

## SACRED PASSIONS / PROFANE SAINTS

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In her novel, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Louise Erdrich engages her readers in a story of emotional complexities. Agnes, the novel's central figure, has an existence marked by emotional and spiritual tug-of-war, her identity as elusive as her spirituality. Known first as Sister Cecilia, Agnes sheds her identity as a Catholic nun after failing to reconcile her love for music with her love for faith. Agnes becomes the common law wife of farmer Berndt Vogel, but amidst her new life of thriving sexuality, Agnes soon discovers her faith cannot be ignored. When Berndt Vogel dies, Agnes resumes her religious devotion after suppressing her other passions and hiding her gender by becoming the priest, Father Damien. For her ministry's duration, Agnes struggles to reconcile her earlier life with the demands of her new life among the Ojibwe people. Agnes's several intense and often conflicting passions, her music, her sexuality, and her faith, become central to the novel. In the resulting friction, Agnes evolves and grows as a character.

Throughout the novel, Erdrich uses passion to "play upon" the multiple meanings of one signifier, just as Jacques Derrida accuses Plato of doing in the *Phaedrus* (1847). Erdrich regularly chooses the term "passion" to signify the emotional extremes of agony and ecstasy. As a result, "passion" functions as a thread in the novel, tying Agnes's past life to her present life, her emotional life to her spiritual life. Agnes's tendency to view her world through the binary opposite sacred/profane shapes her struggle to reconcile her conflicting passions. For Agnes, dealing with her passions proves to be both agonizing and ecstatic. Erdrich regularly chooses the term "passion" to signify both of these emotional extremes. As a result, "passion" functions as a thread in the novel tying Agnes's past life to her present life, her emotional life to her spiritual life. Erdrich's insistence on the signifier "passion" reveals that it is not despite but because of its ambiguous nature that she uses the term.

Agnes's tendency to view her world through the binary opposite sacred/profane also shapes her struggle to reconcile her passions. Just as Derrida deconstructs the binary opposites that shape Platonic thought, Erdrich challenges the binary opposites that dominate Agnes. As long as Agnes views her world in the framework of this opposition, her many passions cannot peacefully coexist. Tracing "passion" throughout *The Last Report* and examining its multiple signifieds reveals that binary opposites dissolve in favor of a richer, more complex depiction of Agnes's existence.

### "Passion" and Plato's "Pharmakon"

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato likens writing to a "pharmakon," a Greek word meaning both remedy and poison. "Passion" in *The Last Report* works in much the same way as "pharmakon" does in *Phaedrus*. Derrida deconstructs the oppositions that form Plato's argument against writing: original/copy; speech/writing; philosopher/sophist, etc. (1846). Derrida illustrates how Plato's use of "pharmakon" ultimately undermines his argument that writing is inferior to speech. The "pharmakon" can never be

entirely beneficial or entirely harmful since it carries both signifieds simultaneously. Similarly, in *The Last Report*, “passion” is never completely positive or negative since each distinct passion contains a complete emotional spectrum. Erdrich uses “passion” to emphasize the relationship between agony and ecstasy. As they merge to change Agnes’s life, these emotions cannot exist in isolation. Like Plato’s “pharmakon,” Erdrich’s “passion” is “caught in a chain of significations” (Derrida 1846). As “passion” surfaces in the novel, it carries with it a slightly different meaning, forging a new link in the chain. In effect, each “passion” in the novel is dependent on all other instances of the word before the true complexity of its meaning will emerge.

When the word “passion” first appears in chapter one, it is already caught in the chain of signifieds: “In her music Sister Cecilia explored profound emotions. Her phrasing described her faith and doubt, her passion as the bride of Christ, her loneliness, shame, ultimate redemption” (14). In this passage, “passion” describes both Agnes’s love for her music and the emotions she experiences when engaged in this love. It also evokes a third definition: the suffering of one for his or her faith, most notably the suffering of Christ on the cross. This definition of “passion” surfaces frequently in the novel, usually as chapter or section headings, such as “The Passions,” the title of part four of the novel (255).

Even in its Christian context, “passion” signifies more than simply one’s suffering for his or her religion. The section in chapter six describing the end of Kashpaw’s family unit is entitled “Kashpaw’s Passion” (100). Here, Kashpaw parts with all but one of his wives because it is the will of the Catholic Church. In a sense, Kashpaw is suffering for his religion (he is soon to be baptized), but he is not suffering a “passion” in the traditional sense of the word. Here Kashpaw suffers the loss of those he loves. The meaning of the word “passion” in the section title is ambiguous; it may be referring to a Christian suffering, to Kashpaw’s intense love for his wives, or to his intense sadness at having to say goodbye. The text suggests that the meaning is a combination of these definitions, for Kashpaw asks himself, “Why did a man have to love so much?” (101). These early instances of “passion” set the pattern for the rest of the novel. Most of the characters experience passions of various types. Agnes experiences many different passions throughout her life that border on emotional extremes and that never signify only one definition of the word.

### **Sacred and Profane Passions**

Throughout the novel, Agnes struggles to come to terms with a web of interlocking and often conflicting passions. The opening pages of the novel establish Agnes’s love for piano music along with her love and devotion for her faith. However, these two passions cannot coexist without conflict. Agnes’s passion for Chopin proves to be a profane disruption to the sacred silence of the convent, and she must leave the convent when this passion proves stronger than her passion for her faith (16). Agnes does not, however, simply trade in her life as a nun; she also trades in her life of celibacy. She moves in with Berndt Vogel and a sexually charged period of time, undeniably profane by Catholic nun standards, follows. Agnes’s physical and emotional passions thrive, and she cannot resume her faith again until she loses her passions in the flood (44).

Erdrich begins challenging the sacred versus the profane as early as chapter one by revealing the citational relationship among different functions of the signifier “passion.” Any time “passion” sur-

faces in the text, it imposes its meaning on all other functions of the word. Derrida's term for this is "anagrammatic" (1848), and in *Plato's Pharmacy* he argues that the anagrammatic nature of the word "pharmakon" is lost from Plato's text when it is translated: "The effect of such a translation is . . . to destroy it (Plato's text) by interrupting the relations interwoven among different functions of the same word in different places, relations that are virtually but necessarily 'citational'" (1848-49). Likewise, in translating Erdrich's text into a language other than English, this same relationship between different functions of "passion" would be lost. The word can never carry only one signified; every time the word surfaces, it creates a new signified. These new signifieds do not, however, simply supersede the former functions of the word, but add to the word's overall meaning. Just as an anagram is the rearranging of letters to create new words, the anagrammatic nature of "passion" is a rearranging of different signifieds to create new signifieds. The meaning of "passion" in the novel is constantly shifting as new signifieds emerge and enter into this citational relationship.

This citational relationship among the different passions in the novel emerges first in chapter one. Erdrich reserves the term "passion" for describing how Agnes feels toward her faith: "Her phrasing described her faith and doubt, her passion as the bride of Christ" (14). Here, the meaning of "passion" is ambiguous and could be referring to any number of definitions: love, suffering, hate, etc. It is likely a combination of these definitions. Just as Derrida says of "pharmakon," "passion" cannot be only one of these definitions. Its numerous signifieds affect the word's function.

By labeling Agnes's faith as "passion," Erdrich emphasizes the similarities between Agnes's relationship with Chopin and her relationship with Christ. Both relationships are highly sexual. Agnes's sexual relationship with Chopin is clear even before she leaves the convent. Her sexual relationship with Christ is not so clear until chapter two when she is rescued and has a sexual encounter with Him: "Through You, in You, with You. Aren't those beautiful words? For of course she knew her husband long before she met Him" (43). Agnes's tendency to view her passions as either sacred or profane marks her inability to acknowledge the similarities between them. Agnes's passion for Christ cannot be completely sacred, nor can her passion for Chopin be completely profane. As long as both relationships carry the label "passion," they will continue to cite each other; they will continue to carry both sacred and profane signifieds.

The signifier "passion" challenges the very notion of the binary opposite sacred/profane because contained within its many signifieds are both of these polar concepts. Like Plato's "pharmakon," Erdrich's "passion" "partakes of both good and ill, of the agreeable and the disagreeable" (Derrida 1850). The disagreeable aspect of "passion" is epitomized in the character of Sister Leopolda. In fact, one description of Leopolda bears a striking resemblance to Plato's definition of writing as a pharmakon: "Yes, Leopolda was the hope and she was the poison" (158). Leopolda is herself a pharmakon; she is a sinner masquerading as a saint. However, as is the case with all true pharmakons, Leopolda is not exclusively profane. Her good deeds lead many to consider her virtuous and even a saint. The true complexity of Leopolda's character surfaces during Father Jude's investigation of her life. Jude is given the task of writing a passion for Sister Leopolda, a candidate for canonization (336). But in his investigation Jude discovers more than traces of the profane in Leopolda's seemingly sacred life. Among the profane in Leopolda's character is her murder of Napoleon Morrissey via a barbed rosary and her abandonment and later torture of her daughter Marie. Jude labels these "crimes of passion for the faith"

(339). The line that separates the sacred from the profane is dissolving. Father Jude explicitly states this in chapter three when he questions the nature of sainthood: “Were saints only saints by virtue of their influence, their following, their reputation for the marvelous, or was there room for personal failure?” (52). Jude acknowledges the possibility that even the most sacred of lives may contain traces of the profane.

This polarization of signifieds intensifies as Erdrich uses “passion” in its most sacred sense by calling up images of stigmata. In a moment that solidifies Leopolda’s profane reputation, Father Damien recalls how she allegedly stabbed Marie Kashpaw with a fork and passed it off as the holy stigmata (138). This image surfaces again when Marie Kashpaw learns that Leopolda is actually her mother: “the hand . . . burned, the center, the palm where I’d been stabbed by this very nun, this Leopolda . . . My mother. From my hand the burning spread . . . Spread until the whole of me flared” (324). Here Erdrich colors images of Christ’s Passion with the profanity of Leopolda’s violence and rage.

In the end Sister Leopolda is never granted sainthood in the novel, and therefore a reader may be tempted to pass her off as an entirely profane character. Erdrich takes multiple steps to prevent her readers from adopting this wholly binary view. The evidence against Leopolda is grim; however, it is still mere evidence. The profane deeds of Leopolda are filtered through the memories and perspectives of Father Damien and Marie Kashpaw. In fact, there are moments in the novel that threaten Father Damien’s and even the narrator’s credibility. The tone of the narrative regarding Pauline Puyat (Leopolda, before she becomes a nun) often drips of bitterness. Several times in earlier chapters Pauline is referred to simply and disdainfully as “the Puyat” (122). The narrator judges Pauline before she does anything clearly offensive: “Pauline Puyat then, with an audacity that spoke both of boundless arrogance and violent compassion of her nature approached” (113). This moment occurs before anything truly profane has even been revealed about Leopolda. Despite Pauline’s good deeds, the narrator labels her as profane. Despite Pauline’s success in curing many of the villagers of influenza, Father Damien maintains a grudge: “First she meddled, wheedled, pushed herself in where she wasn’t wanted, and then she made some peaceful gesture like the one with Quill, or proved herself heroic as during the epidemic, so Father Damien could not entirely condemn her. No matter, she was a continual scapular of annoyance. A hair shirt” (124). The annoyance that Father Damien feels toward Pauline threatens his credibility as it suggests that Damien is harboring a deeper, more personal hatred. The reader would be hard-pressed to deny the ill in Leopolda’s character, but neither can the reader deny the possibility of good as well. This ambiguity, Derrida would argue, is necessary in order for the character of Leopolda to truly “show itself,” or for the truly profane in Leopolda’s character to surface. While Plato defines the “pharmakon” in binary terms, to do the same to Leopolda would be to cling to the binary opposite sacred/profane. Leopolda cannot be entirely profane just as Father Damien cannot be entirely sacred.

### **Catholic/Ojibwe Binary**

As the novel progresses, the binary opposite sacred/profane breaks down into a smaller binary opposition: Catholic/Ojibwe. Agnes’s original mission as Father Damien is to purge the Ojibwe of their profane ways by delivering the sacred word of God: Catholicism. In a section of chapter eleven

entitled “Agnes’s Passion,” Agnes undergoes an intense suffering following the departure of her fellow priest and lover Gregory (207). Here, Erdrich blends the term’s religious definition with its emotional meaning. Agnes experiences a physical suffering for her religion, likened to Christ’s suffering and complete with blood imagery: “Some nights it was a magnetic vest drawing blood to swell tightly just under her skin. . . . Other nights a shirt of razors slit and raked her and left no mark” (209). Agnes’s true agony derives from the loss of her passionate relationship with Gregory. While Agnes suffers passion in a religious sense, she does not only suffer for her Christian faith. This section of the novel marks a shift in Agnes’s character as she undergoes a partial conversion to the Ojibwe faith. As Father Damien, she undergoes spiritual experiences of both faiths. Agnes emerges from this physical and spiritual struggle only after dissolving the binary opposite Catholic/Ojibwe.

Until Agnes breaks free of the conflict between the sacred and profane, her passions for her faith and her music cannot coexist. After blending the two, Agnes’s love of music returns. Finally, she can reconcile her passions for her religion and for her music. Chapter twelve marks another shift in the novel back to a more passionate time, similar to the novel’s opening chapters. Passion flourishes in the church as Agnes reclaims her music. She purchases an ornate chalice, paints the church, and commissions a statue to be built (224). She uses stolen money to make her purchases, further proving that her notions of sacred and profane have melded.

It may take some effort on the part of the reader to resist interpreting Agnes’s spiritual shift as a complete conversion to the Ojibwe faith. To believe Agnes completely abandons her Catholic faith in favor for the Ojibwe faith would be to cling to the binary opposites the novel works so diligently to dissolve. Ron Charles offers a more reasonable interpretation in his review of the novel: “In her depiction of the intersection of these two faiths, Erdrich celebrates what’s holy in both.” A blending of Catholic and Ojibwe theology molds Agnes’s new spirituality. In chapter ten, the narrator describes this new worship: “she preferred the Ojibwe word for praying, *anama’ay*, with its sense of a great motion upward. She began to address the trinity as four and to include the spirit of each direction” (182).

The novel’s final chapter, “Father Damien’s Passion,” marks the final use of the *pharmakon* “passion.” Here more than anywhere else in the novel, the term carries a combination of signifieds, citing its every prior use. The title of this final chapter alludes to Agnes’s suicide and to Father Damien’s ministry and Agnes’s life. As Father Damien, Agnes’s passion has been one life-long struggle to understand an existence so complex it cannot be expressed through the use of binary opposites. Agnes’s final words in the novel suggest she reaches this understanding: “What is the whole of our existence but the sound of an appalling love?” (355).

Agnes’s life could be described as “the sound of an appalling love,” yet even this summary fails to communicate the intricacy of Agnes’s character in *The Last Report*. If any summary of Agnes’s character would suffice, a most suitable one would be in the term “passion.” In her inner battles over her passions, Agnes experiences growth. When she embraces her passions, she experiences joy; when she banishes them, she suffers. Only through suffering does Agnes learn to cherish her passions. This seems to be her final conclusion before she dies: “If only I’d thought to get out of the way when the river came for me. How easy my life would have been. How tedious!” (349). Every significant point in Agnes’s life, every turning point in the novel, becomes a passion. Her passions, not reducible to

binary opposites, dictate her life. Each one, a pharmakon, partakes of the good and the ill, of happiness and of sadness.

### **Works Cited**

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