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Sigrid Undset's Sacramental Realism: The Body in *Kristin Lavransdatter*

by

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Abstract

Though literary modernism has been historically characterized as atheistic and anti-traditional, new critical voices are emerging that argue for the presence of the sacred in modernist texts. This paper joins those voices by proposing, along with the reexamination of the sacred in nonreligious writers like Woolf and Joyce, a reexamination of specifically religious work and on its own terms. The modern Catholic novel, in particular, with its focus on the eternal significance of humanity, deserves this attention. The paper offers Sigrid Undset's 1920, Nobel Prize winning, Catholic trilogy, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, as a significant (and unjustly overlooked) text of the period, ripe for reevaluation. Nearly all critics who discuss *Kristin Lavransdatter* pose a dichotomous reading of the text, in which the protagonist Kristin overcomes her flesh and her earthly desires in order to move toward eternity and God. The trajectory of the narrative, they argue, discards all things physical in favor of the spiritual. This paper refutes those dichotomies, presenting a new close reading of the body, paganism, and the natural world in the text of *Kristin Lavransdatter* to suggest that Kristin's life is not a dichotomy between flesh and spirit, but rather, inherently sacramental, as she moves to a deeper understanding of Christ's Incarnation and Cross. Finally, the paper proposes the term *sacramental realism* to define Sigrid Undset's contribution to modernism.

Table of Contents:

Context: Modernism and the Modern Catholic Novel.....	1
Background: Undset and Lavransdatter	10
Critical Reception.....	15
Critical Discussion: The Earthly and the Eternal.....	16
The Physical: Blood and Light.....	23
The Body.....	29
Sacrament.....	34
Suffering: The Cross	39
Sacramental Realism.....	52
Paganism	57
The Natural World	63
Conclusion.....	68
Bibliography.....	69

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Context: Modernism and The Modern Catholic Novel

The twentieth century was born into a crisis of instability: “the loss of faith; the groundlessness of value... and a nameless, faceless anxiety” (Levenson 5). In the wake of World War I, many felt as though the world had been upended. So, the great goal of the writers in the modernist movement at this time period was to challenge what had come before, the structures that had failed them—according to critic Michael Levenson in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*. The story they told themselves was “a tale of tyranny and resistance” to the old order (Levenson 2). And the general consensus throughout the decades of criticism since, then, is that tradition and religion were the tyrants, the enemies of modernism and modernists. However, Levenson joins a growing body of critics asserting that this dichotomy between “revolutionary artist and benighted traditionalist” is, in fact, an inaccurate characterization (2). He argues instead for the diverse ideologies of the period, and for the need to re-examine the “many modernisms” as they existed then, rather than consigning them to simplistic dichotomies. Levenson argues for “a new eye for distinctions” in modernism (8). My project seeks to explore those emerging distinctions. In particular, I highlight the modern Catholic novel, with its emphasis on the eternal significance of humanity as a response to the instability of the modern world—a distinction especially relevant if we are to nuance the dichotomy of anti-establishment versus tradition, or religion versus atheism.

But, why is it necessary to talk about the sacred in regards to modernism—purportedly the era in which God died? Another critic, Pericles Lewis, admirably demonstrates that the sacred is, indeed, a presence in these texts—an argument that has merit to me, as I will demonstrate here. And by taking this premise seriously, we now have an entirely new realm of modernism to explore—one that dramatically re-characterizes the movement. What does it mean

for the sacred to exist alongside the widespread rejection of religion? If relevant, is a question that badly needs exploration.

Lewis begins his essay with one of the most canonical modernists, Virginia Woolf. He cites her reaction to T. S. Eliot's religious conversion: "There's something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God" (qtd. in Lewis 178). The quote has often been taken as a crucial representation of Modernism's distinctively atheistic and secularist perspective. However, Lewis argues that spirituality and religiosity are, in fact, central to Woolf's great works and to the modern movement as a whole. (Implying, too, that the quote in question—an off-hand comment that somehow became the defining mantra of secular modernism—has been widely over-read.)

He offers instead the complexity of Woolf's masterpiece, *To The Lighthouse* as a primary example of the "limitations of some standard accounts of Modernism" (180). He claims the novel is Woolf's attempt to create a more spiritual modern work, as it makes a double-move, revealing both the "'disenchantment' of the modern world' and the possibilities for a re-enchantment" (179). For example, despite prevalent narratives of Woolf's anti-religion, Lewis explains that she actually disliked atheists as much as believers, and quotes her call for "a more 'spiritual' form of modern fiction, in contrast to the materialism of her Edwardian predecessors." She explored what she called, "moments of being," as near-sacred experiences in which the artist receives vision (Lewis 178).

Woolf uses religious images and plot elements, both Christian and pagan, to pose questions of "ultimate meaning"—like the existence of the divine. The deliberate use of these elements to ask questions of enchantment indicates something of her intent: to possibly seek the new role of the sacred in the modern world (Lewis 179). For example, the plot of the novel can

be read as the “damning” of Mrs. Ramsay by Mr. Ramsay (“Damn you,” he says in the first chapter; she wonders if he will apologize, but he never does), or the instance of her death—after which Mr. Ramsay’s stretched out arms recall Odysseus’s and Aeneas’s encounter with spirits. Or the ghost-like figure of Mrs. Ramsay as she appears to Lily, and Lily’s consequent attempt to “resurrect the dead,” in an artistic “moment of being” (Lewis 180). The disillusionment of the modern world is here presented alongside allusions and references to religion, not mere symbol or frill, but purposeful, as characters seek meaning. Characters like James, Lewis explains, who seek spiritual meaning in the world, and so will not accept his father’s disenchantment, or Lily, who looks to Mrs. Ramsay and to her own art to make shape of the world. Finally, the religious presence at the end of the novel explicitly surfaces in Mr. Carmichael, described as “an old pagan God.” The trident raised in his hand represents another step in disenchantment—for it turns out to be just a French novel, not the tool of a divine being. But it can simultaneously be read as an attempt at re-enchantment, too, for Mr. Carmichael’s motion (raising the book) reveals the desire for *something* transcendent to be there—“to preserve a sense of sacred power in the modern, disenchanted world” (Lewis 180).¹

Lewis connects this literary analysis with a re-examination of the “secularization hypothesis” of modernism—which holds that the modern world necessitates the rejection of the supernatural or sacred—proposing two flaws in the ideology. First, that the only option apart from monotheism is a wholly secular world, and, especially, second, that Modernists “celebrated the putative secularization of modernity” (Lewis 181). On the contrary, he argues, these artists still, quite clearly, grapple with questions of religiosity in their works, though outside God and

¹ Similarly, Joyce’s *Ulysses* reveals “the paradoxical character of Modernism’s encounter with the sacred,” for the quintessentially modern work is infused with religion, and bestows “a sacramental quality” on the mundane and the everyday (Lewis 193).

the church (thus their approach to spiritual questions is quite unorthodox) (Lewis 182). Although there was, Lewis explains, a dramatic shift in people's relationship to religion into the twentieth century, to make a hard line between the "naïve nineteenth" century and the "knowing, sophisticated twentieth" is a move akin to the "repressive hypothesis" of sexuality of the same time period, critiqued by Foucault, which sets up the repressive seventeenth to nineteenth centuries versus the liberated twentieth, and so denies the existence of resurfacing continuities with repression in the twentieth century, and therefore, denies also the continuity of discourse and tension throughout all these centuries (Lewis 182). Just so, the secularization hypothesis in modernism similarly denies the possibility of discourse about the sacred. Ultimately, Lewis claims the period as one distinctly in tension with religion in the modern world, rather than a period of abrupt and complete rejection. The great figures of modernism had, they felt, been deserted by the old gods, and so, as Lewis argues, looked for new gods in unorthodox, and sometimes even orthodox, places (193).

To his argument, however, I would add a clarification of my own: that we do not mean, by the term sacred, anything like the 'gothic supernatural,' or the 'psychological,' or even the 'romantic'—all terms more often deployed in discourse about modernism. First, it is not the gothic idea of the supernatural, because the sacred is not so dark or pessimistic. It is on a trajectory toward transcendence and hope. The supernatural, on the other hand, points to the dark and eerie. Though both occur in the non-physical realm (both unearthly experiences), the sacred is primarily positive and meaning-bearing, where the gothic idea of the supernatural is negative and lacks any greater meaning.

Neither is it psychology, because the sacred enters the narrative where the psychological leaves off—existing in the realm of myth and ultimate meaning, transcending the individual

psyche. In other words, the sacred is always outside the characters. For instance, in *To The Lighthouse*, Woolf places sacred images there intentionally, as literary devices, not as a manifestation of character's inner lives. It is Woolf's mythical description of Mr. Carmichael holding the book that symbolically implies the transcendent; Woolf is not intending to represent an event in Mr. Carmichael's inner psyche that caused him to believe himself a god. The sacred also represents a turn outward, not inward, in terms of narrative action. The characters looking for the sacred seek something outside themselves, like Lily looking to Mrs. Ramsay and art. This is not presented as a search for psychological compensation for loneliness, but a real desire for meaning. Psychology begins and ends with the individual, but the sacred moves beyond such isolating boundaries.

The sacred is also not the romantic. Though the sacred seeks the transcendent like romanticism does, it is more realistic about its findings. Characters (and readers) can search for the sacred, but there is no guarantee that they find it, and when they do, it is often more mundane, more material than they were expecting. Where romanticism would elaborate on the grandeur of its findings, the sacred presents simply what is there, as it is, and with much less fervor. Therefore, the sacred is neither idealistic nor emotive enough to be a remnant of romanticism.

The sacred in these modern texts exists somewhere between the dark and isolated pessimism of the gothic supernatural and the psychological on the one side, and the high idealism of romanticism on the other. It is, rather, a strange blend of the concrete and transcendent—what in any every other age has been called the sacred—and allows hope to manifest in modernism.

Following Lewis's example, then, other critics are beginning to take a fresh look at those modernist authors searching for the sacred in unorthodox places. But what of those authors who are looking in the orthodox places, if great writers even exist in this category? For as Levenson asserts, there exists the necessity of examining "a religious imagination of re-enchantment within works that have been taken as rigorously secular" (6). What about, on the other hand, those writers who tackle religious themes overtly and are often left to wander on the margins of the canon (Lewis 190)? A diverse group of women dealing with supernatural and religious themes—Willa Cather, Marie Corelli, Sheila Kaye Smith, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Radclyffe Hall—receive much less attention by critics of high modernism (Lewis 190). And the primarily male authors of the Catholic revival of the 1920s and 1930s—Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Georges Bernanos, François Mauriac—according to Lewis, "bear an uneasy relation to the term 'Modernism'" (can they be modern, if they are explicitly religious?) (190). Yet even Lewis does not give them more than this single paragraph. But I believe it is now time for a re-examination of those modernist works that are explicitly religious—and on their own terms. For this reason I will take up the modern Catholic novel, at the behest of Levenson's call for reexamination, and attempt to draw it back into the circle of modernist discussions. If one of the untold stories of modernism is its effort to reevaluate the sacred in the modern world, then the modern Catholic novel, with its interest in the eternal, offers a valuable perspective.

The modern Catholic novel seems to provide a useful contrast to those modernists seeking the sacred in unorthodox places for several reasons. First, if we are looking for more orthodox views, the Roman Catholic Church, the stronghold of Western tradition for the last two thousand years, is as orthodox as it is possible to be. Second, because these Catholic novelists—Greene and Waugh in England, Mauriac and Bernanos in France, Undset in Norway—were and

are considered some of the great writers in their time. And finally, because their modern Catholic novels are not only Catholic/orthodox but also distinctively modern, in style and theme. Reading their work with a Catholic rather than a secular lens illuminates certain aspects of the modern conscience that have heretofore been elided, especially its tension with religious claims and its search for new models of the sacred.

But first, a definition of the Catholic novel is needed. The term ‘Catholic novel’ designates a work that could not be understood by someone unfamiliar with Catholicism and the “the particular obligations it entailed for its adherents” (Griffiths 6). For example, in a Catholic novel, mass, liturgy, sacraments, and Catholic doctrine often form key aspects of the setting and plot, and the themes often include class, objects of devotion, sacrament, grace, and liturgy (mass, benediction) that provides dramatic moments intended to evoke eternal truth (Griffiths 113, 114, 116). Additionally, Fraser explains that these writers often use realist techniques, but they do not accept the physical world as sufficient to itself (xx). Instead, they seek out the presence of the divine within the physical world, especially as it appears within human action (Fraser xx). Ultimately, I concur with critic Mark Bosco, that in order to best understand a Catholic novel as such, one must be able to see “the imaginative contours of writing,” through which religious practice and theology inform the text, and to articulate predilections of the Catholic mind—like a focus on the incarnation, the sacraments, and personhood—that are often found in authors who take up Catholicism, (15).

It is also important to note some historical background, specifically for the modern Catholic novel. Maurice Baring began the movement, adopted by Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh and later, David Lodge and Muriel Spark. Though the movement began early in the 20th century, not until the 1950s did non-Catholics begin taking ‘the Catholic novel’ seriously as a

literary trend (Bergonzi 172). These modern Catholic novelists write for a secular audience but subtly introduce Catholic themes, like sacrament, personhood, and the incarnation. Typical Catholic techniques and themes are often undermined by irony or uncertainty and, especially in Greene, a lack of hope, and there is always the possibility of multiple interpretations (Griffiths 78, 169).

Much like their unorthodox counterparts, the religious imagery of modern Catholic writers attempts to distinguish what is sacred in the modern world. But the modern Catholic novel diverges from its unorthodox counterparts in several ways. First and obviously, in their use of orthodox Christian practice and teaching as an answer to questions of enchantment. Second, and more interestingly, in their emphasis on the eternal. In the modern Catholic novel, characters possess the “solidity and importance of men with souls to save or lose,” in contrast to those of Woolf or Forster who, according to Greene, wandered “like cardboard symbols through a world that was paper thin” (qtd in Griffiths 160). Though the focus on the eternal more often veered toward hell than toward heaven, the novels “offered a particular intensity and recurring high drama lacking in their counterparts; man was poised, most precariously, on the isthmus of a middle state” (Bergonzi 173). I would argue that the eternal emphasis of the modern Catholic novel is what gives it weight, and hope, where their counterparts are lacking, because the modern Catholic novel’s eternal trajectory reaffirmed the significance of humanity in an age that had learned to doubt it. Where is the sacred in the modern world? For the Catholic writers, it was within humankind.

That the dramatic presence of the eternal in the modern world is one of the great draws of the modern Catholic novel is confirmed by the timeline of the movement, which did not live long, but petered out in the 1960s. Even Waugh and Greene moved on (Bergonzi 175). The

decline of the modern Catholic novel corresponds with Vatican II, which is followed directly by a period of confusion in the Catholic Church, and, significantly to this discussion, a loss of focus on hell. As Catholic novelist and critic David Lodge writes, “At some point in the 1960s...Hell disappeared” (Bergonzi 185). And so with it, the main draw of the modern Catholic novel. There is no longer such difference between a Catholic world-view and a secular one; the “great passions” and religious transcendence that characterized Catholic understanding were dimmed (Bergonzi 186). That the modern Catholic novel enjoyed such initial acclaim but suffered a short lifespan is often cited as reason to dismiss it. However, to me, this seems more likely an indicator that the particular answer it offered to the questions of modernism was a poignant one. For when this answer, the eternal importance of humankind, was no longer central, then the modern Catholic novel faded. Modern texts grapple with questions of the sacred in many different ways, and the modern Catholic novel distinguishes itself in the conversation through this eternal emphasis and the hope that it implies.

The modern Catholic novel was written for and embraced by the needs and anxieties of modernism—a time attempting to reorient itself to the sacred and reevaluate the role of traditional structures. The orthodox answers to these questions are as much part of the quest as the more familiar unorthodox answers.

For my pursuit, I have chosen to focus on *Kristin Lavransdatter*, the 1920, Nobel Prize-winning medieval trilogy by Norwegian author Sigrid Undset. This trilogy has long been recognized as a masterwork, but has faded from view in our time and so lacks a significant body of recent criticism in English. But what does a work entirely about the 14th century have to offer this discussion? A quote from Undset, will, perhaps, suffice for now: “if one peels off the layer of notions and ideas peculiar to one’s own time, one can step directly into the medieval period

and see life from its standpoint—one discovers that it coincides with one’s own. Then one can write as a contemporary. For of course one can only write novels about one’s own contemporary period” (qtd. in Naess 214).

One of my main contributions to this discussion will be the defining term *sacramental realism* to refer specifically to Undset’s work, but also the work of the modern Catholic novel more broadly. By it I mean that she succeeds in the remarkable feat of portraying a balanced relationship (nearly a synthesis) between the material and the spiritual world—thus, ‘sacramental’—and that this balance leads her to a style at once brutally realistic and deeply hopeful—thus, ‘realist’. Her unflinchingly accurate examination of the human condition is accompanied by a profound awareness of the sacred and the mystery of God’s goodness and tangible presence in the physical world.

Background: Undset and Lavransdatter

Sigrid Undset (1882-1949), one of the great Norwegian writers of the twentieth century, published *Kristin Lavransdatter* in 1920, and it is the work for which she is mainly known. Though she wrote many novels set in the modern period as well, (*Jenne, Ida Elisabeth*) none of them ever outshone her two medieval series, *Kristin Lavransdatter* and *The Master of Hestvekin*. Little scholarship has been done on her over the years in English, though in Norwegian criticism she remains significant.

Eldest of three daughters, Undset was born in Denmark in 1882, but moved to Oslo, Norway with her family two years later. After working for many years as a secretary, her first novel was published at age twenty-five, and she began a career as a promising writer. She wrote realistic novels, primarily about working people’s family relationships, usually marriage, and focusing on the lives of women (Winsnes). When *Kristin Lavransdatter* was published (the three

novels came out 1920, 1921, and 1922), the trilogy was recognized instantly as a masterpiece of narrative story telling with complex and compelling character development and a uniquely accurate glimpse into the medieval world—a masterpiece that “integrated medieval history and fiction in an unprecedented manner” (Thresher 303).

Kristin Lavransdatter follows the life of the 14th century woman, Kristin—from her childhood, through her rebellious adolescence, tumultuous marriage and motherhood, until her death of the plague. Because the story takes place in medieval Norway, Catholicism (not Lutheranism) serves as the foundation of society and of the characters’ understanding of the world and their community. Undset herself converted to Roman Catholicism in 1924, several years after the publication of the work.² Catholic norms of sacramental and incarnational theology pervade the narrative, in both plot and form.

The first novel in the trilogy, *The Wreath*, presents Kristin’s growth from a child into a young wife. She is beautiful, with long blond hair and a pale, round face. She has a gentle disposition but, as with most children, thinks more of herself than of others. Her father, Lavrans Bjorgulfson, is a pious and joyful man, who takes great delight in his daughters, but Kristin especially. Her mother, Ragnfrid, on the other hand, is a somber woman who shows little affection for her daughters. Kristin’s next youngest sister, Ulvhild, is even more beautiful than she, but at the age of four a runaway log crushes her when the children are playing, and she

² Though raised in a secular home, Undset felt increasingly drawn toward Christianity throughout her life, and in 1924 she converted to Roman Catholicism. She explains that it gave her “sober information about absolute truths. Even if the truths in themselves are not sober but fairly wild, and the absolute is infinite and inexhaustible” (Undset qtd. in Synan 137). Lutheran Norway, the secular intelligentsia, and the broader world that knew her for the growing fame of *Kristin Lavransdatter*, were scandalized. She participated in public debates on all kinds of political and academic topics (often critiquing modernity and feminism) and wrote articles in defense of the Catholic Church and its teachings (Thresher 297). After her conversion, most of her work, novels and short stories, dealt with religion in one way or another.

becomes severely crippled and ill of health, eventually dying at a young age. The family are not aristocracy, but they are prominent and well-off land owners in the valley of Jørundgaard, generous and well liked by the surrounding villagers and families.

Kristin's father betroths her to a neighboring family's son, Simon Andresson, and Kristin initially agrees to the betrothal. Though she doesn't feel particularly strongly towards Simon, he is a kind and admired young man, and gets along well with the family. However, after Kristin narrowly escapes being sexually assaulted by the priest's nephew, she asks to be sent to a convent in the nearest city, Nidaros, for a year before her marriage, so that she can escape the village gossip, which blames her for the attack.

While living at the convent, she meets Erlend Nikulauson—a young aristocrat and landowner. He is dashing handsome and reckless; they fall instantly in love. They begin meeting in secret, and soon sleep together. Kristin tells no one, but remains in constant fear of pregnancy and feels increasingly isolated from her community and her faith. When she returns home, she refuses to marry Simon. Lavrans won't end the betrothal, at first, in part because he does not wish to break his word to the Andersson family, but also because he does not trust Erlend as a husband. (By this point it has come out that Erlend has two illegitimate children with a woman who was married to someone else.) But Kristin won't take no for an answer, and eventually, heavy of heart, Lavrans acquiesces to the betrothal of Erlend and Kristin. They get married, with Kristin several months pregnant, and then move to Husaby, Erlend's estate.

The second book, *The Wife*, details Erlend and Kristin's married life. They are often at odds, Kristin being absorbed with her young sons and frequently pregnant, Erlend becoming ever more restless and impatient with marriage. Her greatest joy, and greatest pain, comes in motherhood. She loves her sons fiercely, but her overprotective nature suffocates them and often

butts up against Erlend's carelessness and disinterest. In Kristin's fear that her children will not be provided for by their father, the mounting stress of managing the entire estate by herself, and lingering guilt about her and Erlend's past she becomes increasingly resentful of her husband and increasingly consumed by pride and spite. She prays in the chapel and attends mass everyday, but she cannot shake her growing bitterness.

The final novel, *The Cross*, takes Kristin to the end of her life. Erlend has an affair, they lose his estate because of his involvement in an attempt to usurp the queen, and eventually Kristin and Erlend separate. Unable to bear her constant accusations, he moves up into the mountains, leaving her alone on Jørundgaard (to which they had to return when Erlend was stripped of his title) to care for their seven sons and the farm alone. She goes up to visit him once, to ask him to come home, and they conceive a child. But, though they reconcile, he refuses to come back with her, and she returns alone. The villagers, increasingly hostile to the family because of Erlend's (and their son's) arrogance, accuse her of adultery. One of their sons rides up into the mountains to bring Erlend back to defend her, but by the time Erlend reaches the home a mob has already formed outside. In the scuffle, Erlend is fatally stabbed and dies.

Kristin remains there for several years as her children grow up and leave, some becoming knights, others priests, and some dying. Eventually, when one of her sons and his wife have taken over the management of Jørundgaard, Kristin decides to leave, to take the vows of a nun and permanently enter a convent. After a few years at the convent, the plague descends on Norway. She spends her last months caring for other victims, until she dies of the disease herself.

As we will see shortly, most of the critics who discuss *Kristin Lavransdatter* find in it a pessimistic and dichotomous world. Kristin moves (painfully) away from the sinfulness of her body and the world to an acceptance of Christ and heaven, they argue. However, I will refute the

presence of such strong dichotomies. Kristin's movement toward the eternal and toward Christ does not negate the flesh, but rather, honors it and requires its participation. Undset's sacramental realism presents a world in which the material and the spiritual work together—for it is with growing understanding of Christ's bodily incarnation and suffering that Kristin draws close to God.

Charles Archer and J.S. Scott translated the first English edition in 1923, and that version remained the preferred for over seventy-five years (Satterlee 39). But since Tiina Nunnally's 1997 translation³ was published, it has been the most widely read and acclaimed version, so I have chosen it as my text. Thom Satterlee, in his review of Nunnally's translation, compares the two, pointing out all the unnecessary archaisms in Archer and Scott, and the often-stilted language. Take this example: “‘The ale is good, Lavrans Bjorgulfson,’ said Haakon. ‘But methinks a jade has cooked our porridge for us today. ‘While the cook cuddles, the porridge burns,’ says the byword, and this porridge is singed’” (178-179). Now compare it to the same passage in Nunnally: “‘The ale is good, Lavrans Bjergulfssen,’ said Haakon. ‘But a slut must have made the porridge for us today. Overly bedded cooks make overly boiled porridge, as the saying goes, and this porridge is scorched’” (199). Nunnally, Satterlee claims, has great talent for representing the original tone and flow of the Norwegian, without resorting to archaism. She also weaves in words like “maiden” to indicate the medieval setting, or leaves a word, often one that will be repeated, un-translated and attaches a note to explain meaning—a *ting* is an assembly or council. Overall, her translation is much more readable, closer to Undset's own technique, and preserves the medieval setting well (Satterlee 41).

Critical Reception

³ The three novels are paginated within the trilogy volume as follows: *The Wreath* (3-291), *The Wife* (295-697), *The Cross* (701-1124).

Because Undset's father was an archeologist with a great interest in the medieval world, she grew up surrounded by his books, listening to he and his colleagues discuss their work. She read *Njál's Saga*, one of the great Norse sagas of the 13th century, when she was only eight years old, and it, along with the old Norse ballads, inspired her literary imagination and served as a primary source for her medieval novels (Winsnes 102-3). In her book on Undset, Brunsdale explains how the enduring legacy of Old Norse literature lives again through Undset's writing:

That kind of courage has reverberated throughout the realistic tradition of Scandinavian literature. The Old Norse myths squarely face the darkest mysteries of man's being and his greatest terror, the mind's disintegration in madness or death. From the *Eddas* and the sagas to the psychological realism of Ibsen, Strindberg, Hamsun, Lagerkvist and Sigrid Undset, Scandinavian literature has unflinchingly probed the deeps of the human unconscious where the most profound human urges originate (Brunsdale, *Sigrid* 7).

Undset's realistic approach and willingness to examine the 'dark mysteries' of the human condition signal her roots in the tradition that she admirably carries on, as does the accuracy with which she portrays medieval life. Mitzi Brunsdale likewise claims that Undset's realism is what marks her place as a Scandinavian and a modernist writer: "By defining the Scandinavian contribution to twentieth-century writing, she also accurately described her own place in Norwegian literature, celebrating '[The] preference for the realities of life...'" ("Stages" 86).

But, the occasional critic will argue that she was less than faithful in her representation of the medieval. Harry Slochower, for example claims that, out of a desire to reveal the higher morality of past, Undset has romanticized it by imbuing the characters with religious sensibilities and unrealistic, lofty views (29). Such claims are easily dismissed, however; none of her main

characters are models of Christian morality. In fact, they are all of them deeply flawed, and the primary action in the trilogy consists of their struggles with their own moral failings.

Rather, unflinching accuracy in the depiction of medieval life is overwhelmingly cited as Undset's greatest achievement. In her Nobel Prize presentation address, Per Hallström applauds Undset for portraying women's lives with "merciless truthfulness" (*Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn* 163). Undset's first, and still most important, biographer, A. H. Winsnes, asserts that she possesses the ability to identify with the common person of the middle ages, to sense as they sensed, feel as they felt, and think as they thought: "Here is the eternal realism, the realism of Homer and the Bible, of the sagas and the great novels of the nineteenth century" (Winsnes 150). Correspondingly, Brunsdale explains that "most critics agree that their [her medieval works'] greatest impact derives from her unerring psychological portraiture" ("Stages" 84). Her medieval works are enduring, not only because they present the medieval world realistically and with great detail, but also because her characters are profoundly realistic. For that reason, Reichardt calls Kristin one of the "most fully realized characters in literature" (*Exploring* 100). This is particularly important to this project, as 'the real' is central to her technique and her sacramental realism.

Critical discussion: The Earthly and Eternal

Studies of Catholic literature have often failed to examine the actual literary value of texts, as Richard Griffiths notes, instead focusing on theology or spiritual biography (3). This is strikingly true of the body of criticism on Undset, almost all of which consists of one of three things: Undset's personal, biographical spiritual development; an overview of the plot of *Kristin Lavransdatter* and a summation of themes; or a smattering of quotes (from over 1,000 pages of

text) supplemented by references to Catholic doctrine. Close reading of the text is strikingly absent from almost all of the criticism in English.

Most critics who provide overviews of the plot identify the core struggle in *Kristin Lavransdatter* as that between Kristin's own will and her desire to follow God's will. She stubbornly refuses to marry her betrothed, and, (Kristin's own word) "trampling" on her father and her betrothed, she insists instead upon marrying the dashing yet reckless Erlend Nikulauson. Their life together is tumultuous, passionate, and incredibly painful. At the end of Kristin's life she muses: "All my days I have longed equally to travel the right road and to take my own errant path" (Undset 1079). Critics frame this as a battle between the earthly and the eternal, within Kristin's soul and within the novel as a whole, in which the eternal emerges triumphant, superseding any physical reality. In this argument, her final choice to enter a convent represents the ultimate relinquishing of the flesh, the earthly passions that caused her such pain, in favor of her eternal, spiritual life with Christ.

The earliest to the most recent work on Undset continues to articulate similar sentiments. Victor Vinde says in 1930, it is "a world where the spiritual never prevails over the temporal except by the negation of life itself" (Vinde 37). And Olivia Schaff provides a similar observation in her 2001 article: "The struggle for personal growth as well as the triumph of the spirit's dominion over the flesh are themes that frequent Undset's writings" (68). In fact, this view is so widely accepted that it is repeated with gusto in the new introduction to the trilogy, by Brad Leithauser, who claims the story as: "the record of a long, hard-won, noble victory, as the passionate teenager who brooks no curbs on her desires... decades later renounces the decaying kingdom of the flesh for the indestructible domain of the spirit" (xv). Yet this view is

unnecessarily narrow and dichotomous—pitting the material and spiritual against one another—and indicates, I will argue, a shallow reading of the trilogy.

In a similar vein, Edward Synan notes that the medieval setting of Undset's work necessarily calls for the supremacy of the eternal over the earthly, because in the medieval world "sorrow and tragedy and disasters were interpreted, accepted, opposed, somehow lived through, in the shadow" of the medieval Norwegian church (101). In Kristin's time, everyone saw the world through the lens of their Catholic (or occasionally, still, pagan) faith. Brunsdale, too, notes the importance of the story taking place in the "setting of a moral universe where God and his church reign supreme" ("Lifetime" 133). Like Synan, Brunsdale suggests that Undset's focus is on the eternal, rather than the temporal. She argues that Undset's characters—like Kristin and her passion for Erlend that quickly descends into bitterness—reveal that the things we desire so ardently and recklessly "inevitably fade to insignificance in comparison to the needs of the immortal soul" ("Lifetime" 130). And so, Kristin has to "learn through suffering that she alone was responsible for the fate of her immortal soul" ("Lifetime" 134). Gustafson articulates the dichotomy most directly when he states of the trilogy, "Between the flesh and the spirit there exists a constant, intensive strife—and the spirit must eventually triumph over the flesh if man is to be good" (287).

These critics all site that the medieval Catholicism of the books accounts for such a dichotomy. Yet the opposition they present leads to a strangely gnostic reading of the work, and Gnosticism (the belief that the body is inherently sinful and must be overcome) is a heresy in the Catholic faith. Language that places the eternal above the earthly, the spirit above the flesh, necessarily divorces the two and sets them at odds. A deeper look at the text certainly does not support these claims. Even without citing the Catholicism of the author, one can make an

irrefutable claim to the devoutly Catholic outlook of the trilogy,⁴ and the gnostic dichotomy the critics present is inherently opposed to such an outlook.

In medieval Catholicism, two foundational doctrines of the faith stand in direct contrast to Gnosticism: the Incarnation⁵ and the sacramental life. The Catholic Church defines sacrament as a visible sign of invisible grace. It is a word used to describe the rituals of the Catholic Church: baptism, confirmation, marriage, confession, priesthood, the last rights, and communion, the most important of which is communion, or Eucharist, because Catholic theology teaches that the bread and the wine literally become Christ's body and blood, physically present. This theology stems from an understanding of the Incarnation of Christ, when he took on a human body and became both fully human and fully divine. The word sacramental is also used to describe the worldview that emerges from the Incarnation and Catholic sacraments, in which God is thought to be specially present and active. A sacramental understanding of the world, a world in which Christ in his suffering is continually present, pervades Undset's trilogy, not just because the authority of the Catholic Church and its sacraments surround and inform community and culture, but because the story itself embraces these structures as foundational. The recurrence of this theology throughout *Kristin Lavransdatter* implies a synthesis of flesh and spirit, rather than a divide.

Another puzzle piece in this critical discussion is the role of Vatican II (1962) in Catholic literature and literary criticism. John Waldmeir, in *Cathedrals of Bone: The Role of the Body in*

⁴ After all, Undset received the Nobel Prize for her accurate depiction of medieval life, and medieval life in Norway was almost exclusively Catholic. Undset is true to her aim to present life in the 14th century as accurately as possible, and Catholicism provides the foundational outlook of all the characters and their community.

⁵ Undset herself writes on the Incarnation "as doctrine and historical reality." She goes on to characterize it: "We can celebrate the Christmas Miracle on any day of the year. For it means the breakthrough in time of the eternal reality" (Winsnes 215).

Contemporary Catholic Literature, presents the difference in Pre- and Post-Vatican II Catholic writing. His premise states of Post-Vatican II authors:

Their fascination with the religious consequences of human bodies living out the tensions inherent to their physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual constitutions, and their willingness to examine those consequences in their writings, is intimately connected to the way Vatican II produced documents and codified practices that invited Catholics to consider the Church anew and to imagine their relationship to it in terms borrowed from ‘bodily’ existence.

(Waldmeir 3)

While Pre-Vatican II writing, he claims, is “Dominated by a Tridentine ideal of the body in its ‘pure and spotless state like a best robe’ (like a garment, Trent insists, decidedly not worn against the flesh but ‘carried . . . before the tribunal of our Lord’)” and that “Catholicism for the preconciliar generation . . . existed amid a tension between body and spirit, where the latter typically prevailed” (Waldmeir 28). As a primary example of this contrast, he compares Bernanos’s *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, and Hansen’s *Mariette in Ecstasy*. Bernanos depicts no physical consequences from the characters’ spiritual, out-of-body experiences, and a God who interacts with them conceptually but not physically (Waldmeir 32). Contrastingly, Hansen depicts characters whose bodies are imperative to their Catholic identity.

However, I believe that Undset’s work proves a significant exception to this rule.

Waldmeir claims of Vatican II’s language, and thus the literature that followed, that “Vatican II interprets the tension between spirit and flesh in ways that understand the body as valuable because of its physical attributes, not in spite of them,” (28). Yet this claim is also demonstrably true of Undset’s Pre-Vatican II writing—especially *Kristin Lavransdatter*.

Waldmeir also directly critiques J. C. Whitehouse's categorization of the two periods—that pre-Vatican II writing primarily shows 'vertical relationships' between characters and God, while post-Vatican II presents 'horizontal relationships' between characters, social relationships, and the things of this world, and that the vertical is preferable (19). Neither of these categorizations is satisfactory, however, because Undset's writing proves an exception to both. Though her work does emphasize a vertical relationship between the characters and God, this relationship is mediated by the surrounding physical world and their bodies. Furthermore, Waldmeir criticizes Whitehouse's naive assumption that there existed, in the 'vertical,' pre-Vatican II literature, a "golden age of Catholic imagination," and says that "it is unlikely that such an age ever existed" (20). I would simply offer the same sentiment back to Waldmeir. It is unlikely that such an easy divide between body-denying and body-affirming Catholic literature exists. The theological implications of the Incarnation and the sacraments, expressed richly in *Kristin Lavransdatter* and present since the beginning of the Church, make this improbable.

Yet there are only a few critics who support a non-dichotomous reading of *Kristin Lavransdatter*. Winsnes's language, though not directly, implies a joining of body and spirit rather than a division in her work. He acknowledges the eternal direction of *Kristin Lavransdatter*: "All human life is seen in an eternal perspective, in relation to the divine order, the one absolute perfection, which is the source of all truth, beauty and wisdom" (Winsnes 119). But he also emphasizes Undset's appreciation of the normal and "eternally human" (Winsnes 7-9), and her enduring focus on "the eternal which dwells in every man and woman" (Winsnes 152). Such wording suggests that the eternal is not something opposed to or outside of the earth, but something already present within it. He argues that her aim is to:

reveal the play between the external and internal, the life of the soul in the whole of its material and organic context. Her medieval novels are not peopled by ethereal beings. The primitive earth-bound side of human nature, the life of instinct, impulse and passion, provides fundamental characteristics of them. We see them grow up from the soil whence they first spring. But there is always a keynote heard from Heaven, a note struck by the longing of the created for the Creator. (Winsnes 151)

Winsnes's language here suggests a relationship rather than a hierarchy: the 'play' between external and internal, spiritual and material. Undset's characters are 'earth-bound,' but they also hear the sounds of Heaven.

Along with Winsnes, J. C. Whitehouse seems to be one of the only critics who pushes against a dichotomous reading of Undset. Rejecting those critics who suggest it, he argues that "it would seem more exact to speak of the spirit transforming or heightening the flesh rather than subduing it, as even the most superficial reading of *Kristin Lavransdatter* or *Ida Elisabeth* would indicate" (*Vertical Man* 92). This position is closest to the one I will defend with my analysis of the body and the physical, sacramental world throughout the trilogy. As Winsnes asserts, the characters move and live in an awareness of the eternal realities of their lives, but in order to embrace the eternal they are not required to deny their bodies or the physical world. Rather, the physical is transformed and made holy through its relationship with the eternal.

The flesh and the spirit are not opposed in Undset's literary world, so no criticism that depends on these binaries could ever be fully accurate. Kristin's journey is, indeed, a struggle to submit her own will to God's. But it is not a struggle to achieve the eternal and set aside the earthly. Rather, it is the progression of her life toward the realization of the Incarnation (the

divine within the earthly), which always necessitates the *cross*: that earth is not superseded by heaven, but that heaven comes down into earth just as earth is lifted up into heaven.

The Physical: Blood and Light

This struggle between flesh and spirit takes place within the human body. And it is in the body where the sacramental and the incarnational, the through lines of this project, will meet. Therefore, it is by examining Undset's literary treatment of the body that we can formulate a response to those critics who believe her work is exclusively, moralistically on the side of the eternal rather than the earthly.

A character in one of her later novels, *The Wild Orchid*, says of Christ's presence in the Eucharist: "If it was true that He was *here*... then he must also be present in another way everywhere and at all times...then the whole of life was inconceivably more serious and valuable than he had ever dreamt...It is simply too good to be true" (qtd. in Brunsdale, *Sigrid* 99-100). The emphasis here is decidedly on what sacrament means for the physical world, right now, rather than in the eternal life to come. And all of Undset's novels demonstrate this concern with the present and physical life here and now.

The first encounter with the physical body occurs when the young Kristin is seven years old. She travels up into the mountains with her father and becomes separated from the party. As she wanders, unconcernedly, through the trees, she notices a figure:

...there was a woman over there, with a pale face and flowing, flaxen hair. Her big light-gray eyes reminded Kristin of Guldsvain's [the horse's]. She was wearing something shiny and leaf-green, and branches and twigs hid her figure up to her full breasts, which were covered with brooches and gleaming necklaces.

Kristin stared at the vision. Then the woman raised her hand and showed her a wreath of golden flowers and beckoned to her with it. (Undset 19)

The child runs back to find her father and tells him she has seen a dwarf-maiden. Lavrans is visibly shaken and makes the sign of the cross over his daughter (Undset 20). The obvious sensuality of the dwarf-maiden, her flowing hair and full breasts, is Kristin's first introduction to the body.

How much the young Kristin understands is unclear, (though she does stare, attention captured) but the wreath of golden flowers provides a foreshadowing for the rest of the novel. This first book of the trilogy is titled, after all, *The Wreath*. In Medieval Norway, the 'bridal wreath' is a euphemism for a woman's sexual purity, and young brides are expected to enter marriages with their 'wreath' intact. Kristin's loss of her wreath to Erlend before their marriage provides the primary conflict in this first book, within her own character, and in her interactions with Erlend and her family.

It might seem obvious that this scene, then, sets up the separation between flesh and spirit. On the one hand, we have a pagan symbol: the sensual elf-maiden, one with nature ('leaf-green' clothing and branches covering her figure), tempting Kristin to accept her wreath from the wrong hands and so ruin her soul. And on the other hand, we have the innocent girl's fear, and the righteous Lavrans' attempt to protect her from such fleshly evil with the Christian sign of the cross. Reichardt, like most other critics, has taken this dichotomy as the playing field of the trilogy, and so in *Exploring Catholic Literature*, describes different contrasts in the work: the elf maiden versus Edvin the kind priest, and God versus the world (100). But, I think that a further examination of these themes throughout the text—pagan versus Christian, nature versus heaven,

and flesh versus spirit—might offer a different reading of these apparent oppositions, one that suggests, instead, a synthesis.

Another important foreshadowing related to the body occurs during Kristin’s childhood years. She travels to a cathedral in Nidaros with the mendicant monk, brother Edvin, where he helps craft stained glass windows. He brings her up to the scaffolding at the top of the cathedral so that the sunlight pouring in through the stained glass washes over her:

...the multicolored specks of light on the wall came from rays emanating from the picture itself; she and the monk were standing in the midst of its radiance. Her hands were red, as if she had dipped them in wine; ...It was like standing at a great distance and looking into heaven... ‘Stand here...Then the light will fall on you from Christ’s own cloak.’ From the church below the faint smell of incense and the odor of cold stone drifted up toward them. (Undset 33)

This scene ushers in two images that then recur throughout the trilogy: light and blood. Light usually indicates peace, the presence of Christ, and eternity, while blood represents pain, emotional or physical, and sacrifice. The mystical and the earthly meet in the interaction of these two images, particularly in the final novel, *The Cross*, when Undset presents them together.

In this scene, the light falling on Kristin is depicted as being from Christ himself, and the girl feels as though she is looking into heaven. Like this one, images of light throughout *Kristin* indicate that the character in question is experiencing something eternal and incarnational, usually accompanied by a sense of the presence and love of Christ. Yet, as here, there is often a contradiction between the nearness and farness of the eternal. On the one hand, the light of heaven, its ‘radiance,’ is directly touching her, and Christ covers her with the light of his own cloak—an intimate experience. But at the same time, she feels she is at ‘a great distance,’

looking in. Though she is encountering the divine, it is also very clear that she is not in heaven yet—that her feet remain firmly planted on the ground. This experience demonstrates the interaction of the earthly and the eternal, and the paradox that it often is.

The other image here is blood. In this first example, Kristin's hands are red, 'as if she had dipped them in wine.' One level of Catholic symbolism is clearly at work: the sacrament of the Eucharist, in which the wine transforms into the blood of Christ, shed for the world. The wine-light, Christ's blood, covers Kristin's hands as a foreshadowing of both her guilt in betraying Christ and her own sacrifice and participation in the sacrament. When she chooses Erlend over the laws of God and the wellbeing of her family, and later when she chooses her own pride over love of others and of God, she betrays Christ. (The emotional turmoil she feels in these instances of sin is often described using imagery of blood.) But, in the end, she does choose to sacrifice herself (and serve with her hands)—by joining the convent, caring for plague victims, and retrieving the body of a peasant woman at great cost to herself—and thus participates in the lot of all Christians, to share Christ's cross. (Thus, the title of the last book in the trilogy: *The Cross*.)

Both the light and the blood are indicators of sacrament—sacrament being a visible sign of invisible grace, an encounter with the presence of God, both spiritual and material. That this first instance occurs in a Church is significant, as the Church is the arbiter of sacrament, assuring its sacred nature.

Following this scene, Brother Edvin, who exemplifies the love and joy of Christ and the humility of a faithful Christian, gives Kristin some advice:

... it's because our hearts are divided between love for God and fear of the Devil, and love for this world and this flesh, that we are miserable in life and death ... It

was because of God's mercy toward us that He saw how our hearts were split, and He came down to live among us, in order to taste, in fleshly form, the temptations of the Devil when he entices us with power and glory, and the menace of the world when it offers us blows and contempt and the wounds of sharp nails in our hands and feet. In this manner He showed us the way and allowed us to see His love. (35)

Again, this instruction might seem to support the dichotomies we are discussing. Our hearts are split between the world and God, the flesh and the spirit, therefore, the two must be at odds. However, the structure of Edwin's argument reveals the potential for a different interpretation. His premise is: we are unhappy because our loyalties are divided. But, because of this unhappiness, an event occurred. *The Incarnation*—which was designed to reconcile this breach, not to reinforce it. At a particular time in history, God chose to come to the earth as a man (and still God) and experience an earthly life. And by doing so, God, Christ, showed us the way to live and showed us his love. The Incarnation is also what happens again every time the sacrament of the Eucharist occurs: Christ's physical presence manifests on earth. Hearts no longer need to be divided painfully between the earth and heaven, because Christ, through the Incarnation, has united them—indicating, too, that this unity is the desired sacred state. Heaven is on and in the earth. Reichardt explains, in *Between Human and Divine*, the role of Incarnational thinking to Catholics:

Catholic thought regards all created matter and all aspects of human life on Earth as imbued with meaning and, indeed, as the very arena in which we find redemption. To Catholics, in a famous formula, grace builds upon nature: it does not scorn nature or destroy it but transforms it. An incarnational approach to the

world—the sense that all created things and human history have been sanctified by Christ’s entrance into them. (4)

Brother Edvin expresses just this sentiment. Notice, too, that the evils Edvin speaks of are not the *existence* of bodily desires, but rather, the perversion of them through the temptations of the devil—not the existence of the world, but the pain inflicted by evil. The world itself is not the problem, it is the evil within it, and within humankind, that need be overcome through this sanctification.

Now, this does not mean that it is easy to seamlessly unite earth and heaven, of course. Human nature is always inclined to division, and as Edvin explains, people are still miserable because of it (and also wouldn’t need redemption without it). But if one, like Edvin or Lavrans, and eventually, Kristin, holds the Incarnation at the center of life, it becomes possible (though not easy) to live within both, because Christ is with them and shows them how.

Yet part of the reason why this is not easy is that the Incarnation also necessitates the cross. A little later in her life, when Kristin is becoming a young woman, her little sister, Ulvhild, is crushed beneath a log and gravely injured. From then on the girl is fragile and weak, and their parents speak of sending her to a convent. One day, playing outside, she falls and cuts her mouth, and Kristin goes to help her. “It had occurred to her...while she sat with Ulvhild’s bloodied face in her hands, that perhaps this was an omen for her. If she would take her sister’s place—if she would promise herself to the service of God and the Virgin Mary—then maybe God would grant the child renewed vigor and good health” (Undset 67). Kristin wonders if Ulvhild’s blood is an omen for her future. Ought she sacrifice herself and go to a convent in place of her sister? But she instinctively resists, and we see the Brother Edvin’s conflict in Kristin’s heart as well: “she did not want that kind of faith; she did not love God and His Mother and the saints in that way.

She would never love them in that way. She loved the world and longed for the world” (Undset 68). Kristin herself understands the world as inherently opposed to God. Within her heart she feels a dichotomy between the two, yet this is specifically in her time of resistance.

And the following moment suggests a different reality:

Kristin knelt down on the stone and placed her folded hands on the base. ‘Holy Cross, the strongest of masts, fairest of trees, the bridge for those who are ill to the fair shores of health...’ As she spoke the words of the prayer, she felt her yearning gradually spread like rings on water. The various thoughts that were making her uneasy were smoothed out, her mind grew calmer, more tender, and a gentle sorrow, empty of all thought, replaced her troubles. (Undset 69)

Kristin utters a great theological claim in her prayer. Namely, that the cross is the bridge between this world and the next. It is nature, tree, wood, part of this world, but also a mast, and a bridge, a pointer to and a way into the next. The faithful Catholic lives on that bridge, a member of both worlds, because they are really the same world, made one by the cross. To renounce the earth would be a mistake, for God is in it. One should notice, too, that Kristin does not feel compelled to an affirmative of her earlier question. Should she go to a convent? These worries are smoothed out, replaced instead by peace. This seems a fairly direct answer in the negative. Instead, she spends most of her life, as a wife and a mother, attempting (though often failing) to live a good *earthly* life, for God. Yet she is also right that the blood is an omen, because she does, at the end of her life, take Ulvhild’s place in the convent.

The Body

Kristin’s body itself is one of the primary focal points of the novel. Her sexual desire for Erlend, Erlend’s sexual desire for her, her consequent shame when they transgress society’s

laws, and the physical consequence of pregnancy outside of marriage provide the main plot points for the first novel in the trilogy. Whitehouse argues compellingly that sexuality, particularly female sexuality, and its “essentially humanizing role as it grows and matures” is a prominent and recurring theme throughout Undset’s work (*Vertical Man* 103). The prevalence of this theme indicates Undset’s unique, realistic approach toward the (particularly, female) body and physical experience.

Kristin’s first sexual experiences with Erlend are not yet mature. She is young and unwed and feels little desire herself; she acquiesces to Erlend’s advances for his sake, not for her own: “Erlend raised his face for a moment, and she was suddenly reminded of a man who had once been given food at the convent—he had kissed the bread they handed to him. She sank back into the hay with open arms and let Erlend do as he like” (Undset 142). But even here, in the midst of what would have been considered a grave moral transgression, Undset points us to the sacramental nature of sexuality. Kristin compares herself to bread longed for by a starving man, and the parallels to the Eucharist, the bread/body of Christ, are inevitable. Indeed, the act has bound them together irrevocably: “And [Kristin] felt now that they were truly one flesh; she would have to answer for everything he did, even when she disliked his conduct, and she would feel it on her own hand when Erlend so much as scratched his skin” (Undset 186). This physical act of their bodies has bound them together emotionally and spiritually. Though they are not married, they have consummated their bodily relationship—one of the necessary actions to fulfill the sacrament of marriage—and so they have become ‘one flesh.’

Though its sacramental nature is highlighted here, Undset does not idolize sexuality, but speaks of it frankly and truthfully. When Kristin wakes up after being with Erlend for the first time, she is surprised and hurt: “Her whole body seemed to be aching with astonishment—that

this was the iniquity that all the songs were about” Kristin feels herself now Erlend’s “possession” (Undset 143). Erlend speaks, and “his voice etched a wild new pain into Kristin’s soul” (Undset 142). The eternal significance of this act is not lost on Kristin. She feels herself now cut off from her community, her family, and all her old ways of life, bound only to Erlend (Undset 149). Because they have taken sexuality out of their societal and religious context, sex becomes an ‘iniquity’ (though later sexual encounters indicate that it is not always so). Kristin’s pain in this first encounter showcases Undset’s unflinching pragmatism, particularly when it comes to female sexuality, as a first sexual experience is often painful for women. Undset takes the life of the body seriously enough to present it as accurately as possible—with all its potential for beauty or pain.

In the second novel, *The Wife*, the body remains crucial, for the physical (and emotional) pains and joys of motherhood offer the novel structure and conflict. And as the prerequisite of motherhood is sexuality, sexuality remains prevalent as well. Soon after their first encounter, Kristin begins to feel passion for Erlend, and, as one might expect, Undset does not shy away from depicting female desire. For example, on their wedding day “Kristin thought he was so handsome that her whole body ached” (Undset 276). And later, Kristin thinks: “There was nothing inside her except the burning hunger to see him, to be near him, to open her lips to his hot mouth and her arms to the deadly sweet desire which he had taught her” (Undset 434). But Kristin also realizes the pain that this desire causes. After she and Erlend accidentally murder his ex-paramour (who had come to kill Kristin), Kristin muses, despairingly: “I didn’t realize then that the consequence of sin is that you have to trample on other people... But I know that I won’t let go of Erlend—even if I have to trample on my own father” (Undset 230). Kristin also realizes that her passion has hardened her heart, not just toward people, like her father, but toward her

faith as well: “She had felt her passion temper her will until it was sharp and hard like a knife, ready to cut through all bonds—those of kinship, Christianity, and honor” (Undset 434). Is all passion and physical desire, then, in opposition to the good and the eternal?

Words from Gunulf (Erlend’s priest brother) to Kristin help elucidate the relationship between passion and the eternal:

all other love is merely a reflection of the heavens in the puddles of a muddy road. You will become sullied too if you allow yourself to sink into it. But if you always remember that it’s a reflection of the light from that other home, then you will rejoice at its beauty and take good care that you do not destroy it by churning up the mire at the bottom (Undset 445).

Gunulf’s words here prove essential to this interpretation of the trilogy. First, they make apparent why so many critics have interpreted the books in a gnostic framework. Kristin speaks about the opposition between bodily desire and faith, and here a priest refers to the earth and earthly love as a muddy puddle. From there it’s an easy jump to a dichotomous analysis. However, as usual, a deeper look might improve understanding. For instance, if heaven is truly reflected in the puddles (earthly love), then the puddles are precious indeed. And furthermore, the priest calls Kristin to ‘rejoice’ at the beauty of the reflection and to ‘take good care’ of it. This indicates the puddles are ultimately positive, despite the negative connotations of ‘muddy.’ Gunulf asks, not that Kristin deny her earthly loves, but that she remember where they come from and to whence they are going, so that she might care for them better. Kristin’s fault lies, not in passion, but in forgetting the root of all passion: Christ. When passion (and therefore, physicality) is divorced from its roots in the eternal, then it can become distorted, selfish, and prideful—‘churning up the mire’—as it does in Kristin’s life. Just like the bloody baptism of birth, an earthly love, on its

own, is not redemptive. (Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that earthly love ‘on its own’ does not exist.) When earthly affection finds its roots in the spiritual—when sex is truly sacramental, when motherly love is not possessive but nurturing and liberating—it is transformed and made into what it was meant to be. And such transformation does not mean these acts become less physical, but more so, because they are now whole, performed by body and spirit in tandem, the two of which emphasize one another.

Examples of good earthly love, transformed and heightened by eternal love, are fewer than their opposite (for Undset does not overestimate the moral fortitude of humanity), but hints of them can be found. For instance, the desperate tenderness of Kristin and Erlend’s wedding night highlights the potential redemptive nature of sex in a fully sacramental context:

She threw her arms around him and sobbed loudly. Sweet and wild, she felt that now it would all be chased away—the terror, the ghostly visions—now, at last, it was just the two of them again. He raised his face for a moment, looked down at her, and stroked her face and her body with his hand, strangely quick and rough, as if he were tearing away a covering. ‘Forget everything, my Kristin—everything except that you’re my wife, and I’m your husband.’ (Undset 283)

Erlend’s words rearticulate the vows they have just made, framing their earlier sexual encounter within their marriage. Similarly, with the movement of his hand, torn away and forgotten are their past illicit encounters. Where before passion and fire conveyed negative implications, ‘wild’ in this context, especially paired with ‘sweet,’ is not negative. This encounter, this passion, is markedly different—made whole—because they have given themselves to one another in the sacrament of marriage.

Sacrament

In sacraments—like marriage—the body is required for the transformation of the soul. The scene of Kristin’s first son’s baptism shows what this looks like. Undset describes the newborn, referring several times to the redness of the boy’s skin: “wine-red infant” “kicking, red, naked child,” indicating flesh, blood, incarnate (370). In contrast, the color white is used to describe his baptism, immediately following the birth: “a priest in white garb” splashes water, and then Kristin is handed the “tiny white bundle” (Undset 370). Again, we see red associated with the body and with pain (it was a traumatic birth). And once the boy is baptized, a white cloth, seeming to symbolize purity and the necessity of cleansing the body, covers his red flesh. Correspondingly, later, after Kristin has given birth again, a priest asks her to consider the necessity of baptism for redeeming the flesh:

You who have given birth to two children—have you never thought about the fact that every child who is born is baptized in blood, and the first thing a person breathes on this earth is the smell of blood? Don’t you think that as their mother you should put all your effort into one thing? To ensure that your sons do not fall back on that first baptismal pact with the world but instead hold on to the other pact, which they affirmed with God at the baptismal font? (Undset 450)

However, when Kristin receives her son, she sees a “little bit of red, silky-soft face visible among the linen wrappings” (370). The red has not gone away, but rests in the white wrapping, soft and silky just like the linen. The body is not rejected, but enfolded, and the silky texture of both his skin and the cloth unite them.

Most importantly, the body has not been hidden or done away with or made lesser in favor of the eternal, but is made one with the eternal through a *physical* ritual—the sacrament of baptism. The water splashed on his head, and the cloth that symbolizes purity through Christ are

experienced physically. Gunulf urges Kristin later that the boy should not forget this pact with God and return to a worldly life, symbolized by a bloody birth, and indeed, the eternal significance/necessity of the baptism is obvious; a bloody baptism without a baptism of water would not lead one to salvation. But the spiritual baptism with water does not negate the first bloody baptism. The first, natural baptism is necessary for the boy to live at all; the second, spiritual baptism unites the physical with the spiritual.

This scene aptly demonstrates that spirituality is experienced through the body, which is the whole premise of sacrament in the Catholic life. And indeed, all deep spiritual encounters throughout the trilogy are bound up with the actions and the experiences of the body and the material world. For instance, prayer is accompanied by physicality: “Kristin knelt down on the stone and placed her folded hands on the base” of the cross (Undset 69). In almost every instance of prayer throughout the trilogy, the narrator mentions that the one praying has kneeled, literally folding the body in supplication (643, 648, 729, 746, 747).

In an extended example, Kristin’s first pilgrimage reveals how both the material world and the body participate sacramentally in salvation to unify Christians with the eternal. During her wedding, Kristin prays earnestly to Saint Olav that her son might be born healthy: “Holy Olav, I beg for mercy nevertheless, I beg for compassion for my son. Take him under your protection, then I will carry him to your church in my bare feet. I will bring my golden crown to you and place it on your altar, if you will help me. Amen” (280). A pilgrimage, a physical (and arduous) journey is how Kristin will demonstrate repentance and faith.

Her pilgrimage is permeated with descriptions of her body. She is often uncomfortable, “her head itched terribly from the sweat,” and the skin around her waist is rubbed raw from her belt (Undset 394). But her joy during the journey comes from sensory interactions with her son:

“it felt good to hold him at her breast”; “Kristin gazed happily at his fine, rosy limbs and pressed one of his hands between her breasts as she nursed him” (Undset 394-95). Once again, Undset’s realism doesn’t shy away from the good or bad of human experience—in this case the bodily experience of a nursing mother and child.

We also discover on this pilgrimage that bodies of architecture and landscape convey spiritual experiences and participate in sacrament as well. Struck by the beauty of Christ Church, Kristin thinks, “the splendor of God’s kingdom bore witness through the stones that His will was all that was beautiful” (Undset 400). Kristin undertakes her pilgrimage to Saint Olav’s shrine at Christ Church once Naakkve is born, in penance for her sin and to thank God that the child was born without defect. Soon before she reaches the cathedral, she climbs a hill from which she can see the whole city laid out beneath her, with the cathedral’s spires rising up over all. “Overcome and sobbing, the young woman sank down before the cross at the side of the road, where thousands of pilgrims had lain and thanked God because helping hands were extended to them on their journey through the perilous and beautiful world” (Undset 400). She sinks down before the cross and weeps, overcome by the beauty of God’s world and an awareness that she is not alone—the hands of other Christians are with her; their help is embodied. Significantly, it is not the cross that moves her to weep. The context for her tears are the two previous paragraphs, which contain descriptions of the town, the cathedral, and the countryside: “brown farm buildings,” “trees... dark and domelike in the gardens,” “stone houses,” “Christ Church so magnificently huge and radiantly bright,” “summer-green land,” the fjord and “large summer clouds,” “glittering blue mountains” (Undset 400). Though the cathedral is the most prominent form in the landscape, with everything else as though “prone at its feet,” it is the entire scene that moves Kristin to lay her body down at the foot of the cross in gratitude. The cathedral doesn’t

stand apart from the other figures, but shines in their midst, “pointing up into the bright summer sky” (Undset 399). Undset’s description paints the landscape with a remarkable unity that reveals something holy in all of it together.

Scenes like this defy those critics, like Gustafson, Slochower, and Vinde, who accuse Undset of gloominess and despair—of painting a dark and sinful world. For Kristin shows us here that the earth, though often perilous, can also disclose sharp and sudden reminders of the beauty of God. And these reminders are necessarily physical. The stones of the cathedral “[bear] witness” to His beauty. And the houses, the ships in the fjord, the mountains and the summer fields, all participate in that beauty as well. It is the physicality of these figures that moves Kristin, and she responds in kind, by laying her body down at the cross, which is what they have pointed her toward. Powerful interactions with the eternal do not move Kristin beyond her body, but require the participation of her body.

When Kristin is in the cathedral, we also discover the ‘perilous’ side of bodily experiences of the eternal. She becomes intensely aware of her own sinfulness and unworthiness. Underneath the “massive” walls, the “wealth of pillars and arches and windows” and the “spire rising high into the heavens,” she sinks to the ground again, but this time “beneath her sin” (Undset 400). Confronted by the grandeur of the Church, she becomes ashamed of her own sinful and prideful heart, and her body crumples, defeated. The physical beauty of the Church bears God’s beauty to those on earth, and helps Kristin gain new comprehension of the eternal, not as something far distant, but as something near and living: “the pillars were furrowed like ancient trees, and into the woods the light seeped” (Undset 401). The light, which signifies the eternal, seeps into the cathedral pillars, which are like trees, which represent the natural world. And so, in the building of the Church, the natural world is united with the eternal: “...the vaults

of the ceiling arched upward, lifting the church toward God...Kristin fell to her knees next to a pillar...Now she saw how deep in the dust she lay” (Undset 401). When the materiality of the Church brings Kristin into the presence of eternal beauty, she recognizes the desperate state of her own, pride-filled soul, in conflict with the eternal light.

However, her response to this despair is not to reach outward for the ‘light’ as some ethereal, heavenly power. On the contrary, she turns to the *body* of Christ and the saints to help her. She sees Christ’s figure on the cross and collapses again onto the floor, weeping. She sees Saint Olav’s shrine too, where “lay his holy body, waiting for Resurrection Day,” when he would rise up and the skeletons throughout Norway would rise with him, and “they would be clothed in flesh and would rally around their king” (Undset 402). This last image reveals Kristin’s understanding of the holiness of the body—not a theoretical understanding, but as a real and saving doctrine.⁶

She then hears the voice of her old priest explaining that, as one builds a church, “in this manner we ought to use the tools of faith to cut and carve from our sinful, natural being a faithful link in the Church of Christ” (Undset 403). Bodies do not automatically have a perfect bond with the eternal; all suffer from sin and pride, like Kristin. But with the tools of the faith, their natural beings can and should become a link with the eternal Church.

This scene is mirrored by another, later scene, in which Kristin recalls the resting place of Saint Olav and other saints and the importance of human bodies. At an Ash Wednesday service, she contemplates again her unworthiness:

⁶ The doctrine of the Resurrection of the Body teaches that at Christ’s return, all bodies will be resurrected and transformed, and is one of the bases for the Church’s condemnation of Gnosticism.

The old smell of cold incense kept her thoughts fixed on images of death and decay of temporal things. And she didn't have the strength to lift up her soul to catch a glimpse of the land where *they* were.... For in her soul sin continued to exist, like the roots of a weed intertwined in the soil. (Undset 601)

Overcome by the transient nature of all things, and by her pride and inconstancy, Kristin can't bring herself to think of heaven or goodness. Once again, she does not, in her mind, reach for heaven. But, in her despair, she is able to turn to the bodies of the saints for protection and hope:

In her thoughts she threw herself down before Saint Olav's shrine, she reached for Brother Edvin's moldering bones over in the church at Vatsfjeld, she held in her hands the reliquaries containing the tiny remnants of a dead woman's shroud and the splinters of bone from an unknown martyr. She reached for protection to the small scraps which, through death and decay, had preserved a little of the power of the departed soul—like the magical powers residing in the rusted swords taken from the burial mounds of ancient warriors. (Undset 601-2)

Following the ancient tradition of the Church (and pagan sensibilities, too), Kristin feels power and holiness in the bodies of the saints. They are not ruined or bound by death and the 'decay of temporal things,' because their bodies were made holy through their suffering and good deeds on earth. And their bodies are, in this moment, the most powerful tools of the faith for Kristin.

Suffering: The Cross

In all of these examples we see two sides of the material world: the beautiful and the perilous. We find glimpses of the deep-rooted beauty of the world and its unity with the infinite. However, it is often through suffering that characters reach a real understanding of this beauty and unity; they must traverse the perilous before they discover the beautiful in its entirety.

Brunsdale argues, “Undset demonstrated the truth and beauty that can be bought only with human pain, a harsh and noble lesson she learned from Norway’s history” (*Sigrid* 1). Undset’s understanding of human pain, in this sense, is both Catholic and Norwegian. Catholic, because in Catholicism the suffering of Christ is always primary, and to walk through one’s own suffering alongside Christ leads to life and beauty. Norwegian, because they were a people who endured much and strove, always, to face whatever came with courage. The Catholic and Norwegian are represented together in the above scene by the body of Saint Olav—a revered Norwegian warrior who was later transformed into a saint.

None of Undset’s characters are strangers to suffering, so Christ’s suffering on the cross draws them to him, to unite their pain to his. When Kristin visited the cathedral, Saint Olav, she imagines, “pointed out to her the light that is the source of all strength and holiness. Saint Olav turned her eyes toward Christ on the cross—see, Kristin: God’s love. Yes, she had begun to understand God’s love and patience” (434). Undset includes that Christ *on the cross* is what helps Kristin to understand his love. As she looks upon the crucifix, she thinks:

As your pierced hands were stretched out on the cross, O precious Lord of Heaven. No matter how far a soul might stray from the path of righteousness, the pierced hands were stretched out, yearning. Only one thing was needed: that the sinful soul should turn toward the open embrace, freely, like a child who goes to his father and not like a thrall who is chased home to his stern master. Now Kristin realized how hideous sin was. Again she felt the pain in her breast, as if her heart were breaking with remorse and shame at the undeserved mercy.

(Undset 408)

It is the body of her suffering Lord that draws Kristin in, and stirs a longing to experience his embrace. Even her soul's turn to Christ is explained with a bodily metaphor: embrace. Similarly, when Simon is dying, he asks Kristin to make the sign of the cross over him and remembers:

But whenever we make the sign of the cross over ourselves or over anything that we want to protect with the cross, then we must remember how the cross was made sacred and what it means, and remember that with the *suffering* and *death* of the Lord, this symbol was given honor and power. (Undset 905, emphasis mine)

The sign of the cross has power when the body makes the physical symbol, and its power comes from Christ's suffering and death. When Gunnulf is troubled, he kneels down and holds his arms out in the shape of the cross and remains so for hours. "With his eyes fastened on the crucifix, he waited for the solace that would come when he was able to focus all his attention on his contemplation of the cross" (Undset 455). Embracing suffering brings him peace. Solidarity with Christ's bodily pain grounds Gunnulf in the truth of the crucifixion. Likewise, Kristin remembers her father on the night the church burned down: "He stood beside the crucifix he had rescued, holding on to the cross and supporting himself with it" (Undset 523). Lavrans, the most pious and arguably the model Christian character, relies on the physical presence of the cross itself in this moment of crisis and pain.

The doctrine of transubstantiation—Christ bodily present in the bread of the Eucharist—runs implicitly throughout the text, emphasizing the immanent presence of Christ's suffering body. We are told early on that Bethlehem, in Norwegian, means "the place of bread. For that was where the bread which will nourish us for eternal life was given to the people" (Undset 326). And toward the end of her life, Kristin dreams she is begging alms with Brother Edvin. He walks

toward her, “His hands were full of bread,” and “the estate was not merely a noble manor, but it seemed to her to signify a holy place, and Brother Edvin belonged to the servants there.” The bread “signified the host, and she accepted the food of angels from his hand” (Undset 1072). This vision indicates that fulfillment in eternity consists of encountering Christ’s body in this sacramental manner.

Consequently, the recurrence of blood and red in reference to the body show that not only physicality, but also the pain that accompanies it, is necessary for salvation. When Ragnfrid confesses to her husband, Lavrans, that she was not a maiden when she married him, she weeps hysterically, remembering a story about a man who came back from the dead and reported that “unfaithful wives ground up earth for their husbands food. Bloody were the stones they turned, bloody hung their hearts from their breasts,” and Lavrans replies, “earth has to be ground up, my Ragnfrid, before the food can grow” (Undset 291). Lavrans’ response indicates that suffering is necessary for growth, and therefore, life.

Emotional pain, too, is often painted with bloody imagery. Kristin’s children would take “bloody threads from the roots of her heart” when they flew the nest and left her (Undset 854). When neighbors accuse her of adultery and killing her last child, “she had thought her heart would burst into bloody pieces” (Undset 954). And when she leaves her home for the last time, “Feelings of longing seemed to burst from her heart; they ran in all directions, like streams of blood” (Undset 1062). Blood—and therefore sacrifice and sanctity—is invoked in nearly every description of human pain.

Relatedly, Brunsdale argues convincingly that, in Undset’s writings, the—necessarily painful—bond between parent and child is redemptive too (*Sigríð* 52). For example, at a cathedral, Kristin tries to pray, but cannot summon the same remorse or emotion she did the last

time she was there. She imagines that last time was different because then she held her son, Naakkve. “His little mouth at her breast warmed her heart so well that it was like soft wax, easy for the heavenly love to shape” (Undset 439). And she and Erlend both realize how the pains of parenting have shaped them. Kristin thinks, “How much richer and stronger and braver she had become with each child was something that she first realized tonight” (Undset 628). Erlend, after being tortured for political insurrection, recalls Kristin’s births: “I was thinking last night...about the time she gave birth to our eldest son. She was no better off than I am now—judging by how she wailed. And if she could bear it seven times...for the sake of our pleasure...then surely I can too” (Undset 677). The pain of parenthood has strengthened both of them, but particularly Kristin, because her pain teaches them both.

Thus, we see that the pains and joys of parenthood are experienced bodily (expressed through red and blood) and also redemptive. For example, Kristin cries out to Mary for her and her son, recalling Mary’s example of a motherhood that bridges the temporal and the eternal: “Blessed Mary, you who are the clear star of the sea, the crimson dawn of eternal life who gave birth to the sun of the whole world—help us!” (Undset 326). Mary, the woman who, paradoxically, gave birth to eternal life, showcases the centrality of the Incarnation—the entrance of God into a human body and material world. The light represents the eternal, but that it is a crimson light binds it with temporality, blood, sacrifice. The Incarnation never surfaces in Undset without the simultaneous presence of the cross. And so, blood connects these earthly experiences, sexuality, emotional turmoil, motherhood, symbolically to the suffering of Christ, exemplified as Kristin prays, “Jesus, who gave his sweat and *blood* for our sake” (Undset 1068, emphasis mine).

In the final novel, *The Cross*, we finally begin to see fuller examples of Kristin embodying a sacramental, earthly life that is made whole by its unity with the eternal. This is not because she has fought her body and won, denied, or even lessened, the material in favor of things eternal. Rather, it is because, as the title suggests, she has accepted the necessary movement of the physical (Catholic) world: the Incarnation to the *cross*. One critic, Drake, argues that Kristin, in the end, “through suffering and by sheer force of character” rises “above the blight of her transgressions and the unruly impulses of the flesh” (78). However, I argue that her suffering actually unites her with her body and with Christ. Much more accurate is Whitehouse’s assertion: “Most of the characters move towards a lived, rather than a purely conceptual, recognition of such virtues as loyalty, responsibility, understanding and compassion” (*Vertical Man* 190). Kristin’s progression, too, is one toward a lived, an *embodied*, life of virtue.

Nearing the end of *The Cross*, after Erlend’s death, Kristin is living at Jørundgaard with her son Gaute and his wife when she decides to leave the farm and join the convent in Nidaros. She is finally able to relinquish the tight grasp she has always kept on her children (after watching so many of them leave against her will), and finally lets go of her place as matriarch at Jørundgaard. On her journey, she thinks about her life and the role suffering has played in it:

It dimly occurred to the mother that in her anguish and sorrow and love, each time the fruit of sin had ripened to sorrow, that was when her earthbound and willful soul managed to capture a trace of the heavenly light. Hail Mary, full of grace. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus, who gave his sweat and blood for our sake... As she said five Ave Marias in memory of the painful mysteries of the Redemption, she felt that it was with her sorrows that she dared to seek shelter under the cloak of the Mother of God. With her grief

over the children she had lost, with the heavier sorrows...Mary...she had grieved more than any other mother, and her mercy would see the weak and pale glimmer in a sinful woman's heart. (Undset 1068)

Her affinity with Mary comes from their shared motherhood and the suffering they endured because of it. Kristin is able to approach Mary and ask her for help, because Mary's suffering motherhood has endowed her with mercy and understanding for Kristin's pain. (And as usual with motherhood, bodies play an instrumental part in their suffering: Mary's 'womb' is blessed; her son, Jesus gave his 'sweat and blood.') Furthermore, that the mysteries of the Redemption are painful underscores Kristin's realization that, throughout her life, she has come closest to God's light after enduring great anguish, even when that anguish was brought about by her own sin. Kristin is beginning to acknowledge the redemptive power of suffering.

She arrives at Christ Church in Nidaros and goes to the vigil of Saint Olav. She is holding a baby throughout the vigil (another nod to motherhood and the role of the body), because she had agreed to take the child for a moment for one of her fellow pilgrims but then lost the mother in the crowd. In the Church, she contemplates her life, realizing God sees everything as if from "a mountain crest" (Undset 1081). And again, she demonstrates a growing understanding that what is needed is for her to draw to God in sorrow: "Not my happiness or my pride, but my sin and my sorrow, oh sweet Lord of mine. She looked up at the crucifix, where it hung high overhead, above the triumphal arch" (Undset 1081). She looks towards Christ's body (while still holding the child's body to her own) on the cross once more, and seems to find deeper affinity with it, with sacrament. The address, 'sweet Lord of mine,' is much more tender than previous prayers.

And then she lifts up the sick child in her arms and prays for her, for healing. But Kristin is also weak and tired, and a woman next to her notices. She draws “Kristin’s weary head onto her spacious lap. ‘Rest for a while, sister. I think you must need to rest.’” (Undset 1082). Kristin’s spiritual experience is infused with bodily interaction, her holding the child, and the stranger holding Kristin. As she sleeps in the stranger’s lap, she dreams that she and Erlend walk into a room and Lavrans is there, making arrows. When Lavrans sees them, he suddenly burns his fingers and then puts them in his mouth as he turns to look at the couple, smiling (Undset 1082). The motif of suffering as redemptive continues here: Erlend and Kristin were one of Lavrans great sorrows in life, but he continued to love and forgive them anyway, thus, his smile at the end, despite how they have burned him, indicates forgiveness. Importantly, the dream shows the participation of Lavrans’ body, his burned fingers, in that spiritual journey.

When Kristin wakes, she feels overwhelmed and united to those around her through suffering: “Her heart burst with a feeling of oneness with these destitute and suffering people, among whom God had placed her; she prayed in a surge of sisterly tenderness for all those who were poor as she was and who suffered as she herself had suffered. ‘I will rise up and go home to my father’” (Undset 1083). This last line, in quotes, is the final sentence in the chapter, and the next chapter opens on Kristin in the convent. She utters and then acts on her understanding of redemptive suffering by going to devote her life to God and prayer. Her time, and specifically her death, in the convent demonstrate the necessity of the body in Kristin’s redemption.

Not long after Kristin arrives, the plague descends on Norway, and “Death and horror and suffering seemed to push people into a world without time” (Undset 1104). Those stricken with boils live, and those with bloody vomiting, die (Undset 1106). Once again, blood represents both bodily suffering and spiritual connection to Christ’s sacrifice. When Kristin sees her first plague

victim, vomiting blood, she “felt dizzy, as if she were rocking on a sea where all the bitter and angry thoughts she had ever had in this world rose up like a single wave among thousands and broke into desperate anguish and lamenting. Lord help us, we are perishing” (Undset 1103).

They all fear the plague as a punishment from God for their sin.

One evening, the nuns learn that a group of local men are attempting to sacrifice a young, beggar boy to the pagan gods in the hope of ending the plague. The abbess, “unable to speak,” because she is still recovering from the plague herself, makes the other nuns understand she wishes to go out with them to stop this. “She demanded to be given the gold cross, the symbol of her office, and her staff” (Undset 1109). Armed with the physical symbols of the power given her by God, the abbess leads them outside.

[Kristin] pushed aside several shadowy men’s backs, stumbled on piles of shoveled dirt, and came to the edge of the open grave. She fell to her knees, bent down, and pulled out the little boy who was standing in the bottom, still complaining because there was earth on the good piece of lefse he had been given for sitting still in the pit. (Undset 1110)

In a reversal of her prideful/pagan act to save Simon’s son, Kristin humbles herself to save this peasant boy. “Fru Ragnhild ... staggered forward, and picked up the lantern from the ground. No one raised a hand to stop her. When she lifted it up, the gold cross on her breast glittered. She stood leaning on her staff and slowly shone the light down the line, giving a slight nod to each man as she looked at him” (1111). Leiva-Merikakis explains: “The unforgettable figure of Lady Ragnhild, in her courageous stance despite her crumbling frame, with crozier planted on the earth and cross gleaming from her maternal breast, is an embodiment of the Church’s unyielding authority and resolute charity” (66). Her physically broken body, embodying the sacramentalism

of the church, is an example of the triumph of “divine love through human weakness” and the “showdown between a mysticism of life and joy and a mysticism of life and fear” (66).

The men are still full of rage and resentment, however, and refuse to back down, but Kristin begins berating them for their cruelty toward the boy and the nuns, saying that she is like the men, unfaithful and unworthy, but the nuns have given everything to care for others. When the men then admit that the boy’s mother is dead in her hovel, Kristin is horrified: “no one has had enough mercy to put her into consecrated ground?” (Undset 1113). The men continue to shout, and one says he will only believe in the mercy of God if the nuns go and fetch the body of the boy’s dead mother right then. The abbess motions them to stop but Kristin runs off to do so immediately (Undset 1113-4). As she approaches the woman’s hut,

She felt as if she were standing in a cavern of night, and it was the hiding place of death. The crash of the breaking waves and the trickle of water ebbing between the tidal rocks merged with the flush of blood inside her, although her body seemed to shatter, the way a keg splinters into slats. She had a throbbing in her breast, as if it would burst from within. Her head felt hollow and empty, as if it were leaking...In a strangely listless way she realized that now she must be suffering from the plague herself—but she seemed to be waiting for the darkness to be split by a light that would roar and drown out the crash of the sea, and then she would succumb to terror. She pulled up her hood...and drew the black nun’s cloak closer...but it didn’t occur to her to pray. Her soul had more than enough to do, working its way out of its collapsing house, and that was what made her breast ache as she breathed. (Undset 1117)

Kristin realizes that she has the plague, and that her soul and her body are beginning to separate—the iniquity of death. The blood throbbing inside her becomes one with the crashing of the sea, as she is overwhelmed more and more by the physical world.

Slochower claims that “[The plague] comes emphasizing the loathsomeness of the body, the ephemeral nature of physical existence” (43). But while the ephemeral nature of physical existence is certainly emphasized throughout the trilogy, it is not the loathsomeness of the body. Rather, the descriptions of the plague’s effects on the body emphasize the power of sacrifice and suffering. All of the references to Christ’s blood, to the blood of those Kristin knows, and to the emotionally and physically bloody life she has led culminate in her final succumbing to the plague as she sacrifices herself for the victims she has cared for and this peasant woman and her son.

Then she thought it was life itself working its way out of her—an unthinkable, piercing pain as if something inside, firmly rooted to the utmost ends of her limbs, had been torn loose. All that was contained within her breast was ripped out; she felt it fill her throat. Her mouth filled with blood that tasted of salt and filthy copper; a moment later her entire robe was covered with glistening, dark wetness. Jesus, can there be so much blood in an old woman? she thought. Ulf Haldorsson lifted her up and carried her. (Undset 1119)

The painfully visceral description of Kristin’s suffering emphasizes the importance of the body. And even in this state of decay, it is not something to be shunned, for when she can’t go on by herself, Ulf holds her: he gathers the dying woman in his arms and “becomes one” with all those who had carried her in her life (Undset 1119). Kristin, in her last, most sacrificial act, (covered completely in blood), finds herself in communion with, physically carried by, all those who

sacrificed for her. And as Ulf carries her, she glimpses, through her confusion, signs of God's presence: "Behind his dark head there were red lights, and they seemed to be shining from the fire that nourishes all love" (Undset 1120). The 'red lights' combine the recurring motifs of blood—suffering, sacrifice—and light—eternity, God's presence—and together they meet to make sacrament, overflowing from the fire of God that sustains all things.

On her deathbed, Kristin decides to give something to pay for the dead woman's funeral and masses to be said for her. Her only two remaining possessions are her wedding ring from Erlend and her father's crucifix, and she chooses to give up the ring: "She took it off and looked at it. It lay heavy in her hand, pure gold and set with large red stones. Erlend she thought. And she realized that now she should give it away... She closed her eyes in pain and handed the ring to Ulf" (Undset 1121). By giving up this symbol of her earthly marriage to Erlend and keeping the cross, she could be signifying her relinquishing of this world and preparing to go into the next. Brunsdale claims that "For Sigrid Undset, Kristin Lavransdatter's final act was her first act of pure faith, making sense at last of the sufferings Kristin's sinful pride had brought her" ("Sigrid" 90). It would seem that she has finally given up the things she held on so tightly to in life and has chosen instead charity and God alone.

However, she notices that the M from the symbol of the Virgin Mary on the inside of the ring has left a mark on her finger, "on the brown, rough flesh it was quite clear—like a scar of thin white skin," and "The last clear thought that took shape in her mind was that she was going to die before the mark had time to fade, and it made her happy" (Undset 1122). Her marriage to Erlend, a sacrament, not only has marked her for the world to come, but goes with her into it. Staring at the mark, she contemplates that despite her life of "willfulness," "some of [God's]

love had stayed inside her, had worked on her like sun on the earth, had driven forth a crop,” and despite her unfaithfulness, her neglect and pride,

He had held her firmly in His service, and under the glittering gold ring a mark had been secretly impressed upon her, showing that she was His servant, owned by the Lord and King who would now come, borne on the consecrated hands of the priest, to give her release and salvation. (Undset 1122)

Like the sun on the earth, God’s work in Kristin came through the physical. On one hand, literally the physical mark of the ring, on the other, the sacramental nature of her marriage (Catholic marriage is intended to prepare one another for salvation). And ultimately, he comes embodied in the Eucharist, given to her from the priest’s hands.

Though Undset directs us to the eternal character of these events, it’s clear that they all come through the physical world and that this is good and beautiful, for behind it all lies the assumption of the Incarnation and the sacrifice of Christ. Undset herself explained this notion in an essay, “But God comes to us, forever faithful and loving, and binds himself to us with flesh and blood to fight for the human race together with the human race, as God and true Man among men” (Undset, “Christmas” 284). It is through flesh and blood that God fights for us on earth, which is why Kristin’s body is marked with God’s sign as she goes into the next world in the novel.

Indeed, for all the critics’ talk of the eternal overcoming the earthly, the closest we get to the eternal world is this brief description of Kristin’s death: “Then everything disappeared in a dark red haze and a roar, which at first grew fearfully loud, but then the din gradually died away, and the red fog became thinner and lighter, and at last it was like a fine morning mist before the sun breaks through, and there was not a sound, and she knew that now she was dying” (Undset

1123). Though the eternal is near, in the Host and in Kristin, it does not descend and overshadow the material. When Kristin goes into the red mist, we do not go with her, but remain with a few minor characters: a priest who asks Kristin's old servant, Ulf, to come to the cookhouse and have some food, and though Ulf protests "I have no wish to eat anything," the priest replies, "all the same, you must come with me and have some food" (Undset 1124). The last act in the book, then, is an earthly one: that of nourishing the body.

It seems, therefore, that the physically present world is what concerns Undset, and that, contrary to many critics' claims, the eternal does not supersede the physical. Though the author and the characters are imminently aware of eternity, their physical actions have meaning because of their eternal significance, the eternal comes to them and through them through the physical medium, and so the focus of this trilogy is on the physical reality. Slochower gets closer to the heart of Undset's work than many of her religious critics when he claims: "A contradictory note rends her art. In a deeper sense, it is the reflection of a pattern pledged to spiritual ends, while bound up with a materialistic frame" (28). He is exactly right. But what he does not understand is that this contradiction—the paradox of the spiritual and the material bound up with one another—is the reality that Undset intends to portray. And the mastery with which she presents this paradox is what makes her stand out from both materialist modern, and typical pre-Vatican II Catholic writers.

Sacramental Realism

Undset has been labeled many things—optimist, pessimist, realist, moralist, etc. What we label people is key to how we perceive them—in this case, how we perceive their work—so, along with my reading of the text, I would propose a new term to elucidate Undset's writing: *sacramental realist*.

Despite Undset's many labels, most commentators' opinions fall into one of two camps: emphasizing either her pessimism and despair, or some form of spiritual 'realism,' in which her faith lends her unflinching truthfulness a more hopeful attitude. The most common is some version of 'realist,' with various modifiers attached. But to best understand the term realist, or realism, in relation to Undset, we must turn to her literary heritage—the Scandinavian tradition. Brunsdale explains, "By defining the Scandinavian contribution to twentieth-century writing, [Undset] also accurately described her own place in Norwegian literature, celebrating "[The] preference for the realities of life . . . [and the] interest in the innate disparities which condition our development" ("Stages" 86). And Undset says elsewhere that all Scandinavian literature has in common "realism and a feeling for the individual and peculiar" (qtd. in Winsnes 237). According to Brunsdale, the realism of Scandinavian literature is embodied by the Norse myths that "face the darkest mysteries of man's being," the *Eddas* and the sagas, and the "psychological realism" of Ibsen, Strindberg, Hamsun, Lagerkvist and Sigrid Undset, who delve deep into the depths of the human unconscious (*Sigrid* 7).

In *A History of Norwegian Literature*, Naess explains that the literary movements of realism and naturalism appeared late in Scandinavian literature, during the 1870s and 1880s, in what is now referred to as the Modern Breakthrough—Ibsen, Bjørnstjerne, Bjørnson, Kielland, and Garborg (203). Then, a few decades later, Norway's independence in 1905 moved the next generation of writers—novelists, Egge, Bojer, Scott; the sociological analysts, Anker, Elster, Elvestad; and the epic novelists, Undset, Duun, Uppdal, and Falkberget—to return to their nation's history and to assess the effects of modernity in Norway (Daniel Haakonsen coined the writing that emerged from this move "ethical realism") (Naess 205). "Straightforward storytelling" was emphasized above all, and the tensions between past and present, individual

and group were key symbols; but the most significant transformation during the early twentieth century was that, though Norwegian literature retained the prominence of realism and naturalism, it also became “mythical”—authors explored Norway’s “mystical” past and attempted to synthesize contradictory narratives into a cohesive story—usually achieved with the help of religion or history (Naess 205). In other words, Naess explains, “twentieth century modernism makes no appearance in Norwegian literature until after the Second World War” (205). This explains, in part, why Undset’s approach is so variant from the other great “modern Catholic” writers she is compared to; Scandinavian literature dealt with the crisis of modernity much differently than the rest of Europe.

Naess continues, discussing the relevant authors, and remarks that of the epic novelists in twentieth century Norway, Undset is by far the “most important” (Naess 210-11). All her work reveals her “direct sort of realism and high standard of craftsmanship” (Naess 216). How, then, does Undset wield the realist tradition that is her inheritance? Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis dubs Sigrid Undset a *mystical realist* (68). Winsnes describes her, similarly, but more in-depth, as an *eternal realist*, claiming that Undset can identify with the common person of the Middle Ages, sense as they sense, feel as they felt, and think as they thought: “Here is the eternal realism, the realism of Homer and the Bible, of the sagas and the great novels of the nineteenth century” (150). It is Undset’s ability to present the lives of her characters as they would have been, without over-dramatization or embellishment, but still so poignantly, that defines her realism. It is eternal in that it conveys the continuity of human experience. But Winsnes continues, claiming it is also eternal, because:

The historical realism of these novels is inextricably bound up with their ethical and spiritual message of the eternal which dwells in every man and woman and

her revelation of the common stuff of humanity which is colored, shaped and changed in the shifting tide of time. (Winsnes 152)

Undset is able to convey the truth of human experience because her faith allows her to see the great moral drama that is taking place all throughout history, within every person. Similarly, Brunsdale also claims that Undset's faith is inextricable from her realism: at the heart of her art lies "a relentless realism that enfolds the certainty of man's salvation" (126). And Naess claims that her "Catholicism enhanced her instinctive realism" (213). Finally, a quote from Undset herself provides evidence of the link between her realistic approach and her faith: "the realistic daylight of the Gospel was set against the primaeval mist of the myth... It was founded by a Man whose life and death could be reckoned in time..." (qtd. in Winsnes 170-1). In the Christian faith, she finds reality, presented clearly and in tangible terms.

Therefore, she goes on to present concrete experience in her own work—not just in story matter, but in form. Winsnes says, on the writing of *Kristin Lavransdatter* (specifically, Kristin and Erlend's first love), "there is such a perfect fusion of spirit and matter that everything, people and objects, landscapes and interior scenes, stands before us in plastic clarity, living and full of poetry" (115). What we have seen to be true of her story matter is equally true of her technique: spirit and matter are not divorceable. Not just in material, but in the construction of text, her aim is to:

reveal the play between the external and internal, the life of the soul in the whole of its material and organic context. Her medieval novels are not peopled by ethereal beings. The primitive earth-bound side of human nature, the life of instinct, impulse and passion, provides fundamental characteristics of them. We see them grow up from the soil whence they first spring. But there is always a

keynote heard from Heaven, a note struck by the longing of the created for the Creator. (Winsnes 151)

Her characters are infinitely more concerned with life here and now than with the world to come; they do not often anticipate eternity (Whitehouse, *Vertical* 113). Yet their material actions are all obviously or subtly infused with a recognition of the spiritual, present. This fusion between matter and spirit is what gives her realism its power.⁷

For when Undset engages the tension between our physical reality and the eternal reality, she finds that the only way to reconcile these is through the sacramental. She seems to be, therefore, not a mystical or eternal realist—both too ungrounded, too oxymoronic—but a *sacramental realist*. Her realism depends on a recognition of suffering and a recognition that in the suffering world the eternal is present. While mystical and eternal realist both perpetuate the dichotomy between the noumenal and phenomenal—situating mystical/eternal and realist as two opposing terms—*sacramental realist* holds within it the relational interdependence of the temporal and the eternal. This understanding combines Undset’s brutally accurate examination of both the pains and joys of this life with her awareness of the supernatural and the mystery of God’s goodness and tangible presence (the sacramental), expressed and embodied by the Catholic Church. In *The Burning Bush*, Undset says that the Catholic Church offers, “sober information about absolute truths. Even if the truths in themselves are not sober but fairly wild, and the absolute is infinite and inexhaustible” (qtd. in Brunsdale 137). Her sacramental realism

⁷ When Derrida critiques Logocentrism (the Western metaphysic that gives primacy to presence and origin) in “Of Grammatology,” he explains its claim about writing: “There is...a good and a bad writing: the good and natural is the divine inscription in the heart and the soul; the perverse and artful is technique, exiled in the exteriority of the body” (312). Undset’s writing, by fusing the spiritual and material—soul and body—in content and form, denies the superiority of the internal over the external.

then hinges on the fantastic truth of God incarnate, and on the fact that our physical lives are not just a preparation for, or lived in awareness of, but are entwined with the eternal.

Because of her sacramental realism, Undset remains hopeful in the face of human suffering. “Despite the suffering of life and the agony of our own deeply divided spirits, Undset’s vision of human nature is, in the end, a profoundly hopeful one, for God uses and restores to us what we have lost or squandered by sin or foolishness” (Reichardt, *Exploring* 108). The beauty and serenity of Kristin’s final moments, which come immediately after horrific bodily and spiritual trauma, provide a prime example. Whitehouse explains it well when he says that in Undset’s work there is “a refusal to turn away from the harshness of life, and a perception that it is not all harshness” (Whitehouse, *Vertical Man* 93).

Paganism

Another characteristic of the trilogy deserves examination: the role of the pagan in *Kristin Lavransdatter*. First, because it’s significant to Undset’s historical accuracy and literary tradition. Second, we must address it if we are to reject a dichotomous reading of the novel entirely—for just as Undset masterfully synthesizes body and spirit, she also presents the, related, fusion of Catholic and pagan. Like the Old Norse Myths and medieval sagas that provide so much of her inspiration, Undset frequently uses understatement to heighten “the burning creative tension between pagan and Christian ideals” (Brunsdale, *Sigrid* 16). Near the end of the eleventh century, Catholic literature began to override the Heroic Scaldic poetry of the Norse. Christ and the saints were introduced first as great warriors, but soon transformed into suffering saints. Yet the Nordic character never entirely relinquished its pagan roots (Slochower 26). As in many other medieval countries, the Catholic Church in Scandinavia persisted by absorbing the pagan mythologies into its own lore (Slochower 26). For example, St. Olav, a Norse knight and

descendent of demi-gods, was transformed into Norway's favorite saint. Slochower described the synthesis between the two religions: "Christianity in Norway's mountains absorbed some of the heathen magic. The elfin, Northern atmosphere persisted, even as the idea of the Absolute conquered" (26).

Yet Slochower also claims that *Kristin Larvransdatter* presents the *clash* between pagan passion and Christian piety (26). Gustafson goes even further, arguing that an unresolvable conflict between the pagan and the Christian is the fulcrum of the whole story. Kristin (in her struggle between the flesh and the spirit),

represents in her person a strong-willed, essentially pagan spirit being slowly broken—in a sense, perhaps, transformed—by the severe moral dogma of the medieval Church. In her we come to find perhaps the most profound delineation in a world literature of the struggle between a Christian ethics and a pagan world.
(332)

It is not the existence of tension between the two that I would dispute, but rather, Slochower's choice of adjectives, passion and piety, and Gustafson's insistence on the war between pagan and Christian translating to flesh and spirit. For, now the dichotomies emerge again. On the one hand, pagan 'passion,' connoting bodily experiences and the physical realm, on the other, Christian 'piety,' holiness, and other worldliness.

But contrary to these claims, synthesis between Christianity and paganism abounds in *Kristin Lavransdatter*. We have already touched on Kristin's encounter with the dwarf maiden, and this scene provides an excellent example of this synthesis. Though Slochower claims that Kristin "imagines" (26) seeing the vision of the seductive, leaf-covered elf, neither Kristin herself nor any of the adults express doubt that what the child sees is real. The narrator, too,

presents the scene as though everything is really taking place. In a similar scene, the narrator tells us that Kristin and the other children are afraid of a particular spot in the river, because “In a pool just below the bridge there lived a river sprite” (Undset 10). The existence of such pagan spirits is not questioned, but expected. Though the Catholic Church provides the overarching foundation and outlook, many pagan beliefs live comfortably under its umbrella. The two live, entwined, and their relationship, we will see, parallels that of earth and heaven—paganism corresponding with the earthly and Catholicism with heaven.

The two belief systems actually have some striking similarities. Brunsdale argues that Undset’s medieval work advances Scholasticism, Thomas Aquinas’s reconciliation of faith and reason, which purports that God can be recognized through knowledge of the senses (“Stages” 92). This bestows great importance on the physical world as a place of interaction with God. Catholicism has always been panentheistic, holding the belief that God is present in all things on earth. Though not the same as a pagan pantheism, the belief that nature *is* god, panentheism, with its emphasis on the sanctity of nature and the physical world, grants legitimacy to some pagan sensibilities.

In fact, Undset praises the old paganism. While she condemns “modern heathenism” as “a declaration of war against a God who has spoken,” the old heathenism was “a love song to a God who hid himself, or an attempt to *live* with the divine whose power men felt around them” (Undset, “If 2+2=5” 11). The old paganism came out of humanity’s desire to acknowledge and interact with the supernatural. For instance, Undset explains that, in Norwegian folk-tales the supernatural is not opposed to the natural world but is intricately joined with it. In these stories,

the people go about their business, tiling the soil, caring for their cattle, felling timber or looking after their nets and their boats—and then they sail or walk or

tumble down a hole in a field, right into the realm of the supernatural, where after a while they will feel very much at home. It is rather like the world they have come from. (Undset qtd. in Winsnes 240)

Likewise, in Catholic thought, the supernatural world permeates the physical. In a Christmas essay, Undset asks that “when we give each other Christmas presents in [God’s] name, we should remember that he gave us the sun, the moon and stars, the earth with the forests and meadows, and the sea and all that moves, and all that leafs forth and bears fruit...” (“Christmas” 286). Both pagan and Catholic thought expound a profound relationship between the natural and the supernatural, which again refutes the claim that the two systems are entirely opposed, and suggests that paganism also serves, in the novel, to unite body and spirit, rather than to divide.

In other ways throughout *Kristin Lavransdatter*, the pagan narrative is interwoven with the Christian. For example, Erlend dies a pagan death, which serves as the foil of Lavrans’ Christian death, but both are acceptable. Lavrans passes away in his home, surrounded by his family and the prayers of the priest. He looks to the crucifix and says in Latin, “when I awake, I am still with thee,” and dies (Undset 565). In death, as in life, Lavrans provides a powerful example of Christian faith. Peaceful and submissive, he meets death (and Christ) with open arms.

His son-in-law, Erlend, on the other hand, does not relinquish life so tranquilly. As Kristin is riding home from meeting Erlend in the mountains, she rides past the church and her response foreshadows the nature of her husband’s end: “As she rode past the church, she gave a little shudder. She felt as if she were returning home from inside the mountain. As if Erlend were the mountain king himself and could not come past the church and the cross on the hill” (Undset 927). Shortly after this, the villagers, enraged at Kristin’s supposed adultery, converge on Jørundgaard, her sons arm themselves to defend her, and Erlend appears just in time to engage in

the fight and receive a fatal stab wound. He is taken to bed and the priest called, but the priest who arrives is one who furthered the gossip about Kristin, and so Erlend refuses to take the sacraments, the last rites of the dying, from him. He explains to his wife and those present, “I am a sinful man. May God bestow on me the grace of His mercy, as much as He will grant me, but I know [...] I will not live long enough to be...so old...and so pious...that I can bear...to sit calmly in the same room with someone who has told lies about you” (Undset 978). Shortly after this he dies.

Violent, bloody, and vengeful, Erlend’s death (true to Kristin’s foreboding) is that of a pagan warrior king. Yet Kristin’s hope is that God will have mercy on Erlend, despite his death, “stuck down with anger in his heart and blood on his hands,” because Erlend never harbored ill will toward any man (Undset 1079). The reader, plausibly, shares this hope as well. Though great Christian men like Lavrans are lauded, they are not the norm. Much more common in Undset’s medieval world are men like Erlend: less inclined to piety, but who do their best to live honorably and without resentment and can therefore expect to receive mercy from their Lord. Thus, pagan characteristics are not wholly rejected, but exist in relationship with the Christian, and pagan values—honor, courage, fortitude, sacrifice—are given greater significance in the Christian narrative than they had before, and so further evidence the connections between the two systems.

However, though paganism and Catholicism exist in relationship and share commonalities, the tension that Slochower and Gustafson are picking up on does exist in some form. Though the characters of Undset’s medieval world accept the reality of pagan spirits and powers alongside their Christian belief in an absolute good, when the two clash it is the Christian that they adhere to (or feel that they should). In one of the most spiritually dramatic scenes of the

trilogy, Kristin performs a pagan ritual to save Simon's son's life, and the event reveals the nature of the conflict between the pagan and the Christian (Undset 740). Simon, the man to whom Kristin was first betrothed, ends up marrying her younger sister, Ramborg, though he never ceases to love Kristin. Kristin resents him fiercely, because he discovered her and Erlend in a brothel together before they were married, but swore to keep it a secret. Kristin feels terrible shame that he knows the depths she went to for Erlend, even though Simon never indicates that he is holding it over her.

Several years after Simon marries Ramborg, they have a son, but the boy becomes gravely ill. Kristin offers to perform a heathen healing ritual to save the boy, but she does not do so out of a real desire to help. Rather, she can sense Simon's weakness and knows he will not resist. So, Simon will be in her debt, and she will have evidence of his moral weakness (Undset 740). The deed exposes the tension between the pagan and the Christian. On her way to the church to collect a piece of sod from a grave,

She felt as if she had to overcome a new wave of terror. The moonlight lay like a delicate spiderweb over the tar-timbered edifice. The church itself looked terrifying and ominously dark beneath the thin veil. Out of the green she saw the cross, but for the first time she didn't dare approach to kneel before the blessed tree. She crept over the churchyard wall at the place where she knew the sod and stone were the lowest and most easily breached. (Undset 743)

Kristin is very close here to the spiritual realm; the 'thin veil' of moonlight seems to signify the veil between this world and the next. And Kristin feels that her current pursuit is placing her in direct opposition to her Christianity; the church terrifies her, and she cannot approach the cross, but must, instead, breach the wall, effectively betraying her faith. Notably, it is not the pagan

admiration of physicality that harms her, for through her action Kristin actually violates the goodness of nature and comes into conflict with it. She cannot approach the ‘tree’ emerging from the ‘green’ (which is the cross), and she cuts a strip of sod off of a grave, a symbol of death. Her sin is not a pagan worship of the material, but a corruption of the will; it is her pride and her decision to turn from God. Kristin’s interaction with the pagan cuts her off from her faith and her God, not by overemphasizing the physical, but by compelling her to indulge her pride. We see from this scene, then, that the conflict between pagan and Catholic does not correspond to that of the flesh and the spirit. Rather, the pagan elements of the novel, like the Catholic, reinforce the synthesis of the material and the spiritual.

There is fear in the characters’ encounters with the pagan world, which are perceived as contrary to God and his church—thus, Lavrans making the sign of the Christ over Kristin when she sees the elf-maid, Kristin’s shame when she uses witchcraft to heal Simon’s son, and her distress when she imagines Erlend the mountain king. When paganism prompts the characters to follow the old, hidden gods who compel them to indulge in sinful desires, like lust or power, rather than the Christian God, then it must be firmly rejected. But, the underlying ethic of the old paganism, which persists throughout the medieval ages, rests on truth—the truth that the world is full of the presence of the divine—and so the pagan mindset could be subsumed into a Catholic understanding and emphasize the sacramental reality Undset is attempting to portray.

The Natural World

I’ve been elaborating the relationship between the physical to the spiritual throughout *Kristin Lavransdatter*, therefore, Undset’s presentation of the physical, natural world in the trilogy deserves examination. Nature serves an important role in the text and often seems a character in its own right. Winsnes explains, “The impulse in all Sigrid Undset’s medieval

writing...is a fundamental conception, common to the whole Christian faith: the idea of man as created by God, made in God's image and called to be God's servant and fellow-worker in the *world*" (111, emphasis mine). Correspondingly, Undset's characters are in relationship with the world they live in and care for. It is the cause of much sorrow, but also of great joy and fulfillment. In other words, "We see them grow up from the soil whence they first spring" (Winsnes 151).

Frequently throughout the trilogy, descriptions of nature also mirror Kristin's inner state. For instance, in *The Wreath*, it is snowing "heavily and silently" before, during, and after Ulvhild's death, and Kristin's heart is similarly heavy during this time (Undset 236). Much later, when Kristin returns back to the valley of her childhood with her family, shamed by Erlend's failed political scheming, she experiences the mountains with foreboding: "It seemed as if even the steep mountains surrounding the valley that had sheltered her childhood now looked differently at her and her home: black with menace and stone-gray with a fierce determination to subdue her" (Undset 824). This literary device, nature's echoing of Kristin's inner world, indicates a deep connection between her and the physical world around her.

Similarly, Kristin's fertility and motherhood connect her with the natural world. After she gives birth to her first son, she imagines a flower seen during her time at the convent: "Through the exhausted, confused mind of the mother tumbled, hazily recalled, the sight of a bud she had seen in the cloister garden—something from which red, crinkled wisps of silk emerged and spread out to become a flower" (Undset 369). The life she has just brought into the world parallels the budding flower, symbolizing fertility and growth—crinkled at first, indicating the pain the mother had to endure, the red once more suggesting blood. But then the petals reach out and become something new and alive, something good—a flower, her son. And that the vision is

from her time at the cloister, a place supposedly removed from the world and earthly things, indicates the connection between God and the earth, the sanctity of nature and fertility.

Nature also reveals God, as we saw exemplified by Kristin's pilgrimage. Her greatest revelations about her creator and her relationship to him are always triggered by a natural experience. For example, in *The Cross*, after Erlend has died, she lives at Jørundgaard with two of her sons. One day, walking home past the old smithy, she looks at the abandoned building, and

it seemed almost as if she were looking at a picture of her own life [...] The ground was strewn with bits of coal, but thin, short gleaming tendrils of grass were springing up all over the abandoned site. And in the cracks of the old hearth blossomed fireweed, which sows its seeds everywhere, with its exquisite, long red tassels. (Undset 1017)

Through the crumbling coal and the old stones—symbols of domestic life—grows the fireweed with its red, reaching petals that draw upon all the other imagery of suffering and blood, emotional and physical, the wounds of motherhood and her marriage with Erlend. But here, the pain has been transformed into growth and life. Earlier in life, Simon says to Kristin, of her relationship with Erlend, “all fires burn out sooner or later.” And when Erlend dies, Kristin thinks the phrase to herself in her great grief, stretched out across his corpse: “All fires burn out sooner or later” (Undset 984). Yet here, in this glimpse of her life at the smithy, we are reminded that after fires burn out—the coal, the hearth—then the seeds take root and plants begin to grow. And these plants that grow, the fireweed, takes the pain endured and makes it into something “exquisite.”

In a similar occurrence, on her final pilgrimage to the convent, Kristin sees her life mirrored by the river: “She too had restlessly rushed through the wilderness of her earthly days, rising up with an agitated roar at every rock she had to pass over. Faint and scattered and pale was the only way the eternal light had been mirrored in her life” (Undset 1068). Within the natural world Kristin sees the struggles of her own heart. And even her conception of the eternal is of light, which is a phenomenon of nature. Furthermore, this light is not something that would sunder her from the world, but would allow her to shine in it, to ‘mirror’ the light. And at the beginning of this pilgrimage, “Feelings of longing seemed to burst from her heart; they ran in all directions, like streams of blood, seeking out paths to all the places in the wide landscape where she had lived, to all her sons roaming through the world, to all her dead lying under the earth” (Undset 1062). Her heart is bound to the landscape she has lived in, to her sons whom she bore, and to those she loved who now rest beneath the earth. As a physical creature, it is expected that her life and her loves be entwined with other physical creations that inform her experience of her own inner life and of God.

In her final moments, she situates her life and Christ’s role firmly in the natural world, not divorced or at odds, but in it and through it.

She had finally come so far that she seemed to be seeing her own life from the uppermost summit of a mountain pass. Now her path led down into the darkening valley, but first she had been allowed to see that in the solitude of the cloister and in the doorway of death someone was waiting for her who had always seen the lives of people the way villages look from a mountain crest. He had seen sin and sorrow, love and hatred in their hearts, the way the wealthy estates and poor hovels, the bountiful acres and the abandoned wastelands are all borne by the

same earth. And he had come down among them, his feet had wandered among the lands, stood in castles, and in huts, gathering the sorrows and sins of the rich and the poor, and lifting them up with him on the cross. Not my happiness or my pride, but my sin and my sorrow, of sweet Lord of mine. She looked up at the crucifix, where it hung high overhead, above the triumphal arch. (Undset 1081)

Once more, it is nature that helps her to understand Christ, as one who sees the whole earth and people's lives, their pain and their sin, as from the mountain summit. But this is not just a metaphorical connection, because he does not stay upon the summit looking down and beckoning people up, but rather, he goes down among them in body, through the Incarnation. Not one time, but throughout human history, continually gathering their sins and their sorrows, in order to bring them to the cross with him. For as before, the Incarnation necessitates the cross; one rarely appears without the other. Indeed, it is Kristin's suffering that finally brings her to Christ. She asks him to think not of her pride or happiness, but of her sorrows, for they are what give her life meaning and point her to God. The imagery of the crucifix, the physical presence of Jesus's broken body, is what she fixes her eyes on as she prepares to die.

The pain inherent in the natural world and the body is what often convinces sects of Christianity to curse the body and focus instead on a spiritual life to come, without physicality. But a Catholic understanding is able to embrace the body, because it embraces Christ's cross, which enfolds and gives purpose to human pain. Through human suffering, Catholics take up Christ's cross with him. And in this, the natural world is not something to fight against, something separate from the eternal world, but is united with it. Sitting on a hill outside her manor, Kristin hears the words of the mass: "From the vault of the evening sky, from the countryside beneath her gaze came the murmur of the mass intoned as she had heard it thousands

of times before, in the voice of her father..." (Undset 631). The mass, the enactment of Christ's sacrifice, comes to Kristin, from the sky, from the countryside, from the earth.

Conclusion

Just like the pagan and the Christian are not opposed in Medieval Norway, neither are the flesh and the spirit, earth and heaven. Though Undset's depiction of the body's participation in salvation, through sacrament, is less obvious than many post-Vatican II authors'—for it was not a point she was trying to prove—the theme is continually woven throughout the narrative of *Kristin Lavransdatter*. As Bayerschmidt notes, "All life [in the middle ages] had an eternal perspective" (91), and Undset's sacramental realism deftly depicts this life as it would have been lived: in relationship with the physical world—immanently aware that the divine lives in and through the earthly.

To return briefly to the opening section: modern Catholic writers' eternal perspective is what gives them value in an age that often prefers to stay within the material. After examining Undset, however, it seems that she is one of the few authors—religious or not—who successfully merges the eternal and the material. Kristin's journey toward Christ's Incarnation and cross is moving because Undset presents transcendent *hope* in a divine reality without disparaging or leaving the bounds of earthly and bodily experience.

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