

THE GRACE OF INDIRECTION AND THE MORAL IMAGINATION: LEARNING FROM WILLIAM SPOHN AND LITERATURE

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The author mines William Spohn's notion of the grace of indirection as it relates to the potential impact of the arts on the moral imagination. The article moves beyond exposition of Spohn's idea, first, by showing how the grace of indirection is a concept with deep connections to long-standing Christian convictions about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit; and second, by offering an extended example of what the grace of indirection might look like relative to a contemporary short story by Tim Gautreaux.

WILLIAM SPOHN,¹ A FREQUENT CONTRIBUTOR to this journal until his all-too-soon death in 2005, wrote often about the importance of the moral imagination. Perhaps best known for his volume *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics*² and his long-standing work on the formative power of the Scriptures and spiritual practices for the moral imagination, Spohn also wrote about the impact of the arts, particularly the literary arts, on the moral imagination and, more generally, on moral formation. In an

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¹ William C. Spohn (1944–2005) was director of the Bannon Center for Jesuit Education and the Augustine Cardinal Bea, S.J., Distinguished Professor of Theological Ethics at Santa Clara University. Prior to these positions he was associate professor of theological ethics, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley. Recipient of a long list of academic honors and grants, Spohn's contributions to the field of Christian ethics have been enormous. See his curriculum vitae at <http://www.scu.edu/cas/religiousstudies/facultystaff/Regular/spohn/upload/Spohn-CV.pdf> (this and all other URLs cited herein were accessed December 5, 2010).

² William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 1999).

essay on this topic in a not-widely-disseminated anthology published in the year of his death,³ Spohn described what he called the grace of indirection as the fundamental way in which the arts can help shape our moral imaginations.

My objective here is to mine the richness of Spohn's notion of the grace of indirection, especially as it relates to the potential impact of the arts on moral formation. Because Spohn's single essay on this topic has not likely been accessible to many readers, it is worthwhile to give an exposition of what he meant by "the grace of indirection" as it is related to the moral imagination; the idea deserves wide circulation. My article, however, moves beyond a mere exposition of Spohn's ideas in two substantive ways: first, by showing how the grace of indirection is a concept with deep connections to long-standing theological convictions about God, Jesus, and the Spirit; and second, by offering an extended example of what the grace of indirection might look like relative to a contemporary short story by Tim Gautreaux.

The article is in three parts. Part one situates Spohn's notion of the grace of indirection in the context of some larger theological commitments and themes. In fact, the grace of indirection gives an account not only of the place of the arts in moral formation but also of the fundamental manner of God's relationship with humankind. Moral development takes place in response to the presence and promptings of the Spirit of God, however indirectly or obliquely bestowed. Part two examines, more specifically, Spohn's view of the potential impact of the arts on moral formation. This leads me to explore, as Spohn did, the way the arts can influence moral perception, imaginative identification, and discernment—central themes throughout his works. Part three uses the Louisiana short story writer Tim Gautreaux's "The Courtship of Merlin LeBlanc" to illustrate what Spohn meant by the grace of indirection. This story displays the fact that moral formation can take place in response to the gift of God's Spirit in indirect, surprising, and at least initially unwelcomed ways.⁴

³ William C. Spohn, "The Formative Power of Story and the Grace of Indirection," in *Seeking Goodness and Beauty: The Use of the Arts in Theological Ethics*, ed. Patricia Lamoureux and Kevin J. O'Neil, C.Ss.R. (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) 13–32.

⁴ Although this article discusses the grace of indirection as it relates to moral formation and the place of the arts in such formation, one could substitute "moral and spiritual formation" wherever "moral formation" is referred to because, as Spohn emphasized, though distinct, the two are intimately related. This is seen especially in his steady emphasis on the pedagogical and transformational value of spiritual practices in moral formation. For a fine discussion of the relationship between the two see Spohn's "Virtue, Practices, and Discipleship," chap. 2 of *Go and Do Likewise* 27–49.

THE GRACE OF INDIRECTION AND CHRISTIAN FAITH

In the single place in his published works in which Spohn referred to the grace of indirection (see footnote 3), he did so to describe the possible impact of the arts on moral formation. It is important first, however, to examine the way the idea displays deep theological convictions important for questions well beyond those relating to the arts. What follows, though it is prompted by Spohn's discussion of the grace of indirection, extends his analysis by showing connections between the grace of indirection and key theological convictions about God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. The notion of the grace of indirection is valuable in reference to the arts in moral formation, but it is also intimately connected to the larger conviction that followers of Jesus live, have their being, and move forward in their lives in response to the gracious presence and promptings of God—however indirectly or obliquely that presence and those promptings may be experienced.

God

In his 2005 essay on the grace of indirection, Spohn drew on the insights of Catholic essayist and short story writer Andre Dubus to express a centrally important theological conviction about God:

Dubus' writings point to a puzzling insight: we do not have experiences *of* God but experiences *with* God. Like the sun, God cannot be seen directly; instead the divine glory shines off specific people and objects. Because the divine reality is unlimited mystery it simply exceeds human cognitive capacities that can only operate through finite categories. For humans, the approach of God has to occur indirectly and be perceived peripherally. We cannot perceive or understand God directly because this infinite Object exceeds our intellectual capacities. That is why God's self-gift to us always resembles the burning bush that startled Moses. In ordinary life, something extraordinary points to a reality that we couldn't possibly grasp directly, face to face.⁵

Nothing less than the mystery of God is the foundation of this notion of the indirectness of grace. In a 2007 article on God as mystery, Dominican theologian Brian Davies began by reflecting with pride on the fact that the mission of the Order of Preachers is to proclaim the loving power and presence of God in the world, especially in and through Christ. Even so, Davies says that Dominicans have always been at their best when they have not strayed far from the humbling reality that what they preach, in the end, is mystery. He quotes Herbert McCabe to remind us that God is mystery, the unknown "beyond and behind the whole universe."⁶ Our human capacities for understanding are, of course, limited, so that what we experience

⁵ Spohn, "The Formative Power of Story" 15.

⁶ Brian Davies, O.P., "The Mystery of God: Aquinas and McCabe," *New Blackfriars* 77 (2007) 335.

and know of God is never complete, never exhaustive of the mystery; rather, our experiences and knowledge of God point to a God who is always beyond. Elizabeth Johnson's *She Who Is* gives a fuller account of God as mystery. Her discussion of classical theology's treatment of God is an examination of three important implications of God honored as mystery: "the doctrine of God's hiddenness or incomprehensibility, the play of analogy in speech about the divine, and the consequent need for many names for God."⁷ Whatever we experience and know of God must be framed in the context of the larger reality that God is fundamentally mystery.⁸

Which is not to say that God is completely unknown to us. As virtually every page of Scripture attests, God is a God of revelation. In and through human experience and human history, and especially in and through the Word made flesh, God has come close. Thus we dare to call Jesus Emmanuel. But here too, drawing on an insight from Hans Urs von Balthasar's *The Unknown God*, Johnson reminds us that even in Christ, God remains mystery:

Even in Christ our knowledge is imperfect, so that we see now as though in a mirror, dimly, and know only in part (1 Cor. 13:9, 12). Indeed, there is a sense in which the mysteriousness of God is brought to a more intense pitch in the experience of divine saving love poured out in Jesus Christ: "the mystery of divine incomprehensibility burns more brightly here than anywhere." Thus, while the Scriptures are the inspired literary precipitate of communities involved in knowing and loving the one true God, biblical tradition itself bears witness to the strong and consistent belief that God cannot be exhaustively known but even in revelation remains the mystery surrounding the world.⁹

Spohn had a deep reverence for the mystery of God, and his notion about the indirectness of grace is a manifestation of it. To return to his metaphor, if it is true that God is like the sun and is not able to be seen directly, it is likewise true that God's glory and grace in our lives shine off people and objects, thus enabling us to glimpse, however indirectly and

⁷ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1993) 104.

⁸ *Ibid.* 108–9. Here Johnson recalls the striking teaching of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 that "between Creator and creature no similarity can be expressed without implying that the dissimilarity between them is ever greater" (DS 806); see Josef Neuner and Jacques Dupius, eds., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (New York: Alba House, 1981) 109. The argument here is that in indirect ways the grace and wisdom of God is accessible to disciples of Jesus, yet our experiences and knowledge of God, including our knowledge of what we believe God might be prompting us to be and do, however trustworthy, are partial and incomplete.

⁹ *Ibid.* 106–7. The embedded quotation is from Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Unknown God," in *The Von Balthasar Reader*, ed. Medard Kehl and Werner Loser, trans. Robert J. Daly and Fred Lawrence (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 181–87, at 186.

briefly, something of the glory and wisdom of God. Spohn wrote, "A glimpse of transcendent goodness and beauty doesn't make experience transparent to the Mystery, but it should make us alert for further clues."¹⁰ Employing still more metaphors, Spohn suggested that believers need to develop "peripheral vision," for, at least in glimpses, God can be recognized not indeed on "center stage" but "on the wings."¹¹

In reference to the mystery of God, then, the notion of the indirectness of grace is simultaneously optimistic and humble: optimistic in the conviction that the presence and wisdom of God is genuinely accessible to us; humble in the awareness that God's presence and grace are most likely recognized only indirectly and in glimpses, enough that we might be transformed by that grace, but as though by one glimpse at a time.

Jesus Christ

The centrality of Jesus Christ in Spohn's theology can hardly be overstated. Evident on every page of *Go and Do Likewise* is his well-developed thought on the normative nature of Jesus Christ for Christian living. Building on his previous works, Spohn summarizes his overall argument:

The imagination gives us access to Jesus as the concrete universal of Christian ethics, the paradigm that normatively guides Christian living. The imagination moves analogically from classic patterns of his story to discover how to act faithfully in new situations. The basic command that Jesus gives at the end of the Good Samaritan story invites Christians to think analogically: "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37). The mandate is not "Go and do exactly the same" as the Samaritan. It is decidedly not "Go and do whatever you want." The term "likewise" implies that Christians should be faithful to the story of Jesus yet creative in applying it to their context. The New Testament provides the patterns that ground the analogical imagination: metaphorical frameworks (particularly the kingdom of God), parables and encounters with Jesus, and the overall narrative pattern of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.¹²

Obviously the conviction about the centrality of Jesus for the Christian moral life is common among moral theologians. Bernard Häring had begun his enormously influential *The Law of Christ* with a call that Christ himself (and neither church teachings nor conclusions of the natural law) be recognized as the norm and law of the Christian life.¹³ Vatican II had

¹⁰ Spohn, "Formative Power of Story" 15.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise* 4.

¹³ These are the first four sentences of the foreword to *The Law of Christ*, vol. 1: "The principle, the norm, the center, and the goal of Christian Moral Theology is Christ. The law of the Christian is Christ Himself in Person. He alone is our Lord, our Saviour. In Him we have life and therefore also the law of our life" (Bernard Häring, C.Ss.R., *The Law of Christ: Moral Theology for Priests and Laity*, 3 vols., trans. Edwin G. Kaiser, C.Pp.S. [Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1966] 1: vii–xii, at vii).

issued its own call that moral theology, like other theological disciplines, “should be renewed through a more vivid contact with the Mystery of Christ and the history of salvation.”¹⁴ Perhaps, then, Spohn’s *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* may be seen as the culmination of his effort over many years to respond to the call of Häring and the council for a Christ-centered moral theology.

Equally influential upon Spohn were the works of Protestant theologians H. Richard Niebuhr, James Gustafson, and Stanley Hauerwas. As Anne Patrick notes, “Spohn seized on Niebuhr’s writings about Jesus Christ being the ‘symbolic form’ by means of which Christians interpret experience.”¹⁵ He built upon several key convictions of his teacher and mentor James Gustafson. Two of the most important are the idea that the key question in Christian discernment is to determine how we might respond to what God is prompting and requiring us to be and do here and now,¹⁶ and the conviction that indeed Christ makes an enormous difference in the moral life, particularly by shaping Christian identity, perception, dispositions, and affections.¹⁷ As have many others, Spohn took from Stanley Hauerwas the notion that, fundamentally, Christian moral formation means formation in virtue, and that the meaning of specific virtues are narrative-dependent, embedded in the narratives of the Christian community, the Scriptures, and most particularly the Gospels.¹⁸

Drawing on these and other sources, Spohn concluded that Jesus is the “concrete universal”¹⁹ of the Christian life. With the power of

¹⁴ Vatican II, *Optatam totius*, Decree on the Training of Priests, *Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Austin P. Flannery (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975) 720.

¹⁵ Anne E. Patrick, S.N.J.M., “Jesus and the Moral Life: Edwards, H. R. Niebuhr, and Spohn,” *Explore* 10.2 (Spring 2007) 16.

¹⁶ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise* 31.

¹⁷ James M. Gustafson, *Christ and the Moral Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968). See especially chap. 7, “Christ and the Moral Life: A Constructive Statement” 238–71; and “The Relation of the Gospels to the Moral Life,” in *Moral Discernment in the Christian Life: Essays in Theological Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007) 41–51. Spohn’s debt to Gustafson is evident in part 2 of *Go and Do Likewise* where he discusses Christian transformation relative to perception, emotions, dispositions, and discernment. Those are some of the categories Gustafson used to describe Christ’s impact on the moral life.

¹⁸ See, for instance, William C. Spohn, “Parable and Narrative in Christian Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 51 (March 1990) 100–114, at 101–5; and *Go and Do Likewise* 127–28.

¹⁹ In several places Spohn credits William Wimsatt for the idea of a “concrete universal.” See William C. Spohn, *What Are They Saying about Scripture and Ethics*, rev. ed. (New York: Paulist, 1995) 99; and *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1988) 91. In another place, citing Wimsatt, Spohn describes a concrete universal as “a specific character that

the analogical imagination followers of Jesus must attempt to discern the pattern of his convictions, dispositions, and behaviors and attempt to “spot the rhyme”²⁰ between their own lives and the normative life pattern of Jesus. Done well, spotting the rhyme requires, simultaneously, fidelity and creativity: fidelity to the normative story of Jesus and creativity in making connections to their own communities and lives here and now.

It should be evident that built into Spohn’s conception of Christian discipleship as “rhyming” with Christ is the notion of the grace of indirection. To say that Jesus Christ is the concrete universal for the Christian life *and* that Christians must use their imaginations to see how their lives—singly and together—are to be similar to, even as they must be different from, the pattern they discern in the “particular encounters, parables, and sayings of the Gospels as well as the overall narrative shape of cross and resurrection”²¹ all presumes that the grace of knowing how we might be faithful disciples here and now is not given to us in a direct, can’t-be-missed manner. In his 1990 article “Parable and Narrative in Christian Ethics,” Spohn drew on the insights of several New Testament scholars to argue this point in regard to the parables of Jesus. In my view the argument about the parables seems to stand for the overall narrative about Jesus in the New Testament.

Because the parables are open-ended, they do not allow the hearer to remain aloof or inactive. They do not dictate specific conduct, since “as religious language they present not simply a series of ethical paradigms or exhortations, though they are often so interpreted, but a *vision of reality which becomes a presupposition to ethics.*”²²

has sufficient depth to strike a chord in our humanity and that presents a pattern that can be analogously extended to new situations” (“Formative Power of Story” 21). In this way, the story of Jesus is not the only concrete universal, not even for Christians. Francis of Assisi is a good candidate as well. For Spohn, what is unique about Jesus in this regard is that, as concrete universal, “Jesus is the paradigm that normatively guides Christian living” (Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise* 4). He is the normative concrete universal for all followers of Jesus.

²⁰ More than once Spohn referred to a quotation attributed to Mark Twain concerning “spotting the rhyme”: “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme.” See, for instance, William C. Spohn, “Jesus and Ethics,” *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 49 (1994) 40–57, at 47.

²¹ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise* 4.

²² Spohn, “Parable and Narrative in Christian Ethics” 107. Here Spohn is quoting John A. Donahue, S.J., *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 17. Spohn also acknowledges indebtedness to: C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. (1936; New York: Scribner’s, 1961) 5; George W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981); Benedict M. Guevin, “The Moral Imagination and the Shaping Power of the Parables,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 17 (1989) 63–79; and Sallie McFague,

Thus our contact with Christ and our knowledge of how we might rhyme with Christ are not simply reducible to abstract paradigms, principles, or norms drawn from the Scriptures that are then applied directly to moral situations. Knowledge of how we might be faithful to the normative story of Jesus and creative in connecting to it, “rhyming with it,” in our particular lives and communities is not given to us directly or immediately. It is not reducible, for example, to what others have done to follow Christ in their lives, however valuable the lives of the saints might be. Instead, we are graced with such insight, such “revelation” (as Spohn called it²³) in indirect and mediated ways; the wisdom of God shines off specific people and objects in indirect ways, indeed in sometimes surprising and shocking ways.²⁴ Such knowledge is the fruit of our own work—our capacities for perception, affective imagination, and discernment—and, simultaneously, our response to the grace of the Spirit of God within and among us.²⁵

The Holy Spirit

As we have seen, from the titles of many of Spohn’s works, from the substance of *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics*, and from “Jesus and Ethics,” his presentation at the 1994 meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America, it is clear that one of his primary theological commitments was to secure the place of Jesus Christ at the center of Christian ethics and indeed of the Christian life itself. To be a Christian is to be a disciple of Jesus. But as the concluding sentence of the previous section proposes, Spohn’s theology, including his notion of the grace of indirection, is not without reference to the Holy Spirit. To be sure, Spohn’s Christology is far more explicit than his Pneumatology. Even so, in key places Spohn acknowledged explicitly the important role of the Spirit of God in Christian ethics and in Christian living. The role of the Holy Spirit is presumed throughout many of his writings, including his brief treatment of the grace of indirection. My own view, drawing on Spohn’s work, is that the Christian life is a life of response to the power and prompting of the Spirit of God in our lives, however indirectly manifested. Through the grace of the Holy Spirit, disciples of Jesus are able to discern how to conform their lives to the life of Jesus, to “spot the rhyme” between Jesus’ life and their own.

Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). Spohn’s own take on the place of the Scriptures in Christian ethics is seen in his own *What Are They Saying about Scripture and Ethics*, esp. chap. 5, “Scripture as Basis for Responding Love” 94–126.

²³ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise* 11–12.

²⁴ Spohn, “Parable and Narrative in Christian Ethics” 107.

²⁵ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise* 11–12.

It may be useful to consider Spohn's brief words concerning moral formation in the article on the grace of indirection: "Moral formation is the central purpose of teaching ethics, theological or otherwise."²⁶ To be sure, moral formation is no enemy of critical thinking and ethical debate, but the most fundamental purpose of engaging in ethics is to respond to the question of the ancient philosophers, "How ought we to live?" However, theologian Spohn went on: "When ethics is taught in light of the biblical tradition, the question expands to 'How ought I live in response to the gracious invitations of God?'"²⁷ Presumed here are two of Spohn's most fundamental theological convictions, namely, that the power of the Spirit of God is present and active in our lives; and further, our moral development takes place in response to the loving, transforming presence of God. Spohn thought of moral formation as growth in virtue. Such growth, he insisted, "is not primarily a human achievement but the work of God's Spirit with which humans cooperate. . . . Teachers of theological ethics hope to point as well to a more subtle formative power in human experience, to the One 'whose power at work in us can do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine' (Eph 3:20)."²⁸

One of the places in Spohn's works where discussion of the critical role of the Spirit in our lives is clearest and most emphasized is in chapter 7 of *Go and Do Likewise*, "Dispositions and Discernment." Early in the chapter he discusses several Pauline texts and themes, among them the faith conviction that "not only are believers 'in Christ' but Christ is in them. Through baptism they have been plunged into the life of Christ and have been given the Spirit, which will shape them to resemble Christ more and more."²⁹ Thus, it is the presence and power of the Spirit in us that enables us to discern how to "rhyme" with Christ. Later in the chapter Spohn discusses what several biblical theologians refer to as the eschatological tension between the indicative and the imperative: "the indicative, which states what has been done for us, and the imperative, which states what should be."³⁰ Elaborating further, he explains the role of the Spirit in the disciples' ability to move forward in this tension:

The gap between the indicative and the imperative is bridged by the power of the Spirit given by Christ. The power of the gift of the spirit of salvation carries over into the moral call through the Spirit of Jesus, which works from within to conform them [the disciples] to Christ. The Spirit is the Christ-life which now animates the Christian, provided that the person lives it out in disposition and deed. The Spirit conforms Christians to the ascent-descent of the cross and resurrection. The inner

²⁶ Spohn, "Formative Power of Story" 13.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise* 149.

³⁰ Ibid. 151.

patterning of the Spirit coincides with the historical pattern of the passage of Jesus.³¹

Hence, for Spohn, the Spirit plays no small role in enabling followers of Jesus to conform to Christ. Connecting this emphasis on the Spirit with the idea of the grace of indirection, we should recall Spohn's metaphor that like the sun, God—indeed the Spirit of God—cannot be seen or known directly, but indirectly, shining off specific people and objects, often in surprising and challenging ways, in ways that might easily be missed without well-developed peripheral vision.

To consider the Christian life as one of response to the presence and promptings of the Spirit of God, enabling us to discern how to “rhyme” with Christ, is not to suggest an overly passive view of discipleship. To be sure, there is work to be done, work that followers of Jesus must do to be faithful disciples. Hence Spohn emphasizes the importance of the moral and spiritual practices—practices often best engaged in with others—for formation in Christian discipleship. I attend to these practices in the next section, but fundamentally, faithful disciples move forward in their lives by learning how to be responsive to the grace of the Spirit who enables them to rhyme with Christ. This requires training our moral sensibilities in regard to perception, imagination, and discernment.

THE GRACE OF INDIRECTION—THE ARTS AND MORAL FORMATION

In the article in which Spohn discussed the grace of indirection he made the overall claim, shared by others, that “the arts can assist ethical instruction and reflection at three levels: perception, imaginative identification, and discernment.”³² In this section I attempt to answer the *how* question regarding the potential impact of the arts, especially stories, on these three aspects of moral agency. The paragraphs that follow draw on Spohn's ideas on these three topics as he wrote about them in reference to the New Testament.³³

Spohn suggested that there are at least two ways in which narrative arts might have a positive impact on Christian moral formation. First, stories can “sharpen our peripheral vision”³⁴ and in other ways develop our skills of perception, imagination, and discernment; in this way they can help prepare Christian followers to discern more keenly how they might

³¹ Ibid. 152.

³² Spohn, “Formative Power of Story” 13.

³³ See Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*. The titles of chapters 3 to 7 illustrate Spohn's long-standing interest in the categories of perception, imagination, and discernment: “The Analogical Imagination,” “Perception,” “Correcting Perception,” “Emotions and Dispositions,” and “Dispositions and Discernment.”

³⁴ Spohn, “Formative Power of Story” 14.

rhyme with Christ; indeed, this can be construed as the central Christian task. Telling stories of Christian rhyming is one manifestation of the grace of indirection in relation to the narrative arts; by forming our skills, stories indirectly prepare us to know how to rhyme with Christ. Second, appealing to the thought of Iris Murdoch, Spohn suggested that the arts can have an even deeper impact on our moral lives as disciples and not simply as a tool to sharpen moral skills.³⁵ Speaking of the appeal of beauty itself, Spohn wrote that “works of art concentrate experience and evoke a heightened response that can penetrate our self-absorption.” Beauty, he continued, “pulls us out of this native self-concern to appreciate a goodness that is beyond us, and so ‘unselfs’ us, at least momentarily.” “Works of art can portray something admirable or appalling, noble or deeply troubling, in an aesthetic experience that has moral resonance.”³⁶ The effect that the arts can have on us, Spohn insisted, involves much more than simply sharpening the skills needed for rhyming with Christ; the arts can have a deep impact on our moral lives. Indeed, they can be thought of as instruments of divine grace moving us morally from self-absorption to qualities like compassion, moral courage, and generosity. The resonance between such qualities of character and the virtues called for in the Gospels is striking. In my final section I present a story that, resonating with the parables of Jesus, lifts up the possibility of redemption. For some readers this story might be an indirect but wonderful pathway of grace.

In the discussion of perception, imaginative identification, and discernment that follows it will be evident from the start that there is a steady interplay among these three elements of moral experience. For the sake of analysis I will discuss them distinctly, but their interrelated nature will be evident.

Perception

Citing Arne Johan Vetlesen’s *Perception, Empathy, and Judgment*, Spohn observes: “Perception is the threshold of moral experience. We have to notice the features of experience that make for human flourishing or suffering before we can begin to respond emotionally and deliberately.”³⁷ Perception may be the threshold of experience, but it does

³⁵ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Schocken, 1971) 64–65. For a discussion of the “forward momentum” of beauty see Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1999). Scarry acknowledges that beauty’s forward momentum is not automatic; it is a possibility.

³⁶ Spohn, “Formative Power of Story” 17.

³⁷ Ibid. 16. See Arne Johan Vetlesen, *Perception, Empathy, and Judgment: An Inquiry into the Preconditions of Moral Performance* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1994). The compatibility of Vetlesen’s thought with Spohn’s is evident. This is the case especially regarding the interplay between perception and the emotions—as Vetlesen observes: “A main thesis of this work

not stand alone. If Vetlesen is right, we may not perceive or see a moral situation very well at all without empathy. Spohn would agree wholeheartedly as indicated by his many discussions of the reasoning heart, a topic I will discuss shortly.

The notion that perception, however well or not well shaped by empathy, is the threshold of moral experience is of course not new. H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Responsible Self* influenced Spohn (and many others) in this regard. Niebuhr proposed that the moral life is a matter of attempting to discern fitting responses in the moral situations in which we find ourselves. The experiential and responsive features of morality are thus central. In attempting to answer the questions "What shall we do?" or "How shall we respond?" we inevitably must raise and answer the prior questions, "What is going on here?" and "How and by whom are we being acted upon?" We must see well, we must perceive and understand the moral situation as fully and carefully as possible or else our moral response is not likely to be appropriately fitting, that is, morally responsible.³⁸ Moral vision, moral perception, could hardly be more important.

Spohn goes on to stress that moral perception is not a single function or a distinct psychological capacity; it is "a function of the whole person which engages reflective, emotional, and imaginative capacities. It includes honest assessment, sympathetic appreciation, attentiveness to relevant detail, memory refined into useful experience, social skills, virtuous dispositions, and practical 'knowhow.'"³⁹

Of course no one is born with such moral perception. The character qualities that are the ingredients of moral perception must be developed or schooled. Often failure in regard to perception simply involves inattentiveness, or the inability (due to lack of experience) to distinguish between morally relevant and nonrelevant features of a moral situation, or perhaps the inability to recognize or to listen well to the moral "players" involved. But it can go deeper; Spohn names habitual self-absorption, envy, and indifference to others as some of the vices that can impede good moral perception.⁴⁰ "Correcting Perception"⁴¹ is often needed. Spohn discusses

is that moral perception rests on the faculty of empathy and that the latter is a precondition of the former" (ibid. 7).

³⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 63–64. A parallel work is Enda McDonagh's *Gift and Call: Toward a Christian Theory of Morality* (St. Meinrad, Ind.: Abbey, 1975). In every moral encounter, McDonagh argues, "the other" calls us to genuine recognition (perceiving the other as gift rather than threat) respect, and response. Thus McDonagh emphasizes the interpersonal nature of moral experience.

³⁹ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise* 96.

⁴⁰ Spohn, "Formative Power of Story" 16.

⁴¹ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, chap. 5, 100–119.

this at some length in relation to the Gospel narratives; the parables especially can help correct our vision in jarring and disturbing ways. As mediators of grace, the parables (Luke's Prodigal Son and Good Samaritan stories spring to mind) can help us "see" in clarifying, life-transforming ways what precisely being in good standing with God means—that it is a matter of grace rather than of moral accomplishment.

But Spohn would have us notice that the arts, especially narrative arts, can likewise be instruments of such grace. In the passage below, he illustrated how this can happen.

Works of art concentrate experience and evoke a heightened response that can penetrate our self-absorption. Works of art can portray something admirable or appalling, noble or deeply troubling, in an aesthetic experience that has moral resonance. Students can be drawn out from behind their defenses by such portraits. . . . For example, a class might respond readily to the diary of Etty Hillesum, the young Dutch Jewish woman who learned to love and forgive even in a Nazi concentration camp. . . . It would be hard to miss the beauty and integrity that shines out in Hillesum's writing. . . . Returning to their own experience, students may begin to notice instances of ordinary heroism around them and then begin to wonder whether they too would be capable of such fidelity and courage.⁴²

So it is not simply the stories of Jesus that can correct our moral perception. Without diminishing its importance in any way for followers of Jesus, it is not simply the New Testament that can be an instrument of corrective moral perception. In indirect and surprising ways, in ways that require peripheral vision, the grace and wisdom of God—challenging us to see both "the other" and ourselves in new ways—can be made manifest in works of art. Both as tools to sharpen moral perception, and as vehicles of grace themselves, works of art can move us from self-absorption to empathy and care for others.

Imaginative Identification and the Emotions

Marshall Gregory begins his *Shaped by Stories: The Ethical Power of Narratives* by recalling a Horatian observation: "Long ago, with elegant succinctness, Horace defined the educational transposition by which readers identify with narratives: 'Change the name,' he says, 'and you are the subject of the story' (Satires, 1.1)."⁴³ Through the power of the imagination, Gregory argues, we tend to identify with the characters of the stories we encounter on a daily basis. Typically, we give our assent to those stories, mostly in gradual ways and often without critical attention. In this way, he argues, stories have an enormous impact on us morally.

⁴² Spohn, "Formative Power of Story" 17.

⁴³ Marshall W. Gregory, *Shaped by Stories: The Ethical Power of Narratives* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 2009) 1.

We should care deeply, therefore, about what those stories convey, and we need to think critically about their moral significance.⁴⁴

Spohn did not get a chance to read Gregory's book, but it seems clear that he would have endorsed it. "Once we cross the threshold of paying deliberate attention to the work of art," Spohn wrote, "then we can use the imagination to cross over into the world of the story to appreciate the moral quality of strangers' lives."⁴⁵ How does the imagination do this? Spohn tells us:

The imagination works on patterns that it spots in experience. It discovers a certain shape in the data, a gestalt that organizes the data into significance. As Hansen noted, "stories are ways of making chaos orderly and predictable." That pattern can be then used to bring some order to new situations by reasoning analogously. Practical reason grows more subtle as metaphors and images "fund" the memory for future application to experience. People bring moral insight to a challenging situation by spotting the resemblance that it has to a previous experience where facts and emotion formed a pattern. Because the new circumstances are always somewhat different from the original instance, the remembered pattern does not provide a blueprint for action, but it does suggest analogies.⁴⁶

This is how Spohn understood the analogical imagination. Through it we are able to spot similarities and differences between our own lives and those of others. The analogical imagination enables us to identify with the characters in the narratives we attend to—that is, the characters in a novel or short story or the characters in the parables, events, or encounters of Jesus. It is important to stress that "identify with" does not necessarily mean that we are always attracted to or wish to emulate all the dispositions or actions of those characters. As Spohn noted:

Although corrupt characters may be fascinating, finally we don't identify with them; in effect they pattern our desires in the opposite direction. By an inverse insight about their appalling lives the reader may back into a deeper appreciation of a human life. Or perhaps we do identify partially since they hold up in high profile tendencies like anger or jealousy that we can recognize in ourselves.⁴⁷

The elder son in the Prodigal Son parable comes to mind. Part of the genius of the parable is the way it allows hearers to see in others qualities of character (often not attractive qualities, such as the son's jealousy and self-righteousness) that reveal analogously disturbing qualities in

⁴⁴ See *ibid.* 1–5, 63–80.

⁴⁵ Spohn, "Formative Power of Story" 19.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 21. "Hansen" is novelist and screenwriter Ron Hansen. See his *A Stay against Confusion: Essays on Faith and Fiction* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001) 43. Spohn drew from Hansen the idea that through the power of the analogical imagination stories can be "dress rehearsals for life."

⁴⁷ Spohn, "Formative Power of Story" 23.

ourselves.⁴⁸ When a story is able to do something like that—be it the story of David from the Hebrew Bible or a parable of Jesus or a novel or short story—the grace of God has indirectly “slipped into” our lives. “Sometimes,” Spohn observed, “a novel or film can slip under our defenses and make us face realities that we have blocked from sight.”⁴⁹ This is what the grace of indirection looks like.

A key element in the analogical imagination and our ability to identify with the characters in narratives is emotion. The link between imagination and emotion is critically important. Commenting on what happens to us when we are engaged by a work of art, Spohn wrote, “When we let the work arrest our attention, we get an initial take on the world of a story or poem that engages us emotionally. This bond then allows us to identify with the characters and project ourselves into their struggles.”⁵⁰ He elaborates: “When the imagination spots a pattern and the heart identifies with it, then it has the power to reshape the reader’s experience. . . . When the imagination intuitively grasps the trajectory of a character’s life, the reasoning heart enables us to savor the quality of that life distilled in the short story.”⁵¹ “Empathy” is the word that both Gregory and Vetlesen use for our ability to bond with or identify with the characters in narratives. “It is by virtue of this facility [to empathize],” Vetlesen argues, “that I can put myself in the place of the other by way of a feeling-into and feeling-with.”⁵²

Throughout his theological career Spohn emphasized the importance of emotion in the moral life. Anne Patrick has noted the way that Spohn, long interested in a “genuinely American Catholic moral theology,”⁵³ drew from a host of Protestant theological and spiritual writers, most significantly the great Puritan writer of the 17th-century and of the Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards and then, 200 years later, H. Richard Niebuhr.⁵⁴ What Spohn found attractive in their thought was the critically important role they saw for the emotions, the affections, in the spiritual and moral life. In 1983 when Spohn wrote about “the reasoning heart,” he drew from Edwards to argue the case for an understanding of

⁴⁸ Edward Schillebeeckx’s notion of contrast experience offers support for the way stories of persons we do not want to emulate can nevertheless positively impact us morally. See Robert Schreiter’s explanation of this, “Edward Schillebeeckx: An Orientation to His Thought,” in *The Schillebeeckx Reader*, ed. Robert Schreiter (New York: Crossroad, 1985) 1–24, at 18.

⁴⁹ Spohn, “Formative Power of Story” 18.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 19.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 22.

⁵² Vetlesen, *Perception, Empathy, and Judgment* 8. See Gregory, *Shaped by Stories* 54.

⁵³ Patrick, “Jesus and the Moral Life” 15.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 14–17.

discernment that would not be in opposition to “the reasoning head,”⁵⁵ but that would not be satisfied with it either. Citing Edwards, Spohn argued that discernment in the life of the Christian depends on the “constellation of affections,” bestowed in grace by the Holy Spirit, that provides a matrix for discerning what is and is not compatible with following Christ.⁵⁶ This emphasis is present throughout Spohn’s writings. Perhaps his most developed thought on this is found in his *Go and Do Likewise*. Regarding the way meditation on the Scriptures can school the affections, he wrote:

Through spiritual practices biblical images and stories become affective paradigms for moral dispositions. They tutor the basic emotional tendencies so that Christians are disposed to respond in a manner that is consonant with the story of Jesus. Story-shaped dispositions sharpen perception and help Christians discern what to do. Religious convictions are not held primarily as abstract propositions. They are imbedded in images and metaphorical frames for viewing and assessing the world. Paradigmatic biblical stories are prototypes for recognizing an emotion and indicating an appropriate response.⁵⁷

As we have seen, Spohn argues that the dynamics (including the role of the affections) at work in the way followers of Jesus attempt to rhyme with Christ are the same dynamics at work in relation to the narrative arts. To be sure, the novels of Graham Greene and the short stories of Flannery O’Connor do not carry the same weight for Christian disciples as does the New Testament. The “concrete universal” of Jesus, embedded in the Scriptures, has a normative claim on all followers of Jesus in a way the best of Tim Gautreaux’s stories do not. That said, in Spohn’s view, which I share, the grace of God is manifest not only in the concrete universal that is the story of Jesus, but in an indirect manner (requiring peripheral vision) in works of art. Sometimes we can be drawn into the wonderful, perplexing, or disturbing lives of characters in a story and, through the power of imagination in concert with empathy for those characters, we can suddenly find that we ourselves are “in the story,” just as Horace thought we would be. We can wonder not simply whether the protagonist will have the moral courage or compassion to respond well in the situation at hand, but whether we ourselves might respond with the courage or compassion we find in the stories we encounter in our own lives. This too would be the grace of indirection well underway.

⁵⁵ Spohn, “The Reasoning Heart: An American Approach to Christian Discernment,” *Theological Studies* 44 (1983) 30–52, at 31.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 48–51.

⁵⁷ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise* 120. It should be noted that Spohn’s formation as a one-time member of the Society of Jesus schooled him in this role of the affections.

Discernment

Spohn suggests that “the third and most significant contribution the arts can make to moral pedagogy is to sharpen the practice of moral discernment. Moral perception and empathetic identification prepare us for actual decisions about what we will do and what sorts of persons we will become.”⁵⁸ In the following passage he describes the grace of indirection as it relates to the role of the arts in moral discernment:

This third function of the arts also works indirectly since there is no technique for finding the right answer in discernment and God’s calls usually do not come as startling revelations. Grace invites us within the choices and challenges that face us in ordinary experience. Even when we discern our options in serious prayer, we do not expect to have experiences of God but experiences with God.⁵⁹

Spohn’s view of discernment for followers of Jesus, drawn especially from the works of Edwards, Niebuhr, and Gustafson, is that it is the ability to recognize and respond to the grace of the Spirit of God—present and active indirectly, in and through “ordinary experience”—calling, requiring, and enabling us to live according to the pattern of Christ in the situations in which we find ourselves. “The ultimate practical goal of theological ethics is to develop graced practical wisdom, which is the ability to discern and respond to God’s approach in particular relationships.”⁶⁰

There is a good deal of anthropological optimism in this perspective. To begin with, there is the faith-filled conviction that God “approaches” us and that, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, we are capable of recognizing and responding to that approach. Bias, blurred vision, and self-absorption notwithstanding, we are capable of discerning how we might rhyme with Christ in generous, faithful, and loving ways. Spohn acknowledged his assumption that “God prefers to lead humans by drawing them to what is good rather than by issuing marching orders. If duty drives the agent from behind, it is the beauty found in moral goodness that lures her from ahead. Insofar as the arts can help us appreciate what is good and beautiful, they can play an important role in sharpening moral discernment.”⁶¹

Spohn suggests that the primary role of the arts in relation to discernment is that they can help sharpen the practice of moral discernment. But he seems to suggest more than that. In light of the connection Spohn recognized between beauty and goodness, the narrative arts can themselves be mediators of grace, providing graced invitations (indirectly of course) for how followers of Jesus might recognize, in ways consonant with the

⁵⁸ Spohn, “Formative Power of Story” 24.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 25.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

story of Jesus, their moral call in their ordinary moral experience. Novels and short stories, though not the concrete universal that the story of Jesus is for Christians, might still be instruments for recognizing the call of God in ways that resonate with the story of Jesus. The short story in the final part of this paper will illustrate this.

Two further comments are in order regarding discernment and the possible role of the arts in this important and, in some ways, culminating feature of moral experience. Both comments display the fact that discernment provides no blueprint for simple answers to complex moral questions, and however optimistic one might be regarding human capacities, there are many ways in which we can get off track or miss the mark. Not surprisingly, then, we find Spohn's wise emphasis on community and spiritual practices.

As he acknowledged in *Go and Do Likewise*,⁶² Spohn emphasizes in the article on the role of the arts in moral formation that, however personal moral discernment might be, it is not a solitary practice. "The Spirit of Wisdom is in the Body of Christ prior to its being in the bodies of individuals."⁶³ Part of the practice of discernment, then, involves attending to the wisdom of God as it may be mediated through the community. Spohn notes that various Christian denominations understand and practice discernment differently. Whereas Christians of the Reformed communion may turn to congregational discussions and voices as part of the discernment process, and whereas Lutherans may look to national synods or Methodists to general assemblies of clergy and laity, Roman Catholics "pay attention to the 'magisterium' of official teachings as well as theological interpreters"⁶⁴ in attempting to recognize the promptings of the Spirit in their moral experience. What is important about this is the recognition that although discernment involves very personal and "serious attention to the movements of the mind and heart,"⁶⁵ followers of Christ are wise to learn how the community has understood and interpreted a parable like the Good Samaritan before they jump immediately and in solitary fashion to what the parable might be calling them to be and do here and now. And if that is so in regard to the stories of the New Testament, even more it seems that the voice of the community—mediated by a small Christian community, a pastor, or spiritual director, etc.—ought to be heard before one would make a radical, life-changing decision prompted by a novel or a short story. Discernment may be a deeply personal affair, but it is not private, either in its exercise or in its outcome.⁶⁶

⁶² Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise* 157.

⁶³ Spohn, "Formative Power of Story" 26.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 26–27.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 27.

⁶⁶ For an even stronger account of the place of the community and its wisdom in moral discernment, see Richard M. Gula, *Moral Discernment* (New York: Paulist, 1997) 62–74.

In *Go and Do Likewise*, Spohn discusses at length the pedagogical and transformational significance of spiritual practices in the Christian life. Discerning how the Spirit of God might be prompting one to rhyme with Christ is not easy; we can get it wrong. Singly or together, spiritual practices are no guarantee that our rhyming will be done well, but in cooperation with the Spirit they can prepare us to discern how to live with fidelity and creativity in relation to Christ. “Through the regular pedagogy of spiritual practices,” Spohn writes, “God’s Spirit works to transform Christians.”⁶⁷ Spohn examines intercessory prayer as a practice that can sharpen moral perceptions; he discusses meditation on Scripture and discernment as practices that both evoke and direct our moral dispositions; and he examines how the communal “practice of the Lord’s Supper, with its constituent practices of forgiveness and solidarity with the poor, deepens Christians’ sense of identity.”⁶⁸ Even these practices do not guarantee discernment that results always in fitting rhymes with Christ, but they can help disciples discern such rhymes.

In the essay on the arts in moral formation, Spohn makes the case that the arts—especially narrative arts—can have a similar kind of pedagogical and transformational impact, especially in regard to the formation of the habit of discernment. “Literature’s dress rehearsals, especially when done in thoughtful conversation with others,” Spohn writes, “can provide a school for the reasoning heart.”⁶⁹ He explains how this might be:

Developing a discriminating sense of the rich human qualities that are ingredient in story and other art forms can help refine the capacity for religious and moral discernment. Crossing over imaginatively into the lives of others represented in drama or novels can free us to imagine the paths our own life could take. Not any story will do. The arts don’t directly convey the grandeur of God, but they immerse us in life’s particulars where the poet can help us notice that, even in its tangle and disappointments, “there lives the dearest freshness deep down things.”⁷⁰

At the least, then, narrative arts, as dress rehearsals, can have a positive pedagogical influence on us, schooling the reasoning heart. But this last quotation from Spohn seems to point to a more prominent, though still indirect, transformational impact. Recalling Spohn’s reference to his classroom use of the diary of Etty Hillesum, it seems that some narratives can themselves be vehicles of grace. Noticing the amazing depth of heroism and

⁶⁷ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise* 37.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 38.

⁶⁹ Spohn, “Formative Power of Story” 29. John Carey (*What Good Are the Arts?* [New York: Oxford University, 2006] 208–9) offers an argument that is different from, but related to, Spohn’s. Carey stresses the way the literary arts can encourage critical thinking and, in more pervasive ways, help develop our minds.

⁷⁰ Spohn, “Formative Power of Story” 29. The embedded quotation is from Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poem “God’s Grandeur.”

forgiveness in Etty, we may, in grace, find ourselves crossing over to our own lives, more ready to discern how our own courage and forgiveness may be waiting to be stretched, indeed transformed. In this way, as Spohn suggests, the regular reading and discussion of such works of art may indeed be counted as a spiritual practice.

**SHORT STORIES AND THE GRACE OF INDIRECTION:
TIM GAUTREAUX'S "THE COURTSHIP OF MERLIN LeBLANC"**

Two introductory comments are in order before proceeding to a discussion of a particular short story and the grace of indirection. First, why short stories? Sharing Spohn's pedagogical interests, I have used short stories for nearly 15 years in my Christian ethics courses at St. Catherine University in Minnesota, a Catholic university for women, and have found them to be pedagogically effective and indeed indirect vehicles of wisdom and grace for me and, trusting their feedback, for many of my students. Many of the stories come from a small but wonderful collection edited by Susan Cahill, *Women and Fiction*.⁷¹ Precisely because of their brevity, I am able to use eight to ten stories in the course, located in the syllabus in such a way that they invite conversations well connected to the topics and questions of the course. Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing," for instance, inevitably prompts valuable insights and, for some, a kind of transformative revelation about the fragile nature of human freedom as an element of moral character. Hortense Calisher's "The Scream on Fifty-Seventh Street" offers a penetrating, disturbing, but eye-opening view (as a "negative contrast experience") of how vitally important human relationships are for human flourishing as we watch what happens to a person's life when such relationships have shriveled up. The impact on the minds and hearts of my students has often been powerful. And Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation" frequently opens eyes and touches hearts as we focus on Mrs. Turpin and wonder if she can respond to the disturbing but graced invitation to move from bias to human solidarity, indeed to salvation.⁷² By their nature, of course, short stories do not allow for the long view of a person's life or character. But a well-written short story provides more than enough for our imagination and our capacity for empathic identification to become engaged. Through the grace of indirection, many of us respond to the invitation to cross over from examining the lives of the characters in the stories to our own.

⁷¹ Susan Cahill, ed., *Women and Fiction: Short Stories by and about Women* (New York: New American Library, 1975).

⁷² All three stories are found in *ibid.*

Second, what sort of short stories might have the kind of impact that we have discussed? Although stories from many times and cultures can surely offer graced invitations for moral and spiritual “crossing over,” the suggestion here is that contemporary short stories, meaning “post-Chekhov” stories, are particularly well suited for this. The influence of Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) on short stories written after him can hardly be over-emphasized. Chekhov is considered by many literary critics to have prompted a distinctively contemporary approach to short story writing precisely because, under his influence, in the words of Frederick Reiken, short stories have become less and less driven by event and plot, and focused far more on character and question.⁷³ Reiken refers to the writings of master short story writer Raymond Carver, a self-described disciple of Chekhov, to describe what a post-Chekhov story is like. If Carver were writing a story about someone with a drinking problem, Reiken suggests, his goal would probably not be to construct the plot in such a way that readers would focus on whether or not he can “get on the wagon,” but rather to invite readers to see and feel what it is like to be such a person in such an enormous struggle, raising the question whether—and perhaps our hopes that—there might be a path to recovery or redemption.⁷⁴ This is what is meant here by a “contemporary” or “post-Chekhov” short story. From the hands of master writers, such stories invite crossing over to our own lives; they are indirect but graced invitations to consider questions about our own character in the struggles of our own experience. In a brief review of the impact of Chekhov plays in contemporary European theater, Georgian theater director Giorgi Margvelashvili suggests that Chekhov’s stories and characters become “incredibly familiar and intimate for everyone in the audience. Every single person in the audience—provided he or she is watching a good staging of the play—is confronted with his [or her] own past and present.”⁷⁵ Such stories can sharpen our moral perception, deepen our capacity for empathy, and hone our skills for discernment. But more, such stories can be indirect but graced invitations to cross over from the experience of the characters in the stories to consider the stories underway in our own lives.

⁷³ Frederick Reiken, “The Legacy of Anton Chekhov,” *Writer’s Chronicle* 42.1 (December, 2009) 24–34, at 25–26. See also David Jauss, “Returning Characters to Life: Chekhov’s Subversive Endings,” *Writer’s Chronicle* 42.5 (March/April 2010) 24–35. Jauss argues that the endings of short stories have not been the same since Chekhov.

⁷⁴ Reiken, “Legacy of Anton Chekhov” 25.

⁷⁵ Quoted by Clare Bigg in “At 150 Years, Chekhov’s Appeal Remains Timeless,” January 1, 2010, http://www.rferl.org/content/At_150_Years_Chekhovs_Appeal_Remains_Timeless/1943133.html.

Let us consider one particular short story, Tim Gautreaux's "The Courtship of Merlin LeBlanc."⁷⁶ Obviously there is nothing that can match reading the story itself, but a brief summary is in order.⁷⁷

The story takes place in a Cajun region of Southern Louisiana, not far from Ponchatoula. The central figure is Merlin LeBlanc who receives the news that his 34-year-old daughter Lucy has been killed in a plane crash. Merlin's wife had died a number of years previously, and Lucy is the third and last of his three children, the other two having already passed away. So Merlin suddenly finds himself the sole guardian and caretaker of his grandchild, Susie, Lucy's seven-month-old daughter. Is Merlin up to this? That is the question. His previous experience as a father and the first glimpses we have of Merlin's care for Susie cause us concern. Merlin acknowledges to himself that he wasn't much of a father to his own children, and that undoubtedly he was better as a caretaker for the strawberry patches and the pigs behind the tractor shed than he was at being a parent. In the story's first paragraph we get a glimpse of little Susie alone on the floor with a TV cord in her mouth while Merlin looks for some toys for her; he comes back with some multicolored shotgun shells he had stored in his bedroom closet. Merlin "realized with a pang that he couldn't keep his eyes off her for a minute."⁷⁸ He has a lot more realizing to do if this is going to work. Merlin seemed never to understand why you needed to talk so much to children, why they did not do what is logical, just like the pigs! As Piacentino puts it, at such moments in the story Merlin "creates a clear impression of his shallow and naïve view of child rearing and pathetic evasion of his fatherly responsibilities."⁷⁹ He is no hero. At the same time, as the story proceeds there is more than a hint—a mounting hope—that Merlin might come to recognize the situation at hand as an opportunity "to correct his past deficiencies in parenthood."⁸⁰ Gratefully, Merlin is not alone. His father, Etienne, and grandfather, Octave—themselves both fascinating and flawed characters—help Merlin see himself and his past failures more clearly, and they point him in some good directions for what will be needed to provide

⁷⁶ Tim Gautreaux, "The Courtship of Merlin LeBlanc," *Same Place, Same Things* (New York: Picador, 1996) 57–71. An equally fine collection is Gautreaux's *Wedding with Children: Stories* (New York: Picador, 1999). Two of his stories (one from each of these collections) appear in the anthology edited by Daniel McVeigh and Patricia Schnapp, *The Best American Catholic Short Stories* (Lanham, Md.: Roman & Littlefield, 2007).

⁷⁷ For the following I am indebted to a significantly longer synopsis provided by Ed Piacentino, "Second Chances: Patterns of Failure and Redemption in Tim Gautreaux's *Same Place, Same Things*," *Southern Literary Journal* 38.1 (Fall, 2005) 115–33.

⁷⁸ Tim Gautreaux, "Courtship of Merlin LeBlanc" 57.

⁷⁹ Piacentino, "Second Chances" 129.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

for little Susie responsibly and lovingly. By the end, with the indirect help of his senior mentors, there is reason to hope that perhaps Merlin may be up to this challenge after all.

In his essay on the themes of failure and redemption in Gautreaux's stories, Piacentino draws on the insights of reviewer Suzanne Berne regarding the characters in Gautreaux's stories:

Berne perceptively observes that "most of the characters . . . live in swamps of repetitive mistakes and disappointments." These characters, whom she classifies as "emotionally stagnant people," become involved in situations where the "dramatic tension centers on whether they'll seize a last chance to inch out of their particular quagmires."⁸¹

In light of the comments made earlier about post-Chekhov stories, the energy of "The Courtship of Merlin LeBlanc" revolves less around plot and event (What will happen?) than around a question of character (What sort of person is Merlin capable of becoming in this situation?). With the help of his father and grandfather can Merlin find within himself the other-centeredness, tenderness, responsibility, and love that will be needed to care for little Susie? Gautreaux deftly gets us to hope for and empathize with Merlin. So many things about him are not at all attractive; yet at least this reader could not help but hope—both for Susie's sake and for Merlin's—that Merlin could indeed see and respond to the present situation as a graced invitation to become the person he has not yet been, but longs to be: a man of other-centeredness, responsibility, and love.

With Piacentino I agree that "The Courtship of Merlin LeBlanc" is indeed a story about the possibility of redemption; Merlin has a chance to "redeem himself" from his past failures as a parent and, even more deeply, to "redeem himself" in regard to his own character, to become a more generous, responsible, and loving person. But "redeem himself" is not quite right. For indeed, as Gautreaux tells the tale, the chance is being given him; it comes as an opportunity, even as a kind of gift, in and through the sudden and tragic situation in which he finds himself. Further, it seems that Merlin might not even have recognized the opportunity/gift, much less respond to it, without the interventions of his father and grandfather. Through the eyes of religious faith, of course, this "chance" or "opportunity" and surely the interventions of Etienne and Octave can hardly not be seen as indirect graces for Merlin to be redeemed by nothing less than the power of God, bestowed in the indirect and unlikely situation at hand, and mediated in part by Merlin's father and grandfather. In the categories invoked throughout this essay, the question the story prompts is not how Merlin might "redeem himself," but will he be able to respond to the grace of God

⁸¹ Ibid. 115. See Suzanne Berne, "Swamped," *New York Times Book Review* (September 22 1996) 16.

bestowed upon him, indirectly and surprisingly, in the circumstances of his life and in the interventions of his senior mentors. Gautreaux gets us to hope that he can.

But Gautreaux did something deeper as well—at least for me. Recalling the insight of Horace discussed earlier (“Change the name, and you are the subject of the story”), Gautreaux’s story invites readers to “cross over” and consider their own experience. Because the author so masterfully gets readers to empathize with Merlin, and describes his flaws and emerging hopes for redemption so well, the imaginations of readers are easily engaged. Certainly mine were. It is not hard to find oneself in the story, to “cross over” and recognize that grace—the possibility of a deeper sort of redemption—is indirectly offered us as well. Through the eyes of faith, it is nothing less than a gift of God, however indirectly given, to be able to recognize our failures and the ways we have fallen short as persons. Through the eyes of faith, it is nothing less than the grace of God to begin to perceive that in the situation in which we currently find ourselves, most likely with the help of some surprising, if not disturbing companions on the road, we can begin to see the possibility of redemption. I found myself “crossing over”; that is, as I began to hope that Merlin could respond to the grace of indirection in his life, I came to hope that I too could do the same in my own life.