

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Ten, Number Three

## Slavoj Žižek's Passion (for the Real) and Flannery O'Connor's Hermaphrodite

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Abstract:

Žižek has argued in his books on Christianity and modernity that institutional Catholic Christianity has placed its members in a double bind by insisting on belief in a nonexistent God of Being. The laws of this God of the Symbolic are perverse in that they impose impossible requirements on all believers. By the mid-twentieth century, however, Catholicism was experiencing the revolutionary reforms of the Second Vatican Council. Dogmatic Law at this time gave way to a renewed emphasis on the community of love associated in early Christianity with the Holy Spirit. This God of the Real is inherently Trinitarian: God-Father-Thing, Spirit as community of believers, and Christ as the imaginary Real gap between them. The American gothic writer Flannery O'Connor in her short story "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" provides a meditation on this Real Trinity. In O'Connor's story a hermaphroditic circus freak becomes an emblem of the deadlock of sexual difference and a monstrous Christ-figure in the Žižekian sense. Its place is theologically incoherent and represents the passion for the Real emerging out of the perverse situation of mid-century Catholic orthodoxy.

“Ah, ha! Just as they are upon the banners, you will see them on the inside! Living, breathing monstrosities, Josephine-Joseph, Half-Woman, Half-Man” (Browning 1932: unpaginated).

“[T]here is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus” (*Douay-Rheims* 1899: Gal. 3.28).

The Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner once remarked that "the devout Christian of the future will either be a mystic...or...will cease to be anything at all, if by mysticism we mean a genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence" (Rahner 1971: 15). Although Flannery O'Connor categorically claimed in a 1955 letter, "I am not a mystic" (O'Connor 1979: 92), her textual works engage pervasively with what cannot be spoken, cannot be known, and cannot be thought.<sup>1</sup> While her style is typically astringent, O'Connor's writing opens her characters and her readers to what she calls "an experience of mystery itself" (O'Connor 1970: 41), which is perhaps her version of Rahner's "experience of God," which emerges "from the very heart" of existence. As in all grotesque work, hers "lean[s] away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected," toward the freakish, the monstrous (O'Connor 1970: 40).<sup>2</sup> Her openness to the unknown and even terrifying comports well with the historical moment of Roman Catholicism in which she lived: the very last decades before the *aggiornamento* (or "bringing-up-to-date") of the Second Vatican Council, called in 1961 by Pope John XXIII. One might characterize this period as an end to the hegemony of post-Reformation scholasticism, especially its emphasis on the God of Being, what is nowadays called the ontotheological God. O'Connor lived as well during a time when ideas that had been condemned as "modernist," Protestant, and heretical would become official positions of the Catholic Church. In twentieth century Catholicism syllogistic logic inexorably gave ground to liberal theology with its emphasis on what Pope Pius X condemned in 1910 as "blind sentiment" (Pius X 1910: unpaginated).

In the language of Slavoj Žižek, the modern moment of Christian "perversity" was in these years of the twentieth century being unsettled by a renewed "passion for the Real" (Žižek 2003: 63).<sup>3</sup> It was a time of the "perverse version of Christianity" giving way to "subversion" (Žižek 2003: 49, 56). The dogmatic orthodoxy of the post-Trent and post-

Vatican I Church found itself by the 1950s and 1960s to be in serious competition with a renewed focus on the living spirit, the “bond of love” that for Žižek emerged from the event of the Crucifixion (Kotsko 2008: 97). In that “truth-event,” Christ becomes a “concrete” and indeed “singular universal,” “just as...those without a proper place within the social order stand for humanity as such, in its universal dimension” (Žižek 2003: 80). The revolutionary qualities of the Christ-event gained greater recognition as Catholics came to terms with what Žižek calls “the subversive kernel of Christianity” (Žižek 2003: 6). Catholic Christians were learning that in modernity Jacques Lacan’s “big Other,” or the God of Being, no longer exists, perhaps never existed. If this is so, then we should be able to trace the progression from, and tension between, the God of Law or God of the Symbolic (the God of perversion) and the God of the Real as the community of love initiated by the Christ-event (the God of subversion). One promising locus of this conflict is the textual work of the mid-twentieth century American Catholic writer Flannery O’Connor. Her illuminating story “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” lays out her own Trinitarian theology and focuses on the theologically incoherent figure of a hermaphroditic carnival freak: “neither male nor female,” “half-woman, half-man,” “a man and woman both” (O’Connor 1971: 245). This fiction engages with faith in the Law of the big Other and ends with a vision of the monstrosity of Christ.

There is of course no greater exponent and reinterpreter of the Lacanian Real than Slavoj Žižek. In books such as *On Belief* (2001), *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003), and, with John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ* (2009), Žižek explores this Real in relation to Christian belief and Christian communities. For Žižek the central problem with Christianity in “modernity proper,” after the death of the ontotheological God, is its upholding of patriarchal and Symbolic Law at the expense of the Real and its law of love. The latter is no law at all, “in which everything is simultaneously prohibited and permitted” (Žižek 2003: 104). For Žižek the “core” of the institution of Christianity (although not its foundational “kernel”) is “perverse.” It is psychologically, politically, and ethically sick in that it places those subject to it into an impossible situation. As Adam Kotsko puts it, for Žižek the perverse version of Christianity “names *the ultimate ethical failure*” (Kotsko 2008: 62). Žižek, following Lacan, sees perversion as a “double strategy” within the Symbolic order, the realm of language, reason, and consciousness (Žižek 2003: 53). The first strategy of perverse Christianity is to install for everyone everywhere the “virtual order” of the big Other (Žižek 2009: 61). The second is “a no less desperate attempt to

codify the transgression of this Law,” to turn each citizen of this City of the Symbolic God into a failure, a criminal (53).

An example of this ultimate Law is the body of dogmatic teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, statements that are, in traditional theological parlance, articulations of "objective truth" (Knights 1909: 90). An early twentieth-century Catholic encyclopedia defines dogma as a “revealed truth,” which depends not on philosophical or scientific knowledge, but on “the intellectual character and objective truth of Divine revelation” (Knights 1909: 90). By the end of the nineteenth century dogma was considered in Catholic theology to be immutable, an articulation of permanent truths about God and the universe. Such truths have been expressed by God through Scripture and the teaching authority, or Magisterium, of the Church, and all Catholic Christians were—and are—required to believe them. Even during and after the reforms of Vatican II, Catholics must offer “the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals,” and assent freely...to the truth revealed by him” (Paul VI 1965: unpaginated [¶5]). Such statements express, in Žižek's Hegelian formulation, "abstract...universality" (Žižek 2003: 81). For Žižek the Universal “stands for an impossible/unconditional demand” (82), in Vatican II an insistence that one “assent freely” to a “full submission” of one’s intellect and will. Here the free person becomes a slave to God’s Law. The laws themselves in the form of dogmatic statements consist of truth claims and rules to be followed.

According to Žižek the teachers of the Law place believers in a double bind. They must obey the Law but are incapable of doing so, at least fully and perfectly. This is the second strategy of perverse orthodoxy: to turn everyone under the Law into transgressors, lawbreakers, and sinners. Even the greatest saints in the Catholic tradition were also sinners; no one is able to obey the Law of a perfect God perfectly. And indeed, even the purest and most saintly depend for their existence on convicted sinners, for without sinners there can be no saints. Holiness is meaningless without sin, virtue without vice. This paradox is perhaps an obvious one to all Christians, but Žižek gives it another turn of the screw, a Hegelian negation of negation. According to Žižek, "if Adam had chosen obedience to God, there would have been no sin and no Law: there also would have been NO LOVE" (Žižek 2003: 81). For both Lacan and Žižek, “the ultimate proof that God loves us is that he ‘gives us what he does not have’” (Žižek 2009: 59). It is not only the case that there would have been no Christ without Adam, or at least no good reason for God to become Man, for God (impossibly) to become not-God.

"Adam and Christ are" for Žižek "one and the same" (87). What this means for Žižek is that Adam's choice was not a choice at all; it was a "forced" choice. Adam had no choice but to sin; God needed Adam so that there would be Christ. (Without sinners, no saints; without the Fall, no Salvation.) If, as Friedrich Hegel argued, "Evil resides in the very gaze which perceives Evil," then the "TRUE FALL is the very gaze which misperceives the first move"--Adam's so-called choice--"as the Fall" (87). For Žižek the Christ event was thus a "truth-event," a revolutionary moment, "the very movement of negativity which splits universality from within" (87). Here universality is no longer abstract but concrete because the universal—Christ as God—enters the frame of the material and concrete—Christ as man. Understood in this way, Christ does not negate the Fall but is its "accomplishment" (88). The Fall/Evil and the Redemption/Good become here purely a matter of perspective.

If Christianity represents the perverse implantation of the Law as well as its necessary transgression, Christ himself is the force of love that resists the Law. He is the universal become concrete, or in Lacanian terminology, the "All" in the modality of the "non-All" (Žižek 2003: 69). Žižek characterizes this situation in *On Belief* when he notes that for the Christian who has belief in Christ, "this wretched man, IS the living God," non-All and All (Žižek 2001: 90). Something revolutionary occurred in the Christ-event, specifically the event of the crucifixion, when God himself arguably becomes an atheist. "Because Christ *is* God, his cry of dereliction" on the cross has "radical consequences" (Kotsko 2008: 95). Christ's cry—"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"—is interpreted by G.K. Chesterton in his early twentieth-century apologetic work *Orthodoxy* in a strikingly Žižekian fashion (*Douay-Rheims* 1899: Mark 15.34). For Chesterton these words of abandonment indicate that there is "only one religion," Christianity, "in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist" (Chesterton 1909: 257). Žižek interprets Chesterton's claim as that of a Catholic Christian letting down his perverse guard and admitting what really happened on the cross: God faced up to God's own impotence. Christ unveils on the cross that the "Big Other," the all-powerful God of ontotheology, simply does not exist, or, if he does, is powerless to save his son from death. Christ shows us that there is no Almighty God behind the linguistic and conceptual curtain of the theology of Being. Behind this death there is no Law, only, oddly, love.

It is at this point that the Real finds its way into Žižek's peculiar interpretation of the Incarnation. Because "concrete universality' is the very movement of negativity

which splits universality *from* within, reducing it to one of the particular elements,” it sheds the distance of abstract universality and “enters its own frame.” (Žižek 2003: 87). This is Christ as an eruption of the Real into the logic of the Symbolic, an event that also becomes constitutive of the Symbolic order itself. The Hegelian term “concrete” implies both solidity and materiality, but the Real is never just (something like) the actual world before there was identity (the Imaginary) and language (the Symbolic). The Real is, rather, as Žižek puts it, “the symbolic itself in the modality of the non-All,” universality in its mode of “concrete universality.” It--the Real--is the “symbolic gesture par excellence,” the Symbolic with no limit, no exception, no Law, thus no transgression (Žižek 2003: 69). Christ, in this formulation, is not only an event of the Real that disturbs the Symbolic. He is as well a gap *within the Real itself*. Christ here names the “thin edge” between the Father and the Spirit, a rupture named the Body of Christ that separates the “community of the Spirit” from the “God-Father-Thing.”

According to Žižek all members of this Trinity are versions or modalities of the Real: Christ is the “imaginary Real,” a mediating figure between the “real Real” of the God-Father-Thing and the “symbolic Real” of the Holy Spirit (Žižek 2001: 82-83). What I am calling the “God of the Real” in this essay is exactly this Trinitarian God, made up of three aspects of the Real. The Father is the “violent primordial Thing,” the Real in all its abyssal realness, unable to be characterized by language, beyond even imagination, the God of the true mystics (82). He is not to be confused with the lawgiving and nonexistent big Other of the Symbolic. The Spirit, in turn, is the “community of believers” — not the Law but the actual *communitas* (to borrow a word from Victor Turner), the charismatic community (Žižek 2001: 83).<sup>4</sup> The Spirit is “the signifier reduced to a senseless formula” perhaps best characterized by speech in nonsensical “tongues” or glossolalia (Žižek 2001: 82). Finally, there is Christ the “imaginary Real” in a singular position as the “gap” which “separates God [the Spirit] from God [the Father-Thing] and man from man” (24). In *The Monstrosity of Christ*, Žižek terms this position the “double kenosis” or emptying of Christ: “man’s alienation from/in God is simultaneously God’s alienation from himself in Christ” (Žižek 2009: 57, 75). This makes Christ a “‘more than human’ monstrous subject” (Žižek 2009: 75). As in the quotation from the 1932 Tod Browning film *Freaks* that provides the first epigraph of this essay, “you will see [Christ] on the inside” of the Trinitarian God, a “living breathing monstrosit[y]!” (Browning 1932: unpaginated).

If the moment of God's atheism at the crucifixion is the initiatory event of Christianity, then in his own way the Misfit in O'Connor's most famous story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is exactly right when he declares that "Jesus thrown everything off balance" (O'Connor 1971: 131). He here points out that Christ's death on the cross, the just for the sake of the unjust, subverts the perverse logic at the core of Christianity and points toward something deeper within it, which Žižek calls a "kernel" of the Real. At some point Christianity has taught O'Connor's unhinged Misfit—an escaped criminal on the run from the law—that Christ's sacrifice is completely unjust, a rejection of both the Law and its transgression. It is something new and unexpected, an eruption of the Real itself. For Žižek it is this very element of Christianity that shows the most promise, in that it offers "'a religiously mystified version' of a 'radical opening' to universality" (Parker 2004: 54). An emphasis on this paradoxical event might allow for the emergence of a Church focused on the Holy Spirit as a "community deprived of its support in the big Other" (Kotsko 2008: 99). Owing to his emphasis on the Holy Spirit, if Žižek is any kind of Christian at all, he is a charismatic Christian. For Žižek, within the (ontotheological) God of the Symbolic--of power, language, and Law--is a (Trinitarian) God of the Real, a God of terror, of senselessness, of monstrosity, of love.

Strangely enough, I think that Flannery O'Connor would agree. She was certainly a devout Catholic who held firm to the teachings of the Church. "If you're a Catholic you believe what the Church teaches" she claims in a 1955 letter to her friend Elizabeth Hester. In another letter, to William Sessions, she goes even farther: "the Catholic believes any voice he may hear comes from the Devil unless it is in accordance with the teachings of the Church" (O'Connor 1977: 196, 410). O'Connor repeats such sentiments often enough that I am convinced she believed them. A Catholic believes in the dogmas of the Church and follows its laws in her daily life, and she believes them in her very body according to O'Connor, for whom "the laws of the flesh and the physical" are "the virgin birth, the Incarnation, the resurrection" (O'Connor 1977: 100). But such dogma, the Law of the Symbolic, is not really God—even for the devout O'Connor. Indeed the Law in the form of the dogmatic teachings of the Catholic Church is not an end in itself, a God to be worshipped, but a surprising doorway to freedom and mystery. Writing to Hester, who was considering conversion to Catholicism, O'Connor insists that "dogma is only a gateway to contemplation and is an instrument of freedom and not of restriction. It preserves mystery for the human mind" (O'Connor 1977: 92). Behind the Law, and its

very purpose, is a mystery that is Real, a point on which both O'Connor and Žižek in their own ways would concur.

O'Connor makes her rejection of the God of the Symbolic most explicit in a 1955 letter to Hester where she states, "I do not connect the Church exclusively with the Patriarchal Ideal. The death of such would not be the death of the Church, which is only now a seed and a Divine one" (O'Connor 1977: 99). Here in O'Connor we come very close to Žižek's "kernel of the Real" through her rejection of conventionally patriarchal authority (the Law of the big Other) and her articulation of the Church as a divine "seed." Žižek's "kernel" is no ultimate void around which a negative theology might be constructed. It is not the "inaccessible Thing," but is "the gap that prevents our access to it" (Žižek 2003: 78). It is "the distorting screen that makes us miss the Thing" (77). This gap in the Real is Christ, or more properly the Christ-event. Around this "seed" have clustered laws of an ontotheological God who might indeed be, as Žižek would have it, both impotent and even dead or nonexistent. Born in this violent moment of death, this truth-event, is a potential community of love in the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup> Through Christ we approach the Real through subtraction (in contrast to purification) when we endeavor "to isolate the kernel of the Real through a violent peeling off" (64). Violence and the suffering that accompanies it are inevitable when we evince a passion for the Real.

Given Žižek's emphasis on the Holy Spirit as the community of the God of the Real, it makes sense to turn to O'Connor's story "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," which is in its own way a meditation on the Trinity.<sup>6</sup> The setting of the 1954 story is familiar to readers of O'Connor, a farm in the American South, likely Georgia, run by a widowed woman whose daughter is something of a trouble-maker. One of the elements that make this an atypical O'Connor story is that its protagonist, an unnamed twelve-year-old, is a member of a Roman Catholic family rather than an evangelical Protestant one. Over the course of the story the girl's cousins Susan (pronounced "Su-zan") and Joanne visit from the convent school where they board. These are to be accompanied by two Protestant teenagers to a traveling circus and plan to leave the younger narrator at home. O'Connor finds some humor in the culture clash between Catholic girls and the Protestant boys, the latter of whom sing "You've Got a Friend in Jesus" and "The Old Rugged Cross" ("stained with blood so divine," as George Bennard's lyrics have it) (Bennard 1913: 603). In their turn, the girls intone the ultimate song of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist, the Latin chant "Tantum Ergo Sacramentum," composed in the thirteenth century by the



father of scholastic philosophy, St. Thomas Aquinas. This hymn praises “*Genitori, Genitoque*,” “begetter and begotten,” Father and Son, as well as “*procedenti ab utroque*,” the Spirit “proceeding from them both” (O’Connor 1971: 240-241). The Latin is unfamiliar to their audience, one of whom calls it “Jew singing”—the unintelligible hymn of the *magnum mysterium* (241).

Over the course of the story what deeply affects the young protagonist is not this musical affirmation of the mystery of the Trinity and Christ’s real presence in the Eucharistic species. Most unsettling is, rather, her cousins’ tale after their return from the carnival about a freak that they witnessed there: a hermaphrodite, at first called a puzzling “you-know-what” (O’Connor 1971: 244).<sup>7</sup> This figure displays a perplexing anatomy to paying customers at the travelling circus. According to the cousins, it “had a particular name but they couldn’t remember the name” (245). It appears in a “tent...divided into two parts by a black curtain, one side for men and one for women,” and the “freak” visits each side in turn, saying “I’m going to show you this and if you laugh, God may strike you the same way” (245). It is never made clear what “this” is. The situation here inevitably evokes Lacan’s famous illustration of urinary segregation (see Lacan 2007: 416-17), and it also provides an instance of what Žižek has called the “deadlock” (or real) of sexual difference: “For Lacan, sexual difference is not a firm set of ‘static’ symbolic oppositions and inclusions/exclusions..., but the name of a deadlock, of a trauma, of an open question, of something that *resists* every attempt at its symbolization. Every translation of sexual difference into a set of symbolic opposition(s) is doomed to fail, and it is this very ‘impossibility’ that opens up the terrain of the hegemonic struggle for what ‘sexual difference’ will mean (Žižek 2000: 110-11). The cousins articulate this impossibility as follows: “it was a man and woman both.”<sup>8</sup> They know this because “It pulled up its dress and showed us” (245).<sup>9</sup>

Recent work in biology and medicine indicates that a “hermaphrodite” is a mythical construction and should not be confused for genuinely “intersexed” anatomy, a term that indicates “a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive sexual anatomy that doesn’t seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male” (ISNA: unpaginated).<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, O’Connor insists in an apparently earnest letter written in 1954 not only that the character in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” is a “hermaphrodite” but also that figure is “no invention” (O’Connor 1988: 925). She claims “It” had appeared “at a fair” in her hometown of Milledgeville, GA, in the summer of 1953 (O’Connor 1988:

925).<sup>11</sup> Like the unnamed narrator in O'Connor's story, the author did not herself see this purportedly actual hermaphrodite. Rather, she heard of it from a dairyman's daughter who told her about it, and O'Connor simply believed this tale of a dual-sexed human body. In any case, according to both O'Connor's letter and the fictional cousins' story, the freak admonishes viewers not to laugh for a very important reason: "God made me thisaway and I don't dispute hit" (O'Connor 1971: 246; O'Connor 1988: 925). This body, male and female both, is understood by the fictionalized hermaphrodite—and indeed by O'Connor herself in the 1954 letter—to be a creature made by God for inherently mysterious reasons.<sup>12</sup>

In its own body the hermaphrodite breaks--or at the very least radically reinterprets--a basic biological and theological maxim as it is expressed in Genesis chapter 1: "Male and female He created them" (*Douay-Rheims* 1899: Gen. 1.27). Neither male nor female, it seems, did God create this hermaphrodite, but something like both.<sup>13</sup> According to the *Baltimore Catechism*, which served as the basic textbook for young American Catholics of Flannery O'Connor's generation, God made the first female, Eve, from the first male, Adam: "He made Eve out of Adam's rib to show that they would be husband and wife, and to impress upon their minds the nature and sacredness of the love and union that should exist between them" (*Baltimore* 1885: q. 39). This happened, according to the *Catechism*, on the sixth day of creation. For Catholics schooled in this rulebook of the faith, femaleness emerged from an original unity with maleness (and for Paul in Galatians it is Christ who potentially returns Christians to this very unity; see *Douay-Rheims* 1899: Gal. 3.28). The separation of the sexes occurred by divine action in a time imagined to be before, as Žižek would have it, Adam's forced choice and our common parents' first sin. If O'Connor's hermaphrodite represents a return to the prelapsarian state of male-femaleness, then it is no sinner, no criminal, at all.

O'Connor's unnamed twelve-year-old protagonist, perplexed by her cousins' tale of an anatomical reality that encompasses both male and female, dreams of the hermaphrodite. In the dream this carnival freak reminds onlookers that they are each "a temple of the Holy Ghost" (O'Connor 1971: 246). The imagined freak exhorts: "Raise yourself up. A temple of the Holy Ghost. You! You are God's temple, don't you know? Don't you know? God's spirit has a dwelling in you, don't you know?" What we have here is an announcement of the community of love heralded by the death of the God of the Law, the big Other who ostensibly "created them" "male and female." The freak then

warns: "If anybody desecrates the temple of God, God will bring him to ruin and if you laugh, He may strike you thisaway. A temple of God is a holy thing. Amen. Amen" (246). In these words, the logic of the Symbolic is clearly at work, and thus returns. If one breaks the Law of the God of Being, the Creator, to honor and cherish all of God's creation by laughing at a freak who comprises both maleness and femaleness, then one might become just such a freak. This creature inhabits a threshold space between the law that is no law at all, the law of love, and the universal, if virtual, proclamations of the big Other. Whether or not the freak's body is inherently sinful is therefore a matter of perspective, much like the Fall and the Redemption, sin and grace.

The freak in the girl's dream associates itself with a "desecrated temple," but it is not clear why the hermaphrodite has been punished or struck "thisaway."<sup>14</sup> The freak seems to regard itself as both a creation of God and an object of God's "ruin." The freak is Job-like in that the sufferer suffers without knowing why, but trusts God anyway: as the freak puts it, "I ain't disputing His way" (O'Connor 1971: 245). What this freak is, even to itself, is something unexpected and surprising, something that is not encompassed by Scriptural or Church authority. This story is a bit like a question that a precocious child might raise in religion class, learning about Adam and Eve, men and women. What about those who are both, and thus neither? To put this in current medical parlance, what of those with "5-alpha reductase deficiency; androgen insensitivity syndrome, aphallia, clitoromegaly; congenital adrenal hyperplasia; gonadal dysgenesis; mosaicism regarding sex chromosomes; ovo-testes;...Non-Klinefelter XXY," and similar conditions (Van Ornum 2014: 2)? Any of these might characterize O'Connor's fictional hermaphrodite and its real-life model. These are the kinds of questions, put with simplicity or sophistication, that, I imagine, most Christian religion teachers would move on from very quickly, would try to deflect or ignore. Certainly this has been the longstanding Vatican approach to the topic of the dual- or intersexed. In sum, the "freak" simply does not fit into received theological categories, including those found in the Bible, the Code of Canon Law, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church, all of which simply assume that all people are either male or female, and builds entire systems of moral theology on this untested and biologically untenable assumption.<sup>15</sup>

O'Connor's freak, in Žižekian terms, is not merely a transgression of the Law, thus (like Adam) its foundation. The freak seems to make the Law irrelevant. How can this figure be punished with an hermaphroditic condition that the freak has had from

birth? When does the punishment precede the crime? Here again Žižek steps in to remind us that in the perverse logic of orthodoxy, the punishment always precedes any transgression, in that the real fall, the real punishment, is the Symbolic order itself. If Christ is the embodiment of the initiatory injustice that underlies the Christian notion of justice, then it is perhaps inevitable that O'Connor's story turns, finally, from Father and Spirit to the figure of Christ. On the morning after their night at the circus, the cousins travel with our unnamed protagonist, her mother, and their driver back to their school, Mt. St. Scholastica. Its name (although a literal reference to the sister of St. Benedict) implies that it is a bastion of the purely syllogistic logic of scholastic philosophy, but what it will turn out to be is a temple of the Holy Ghost, the home of the Body of Christ. When the group arrives at the school, the peculiarly Catholic rite of Eucharistic Adoration and Benediction is about to begin, and a nun shuffles the entire group into the convent chapel. As the ritual unfolds, and the congregation chant "Tantum Ergo," the story's protagonist experiences two consecutive reactions. The first is a return to the God of the Symbolic, the perverse logic of law and transgression. She realizes, that is, that she is in the "presence" of the God of presence, the God of Being, and her mind turns immediately to her transgressions. "Hep me not to be so mean," she prays, "Hep me not to give...so much sass" (O'Connor 1971: 247). She becomes immediately aware of her guilt and the need of the big Other—the virtual order that has generated this very guilt—to expiate it. She prays, however, "mechanically" (247). Her heart is not in it.

The girl's second reaction occurs as the priest lifts up the Host, "shining" and "ivory colored in the center" of a monstrance, usually a starburst shaped container made of precious metal and ornamented with jewels (O'Connor 1971: 248). She is at this moment reminded of the fair and the tent and the freak inside of it. The priest blesses the assembly with the consecrated wafer, that is, the Body of Christ, by lifting up the (monstrous) monstrance, lowering it, then moving it from left to right, forming in the air the sign of the cross.<sup>16</sup> As he does so, the girl hears the voice of the freak saying "I don't dispute hit. This is the way He wanted me to be" (248).<sup>17</sup> Here there is not a threat of divine retribution for a forced choice or inevitable crime, but simply acquiescence to the incoherence of a hermaphroditic body, emblematic of what Žižek following Lacan calls the deadlock of the real of sexual difference.

To say that the freak becomes a Christ figure here can come as no surprise to any attentive reader, but to think of the freak as a Christ figure in the Žižekian sense is, I

think, in its own way illuminating. Christ is the membrane or gap (or, if you prefer, “lamella”) between the “God-Father-Thing,” abyssal realness, and the charismatic community, the spirit of love, which is also the “symbolic gesture par excellence” (Žižek 2003: 69).<sup>18</sup> Likewise, O'Connor's freak becomes, in Hegelian terminology, a “concrete universal.” At the end of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* Žižek explains that “what dies with [Christ] is the secret hope discernible in ‘Father, why hast thou forsaken me?’: the hope that there is a father who has abandoned me” (Žižek 2003: 171). What emerges from the event of the cross is a community of the Spirit, “deprived of its support in the big Other,” what I am calling the God of Being, the lawgiving God of ontotheology (Žižek 2003: 171). It is at this moment, always viewed retrospectively, that the core or shell of perverse Christianity breaks open to reveal what it hides: the kernel of the (Trinitarian) Real, the seed of the Divine as both inaccessible void and that which bars access to it. Christ. For this reason, the best way to follow Christ is “to *betray* him in order to fulfill his mission,” a betrayal found in the theologically incoherent, likely imaginary body of O'Connor's hermaphrodite (Žižek 2003: 16).

And like Christ's the lot of O'Connor's freak is ultimately one of ridicule and suffering for a crime that it did not commit. Indeed, the freak suffers like Christ because it does not meet others' expectations, or exceeds them. Its reality simply does not fit into the inherited theological systems of the Roman Catholic Church. O'Connor herself disavowed the importance of the dual-sexed nature of her fictional “freak” in this story, claiming “I could have used any freak but there is certainly a more poignant element of suffering in this than in anything else one could find at a fair” (O'Connor 1988: 925). Notwithstanding this claim, the most “poignant” quality of O'Connor's hermaphrodite is the inability of Catholic theology to situate its vexing body anywhere within its theological Law, particularly as it was codified in scholastic theology, Canon Law, and the catechism. Unable to be contained, named, or even conceptualized, the freak's presence provokes local authorities—both secular and religious—to close for business the travelling fair. “They shut it on down,” we are told; “Some of the preachers from town gone out and inspected it and got the police to shut it on down” (O'Connor 1971: 248). The references to presumably Protestant “preachers” as well as local enforcers of the law imply that the subversion of order associated with the hermaphrodite's body resonates beyond the Catholic theological context and threatens the Symbolic order more foundationally. The freak stymies the Law of the Creator God that all shall be male or female. It is punished

not so much for breaking the law as for its inchoate realness as some incoherent combination of male and female, both.

O'Connor's Christ-like hermaphrodite suffers "humiliation and pain" because, as Žižek would have it, these "are the only transcendental feelings." Žižek continues in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*: "it is preposterous to think that I can identify myself with the divine bliss--only when I experience the infinite pain of separation from God do I share an experience with God Himself (Christ on the Cross)" (Žižek 2003: 91). O'Connor's freak, like Christ on the cross, couldn't be farther from the nonexistent God of Being and his irrelevant, virtual Law. "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" ends with a vision of the setting sun as "a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood," and "when it sank out of sight, it left a line in the sky like a red clay road hanging over the trees" (O'Connor 1971: 249). Here we move from Christ—the monstrous and blood-drenched "Host"—to Adam, in the form of the "red clay road." God, according to Genesis 2, made the first man (or perhaps man-woman) "out of the ground" or clay (*Douay-Rheims*: Gen. 2.7), and Žižek has reminded us that there is no Christ without Adam, no law without transgression. "Adam and Christ are one" and both represent the forced choice of instituting the Law and of initiating its inevitable disruption by the Real (Žižek 2003: 87). If O'Connor's hermaphrodite is an instance of what Žižek terms the "concrete universal," the kernel of the Real within the Law of the Symbolic, then it represents a subversive passion emerging out of this most perverse situation.

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<sup>1</sup> O'Connor's early, and recently published, *Prayer Journal* includes a plea to God that she become a mystic: "What I am asking for is really very ridiculous. Oh Lord, I am saying, at present I am a cheese, make me a mystic, immediately" (O'Connor 2013: 38). Judging from her 1955 letter to Hester quoted above, O'Connor's prayer had not (yet) been granted.

<sup>2</sup> Although her work evinces an openness to mystery, O'Connor definitely does not write within what Žižek terms "the usual pathetic narratives of mystical rapture" (Žižek 2003: 21). Her stories are violent, sometimes brutally so, and often homicidal.

<sup>3</sup> Žižek borrows this phrase from Alain Badiou.

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<sup>4</sup> See Turner 1969 on “communitas” as a liminal group whose members are characterized by their “lowliness and sacredness...homogeneity and comradeship” (96). This idea bears a striking similarity to Žižek’s community of the Spirit.

<sup>5</sup> One of Žižek’s most recent books, *Event: A Philosophical Journey Through a Concept*, provides a sustained engagement with this idea, including Christ’s crucifixion as an “event.” He points out in a note: “in the crucifixion, it is not the terrestrial body which dies, while the sublime body remains as the Holy Spirit; what dies on the cross is the very sublime body of Christ” (Žižek 2014: 174).

<sup>6</sup> For an rudimentary psychoanalytic, dialectical, and Trinitarian interpretation of this story, see Horton 1994-95.

<sup>7</sup> Most O’Connor critics writing from a Catholic perspective interpret the hermaphrodite as an affirmation of the holiness of the human body in whatever—including dual-sexed—form. For Giannone, e.g., the hermaphrodite represents the theological truth that “no physical condition impedes the Spirit’s entry” (Giannone 1999: 79), and for Sykes, Jr., the hermaphrodite “provides the grounds for affirming the holiness of the body in whatever form, and in whatever sex or combination of sexes” (Sykes, Jr. 2007: 73). Psychoanalytic feminist writing has associated this “freak” with the girl’s potential liberation from her own feminine and “passive sexuality”; this androgynous figure might restore “to women at least conceptually the breadth of human potential” (Kahane 1985: 350). The Bakhtinian implications of the hermaphrodite’s carnival setting are perhaps too obvious to merit comment.

<sup>8</sup> For a lucid explanation of the “fundamental contradiction” of sexual difference, its Kantian antimonies, and its theological relevance, I recommend Kotsko 2008: esp. 46-51.

<sup>9</sup> A number of critics have noted that the blue color of the hermaphrodite’s dress associates it with the Virgin Mary (see, e.g., Kahane 1985: 350) and therefore with what Julia Kristeva terms the pre-Symbolic *chora*, the “space of things without space, wider than the skies”—that is, the Real (Kristeva 2012: 55).

<sup>10</sup> The term “intersex,” like “hermaphrodite” before it, has become controversial, as has “disorders of sex development” (DSDs), the designation that emerged from the 2005 “Chicago Consensus Conference” on pediatric endocrinology (Reis 2009: 153). Reis proposes the alternative phrase “divergence of sex development” for three reasons: (1) in contrast to “hermaphrodite,” it is not mythical; (2) it is less political than “intersex” has

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become since the 1993 foundation of the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA) by activist Cheryl Chase; (3) unlike the designation “DSD” it is non-pejorative (Reis 2009: 154). Although I am sympathetic with Reis’ argument, in this essay I prefer “hermaphrodite” to describe the “freak” in “Temple” (1) because it was O’Connor’s own term for this character and (2) for its Imaginary implications. For an overview of this ongoing lexicological controversy, see Reis, “The Politics of Naming Intersex” (Reis 2009: 153-162).

<sup>11</sup> In her study of American freak shows, Adams notes that “[i]nstances of sex and gender ambiguity were among the freak show’s favorite obsessions, from hermaphrodites to bearded ladies to transvestites” (Adams 2001: 124). Adams’ research gives at least some credence to O’Connor’s claim about the hermaphrodite who visited Milledgeville in 1953.

<sup>12</sup> As with the Christ-event, it would not matter to Žižek whether or not O’Connor’s hermaphrodite *really* existed. This is so because, as Kay perceptively summarizes it, “an aberrant misperception may be a case of a concrete universal: what appears to be an utterly singular, historically misinformed distortion may in fact prove to be the spur to a whole new way of symbolizing the phenomenon in question” (Kay 2003: 43).

<sup>13</sup> The male-female binary of biological sex has long informed official Catholic teaching, more recently in the form of the “theology of the body” of Pope John Paul II, with its emphasis on the “normative” and “nuptial” meaning the two sexes (John Paul II 1997: 26, 62). An hermaphroditic body, of course, makes this distinction irrelevant, even irrational, although for John Paul II it does suggest the original and solitary state of the “male-female” Adam before the creation of Eve in Genesis 2 (see John Paul II 1997: 62).

<sup>14</sup> This character’s sense of hermaphroditism as a punishment by God strikingly contrasts with the “happy limbo of non-identity” that Michel Foucault associates with the hermaphroditism of the title character of the 1868 memoir *Herculine Barbin*. In this text it is not hermaphroditism as such that is seen as a punishment by God (Foucault 1980: xiii). The punishment—an insistence on “a single, a true sex”—is administered by religious and scientific authority, a priest and a doctor (Foucault 1980: vii). These insist on legally assigning Herculine the identity of “a young man,” renamed Abel Barbin (Foucault 1980: xi). The implication here is that threat of Herculine/Abel’s sexual “non-identity”

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overwhelms authority in modernity. See also Dreger 1998 on “The Many Social Threats of the Hermaphrodite” (75-78).

<sup>15</sup> Current Catholic teaching on the topics of hermaphroditism and intersexed identity is most unclear. There is no mention of such phenomena in the universal catechism nor in Canon Law. See, e.g., “Intersex: A No Man’s Land, Theologically Speaking” (Van Ornum 2014). Very rare statements by Catholic theological experts, as at an EWTN (Eternal Word Television Network) blog, assume that hermaphroditism—whether “false” or “true”—is a condition to be “correct[ed]” because “Everyone has a right to be a member of one sex or the other” (Torraco 2001: unpaginated). Torraco’s division of hermaphroditism into true and false (or pseudohermaphroditism) generally reflects a nineteenth-century understanding of intersex (see Dreger 1998: esp. 143-44). See also Pacholczyk 2016. Pacholczyk, a neuroscientist, admits that “‘intrinsic maleness’ or ‘intrinsic femaleness’ may be difficult to assess” in some “more complicated intersex cases”; nevertheless, “we must do our best to recognize, respect, and act in accord with” the longstanding biological and theological binarism of male and female (Pacholczyk 2016: unpaginated). It is unclear in this short article if “difficult to assess” at least sometimes means that it is in fact impossible.

<sup>16</sup> Basselin has perceptively pointed out that “The monstrous [Christ] and the Monstrance become one in the girl’s imagination, a result of her dream encounter with the hermaphrodite” (Basselin 2013: 48).

<sup>17</sup> For Horton, the Holy Spirit here “is telling the child that she is like the freak (in that she is flawed and a temple of the Holy Ghost), but that this is what God intends” (Horton 1994-95: 40). The message is that the purpose of the Law is to be broken.

<sup>18</sup> The lamella, like Christ, “inhabits the intersection of the Imaginary and the Real: it stands for the Real in its most terrifying imaginary dimension” (Žižek 2006: 64). It is, further, “a kind of positive obverse of castration: the non-castrated remainder,” which is also a fitting description of the imaginary body of O’Connor’s hermaphrodite (65).