

INTRODUCTION

Sacramental Realism

Sacramental Realism and Catholic Literature

The theological meaning of ‘sacramental realism’ can be condensed into the catechetical definition of the seven sacraments as ‘outward signs of inward grace’.¹ This formulation encapsulates the fundamental paradox of sacramental realism in its familiar theological and also in its less familiar literary guise: the paradox of apprehending a reality that cannot be perceived and yet that is so real as to effect a dynamic inner transformation. The term inevitably evokes different things for the theologian and literary scholar. The conflation of ‘sacrament’ and ‘realism’ resonates for the theologian or philosopher with the Latin *res*, meaning the sheer, full reality of a given thing.² The stock literary definition of ‘realism’ recalls primarily the realist and subsequent naturalist traditions in European literature, epitomized in the nineteenth-century French realist novels of Flaubert and the Goncourts, whose efforts to depict reality through the minutiae of social and scientific verisimilitude represent one of the principal developments in European fiction of the last two centuries.

In the broadest terms, what distinguishes a literary ‘sacramental realism’, as I use the term in this book, from its modern secular counterparts is a differing understanding of reality, of nature and its relationship to supernature, and, moreover, the impact this difference has on the writer’s conception of the text and the demands that the text makes of its reader. A text that depicts a reality other than that which is perceived differs greatly from one in which the objects of representation are determined by scientific observation and verification. For the Christian believer, the verisimilitude of the material realm is important but can tell only part of a given tale, which instead resonates beyond the immediate and into the eternal. This would be as true in life as in art. The consequence of this multidimensionality is that ‘sacramental realism’ in literature will be inherently paradoxical: How does the writer know how to depict the unknowable? How can he or she imagine the unimaginable? How are modern prose, and concomitantly modern verse, affected by these divine demands placed upon them?

These aesthetic paradoxes are latent in the history and etymology of the Latin word and theological term *sacramentum*. Derived from the verb *sacrare* meaning ‘to make sacred’, *sacramentum* initially carried the idea of a sacred military oath but was introduced into Christian language by the Church Fathers as a translation of the Greek *mysterion*. What the Western Church calls ‘sacraments’ are ‘holy mysteries’ in the Eastern Church. Here is the twofold idea, central to sacramental theology, of the manifest, tangible sign (a formal rite or oath) and its direct relationship to a mysterious, supernatural reality (sanctifying grace). Thus in the rite of each sacrament

in the Catholic Church there is a given form and matter that together signify the sacred reality they confer on the recipient.³ In the sacrament of Baptism the words ‘I baptize you, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ are the form and the water the matter. Together they signify the inward cleansing of the soul from original sin and her initiation into Christian life. Likewise the sacrament of Confirmation is conferred with the words, ‘Be sealed with the Holy Spirit’, as the bishop lays his hands on the confirmand and anoints him with the oil of chrism. According to Catholic theology, a dynamic link exists between these sacramental signs and the realities they signify. The outward sign is not just a symbol of divine grace, rather sacraments are efficacious signs: they do not merely represent a sacred reality but themselves cause the reality they represent. The water is truly cleansing and the oil truly seals, yet in both cases the principal efficient cause is God. Within the sacramental system, material realities can therefore be sources of spiritual well-being. Accordingly, the outward signs of the sacraments are dynamic signs and instruments of grace, visible and tangible realities dignified through their involvement in the sanctification of humanity.

A memorable example of how reality when perceived sacramentally can influence literature is Dante’s Beatrice. At the heart of Dante’s writing is the enigma of his devotion to the lady whom in life he barely knew, but who after death, so he believed, would lead him towards the Godhead. In the *Vita nuova* she represents his journey as philosopher towards wisdom, a journey that he continues in *Paradiso* as pilgrim-poet at her side. In the poem, as Beatrice and Dante advance towards the ultimate sight of the Godhead in the Tenth Heaven, she is his real companion, yet she is also with him to serve as a sign and instrument of divine grace. Dante scholars have generally acknowledged Beatrice’s character and function in the *Divina Commedia* as sacramental. According to Charles Singleton, Beatrice as a blessed soul sees by ‘the light which is light’ and no longer needs an ‘intermediary, sacramental source of light’.⁴ The mortal Dante, however, remains dependent on the sacramental system. Beatrice is consequently not only a real person in *Paradiso*, but also an outward sign and instrument of the inward grace that transforms Dante:

Beatrice tutta nell’etterne rote
 fissa con li occhi stava; ed io in lei
 le luci fissi, di là su remote.
 Nel suo aspetto tal dentro mi fei,
 qual si fè Glauco nel gustar dell’erba
 che ’l fè consorte in mar delli altri Dei. (*Paradiso*, 1.64–69)

Gertrud von le Fort cites this passage from *Paradiso* in her series of essays on the symbolic meaning of femininity, *Die Ewige Frau* (1934). She reads the scene as analogous to the mutual sanctification of man and woman in sacramental marriage. When Dante looks at Beatrice, ‘[er] sieht hier nicht das Göttliche in der Frau, sondern er sieht Gott, weil sie auf Gott blickt.’⁵ The saintly eyes of Beatrice are a wondrous sacramental mirror, akin to the ideal of Christian marriage, through which Dante not only perceives, but also receives divine grace.

This classic medieval example suggests the extent to which a sacramental view of reality was present in early European literature. With the passage towards and through

secularization, this model for literary representation became in turn subversive, rare, and even reactionary. Numerous scenarios in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, for example, hinge on the spiritual and social significance of the sacraments generally accepted among his first readers. The sacrament of Penance, in particular, provides the setting for some of his most elaborate and irreverent plots.⁶ Where Dante's *Commedia* typifies the sacramental imagination at work, and Boccaccio makes often scurrilous use of what was for him a theological and cultural commonplace, the sacraments have more recently found their place in modern fiction as a means of writing against the grain of an empirical literary norm. For example, Gertrud von le Fort's British contemporary G. K. Chesterton created in Father Brown a likeable but bumbling hero in the tradition of the detective thriller mastered in Victorian England by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Chesterton's amateur detective, however, is also a priest, a minister of the sacraments. In 'The Queer Feet' (1911) Brown finally captures the elusive Valentin, a much feared murderer and thief. The genre of modern detective fiction, of which Chesterton as the first president of the illustrious Detection Club was acutely aware, demands a final, tightly reasoned denouement of the crime prior to the arrest of the criminal. Yet, in Chesterton's story, the rational denouement develops, not with the apprehension of Valentin, but with a sacramental confession. Having solved the crime and given absolution to the penitent criminal under the seal of confession, Brown allows Valentin to go free:

'Did you catch this man?' asked the colonel, frowning.

Father Brown looked him full in his frowning face. 'Yes', he said, 'I caught him with an unseen hook and an invisible line which is long enough to let him wander to the ends of the world, and still to bring him back with a twitch upon the thread.'⁷

This final twist is intended both to disappoint and to challenge the reader's expectations; Chesterton is playing with a popular fictional genre to say something not so much about the workings of crime as about the workings of grace. In the case of Boccaccio, the sacramental view of reality provides a starting-point for narrative deviation, whereas Chesterton's goal is the re-creation of the sacramental view of reality, unquestioned by Dante, in a secular genre.

Unlike Dante's *magnum opus*, however, what unites the short stories of Boccaccio and Chesterton is that they both use the reality of the Church's seven sacraments primarily as literary devices to make possible developments in plot and character. Yet the theological implications of a literary sacramental realism extend beyond the use of the sacraments as literary devices within a plot. Literary sacramental realism necessarily touches on broader aesthetic questions; not just of how the 'unseen hook and invisible line' of grace can be cast within a plot, but how this is to be depicted, how grace can be conveyed in language, and how this elicits all the imaginative processes involved in the writing of a text.

Sacramental Realism and Theology

But what distinguishes a sacramental from a merely symbolic or spiritual understanding of reality? Catholic teaching on the sacraments, which culminated in the thought

of St Thomas Aquinas, claims a radical relationship between material and spiritual realities, one distinct from that proper to other modes of signification and symbolism. St Thomas argues in his *Summa theologiae* that the principle of an instrumental, efficacious causality distinguishes the Church's sacraments, instituted through the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ, from either primitive systems of symbolism in pagan religions or the symbolic faith that under the Old Covenant characterized the relationship between God and Israel. Human beings, as sensory beings, have a natural propensity towards sensory signs and symbols as a means of illustrating realities, and particularly spiritual, abstract, and intangible realities, which are otherwise beyond their understanding.⁸ Symbols, images, signs, gestures, analogies, and language: these all function through some acknowledged relationship, be it arbitrary, referential, associative, between the signifier and the signified. One road sign might ask you to choose between the road to Durham and the road to Newcastle; another might tell you to stop immediately. In one case the sign is advisory, in the other obligatory. Yet you do not choose the correct road nor stop your vehicle *because* of the signpost. In neither case, unlike a sacrament, does the sign cause or effect that which it unequivocally represents or suggests to the mind and emotions.

Throughout salvation history, human beings' ability to learn and understand in symbols has been incorporated into acts of worship. St Thomas uses the Jewish Passover as an example of an Old Testament foretelling of the sacramental economy established between God and man by the incarnate Son. When the angel of death passes over the homes of the Israelites, who have painted their lintels with the blood of the sacrificial lamb, visible human actions are shown in a direct relationship to the shedding of divine grace and mercy. Only in the person of Jesus, however, do the sacramental signs of the New Covenant acquire their unique significance as instrumental causes in the perfection of human sanctity.⁹ They are efficacious because they both signify and contain their own cause, that being the redeeming grace poured out by Christ on the Cross:

[...] a sacrament properly speaking is that which is ordained to signify our sanctification. In which three things may be considered; viz., the very cause of our sanctification, which is the Passion of Christ; the form of our sanctification, which is grace and the virtues; and the ultimate end of our sanctification, which is eternal life. And all these are signified by the sacraments.¹⁰

In Catholic thought, the sacramental sign is therefore unique, a novelty of redemption that dignifies the material in a dynamic exchange of grace between man and God, natural and supernatural, visible and invisible. Thus, the words of absolution — Father Brown's metaphorical fishing line — are not reducible for the Catholic believer to a merely therapeutic or psychological exercise but do truly exert a 'tug' of grace on the penitent.

The sacrament of the Eucharist best exemplifies, and is central to, theological sacramental realism, as well as to its literary counterpart. In the Mass, Catholics profess that it is the whole Christ, God and man, who is made really present under the appearances of bread and wine. The sacrament of sacraments is therefore Jesus, 'the Word made Flesh', the mystical body. The gestures of the Mass are themselves representative of the sacramental exchange that has been instituted between God and

man. On behalf of the people, the priest *in persona Christi* offers bread and wine in thanksgiving and remembrance of Christ's inimitable and complete sacrifice on the Cross. In the transubstantiation that same sacrifice is re-presented (made present) and the same redemptive grace poured out anew, as the Council of Trent proclaimed in 1562:

[Christ], our Lord and God, was once and for all to offer himself to God the Father by his death on the altar of the cross, to accomplish there an everlasting redemption. But because his priesthood was not to end with his death, at the Last Supper 'on the night when he was betrayed,' [he wanted] to leave to his beloved spouse the Church a visible sacrifice (as the nature of man demands) by which the bloody sacrifice which he was to accomplish once for all on the cross would be re-presented, its memory perpetuated until the end of the world, and its salutary power be applied to the forgiveness of the sins we daily commit.¹¹

Following St Thomas, Catholic theologians have therefore explained the Eucharist as a mystery that is at once symbolic and realistic.¹² The sacramental species of bread and wine, traditional symbols in Jewish worship of the first fruits of the earth offered to God, are the *sacramentum tantum*: they are only signs; they signify but are not signified.¹³ The spiritual effect of the Eucharistic sacrifice is the *res tantum*: a reality that is signified but, being spiritual, does not signify. At the end of time, when there will be no signs and figures, there will be no *sacramentum* but only the *res tantum*, the unity of the mystical Body of Christ in its perfection.¹⁴ Until then, that perfection is brought about by the true Body and Blood of Christ under the sacramental species of bread and wine, the *sacramentum et res*: the sign and reality, the signifier that is also the thing signified. In this paradigm of sacramental realism, the senses perceive the appearances of bread, while the intellect, perfected by faith, perceives the reality of Christ, as expressed in the 'Pange, lingua', the medieval Eucharistic hymn attributed to St Thomas:

Verbum caro panem verum
 verbo carnem efficit
 fitque sanguis Christi merum,
 et, si sensus deficit,
 ad firmandum cor sincerum
 sola fides sufficit.

The real presence of the Eucharistic *sacramentum et res* is thus a continuing challenge for the believer, precisely because it forces him or her to perceive a specific reality, and by extension all reality, in a way that contradicts sensory perception. In his study of the Catholic sacraments, the Dominican theologian Colmar E. O'Neill argues that theological sacramental realism is at once Christocentric and anthropocentric, crucial to an understanding of how Christ's objective redemption is at work in the salvation of each individual human being. Focusing on the theology of the Eucharist, he argues that the seven sacraments testify, not to an exclusive source of grace, but to the way in which God has chosen to communicate his redeeming grace to all humanity. O'Neill quotes the Second Vatican Council's definition of the Church as 'a kind of sacrament or *sign and instrument* of intimate union with God' to argue that an understanding of the sacraments is essential to understanding how the divine presents itself to and influences human experience:

What it means is that the kind of realism which is given in the Eucharist says something about the way God acts in the world and this establishes an openness on the part of the theologian to acknowledge other, similarly realistic, interventions of God. [...] Sacramental realism, if we are to perceive what it implies, requires that we make an effort to see it as an element in the mystery of God in his dealing with human personality.¹⁵

What O'Neill says about the openness of the theologian applies equally to the imaginative writer. Redeemed reality, it would seem, is sacramental. A biblical example of this is given in the two men on the road to Emmaus in the Gospel of St Luke. Absorbed in their distress at the death of Jesus, they fail to recognize him as he walks and talks with them. Only when he breaks the bread at supper do they recognize and rejoice in him as their resurrected saviour. He disappears, but they now see with faith what they could not see with their eyes.¹⁶ As St Augustine writes in his commentary on this text, the recognition of Christ in the bread gives them a new clarity of sight and perception:

For they walked not with their eyes shut, but there was something within them which did not permit them to know that which they saw, which a mist, darkness, or some kind of moisture, frequently occasions. [...] It was so permitted by Christ up to the sacrament of the bread, that by partaking of the unity of His body, the obstacle of the enemy might be understood to be removed, so that Christ might be known.¹⁷

Theological sacramental realism, then, expresses the real action of Christ's saving grace at work in the Church, his mystical body.¹⁸ Literary sacramental realism will attempt to draw the consequences of this into fiction and poetry. 'The pattern of Christ,' writes O'Neill, 'this unique archetypal sacrament, is reproduced when the Christian cleaves to the human situation and transforms it by the power of the Spirit.'¹⁹ A belief in the sacramental system requires an aesthetic that tries to draw out and depict the sacramental paradox, to plumb the depths and heights of experienced reality, painting the visible with the invisible, the mundane with the celestial, attempting to harmonize the workings of creative art with the workings of grace. The English Catholic convert David Jones pointed out the importance of a sacramental ecclesiology for Christian art in similar terms: 'Because the Church is committed to 'Sacraments' with a capital S, she cannot escape a committal to sacrament with a small s, unless the sacramentalism of the Church is to be regarded as a peculiar and isolated phenomenon.'²⁰ It follows that literary sacramental realism is not simply a 'spiritual' view of reality akin to the Christian medieval understanding of the natural world as showing forth vestiges of its creator. This is clearly one idea inherent to sacramental realism. More than being indicators of the presence of divine grace in the world, sacramental signs are mundane elements, whether bread, water, wine, or oils, which are conjoined with human words and gestures and dignified in the economy of salvation by God-made-man Himself. The same dignity extends to the mundane elements that become the subject-matter of literature and art.

Christian art consequently acquires the task of 'bodying forth' those sacred realities that constitute the fulfilment of Christian life.²¹ The American Catholic fiction writer Flannery O'Connor has argued that the writer has to adhere to this understanding of redeemed reality as the sphere within which the ultimate mystery of human existence

is mediated. A sacramental vision of reality, she argues, is not an imposition on creative activity, but rather challenges a writer's imagination and ability to communicate the fullness of 'what-is':

The Catholic sacramental view of life is one that sustains and supports at every turn the vision that the storyteller must have if he is going to write fiction of any depth. [...] The fiction writer presents mystery through manners, grace through nature, but when he finishes there always has to be left over that sense of mystery which cannot be accounted for by any human formula.²²

For O'Connor — whose explicit references to Catholicism in her fiction are rare — the absence of an implicit sacramental view of reality in literature means that only part of a story has been told. It follows that literary sacramental realism does not just address texts about Catholics and their sacramental faith (although in the writings of Gertrud von le Fort, Sigrid Undset, François Mauriac, Graham Greene, and other Catholic authors this is often the case), but more broadly provides the theological framework for the way in which the author seeks to convey his or her subject matter. This explains why the term 'sacramental realism' as I use it in this book is not, unlike literary realisms in general, limited to prose fiction. Following in the tradition of Dante, significant poets of the modern period have evoked a sacramental universe in their verse, be it Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'world charged with the grandeur of God [...] | [...] like shining from shook foil' or the transfigured dusk setting awaiting 'du mildes Licht' in Annette von Droste-Hülshoff's 'Mondesaufgang'.²³ The theological notion of *sacramentum et res* thus rests paradoxically at the crux of a Catholic literary aesthetic: the real, active, yet hidden presence of redeeming grace at all levels of human life and art.

Gertrud von le Fort and Sacramental Realism

Until now I have avoided specific reference to Gertrud von le Fort as a sacramental realist in order to sketch the outlines of an aesthetic that is inherent to her work as a Catholic writer, and yet in no sense exclusive to it. As O'Connor claims, all writers who profess the efficacy of the sacraments in life will have to address 'at every corner' the implications of their belief for their art.²⁴ Nonetheless, le Fort's own writing provides ample material for an introduction to literary sacramental realism, and her critics have in varying degrees been alert to the sacraments as the dynamic element within her creative work. Theoderich Kampmann has voiced this most clearly, first in his 1935 monograph and later in an essay of 1960 in which he argues that le Fort's oeuvre is a literary *laudatio sacramenti*:

Hier [im Aufsatz] sei in gebotener Kürze auf eine Wirklichkeit aufmerksam gemacht, die für das Werk dieser Dichterin leitmotivische Bedeutung besitzt. Wir meinen die Wirklichkeit des Sakramentes im allgemeinen und der Eucharistie im besonderen. Man darf die Behauptung wagen, das magnum mysterium sei in allen Werken Gertrud von le Forts ausgesagt, unverschleiert teils und teils verhüllt. [...] Daß das Sakrament [die Eucharistie] weder frommer Schmuck ist, der das Leben verschönt, noch milder Trost, der die pia anima wärmt, sondern jener diakritische Punkt, an dem Heil und Unheil sich entscheiden, Himmel und Hölle, tritt deutlich ins Licht.²⁵

What Kampmann claims here with specific reference to the novel *Der römische Brunnen* (1928), I will develop as central to my analysis of le Fort's work between 1924 and 1946. A sacramental presence provides, with vicissitudes, the 'diacritical point' for all her literary activities during these years. This often assumes an explicit form when the seven sacraments are crucial to her narrative strategy: Reconciliation and Confirmation in *Das Schweißtuch der Veronika*; Baptism in *Der Papst aus dem Ghetto*; Holy Orders in *Die Letzte am Schafott*; Viaticum in *Die Consolata*; Matrimony in *Der Kranz der Engel*; and the Eucharist in almost all these works of fiction. Yet a sacramental view of reality is implicit to the workings of her fiction and verse even when there is no reference to Christian faith or religious practice, such as in the two 'inner emigration' Novellen *Das Gericht des Meeres* and *Die Opfefflamme*. This implied presence of the workings of grace becomes an important factor in her writing and publications during the Third Reich, when overtly Catholic utterances were subject to increasing suppression and censorship.

Le Fort articulated her aesthetic ideas most fluidly in short essays, reviews, and poems published during the twenty-six years of her career that follow the end-point of this study, but her most comprehensive expression of her sacramental view of reality appeared in 1934 in her study of the feminine and the religious, *Die Ewige Frau*. In the preface to the book's three essays, le Fort stresses that her interest lies not in the psychological, biological, social, or historical, but rather in the symbolic significance of femininity.²⁶ The feminine, she argues, is a pre-eminent symbol of the religious. In order to proceed with this argument, however, she believes it necessary to clarify what she means by the 'symbolic':

Die Sprache der Symbole — einst die allgemeinverständliche Sprache eines lebendigen Denkens — ist heute weithin von der Sprache des abstrakt-begrifflichen Denkens verdrängt worden. [...] Symbole sind Zeichen oder Bilder, in denen letzte metaphysische Wirklichkeiten und Bestimmungen nicht abstrakt erkannt, sondern gleichnishaft anschaulich werden; Symbole sind also die im Sichtbaren gesprochene Sprache eines Unsichtbaren. Zu Grunde liegt die Überzeugung einer sinnvollen Ordnung aller Wesen und Dinge, die sich durch die Wesen und Dinge selbst als göttliche Ordnung auszuweisen vermag; eben durch die Sprache ihrer Symbole.²⁷

The symbolic order to which le Fort refers here is not expressly sacramental, but rather suggests the vision of an 'analogical universe' commonplace in patristic and scholastic thought. An analogy, a certain likeness, exists between the creator and his creation. Through this analogy, known to theologians as the *analogia entis*, all created beings are seen to a greater or lesser degree as symbols that point towards ultimate metaphysical realities. Le Fort therefore addresses the feminine as a symbol in so far as it reveals the metaphysical essence towards which it is properly ordered: 'es geht [...] um seinen religiösen Rang, um sein Urbild und sein Endbild in Gott'. In the course of the essays, however, there is a necessary passage towards a more obviously sacramental symbolism and realism. First, she insists on relating the demise of a symbolic *Weltanschauung* to the secularization of culture. Implicit is a nostalgia for the religious realism of the Middle Ages, which now seems incredible to an age that is 'in ihren metaphysischen Instinkten tief verwirrt oder mißleitet' (p. 11). With the idea of representative and analogous symbols consequently comes the question of their

mediation, the re-presentation and real presence of the eternal in the temporal, the universal in the particular. Once mortal beings have acknowledged their relationship as creatures to the creator, they must view the world with a perspective towards eternity:

Das in seiner zeitlichen Bedingtheit aufgelöste, vor dem Zeitlos-Unbedingten versinkende Geschöpf — es versinkt eben doch dem Zeitlos-Unbedingten und erscheint nun, von ihm aufgefangen, nicht mehr als sein eigener Wert, sondern als Gedanke und Spiegel des Ewigen, als sein Gleichnis oder Gefäß. (p. 11)

In this cluster of nouns is contained not just a definition of man's passive likeness to the creator; le Fort also introduces the imagery of mediation. Human beings have an active role as reflecting vessels of the eternal, the fulfilment of which she sees in Dante's Beatrice. The world does not just point towards redemption but is mysteriously co-opted into its enactment in the here and now.

The discussion swiftly moves into the adjacent question of how modern man can realize and articulate this reality in the world. Le Fort advances towards art as typifying a symbolism that is representative, as well as instrumental and mediatory. Through this analogy with art, she describes the relationship between God and humanity as distinctly sacramental:

Das Religiöse — wir sahen es — beginnt dort, wo das eigenwillig Subjektive endet. Aber in welcher Sprache soll jenseits dieses Endes noch geredet werden? Wir können das Metaphysische nur unter dem Schleier der Gestalt fassen, also nur dort, wo wir uns doch wieder auf den Boden des Zeitlich-Relativen gedrängt sehen. Nur die ganz große Kunst in ihren ganz großen Gnadenstunden vermag in der vergänglichen Gestalt das Unvergängliche zu verkünden. Sobald wir aber diese befragen, stehen wir noch einer anderen Verkündigung gegenüber: die große abendländische Kunst wird sich nie zu lösen sein von der großen christlich-katholischen Dogmatik, ja sie ist in ihren überzeitlichen Erscheinungen geradezu deren stellvertretende Priesterin. (p. 12)

Art, le Fort is convinced, offers an analogy by which to grasp the efficacious reality of redemption within modern culture. Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* continues to embody in music the Creed that is neglected in religion: 'so verkündigt die große bildende Kunst und Malerei über die Jahrhunderte hinweg unabweisbar auch den modernen Heiden noch die Gestalten des christlichen Erlösungsdramas' (p. 13). Art, as a means of revelation, therefore stands in a privileged relationship to religion. Moreover, this relationship establishes redemption as its overarching theme. Throughout *Die Ewige Frau*, alongside her enquiry into the symbolic meaning of femininity, le Fort thus also seems engaged in the project of mapping out a language for grace. Replete with literary allusions, the text reveals the manner in which she conceptualizes the sacred exchange between God and man. The veil, a highly significant mythopoetic and allegorical image in most world religions, and no less in modern German literature, is for le Fort not only 'das Symbol des Metaphysischen auf Erden', a leitmotif for the innate religiosity of the feminine, but also for the hidden presence of sacred realities in the world (p. 17).²⁸ Much of what is said on femininity therefore relates to le Fort's sacramental realism. The exclusion of the feminine from social and cultural life is tantamount to the exclusion of 'die Hälfte der Wirklichkeit' (p. 156).

This exclusion has its direct parallels in art. ‘Das Unscheinbare’, ‘das Unbegreifliche’, ‘das Verborgene’, ‘das Abwesende’, ‘das Verhüllte’, ‘das Schweigende’, ‘das Einsame’, ‘das Hingegebene’ are all recurrent elements of what le Fort refers to as ‘die andere Hälfte der Wirklichkeit’, symbolized in the feminine and essential to an apprehension of the fullness of human being and lived reality; all elements that in turn have a particular sacramental and Eucharistic resonance (p. 33). True art, it follows, will incorporate these hidden elements: le Fort cites examples from Dante, Hölderlin, the *Nibelungenlied*, and Greek tragedy. True art thus stands in a privileged relationship to the *mysterium caritatis*, equipped to body forth the efficacious and real presence of redeeming grace in human life (p. 44).

The manner in which art can depict grace is the central theme of le Fort’s essay *Mosaiken*, published in around 1950. The essay presents her ‘reading’ of various Italian sacred mosaics, but the questions she addresses are equally pertinent to literary art. She describes Byzantine mosaic as an art form that has united the Christian East and West in giving material articulation to the praise of God. Mosaic art challenges modern aesthetic expectations. Its focus on the timeless and eternal often prompts alienating responses: the immediate impact of a sacred mosaic on the modern mind is an impromptu ‘Befragtwerden von der Ewigkeit’.²⁹ The essay develops as a meditation on what happens when art is directed solely towards God, and, in consequence, the temporal is viewed only in relation to eternity. In order to describe this prerogative le Fort advances towards her own explicit definition of sacramental realism:

Großen Liturgien gleich, die in Stein und Gold übersetzt sind, dienen [die Mosaiken] der Verherrlichung Gottes, sie schmücken sein Haus, sie tragen sakralen Charakter und im Blick auf den Menschen höchstens sakramentalen. [...] Diese Kunst transzendiert mit einer unerhörten Gewalt, sie lebt von jenseits der Erfahrung. Ihre Gestalten werfen keinen Schatten, keine Perspektive wird in der Zeichnung sichtbar, alles begibt sich flächenhaft auf dem abstrakt goldenen Hintergrund — er bedeutet den mystischen Ausdruck der für irdische Augen bildlosen Ewigkeit — sie ist es, die dem Mosaisten hinter jeder zeitlichen Erscheinung aufsteigt. (pp. 51–52)

Sacred mosaics are sacramental in so far as they ‘translate’ the relationship between God and man into lapidary, material form. What impact does this ‘translation’ have on the mode of representation? In their relation to the eternal, earthly events (in this instance themes from the Bible and Christian tradition) are no longer bound to the perspectives of lived experience. Confronted with the eternal, the mundane appears two-dimensional, shadowless, and in some sense diminished, even distorted. The superimposition of the depicted scene onto an imageless golden background circumvents a naturalistic or narrowly imitative representation of reality. Le Fort highlights this golden background as a symbol for an eternal presence visible to man only with the eyes of faith. Moreover, it is a symbol for the presence in art of that divine reality that in life remains hidden. This description of an imageless reality as a background to visibly perceptible and intelligible events epitomizes the principle of sacramental realism in art. The sacramental realist does not relinquish a naturalist or material view of reality but must revise it as soon as he or she places the subject matter in relation to the eternal. The possibility of eternity therefore transforms the priorities and perspectives of realism.

Le Fort's argument here runs close to Erich Auerbach's introductory essay in *Mimesis* (1946). Auerbach compares the literary depiction of reality in Homeric epic with that in the Book of Genesis. Homeric style, he argues, is outstanding for its realistic depiction of 'ausgeformte, gleichmäßig belichtete, ort- und zeitbestimmte, lückenlos im Vordergrund miteinander verbundene Erscheinungen'. This foreground hides nothing, 'in ihnen ist keine Lehre und kein geheimer zweiter Sinn'.³⁰ Homer's genius lies in his narrative's complete representation of the minutiae of perceived reality. Auerbach draws his contrast to Homer with the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac from Genesis 22. Where Homer's epic presents a foreground replete with local and temporal verisimilitude, the biblical text directs its reader through an irregular, even incongruous narrative foreground. Where the classical text displays a linear, 'horizontal' development, the biblical paradigm creates a 'vertical' perspective (p. 19). Yet precisely through its omission of foreground and 'horizontal' linearity, Auerbach argues that the biblical passage gains in epic, 'realistic' complexity. Little is expressed or described about the ascent by Abraham and his son to the mountain where the sacrifice is to take place, but the situation is pregnant with emotion and suspense. What is unexpressed, undefined, and silent lends itself to a whole that is 'rätselhaft und hintergründig', a background of psychological, emotional, and supernatural complexity (pp. 14–15). This literary characterization of the biblical text recalls le Fort's description of the golden background, the eternal presence, in Byzantine mosaic. Given Homer's delight in the physicality of the world, his poem conceals no material detail nor pretends to lead the reader beyond the absorbing reality depicted in the narrative foreground (p. 15).

But a narrative that is burdened with 'Hintergründigkeit' — a transcendental background at that — lays claim to a more drastic hold on 'wahre Wirklichkeit' than does Homer's realism (pp. 14, 17). It follows that empirical reality becomes secondary in the biblical model. Auerbach stresses that this is not so much at the expense of the material and the tangible, but rather reinforces the intractable relationship between the immaterial and intangible, thus between foreground and background: 'Die erhabene Wirklichkeit Gottes greift [...] so tief in das Alltägliche ein, daß die beiden Bezirke des Erhabenen und des Alltäglichen nicht nur tatsächlich ungetrennt, sondern grundsätzlich untrennbar sind' (p. 26). For Auerbach, the stylistic paradigms of Homer and the Bible correspond to two basic, opposing types of literary representation of reality in European literature. In the course of *Mimesis* he argues that the 'figural realism' of the Middle Ages, culminating in Dante's *Commedia*, successfully drew together both strands, both the horizontal and the vertical perspective (pp. 191, 193). Modern secular literature departs from this Christian figural model, and he likens nineteenth-century realism to the Homeric paradigm. Only in the Russian novel, which continues to observe a Christian world-view in its spiritually and emotionally fraught narratives, does Auerbach find a link with the 'altchristliche[r] Realismus' that has since been superseded in modern Western Europe (p. 484).

Although Auerbach regards the Russian novel as a literary-historical anomaly, by extension the Christian novels of the French *renouveau catholique* and its German, British, and other counterparts also belong synchronically to the European secular realism out of which they emerge while latching diachronically onto the Judaeo-Christian tradition, which privileges a vertical perspectivism and views spiritual and

physical realities together as essential parts of a universal whole. This argumentation provides a reply to Ian Gregor and Brian Nicholas who have claimed, with reference to Greene and Mauriac, that a concentration on the workings of grace in a modern novel makes claims beyond the realm of art and beyond the acceptance of most readers. The introduction of indemonstrable theological factors tends to what they view as the unliterary ‘devaluation of human actions’. They acknowledge that the ‘life of grace’ provides abundant material for good fiction, but insist that Christian authors must bow to literary convention: ‘from the literary point of view we must agree that “inward marks of sanctity” must be revealed outwardly’.³¹ While this thesis provides a valid explanation of the problems of reception that face modern Christian writers, it demonstrates a view of fictional representation determined by modern secular realism. In contrast, Auerbach’s history of mimesis recalls an alternative realist tradition, which neglects neither inward nor outward realities, but rather tries to represent the concordance of both.

Likewise, in ‘Mosaiken’, le Fort argues that the high degree of stylization found in mosaic images is neither unrealistic nor comparable to the abstractions and inorganic relationships found in modern and surreal art. The stylization rather follows from an aesthetic that demands constant direction and re-direction towards a sublime reality. Le Fort uses the example of stylized depictions of Mary, whose existence as the earthly mother of the eternal God reflects the cosmic significance of all created beings:

Ihr Dogma vereinigt sich mit der Lehre von der Sophia als der geheimnisvollen präexistenten Weisheit und Hingebung der Materie und den göttlichen Schöpfungswillen, mit anderen, sehr modernen Worten: es gibt keine tote Materie, sondern nur Kräfte, die sich entscheiden können.³²

Mary embodies redeemed creation ordered towards its proper end in God. She also stands for the drama of redemption, the battle to draw all living creation in her wake towards this *telos*. Matter matters only because of this *telos*. The Catholic aesthetic that le Fort defines here in relation to mosaic art can therefore be read as a more general description of the sacramental economy and its representation in art.

The role of the writer in this aesthetic is a recurrent theme in le Fort’s verse and essays. In a series of hymnic poems, ‘Von Dichtung und Muse’, she portrays the workings of literary art as they function in a sacramental universe. The poems were first published in 1949 but were probably written during the Second World War. Although their composition thus falls towards the end of the period considered in this book, they — like the essay ‘Mosaiken’ — can be viewed as the belated articulation of aesthetic assumptions underlying all le Fort’s Catholic writing. In ‘Stimme der Dichter’, for example, the poet of all ages sings of his unrivalled autonomy and ability to cross time and place, to depict all things, good and evil, seen and unseen realities, within the framework of salvation. He derives artistic freedom from his instinctively religious view of nature and creation:

O diese Stimme des Alls,
O diese gewaltigen
Liturgien der Schöpfung:
Das leuchtende Credo der Sonnen, das Gloria der Sterne,

Das bräutliche Liebesgebet der blumenempfangenden Erde
Und ihre Mutterlieder, die lallenden, lullenden Quellen.³³

These poems also reveal the degree to which le Fort's sacramental view of reality extends to art itself. Although I use 'sacramental realism' principally to describe how le Fort conveys a sacramental perspective in her writing, the notion of the near sacramentality of art *per se* is an important element of her aesthetic. In 'Stimme der Dichter' her poet is 'every-poet': 'Tausendmal ward ich geboren und tausendmal küßt ich | Dies holde, gewaltige Dasein.'³⁴ In this regard her aesthetic can be termed broadly Romantic and demonstrates an (acknowledged) affinity to the Christian aesthetic of Joseph von Eichendorff. Indeed, her poet refers to 'das schlafende Lied' that stirs within him and inspires him to create, an allusion to Eichendorff's 'Wünschelrute'. The minstrel characters in Eichendorff's *Marmorbild* (1819) and *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts* (1826) epitomize the notion of poetry as intrinsically Christian, which he reiterates throughout his theoretical writings. For Eichendorff poetry has been dependent on religion since the ancient Greeks. Christianity further dignified this natural correlation between poetry and faith, a development that for him is synonymous with Romantic art. The freedom that le Fort's poet expresses thus resembles what for Eichendorff is clearly the Romantic liberty of a sacramental universe:

Es geht, wie durch die physische Welt, so auch durch das Reich der Geister, eine geheimnisvolle Zentripetal- und Zentrifugalkraft, ein beständiger Kampf zwischen himmlischer Ahnung und irdischer Schwere, welcher in dem großen Ringe, der die Geister wie die Planeten umfaßt, je nach den engeren oder weiteren Kreisen, die sie um den ewigen Mittelpunkt beschreiben, Licht oder Schatten, belebende Wärme oder erstarrende Kälte sehr verschieden verteilt. Aber das, was in dem Sonnensystem als unvermeidliches Naturgesetz erscheint, ist im Geisterreich ein Akt der Freiheit, die Notwendigkeit wird hier durch freie Wahl zur Tugend oder Sünde, je nachdem die natürliche Harmonie bewahrt oder willkürlich gebrochen wird. Wir scheuen uns daher nicht, diesen höchsten Maßstab alles Lebens auch an die bedeutendste Manifestation des Geisterreiches, an die Literatur, anzulegen.³⁵

The poet works within the centripetal and centrifugal forces of redeemed creation. He is at once drawn towards and away from his earthly dwelling. With this view of the inner dynamics of reality, poetry itself takes on both for the nineteenth-century Romantics and for le Fort a quasi-sacramental quality. In her poem, 'Von Dichtung und Muse', le Fort draws a series of analogies in which poetry is likened to redemption, its muse described as a 'süß-heimliche Christin': just as creation is intended for transfiguration at the end of time, so too can it be transfigured by poetry (p. 7, ll. 15–16); like grace poetry knows no bounds (p. 8, ll. 10); like divine mercy poetry is faithful to the weak and needy (p. 7, ll. 23–25).

Le Fort's 'Romanticism' should not, however, be overstated. Indeed, in a 1952 essay on Graham Greene she explores similar thoughts in relation to an author whose writing, she says with definite approval, 'verhält sich zur Poesie wie die schonungslose Helle elektrisch beleuchteter Städte zum Mondlicht einer romantischen Landschaft'.³⁶ In apologetic vein, she defends Greene's novels for their fidelity to the extremes of human experience. The crux of her argument is that Catholic literature must explore the dynamics of human salvation and should not become an

instrument of Catholic moral teaching: 'Dichtung ist gnadenhaft, Moral ist richterlich eingestellt.'³⁷ Citing John Henry Newman, she states that the intention (albeit not necessarily the effect) of moral edification is antithetical to art, which should instead be inclined towards demonstrating the workings of grace:³⁸

[Bürgerliche Moral] ist eine Moral der Gerechten im Reich dieser Welt, für die christliche Moral aber gilt das Wort von den Zöllnern und Sündern, die dem Reich Gottes näher sind als sie. Nun, auch dem Dichter sind sie näher: Dichtung hat eine unwiderstehliche Neigung, sich der Fragwürdigen, der Angefochtenen, ja der tragisch Gescheiterten anzunehmen — unangefochtene, moralisch geglückte Existenzen haben für sie nur geringe Anziehungskraft. An diesem Punkt wird das eigentümliche Paradox des Dichterischen klar, aber ist es nicht zugleich das Paradox des Christlichen?³⁹

Not the strictures of morality, but a Christian perspective on the world in which a writer is at work determines the freedom of his or her art. In addition to this autonomy, the writer must, however, reckon with a further paradox common to poetry and Christianity. The sacramental realist perceives in the world the signs and instruments of Christ's redemption. Yet his grasp on the sacred realities at work in human life is no surer than his grasp on his own salvation. According to le Fort, the achievement of Graham Greene's fiction is its masterly negotiation of this paradox: 'die erstaunlichen Überraschungen trostvollen Art, die er uns in seiner Dichtung zumutet, fallen immer in dem Sinne, daß Gott eben größer ist als das menschliche Herz'.⁴⁰ In similar vein, le Fort's poet in 'Stimme des Dichters' reflects that his art has won him a peculiar liberty, yet one dependent on his own humble humanity:

O faltet die Flügel für mich, ihr meine Lieder,
Ihr trauten Gestalten darinnen, bittet, o bittet für mich
Und legt mir liebevoll
All euren Reichtum um, den einstmals meinen —
Nur eine Stunde lang leiht mir die eigene Seele,
Das Leben, das ich euch gab — nur eine Stunde,
Daß ich bestehen kann, denn ach, von allem, was mir gehörte,
Blieb mir nur das Verswendete, nur das Verschenkte.⁴¹

Le Fort's sacramental realism, her sacramental view of reality, implies a sacramental view of art. The relationship of the poet to his or her subject is, in her view, akin to a posture of Christian love, a gift of self for the sake of the text. Thus she elsewhere describes her poem 'Stimme des Dichters' in terms of the poet's actual participation through his art in the exchange of grace: 'jede Stimme kann [dem Dichter] anvertraut werden, aber in diesem Auffangen des ihm Anvertrauten vollendet und erfüllt er sich selbst — Dichtung ist also, wenn Sie wollen, eine Form der Liebe'.⁴² This argument is crystallized in an essay, 'Vom Wesen christlicher Dichtung', also first published in the early 1950s, in which she proposes that Christian literature cannot be defined by contrast with other literatures. Given its inclination towards the guilty and the unfortunate, towards conversion and redemption, she claims that literature in and of itself, from the pagan Greeks to the secular moderns, has a Christian element: 'die liebliche Muse der Dichtung [erscheint] als eine zwar nicht voll durchchristlichte Gestalt, aber doch als eine von ihren eigenen tiefsten Impulsen her unbewußt aber unwiderstehlich auf das Christliche Hingeordnete, von einem zarten, gleichsam

adventlichen Licht umflossen'.⁴³ This notion of the 'Advent light' of literary inspiration is borrowed directly from her friend Theodor Haecker's interpretation in *Virgil: Vater des Abendlandes* (1931) of Virgil's importance as the 'Advent pagan' whose works epitomize the annunciatory, expectant role of culture before both Christ's birth and His second coming.⁴⁴ The full aesthetic implications of this view of art shared by le Fort and Haecker are not the primary focus of this book, which rather addresses first and foremost the manner in which le Fort's sacramental view of reality informs her fiction and verse. But this reference to Haecker's important 1931 treatise recalls that le Fort's sacramental realism emanates from the specific literary-historical context of inter-war German Catholic literature. For, as I shall show, the workings of le Fort's sacramental realism at once distinguish her from and align her with trends in mainstream German literature of her period. Hers is a distinctly modern and Christian literary aesthetic, the product of a mind intent on showing imaginatively what it would be like to 'believe as if I saw'.⁴⁵

Notes to the Introduction

1. See Colmar E. O'Neill, *Sacramental Realism: A General Theory of the Sacraments*, Theology and Life, 2 (Wilmington, DE: Glazier; Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1983).
2. On the complexities of translating the Latin *res* see Josef Pieper, 'Wahrheit der Dinge': Eine Untersuchung zur Anthropologie des Hochmittelalters (Munich: Hegner, 1947).
3. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger, 1914), part 3, question 60, article 6, p. 13 (hereafter *ST*).
4. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. and comm. by John D. Sinclair, 3 vols (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) III, p. 29; Charles Singleton, *Journey to Beatrice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), p. 30.
5. Gertrud von le Fort, *Die Ewige [sic] Frau* (Munich: Kösel & Pustet, 1934), p. 75.
6. See Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. by Vittore Branca, 2 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1980; repr. 1999) I, Day I.1, pp. 49–70; Day IV.2, pp. 487–504.
7. G. K. Chesterton, *The Innocence of Father Brown* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 70.
8. *ST*, 3a, 60, 4, pp. 6–8.
9. *ST*, 3a, 60, 2, pp. 3–5.
10. *ST*, 3a, 60, 3, p. 6.
11. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994 edn (London: Chapman, 1995), paragraph 1366, pp. 307 (hereafter *CCC*).
12. O'Neill, p. 98.
13. *CCC*, paragraphs 1333–34, pp. 299–300.
14. See John 16. 25.
15. O'Neill, pp. 16–17. See *Lumen gentium*, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. by Austin Flannery, OP (Northport, NY: Costello, 1975), paragraph 1, p. 350.
16. Luke 24. 13–35.
17. St Augustine, in *Catena aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers*, ed. by St Thomas Aquinas, 4 vols (Albany, NY: Preserving Christian Publications, 2001), III.2: *St Luke*, pp. 779–80.
18. See Ephesians 4. 15; Colossians 1. 18, 2. 19.
19. O'Neill, p. 57.
20. David Jones, 'Art and Sacrament', in *Epoch and Artist* (London: Faber, 1959), pp. 143–79 (pp. 177–78).
21. William Barry, *Roma Sacra: Essays on Christian Rome* (London: Longmans Green & Co., 1927), p. 183.
22. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (London: Faber, 1972; repr. 1984), pp. 152–53.

23. Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Selected Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 114; Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, *Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, ed. by Winfried Woesler, 28 vols (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1978–2000), I.1: *Gedichte zu Lebzeiten: Text*, ed. by Winfried Thies (1985), pp. 354–55.
24. O'Connor, pp. 152–53.
25. Theoderich Kampmann, 'Die Laudatio sacramenti im Werke Gertrud von le Forts', *Festschrift zum Eucharistischen Weltkongreß 1960*, ed. by the Theological Faculty of the Ludwig-Maximilian University, Munich (Munich: Max Hübner, 1960), pp. 128–31; cf. Kampmann, *Gertrud von le Fort*, p. 14. See also Xavier Tilliette, 'Gertrud von le Fort: Histoire et symbole', *Études*, 92 (1959), 40–59; Eugen Biser, 'Der Weg ins Geheimnis: Mensch und Heil nach Gertrud von le Fort', *Stimmen der Zeit*, 101 (1976), 651–67.
26. See Chapter 6, pp. 159–60.
27. Le Fort, *Die Ewige Frau*, p. 5.
28. See E. H. Gombrich, 'The Symbol of the Veil: Psychological Reflections on Schiller's Poetry', in *Freud and the Humanities*, ed. by Peregrine Horden (New York: St Martin's Press, 1985), pp. 75–109.
29. Gertrud von le Fort, 'Mosaiken', in *Die Frau und die Technik* (Zurich: Arche, 1959), pp. 49–60 (p. 51).
30. Erich Auerbach, 'Die Narbe des Odysseus', in *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, 9th edn (Tübingen: Francke, 1994), pp. 5–27 (pp. 13, 15–16).
31. Ian Gregor and Brian Nicholas, *The Moral and the Story* (London: Faber, 1962), pp. 185–216 (p. 205).
32. Le Fort, *Die Frau und die Technik*, p. 54.
33. Gertrud von le Fort, *Gedichte* (Wiesbaden: Insel, 1953), p. 14, ll. 15–20.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 13, ll. 3–4.
35. Joseph von Eichendorff, 'Geschichte des poetischen Literatur Deutschlands, I', in *Werke in sechs Bänden*, ed. by Wolfgang Frühwald, Brigitte Schillbach, and Hartwig Schultz, 6 vols (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985–93), VI: *Geschichte der Poesie: Schriften zur Literaturgeschichte*, ed. by Hartwig Schultz (1990), pp. 822–23.
36. Gertrud von le Fort, Introduction to Graham Greene, *Paradox des Christentums*, trans. by Elisabeth Schnack (Zurich: Schöffer, 1952), pp. 9–23 (p. 10).
37. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
38. See John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, ed. by Martin Svaglic (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1960; repr. 1986), p. 223.
39. Le Fort, Introduction to *Paradox des Christentums*, p. 20.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
41. Le Fort, *Gedichte*, p. 17, ll. 8–15.
42. Gertrud von le Fort, 'Autobiographische Skizzen', in *Die Frau und die Technik*, pp. 31–43 (p. 39).
43. Gertrud von le Fort, 'Vom Wesen christlicher Dichtung', in *Aufzeichnungen und Erinnerungen* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1951), pp. 45–48 (p. 47).
44. Theodor Haecker, *Vergil: Vater des Abendlandes* (Leipzig: Hegner, 1931), p. 25. Le Fort acknowledged Haecker's influence on this idea of the 'Adventstimmung' of literature in an interview published in *Die Zeit*, 8 November 1959, [no page].
45. John Henry Newman, *A Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1979), p. 96.