

Revelation According to Jacob and Mrs. Turpin: Early Reflections on Preaching and Contemporary Literature

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In a letter to her friend and sometime critic, Maryat Lee, a dying Flannery O'Connor responded to Lee's comments about the starry vision seen by Mrs. Turpin at the end of O'Connor's short story, "Revelation."

Sure you are right. She [Ruby Turpin] gets the vision. Wouldn't have been any point in that story if she hadn't. I like Mrs. Turpin as well as Mary Grace. You got to be a very big woman to shout at the Lord across a hogpen. She's a country female Jacob (*The Habit of Being*, 577).

O'Connor suggests by her reference to the biblical Jacob that her portrayal of Mrs. Turpin in the story, a brashly bigoted matriarch, owes something to the biblical character. The goal of this paper is to explore just what that "something" may be. But I do not wish to limit my interests to the ways in which Jacob influenced the creation of Mrs. Turpin. I hope to show that a careful reading of O'Connor's "Revelation" can shed some light on a deeper reading of the biblical story as well. And finally, I want to add some comments concerning the effects all of this might have on preaching from contemporary literature.

O'Connor's "Revelation"

Summarizing the fiction of Flannery O'Connor is a task only a fool would attempt. Her prose is so taut and compact, her characterizations so sure and sharp, the plots essentially static yet pulsating with the stuff of real life, that there is nothing that can substitute for reading the real thing. I hope that one of the effects of your reading of this article is that you will rush right out and read, or reread, the story for yourself. But since some of you have yet to have that treat, allow me to give you a pale flavor of the original.

The story opens in a doctor's office, described to us as "very small" and "inadequate and ridiculous" (488). (The page numbers are taken from the collection, *The Complete Stories*.) Mrs. Turpin, on the other hand, is "very large." Indeed, after sizing up the inhabitants of the doctor's waiting room, and deciding that real manners and breeding are in short supply, Mrs. Turpin eases "into the vacant chair, which held her tight as a corset" (489). Although a "stylish lady" in the waiting room assured her, "Oh, you aren't fat," it is clear to the reader that Mrs. Turpin is fat. In fact, when Mrs. Turpin is around, other people and things become decidedly smaller. This is not only true of the doctor's waiting room, but is equally true of her husband, Claud, who is "somewhat shorter than Mrs. Turpin," but is also "accustomed to doing what she told him to" (488). And in the pages that follow it becomes very clear that in the eyes of Mrs. Turpin, all the people she contacts are in several ways quite small and inadequate.

In a series of delightfully comic vignettes, Mrs. Turpin interacts with the various people who are waiting for the doctor's attentions. Next to the pleasant "stylish lady," the one who first engages her in conversation about her weight, sits a "fat" and "ugly" girl, whose face is "blue with acne," and who "scowls" at Mrs. Turpin's glance. Mrs. Turpin's reaction to this girl is to feel "pity" and to remind herself that though she too was fat that she "had always had good skin" (490). Next to confront her gaze is a child, "kind of vacant and white-trashy, as if they (this child and an old woman) would sit there until Doomsday if nobody called and told them to get up" (490). Then there is the child's mother, dressed in a "gritty-looking yellow sweat shirt and wine-colored slacks" and whose "lips were stained with snuff." "Worse than niggers any day, Mrs. Turpin thought" (490).

This room full of assorted "underlings"—save the stylish woman perhaps—sets Mrs. Turpin to wondering who she would have chosen to be if she could not have been herself. If she was forced by Jesus to choose between being "a nigger or white trash," she guesses she would choose to be a black, "but that don't mean a trashy one." In fact, she would not mind being a "neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black" (491). Mrs. Turpin spends much time "naming the classes of people." She starts at the bottom of the heap with "most colored people" and moves up through "white trash," "home-owners," "home-and-land owners" (her own group) and finally those with bigger homes and much more land. But her classification system starts to break down when she remembers the black dentist with his Lincoln car and his swimming pool and his fancy horse breeding farm. And then she sees, "all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head, and she would dream they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven" (491-492).

Mrs. Turpin's pathetic attempt to order the world in some easy classifications has lead her to the horrors of Nazi extermination camps. Her attempts to control her world, to manipulate it to suit her own selfish needs, ends in confusion and disaster. In fact, after a lengthy discussion with the stylish lady, with interjections by the poor white trash lady, about the changing state of race relations, and how it is always most important to be "kind" above all, Mrs. Turpin exclaims how grateful she is to be just who she is.

"If it's one thing I am," Mrs. Turpin said with feeling, "it's grateful. When I think of who all I could have been beside myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, 'Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is! It could have been different!' . . . 'Oh thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you!'" she cried aloud (499).

But Mrs. Turpin's exclamations of joy are stopped when Mary Grace, the acne-faced girl, hurls a book at her (a textbook entitled *Human Development!*), striking her on the head. She follows this act by jumping on Mrs. Turpin, pinning her to the floor. After several people have pulled Mary Grace off of Mrs. Turpin, the girl snarls, "her gaze locked with Mrs. Turpin's, 'Go back to hell where you came from, you old warthog'" (500).

This quite literal word of Grace is taken by Mrs. Turpin to be a word from God. After she and Claud have gone home, she goes out to their farm's hogpen and confronts the Almighty directly and alone.

"What do you send a message like that for?" she said in a low fierce voice, barely above a whisper but with the force of a shout in its concentrated fury. "How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?" (506).

After challenging God with questions like these, she says in a “final surge of fury, “Who do you think you are?” After a long look at the hogs, who “appeared to pant with a secret life,” Mrs. Turpin received another revelation. In a vision, she sees a “vast swinging bridge” on which a “vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven.”

There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right . . . They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away (508).

After receiving such a vision, Mrs. Turpin sits immobile for a time and then sets off for the house. But she is changed. As the crickets begin their nightly chorus, Mrs. Turpin hears instead “the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah” (509). Her confrontation with revelation has “burned even her virtues away,” virtues like the ways in which she saw herself bigger and better than everything and everyone in her life. Mrs. Turpin is both a warthog from hell and herself, too, for so are we all in the economy of the grace of God. And such a revelation is likely to come in the most unlikely of ways through the most unlikely of persons. Jacob, like Mrs. Turpin, his female country counterpart, has a not dissimilar confrontation with his own “Mary Grace.” Unfortunately, a careful reading of the story suggests that any change in Jacob is not quite so easily seen.

Jacob’s Revelation

Mrs. Turpin’s vision of the “vast swinging bridge extending upwards from the earth” seems to find its inspiration in Jacob’s famous experience with the “ladder” of God at Bethel in Genesis 28. What Jacob sees is apparently rather more like a ramp leading into the sky or a kind of stepped pyramid of the Babylonian variety. Whatever precise picture the author has in mind, Jacob’s vision is of the place where God and God’s messengers visit the earth. Bethel is the “navel of the earth,” the Omphalos, where earth and heaven are connected. Jacob’s nocturnal vision is of God who gives to Jacob the promise that was first vouchsafed to his grandfather, the promise of land and blessing (Gen. 28:13-16; see Gen. 12:1-3 for the earlier promise). In this instance of the gift, God goes even further by promising Jacob “I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

This magnanimous gift on the part of God comes at a most interesting time in the life of Jacob. He has in the preceding story apparently tricked his blind and dying father out of the patriarchal blessing, a blessing intended for his older twin, Esau. This tricky bit of business has occurred not long after Jacob had bartered with the same Esau, gaining the right of the firstborn from him in the exchange for a bowl of “red-stuff,” as Esau so indelicately names it. Being bilked twice, Esau fumes to himself, “Isn’t he well named? Jacob (grabber/taker)! He has “grabbed me twice; he has taken my birthright and now has taken my blessing” (Gen. 27:36). Killing is much too good for this Israelite corporate raider, but Esau will do it anyway, just as soon as the proper

mourning period has ended for the dying Isaac.

Several things jump to mind when one thinks what God might say to Jacob at this crucial moment of revelation. I must admit that a free reiteration of the gift of land and blessing is not one of them! Without remonstrance or finger wagging of any sort, God offers the promise to Jacob, the weasel. And his response? He bargains with God to make sure that God will come through with the goods as promised (Gen. 28:20-22)! It becomes quite obvious in the story of Jacob that he simply cannot accept any gifts from anybody. In more theological terms, Jacob cannot live in a world of grace. In a world where grace is operative, there can be no absolute control over one another. In a world of grace, the “virtue” of hierarchy where everyone is in their place cannot exist. Like Mrs. Turpin, Jacob needs a revelation of grace, but unlike her he does not learn the truth of grace when it first comes to him. But he does get another chance, and it is in this other chance that we can learn more about the relationships between Mrs. Turpin and Jacob.

The Face of God

Commentators have focused the vast bulk of their attention on the nocturnal wrestling match at the Jabbok river as staged between the solitary Jacob and an unnamed “man” (Genesis 32:22-32). This may in part be the result of the enormously ambiguous nature of the narrative, an ambiguity that has yielded an astonishing array of interpretations. I will make just two observations about this enigmatic scene. First, the narrator of the story, that omniscient author/teller who shares the scene with us, uniformly names Jacob’s opponent as a “man.” Second, it is only Jacob who claims that the mysterious wrestler was in fact a manifestation of God. Anyone reading the Jacob cycle up to this point has learned many things, but surely all would agree that trusting Jacob to tell the truth is hardly one of them! Was this angel or God? Or was it “man”? If the only witness we have who offers an answer to these questions is Jacob, we should hardly believe him without reservation; this is after all Jacob! But we can ask of the narration: Is this revelation meaningful to Jacob? Is his life changed, beyond the obvious limp he now suffers?

No change seems evident as he prepares to meet his enraged brother, who has had twenty years to nurse his grudge into a boiling fury. The first sight Jacob has of Esau after these twenty years appears to confirm his worst fears. “Jacob lifted his eyes and looked. Oh! Esau was coming and with him were four hundred men” (Gen. 33:1). Now there will be a reckoning, thinks the scheming Jacob. He knows that “what goes around comes around.” In the world of bartering and buying and deceit (the latter begins when the first two don’t work) you have to pay the piper. What Jacob does not know is that he is about to meet his Mary Grace; the fat, acne-infected girl in the doctor’s office now makes a reappearance in the person of old, brutish, stupid Esau. But rather than a book to the head, Jacob gets a surprise for the heart. “But Esau ran to meet him, hugged him, fell on his neck and kissed him. And they wept.” It is an act of grace, not unlike the free gift of God at Bethel for the rascal, Jacob.

The grace-full Esau asks Jacob about the enormous gift that he, Jacob, had sent to him before the meeting (Gen. 32:13-20). Jacob admits that it was an attempt to buy the favor of his brother, but Esau brushes the huge payoff aside with the simple claim, “I have enough, my brother” (Gen. 33:9). But Jacob, the man who cannot accept grace, urges Esau to accept the gift, because if there are free gifts, Jacob is no longer in control of his destiny and “grabber” will cease to exist. Revelation has come to

Jacob again, but again he cannot see it. Oh, he does say more than he knows: “Truly seeing your face is like seeing the face of God—because you have received me with such favor” (Gen. 33:10). Exactly! In the grace of Esau, Jacob truly has seen the face of God. But he does not know it, and cannot accept it. He strongly urges Esau to take his gifts (Gen. 33:10,12), which Esau finally does, and then he lies to him about following him to his home in Seir. Jacob heads in another direction to Succoth. Unlike Mrs. Turpin, Jacob hears no cricket chorus of hallelujahs, announcing the equality of race in the sight of God. Rather than heading home with Mrs. Turpin, Jacob wanders off to continue the cycle of deceit which will bring him such pain in the Joseph story soon to begin (Gen. 37-50).

Jacob and Mrs. Turpin

We may now summarize the differences between and similarities of these two memorable characters.

1. Both are thoroughly self-centered and seemingly self-sufficient people. Mrs. Turpin has a fixed world view wherein all people are placed in their appropriate categories in a hierarchy of values. The fact that her world view leads to all manner of comic as well as monstrous implications appears to affect her not at all until Mary Grace’s well-aimed missile awakens her to other ways of seeing, alerts her to the fact that the world may not be all that she has thought it to be.

Jacob’s own sense of self-possession consists in his understanding of the way human relationships are to be handled, namely, one receives only that for which one grabs, by hook or crook, emphasizing the latter in the case of Jacob. In Jacob’s understanding of the world, there is no room for grace, for gift. Jacob has spent all of his life taking what he wants, conniving for success, and lying with regularity. His terrible fear of his brother, as he approaches their meeting after twenty years apart, is based on his certain conviction that if he, Jacob, were in Esau’s shoes, his rage and desire for revenge would know no bounds. His previous relationship with his father-in-law, Laban, has suggested what one could expect of a Jacob who feels himself wronged. He first gets a sweet material revenge (Gen. 30:37-43), then incites Laban’s two daughters against their father with a self-serving speech, filled with false piety and crocodile tears over his treatment by Laban (31:1-16), and finally flees Aram with wives, children, and huge flocks in tow.

Jacob’s world view is at least questioned by the surprise attack of the nocturnal wrestler at the Jabbok river. However, despite the limp that Jacob suffers as the outcome of the match, his attacker himself assures him that he has “wrestled with divine and human beings and has prevailed” (32:28). Jacob’s joyful cry that he has “seen God face to face” and yet remains alive is hardly a sign that he is a changed man as a result of the supposed theophany. All we may conclude is that Jacob has bested God or is at least himself convinced that that is what has happened at Jabbok. Mary Grace’s book to the eye, and subsequent verbal assault, alerted Mrs. Turpin that she needed to see and hear differently. But Jacob’s limp reveals to him only that he has done to God what he has done all along with his fellow humans—his brother, his father, his father-in-law; when the final bell has been sounded Jacob has been declared the winner.

2. Both receive a revelation, but only Mrs. Turpin truly acts upon the reception. Mary Grace’s book silences her almost completely; there is remarkably little dialogue in the story after the attack in the doctor’s office. Indeed, Mrs. Turpin’s powers of

observation increase with her increasing silence. She now gazes deeply at the world around her, in ironic contrast to her earlier simplistic categorizations of all people and things. In the opening scene she cannot even tell that a clock on the waiting room wall is not some beautiful antique; it, in fact, can be had for green stamps, as the “white trashy” lady quickly points out. But at the end, as Mrs. Turpin gazes across the hog-pen, the sky becomes a highway and a swinging bridge whereon all souls rumble toward heaven.

In contrast, Jacob’s response to the wrestling match is that he has seen God face to face and has bested God in the match; he limps, but the limp is a limp of triumph. And in the appearance of his brother, Jacob claims to have seen God in the brother’s face, but the result of this claim is not a new picture of the world but the same world of payoff and lie. Through his tears of meeting with Esau, Jacob still schemes how he can go his own way, a way distant from his forgiving brother.

If the reader reads to the end of the story of Genesis, he/she will find that Jacob’s world, rather than the grace-filled world of Esau, is the one that persists. Jacob is first made odious in the land by the murderous scheming of his sons, Simeon and Levi (Gen. 34), and then is cruelly tricked by his other sons concerning the fate of his favorite son, Joseph. And finally even the startling revelation of the identity of the wily Egyptian secretary of agriculture as none other than that same Joseph (Gen. 45) does not wipe away the cruel games he perpetrates against his hungry brothers in the preceding chapters. Nor does that revelation bind the family back together; in the final chapter the brothers lie to Joseph, using the dead Jacob in the lie, precisely because they do not trust their powerful brother (Gen. 50).

In these two ways, then, Jacob and Mrs. Turpin are similar. They both are self-centered characters and both receive a word of revelation through the most unlikely of means. However, unlike Mrs. Turpin who hears the word and acts on it, manifesting real change in her life, there is little evidence that Jacob truly hears and acts on his revelation from God.

How is Mrs. Turpin Related to Jacob?

This comparison between two stories, separated in time by more than two millennia, was activated by O’Connor’s own belief that part of what she was creating in the character of Mrs. Turpin was a “female Jacob.” Her allusion to the biblical character needs to be defined more carefully.

“Literary allusion . . . involves the evocation—through a wide spectrum of formal means—in one text of an antecedent literary text” (Robert Alter, *The Pleasures of Reading*, 112). This widely accepted formal definition of literary allusion makes it certain that O’Connor’s “Revelation” does not formally allude to the biblical story of Jacob. It is true that certain French literary theorists have for the past two decades attempted to substitute something called “intertextuality” (the name was apparently coined by Julia Kristeva in 1967) for the above-named “allusion.” The difference between the two terms resides primarily in authorial intention. In allusion, one author purposely calls forth the memory of some antecedent work for the purpose of commenting on it in any one of several possible ways. In intertextuality one could lay side by side any two or more works and evaluate them together, regardless of any intentions to do so by any of the authors involved. An intertextual comparison between Dr. Suess’ *Horton Hears a Who* and George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* might indeed yield some interesting results (you first!), but I know of no information that

would lead me to believe that Dr. Suess was alluding to Eliot in his later work. This distinction between allusion and intertextuality is a useful one.

However, the relationship between “Revelation” and the biblical Jacob strikes me as somewhere in between allusion and intertextuality. As I have said, the relationship is not a formally allusive one, but because O’Connor herself comments that there is a memory of Jacob at work in Mrs. Turpin, the relationship is more than a random intertextual one. I wish to call this relationship an evocative one. For O’Connor, Mrs. Turpin is evoked by Jacob. She is hardly a carbon copy of Jacob; as we have seen, she responds to her revelation in quite un-Jacob-like ways. Nevertheless, for O’Connor, Jacob’s memory is alive in Mrs. Turpin. The fact that Mrs. Turpin receives a revelation of the divine through the unlikely Mary Grace is a story evoked by the prior story of Jacob who receives the revelation of the divine through the unlikely sources of a nighttime wrestling match and a grace-filled reunion with his foolish brother, Esau. It should be obvious that my category of evocation is much closer to the intertextual end of the scale than to the allusive end, but the fact remains that the comparison I have made was far more than random, having been suggested by the author herself.

How has this comparison been helpful in a fresh reading of the two texts?

1. My reading of the story “Revelation” helped me to focus more squarely on the character of Jacob as the receiver of divine revelation in the light of Mrs. Turpin’s reception of her revelation. As O’Connor builds her portrayal of Mrs. Turpin through her interactions with those people and things around her, the reader of the biblical story is forced to reexamine those people and things around Jacob in an attempt to discover how more precisely his reactions to the revelation are affected by his prior relationships. In this regard, it could be said that the “book-to-the-eye” revelation of Mrs. Turpin, coupled with the verbal announcement of her porcine nature, was sufficient to get her attention, whereas the assault of the mysterious man on Jacob did not quite break through and did not prepare him for the wonderful word of God from his brother. As a result the word of grace in the O’Connor story is far more visible and direct than it is in the Jacob account. And that observation leads to the second result of the comparison.

2. Reading the Jacob story alongside the O’Connor tale throws into high relief the latter’s homiletical interests. Mrs. Turpin receives revelation, and she is a different woman. No longer are the easy hierarchies of humanity possible for her; even the crickets now chirp their hallelujahs. Creation is a new place for Mrs. Turpin, and the homiletical point is obvious: we Mrs. Turpins need to see with fresh eyes and hear with new ears if we are to escape from our petty, bigoted, and finally monstrous lives. And, O’Connor says, it may take a book to the head to effect the change. Yet, as my colleague Bill Power is wont to say, “God works in nefarious ways God’s blunders to perform.”

No such easy homiletical fruit is to be gleaned from the story of Jacob. In my reading of the story, Jacob is plainly not a changed man because of his revelations from God. The effect of this fact is to focus our interest away from Jacob as moral or theological hero, and to focus attention on the means of the revelation, namely the gifting God of Bethel, the wrestler at Jabbok, and Esau, the fool. The means of revelation in the story “Revelation,” Mary Grace, falls out of interest after she has delivered the word to Mrs. Turpin. One could say that the author/collector of the Jacob story is more sly or at least more indirect than O’Connor as they keep Jacob in the foreground of the tale but force the reader to look elsewhere for the actual evidence

of the divine presence. Both stories announce that God's revelation comes even to such as Mrs. Turpin and Jacob, but only O'Connor makes it explicit that the Mrs. Turpins of the world can be changed by such events. The authors of the Genesis Jacob are far less sanguine about the possibility for change.

Some Reflections on Preaching and Contemporary Literature

There was a time in the pulpits of the western world that the use of literature in preaching was widespread and expected. It is quite startling to read the sermons of the past century in England and America and to discover the common use of long swatches of famous literature in those sermons. The source was quite often Shakespeare (in an 1880 sermon of Phillips Brooks over 100 lines of various of the bard's plays are quoted!), but all of the classics, primarily of the western world, were regularly employed, and usually quoted at length.

Things have certainly changed. Indeed, I find it rare to hear reference to, much less quotation of, literature in the sermons I encounter. Oh, there has been little lessening of illustration, but the source of illustration is rarely serious literature. In the 1950's and 1960's, it was not at all uncommon to hear sermons that were steeped in the literature of the time. Indeed, some of these sermons were little else than a theological commentary on a work of fiction. MacLeish's *J.B.*, Camus' *The Plague*, Sartre's *No Exit*, are some of the titles that served for the very heart of sermons I have heard or have in my own library. The only sermon I have heard in the last fifteen years that used a piece of literature as its central source was *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Do not misunderstand me; I love *The Velveteen Rabbit* and thought that it made a fine and fully appropriate basis for a sermon on the Gospel of God, but I am struck that in fifteen years I can think of no other example of the extended use of serious literature in a sermon. I have, of course, from time to time heard smaller pieces of literature quoted in sermons, but their use was only briefly and minimally illustrative, indicating that the preacher had found the quote in some homiletical helper rather than having a deep engagement with the primary source.

Why has this sharp change occurred? Here I can only surmise, because I have heard or read no extended discussion of this question. The more pessimistic answer may be summed up in a quotation from Charles the Second of England, who, when asked why great crowds came to hear a certain preacher, was purported to have said, "I suppose his nonsense agrees with their nonsense." The implication of this quotation for our subject appears to be that one can no longer quote what one's hearers no longer read. Preaching becomes then a pooling of mutual ignorance, an empty-headed preacher orating homespun platitudes into a waiting sea of emptier-headed hearers who know far less than the supposedly learned one who stands before, and generally above, them.

Of course, Charles may have meant that he, personally, did not like the preacher of whom he spoke, and given the boiling Protestant-Catholic pot in the mid-seventeenth century, one could surmise that he was referring to some unpleasant dissenter of one kind or another, rather than making a comment on the quality of his preaching or the depth of his learning. I choose to exegete the passage in the way I have done in the preceding paragraph.

But is it true that literature is no longer being read by anyone, that the ubiquitous television has turned us all into large-eyed lumps, slouched on our couches, with index fingers grown mutantly large by the constant pressing of the remote control

buttons? All evidence suggests no. Reading is a growth industry. Book sales are enormous. Authors make almost as much money as football players or entertainers. Public library use is soaring. And it needs to be said that not only are Danielle Steele, Tom Clancy, and Stephen King being read. When Albert Hourani's *History of the Arab Peoples*, E. L. Doctorow's *Billy Bathgate*, and Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* are on the bestseller lists, it cannot be said that only "light" reading is the fare of the day. I would suggest that many of the people who sit in the pews are serious readers of contemporary literature. They should not bear the complete blame for the loss of use of literature from the pulpit.

What about the preacher? Again, I can only surmise and offer a few suggestions. Because the role of pastor has changed from theological and intellectual leader of the community to managing director of a corporation (I caricature, but not too much, I fear), expectations for such a person necessarily change. The complexity of the pastoral role is quite enormous, and the demands on the pastor's time are astonishing. In such a climate, the reading of serious literature is usually far down on the list of any pastor. He/she must keep abreast of so many things in so many fields, literature seems like a luxury only a pulpit "prince" like Phillips Brooks from a long gone time could afford.

But let me make an assumption without arguing it adequately: the preacher's tools are words, words that are attached to the most important story in the history of the world, a story that must be spoken in this time to these people. To know appropriate Bible knowledge and to possess critical theological skill is only half (or so) of the task of preaching. The other part of preaching is the world into which the sermon goes, and the most acute observers we have of that world in all of its complexity are our writers: our novelists, our playwrights, our poets, our short story tellers, our biographers, our diarists. In the pages of these artists, the preacher can discover the new and the fresh, both in terms of content and of form.

So, with that assumption in mind, I will now offer four suggestions concerning the use of contemporary literature from the pulpit.

1. Illustrative Pairing

My example of the evocative relationship between O'Connor's "Revelation" and the story of Jacob suggests the homiletical possibility of what I shall call illustrative pairing. The preacher could tell the story of Jacob's reception of revelation and his subsequent rejection of its implications, and could then contrast that with Mrs. Turpin's reception and acceptance of revelation for her life. In this way the hearers could see that God offers revelation to peculiar folk in peculiar ways, that even biblical "heroes" do not always listen to the word of God, and that they, the hearers, can receive the divine word if they remain open and expectant to its possible life-changing power. And the very modernity of Mrs. Turpin's experience can help to bring the discussion of divine revelation out of an ancient time into the present.

2. Dramatic Monologue

In this second style, the preacher could use the O'Connor story as the central story for the entire sermon, but could weave within its telling elements of the older biblical story. For example, when recounting Mrs. Turpin's revelations in the doctor's office and at the hogpen, the revelations of Jacob could be recalled (either in the mind of Mrs. Turpin or as a commentary by the third-person narrative preacher) in order to connect the biblical story to the modern one. The teller might suggest that Mrs. Turpin could, like her biblical counterpart, have rejected the revelation's authority for her, but in fact did not do so. The implication would be that we can emulate Mrs. Turpin and can

undergo profound change in the light of our hearing of the word of God. This style moves beyond illustration of an idea into the actual presentation of an experience of change.

3. Dramatic Multiple Reading

This third style suggestion involves two preachers who present in dramatic dialogue the two stories of Jacob and Mrs. Turpin. I could envision the stories interwoven in their telling, first the beginning of Jacob's story matched by Mrs. Turpin in the doctor's office, then Jacob's trickery and initial revelation matched by Mrs. Turpin's book-to-the-head, and so forth. In turn, the two preachers would present their respective stories, being careful to comment on each other's ongoing story. This would require great skill and careful preparation to make clear and effective, but the advantage would be a forceful presentation of each story so that the hearer could actually see the stories laid side-by-side, the better to witness their similarities and ultimate differences.

4. Thematic Illustrative Theology

This fourth suggestion is more common to me as the way contemporary literature was used in the pulpit some thirty or so years ago. The preacher uses the modern story as the framework for a discussion of the theological theme that arose for her/him from the story. Let us assume that the theme for "Revelation" is the surprise of grace. The preacher threads a discussion of that theme through a retelling of the story so that the story becomes a lengthy illustration of the theme. The preacher tells and comments in such a way that the hearers are left knowing that this story is precisely and memorably suggestive of just this theme. The advantage is that the abstract concept, "grace," is given concrete life by the recounted story. This indeed may be the safest use of contemporary literature, because the preacher is in relative control of the story, making it work for quite specific and announced ends, namely, to teach a lesson from the faith.

These four styles are merely suggestive and far from exhaustive. The very imagination energized by serious literature should yield many other possibilities for presentation.

Conclusion

This preliminary exploration into the possible function of contemporary literature, both as commentary on biblical narrative and as building blocks for preaching, began with the simple observation that one modern writer had a character in her fiction evoked by a biblical character. I tried then to examine in several ways how that evocation might be fruitful for understanding both the ancient and the modern stories. I also noted that the use of contemporary literature from the pulpit was on the wane, and, after offering some suggestions about why that might be so, I presented some brief descriptions of ways that such literature could find their way into sermons again.

I should close by asking the question that underlies this entire discussion: why should preachers bother to read serious literature at all? Surely Bible, newspaper, and theological commentary make a formidable enough triad for any would-be preacher. Yet some very important things are missing from the typical use of the three. Robert Alter says it well:

Literary language is an intricate, inventively designed vehicle for setting the mind in restless pleasing motion, which in the best of cases may give us a kind

of experiential knowledge relevant to our lives outside reading (*The Pleasures of Reading*, 22).

Preachers, among others, are ever in need of being “set in restless pleasing motion” by a new kind of knowing that is borne in the words of serious literature. We preachers are creatures of words and the Word. If the faith we proclaim is truly an incarnate one, it behooves us to search out the pointers to that faith among those who are truly masters and mistresses of the word. Here is Robertson Davies:

As the tragic writer rids us of what is petty and ignoble in our nature, so also the humorist rids us of what is cautious, calculating, and priggish—about half of our social conscience indeed. Both of them permit us, in blessed moments of revelation, to soar above the common level of our lives (*A Voice from the Attic*, 219).

Not a bad hope for the preached word, that, “to soar above the common level of our lives.” But, we should hasten to add that we soar in order to call all who hear upward into the high calling of God in Jesus Christ the Lord.