberated" bohemians. Although these characters regard him with a mixture of disbelief and irritation, they also respect him. They confide in him and recognize the truth in his assessment of their tangled affections. The more that they assert themselves by following their impulses, the less free they become. Renata laments that her choice of another man over Scott seems "so foolish sometimes. Even hellish. But he has such *power* over me. I hate it" (110). She is shocked to learn from Atticus that Stuart, the other man, has confessed the same conflicted feelings about her: "*Really*? I haven't felt in charge at all." Atticus wearily answers, "Well, I believe that. Seems to me every one of you here oughta try living according to Bible values and

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see how that works out" (110). In response to this painfully un-hip recommendation, Renata can only sigh. She does not, however, tell Atticus he is wrong.

Stuart in particular provides an illuminating foil for Atticus because he is at once the man Scott might have become and Atticus's opposite. The character of Stuart accentuates that Atticus's virtues are the result of decades of sacrifice and moral action, not fortunate quirks of personality. Stuart's character, too, has been forged by decades of habits that mirror Scott's. Their interactions at Christmas establish the contrast between Scott and Atticus early in the narrative. Renata muses, "You two are so interesting. You're the formidable figure he idolized and struggled not to become, and he's who you'd be if you didn't have all your good habits and rules and boundaries" (64). Stuart is a more direct contrast, *viz.*, a man Atticus's age who has consistently lived without these "good habits and rules and boundaries." He is an ironic but fitting rival with Scott for Renata's affections. Always dressed with studied sophistication, Stuart speaks five languages, owns the local bookstore, excels at urbane conversation, and holds a position of prestige and influence with the authorities. He has also invested in several hotels in the local red-light district, called "Boystown" in keeping with the theme of the expatriates as distorted children (135). Stuart maintains a more financially successful and slightly subdued version of Scott's habits.

Atticus's role as father is emphasized by his differences from Stuart. Further, and more intriguingly for our analysis of the second, constructive strategy for a literature of life, Stuart's hollowness and failings are seen as such precisely because of the presence of Atticus as a positive model of Christian charity and virtue. While he marvels aloud at Atticus's "quaint" manners (106), Stuart manages none of this reserve himself. An early exchange sketches their characters nicely. "One thing I'll always regret is the twinge of *gladness* I felt when I heard [Scott] was dead," Stuart confides to Atticus, observing even as he completes this thought, "Common decency deserts me on occasion" (107). Atticus "fiercely stare[s] at him" but responds only, "You do try to be honest, don't you?" Stuart immediately acknowledges (in a gross understatement) that his comment to the grieving father was "rude," but, in direct contrast to Atticus, he does not have the self-control to have simply not said it. He then admits, with a flourish of his cigarettes, that he has cancer, a fact which he has kept from Renata for fear of her reaction (107-8). This scene compactly shows us Stuart's character. He is dying from a habit that he continues even as he seeks a dubious miracle cure in Resurrectión (107). Though he inappropriately tells Atticus of his reaction to Scott's death, Stuart has studiously refused to tell his lover that he is dying; clearly, he is capable of holding his tongue when his self-interest dictates. Stuart's "honesty" is a mock virtue indeed.

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The difference between Stuart's and Atticus's affection for Renata also underscores the moral difference in the men. Just fifteen minutes before Scott's funeral, Stuart attempts lasciviously to elicit Atticus's agreement that Renata is a "sultry number" and "siren" (77). Atticus first coldly evades and then ends the subject by refusing to answer. As noted above, Atticus regards Renata primarily as a daughter while Stuart regards her, though twenty years his junior, as an object of lust. Atticus is not insensible to Renata's beauty but, again, his habits set boundaries for his conduct and frame his affection. As he groggily regains consciousness during a stomach flu, Atticus registers that Renata is hovering over him with her hand on his forehead, and "he felt the influence of his flesh as he found himself summoning up how it was to hold her as she wept" (99). Even in this moment of indiscretion, however, Atticus does not give himself over to lust. Renata reminds Atticus at times of his wife (79), and his fever blends the two. In his illness, Renata "fitted right into the past and Serena looking out the upstairs window" (99). The passage also refers us back to Renata's reaction upon first seeing Atticus, which is described in the same terms: "she shrieked with hurt and misery and flung herself into him with the freedom of a wife. She cried for four or five minutes and Atticus petted her hair and just held her. With carefulness" (54). For Atticus, Renata is always compared to wife or daughter, women for whom he might have a lasting and committed tenderness. For Stuart, Renata is a trophy and the woman who has "*complete* power" over him, the woman he has won from Scott but with whom he "has an understanding" that she will sometimes sleep with his rival (57). Further, the text suggests that Stuart's attentions are not reserved exclusively for Renata. As Maria, the twenty-something maid at Scott's house, exits with her baby on her hip, Stuart calls after her. Maria giggles in response, and "Atticus found himself registering how long Stuart fondly gazed at her as she went out" (105).

In Atticus, then, we have a moving portrait of a self-disciplined man, attempting to live a Christian life. He struggles to forgive his son and then determinedly loves Scott despite the latter's attempts to deflect this love. He grieves for his boy. He sets himself to the painful task of discovering the truth about Scott's death. Atticus also models the difficult balance in judging when and how to suggest that others should return to Christian moral principles. He is sometimes ridiculed for doing so. His strong moral character commands respect, however, and he is ultimately seen as a source of comfort even by those who cannot or will not follow his advice.

Atticus is also an icon of God the Father. Scott's art and journal bear out the comparison explicitly. Taking inventory of his son's room, Atticus finds Scott's life-sized drawing of his father "as a pious, upright, presidential man, five feet nine inches tall, weighing

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a slight one hundred and fifty pounds . . .” (45). This same image is later described by a young man, whom Atticus questions about Scott. The teenager suddenly recognizes him: “You’re the old man in that picture of his that he drew. My girlfriend thought you looked just like God” (131). In capturing his father’s character, Scott has also captured in Atticus an image of the Father. As a group of tourists embark on a guided tour of the local church, Scott reflects, “I felt like a former inhabitant, . . . as if the hallways, the hidden doors, the shellacked pictures on the walls were as familiar to me as my father’s house, and I’d forsaken the right or possibility of going inside again” (180). Here, Scott explicitly uses his relationship with Atticus as a means of understanding his relationship with God. The same actions and vices that separate him from his father’s house and forgiveness also initially separate him from the house and forgiveness of God. Scott’s reconciliation works in reverse: only after he seeks shelter and forgiveness in the house of God the Father is Scott then able to ask for his father’s forgiveness and eventually reenter Atticus’s house. When Scott finally hits bottom and takes refuge in the cellar of the church, he “half expected a hiss from the holy water as [he] crossed [himself]” (216), but then he finds his way into the depths of the church: “it was as though my place had been prepared for me” (217). After his time in the shadowy purgatory of the church cellar, Scott can ask Atticus for forgiveness (163, 241).

The novel is a self-conscious retelling of the parable of the prodigal son. Interestingly, it is Scott, not Atticus, who compares his relationship with his father to the parable. “It’s the parable of the prodigal son, isn’t it?” writes Scott in his journal, paraphrasing the story and completing the entry with a citation (231-2). Just as the prodigal shrinks from his father’s joyful welcome, Scott cannot accept his father’s outpouring of love. He recalls a party during which he scurried from room to room to avoid Atticus. When Atticus finally does speak to Scott, who is lamely hovering behind the kitchen door, Scott remembers the care of his father:

> “Why are you so spooked, son?” he asked. The question was rhetorical, he had only to fleetingly meet my friends to know how I’d failed to live up to his standards. But there was no blame in him, no scold or pontification, he was never one of those not-in-my-house-you-don’t fathers, there was only that calm, see-all, X-ray stare that told me *This is not healthy and you know it* (225).

This last point is instructive. Ironically, Scott is fully aware of his father’s forgiveness even as he hides from Atticus. Like Renata in her exchange with Atticus, Scott does not attempt to argue that his life is successful or healthy. In this passage, Scott acknowledges that his omniscient father’s implicit assessment is correct on both counts: Scott’s behavior is objectively unhealthy *and Scott knows it*. Rather

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than sending him into the arms of his father, however, this knowledge of his own moral failings motivates Scott to hide—as he hid from Atticus on the night of his mother's death (188), as Adam and Eve hid from God in the garden, and as the prodigal hid from his father in the mire of pigpens.

Scott cultivates the separation between himself and his father, despite his recognition that his father forgives and loves him and that this separation tears at both his father and himself. When he recalls his relationship with Atticus after the accident that killed his mother, Scott comments: "We weren't ever the same after that. My shame got in the way" (188). As he watches his father sleep, Scott urges himself, "*Wake him now, talk to him,* some forthright and graced part of me thought, but to be fully seen, to confess what I had done and failed to do seemed too hard, too shaming, far easier to put it off" (237). Scott is unable to accept his father's forgiveness and love because he knows he cannot make himself worthy of it. "I felt humiliatingly unequal to his faithfulness, his loyalty, his love, as if I were heir to some foreign genes that my father had no part in" (238). He is ashamed to accept his father's love for what it is—a gift. It is Scott, not Atticus, who must have a conversion of heart in order to reconcile with his father:

> I got to my feet . . . still unsure of whether I would be willing to talk to him or to be seen. But there was a kindliness to him, that "You okay?" look, and I found it in me to walk forward. And I asked, "Will you forgive me?" And I felt forgiven even as I said it. (241)

Atticus's love, like divine love, is certain. It is his own ability to receive this love that Scott doubts. Finally, the literary form of the novel reinforces the iconic nature of the characters of Atticus the father and Scott the son. The first two parts of the novel are written as a third-person account of Atticus's search for his son. While we are often privy to Atticus's thoughts and emotions, he is described for the reader by an omniscient narrator. This structure creates a subtle distance between the reader and Atticus, which is appropriate for an icon of God the Father. On one level, Atticus is a fully human portrait of virtue, a model we might hope to imitate fully. However, on another level, Atticus functions as the father in the parable functions. These men act as a loving human father might act toward a beloved and newly-regained son. They also show us the unrelenting and encompassing forgiveness of divine love for the human sinner. The literary distance of a third-person account is appropriate as a reminder that God is the exemplar of love who will always remain transcendent.

The third section of the novel is Scott's first-person account. The sudden shift to the "I" is a jarring contrast to the prior third-person form. It is appropriate that the reader should be forced to speak with

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the "I" of the prodigal.[4] Having spent the majority of the novel identifying with Atticus, the double icon of the good Christian and of God, the reader is thrown into the uncomfortable position of reading the next section of the novel as the sinner, the prodigal whom we have watched hurt and evade his loving father. Just as Robert Clark's strategy was to bring the reader to a crisis point and possible catharsis, Ron Hansen's strategy in *Atticus* is to invite us to enter a crisis with the character Scott. The third-person description provides a heightened sense of the high stakes in the first-person telling for both Scott and Atticus. In contrast to *Deep Midwinter*, not only is the devil's groundwork laid, but the vision of an ordinary life transformed by grace is seen in Atticus and the difficult first-fruits of redemption are experienced in Scott's return to life.

Conclusion

Neither of these strategies alone will bring about a culture of life, either separately or together. Literature, indeed art itself, is powerful, but it is not the only thing. As Flannery O'Connor wrote in a letter to a friend, "Fiction doesn't lie, but it can't tell the whole truth." (O'Connor 1979, 158). Or, as Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) wrote over twenty years ago, "The only really effective apologia for Christianity comes down to two arguments, namely the *saints* the Church has produced and the *art* which has grown in her womb" (Ratzinger, 129). The ordering in these two "arguments" is significant. The original icons, namely humans whose very nature is to image the God who made them, must do the work of evangelism. The culture of death is not just about an absence of good books, but an absence of people captivated by God who is Beauty. The crisis we all face is, in George Rutler's fine phrase, a "crisis of saints." The culture of life demands real saints in flesh and blood. But fiction can be a powerful voice crying in the wilderness.

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[4] La Rochefoucauld's *Maxims* similarly shifts to the self in the last reflections on death (three of the five references to himself are found in this last section). Stéphane Douard and Stuart D. Warner explain this shift in their introduction to the bilingual edition, "... La Rochefoucauld attempts to structure his book so as gradually to lead his readers to direct their gaze within; and he intends to bring this result about through the wit, sharpness, condescension, and bluntness of the book. Readers are seduced into thinking that they are laughing at others, seeing the folly of others, taking pleasure in the misbegotten deeds of others, and being amazed at the extent and variety of acts of dissimulation practiced by others. However, the *others* are no different from *oneself*" (La Rochefoucauld, ix).

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