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# The Wide Reach of Salvation: Christian Universalism in the Novels of Denise Giardina

William Jolliff

It would be careless and reductive to refer to Denise Giardina as a regionalist; she is simply someone paying attention to her life.  
- W. Dale Brown

Maybe Denise Giardina has written too well about Appalachia. *Storming Heaven* (1987) and *The Unquiet Earth* (1992), the two novels set in the West Virginia coalfields of the author's childhood, have received serious critical attention: but with few exceptions, her other novels have been ignored by academic commentators. Had Giardina written with such perfect and articulate craft about Dublin or London or New York, critics might be slower to think of her simply as a regionalist or even a writer of place. And I suspect she would have less trouble being heard when she says, as she has many times, "As much as I'm an Appalachian writer, I get called a political writer, but the label that is most appropriate for my writing is theological writing" (Douglass 34).

At the risk of over-reading a simple response to an interviewer, I believe it important that she refers to her writing not as *Christian* but as *theological*, and the distinction may be critical. For the purposes of this essay, let me suggest stipulatively that a *Christian* novelist creates a fiction in which the world view is essentially consistent with Christian belief and the thematic focus is on the faith questions engaged by her characters; if the book is a popular Christian novel, those aspects will be straightforward and transparent. A *theological* novelist does something somewhat different something which may offer another degree of rhetorical complexity: she is *de*

*facto* engaging in an argument about some aspect of Christian theology and suggesting a thesis that will call upon her readers to rethink, to clarify, or even to revise their system of belief.

A unique aspect of Giardina's contribution is not only that she has published six successful novels with major (secular) presses, but that she has done so in what seem to be multiple genres – a rare accomplishment. Careful reading, however, indicates that while the marketing categories may differ, the books themselves are all, at least loosely, historical fiction; and importantly, as different as they are, they share a markedly consistent theological subtext. Whether her protagonists are suffering under Cromwell's rule in seventeenth-century England or working for labor justice in twentieth-century West Virginia, all arc ideological kin, kin who share a common sensibility and more than a few obsessions. So it's no wonder that particular thematic strains persistently recur: whether she is writing an all-but-historical account of the Battle of Blair Mountain or flinging the reader fantastically through the rigors of time travel, Giardina is interweaving a particular handful of theological topics repeated pondered and given new expression in each book.

Such important recurrences make it all the more curious that critics have largely ignored the integral relationship between the ethical force of Giardina's novels and the theological foundation from which that force derives. Steven Mooney, for example, presents an engaging summary of several artistic and thematic excellences of the coalfield novels, and he rightly praises Giardina's "moral vision." But he does not attempt to ascertain, let alone analyze the foundation of her moral vision: and, aside from a few brief phrases, he makes no mention of the central role that theologically-grounded ethical concerns play in the development of the characters and the progression of the plots. To read his appreciation, one would assume that religion played only the most tangential role. The distinguished folklorist Cecelia Conway is similarly silent. She accurately focuses on the role of community, regional customs, and egalitarianism in *Storming Heaven* – all Appalachian traditions that come under attack from the industrial capitalists who colonize Appalachia to take its resources and destroy a way of life in the process. Interestingly, Conway quotes from an interview with Tim Boudreau in which Giardina characterizes the Appalachian value system as including "a sense of humility, a lack of pretension, a sense of egalitarian values. Also, the culture of has a theological [or spiritual] base" (Conway 139: *sic*). But while Conway's article proceeds to demonstrate in detail the first three characterizing predicates, she never again mentions the "theological base."

In another fine study, Laurie Lindberg applies the analytical tools of Carol Bly's ethical criticism to the various characters in *Storming Heaven*. Lindberg places various characters on different stages of moral development based on how they react to the bullying of the coal companies, and her insightful readings provide a way to understand the different reactions of different characters. To her credit, she gives some attention to Albion Freeman, the Christian minister and moral center of the novel, as a character who has reached a higher stage of moral development. Nowhere, however, does she suggest that his stance might be built on a foundation of Christian ethics – that in fact his Christian beliefs might be the cause of his action. Terry Easton's "Case and Identity in Denise Giardina's *Storming Heaven*" seems to avoid the novelist's theology as well. Drawing appropriately on Marxist theorists Raymond Williams and Antonio Gramsci, Easton focuses on the political, ethical themes of Giardina's Appalachian fiction, particularly as they relate to the colonization of Appalachia by outside capital. He demonstrates how Giardina corrects Appalachian stereotypes in the characters' reactions to subjugation and resource exploitation. Yet like previous critics, he never demonstrates or even suggests that behind her rightly subversive fiction is a foundationally theological motivation; neither does he make the link, necessary in any study of Giardina, between the author's religious faith and her political activism.

Of all those articles which avoid the foundational nature of Giardina's religious commitment, none is more obvious in what it does not do than Sylvia Bailey Shurbutt's "Words, Actions, and 'Resurrecting Home': The Fiction of Denise Giardina and the Ethical Imperative." Shurbutt rightly asserts Giardina's overarching intention: "Few writers, Appalachian or otherwise, have been as concerned as Giardina with the moral complexities that obstruct the intellectual and ethical roads we travel." Indeed, she even quotes Giardina's statement that she is not interested in fictions that do not include the "political and spiritual dimensions of life..." (110-11). Shurbutt then proceeds to detail Giardina's ethical concern, including one of the most cogent critical discussions of *Saints and Villains*; yet, she does so with hardly a nod to the theological foundation that clearly grounds Giardina's intention.

To date, the only critic who begins to suggest the central role of theology in Giardina's work is Martha Greene Eads. In "Industrialization's Threat to Vocational Calling in Denise Giardina's *Storming Heaven*," Eads applies Norman Wirzba's work on industrialization and the loss of concepts like vocation to the novel. While Eads's intention is not to explore in particular detail the theological foundation of Giardina's vision, she at least acknowledges the theological element. In her more recent "Raising the Dead in Denise Giardina's Appalachian Fiction," Eads demonstrates Giardina's

use of place, paying attention to spiritual and philosophical elements. While I would take exception to the critic's panning of Giardina's most recent novels, *Fallam's Secret* and *Emily's Ghost*. Eads stands apart from previous criticism by not avoiding Giardina's theological concerns.

Overall. However, the silence of scholars on the central role theology plays in Giardina's work has become the critical elephant in the parlor. During her interview with W. Dale Brown, when asked whether contemporary readers are suspicious of novels which might espouse religious faith, Giardina responded, "I think in some ways you can wrestle with the other faiths, but when you have a character who says, 'I am a Christian,' you have a problem" ( 149). From my reading, it would seem that a novelist who says "I am a Christian" has a problem as well: critics may ignore the most essential motivation of one's work. My intention in this article is to begin to address this critical deficit by exploring one of the author's most foundational – and controversial – theological convictions.

Of these convictions the most intertextually persistent, as well as the one most likely to raise the eyebrows of Christian readers, is the heterodox proposal of universal salvation. Throughout her oeuvre, Giardina's implied argument is that the traditional idea of limited exclusive salvation is problematic and needs to be reconsidered. Indeed, limited salvation is implied as the source of alterity itself, the source which has pervaded human history and given rise to all kinds of injustice. The pages that follow demonstrate chronologically the role this concept plays in Giardina's novels, as each advances her argument for universal salvation.

*Good King Harry* (1994), though centered in the religious intrigue and economic change of the fourteenth century, does not directly address the idea of universal salvation. One might suggest, however, that in the development of Giardina's theology it is all the more significant for its lack of full articulation. Ideationally, philosophically, and especially theologically, it is the ground from which her later work evolves and is therefore all the more necessary and important in the progression of this idea in Giardina's thinking, as well as in her canon.

The central theological concern in *Good King Harry* is not the universalism question per se, but an amalgamation of several other intricately related and divisive socio-theological issues, questions that might be said to precede the necessary consideration of universalism in many thinkers: foremost among them is the problem of evil. This problem works itself out in several sequences of narrative detail: a deeply

Christian approach to social class: the exclusivism and depravity of the institutional church: the participation of the Christian in war: the question of whether war is ever justified from a Christian position; the relationship between avowedly Christian political leaders and the people they lead. Put so baldly, this catalog seems to describe a theological tract, but Giardina is too intentional a storyteller to let that happen. Quite the contrary, with the possible exception of *Fattum's Secret*, *Good King Harry* may be Giardina's most action-oriented novel.

And yet, while there is more than sufficient action in the plotting to keep even the most dedicated Netflix binger at least marginally interested. *Good King Harry* is in many ways a psychological portrait – or a study of theological ideas conveyed through the device of a psychological portrait. Henry is presented as a brilliant and sensitive nature upon whom one might say, as does Henry James of Isabel Archer, “nothing is lost.” Such an approach allows Giardina to explore the great theological and social ideas of fourteenth-century England while still keeping her readers turning pages – engaged by the entertainingly vulgar humanity of Harry and the novel's incipient complications and predicaments.

Throughout the novel, Harry is portrayed as one who is sensitive to the condition of the marginalized classes. Giardina emphasizes his boyhood identification with Wales to create in him a sympathy with the Welsh suffering from English oppression and from their own aristocracy. In London, the adolescent Harry spends his best days not socializing with the sycophants of his father's court but haunting the bars and brothels, where he becomes a favorite of the *other* – barkeepers, whores, and sundry members of society's lower echelons. Even when he becomes king and invades France, he does so partially in response to the abuse of the “chivalrous” French against their own marginalized people, the peasant class. What seems clear is that his early years of identification with the oppressed Welsh, signified by his fluency in the language, allow him to identify with various groups who are cast into the role of “other,” whether due to ethnic origin, social class, or even nationality.

Though Harry's Christian devotion is even greater than his penchant for partying with the poor, Giardina is careful to show him as holding a heartfelt revulsion for the institutional church that is in part an aversion to its exclusivity. She makes his concern clear early in the story, when abuses by the monastic orders are portrayed (including their great land holdings and lack of sympathy with the poor), and it becomes increasingly evident throughout the narrative. With few exceptions, the religious in the power structures are as perverse and power hungry as their secular counterparts, and little is demonstrated to show institutional religion as any kind of

reforming force; instead, it is a force that needs reforming. This force is shown at its worst in its complementary role with the state, as signified by Arundel, King Richard's chancellor and chief advisor as well as Archbishop of Canterbury – a self-serving man of great wealth who seems largely untouched by the most basic tenets of Christian discipleship.

In such a historical context, the incipient Lollard movement, represented by Harry's one-time best friend Jack Oldcastle, is an appealing ecclesiastical alternative. Giardina's Lollards clearly perceive and articulate the perversion of the established church. Yet however refreshing an alternative they first seem, sympathy with their movement is undercut in two ways, as filtered through the mind of Harry: its single-minded extremism grounded in a perfect persuasion of its exclusive rightness, and its incipient succumbing to its own greed. From Harry's perspective, the Lollards, including his friend Jack, are a little too glad to die horrific deaths for their incorruptible beliefs; but they also seem a little too ready to transfer the wealth of the institutional church into their own treasuries. Further, in what would seem to be the way of many radical religious movements, its members are blinded to other truths by the one they see so clearly: Jack goes so far as to organize a rebellion against his friend and king, even though Harry affirms many of the Lollard theological positions. The coup is put down; but Jack, apparently undaunted, tries to overthrow the monarchy again while Harry is at war in France, yet this time with the added confidence or delusion that if he is killed in the rebellion, he will be raised to life again in three days.

Harry, too, falls from Giardina's grace and from reader sympathy. Harry is as put off as contemporary readers by the wages the world keeps paying for sin, in particular the continual wars that are funded and fought primarily by the sacrifices of common people, while the wealthy maintain the illusions of civility through empty chivalry and, most importantly, through distancing themselves from actual suffering. Harry sees such sin in himself as well as in those around him, as he can simply find no way to avoid the evils his position apparently demands, try as he might always to choose the lesser. In his distress, he concludes that he can use his position as king to bring about lasting good – if he can take his place as the one king over all Christendom. He begins to see himself as a new Charlemagne.

One of the most engaging aspects of the novel is following the wise, insightful King Harry, whose mind the reader has been sharing for several hundred pages, as he begins to delude himself into believing he will somehow maintain his principles and see them spread across a world at peace, as if he could be the one-person force for good. Of course he fails; and we suffer with Harry's political failures as, particularly

after his union with the French, he is pulled into the deadly perverse classism of that regime. He struggles to maintain integrity, but fails nevertheless before a system more powerful than he, the systemic force of which he cannot stop. Though he demonstrates himself able to win battles while simultaneously striving hard to minimize the suffering of the poor – the poor invading soldiers as well as those they invade – he can hardly dent the deep perversity of ideology (and resulting action) that has inevitably accompanied and continues to accompany the privileged classes throughout history. Like most of Giardina's later heroes, he participates in violence while trying to curb its atrocities; but the machine, the ideology, the nature or violence is too great and he can have only limited success. The principalities and powers that lead to war are bigger than any single person.

So while *Good King Harry* doesn't address universalism per se, it does in fact address many questions of alterity, or *otherness* – the very questions that at times may push the Christian seeker or believer from the stratifications of orthodoxy to the egalitarianism of universalism. Why does God make one person rich and another poor? What is the role of social class? What does any institutional church inevitably become corrupt? Why is the relationship between any contemporary Christian practice and primitive Christian teaching on war so strained? In sum, the book brings to a point the theological systems that place a few people clearly among the chosen and leave the rest, through apparently no choice or fault of their own, as most *radically other*: temporally and eternally damned. Put plainly, *King Harry* foreshadows the most foundational question of alterity, a question that would find its place at the center of all Giardina's later novels.

Since scholars of Appalachian literature have given Giardina the most attention, it is not surprising that *Storming Heaven* (1987) is her most studied work. It is a story of interwoven lives in the coalfields of early twentieth-century West Virginia, a period when the region was being colonized by outside capital, its local resources extracted, and its self-sufficient economic culture decimated. The accommodation of local communities to abusive, intrusive power as well as their resistance to outsiders' most devastating practices are the stuff of the novel, a tale grounded in a reality – the true history of which has only begun to be written, its significance only begun to be understood outside Appalachia.<sup>1</sup> Intertwined with the pervasive economic narrative is the love triangle of Carrie Bishop, a subsistence farmer turned coal camp nurse; Rondal Lloyd, a coal miner and labor organizer; and Albion Freeman, a farmer, Christian minister, coal miner, and covert evangelist for the United Mine Workers.



In a 2007 panel discussion with three other Appalachian writers, Giardina's stated, "I'm a different kind of Calvinist. I'm a universalist. I'm a Hardshell. I read about the No-Hellers in composing *Storming Heaven*. I'm a No-Heller, the Hardshell Baptists who think that God's got everything planned out for everybody but that everybody's going to Heaven" (Byer 42). It is no wonder, then, that the No-Heller pastor Albion is *Storming Heaven's* central theological voice. Albion had wintered on the Bishop homeplace for some month, during a childhood illness when his father, an itinerant peddler, was unable to care for him. When he returns to Kentucky as an adult, he does so as a preacher, and, significantly, he re-introduces himself to his boyhood friends as a "no-heller": a type of Primitive Baptist who does not believe in the traditional idea of hell as eternal torment after death.<sup>2</sup> Giardina writes,

"That's why I [Albion] left Knott County, because they didn't want to hear the No Hell preached. They reckoned they was bound for glory and they didn't want to hear about no sinners coming with them."

"You mean you don't believe in hell?" I [Carrie] was shocked. "What about the bad people?"

"Who is the bad people? Hit's us, Carrie. I believe in the Fall, I believe in the first sin, that it taints all of us..."

"I shouldn't say I don't believe in Hell." Albion said. "Hit's real. We all of us live in it sometimes, and maybe will after we die... But one day Jesus Christ will wade right into Hell and haul out the sinners... The folks that stays in Hell the longest will be the ones that vow they don't belong there." (134)

Carrie's reactions are about what one might expect from a more orthodox Christian believer. Even after the two have reached a kind of romantic understanding, she does not share Albion's heterodox conviction. She reflects,

When American Coal or Imperial Collieries stripped [his farm] away from him, would he turn the other cheek? And sometimes he spoke of God calling him to preach in the coal camps of Justice County, his father's home. I could not imagine him in such a place. He would preach Jesus dragging the coal operators out of Hell and die of broken down lungs before he reached the age of forty. That might please Jesus, but I could not bear it. (141)

Carrie's conjecture becomes reality. The two marry, and Albion is called by the Lord – Giardina presents such divine callings quite seriously – to make the coal towns of West Virginia his field of ministry.

When Albion first sees the coal tipple at Felco, he tells her, "That there is my church" (163). He becomes a miner, and he is happy. He works in the coalfields, but he also gains permission from the management to form a Bible study with his fellow

miners, during meal breaks. Eventually, the meetings move to Albion and Carrie's home. In leading the study, Albion preaches unionization as a practice grounded in the truth of Scripture and comes to understand his leading the miners into better working conditions as an antitypical instantiation of Moses leading the Exodus. That he sees his world as a direct response to Biblical admonition is clear in his reaction to Carrie's worry that some of the miners might inform the operators about his view of the Gospel, a message punishable by firing at best, execution at worst. He tells her, "They won't be informers in this bunch... They have been convicted by the *scripture*." (165, my italics).

Inevitably, his Biblical convictions and those of the other miners are tested. One of the nearby mines explodes, killing hundreds of workers – an accident that could surely have been prevented had the operators heeded the clear warnings that the mine was gassy. Carrie accuses her husband:

"Tell me, what does God say about this here?"

"It ain't God's doing. All God done was give Mr. Davidson the freedom."

"Somebody better take away that freedom away," [Carrie] said bitterly. "And somebody ought to burn in Hell for this." (168)

Confronted by Carrie's righteous indignation, Albion listens to her view then succinctly responds, "I got to go help fetch the bodies" (168).

Eventually, a strike is called, and the miners are evicted from their company-owned houses and forced to live in a tent village. There, Albion continues to minister, serving the miners with spiritual and even material solace, made possible through Carrie's employment as a nurse with a local black doctor. When outward violence erupts between the miners and the coal operators' hired-gun thugs. Albion is arrested on a false charge of murder. As he looks toward his trial, he reflects,

"Hit's like the refiner's fire, this here trial. Hit will leave everything clear, if I do like God says. They'll be gun thugs at that trial, Carrie, and the brother of them two that was shot. And they'll be hating me... They'll look at me and I'll see that hate in their eyes. I got to look back at them without hate. I got to be able to smile and speak gentle, and when the lawyers ask me questions, I got to answer with respect. And ifn I can do that maybe I can live at the *Homeplace*." (227, my italics)

The *Homeplace* has become, by this point in the narrative, not simply the Kentucky farm on which Carrie was reared and where some of her family remain, but a metaphor, in Carrie's mind and in the context of the narrative, for Heaven. Albion, however, will not quite accept Carrie's metaphor:

"Hit's [The Homeplace is] part of creation and hit's fallen and hit suffers just like we do. And the only way to live on it happy is to love everything else that's fallen. And ifn I can't love them gun thugs, God won't call me back to the Homeplace, because I'll love all the wrong things about it. I'll love it because they ain't no gun thugs there and because there I can turn my back on all the suffering, and I'll make an idol outen it, and worship it." (227-28)

Albion does persist in love to the end, but his trial does not come about: having created Albion in the image of Christ, Giardina must sacrifice him. The morning the trial is to begin, Albion is murdered by the coal operators who are concerned that he might be acquitted. Yet his spiritual victory is complete, intricately tied to his persistence in universal love and forgiveness, even for his oppressors.

This point is particularly important in the development of the plot because his belief in universal salvation makes necessary and possible not only his work on behalf of his fellow miners, but also his struggle to love those mine owners, managers, and agents of the state who treat him and the other miners in sinful ways. His commitment to universal salvation demands that Albion be able to recognize the ultimate worth of evil people, while simultaneously working hard against their *systemically* evil calculations. Such an accomplishment suggests in Albion an intensely engaging and difficult moral bravery, made believable through his dedication to principle, his humility, and his ultimate sacrifice.

A belief in universal salvation is, then, a defining attribute of the book's most theologically articulate character. The centrality of this theology becomes still clearer when contrasted with portrayals of other religious interests and the less inclusive approach of some of the otherwise sympathetic characters, as noted above with Carrie. Even more, Albion's theological position is demonstrated as the grounding that distinguished his actions and attitudes from those of the other religious groups as well as non-believers. The more orthodox churches, as suggested by Carrie's Episcopalian brother and sister-in-law, have, unsurprisingly, cast their lot with the colonizers; they offer minimal aid to the starving mining families and damn the actions of the union in working on behalf of the oppressed. And some of the fundamentalist churches, as suggested by Rondal's mother, offer only a kind of otherworldly escapism from the conditions of the reality in which the miners live. Both more traditionally religious groups maintain a stance that creates otherness, and those who actively seek to do good on overtly Biblical principles are distinguished from either theological expression.

Still more telling of Albion is his contrast with Rondal who, though an appealing anti-hero, is characterized by anger, violence, and desperation. Rondal is not only the

primary organizer for the United Mine Workers but also Carrie's first (and last, with Albion intervening) lover. His approach to organizing the mines is as passionate as Albion's but wholly without spiritual grounding; though an admirable and engaging character, he is portrayed as one who is psychologically unable to love or express love. His need for vengeance, justifiable by any purely human standard, ultimately perverts his work and proves to be his downfall. Motivated by deep anger as much as by a longing for justice, he proves less effective not only in his leadership of the union, but also in the expression of compassion when it is most needed. As a result, reader sympathy and identification cannot persist with Rondal, despite his good intentions. Ultimately, it is Albion Freeman, the universalist, who retains our sympathy and whose legacy of justice, dignified by his name, lives beyond his life.

Giardina followed *Storming Heaven* with *The Unquiet Earth* (1992), a novel that shares its setting and some characters with the earlier work. At its center is Dillon Freeman, the very infant son who was holding tightly to Rondal's thumb even as, in the final pages of *Storming Heaven*, the organizer dying in Carrie's cabin at the Homeplace. Though Dillon is Carrie's son by Rondal, she gives the boy Albion's surname, his legacy. Through Giardina's deft use of multiple narrators, the novel traces the development of the coal region through the trials of WWII: the erratic, destructive progression of twentieth-century coal mining and the devastating effects of continued colonization on the mining counties of West Virginia and Kentucky. Fittingly, it culminates in the author's fictionalized account of the 1972 Buffalo Creek Disaster (moved 18 years ahead in time for the sake of the narrative).

Unlike the earlier work, *The Unquiet Earth* neither addresses universal salvation explicitly, nor features such a theologically articulate universalist hero as Albion Freeman. Nevertheless, the novel has cogently developed theological themes, and the ultimate equality of all people before God is still more clearly expressed. Very particular ideas of broad inclusion and of the hope of final restoration, both religious and otherwise, are worked out in even greater detail.

Here Giardina's accidental theologian is Dillon, a complex character who, among other things, has a long-term romantic obsession with his cousin, breaks the law as necessary, and cantankerously complicates everyone else's life. Having returned with a permanent leg injury after his WWII service in North Africa, the young Dillon makes a telling confession to his mother, Carne. Sitting on the porch, drinking beer in front of his mother for the first time, he reflects on his wound and introduces us to his theology:

I believe in God, and I believe they's a fire running through everything that lives. When that Bible starts throwing rules at me, I laugh, but when it tells how sin burns and says turn the other cheek and when God gets hung on that cross, buddy I'm right there. I chose me [when he had to shoot another soldier] and that's sin. I aint no better than a goddamn Nazi. That's what they do, choose themselves. And the rich people that keep what they got, they do the same. It's sin and the only way you burn it out is to die. Only it don't work if you just die for yourself, it's got to be for somebody else. (39)

Unconventional though they may be, Dillon takes his beliefs seriously, and readers must do the same. His non-nationalistic, universalist understanding is demonstrated by his actions when Rachel, his cousin and lover-to-be, returns from military service as a nurse in the Philippines with a war memento; the skull of a Japanese soldier. Though Dillon has paid a crippling price in the war, he is appalled that anyone, especially Rachel, could treat any human – even a dead enemy – with such disrespect. He robs her of her skull by force and gives it proper burial.

Dillon's actions with the Japanese skull is the most dramatically developed example of inclusion, but it is far from the only one. Though the mines and mining towns remain largely segregated his closest and most dependable ally in union work is Sim Gore, a black miner and labor leader. The two organize, take direct action and even go to prison together. And near the novel's end, in what may be the ultimate act of racial unity, Dillon's young cousin Ethel has a child with Sim's son, Leon. A still riskier movement toward inclusion is embodied in one of the book's primary narrators, the winning and cagey self-proclaimed mayor of Number Thirteen (yes, that's the name of the town), Hassel Day. While Dillon is leading the work against unfair and abusive management practices, Hassel leads resistance of another kind: helping the impoverished residents of his town simply get by, both materially and spiritually. He is a force for unity and community in the true sense of a shared life; and through a subtle set of references that many students miss on first reading, he is also created as a wholly a-stereotypical homosexual. People with special needs are also fully included as members of the community in Number Thirteen. Toejam, for example, is a boy and later a young man who is intellectually deficient; yet, he is presented as a person with a special kind of brilliance and goodness and a necessary function in community life. His wife is a young woman who had been injured in a shooting accident; she is a woman who appears unable to communicate, but with whom Toejam develops a devoted and admirable relationship.

As one might expect, religious sectarianism, too, is addressed and occasionally overcome in the story. Another of Giardina's complex characters is Tom Kolwiecki, a Vista worker who also happens to be a Jesuit novice. His inept idealism first brings

him to Number Thirteen to help the poor, but he returns years later for the solace of the tightly knit community, solace which he badly needs after working in Central America with Catholic activists influenced by liberation theology and sharing in the torture they suffer. He is a broken person, and his re-assignment by his hierarchy to the coal town parish is more for his benefit than for the benefit of the local families. In a key scene, in order to make Tom appear successful to his bishop, the persistently nurturing and quietly queer Hassel organizes a church service by gathering together (by hook, crook, and coupons for free beer) residents of the village to pose as Tom's converts. That they gather at all is a testament to their sense of community that goes beyond boundaries of sectarian exclusivism: that during the service Giardina has Louella, a local Pentecostal woman, speak in tongues addresses a kind of faith that transcends boundaries. And that the visiting bishop, for whom the charade has been arranged, recognizes this totally uneducated woman's glossolalia as Church Latin suggests how the author intends readers to be open to the mysterious reality or what is happening.

Dillon's view of Christian faith stands in stark contrast with that of the book's most outspoken Christian fundamentalist character (all Giardina's books have one), Doyle Ray Lloyd. Doyle represents what narrator Hassel Day calls that "mean kind of Christianity: and naturally his church is the most stridently exclusive (261). He teaches his flock to be scabs against the union and even to protest the visit of the Catholic bishop. A man who represents, in Doyle Ray's words, "the whore of Babylon. The beast of Revelation, the Roman Catholic Church" (286). Such a sectarian exclusivism is the antithesis of Giardina's universalism, and she casts it in a role only slightly more sympathetic than the abusive actions of the coal operators.

The potential for some final and complete reconciliation – political, spiritual, and personal – is affirmed by the book's climactic scene, a sequence grounded historically in the Buffalo Creek Disaster. The unsafe dam in which coal operators have been dumping waste is about to break, and the three main characters who have hated each other throughout the narrative – the union organizer Dillon, the broken Jesuit Torn, and the profit-driven native Arthur Lee – find themselves joining forces in a frantic attempt to warn the people in the coal towns of the apocalyptic doom. This is the first time the three have worked together, and they do so bound by their sincere and common love of their people. That they all die in the attempt expresses on a higher level a kind of unity that extends beyond death, a concept in keeping with the author's multi-textual argument for Christian universalism.

Giardina's next novel leaves the grit of the coalfields for the intellectual sophistication of Germany; yet, a similar theology motivates the work, *Saints and Villains* (1998) is a fictionalization of the life of German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The book is soundly constructed around Bonhoeffer's biography, but Giardina allows herself a generous creative space for literary craft, psychological interpretation, and theological speculation. For our purposes here, this space is a welcoming ground for many of the author's persistent concerns, including universal salvation. If that tenet seems seldom to arise as a fully articulated topic in *Saints and Villains*. It may well be because the wide reach of salvation is in fact the discursive cloth from which this novel is cut.

Even today when conversation turns to pure evil, whether in a graduate classroom or at a cocktail party, Nazism is the sock example. And naturally, opposition to the Nazis can assume the guise of something like pure good. Giardina, to her credit, disallows such easy bifurcations, and she builds her novel as a frame for a weightier discussion, possibly her most demanding and troubling discussion, or universal salvation. Although they may not be apparent on first reading, suggestions off the topic are clear enough, even on the novel's surface. Alert readers will note that, whenever theologians are referenced appreciatively in the book, all are thinkers commonly mentioned in discussions of Christian universalism: traditional liberals like Adolph von Harnack, iconoclasts like Reinhold Niebuhr, and most significantly, the foundational neo-orthodox thinker Karl Barth. Giardina's approbation of the last is evident during a scene in which Bonhoeffer is told by a friend that she "studied theologian in Germany" (88). Interestingly, Giardina has little to say about Bonhoeffer's relationship with the Swiss theologian.

While the question does not relate directly to our argument here, it is difficult in the context of this novel not to consider the question of whether the real-life Bonhoeffer was a kind of universalist, and, if so, how that term must necessarily be nuanced. While the article is not the place for arguments that have received extensive treatment elsewhere, it seems clear in the context of her canon that Giardina sees him as such, but likely as an adherent of something like the "pessimistic universalism" explored in Tom Gregg's study of Bonhoeffer and Barth. Gregg concludes that "by identifying the sin and unbelief of the believer, there opens a door to the possibility of universalism (even if only expressed with a sigh)" (506); Giardina may have prefigured his conclusions, his sigh, and his pessimism:

People like Bonhoeffer and Barth in the 20th century say, "No, we really aren't getting any better," and there's still this big question of human sin. And I tend to fall in the Barth and Bonhoeffer school of believing in sin. To paraphrase St. Augustine, "no one is born with the

ability not to sin." People look at a little baby and say, "How can anyone believe in original sin." Well, it's a state or being, and there's no baby born who is not going to sin. (Douglas, 392)

Cutting deeper into the particulars of the novel, we see that when discussed in the light of Christian views of the Kingdom of God, nationalism of any type offers itself as a ready synecdoche for the creation of radical alterity, and so Giardina uses it. Her work is a profound and timely diatribe against the coupling of Christianity with any form of nationalism and against the alterity that nationalism necessarily enforces in clear contradiction to Giardina's inclusive theology of the Gospel. Not surprisingly, the most obvious expression of an enforced alterity is the rise of the Nazi regime and the destructive nationalism of the church in Hitler's Germany. The insidious perversity of the coupling becomes the focus of the text, and the historical context lends itself to situations in which such a nationalism can be readily and realistically condemned. The first clear statement of this position is placed in a conversation between Bonhoeffer and Jean Lasserre when both are special visiting students at Union Seminary in New York. At one point, the Frenchman tells his new friend,

"One thing you must understand about me, Bonhoeffer, and if you grasp it, perhaps we may get along. I am no nationalist. I love France. And sometimes I despise it. And I love and despise Germany, and love and despise America. I am a citizen of the Kingdom of God, Bonhoeffer. And one cannot be such a citizen and also a nationalist. *C'est impossible!*" (39)

When Bonhoeffer returns from Union to a teaching post in Germany, this theological position he has embraced puts him at odds with Hitler's rising forces, first with the theologian's National Socialist students. Those devotees who believe that "the Church exists to serve the Fatherland. That the Fatherland is a gift to us from God, and that God has blessed the Fatherland by raising up Adolf Hitler to lead us to our divinely ordained place at the head of the nations" (84). Bonhoeffer's succinct response is that "God does not play favorites with nations, and anyone who claims a divine blessing for his country is guilty of blasphemy and idolatry" (85). This theme is developed in detail throughout, serving as the central and fatal tension in the novel.

It is also worth noting that, in opposition to nationalism, the real-life Bonhoeffer may have furthered his journey toward universalism. Biographer Charles Marsh notes that during his writing of *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer became "more open to Christ's presence in persons, places, and movements outside the church," to which he gave the term "unconscious Christianity" (313). Marsh states that, as he watched his own "Confessional Church" cower before Hitler, his *non-Christian* co-conspirators reacted with a deeper moral courage: they "fastened themselves to the concrete reality with brave defiance. This puzzling divergence inspired Bonhoeffer to cultivate an



appreciation of the 'good people' and propose 'the beatification of those who are persecuted for the sake of a just cause' (314). The result in Bonhoeffer was "Christological concentration leading to a greater inclusiveness," since "in doing righteousness and justice, one creates a space that necessarily "belongs to God" (314). Thus, through his lived experience with those who shared his active – and fatal – concern with righteousness in the face of the nationalistic perversity, Bonhoeffer's integrity forced him toward a new soteriological understanding.

The casual reader might see Giardina as simply condemning Nazism, but closer reading demonstrates that she takes pains to keep her readers from approaching the story as the portrayal of a single nation's historical tragedy. The essential flaw is theological, and theology transcends borders: Western nationalism too, particularly the British and American versions, suffers her critical scrutiny. The first character who represents Western nationalism is the historically portrayed Frank Buchman, the popular American evangelist who preached in England as well. Giardina creates an encounter between the American and Bonhoeffer during the latter's pastoral tenure serving German churches in London before the war. Consistently, Buchman expresses his sympathy for Hitler as a positive force in a holy war against communism, a position that the young Bonhoeffer finds maddening. Bonhoeffer's British ally and confidante, Archbishop George Bell, rightly understands this kind of evangelical fervor that is occurring in Germany and England and America, noting that it "attacks man's spiritual nature and turns it inside out. So that people can believe they live as they always have. They can believe they maintain their ancient virtues and religions. They can hate and truly think it love. Oh, we're not immune to the modern disease here in England, not by any means" (170). As the war and the novel progresses, British nationalism and the damage it does to clear Christian thought are featured still more plainly. The outspoken Bell is castigated in the House of Lords after his speech arguing that the allies follow the constraints of Just War Theory and cease bombing civilian targets and murdering non-combatants. Throughout the novel, nationalism – German, British, and American – is demonstrated as antithetical to the Kingdom of God.

Yet the most effective expression against nationalistic privileging and in support of a universalist understanding of salvation is in Giardina's masterful creation of an uncomfortable sympathy for Bonhoeffer's fictional doppelganger, the Nazi Alois Bauer. The author is not subtle in directing her readers toward how they should read the structural relationship between the two characters; on the contrary, she entitles several chapters that center on Bauer "Doppelganger," and she develops him as such in very clear ways, ways that treat the Nazi as a believable if pitiable human,

which is, ironically, exactly how she presents Bonhoeffer. There is no hero worship tolerated for the troubled martyr. Part of Giardina's ironic development is, in fact, creating more personal sympathy for the Nazi at times than for her protagonist. Bonhoeffer is introduced as the privileged, off-puttingly spoiled son of German aristocracy; Bauer is introduced as an impoverished child whose drunken father has just beaten him and killed his dog. Bonhoeffer is presented as one whose worldly success is assured by the privilege of caste; Bauer struggles to work himself higher in the Hitler regime, striving to make himself useful to those who outrank him. Bonhoeffer is born to the creature comforts that he receives as entitlements and loves too well; Bauer loves such comforts, too, and sets about to earn them.

But possibly the most telling and clearly articulated connection is the relationship of both men to Mozart's Mass in C Minor. Bonhoeffer has been reared to be a brilliant young pianist, and he has enjoyed every advantage to make him so; yet by family agreement, he chooses not to pursue the profession of a concert pianist because, though by training he is technically brilliant, he is told by the distinguished pianist Leonid Kreuzer that he lacks the passion to be an artist of the first rank. Conversely, Bauer has none of the advantages of training; he cannot even read a score. But his passion for the Mass is so great that, after rising in Nazi ranks, he expends his political capital to obtain his ultimate treasure, the original manuscript of the Mass – just so he can hold it. His spiritual passion for the music (the very thing Bonhoeffer lacks) wins the readers' sympathies, even as Bonhoeffer, a child of privilege, at times loses them.

What cannot be overlooked, however, is that Bonhoeffer is indeed a Christian who gives his life in what he perceives as a great cause; and, Bauer is a Nazi who murders scores of people and is complicit in the deaths of millions more. What Giardina disallows is any easy belief that one man is somehow saved and the other damned. Both are villains in their own way and in another way both are potentially, by the grace of God, saints. With that dark universalism sometimes attributed to Bonhoeffer, he upbraids his doppelganger/nemesis: "I am telling you, you cannot escape the love of God. That is a warning" (456). Such complexity confounds any either/or thinking about the "here and now" or the hereafter. It defies alterity. And it recalls Albion Freeman's vision: "But one day Jesus Christ will wade right into Hell and haul out the sinners. Haul them out kicking and screaming" (*Storming* 134).

Giardina takes a dramatically lighter tone with her time-travel fantasy *Fallam's Secret* (2003), and its presentation of universal salvation is still more overt. The novel's

heroine is Lydde Falcone, a West Virginia woman reared by her Aunt Lavinia and Uncle John after the mysterious death by fire of her siblings and mother and her virtual desertion by her distraught father. Uncle John, though a retiring physics professor by trade, has long maintained an uncharacteristic entrepreneurial sideline as the creator and keeper of The Mystery Hole, a campy roadside attraction just off the freeway on the family farm near Fallam's Mountain.

After spending most of her adult life in England as a minor actress and director, Lydde is called home by the unexpected death of the man she presumes to have been her uncle. While there, she discovers that he had not created The Mystery Hole as an old professor's diversion or even to bring the family a few extra shekels; instead, his attraction was devised to disguise a grander mystery: he had discovered a portal in time that can whoosh humans back to Cromwellian England. And then, the plot thickens. Having experienced the shift herself and landed in seventeenth-century Norchester, Lydde becomes the lover of Noah Fallam, the Cromwell appointed governor, and of Fallam's Robin-Hoodish alter ego, The Raven.

The plot summarized above hardly sounds like the context for rigorous theological commentary. Yet in a Narnian way, that is just what this story becomes, and the central theological concept is universal salvation. As in the earlier novels, Giardina focuses the argument by placing it in the mouth and mind of the most romantically idealized character, here Noah Fallam. As *The Raven*, this good man comes to the aid of the materially poor and religiously oppressed, even as he ostensibly works for the oppressive government of Cromwell. Through Fallam, Giardina is setting the illegal acts of Christian mercy against the legal but immoral power of the state.

Long before becoming the heroic Raven, Fallam was a brilliant Oxford student writing anonymous philosophical tracts. In one publication, he advocated for such radical positions as democratic government, the education of all people, and the sharing of goods with the poor. In addition, he condemned the mistreatment of aboriginal Africans and Americans. In sum, he is portrayed as an advocate for all sorts of inclusion. Worse yet, he has openly argued his case for “universal salvation.” By happenstance, his aristocratic father came upon a copy of Noah's anonymous tract and shared its scandalous contents at the family table. Afterwards, the family sat “in silence for a time, considering the enormity of such an idea [universal salvation], the very threat to the security of this world in the notion that all would gain entrance to the next” (229). To their surprise, the heroic Noah, always honest and true, admitted

his authorship; and his father responded, “Get out... Get out of this house. You are no son of mine. Nor shall you see a penny of my money” (228).

It may be that Noah Fallam's pamphlet suggests an insight into the mind of Giardina concerning ideas that stand in a kind of logical relationship, or at the very least, a relationship of mutually sympathetic resonance: ideas that become in her writing parts of a greater whole. Just as the young Noah's pamphlet deals with more egalitarian approaches to political power, education, and goods, it also necessarily addresses universal salvation. At first, this might seem an unnecessary or even accidental link: what do the very concretely grounded ideas about how life and wealth are organized in this world have to do with one's eternal state in some unknown world to come?

The family's reaction to the tract (disowning Noah) furthers Giardina's position along the trajectory I am suggesting: at the mention of universal salvation, they are flummoxed at “the enormity of such an idea, the very threat to the security of this world in the notion that all would gain entrance to the next” (229), a reaction that recalls that of Carrie to Albion Freeman. It is tempting to read that passage, particularly in this rather light-hearted fantasy, as an irony intended to cast the wealthy family as comical, if dangerous, dunderheads. But I suggest that, on the contrary. The passage is not ironic at all. The family, in fact, understands what contemporary readers may initially miss, and it is a concept central to Giardina's theology: an exclusivistic understanding of salvation is foundational for those tendencies of society that maintain the temporal social hierarchy – such things as the repression of political voices, the denial of education, the reduction of a group of people to constant poverty, and race slavery. All these phenomena may be understood as manifestations of various kinds of imposed and enforced alterity: and by association, it might be understood as well, not only in this novel but across her others, that Giardina's central metaphor for alterity, for all things that separate people and create injustice, is an “orthodox,” exclusive view of salvation.

Indeed, the centrality of Fallam's revelation and the fact that he had written of such apparently disparate topics *in a single tract* seem to suggest that, for Giardina, traditional views of heaven and hell function as a divine approbation for all other forms of discriminatory privileging and marginalization. That theological tenet of exclusive salvation can be used to justify – indeed, it serves automatically as a tacit justification – for distinctions among nationalities, ethnic groups, social classes, even believers within the functioning strata of the Church itself; if God makes distinctions among his human creation, distinctions that have eternal and even apparently heinous

consequences, then humans may appropriately do the same. And current social stratifications would seem to indicate clearly, particularly to those in power and holding wealth, the ordained will of God: i.e., the poor are poor because they are the poor, the Jews are wrong because they are the Jews, and the cleric better knows the mind of God because he is the cleric (etymologically, the “heir” of God). The saved are the saved because they are the saved. From this single concept flow the perversities that create the matrix in which Giardina's novels ground their foundational tension, those divisive perversities that her prophetic witness seems bent on attacking: nationalism, classism, racism, sexism, and other divisions.

Giardina’s most recent novel *Emily’s Ghost* (2009), is still more overt in its advocacy of universal salvation. Here Giardina makes William Weightman, Emily Brontë's fictional true-love, a tactful spokesman for her heterodox position. Note that he speaks of it in a cautious, clerical way that *almost* keeps him orthodox:

“I believe in divine punishment,” Weightman said, “But I don't think that means eternal damnation. Hell is the absence of God and is experienced in this life. God is a loving God. If our faith is or any value at all, it is to tell us that. It is beyond my scope to imagine a loving God condemning his creatures to an eternity of torment. But in the end, I leave it to God, as we are bid to do.” (53-54)

The Reverend Weightman’s careful statement clearly reprises the definition noted earlier that Pastor Albion Freeman gives Carrie in *Storming Heaven*. The fictionalized Brontë sisters, however, are themselves less reserved about their heterodoxy. Later in the novel, Giardina makes what may be her most intentional, if most strange, reference to Christian universalism. During a long walk shared by the three Brontë sisters, their aforementioned friend Weightman, and a traditionally orthodox clergyman, Mr. Dury, this conversation comes about:

Anne asked Mr. Dury the question that had become *a secret code as the sisters sorted out the good clergy, in their view, from the bad*.

“What do you think,” Anne asked, “of the possibility of universal salvation?”

“Universal – what? Universal salvation? You mean that everyone would go to heaven?”

“Yes,” Anne said.

“Preposterous!” Dury cried... “And how would it be Heaven it one were cheek to jowl with riffraff?”

Charlotte coughed, said, “How indeed?” and *added Dury to her list of ridiculous curates.*”  
(18, my italics)

That in her most recent novel Giardina describes her sympathetically idealized Brontë sisters as using the universalist question as a kind of moral measure suggests that the author herself is using the question in a similar manner. It is the overt reiteration of her theological thesis.

In other ways, too, *Emily's Ghost* bears significant similarities to her earlier work: it analyzes divisive distinctions of wealth and class. Gender and sexuality, nationalistic thinking and ethnic prejudice. But finally, it may be most significant that the characters who clearly portray universalist thinking in each novel – Albion in *Storming Heaven*, Dillon in *The Unquiet Earth*, Bonhoeffer in *Saints and Villains*, Weightman in *Emily's Ghost* – all die sacrificial deaths, further identifying them with the ultimate measure of truth and love: Christ crucified.

To the degree that Giardina's “ministry” (her own term) of novel writings<sup>3</sup> is that of nurturing fuller human understanding and the broadest definition of inclusivity, her heterodox argument for universal salvation becomes the essential figure for all sustained action of working toward ultimate good. When the salvation/damnation binary is placed under erasure, space is created for the promise of hope. If we find our way to this better theology, then, the author implies, we create the foundation for real and lasting change not only in fictional and future worlds but in this real world as well. If the English aristocrat can stop marginalizing the Welsh sheepherder, if the Boston capitalist can stop marginalizing the Justice County coal miner, if the Nazi can stop marginalizing the Jew, if the wealthy Cromwellian can stop marginalizing the Anglican peasant, and if the bourgeois mill owner can stop marginalizing – and dehumanizing the workers in the Haworth mills that created the world of Emily Brontë, what might happen in this real world in which we live? For Denise Giardina, a novelist with a clear theological agenda, this is the question most worth asking. And how better to direct us toward possible answers than with the concept of salvation, which, in a traditional Christian understanding, extends throughout life and beyond death?

## NOTES

1) To understand the economic forces under which Appalachia has suffered, see Ronald D. Eller's *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930*. Two articles that address the post-colonial perspective directly are Herben G. Reid's "Appalachia and the sacrament of Co-Existence: Beyond Post-Colonial Trauma and Regional Identity Traps" and Rodger Cunningham's "Southern Appalachia Considered from a Postcolonial Perspective."

2) Readers unfamiliar with the complex denominational intricacies in Appalachia might assume that Giardina is simply embedding her characters in some engaging local color of the region; but in fact, her work is persistently realistic and intentional. The Primitive Baptist Universalist Association is a subdivision of the Primitive Baptist denominational group, and congregations could well have been present in Giardina's not-quite-fictional counties. PBUs would not, however, have said that they don't believe in hell. Albion is particularly accurate in his summary. "No Heller" was a disparaging term with which such believers were burdened, an epithet which persists with the group still today (just as participants in my own denomination, the Religious Society of Friends, were slurred early on as "Quakers" until the name stuck). See Howard Dorgan's essential *In the Hands of a Happy God: The "No Hellers" of Central Appalachia*.

3) Though the website in which she used the term *ministry* is no longer active, it may be found archived at <http://web.archive.org/web/20110709012722/denisegiardina.com/about.htm>

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