
LITERATURE AND BELIEF

Edited by Jesse S. Crisler



Literature and Belief
Volume 36:1&2

Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature

B R I G H A M Y O U N G U N I V E R S I T Y

LITERATURE AND BELIEF
A semiannual publication of the Center for the Study
of Christian Values in Literature
College of Humanities, Brigham Young University

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Subscription cost is \$10.00; \$14.00 outside the USA. Address all correspondence, submissions, and subscription inquiries to *Literature and Belief*,
3184 JFSB, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602 (801) 422-3073

Vol. 36:1&2

2016

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ISBN 0-939555-24-7

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EDITORS' PREFACE

In November 2015, scholars from across the United States and a number of foreign countries gathered at Brigham Young University to participate in the seventh symposium sponsored by the Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature. The two-day conference, "Beauty and Belief," which began with a keynote address by Lori Branch and featured plenary addresses by Jeanne Moskal, Van Gessel, and Martine Leavitt, included twenty-two sessions, fifty-five presenters, and upwards of a thousand participants. This conference-specific issue of *Literature and Belief* includes the best of those addresses and presentations.

Lori Branch, Matthew Wickman, and Steve Walker discuss various postsecular approaches to literature, treating this emerging field from different but potentially complementary perspectives. Branch argues that "[w]hat is needed is to *manifest* and also a bit to *manifesto* postsecular studies as a coming of age of the religious turn"; Wickman's analysis of theory after suspicion embodies one such *manifesto*; and Walker's essay provides a salutary rebuke of those who read sacred texts without sufficient thought or care, thereby "translating" spiritual truths into a mere extension of the reader's preexisting sacred or secular bias. Complementing these essays, William Storm, Gary Fuller, and Bruce Young also use postsecular approaches to literature to shed new light on early British canonical authors William Langland, Christopher Marlowe, and William Shakespeare.

But of course the insights made possible through postsecular approaches to literature are not limited to either the English canon nor the Christian faith. This truth is demonstrated both by Van Gessel's analysis of *awareness*—the juncture of the Buddhist concept of *mujō* and the pre-Buddhist Japanese impetus to cherish fleeting beauty—in Japanese literature and by Jena Al-Fuhaid's exploration of important connections among such Victorian poets as Robert Browning and Alfred, Lord Tennyson and such Islamic motifs as the historical beginnings of the hijab and the classic "affair of the lie." Lynn

Alexander and John Mazaheri expand upon Al-Fuhaid's discussion of the Victorian period generally, paying particular attention to the connections among faith, life, and death in various novels and stories in the period, including Dickens' *Bleak House* (1859) and what Alexander terms Victorian deathbed scenes of "holy dying."

In her discussion of the unspoken and the unspeakable in missionary literature, Jeanne Moskal expands the analysis of the sometimes problematic relationship between faith and writing to include cultural as well as literary texts, juxtaposing missionaries' evangelizing letters and histories to such novels as *The Good Earth* (1931). Moskal concludes that the latter tends to be more truthful than the former and that in the long run "the goal of evangelizing . . . might be better served by a policy of [personal and historical] candor rather than leaving dirty laundry for the novelists to air." Keith Lawrence and Daniel Muhlestein follow Moskal's lead in connecting the dots between certain cultural and literary texts, though from radically different perspectives: Lawrence explores the American "spiritual democracy" embodied in psalmody or hymn-writing by women, while Muhlestein laments the extent to which communal lawlessness and violence—especially the violence of a 1925 lynching in Price, Utah—are in subsequent newspaper accounts of the lynching commodified as art, faith, and community celebration. Like Lawrence and Muhlestein, in their discussions James Young and Charles Pastoor illuminate various connections between faith and doubt in American life and literature, Young by uncovering the Christian ethos embodied in the novels of Brainard Cheney, and Pastoor by highlighting what is for many contemporary critics the unspoken and unspeakable in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), which reveals "not only the importance of religious faith but also its validity."

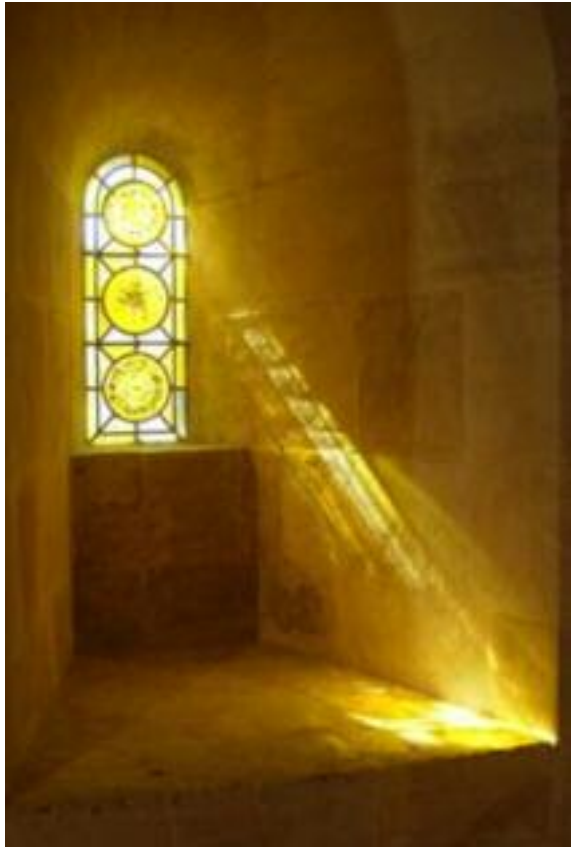
For many contemporary readers and critics, such connections among faith, life, and literature are obscure at best and taboo at worst. In an illuminating essay on her own work, award-winning young adult novelist Martine Leavitt discusses how she attempts to bridge the gap between believers and nonbelievers in *My Book of Life by Angel* (2012) to embody faith, hope, and charity; to speak of both beauty and belief in the same breath; and in the process perhaps

to “comfort the hearts of those who long for, but cannot quite have, faith.” Leavitt’s work stands as a hopeful alternative to the long tradition of doubt and exclusion ably described by Patty Campbell in the concluding essay in this issue of *Literature and Belief*.

Such varied and insightful essays ensured the success of the “Beauty and Belief” symposium, suggesting the continued need for—and interest in—an ongoing investigation of both postsecular and traditional religious values in literature.

–Daniel K. Muhlestein

–Jesse S. Crisler



Beauty and Belief: Postsecular Approaches to Literature and the Humanities

Lori Branch
University of Iowa

In 2007, the Association of American Publishers made the perhaps surprising decision to award its prize for Best Professional/Scholarly Book in Mathematics to a novel. That novel was *Certain Ambiguity* (2010) by Gaurav Suri and Hartosh Singh Bal (“2007”); judging from the largely, though not exclusively, enthusiastic reviews the novel received from mathematically inclined readers, it is not hard to see why. The story concerns a math major at Stanford, Ravi Kapoor, who, to the horror of his family back in India, jeopardizes his four-year, business-major graduation plan by immersing himself in a math course on infinity taught by the charismatic professor Nico Aliprantis. In so doing, Ravi revives his childhood love of the wonder of mathematics that had been nurtured by his Hindu mathematician grandfather, Vijay Sahni. But in his studies with Nico, the two stumble across an article by the grandfather with a tantalizing footnote indicating that during an academic trip to New Jersey in 1919, he was imprisoned and, they later discover, tried for blasphemy.

Ravi’s journey into the paradoxes of infinity, uncertainty, and non-Euclidean geometry takes place in tandem with his research

into this blasphemy trial, the documents for which include the transcripts of his grandfather's extensive interviews with the judge to determine whether his case should go to trial: a Christian and, as it happens, a math aficionado. In the course of their heated discussions, they both proclaim—as do many characters in the novel—their passionate pursuit of rational *proof* as a route to *absolute certainty* in the quest for meaning. Both are shocked into questioning their entire worldview, however, when, in the midst of their pre-trial meetings, in May 1919, the British astronomer and physicist Sir Arthur Eddington reports observations of a solar eclipse that demonstrate the effects of gravity on light and confirm Einstein's theory of general relativity, effectively showing occasions when Euclidean geometry does not hold true. "And now I ask myself," a stunned Sahni says to an equally bewildered Judge Taylor, "If deductions from Euclid's axioms lead to propositions that are not only uncertain, but also possibly untrue, then how can we know anything at all? . . . [N]o axiom is safe. If no axiom is safe, then no deduction is possible" (239). Sahni and Taylor forge what becomes a lifelong friendship when they both must moderate their demands for proof, when they realize that belief investment is inescapable at the foundation of their worldviews: for Taylor his belief in God, and for Sahni his belief in the reality and consistency of mathematics. "I cannot believe that something so beautiful can be untrue," he ultimately confesses to Taylor, "but this is not something I have proof for" (254). This brief examination of the novel's central theme underlines exactly what energizes so many reviewers of the novel: the vivid connection between seeking to know truth and hungering for meaning, between knowledge and belief, and between Ravi's movement at the end of the twentieth century and his grandfather's at its beginning, which Ravi describes as "confronting the loss of his universality and absoluteness": "It is, indeed, amazing," Ravi observes; "[t]he human experience is such that we yearn to find something lasting and true, something that speaks to our own hearts and has meaning. Meaning however, whatever its variety, seems to demand faith" (258).

In its concern for the seemingly inescapable link among beauty, truth, and belief, *A Certain Ambiguity* makes a fittingly interdisciplinary

icon of the religious turn in the academy in the last twenty years, which dates to the mid-1990s in philosophy. Hent de Vries's *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (1999) was an early monograph that connected threads in the works of Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion, and Jacques Derrida, works that de Vries argued shared a new openness to religion and a recognition of similarities between deconstruction and negative theology. In 2000, Marxist philosopher and atheist psychoanalytic social theorist Slavoj Žižek published *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why the Christian Legacy Is Worth Fighting For*, his first of half a dozen monographs on religion. At the American Academy of Religion meeting in Toronto in 2002, in the wake of his collected *Acts of Religion* (2002), Derrida filled a ballroom with two thousand eager listeners who, as John Caputo and Gianni Vattimo put it, "were not people who came to hear about the death of God. . . . [T]he 'desire for God' would be much better" (144). The new avenues of interest in religion de Vries identified might be said to have culminated in Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007), a nearly nine-hundred-page account of the intellectual and social changes by which secular materialism became the "immanent frame" through which many Western people experience the world (548).

Quite famously on the occasion of Derrida's death in 2004, Stanley Fish predicted in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that religion would "succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy" (C1). In departments of English, there have been developments parallel to those de Vries documented, especially post-9/11, though they fall short of constituting what Fish calls "the center of [its] intellectual energy" (C1). The mid-2000s have produced award-winning monographs across a wide range of literary-historical fields, approaches, and presses on topics from medieval affect and Reformation studies to the religiousness of Mikhail Bakhtin and W. H. Auden. There are also flourishing new monograph series in this area, including Bloomsbury's "New Directions in Religion and Literature," Ohio State University Press's "Literature, Religion, and Postsecular Studies," and several series at Baylor University Press. The four major scholarly journals dedicated to literature and religion—*Religion and Literature*, *Literature &*

Theology, Christianity and Literature, and *Literature and Belief*—are flourishing and in some cases have experienced important revivals and expansions. In London in July 2011, three of those journals collaborated for the first time in staging an international conference, “The Hospitable Text: New Approaches to Religion and Literature,” at which then Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams gave the keynote lecture on Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* (2004) and *Home* (2008). Major collaborative projects are also afoot: 2015 brought the published output of the Mellon Working Group on Religion and Literature in a special double issue of *Religion and Literature* (vol. 46, nos. 2–3), and 2016 will see the publication of both the *Routledge* and *Cambridge Companions to Literature and Religion*, all of which testifies to a fertile field under vigorous cultivation.

The curious fact, then, is that the religious turn, however vibrant and prolific, has yet to generate the kind of sea change feminism and the New Historicism, for example, worked in the discipline of literature in previous decades; one thus wonders why this is. To give just a short answer, many scholars have pointed out that the slowness of mainstream literary studies to warm to this vibrant religious turn is due to the secular constitution of literary studies itself. It can only be helpful to cite such scholarship and to remind oneself somewhat regularly of the disciplinary and institutional contexts that continue to shape the attitudes and parameters of scholarship.¹ In 2009, the then incoming editor of *Religion and Literature*, Susannah Monta, commissioned thirty-five essays for a monumental special issue that asked the question, “What is religion and literature?” As not a few of those thirty-five pieces reveal, many scholars of religion

¹In “The Rituals of Our Resecularization: Literature between Faith and Knowledge,” Lori Branch contends that the disciplinary study of literature in the university setting has been dominated by the distinction between faith and knowledge as it came to be understood in the early modern and modern periods, such that literary study is valued in terms of the production of knowledge, and any association with the epistemologically lesser category of faith or belief makes literary study suspect. The secularism of literary studies confesses its disavowed but ineradicable religiousness, however, in the ritual by which it must cyclically reinvent its claims to secularity.

and literature keenly feel how marginal and managed religion remains within the discipline of English. In an environment of such longstanding suspicion and even hostility, one might expect scholars working in religion and literature to welcome the “return to religion” as the harbinger of new opportunities and conversations, but such is not uniformly the case. Susan Felch somewhat pessimistically suspects that the “return to religion” is motivated by “a search for novelty and exoticism that can only be short-lived” and that “risk[s] notoriety and its inevitable sequel—dismissal” (100). From a secular institution, Ken Jackson also fears that the return to religion is simply “transcendence hunting” on the part of materialist thinkers that threatens the enterprise of religion and literature altogether (169).

Contra Felch, however, one need not assume that the moment for a meaningful re-engagement with religion in the discipline has flashed in the pan of literary studies, though the return to religion, especially among some of the field’s more celebrated thinkers, avails itself of ways and means of which one should be rightly critical. More positive is Eric Ziolkowski, who ends his contribution to the issue by declaring, in some helpful language, that “the need for bold cartographical ventures in the territory of religion and literature seems more urgent today than ever before” (132). Similarly, David Jasper calls for scholarship that “does not abandon the business of careful, scholarly thinking, but is actually driven by something even more urgent and elusive than that” (121).

What is needed, then, is a marking of the religious turn’s coming of age, as it were, an integration and popularization of its most important insights that would constitute a paradigm shift for the discipline as a whole. The best and most viable path for so doing is to paint the discipline’s own flag, as it were, the flag of postsecular *studies* and postsecular *reason* more broadly, and not so much to march as to dance—read, write, think, teach, and sing—around it. One could envision this strategy not as a means for engineering yet another “-ism” in the field but for working a general paradigm shift, such as the New Historicism or feminism worked, such that work in the field cannot go on as though these frames of thought do not exist. This would be no colonizing, hegemonic maneuver but a shift

in the conditions of possibility for scholarship in the field so that conversations, publications, indeed dissertations, hirings, and whole careers that many feel are marginalized or suppressed by aggressively secularist assumptions can no longer be so. One might then envision a field—and an academy—in which the dismissal of religion, or the quarantine of it to one or two disciplinary fields, is neither intellectually defensible nor an *a priori* assumption.

What is needed is to *manifest* and also a bit *to manifesto* postsecular studies as a coming of age of the religious turn into a coherently articulated set of new scholarly knowledges and assumptions that can prevent marginalization and fertilize all manner of new scholarship on religion in every facet of humanistic inquiry, a tripartite calling-into-being of postsecular criticism through 1) the explicit work of theorizing a critical, postsecular rationale for criticism, 2) the performative work of scholarship and publishing, and 3) the work of teaching courses under the rubric of postsecular studies. This essay takes up the first of these as a useful ground for the other two. The idea of a sea change in literary studies, arguably the most secular of humanities disciplines, is not poppycock. From within the linguistic turn and a variety of critical theories in the 1990s and early 2000s, certain segments of the discipline reached something approaching Ravi Kapoor's connection between meaning and belief through the recognition that language is at every point porous to faith even as it aspires to knowledge: that language's knowledges are at every turn supported by and rely upon faith and the believing, meaning-making subject who ever moves between worlds of things and thoughts, matter and meanings, bridging the gap between word and thing in particular ways. The questions of the meaning of living and the cosmos are just that, *true questions*, posed by what Christian Smith aptly calls the linguistic, "moral, believing animal," who consciously and in reality encounters and raises them. These true questions inescapably entail dialogue with others and creative engagement with their experiences and with one's existential experiences. This is the way in which meaning is *made* and is artful and poetic, in the sense of poesis: not *ex nihilo* but humanly, consciously, linguistically, relationally. This wedging between faith and knowledge is ground zero for the

convergence between religion and literature and for postsecular studies in the humanities more generally. Seven premises of postsecular studies, drawn from sociology, philosophy, anthropology, history, and literary studies, can inform a genuinely postsecular scholarship within literary studies and the humanities at large:²

I. REVISIONS OF THE SECULARIZATION THESIS

Built on work by Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, the secularization thesis gained traction in sociology in the mid-twentieth century as an account of the declining importance of religious institutions in modernity. An explanatory model and research program, it asserted that the social significance of religion diminishes due to three aspects of modernity: social differentiation (specialized societal institutions subsuming functions once performed by religion), societalization (life becoming oriented more toward nation/society than locality), and rationalization (technological advance obviating the role of faith in the everyday life).³ The normative force the secularization thesis accrued in later twentieth-century academia was hegemonic. As French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger recounts, as late as the 1980s, initiation into the sociology of religion “essentially meant embarking upon an analysis of the reasons explaining the decline of religion . . . as a defining feature of the modern world.” But today, as she puts it, “the entire research landscape is astonishingly changed” (1), for various reasons, including the paradigm’s failure to explain global phenomena from the rise of religious fundamentalisms and new and traditional religions to the persistent religiosity of US culture. Even scholars who agree that religious institutions have declined in importance over the last five hundred years significantly revise secularization theory’s claims, methodologies, and definitions.⁴ Scholars also point out that the presumption of secularization has skewed accounts of literary,

²For an expanded treatment of these seven premises, see Branch, “Postsecular Studies.”

³See Roy Wallis and Steve Bruce.

⁴See, for instance, Graham Ward (“Myth” 166–67).

artistic, and philosophical history, privileging skeptical perspectives as the voices of progress.⁵ Such revisions are usefully designated post-secular because they challenge the theory's most secularist aspects, namely the presumption of secularization's inevitability and its equation to rationality. Such accounts of secularization Taylor calls "subtraction theories" (22), and a crucial upshot of his *A Secular Age* is to show how contingent and *uninevitable* the construction of a secular, materialist immanent frame in Western modernity actually was. The deeper significance of secularization for Taylor is not so much a decline in belief as a transformation of the cultural, intellectual context in which belief takes place—in Taylor's account from religious belief being normative and naïve to being one, often embattled, option among other versions of "human flourishing" (18). Freed from the overdetermination of the secularization thesis, postsecular scholarship can open up myriad accounts of the construction of secular perspectives and subjectivities and of what Hervieu-Léger calls the transformation of religion in dialogue with them (*passim*).

II. THE RECOGNITION OF SECULARISM AS AN IDEOLOGY

To view secularism as an ideology admits that it has operated as an invisible and insufficiently examined set of assumptions. The wealth of scholarship in this vein has prompted Tracy Fessenden to call academics to

begin *seeing* secularism: its modalities (law, education, technology, citizenship); . . . how it positions subjects; what kind of good it does and what kinds it may undo; how, far from being universal and disinterested, it picks up certain strands and conspicuously drops others from the religions it aims to emancipate or displace. (634)

Scholars from geographies to which Western secularism was exported have had the keenest eyes for the particulars of this ideology.

⁵As but one example, see Charles LaPorte's work on Victorian women's religious poetry.

For Talal Asad, at stake in transcultural colonial relations is the imposition of “an entire secular discourse of ‘being human,’” central to which are ideals (for instance) of individualism, “detachment from passionate belief,” objectivity, skepticism, autonomy, and a “utilitarian calculus of pleasure and pain” in which there is no way of engaging suffering but to minimize it (124, 109). Rather than the view from nowhere, this perspective is the view from Western Europe, the singular product of a rationalistic, Protestant-Catholic dialectic in Western modernity.⁶

Like Fessenden, Michael Warner advocates seeing secularism “as a specific cultural formation in its own right, with its own sensibilities, rituals, constructions of knowledge and ethical projects” (210). He suggests that secularism resists critical analysis because it is so interwoven with ideas of academic work and critique; secular culture remains understudied because “one of its features is the consolidation of ‘religion’ as an object of social-scientific knowledge in a way that takes for granted the secular character of explanation itself” (210). Graham Ward’s genealogy of English secularism in *True Religion* (2003) is especially potent in locating economic profit at its center. In his account of the monarchy’s gradual eclipse of the power of the church in Spain and England, political philosophies invoked religion in early bids for legitimacy, only to cordon it off from a newly secular world order soon to be dominated by imperial, consumerist logics (*True* 35–72), a line of argument also advanced by Michael Kaufmann (612–13). Such analyses provide warrant for examining the workings of secularism in history, literary texts, and critical practice. Such critique moves away from the assumptions that 1) the secular order will covertly support a rationalized belief system (the problematic legacy of the Protestant separation of church and state in the US currently unraveling) and that 2) persons or the public sphere should or could ever be without belief (secularism), toward 3) a deliberate secularity more on the Indian model, predicated on the multiple religiosities of its citizens,

⁶Historians have long pointed out the socially secularizing and rationalizing tendencies of Protestantism and the Counter-Reformation Catholicism that responded to it.

protecting religious liberties rather than tolerating or closeting them, and, as Jürgen Habermas suggests, benefiting from varieties of religious interlocutors.

III. THE LIMITATIONS OF CRITIQUE

In the last decade critiques of critical reason and its subjectivities have emerged from many quarters.⁷ “Disdaining the obvious in order to probe the infinite mysteries of the unsaid,” as Rita Felski puts it, “the hermeneutics of suspicion promotes a sensibility that prides itself on its uncompromising wariness and hypervigilance” (“After” 28–29). As she describes it, the process of humanities training and of becoming a critical reader means precisely “moving from attachment to detachment and indeed to disenchantment” (30). Faced with this prospect, many of her students reject the academic culture of critique “because the theories they encounter are so excruciatingly tongue-tied about why literary texts matter, offering only a critical deflation of the reasons rather than a searching engagement with them” (30). The handmaiden of the hermeneutics of suspicion and the “invisible norm” of humanities inquiry, Michael Warner points out, is “critical reading” (“Uncritical” 20). At its heart, critical reading entails “techniques of distancing knowledge,” specifically the “rigorous extraction of oneself from the ethical demands of direct textual address” (20). Warner demonstrates that unacademic modes of reading, especially religious ones, are by no means necessarily uncritical or unreflective, and one of the weightiest ramifications of his essay is the implication of critical reading in secularism’s invisible religiosity: it is “the pious labor of a historically unusual sort of person”; it “inculcate[s]” particular “pieties and beliefs” (20). Critical and religious modes of reading maintain forms of subjectivity; critical reading is distinguished by its disavowed belief and its misrecognizing itself as universal reason.

The recognition of critical reading as a technique for inculcating secularism is a potent ground for postsecular studies, which Caputo

⁷See, for instance, Bruno Latour, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Rita Felski, and Lori Branch (“On”).

claims should be driven by “a post-critical sense of critique” that is more honest about the inability to separate knowledge from implication in belief (On 61). The “post” in “post-secular” should, Caputo claims, “not be understood to mean ‘over and done with’ but rather *after having passed through* modernity”—“a certain *iteration* of the Enlightenment” “by another means,” with a humbler idea of reason and knowledge (60). Such scholarship must be rigorous and critical yet wary of self-elevating distanciation, making room for compassion in its dealings with the text and its writer, capable of interrogating and being inspired by texts. This would be a mode of reading that could reach an audience beyond the academy with the joy of humanistic study. For Felski such “postcritical” or “reflective reading” borrows from phenomenology “the willingness to be patient rather than impatient, to describe rather than prescribe, to look carefully at rather than through appearances, to respect rather than to reject what is in plain view” (“After” 31), and

[i]t assumes that literature’s relation to worldly knowledge is not only suspicious, subversive, or adversarial, that it can also amplify and replenish our sense of how things are. It attends to the depth, intensity, and power of our attachments and does not see scholarly reading as requiring a shedding of such attachments. (34)

In positing relations to literature besides suspicion and in making room for “attachments” and “enthusiasms,” Felski allows for subjectivities and scholarly practices that acknowledge belief and human faculties beyond instrumental reason.

IV. THE LINGUISTIC TURN

In the early twentieth century, Ferdinand de Saussure famously showed that the dual nature of the sign (as signifier and signified) meant that the connection of the sound-image and concept (that is, meaning) was a psychological event and a function of the relation of the sign to other signs in an endless chain of signification. Examining the relationship among word, thing, and idea, philosophers in the

linguistic turn followed de Saussure in challenging the idea that words correspond transparently to things and concepts. The breakdown of this presumed correspondence let loose a variety of nihilistic and relativistic stances, most sensationally the radical arm of the Yale school of deconstruction. But much more lastingly, the lesson of philosophy after Ludwig Wittgenstein (as in the anti-foundationalist work of Nicholas Wolterstorff and Alvin Plantinga) has been that in the most important matters one interprets and believes, with reasons better or worse but never sufficient to constitute proof or to relieve one's responsibility for belief, interpretation, and action, when one might always have chosen otherwise.⁸ Derrida never tired of explaining that deconstruction was concerned not with the destruction of meaning but with truth and meaning as functions of complex relations of signs, events, and contexts, especially the giving and receiving of credit.⁹ In "Force of Law" and "Faith and Knowledge," the concern for context converges on the subject who thinks and acts *within uncertainty*. The central insight of this late Derridean deconstruction is that faith and knowledge, configured as opposites in the Enlightenment, are in this formulation "bound to one another by the bands of their opposition" ("Faith" 43), that the binary by which Enlightenment knowledge defines itself over and above belief is impossible to maintain, because faith (and messianicity) haunts the very nature of language.¹⁰

Rather than repressing the fears of involvement in faith and uncertainty to which the linguistic turn points, a robustly postsecular study must be invested in owning up to it. A postsecular recognition of the universality of belief amidst uncertainty is a ground for valuing free-

⁸The anti-foundationalist turn in Anglo-American philosophy by Christian philosophers at Yale, Notre Dame, and elsewhere, sometimes called "Reformed Epistemology," is one of the most important and (by humanists) understudied philosophical developments of the last quarter century. On belief and sufficient reason, see Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and William Alston.

⁹See especially his *Limited, Inc.* (1988).

¹⁰On Derridean messianicity, see Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (2004) and John Caputo's *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (1999).

dom from coercion, secular or religious. It also actively entertains questions that theory has been begging and foreclosing since the late 1960s: 1) whether there are viable ways of understanding the relationship between word and thing other than direct representation and certainty in propositional truths, and, by extension, 2) whether there are other ways of living and experiencing human existence than as the Cartesian subject of mastery and certainty with its pan-demonium of ills so meticulously elaborated by the Lacanian psychoanalytic criticism of the last half-century.

V. REVISED AND HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF RELIGIONS AND THE RELIGIOUS

If one begins seeing secularism as ideology, that would necessarily be also “to begin seeing religion differently” (Fessenden 634), since religion in modernity has been constituted by the logic of secularism. This seeing differently can take one of two forms: either inhabiting the category of the religious as it has been constituted under secularism in such a way that unsettles secularism, or refusing altogether the way secular thought has constituted religion. Derrida’s method in “Faith and Knowledge” is the first, teasing out the problems in the ways Enlightenment secularism constituted itself and its religious other around the knowledge/faith binary. Such a deep inhabiting of the traditional terms can itself be productive of genuinely new ways of seeing “the religious.” But seeing religion differently must also mean going beyond the knowledge/faith binary that has organized thinking on religion since the Enlightenment. A postsecular perspective encourages one to investigate religion as a shifting range of practices and experiences in different times and places, even as it draws attention to the continuities of spiritual experience across times and cultures.¹¹ As Hervieu-Léger puts it, instead of looking for signs of religion’s demise, one should look for signs of religion everywhere, especially of its transformation in modernity (23, 29). Misty Anderson

¹¹For a helpful new treatment of both the varieties and continuities of spiritual experience across cultures, see Marianne Rankin.

calls for a postsecular scholarship that “read[s] religion in rather than out of history” (237). What “religion” turns out to be in a given time, place, writer, or text, when not constituted in advance by a particular critical theory, is often exciting and revelatory, as Anderson’s work on Methodism and English identity demonstrates.

This historical broadening of understanding of the religious is potentially limitless, because of the impossibility of constituting a pure secularity. Thomas Luckmann speaks of the religiousness of self- and social-formation in ways that evoke Regina Schwartz’s claim to language’s sacramentality, always pointing beyond itself:

The organism . . . becomes a self by embarking with others upon the construction of an “objective” and moral universe of meaning. Thereby the organism transcends its biological nature. It is in keeping with an elementary sense of the concept of religion to call the transcendence of biological nature by the human organism a religious phenomenon. . . . We may therefore regard the social processes that lead to the formation of self as fundamentally religious. (Luckmann 48–49)

Crucial here is what Luckmann insists is the objective reality of human meaning-making in the world—as real as sunlight or fusion—and his equal insistence that one recognizes the mutual construction of self and society as religious.

VI. THE REALITY OF THE PERSON

Corollary to the linguistic turn are disciplinary developments that face one with the reality of the human person as a linguistic, meaning-making being. The need for correctives to a strictly materialist, survivalistic view of the species has been felt at least since the ascendance of Thomas Hobbes’s possessive-individualist account of the human person, certainly from the time of Charles Darwin, and has only been strengthened in the wake of the New Atheist “hard determinism” and evolutionary biology’s adoption of rational choice models from economics. Mary Douglas and Steven

Ney's *Missing Persons: A Critique of the Personhood in the Social Sciences* (1998) blames widespread misunderstandings of poverty, for instance, on the hegemony of the *homo economicus* model of the human being and the conceptual vacuum around the concept of the person in the social sciences, pointing to the need to account for the extra-rational and non-consuming dimensions of human persons. Personalist theology and philosophy, however, which in the twentieth century encompassed work as diverse as the philosophy of Levinas and Paul Ricoeur, the activist religion of Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King, Jr., and the theology of Karol Wojtyla and John Zizioulas, drew on deep roots in European thought to "offer an alternative to liberal individualism . . . by emphasizing the person over the individual and community solidarity over atomization" (Smith, *What* 100). Smith in *Moral Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (2003) and *What Is a Person?* (2010) advances a sociological view of personhood supplemented by approaches from outside the social sciences (personalist theory, critical realism, and antinaturalistic phenomenological epistemology) that eschews reduction to either the physical or the mental/spiritual. He insists on human beings as rightly understood in light of the complex reality of being *embodied souls* whose knowledge about the world is shaped by their beliefs primarily in "living narratives" about the origin and the nature of the value (or sacredness) of being in the world, a remarkably literary view of being human.

Humanistic and social science work on personhood provides important grounds for postsecular studies in that it situates believing, poetry-making, and narrative-making human reality *in the world*, not as something aberrant in an insentient, strictly material cosmos. Such antireductionistic scholarship insists on reading one and one's narrative, belief, language, relation, and freedom into and not out of its account of reality at every turn. Without dismissing all belief as delusion and false consciousness, it opens up questions about the literary structures of narratives and their negotiation of belief and meaning-making.

VII. THE RENOVATION OF ULTIMATE QUESTIONS

Since the 1970s and 1980s, materiality and historicism have functioned as particularly potent forms of Warner's distanciation from direct textual address, and global politics since 9/11 has for some only intensified strategies for avoiding ultimate questions—Where do I come from? What happens to me when I die? What does it mean to live well or beautifully? What is love?—as though entertaining these questions, which literary texts pose not infrequently, as anything other than objects of historical inquiry risks returning one to the naïve or bad-faith orthodoxies of the New Critics or making one into a religious fundamentalist. This assumption of combat between secular neutrality and subjective religious belief, Warner claims, seriously “distorts” scholarly ability “to confront such ultimate questions as finitude, mortality, nature, fate and commonality” (213).

Postsecular studies renovates one's ability to confront such ultimate questions. If one lives up to the insights of the religious turn formulated in the previous six premises, then one can engage ultimate questions not as a buffered or distanciated self but as a person in relation to these questions and the writers who ask them, past and present. Postsecular studies mark the possibility of viewing such questioning, uncertainty, and faith not as disabling lack of knowledge but, rather, as 1) the very condition of possibility for freedom and meaning-making, and 2) the prime concern of scholarly and pedagogical endeavors. The freedom made possible by the faith and construction necessitated by language is the grounds for the possible goodness of *holding dear* love, beauty, art, and hope for peaceful relation across difference: the most important things one does, whether the beautiful or the maniacally wicked, are such acts of believing and valuing, of holding dear. Because one could choose otherwise, articulating these human visions of goodness, and hope calls to people, if it does, as a potent and fragile endeavor. This is grounds for advocating for the role of the humanities in culture and education, a role far beyond the bare modicum of business ethics and bioethics deemed necessary to police what is assumed to be a materialist, scientific, and capitalistic economic reality. The nature of belief and knowledge,

their relation, particularly as they concern questions of goodness, non-violence, and right relations with others, and shaping a self capable of such communion, are not just the parochial concerns of a few but are questions of language and living in the world as beings who speak, read, and write, who *make meaning*. In the words of the Mellon Working Group on Religion and Literature,

Ultimate questions are never answered once and for all; they must be asked, lived, and plumbed anew in each generation. Their answers are profound but provisional, reasoned but necessarily incomplete; they are not quantifiable nor readily assimilated to the academy's hunger for novelty. Precisely for these reasons, they demand serious study. Such study may proceed from thoroughly secular assumptions. Yet engagement with perennial questions has been and continues to be interwoven with a history of significant religious dimensions. To ignore those dimensions is to cut oneself off from much human experience and thought. It is, in effect, to beg the question. (153–54)

Or, as Ravi puts it, pondering the implications of Gödel's theorem at the end of *A Certain Ambiguity*, "No matter what the axiom system, truth will outrun proof" (268)—or in literary terms, linguistic expression. Truth, beauty, and goodness require a freedom that leads one out of the realm of certainty, calling on belief and active hope. The recognition of the inescapability of uncertainty and belief in human experience and that through such belief lies the only access to beauty is the ground for postsecular studies.

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On the Varieties of Readerly Experience, or, Theory After Suspicion

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Distant reading, close reading, surface reading, reparative reading: while the era of theory preceding the present one, for all its disagreements, nevertheless agreed on the “necessity of reading” (de Man, *Resistance* 15), the current moment has begun asking, in earnest, what exactly that means. Never before, perhaps, has the dialectic of blindness and insight—or, perhaps, the questions, which of many blindnesses? of many insights? and why these metaphors?—seemed so pertinent. Such questions become more vexed when one entertains the notion that the new modalities of reading have divulged, by virtue of their very diversity, a comparatively *dogmatic* quality that informed the preceding era. (Why *must* one read? And what methodological strictures does such “necessity” impose?) Indeed, seen from a distance, that earlier moment of critical practice almost had about it the air of a secular liturgy in its ritualistic reiteration of the received principles of interpretation.

But if “reading” during the age of deconstruction was evocatively (if disavowedly) doctrinaire, even religious, then reading in the current climate is more *spiritual*, a term used intentionally here, despite the baggage that accrues to the notion of the spiritual. Actually,

“baggage” is probably the wrong term, suggesting something almost too durable in its disorganization. Spirituality, by contrast, seems ethereal, diffuse, shapeless: something in the air but difficult to grasp, not so much messy as amorphous. “The ‘spiritual,’” Sharon Kim observes, “has no formal structure but resembles water, which can become a body or fill a container though it remains fluid” (17). For this reason, scholars tend to set it against religion, for spirituality

bears some meaning that “religion” seems to obscure. . . . Research in psychology . . . and sociology . . . documents how in popular perception, “religion” refers to a static, traditional, objective institution, while “spiritual” indicates a dynamic, living, personal dimension evoking the “folk” order of experience. (25)

Why refer to the new ethos of diverse practices of reading and interpretation in this way? Timothy Bewes provides something of an entrée here, identifying a kind of spiritual origin—at the very least, a suggestive pre-history—of the “new critical orientation” toward reading. Bewes traces new reading practices to György Lukács’s landmark *Theory of the Novel* (1916–1920), written a century earlier in 1914–15. As Bewes has it, the “prevailing mood” of Lukács’s extended essay may be intuited in “its underlying premise of a world ‘abandoned by God’” and drawn on radically new grounds as a result (2). And this new world, bereft of what Kim highlights as the “formal structure[s]” of religion—one creed set against another, one set of rituals (or reading practices) transcending all others—now takes the form of what she calls the “water[y]” dimensions of the spiritual: “a world,” Bewes reflects, “no longer divided between inside and outside, subject and object, reflection and sensation, feelings and ethics,” but instead eradicating “the distinction between writer and critic” or between “the activities of writing and reading themselves” (3).

What this specifically entails for Bewes—an appealingly large-minded, ethical approach to reading “that suspends judgment, that commits itself . . . to the most generous reading possible” (4, *emphases deleted*)—is not beyond the scope of this essay as much as a little beside the point. For the aim here is not to delineate or taxonomize a

new critical poetics as much as to reflect on the ethos of what suddenly feels like a more expansive field of theory, and to identify what seems to be an alternative register of belief in it. Call it SBNR: spiritual, but not religious.¹ The larger backdrop for this interest in the collective *belief* of the present age is the so-called “religious turn” that has been at least a peripheral feature of literary studies for the past two decades. The subject addressed here—the new attitude toward reading and interpretation—tries to put a finger on how, if not why, religion remains an ethereal part of the critical landscape, a *genius loci*, if not a fully materialized presence within it, tracing the outlines of this new ethos by taking up, first, a signature work of theory from the era of deconstruction and then by contrasting it with the important 2009 intervention on “surface reading” by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus. Their piece, the introductory essay to a special issue on the subject in *Representations*, detected perhaps more than any other a different pulse in the body of contemporary criticism. While they do not take up religion directly, their essay helps one understand how the “religious turn” is also, at least with respect to the new diversity of approaches toward interpretation, a turn *away from* religion, but not from the spiritual.

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At the conclusion of a three-essay meditation on the tectonically shifty (but nevertheless foundational) work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Paul de Man asserts that “Nietzsche’s final insight may well concern . . . the discovery that what is called ‘rhetoric’ is precisely the gap that becomes apparent in the pedagogical and philosophical history of the term. Considered as persuasion, rhetoric is performative” in that it makes things happen, initiating some kind of action or inspiring new understanding (*Allegories* 131). “[B]ut when considered as a system of tropes, it deconstructs its own performance” in that it reveals that

¹This is a New Age phrase in increasing circulation; it is even the name of an organization, of which the tagline is “Love is the answer. You are the question.”

these events are, themselves, merely the predicates of conventional uses of language rather than evidence of something like human authenticity” (131). (“Marry me!,” for example, is a personal and potentially impactful imperative, but it is also an impersonal cliché replete with conventional associations. The same might be said of an epithalamium.) De Man’s point is not that the performative or constative mode is superior to the other. Rather, he concludes, “[r]hetoric is a *text* in that it allows for two incompatible, mutually self-destructive points of view, and therefore puts an insurmountable obstacle in the way of any reading or understanding. The aporia between performative and constative language,” or between language’s shimmering illusions and its mechanical operations, “is merely a version of the aporia between trope and persuasion that both generates and paralyzes rhetoric and thus gives it the appearance of a history” (131).

This provocative, albeit opaque, declaration bears some unpacking. It appears in de Man’s 1979 volume, *Allegories of Reading*. His point, a familiar one in his critical archive, is that texts—any text, all texts—divulge a kind of dualistic logic in that they operate in two mutually exclusive registers simultaneously. Texts *do* things and texts *are* things, and one either suspends one’s disbelief and allows oneself to be transported by poems, narratives, legal contracts, news reports, and all the myriad forms through which one communicates—one either allows texts to do things, to move one—or else one steps back and evaluates, analyzes, and criticizes the mechanisms through which such movement occurs. That is, one either finds oneself swept along by the force of language, or else one reflects on the mechanisms of that force and thereby breaks the textual spell. It is a product of the mortal condition that people cannot simultaneously feel and know the effects of language.²

But the phrase that concludes de Man’s formulation and paragraph—“the appearance of a history”—invites further reflection still.

²De Man essentially conflates textuality with the texture of life. Recall his famous statement that “death is the displaced name of a linguistic predicament” (*Rhetoric* 81).

Early in the excerpt, de Man refers to “the pedagogical and philosophical history” of rhetoric. In the series of essays culminating with this declaration, de Man embeds the development of rhetoric into a larger literary-historical schema that takes history as its object: “Roman-ticism itself is generally understood as the passage from a mimetic to a genetic concept of art and literature, from a Platonic to a Hegelian model of the universe” (79). As de Man notes, M. H. Abrams framed the contours of such a passage in his iconic work *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953); the shift from Plato to Hegel designates, basically, the difference between an aesthetic that sought to imitate nature and one that conceived of itself as creating it. In effect, if the mirror is “constative” (signifying a verification of what is present), then the lamp is “performative” (in bringing into being something that had not previously been there).³ “Within an organically [or performatively] determined view of literary history,” de Man continues, “Romanticism can appear as a high point, a period of splendor, and the subsequent century as a slow receding of the tide” (*Allegories* 80–81). Or, by contrast, one might portray Romaniticism “as a moment of extreme delusion from which the nineteenth century slowly recovers until it can free itself in the assertion of a new modernity” (81). But Nietzsche, the key figure in de Man’s essays, upends either trajectory by dismissing the pretensions of history altogether. In its place, he reveals “radical discontinuities” that disrupt “the linearity of the temporal process to such an extent that no sequence of actual events or no particular subject could ever acquire, by itself, full historical meaning. They all become part of a process that they can neither contain nor reflect, but of which they are a moment” (81). That “process” is the textual dualism discussed above, the oscillation between tropological and persuasive modes that, in themselves, mark actual passages between interpretive registers. Rhetoric here exhibits a kind of historical logic (of one thing after another), as one phase passes into the other and then back again. But rhetoric also undoes a conventional understanding of history as an all-out transition from one state to a different one (to take de Man’s example, from Romanti-

³See Abrams (8–14 and 21–26).

cism to Modernism). This is why rhetoric and literature can be historical in the microscopic pulsations of language while admitting only “the appearance of a history” at the phenomenal level of once-and-for-all changes of culture or custom (131).

De Man’s insistence that, ultimately, literature admits of no history, or that there can be no real history other than that encoded in a rhetorical binary, is an unusually powerful articulation of an idea that permeated his work. Indeed, this grand peroration in de Man’s 1979 volume *needed* the force he summoned for it, for the idea he was articulating—that language is internally riven, that it means something other than what it says, and therefore that it can never function as a medium of truth—was not in itself worthy of much attention not only because de Man had (in books like *Blindness and Insight* [1971]) already been there and done that, but also because Paul Ricoeur, more than a decade earlier in 1965, had published a major book, *Freud and Philosophy*, in which he characterized ideas like de Man’s as belonging to a deep-seated and, by that point, utterly conventional school of skepticism. The story is well known. Ricoeur called this body of work the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” and he argued that it emerged in the nineteenth century with Karl Marx and Nietzsche before arriving at theoretical maturity with Sigmund Freud’s concept of the unconscious. With this new school of suspicion, Ricoeur observed, the concept of interpretation shifted from the reconstruction of textual meaning to an act of “demystification . . . a reduction of illusion” (27). Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud viewed “consciousness primarily as ‘false’ consciousness,” such that any meaning—moral, social, aesthetic, what have you—was seen as a surrogate of something hidden, something repressed, violent, or mystified (Ricoeur 33). De Man, following not only Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, but also Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault (among many others), upped the ante by asserting that this detection of constitutional falsehood was no product of mere interpretive agency, no function of mere critical choice, but, rather, an acknowledgment that consciousness rests on language, and that language inherently takes bifurcated form: trope and persuasion, manifestation and latency, and so on. Meaning would not be possible, de Man asserts, were it not also, and simultaneously, an illu-

sion. In some ways, New Historicism, cultural studies, and schools of thought that cropped up in the wake of deconstruction amplified this notion to the degree that texts there became expressions of things other than themselves, whether of historical circumstance or race or class or gender and so on. Ironically, suspicion began redounding onto rhetoric itself: texts could no longer simply be texts.

In recent years, however, alternative modes of critical engagement like those referred to earlier (distant reading, surface reading, and so on) have emerged that make the hermeneutics of suspicion, in all its variations, seem less necessary than contingent, perhaps dated, and even uncool. To a certain extent, these new schools of thought emerged within deconstruction itself, as the hermeneutics of suspicion exhibited a reflexive suspicion toward its own supposed predilections. In the early 1990s, for example, Derrida took up the “return to religion” and examined how faith, the putative opposite of suspicion, laced itself tightly through the project of Enlightenment rationality (from Descartes forward) reputed to be so inimical to it.⁴ Derrida’s point here is philosophical rather than historical or conventionally religious: he concerned himself less with any *return* to religion than with the traces of religious thinking in seemingly secular constructs. Hence, belief, he remarks, informs any process of collective understanding, beginning with the necessary and preliminary sense people have that they share similar assumptions with those with whom they interact—that they mutually identify similar objects of attention, and that they perceive these objects in roughly similar ways. When, for instance, one undertakes, as Immanuel Kant did, to set forth a theory of *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), and thus to blunt the claims to faith as a motive for action, one implicitly engages in the very kind of activity one would proscribe in that “[w]e believe . . . that we share in some pre-under-

⁴There is, to be sure, a huge corpus of scholarship on this subject, perhaps consolidated most authoritatively by Charles Taylor. Matthew Mutter engages in a deft summary of much of this scholarship, including its implications for modern thought, in his forthcoming book *Restless Secularism: Modernism and the Religious Inheritance*. I am grateful to Mutter for sharing the introduction of that book with me.

standing” of such categories as “religion,” “limits,” “reason,” and “faith” itself (Derrida 5). To this essentially Durkheimian formulation (in its appeal to the notion that “the fundamental categories of thought, [including] science . . . have religious origins” Durkheim [421]), Derrida appends an idea associated with the work of Walter Benjamin concerning “messianicity,” meaning “the opening to the future . . . but without horizon of expectation and without prophetic prefiguration. The coming of the other can only emerge as a singular event when no anticipation sees it coming” (17, emphases deleted).⁵ That is, one (religiously) shares or puts one’s faith in certain presuppositions one holds in common, while recognizing that future encounters (or unforeseeable interpretations of texts) will modify one’s conceptions.

These evocations of faith and of a messianic responsiveness to the unknowable complicate the position Ricoeur sets forth that the kind of critical engagement with which deconstruction would become associated—exemplified by de Man’s analysis of rhetoric—is antiseptic to a long tradition of religiously inflected thinking: “The contrary of suspicion, I will say bluntly, is faith. . . . The first imprint of this faith in a revelation through the word is to be seen in the care or concern for the object, a characteristic of all phenomenological analysis” (Ricoeur 28, emphases deleted). This “*revelation* through the word” and the “*object* [of] phenomenological analysis” correspond precisely with the categories Derrida underscores in his own exploration of the religiosity intrinsic to communication and thought. Such correspondences inspire scholars like John D. Caputo to imagine “the religious aspiration of deconstruction,” the reversal or *conversion* of the philosophical economy of Enlightenment rationalism (xx). Other scholars, however, remain suspicious, and justifiably so. “Refuting the notion that there was an ethical or religious ‘turn’ in Derrida’s thinking,” Martin Häggglund contends “that a radical atheism informs [Der-

⁵One of Benjamin’s more famous articulations of the idea of messianicity—a redemption of history through the unearthing of the injustices of preceding generations—is found in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (254–55, 262–64).

rida's] writing from beginning to end" (1). Hägglund roots this reading in a concept of contingency, more specifically of "survival," that permeates Derrida's work, and that follows from a messianicity that loses all meaning as soon as it ceases to be mortal—that is, capable of death: "The desire to *live on* after death is not a desire for immortality, since to live on is to remain subjected to temporal finitude. The desire for survival cannot aim at transcending time, since the given time is the only chance for survival" (2). For Derrida, then, "there is only one realm—the infinite finitude" of mortality, contingency, and ambiguity, of erasures and traces, where faith is no sooner conjured than it is liquidated inasmuch as it disqualifies states of existence in which something like fullness or presence would resolve all contradiction (Hägglund 4). The Enlightenment may bear traces of religiosity, Hägglund would say, but religion itself, faith itself, only remains possible in a state of uncertainty, of doubt, of suspicion.

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It was with this interpretive axiom in mind that Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus edited a 2009 special issue of the journal *Representations* on the subject of "surface reading." They cast it as a countertype to the school of suspicion, where meaning is seen to be symptomatic of something "hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter" (1). The symptomatic school bears a long history, Best and Marcus observe, longer than that suggested by Ricoeur: "Umberto Eco traces it back to the Gnostics in the second century CE, who, in contrast to Greek philosophers who defined reason as noncontradiction, posited truth as secret, deep, and mysterious, and language as inadequate to meaning" (Best and Marcus 4). But this line of thinking acquired new purchase in the early modern period with "the development of perspective painting" and then truly rose to prominence in the nineteenth century with "Marx's interest in ideology and the commodity," which obscures the role of labor in its own production, and in the early twentieth century with Freud's interest "in the unconscious and dreams" (Best and Marcus 4). From this point forward, phenomena were seen as systemically

deceptive, incapable of truth. At least, according to a de Manian logic. Best and Marcus summon this long history in order to undercut it, resisting the archeological notion that textual meaning must be excavated from some hidden depth. Instead, they bring attention to the cognitive and affective structures of perception, literary language, elements of style, and other aspects of textual effect.

Consider in this regard the first stanza of William Wordsworth's iconic Romantic poem "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey": "Five years have passed; five summers, with the length / Of five long winters" (111). This poem is of particular interest to literary criticism because it serves as the occasion of a powerful and influential reading by Marjorie Levinson, one that, for Mark Canuel and other scholars, has come emblematically to illustrate symptomatology. As Levinson sees it, the poem turns on "a single but far reaching textual maneuver: Wordsworth's erasure of the occasional character of his poem" (15). That "character" takes a variety of forms. Take, for example, the composition of the poem itself, which ascends (and abstracts itself) from its loco-descriptive title, "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, July 13, 1798," to "a series of timeless, spiritually suggestive pastoral impressions," and thus erases the impetus of its inspiration in its immediate surroundings (Levinson 15). Or again, consider the poem's obfuscation of the rural inhabitants of the "nature" the poem idealizes, most notably in the reclusive presence of "vagrant dwellers" who, poaching on enclosed lands, send up "wreaths of smoke" as they prepare their meals (Wordsworth 112). Victims of social policy and statutory laws become, in Wordsworth's lyrical exercise, one with the (deceptive) spirit of the place.

Canuel, commenting on Levinson's interpretation, remarks appreciatively that "virtually no critic" over the past thirty years "has been able to ignore the weight of her claims about the real existence of industrial infrastructure" (365). That is, scholars find themselves unable to ignore questions of the material conditions that give rise to the poem's ideological appeals to, in Levinson's phrase, "spiritually suggestive pastoral impressions" (365). Yet, Canuel also criticizes Levinson's approach for essentially dividing poetry from "lived

materiality” (365), and for seeming to imply that historical conditions subsist over and above the poems that either mimetically transcribe them or else violate a code of fidelity to things as they are. By contrast, Canuel argues, poems are, themselves, objects in the world; and, more than that, they and other cultural artifacts create the realities that, in Levinson’s reading, they merely reflect.

But consider the implication of Canuel’s critique that Levinson’s reading, for all its undeniable ingenuity, relegates the poem to the status of an ideological emblem one must regard suspiciously. Contrast it with a rudimentary “surface reading” of Wordsworth’s poem. The poet professes at the outset to have returned to a place in nature he loved as a boy. There, his thoughts oscillate between reflections on his past and the scene before him: the waters of the River Wye, the “steep and lofty cliffs” of the Cumbrian mountains, and “orchard-tufts” that dot the landscape (Wordsworth 112). Then his gaze drifts to “hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines / Of sportive wood run wild” (112). For Levinson, such a vision betrays a misprision of culture as nature, with the hedgerows, the property lines bound up with a history of enclosure and clearance, converted into “little lines of sportive wood.”⁶ This characterization, she would say, obscures the truth of exploitative history that took the form of clearances in the centuries preceding Wordsworth. De Man might add that such reification reveals how poetic effects—the raptures of metaphor, of cognitive transport—are predicated on confusion, as property laws decompose into imagery, and class struggle morphs into mere foliage. But Wordsworth is also modeling here something like a practice of surface reading, which does not necessarily ignore the complexities of history as much as seek to capture them in the process of their ongoing transformation. When hedgerows become “sportive lines of wood,” what is at play is not so much ideology, or

⁶“The green lawns, that figure in the poem as an image of psychic and material wellbeing, are the miserable product of an economic fact and its charged history, as are the attractively, ‘sportively’ sprinkled lines of hedges, another emblem of enclosure” (Levinson 42).

⁷On the mathematical concept of topology and its significance as an instrument of theory, see Sha Xin Wei.

tragic misrecognition, as topology, or shifting fields of relation⁷—the deep past now connected to the mind of the poet, that mind to the landscape, and that landscape to the tissue of poetic effects binding readers to a world in which the early modern clearances are simply less urgent than a host of other ills the poem addresses further down, like depression, aging, and loss. If “Tintern Abbey,” one of the great poems about nature, obscures ancient peasantry but accentuates the dependency of thought and feeling on their surroundings—if the poem trades the ancient history of class struggle for, say, the present specter of environmental catastrophe—that probably is not all bad. Even ethical work can happen across aesthetic surfaces as well as at ten thousand leagues under the page.

That leads to the real heart of the argument here. The difference between symptomatic and surface reading is as much affective as conceptual: it speaks to a different mood and modality of being as well as to a different methodology of interpretation. For that reason and with Derrida’s analysis above in mind, it also evokes alternative religious registers. While the hermeneutics of suspicion is nominally atheistic, at least as Ricoeur portrays it, undermining as it does any possibility of truth, even revelatory, it actually recapitulates fidelity to the divine sphere it seeks to demystify because suspicion clings to the notion of some transcendent reality. Ideology presupposes truth, a material state of things as they are, somewhere beneath falsehood; psychoanalysis evokes the category of the Real, if only as a structuring principle for the workings of the Symbolic; and so on. Proponents of suspicion, Best and Marcus observe, “daringly associate[e] the power of the critic with that of . . . God . . . who can transcend the blinkered point of view of humankind” (15).⁸

The dynamics of deep *and* surface reading inhere with particular

⁸As Nietzsche remarks and ironically exemplifies, critics, or what he contemptuously labels “men of knowledge,” are not free from the idea of the God they condemn, for “they still have faith in truth”—the truth asserting that any semblance of the divine is, in fact, illusory (150). The same holds true of Nietzsche, however, if he wishes to carry his point. What seems important about this disclosure is less Nietzsche’s own contradiction than the formal place of the divine that a suspicious reading implies.

trenchancy in another new mode of interpretive practice, distant reading, made possible by the digital analysis of vast corpuses of material. At one level, distant reading is virtually all surface, with computers performing relatively perfunctory and elementary tasks—picking out terms, browsing for collocates, and so on—albeit at vast scales of billions of words and thousands (if not hundreds of thousands) of texts. The visualizations generated by these algorithmic “readings” enable one to glide across the surface of decades, even centuries, of literary labor, reducing countless hours of existential lucubrations to points on a graph or nodes in a network. Yet for all its innovative irreverence, much of the affect of distant reading remains decidedly old school, or so Franco Moretti (with Ricoeur, seemingly, in mind) prompts one to infer when he labels traditional interpretive engagement essentially “a theological exercise—[a] very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously” (20). What is needed instead, he playfully remarks, “is a little pact with the devil: we know how to read texts, now let’s learn how *not* to read them. Distant reading: where distance . . . is a condition of knowledge” (20). That is, in place of the kind of exegetical reconstruction Ricoeur advocates, proceed instead to a model of interpretation that renders interpretation itself scientific and falsifiable. Digitally procured patterns will reveal when or whether literary forms emerged, word searches will divulge the rise and fall of discursive trends, and with them the substance of history, and so forth. But for precisely that reason, distant reading does not change the way one reads, not really; instead, it amplifies the skepticism inherent to modern thought in calling *all* interpretive actions to account for their limitations. In that respect, it reinscribes the divine perspective—indeed, the “theological exercise”—it purports to dismantle.

Surface reading, by contrast, does not qualify as a theological exercise: surface readers do not, Best and Marcus contend, take the position of God. Yet, a residual religiosity nevertheless clings to this interpretive practice, though of a different variety. It discloses itself as such when readers ask “what it might mean to stay close to [their] objects of study” (Best and Marcus 15), to position themselves not above but alongside these objects. Here, the operative paradigm is

less one of human fallenness, per de Man (where truth is irremediably displaced by the operations of language), than of connection, one node to another across a networked play of surfaces. Reading in this modality thus falls under the heading less of divine knowledge than *spiritual experience*, a theoretical category designating a “rich interconnection of ideas, memories, and emotions that weaves normally separated parts of life into a single field of meaning,” a vast surface of affective resonances (Wildman 104–05).

Is it going too far to connect surface reading to spiritual experience? In many cases, yes, especially if one reads literally, for very few iterations of surface reading refer to spirituality. But few instances of symptomatic reading refer to God, either; what Best and Marcus reveal by way of that insight is a structuring principle on which symptomatic reading rests, one that connects comparatively irreverent assertions like de Man’s to a longer (indeed, a ritualized, virtually catechized) history. But in that very light the affect to which Best and Marcus appeal bears a history of its own, and it strikes a chord with a mood and movement that have little to do with reading per se. As Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead observe, “Survey after survey shows that increasing numbers of people now prefer to call themselves ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘religious’” (22). Why? Because, and adopting a rationale analogous to the one taken by Best and Marcus, “the term ‘spirituality’ is often used to express commitment to a deep truth that is to be found within what belongs to this world,” whereas ‘religion’ . . . express[es] commitment to a higher truth that is ‘out there,’ lying beyond what this world has to offer” (22). Religion is vertical, spirituality is lateral: it moves across networks, across surfaces.

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New scholarship in the field of spirituality builds on the research undertaken more than a century ago by William James for *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). As James sees it, spiritual experience across all faith traditions reveals certain core points of similarity—convictions that “the visible world is part of a more spiritual

world from which it draws its chief significance,” that “union or harmonious relation with that higher universe is our true end,” and that prayer represents the point of connection between us and this vaster reality that exceeds us (528). In effect, James invokes here a grand topology of meaning in which individual subjects, like distinct nodes in a network, are not so much existentially separate as bound up in greater reticula of meaning. James’s undertaking seems noteworthy, for spiritual experience is, or should be, of interest to literary theorists for a number of reasons and not only as a New Age corollary to new modes of reading. For one thing, spiritual experience delimits an intensely and increasingly interdisciplinary field, connecting literary studies not only to such disciplines as religious studies, art history, anthropology, sociology, and phenomenology—traditional branches for the study of spiritual phenomena—but also to evolutionary biology, neuroscience, systems theory, and more.⁹ For another, and with this congeries of disciplines functioning as a kind of emblem, spiritual experience provides the humanities with an opportunity to claim for itself an explanatory role mediating the cultural meanings of such experience. For that matter, such experience underscores the value of meaning itself, which is what the humanities add, indispensably, to the economy of knowledge. During an era of a widespread and in some cases alarmingly profound “crisis in the humanities,” this is an opportunity not to be taken lightly.¹⁰

But there is a third reason why spiritual experience should be of interest to literary theorists, and that has to do with the historical elaboration of the modern cultural space of theory. Consider for a moment a tension implicit in the very phrase *spiritual experience*. For James and others in his wake examining the subject, spirituality designates a force that bursts the boundaries between categories—feeling

⁹Wildman observes that one must “evaluate the overall plausibility” of spiritual experiences by surveying “entire systems of interpretation” involving multiple disciplines (xii).

¹⁰For an analysis of the relationship between “crisis” and meaning in the humanities, one rooted less in present-day history than in the structure and function of the humanities in the university, see Geoffrey Galt Harpham.

and thought, religion and science, individuality and collectivity, and so on. The *spiritual*, by this reckoning, is a category that connects diverse domains of human existence—psychological, cultural, even historical (in, for example, the animation of scriptural narratives in the lives of contemporary readers). Experience, meanwhile, is a category that ever since the onset of the Enlightenment has been characterized by the drawing of partitions. As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe observes, the etymology of *experience* derives from “the Latin *ex-periri*, a crossing through danger,” such that one may divorce experience from “what is ‘lived’” (18). Indeed, German differentiates two categories of experience, *Erlebnis*, or “lived experience,” generally signifying what is present (and especially what is intensified), and *Erfahrung*, which involves the idea of a lengthy duration and often implies something collective (18). A poem for Lacoue-Labarthe never speaks directly to human experience; in fact, what one “lives” may not be what one recollects later.

Lacoue-Labarthe’s dissection of experience points toward a larger subject of differentiation, which is found in the historical and philosophical rupture between experience and knowledge. This split has been enshrined in the legal system as the statutory difference between witnesses and jurors—those who are directly privy to an incident, who “experienced” it in some way, and those authorized to arrive at conclusions about it, who can “know” what is true precisely because they were *not* present.¹¹ This split between experience and knowledge emerged historically with the epistemology of modern science, with its methodology of experimentation (etymologically related to the word “experience”) and the subjection of the data derived from experiments to a skeptical mode of understanding—the scientific method that is a precursor to the “suspicion” of which Ricoeur writes. But this division between experience and knowledge fostered a further breach between what is sometimes called “short” and “long” experience, or between moments of heightened sensation and periods of extended exposure, an incident in life on one hand

¹¹I write extensively about this phenomenon in *The Ruins of Experience* (2007); see especially the introduction and chapter 1 (1–42).

and a time of life on the other (Jay 9–12). During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a whole cult of art (sometimes identified with Romanticism, other times with Modernism) took shape around the idea of “short” experience, i.e., bursts of feeling or consciousness that transport one beyond the confines of the mundane.¹² This concept met with criticism from cultural critics like Benjamin (and from novelists like Robert Louis Stevenson) because it effectively reproduced the condition it purported to alleviate, namely the modern logic of compartmentalization evident across the division of labor, the specialization of disciplines, and other areas of modern life (Wickman 43–68). As Benjamin’s friend Theodor W. Adorno recognizes, artworks designed to elicit “short” experience do not remedy such divisive structures as much as reify them in the difference they assert between aesthetic experience and everyday life. Adorno calls the thought born of such responses “work-immanent analysis,” or consciousness, whose parameters are set by the artistic worlds from which they are born. Adorno contrasts such thinking with a process of “second reflection,” the exponents of which perceive in the artwork the tensions between the work—including the promise of fulfillment bound up in it—and the social and psychological schisms implicit in the work’s historical moment (345–48).

Two points should be made here. The first pertains to reading, which is that work-immanent analysis and second reflection bear no necessary correlation with surface and symptomatic reading. Take, for example, a hard-boiled detective novel, which seems to invite suspicion as a kind of critical reflex while also presenting, as Fredric Jameson famously observes, a gloss of stylistic surfaces (33–56). Second reflection can imply wider and more affective as well as deeper reading strategies. The second point is that spiritual experience bears within itself a correlative dynamic to the one pertaining to the quandaries concerning experience generally, albeit one with complexities usually

¹²The classic site of this discussion is in Hans-Georg Gadamer (42–81).

¹³For example, near the conclusion of a detailed overview of Christian spirituality as an academic subject, Sandra M. Schneiders classifies spirituality as “the study of experience” but asserts that the latter, “by definition, is incommunicable as such” (29). She thus renders “the analogous experience of the

passed over by scholars of the subject.¹³ It takes little imagination, for example, to see spiritual experience as little more than a kind of ecstasy, a momentary burst of intensity, a good feeling and nothing more, a brief respite from a world that the experience does not change. But does spiritual experience potentially do more than this? Does it bear within itself, as Adorno argues of art, a promise of happiness that introduces a conflict between the conditions of that promise (e.g., a heaven on earth, even one that is metaphorical) and the historical moment in which the experience occurs? Doubtlessly, yes; indeed, the very notion of a promise of happiness is messianic in structure. As Martin Jay shows, an analogy did form historically between spiritual and aesthetic experience, with Martin Buber in particular exhibiting, at first, great (and almost avant-garde) enthusiasm for spiritual experiences of an instantaneous, transcendent variety only later to modify his views in favor of a network of I-and-Thou relationships as a more durable form of religious expression (Jay 122–30). In this respect, it may be less true to say that spiritual experience draws from aesthetic theory than that the latter represents a relatively late evolution of the moral economy of religion.

The historical and philosophical nuances of spiritual experience are extensive; in Jay's analysis, they extend from the work of Kant and Friedrich Schleiermacher to James and Rudolf Otto. Indeed, one might say that an entire journal like *Literature and Belief* predicates itself on the multiple arrangements of the spiritual in modern life, arrangements that themselves bear on the problem of experience. Across all this diversity, however, one might pause to make a fairly simple point, exemplified by Buber's revised perspective, which is that one need not imagine spiritual experience as only a momentary phenomenon, an icon of "short" experience. Indeed, one may gesture toward numerous instances in which such experience extends its

researcher . . . virtually necessary for understanding" without addressing what, exactly, that "analogous experience" means or entails (29). Meanwhile, Ann Taves in a monograph dedicated to religious experience essentially begs the question: "specifying the precise sort of experience we want to study is much more important than defining the concept of experience" (59.)

influence over longer periods of life to modify behavior and circumstances.¹⁴ Nor must one bind spiritual experience to the sphere of the individual, for such experience often involves groups in various arrangements, religious and otherwise.¹⁵ What is more, spiritual experience also implies connection between systems of representation (whether religious, political, literary, or other) that provide explanatory frameworks linking moments of heightened consciousness to sets of meanings that extend across diverse areas of life and periods of time. In that respect, spiritual experience prospectively reconciles “short” and “long” experience, to say nothing of the interface it enables between such diverse branches of academic inquiry as religious studies, sociology, cognitive neuropsychology, evolutionary biology, philosophy, art, literature, and more. This is true even without taking the truth claims of many spiritual experiences concerning redemption, worlds to come, enlightenment, or what have you at face value.

Why, then, should literary theorists, even those with no particular interest in religion, care about spiritual experience? Because it comprises an interdisciplinary subject that presents an especially poignant, if also problematic, opportunity for the humanities to claim a rightful place at the institutional table of learning, and also because the paradox inscribed into the very concept of spiritual experience (connected disconnection, one might say; intimate estrangement) encrypts within itself a puzzle intrinsic to modernity that in the work of the Frankfurt School opens the modern space of literary and cultural theory.

Surface reading, then, opens onto a field of academic inquiry that is much larger than the sphere of hermeneutics that was the scene of such drama for Ricoeur, de Man, and many who followed them.¹⁶ To that extent, surface reading may be of greater interest for

¹⁴This is how James defines “the saintly character,” as that “for which spiritual emotions” and the experiences to which they are attached “are the habitual centre of the personal energy” (298)

¹⁵This includes in postsecular theory strictly political, even atheistic, spiritual communities (Braidotti 251).

¹⁶As an exemplary scene of that drama, see John Guillory’s compelling extended analysis of de Man (176–265).

its implications than for its particular poetics. Best and Marcus suggest as much by portraying their inventive approach as something of a remedy to the long history of suspicion, and not only as a new mode of interpretation. In summary, theory in the postsecular age exhibits an important impatience with suspicion—a mode of thought that was itself born historically in the two centuries preceding theory from the crisis surrounding experience in the latter's rupture from knowledge. Prophets of suspicion like de Man remind one repeatedly that the world *seen* is not the world that *is*. But the exponents of a new connectedness, commensurate with the aspirations, if not always the historical associations, of spiritual experience, desire to reconcile what de Man and others declared riven.¹⁷ Evident in surface reading (but also in environmental studies, Actor Network Theory, and many other branches of thought¹⁸), experience in this evocatively spiritual register intuits within the limits of its own horizons the dimensions of worlds it cannot see, but to which it feels it already belongs. William James could probably have told as much.

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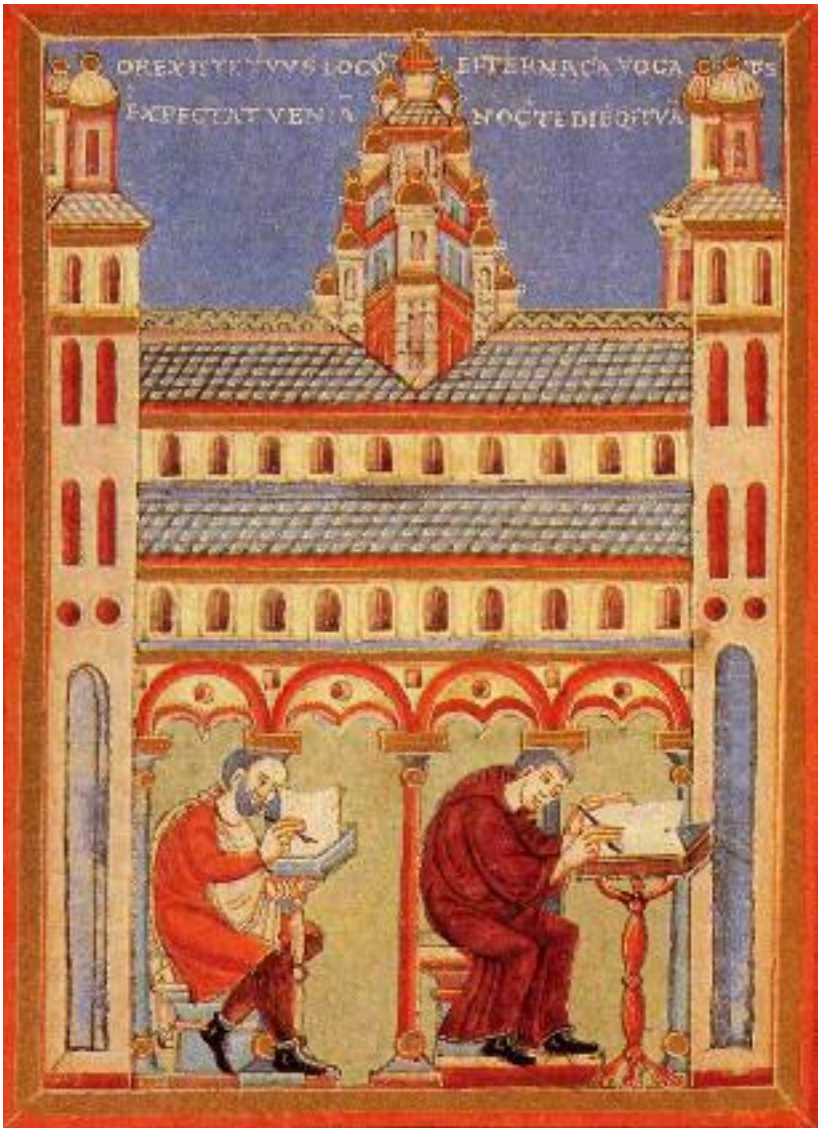
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¹⁷Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick provides an especially important early intervention in this new poetics.

¹⁸Actor Network Theory, for example, though seemingly unrelated to the study of spirituality, shares with the latter an interest—in its case, a rigorously developed interest—in networks of association.

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Monk and Layman Copying a Medieval Text

True as Far as Translated Correctly

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Samson is clearly the hero of heroes for the Hebrew writers of Judges. God seems enthusiastic about him, too—“the Spirit of the Lord” does not hesitate to move “mightily upon” the brawny, bigger-than-life superhero three dramatic times in the short space of his biblical epic (14:6, 14:19, 15:14). But modern readers have a harder time buying into Samson’s moral heroism. It is not just the question of whether his character is worthy of divine inspiration, given his persistent prurient penchant for the wilder variety of Philistine women. The more pressing problem is the result of that inspiration—grisly death, occasionally of something like the unfortunate lion that makes the mistake of getting in Samson’s burly way, but usually of hordes of Philistines, thirty here, a thousand there, several thousand when he brings down their temple on their heads. Modern readers find Samson’s Philistine-killing prowess as impressive in an action-movie sort of way as the Hebrews did. But they also find it unnerving to watch God wax so enthusiastic about murdering Philistines. Every time the Lord inspires Samson, he kills something, generally a thousand or so Philistines. From a twenty-first-century perspective, that is worrisome inspiration.

Many readers—God-fearing, churchgoing, Bible-reading readers—do not like reading the Old Testament. They dislike it for good reason. They find its God hateful. He seems to play favorites, appears to be callously uncaring for a Father, and, sometimes, as in these Samson inspiration scenes, looks downright murderous. Nobody—certainly not the Bible—is saying that God cannot be any way He wants to be: the Master of the Universe is entirely entitled to be bipolar if He pleases. But that is just not the God many Bible readers know and love, not just from the New Testament but from their own personal experience. They cannot help but suspect that the God they have come to know as the Prince of Peace is getting some bad press here. There is a natural tendency to blame what seems to be misrepresentation of God on the writing of the record—unreliable journalism. Actually, the problem may be more with the reading of it.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints holds scripture to be true “as far as it is translated correctly” (*Articles of Faith* 8). If that is true, Bible readers should probably pay more mind to the translation process, because where the Bible is concerned, there is a great deal of translating going on. There is, for example, what God said, translated into the terms of whoever heard it—Samson, for instance, when he is inspired in Judges. There is what Samson thought he heard, translated by whoever eventually wrote it down, then translated again by the redactors of the scrolls in King David’s court when the Hebrew Bible likely first came together, and then translated again four centuries later by the probable refiners of that editing around the time of Nehemiah—not xeroxing, not the dozens of hand-copied clonings of the text, but real rewriting, new textual drafts in new contextual terms and new wording. There is what those scribes wrote, translated by foreign-language translators, as with the King James Version translators, working as those translators did from earlier translators like William Tyndale and John Wyclif. There is what more recent translators translated into the New International Version or whatever version is actually being read. At the climax of that eight-to-ten-step translation process comes the most crucial translating—personal interpretation of what is read in whatever

Bible. It is a little like the parlor game where each person in a circle whispers in the next person's ear what was just heard from the neighbor on the other side—easy to hear it wrong, easy to get it wrong even when it is heard correctly. With scripture, God in some fashion provides the original sentence, which is a great start. But after that, biblical translating slips are surprisingly easy to make.

It looks like slippage occurs early on with the Samson scenario. One might well question, from his violent behavior, whether Samson heard exactly what God said when he was moved upon by the Spirit. The reader is explicitly told that Samson was not told, let alone dictated, precise words, let alone telegraphed a memo of exact things to do; rather, “the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him,” and all know that the Spirit moves in mysterious ways. What if what God actually urged were something more fatherly than the resulting action of Samson's, something less like “kill Philistines” and more like “save Israelites”? What if Samson—all-time greatest killer of Philistines, the man who knew everything there was to know about Philistine killing and not much else—heard, when God wordlessly whispered to him, “save my children,” what he was able to hear of that, something more along the lines of “save my children by murdering as many Philistines as possible”? What if that were about the only way the Rambo of Philistine killers *could* hear inspiration to rescue the Israelites?

Whoever finds that scenario of Samson acting under inspiration in ways contrary to inspiration surprising needs to brace for a bigger surprise. Samson's saga is typical of translating issues in the Bible. Account after Old Testament account is related in ways that make a modern reader wonder about the reliability of various narrators. Some readers are comfortable minimizing the confusion for themselves by assuming the Bible narrator must everywhere be God, inherently reliable. Unfortunately, the Bible suggests nothing of the kind. Occasionally, God speaks directly in the Hebrew Bible, but almost always someone else, usually an unidentified narrator, is talking about Him, and sometimes talking about Him in ways that go beyond calling His morality into question as far as making Him look more like Darth Vader than Luke Skywalker.

The Lord probably appears at his Hebrew-Bible discouraging worst when He jihads the Canaanites. That is not a pretty picture—Joshua passing on God’s instructions to kill all the locals so the Israelites can take their land. The word is not just to obliterate the Canaanite standing army, taking no prisoners. The instructions from Joshua are drastically draconian—kill every single man, woman, and child. And goat. Joshua’s justification for those brutal orders, which he quotes as coming directly from the Lord, is his concern that if any Canaanite child were to survive the holocaust, he might sometime influence some Israelite kid to worship the Canaanite idol Chemosh.

That explanation of the Canaanite genocide seems a little thin from a modern perspective—it does not so much as attempt, for instance, to make sense of the gory livestock extermination. In defense of Joshua’s primitive propaganda, modern justifications of the massacre do not sound much better: *They deserved it, those dastardly Canaanites*. But that notion would seem more dastardly of those who propagate such a defense, ready and willing to kill—to kill anybody, make that everybody, no exceptions. Such justification does not account at all well for the killing of innocent kids, let alone the goats and their kids. Another excuse for God’s supposed jihad is that *God can do whatever He wants, and one is presumptuous to question anything God does*. The decided red-herring nature of that excuse gets highlighted by the fact that the very function of the Bible seems to be—as much in Joshua as everywhere else in scripture—precisely to explain God’s ways to His children. The third most common modern rationale in justification of cutting every single Canaanite throat is that *Israelites really needed the land*. Observing this motivation in other contexts, ISIS depredations, for instance, most people would tend to disapprove. In fact, none of the usual justifications of God’s ordering everybody killed, Joshua’s or modern explanations, could hold up in a debate with a three-year-old, let alone be thought to emanate from God.

Consider an alternative possibility to the readerly premise that God is the meanest, most despicable of tyrants ever—but that is all right, because He is God. Entertain a reading other than the notion that the Lord is something of a superpowered Osama Bin Laden—

more resources, far more competent at killing—but better motivated. Contemplate a reading that is both more appealing and more realistic: God did not tell the Israelites to kill every living Canaanite. The Israelites thought that He did. Joshua was certain that He did. God certainly told them something—they are so sincere about it and Joshua so confident of it that they proceed with extraordinary enthusiasm to all that killing.

But what if there is the kind of glitch in translation considered earlier with Samson? What if Joshua, a William Tecumseh Sherman-on-his-march-to-Georgia sort of a warrior, i.e., really good at his work—those Jericho walls definitely came tumbling down—misheard slightly the Lord's instructions on the best way to move into Canaan? What if God told the Israelites to *settle in Canaan*, and they heard that injunction in the perfectly reasonable or at least common terms of the day as *get those Canaanites out of your road so you can settle in Canaan*? That was, after all, the customary way migration business was handled in those days. One did not just move into the neighborhood the way one does today. One moved the neighbors out so one could then move in. Maybe God did not order it; they just assumed it.

It is not that people do not have the right to think as ill of God as they wish. But most would rather not. The experience for many with God has often been extraordinarily positive. Whatever hitches have arisen in a joint relationship with Him many people frankly feel to be more their fault than His. So some people are just not comfortable viewing Him as some kind of control freak, let alone a monster who gets His kicks by ordering the throats of every man, woman, child, and sheep cut. That simply does not seem the kind of thing the God most people know and love would do—not even if they were really, really, really bad guys, even their sheep; not even if the Israelites really needed the land and sort of deserved it because they were the good guys; not even if they worshipped the worst gods ever and God was somehow—it is very hard to picture this—jealous of that; not even if the nature of the universe somehow required a kind of ISIS justice from God, if jihad somehow looked like justice to Him; not even if that is all right, because He is God, and He, like

the five-hundred-pound gorilla in the joke, can—and *would*, that is the sticking point—do anything He darn well pleases, however hurtful, however hateful; not even if people are such worms that they cannot hope to comprehend the mind of God so they are not worthy to worry about the morality of things like cutting the throats of every man, woman, child, and dog; not even if God works in ways so mysterious His wonders to perform that they are too nasty to be believed; not even for the total stack of all the usual theological excuses put together would most people be willing to degrade the God who has treated them so well by accusing Him of abusing others of His kids so mercilessly, of being capable of murdering anyone, let alone everyone, let alone, for heaven's sake, their livestock, let alone commandeering good folks like Joshua and Samson to do that dirty work for Him. That sort of thing just does not look like His style.

That presents a reality check for people who are determined to think that God likes killing Canaanites. That makes their “necessary evil” reading of God’s misbehavior sound a little short on the “necessary” and long on the “evil.” The bottom line for Bible readers is that it puts the responsibility for their reading not on God but squarely where it should be—on the reader. A person reads, reader-response critics say, as a person is. Style in reading characterizes one as vividly as does style in clothing. The way a person reads can say as much about a person as it does about what is read. As one reads the Bible, the Bible reflects back on one, assessing the set of one’s soul from the way one perceives it. God himself is not murderous. That means that people who worship a murdering god must be reading the murderousness out of themselves—like perhaps Joshua and Samson, like ISIS, for sure, in a venue where one can pull aside ideological blinders far enough to see murderousness for what it is.

Biblical translating can work for as well as against understanding. Scripture does not come with a warning label, urging readers not to mistake negative models for positive models, but it does the next best thing. The Bible does not say, nor in any way imply, that readers should model their lives after every historical anecdote of mistake and moral mayhem and murder in its pages. To the contrary, the preponderance of moral models in the Bible is clearly, often explicitly,

negative: *thou shalt not*s. The Bible is a thoroughly moral book, yet many of the behaviors reported in it are not moral behaviors. That means that readers have both an intellectual and a moral responsibility to affirm what is genuinely moral. Reading something as wrong-headed and darkhearted as support of slavery from biblical sources, for instance, is bad reading. It is not merely inaccurate reading; it is immoral reading.

However viciously the Bible is read, the reading does not make God vicious, nor the Bible vicious. It makes the reader vicious. Readers—of anything, especially of anything as morally fraught as scripture—are responsible for the way they read. When they read the Bible badly, it is not the book's fault, nor God's. Some seem to wish it were. People who read ungenerously have a natural inclination to blame their bad readings on something other than themselves. Some readers excuse their readings on the basis of biblical *inerrancy*, thinking the inerrancy of the Bible makes their readings of it inerrant. Some think they are honoring Peter's injunction that "no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation" (2 Pet. 1:20) when they struggle to align their Bible reading with the theology of some Christian sect or other. Some are convinced they are reading the text *literally* when they read the Bible as if God had spoken every word in it rather than, as the Bible itself indicates, having had some say in it.

To suggest taking the words of Joshua or Samson with a grain of salt as the direct word of God is not to suggest that anyone in the Bible is lying, that anything in it is untrue from the perspective of a particular speaker. Those Israelite jihadists, for instance, are clearly telling the truth, as they knew it. The question is, how much of it—God's truth, that first pristine sentence from His mouth—they got straight. It is obvious that these Bible folk are convinced that they heard the word from God. But it also seems apparent that God would never tell them anything but the truth, and they are definitely determined to transmit what truth they heard. Therefore, it is quite likely that they may not have heard Him as clearly as they thought. That God instructed Samson to murder Philistines at every opportunity by means of whatever unholy weapon came to hand, jawbones of asses

and pagan temples not excluded, is doubtful. Almost certainly, God would not order the deaths of every single Canaanite and his little sister and her cat so that Israelites would have land to settle. But it is obvious that the Israelites thought He did. More crucially for translating concerns, it is not hard to see why they heard what they did, when the reader steps even a little way into their sandals.

Do not get all hot under the proverbial clerical collar here: no one is suggesting that something in the Bible is not true. In fact, the opposite is the case: this Bible narrative really is the truth—not the grit-your-teeth-and-wish-it-were-true kind of truth that some readers try to read into it, but the kind that really happened. Peter Enns makes a compelling case that respecting the truth of the Bible does not require endorsing everything anyone in the Bible says, not even when it is said about God. The Bible is the word—sometimes even the words—of God “as far as . . . translated correctly.” That suggests that it is incumbent on readers to translate it—correctly.

Readerly intuitions are commendable. Readers do not want God accused of doing bad things, and it looks as if the Bible is telling them He did some horrific things. So Bible believers try to excuse the badness, to define the badness out of the things people are saying God did. It is quite natural to assume, when God appears to do something vicious in the Bible, that such acts cannot really be vicious, because God is not vicious. But perhaps a more productive reaction when somebody in the Bible says God does something vicious might be to wonder whether somebody else might have performed the viciousness. The natural candidate—the usual suspect—might be the person attributing misbehavior to God, the person saying, “deity made me do it.” If readers are really interested in believing the Bible and not just wishing that they could, it might make more sense to consider the possibility that God did not do the bad things some people in the Bible say He did.

It could be illuminating to recognize readers’ part in the translating process. They might learn, for example, that the cultural perspective of a people affects the way they hear the word of God, and that obvious fact might explain much that is otherwise inexplicable in scripture. Better yet, translating correctly could show how some

readings that appear to be a black eye on the Lord are simply misreadings. Even better, accurate translation could illuminate not only the reading of scripture but readings of everything, including readers themselves. The fact that the word of God (like everything else, only more so) needs to be translated correctly has clear practical implications. Many readers have experienced inspiration, too—been informed in undramatic but definite ways what to do by the Lord. They understand how hard it is to sense inspiration in the first place, and that it is even harder to get its implications straight. Their personal experience with the way inspiration works strongly suggests that they need to read the Bible the way it is written, honestly and searchingly, not the way they think it should have been written, reconfirming in black-and-white terms what they already think they know.

Scripture, thank the Lord, was not created by a church committee. It is, rather, an aggregation of what some very different people thought God said to them. Readers would do well to read what it says, not what they expect it to say or think it ought to say. The inherent necessity of translation suggests that they need to read Bible words on their own terms, not as the abstract words of God somebody said they were but as what they say they are—the words of God along with the words of a bunch of other men who did not always know exactly what they were talking about. The inspiration process is not so different from any other relationship. Those who think they understand the relationship—husbands, typically, for example, in a marriage—are seriously underestimating it. As the warden admitted to convict Paul Newman in *Cool Hand Luke* (and in so doing pinpointed every relationship ever, especially the inspiration relationship with the Lord), “What we have got here is a failure to communicate.” Looked at as it is and not as one wishes it would be, the amazing thing about Bible reading is not that writers and readers sometimes get things wrong but that they get things right as often as they do.

Readers can safely assume that God is pretty much perfect on the inspiration end of communication. The part that readers have trouble with is the translation part. If they have been reading the Bible,

however faithfully and persistently, as if God said every word in it, they probably need to read it again and see what it actually says. If they are reading it as if God endorsed its every word, approving every random pronouncement that anybody contributed to it as something one ought to do, they might do well to notice that there are at least as many negative examples in the Bible as positive ones. Reading as if God mouthed everything in it, word for word, sours the Old Testament into a really nasty read indeed. But when it is read as if it is the best translation that could be made at the time of what inspired people heard from God as well as they were able, the Bible is the best book ever. When readers stop blaming God for things He did not actually say, the Bible starts making eminent good sense with happy stress on “good.”

Madalyn Murray O’Hair’s translation of the Bible is a version that highlights—in fact, exclusively limits itself to—biblical sexuality and violence. Traversing that rocky textual territory, one realizes not only that O’Hair reads the Bible as if God were the villain, but that she also may not be alone in that misreading. Her determined negativity easily persuades one that the Bible reads better if translated more generously, giving God the benefit of the doubt. That allows readers, instead of wondering why, for instance, it took God so long to get the memo that slavery might not be the best of social ideas, to watch Him over the centuries educating His resistant children in better ways to treat each other. Rather than disappointing readers with what they had assumed to be the Lord’s quaint early take on slavery, it becomes clear through the Bible how long and how hard He has been working to train His people to love their brothers. Instead of distressing themselves over why God seems to be having a hard time getting over hating His gay children, readers can observe Him in the Bible moving them, despite the most virulent varieties of cultural bigotry, toward awareness of how much He cares for all of His children. Instead of an inbred party line that assumes “we are the only people God cares about”—the standard not just among “the chosen” in ancient Israel but for many others still—readers can start noticing those accelerating biblical references to concern for “the stranger among you.” Instead of using Bibles as pa-

triarchal clubs to beat women over the head with, readers can realize that women initiate more narrative action in Genesis than they do in modern America.

One last biblical exemplum of God's guidance not as readers might assume it should work but as it actually works in practice is that delightfully rowdy prophet Elijah. It is clear that God is guiding Elijah, clear that the prophet is enacting, to his level best, what he thinks God wants him to do, and equally clear that there are things in his prophetic career that might have been better managed. If one is assuming that God provided Elijah's detailed script for his duel at Mount Carmel with the priests of Baal, reconsider what its contents would have to have been—*convert my people, Elijah: confront King Ahab; challenge the priests publicly before all the people; set up a duel on Mount Carmel so they have all the advantages of home-field, first try, and possession of the bull for the entire first two quarters; trash talk them sarcastically and scatologically when they fail to call down fire from heaven; make them watch you build the twelve-stone altar; douse it with twelve barrels of water to make it manifestly harder to burn; pray a fanatical anti-Baal prayer; call down lightning to burn up the bullock sacrifice and the wood and the altar and the dust and all the water from the trench; climax your command performance by hunting down and killing all 450 of the priests of Baal, plus the four hundred priests who eat at Jezebel's table, with your own hand* (1 Kings 18:17–39). That script is magnificently dramatic, especially that last clause. It seems evident that inspiration is involved in Elijah's re-conversion of the Israelites. It is equally clear that some of the events involved call into question the nature of that inspiration. Obviously, Elijah heard the "convert my people" clause clearly. After that, some of those details sound more like Elijah's scripting than God's.

It sounds even more like that a chapter later, when God affords Elijah the final lesson of his life:

the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still

small voice. (1 Kgs. 19:11–12)

The moral of that story from God's mouth to His prophet sounds something like, "much as I admired your fine show on Mount Carmel, maybe high drama and violence do not convert as convincingly and lastingly as the Spirit." Or perhaps it sounds like, "you did well, faithful prophet. Next time, though, consider leaving out the part where you kill all the religious competition with your own hands." Much likelier than God's instructing His prophet to murder 850 priests is that God inspired Elijah to "convert my people," and Elijah did that, as best he knew how, in high Elijah style.

Many people have suspected for some time deep in their Bible-reading hearts that God is not the murdering monster some biblical passages seem to indicate. Notions like inerrancy and reading "literally" are good-hearted attempts to try to mitigate God's apparent misbehavior; but they are untrue to the text and insulting to its Author. A better translating approach might be to question those in the Bible who claim that He told them to do vicious things that even people today, let alone the Lord God, would not do. God does not really need lame defenses of lame accusations against Him. He might prefer trust, or, better yet, understanding, specifically understanding that He is better than some people in the Bible and many other places are making Him look. It puts God in such an unnaturally bad light, that need some feel to justify Him for highly questionable actions. The possibility of divine misbehavior seems far less likely than the probability that readers have simply not translated correctly.

The presumptive premise here is that the Bible is the word of God as far as it is translated correctly. Why would biblical authors, and, more especially, the Author inspiring their authorship, put readers in such a perilous, not to say paradoxical, position? Why would God choose to give the Bible in its present translation-in-need-of-translating form when He could have given a sermon or a Sunday School manual or a theological treatise or a list of "Things to Do Today" out of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989) or a manager's flow chart or a picture worth a thousand words or a sociologist's case study or a mathematical equation or a trip to Hawaii or a chemical formula or a guru or an incendiary device to blow one's brains out and blow

His word in? Because the best way, and maybe the only way, to get God's words to readers is through readers, either through personal inspiration or inspiring others to inspire them, as in scripture. Since the word of God comes marked "assembly required," there must be something in the assembling process crucial to the communication.

The Bible truly is the word of God. It is doing its level best—and it is a pretty fair best—to tell not just the historical truth but the ultimate Truth, rather than what readers—having what the Bible refers to as "itching ears" (2 Tim. 4:3)—want to hear. That is why translation issues loom so large. It would be convenient to forget that readers get God's word not directly from the source but through middlemen. People speak of *the* gospel as if there were only one. Actually, of course, after Matthew there is another gospel according to Mark, a gospel according to Luke, a gospel according to John, and gospels according to sixty other translators of God's word, including a Moabite and a woman who won a queen contest by sleeping with a judge. The only possible way to hear God's own good news is to listen very carefully for it through various and finite and sometimes contradictory human voices.

The implications for Bible reading could be as heartening as they are cautionary. Should a child be allowed to read such a book as this—such a persistently ambiguous, sometimes contradictory, always edgy argument-starter of a book? The only way most people would share it with their own children is if they thought that they were unusually bright. They would want them to have it only if they were of sturdiest character, determined to find the truth and able to handle the complexity of truth rather than default to simplistic propaganda. The only way they would trust their children with a book as challenging to read as the Bible would be if they thought they were remarkably good, thoroughly well motivated, capable of deftly separating the wheat from the chaff, tenacious in focusing on the good word of the Lord, however blurry its presentation. The Bible attests by the way it is written, on its every page, that God trusts people, that He thinks them competent readers, capable of much more than merely taking somebody's word about His word. He seems to think that they can translate the Bible for themselves.

One of the worst raps in scripture is the one on Elisha in the mat-

ter of the she-bears: doddering old Elisha

went up from thence unto Beth-el: and as he was going up by the way, there came forth little children out of the city, and mocked him, and said unto him, Go up, thou bald head; go up, thou bald head. And he turned back, and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the Lord. And there came forth two she bears out of the wood, and tare forty and two children of them. (2 Kgs. 2:23–24)

For all the apparent tallness of the tale, no one is at all suggesting that the event did not occur. Quite the contrary—there is definitely something going on here. One cannot make such stuff up. There is definitely not less but more here than meets the eye, certainly more than the usual simplistic translation of “serves the little delinquents right.” No doubt the Lord and His prophet could wipe out forty-two kids by means of angry she-bears. What is doubtful is that they would want to, or that they did.

What if readers were to translate this passage better, to inquire a little more thoughtfully into the facts of the biblical situation? How old, for instance, are those “children”? “Children of Israel” are full-grown adults. Some Bible “lads” are, as in the case of Isaac when he is to be sacrificed, over thirty. If Elisha’s “children” are not stumbling infants but young adults or, worse yet, teenagers, how does the picture alter? Could these be young ruffians rather than kids? Could they be, in those accumulating numbers, which do not sound much like a play date, a gang? Does that possibility make their numbers, rather than tragic, become threatening? Might the gang have been more than forty-two strong, that number only as many as the bears could run down of a hundred, two hundred, to get close enough in their flight to “tare”? And does “tare” mean kill, as is too readily assumed, or something more like “mauled”? How many actually died? Any?

What do the lads mean by that provocative “go up, thou bald head” chant? “Thou bald head” smacks of “hairless wonder,” a smart-aleck teenager cheap shot. Could the hooligans be insulting Elisha, too, with their recommendation that the prophet “go up,” like Elijah

in the burning fiery chariot, both to get out of town and to show them something more interesting in the supernatural department, if he is not as short on that as he is on hair? Could the taunts run more deeply, into a religious vein, since Elisha is headed for Bethel, one of the high places of profound worship that anticipated the temple in Jerusalem? What does their insulting of this gentle old prophet—he is an almost polar opposite to the violent Elijah—on his way to worship suggest about their character and say about the just deserts of a little mauling (as opposed to massacre) from a few bears?

More fundamentally, in this translating: how confident are readers of causal connection between the curse and the bear-tearing? Time gaps between scriptural sentences can run millennia. If the delay before “there came forth two she bears out of the wood” is days rather than the seconds being assumed, a very different scenario emerges. Gangs of young ne'er-do-wells roam the woods, inciting general mayhem, teasing bear cubs, and going so far as to harass venerable prophets. A sensitively aging prophet takes their insults personally enough to yell imprecations at them. The next day or week, enraged she-bears whose cubs have been teased mercilessly take out their wrath on the teasers, scarring many and scaring the devil out of them all. Did the prophet's curse sic the bears on the youths? First Kings does not say so. If readers do, they are succumbing to the habits of Danny Kaye's friend whose favorite place was beside herself and favorite sport was jumping to conclusions. The connection readers jump to conclude is not mentioned in the Bible; there is no “thus the curse was fulfilled” in the Elisha passage unless they read it in.

The Lord backs Samson and Joshua in some pretty brutal moves, so no one can doubt that He might support His prophet in such a situation as this, even to the point of siccing bears on kids. But it does not look likely here that God, or His prophet, is at all violent, let alone lethal. The logical fallacy to which humanity is most prone is *post hoc ergo propter hoc*—“after this, therefore because of this.” Many people are quick to assume, when one event follows another, that the prior event is the cause of the subsequent event. They think that way because causation works that way—causes naturally precede events. But they get so used to thinking in that sequence that they forget that not

everything that precedes every other thing causes that particular thing. Here with Elisha and the biblical bears it probably does not. Maybe the she-bear depredations were not God's fault or even Elisha's. Maybe the troublemakers caused the prophet grief. Maybe he responded angrily. Maybe the bears came out of the woods with no necessary urging from Elisha, spiritual or otherwise. Maybe he was beleaguered enough by obnoxious youths insulting his baldness that even this legendarily patient prophet lost patience and said some shocking stuff, and somebody hearing the "curse" and observing the subsequent bear-tearings concluded that it is dangerous to mess with prophets, particularly in the company of mother bears.

Maybe readers should cut Elisha a little slack. There is every indication in his biblical history that he is a thoroughly good guy. Additionally, there is significant indication in this passage of a situation run afoul of the Hebrew equivalent of a *National Enquirer* reporter. Whoever is recounting this anecdote, it is not God, and it is not Elisha, and, keen an eye as the reporter has for dramatic detail, he is anything but inerrant if *inerrant* is taken to mean historically precise. Maybe readers should also cut God a little slack. Maybe readers should give scripture a break, quit paying so much attention to self-serving speculations of narrators, and let the Bible speak for itself on its own terms. Maybe readers should translate it correctly. When they do, it speaks true.

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The Everyday Aesthetics of *Piers Plowman*

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Heaven exists within one's cultural and societal framework on a number of levels. Of course, heaven is seen as the end goal for a Christian life. If viewed in terms of the end goal for the faithful Christian, heaven becomes a place and experience of reward. But what does it mean to be a place of reward? How can the aesthetics of heaven correspond to expectations for individuals who sacrifice and display fidelity to Christian virtues and morality? In addition, one often thinks of heaven in terms of some manifestation of divine will: "moving heaven and earth." Or the concept of heaven is linked to notions of protection or approbation—"heaven help us" or "in heaven's name." Alternatively, one might consider the various ways that today's society looks to heaven as a standard of excellence or sensory experience. People describe experiences as "heavenly," or the transcendent quality of beauty as feeling as if they are "in heaven." This concept of heaven as the standard or epitome of sensory experience is intriguing, as it establishes heaven as necessarily being the most beautiful and the most transcendent of experiences. As such, heaven as an aesthetic experience must be compared with the highest forms of art. Though when a Christian framework is applied to

this notion of heaven as the aesthetic standard, there might be a comparison offered between the aesthetic realms of earth and heaven, but heaven will always surpass even the greatest works of human or natural creation. Heaven, one would contend, cannot be ordinary, because it surpasses all beauty. This initial grounding forces artists and writers to imagine heaven in terms that exceed the common experience of humanity.

A fundamental issue, of course, is that heaven's beauty was thought to exist beyond all superlatives, and so the goal of writers is to engage in a depiction that can do justice to such a place. But how can one make sense of something that exists beyond one's comprehension, especially when human forms seem unable to meet the challenge? For St. Augustine,

God's creation was utterly unlike human art, in the sense that God's art proceeds, *ex nihilo*. But though he was influenced by Platonic and Roman notions of mimesis, he construed the significant import of human art as symbolic of the higher meaning of God's art: that is, as exceeding mimesis. (Margolis 31)

In other words, art should inspire and refer to the higher meaning—the anagogic truth—of beauty, but such an idea necessitates a series of questions with reference to considering heaven and beauty.

If heaven is to be beautiful, how can authors describe that beauty? Will that beauty simply remind the reader that the writer cannot do justice to the supposed beauty of heaven? These questions underscore the difficulty of dealing with heaven and the notions of beauty. By examining the choices of medieval authors with respect to beauty, one might better understand how aesthetics and the dominant forms of art influenced authorial decisions of creating heavenly visions. Of course, a natural distinction should be made between beauty and aesthetics; though the two concepts seem interchangeable, they are distinct commodities. Denis Donoghue defines this difference:

Beauty is a value, to be perceived in its diverse manifestations. Aesthetics is the theory of such perception. Aesthetics and the

theory of beauty are not the same, because the theory of beauty may be concentrated on objects and appearances but aesthetics is concerned with perceptions and perceivers. (17)

So the focus should not simply be of appreciating beauty and pointing out beautiful scenes of heaven; rather, the focus is on how those scenes—however beautiful—point to how aesthetics create specific appeals to the reader. In other words, the idea is that beauty with respect to heaven is the given, but questions must be asked of the means by which medieval authors create beauty within heaven and what those aesthetic choices mean for the reader and the text.

Dante Alighieri journeys through the three places of the afterlife, culminating in a heaven that might be thought of as rather simple in some respects as the spheres of the universe, progressing to a final vision of the Empyrean shaped like a rose, bathed in the triune light of God. The Middle English *Pearl* presents a resplendent New Jerusalem filled with 144,000 Pearl Maidens marching in virginal white, each of their breasts containing the physical manifestation of their purity in the form of the pearl of great price. In *The Vision of Tnugdál*, heaven contains a litany of precious jewels, evoking the moral and aesthetic qualities enumerated in medieval lapidaries, upon which ethereal light works to enfold all into a heavenly union.

These examples of heavenly aesthetics impact readers in a number of ways, but the most important aspect is that they force them to imagine heaven as only being beautiful. Such an aesthetic dominance seems inessential, as one concedes that heaven must be the most beautiful and perfect place. But questions still must be asked. Can one imagine heaven as anything other than a place of gleaming lights and jewels? Is one able to escape a cultural heritage that presupposes images of brilliant light and God enthroned upon clouds?

William Langland's *The Vision of Piers Plowman* offers an example of a landscape that does not conform to typical understanding or expectations of the afterlife. Can such a place offer the same opportunities of reflection and beauty that traditional depictions of heaven might?

Despite the popular insistence that medieval Christianity presented a cohesive and unified set of beliefs and values, reality paints

a contradictory portrait. In addition to the many heretical scares and crises of the Middle Ages, the period was remarkable for continuing tension regarding the role of the church in state affairs and vice versa, the influence of religion on everyday life, and general concern for what it meant to be a “good” Christian. Aesthetics elided these differences to project a system that allowed for clergy, scholars, and lay people alike to engage with the divine. Each moment, each object might inspire thoughts of the divine. If a meadow were beautiful, medieval aestheticians pointed to the hand behind that landscape. If a church building were beautiful, its organization and symmetry echoed the importance of harmony within the universe. Thus, all of the beauty of the world could be directly tied to God. A world where every object is directly tied to the work of God offers an opportunity to view objects not considered beautiful or artistic and tie them to the realm of heavenly aesthetics.

To highlight the distinction between the potential of life and the choices of aesthetic thought, *Piers Plowman* opens to a world located within the two poles of the human existence: “a tour on a toft tieliche ymaked” (P. 14) and a “deep dale bynethe, a dongeon therinne” (P. 15). The poem does not engage these localities with detailed description, leaving questions as to their composition, purpose, true location, and populace. Of course, a tower on a hill and a deep dale with a dungeon can be easily read as heaven and hell—the ultimate ending places for a medieval life. For Mary Clemente Davlin, the tour and later discussion of the tabernacle “express the deeply Biblical imagination of the poet, influenced here by his beloved psalms, and they reinforce other evidence that early architecture was seen in the Middle Ages at least in part as a sign and a promise of heaven” (106). Davlin also believes that these images are essentially images of protection, but the problem is not one of signs and promises nor protection; these places are not easily accessible and are never actually reached by the Dreamer of the poem nor the titular character. What function can these places actually serve due to their inaccessibility? These initial locations, including “Malverne Hilles” (Langland P. 5), initiate a series of landscapes and buildings that force readers to consider right and wrong actions, allowing them to question whether they will end

up in the “tour” or “doungeon.” This is an eschatological architecture, focusing attention on places and spaces that inspire thoughts of the afterlife. In the same way, *Piers Plowman* deploys various scenes with images that present potential aesthetic responses steeped in morality, highlighting the kind of critical judgment needed for a Christian to attain the ultimate end of the “tour.”

Because the poem will not dazzle readers with descriptions of these places of dwelling, suggestive of heaven, they should look to see how light functions within the poem, which is an essential characteristic of standard visions of heaven in literature. Light’s purpose in heavenly scenes is multivalent, but its ever present quality suggests it is a defining aesthetic component of heaven. *Piers Plowman*, however, does not present overt descriptions of light’s powerful quality in the poem through its earthly source of the sun. *Sonne* appears twenty-two times in the text, varying in usage from orienting actions, defining the scope of Nature, contrasting current conditions to the horrors of the Last Judgment, to pointing to the transformative quality of Christianity. The sun initially orients readers to geographic and seasonal markers—“In a somer seson, whan softe was the sonne (P.1) and “A[c] as I biheeld into the eest an heigh to the sonne” (P.13). The sun’s orienting function continues in *Passus* 7: “The preest and Perkyn apposeden either oother—/ And I thorough hir wordes awook, and waited aboute,/ And seigh the sonne in the south sitte that tyme” (7.139–41). Not only does the sun orient the reader, but it also functions as a catchall for the vastness of the earth and human experience, which Langland employs by noting that “For is no science under sonne so sovereyn for the soule” (10.206) and “Alle the sciences under sonne and alle the sotile craftes/ I wolde I knewe and kouthe kyndely in myn herte!” (15.48–49). In Will’s dream-world, the sun also stands as a perfect foil for the darkness that will descend on the day of doom: “The lord of lif and of light tho leide hise eighen togideres./ The day for drede withdrough and derk bicam the sonne” (18.59–60), “Lif and Deeth in this derknesse, hiron fordeoth hir oother./ Shal no wight wite witterly who shal have the maistrie/ Er Sonday aboute sonne rising” (18.65–67), and “Sith this barn was ybore ben thritti wynter passed,/ Which deide and deeth

tholed this day aboute mydday/ And that is cause of this clips that
 closeth now the sonne,/ In menyng that man shal fro merknesse be
 drawe/ The while this light and this leme shal Lucifer ablende”
 (18.133–37). Despite the fact that the sun’s presence will not be felt
 during Satan’s rule, it yet retains a transformative quality: “‘After
 sharpest shoures,’ quod Pees, ‘moost shene is the sonne’” (18.411)
 and “And sent the sonne to save a cursed mannes tilthe/ As brighte
 as to the beste man or to the beste woman” (19.435–36).

For a poem of approximately 7,300 lines about medieval existence,
 the fact that the sun makes only twenty-two appearances forces the
 question of why there are so few examples of the sun and what those
 examples mean for the poem. The sun in *Pearl* is nonexistent, but
 there is no lack of light—Christ becomes the source of all life and
 light in the poem, working upon various highly ornate and spiritually
 valuable jewels. In Dante’s *Paradiso*, light is the means by which one
 engages with God: “In the deep, transparent essence of the lofty Light
 / there appeared to me three circles having three colors but the same
 extent, / and each one seemed reflected by the other / as rainbow is by
 rainbow, while the third seemed fire, / equally breathed forth by one
 and by the other” (XXXIII.115–20). But there are no such ornate and
 valuable jewels in *Piers Plowman*. In fact, Langland uses the word *jewel*
 only once in the poem: “By Jesus! with hire jeweles youre justice she
 shendeth / And lith ayein the lawe and letteth hym the gate,/ That
 feith may noght have his forth, hire floryns go so thinke” (3.153–57).
 Langland clearly distrusts the influence of jewels with connection to
 institutions meant to protect a Christian from immoral influences.
 But such criticism of jewels also attempts to locate the aesthetic
 quality within the human body. In other words, aesthetics are not
 merely discussions of theories, but they are also opportunities for en-
 gagement and experience for the viewer. The viewer might be
 moved, or the viewer might be appalled. Jewels, for Langland, are an
 aesthetic experience, allowing those who view the jewels to become
 lost within the appraisal. How does one engage with items of beauty?
 Can one be distracted by things that glitter? Or can one understand
 what values beautiful items really represent? In other words, can
 something be beautiful but be morally wrong?

Light works upon the surface of items, creating the effect of dazzling the eye. Taking notions of Plotinian emanation, the gleaming and reflecting of light upon materials, is reminiscent of the unity of being through emanation from and returning to the Divine (Wimsatt and Brooks 113). And the use of light reminds one of purity and essence, which light demonstrates “the purest . . . the most sublime beauty” (de Bruyne 57). There is a clear tension between the purity of light and the kinds of items (however beautiful) that light works upon in the world. The discussion points to the fear associated with these types of bodily charms that might be objects of aesthetic appraisal. Giving voice to that fear is St. Bernard who notes in *Apologia ad Guillelmum* that members of his order must turn away from such delights: “We who have turned aside from society, relinquishing for Christ’s sake all the precious and beautiful things in the world, its wondrous light and color, its sweet sounds and odors, the pleasures of taste and touch, for us all bodily delights are nothing but dung” (qtd. in Eco 7). This discussion underscores the need for an appraisal of aesthetics—the power such a force can have on the minds of people. Why is St. Bernard ridding himself of such beautiful sights? Why does *Piers Plowman* offer readers the character of Conscience so afraid of Mede and her beauty? These fears are not because of simply the corrupting value of immoral or unethical displays of beauty; these fears allow one to recognize that aesthetics has power.

Responses to items of beauty—aesthetic responses—move humans to respond in a variety of directions, allowing each person to become a bodily reminder of the potential of aesthetic response and a critic of such sights, sounds, and pleasures. The Middle Ages promoted a vision of aesthetics that was tied to a moral and ethical approach:

For the Medievals, a thing was ugly if it did not relate to a hierarchy of ends centered on man and his supernatural destiny; and this in turn was because of a structural imperfection which rendered it inadequate for its function. It was a type of sensibility which made it hard for the Medieval to experience aesthetic pleasure in anything which fell short of their ethical ideals; and

conversely, whatever gave aesthetic pleasure was also morally justified, in cases where this was relevant. (Eco 80)

What *Piers Plowman* offers is a move away from images that elicit uncritical approaches; rather, the poem forces readers to view each scene and wonder what value might be assigned to the resulting image—either good or bad. In other words, *Piers Plowman* asks its audience to be aware of the power of aesthetics.

Instead of the ornately described and highly polished jewels of Pearl and the corrupting jewels that Conscience decries, the sun of *Piers Plowman* works upon the actual landscape of the poem; more specifically, the sun works on what God has created. The very universe was a type of “explosion of light and the divine light,” which came to unify everything in the heavens under the heading of God’s creation (Sheldrake 57). Instead of constructing a poem centering on heaven or highly ornate landscapes, Langland offers an unremarkable series of landscapes and individuals. Langland’s poem forces readers to engage with activities germane to the everyday life of medieval England. This emphasis on the quotidian obligates the audience to recognize how commonplace experience does not only matter now; daily existence marks one for eternity. Langland’s audience, allowing for the wide-ranging possibilities of fourteenth-century English literary culture, specifically the oral transmission associated with the poem, would have known about stained-glass windows. Even beyond that experience, some in the audience would have seen or possibly owned jewelry. But every single member of the medieval audience would have experienced darkness. They would have known what it felt like to be cold. They would probably even have known how to gauge location, season, and time by the sun.

Langland’s approach to the question of aesthetics is one of universality. Avoiding an elitist approach to aesthetics, he does not try to thrust his readership into unfamiliar places or experiences; rather, he engages it in diurnal reality. This process speaks not only to his practical theological approach, but it also relates specifically to his aesthetic program. Beauty and aesthetics are not simply meant to awe; they are also meant to overwhelm with spiritual truth, promoting the

connection between God and beauty. For medieval theorists and writers, this aesthetic principle meant that beauty must only originate from God, and so all beauty must bring humanity's attention to that fact. It is unsurprising, then, that a poem so engaged in day-to-day existence points constantly and consistently to a recognition that humanity's existence, however dreary that might be, is only made possible by God. The world of *Piers Plowman* exists outside of the majesty of the grand cathedrals of Europe. Light cannot work on the stained-glass windows of those cathedrals because they are not the true mark of spiritual development; they work not to raise the viewer to heaven or to spiritual truth but speak more to the wealth and prestige of their donors:

Thanne he assoiled hire soone and sithen he seide,
“We have a wyndow in werchyng, wole stonden us ful hye;
Woldestow glaze that gable and grave therinne thy name,
Sykir sholde thi soule be hevne to have.”
“Wiste I that,” quod the womman, I wolde noght spare
For to be youre frend, frere, and faile yow nevere
While ye love lordes that lecherie haunten
And lakketh noght ladies that loven wel the same.
It is a freletee of flessh—ye fynden it in bokes—
And a cours of kynde. wherof we comen alle.
Who may scape the sclandre, the scathe is soone amended;
It is synne of the sevenne sonnest relessed.
Have mercy,” quod Mede, of men that it haunteth
And I shal covere youre kirk, youre cloistre do maken,
Wowes do whiten and wyndowes glazen.
(Langland 3.047–3.061)

These windows, *Piers Plowman* indicates, are not to reach heaven by any means other than by purchase. The goal of the windows is to gain entrance via donation and not through the faith and sacrifices that a rose window demonstrates through its focal point of Christ, from which all meaning of the window resonates and all life gains value. Instead of looking to gain entrance into heaven through the

acquisition of wealth and distribution of funds to religious organizations, one should think of how actions lead either to the “tour” or to the “dungeon.” Again, this critique of the windows and a blinding aesthetic find resonance in the words of St. Bernard commenting on the excesses of medieval churches: “Everything else is covered with gold, gorging the eyes and opening the purse strings. Some saint or other is depicted as a figure of beauty, as in the belief that the more highly colored something is, the holier it is” (qtd. in Eco 80). St. Bernard speaks to the ways in which one becomes lost within the aesthetic experiences, connecting the experience of sight to reflexively opening the purse strings. It is a world where one does not reflect on how the aesthetic experience moves the viewer; rather, it is simply the movement that enthralls and sweeps away in an uncritical manner. Merely because an item is beautiful, as noted in both the above critiques of Mede and stained-glass windows, does not provide a direct link to its value within the Christian worldview. Again, *Piers Plowman* offers readers the ability to evaluate the immediate, uncritical responses one might normally associate with the act of walking into a cathedral and viewing sacred art.

A church is not heaven, but what a church might offer is a place for a body to lose itself in an experience of transcendent beauty. A church might offer a body opportunity to engage with deep contemplation of the truth of the sacraments. A church might offer a body occasion to reflect on its own spiritual well being. All of these opportunities allow for an aesthetic response to locate one’s body within the framework of a moral, Christian world, which Abbot Suger articulates:

[Being in church] induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues: then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven; and that, by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner. (qtd. in Eco 80)

What is vital in such a report is that the transcendent, aesthetic experience can transport one from the terrestrial to the ethereal because of one's surroundings. A church allows for the joining of place and aesthetics in such a way as to remind the medieval of the truth of existence—life, beauty, place all depend upon a relationship to, from, and with God. Suger's conception of aesthetics and medieval churches differs greatly from that which Langland promotes in *Piers Plowman*. From the splendid and glittering world of Suger, one must ask if such an experience can be found in the bloody and sinewy representations of the church in *Piers Plowman*:

Such representation may be seen in the Barn of Unity description:
And Grace gaf hym the cros, with the croune of thornes,
That Crist upon Calvarie for mankynde on pyned;
And of his baptisme and blood that he bledde on roode
He made a manere mortar, and mercy it highte.
And therwith Grace bigan to make a good foundement,
And watlede it and walled it with hise peynes and his passion,
And of al Holy Writ he made a roof after,
And called that hous UniteHoly
Chirche on Englissh. (20.324–31)

While the poem has previously evoked questions as to how to view the stained-glass windows of great cathedrals and the jewels that might normally be associated with beauty, it also offers a final church that removes all of the splendor that might be associated with a proper Christian church. Can this place serve the same function as Suger's beautifully decorated and appointed churches? By refusing to present a series of images that question the spiritual or economic values of jewels, the poem locates the aesthetic response within the physical, bodily terms of Christ. This is a sanctuary made of the very physical being and means of torture of Christ. This is where the poem's final scene occurs, and it literally places Christ at the center of its vision. The dreamer Will has wound his way from the Field of Folk to the Trial of Mede to the Harrowing of Hell to the Ploughing of the Field to the Tree of Charity. These scenes have offered various pieces

of advice; however, each piece is clear: put one's faith in God. Each item directs one in a pattern, however winding, to this locale, to this final aesthetic scene. This is a world fixed on the immediate appraisal of life, getting the most out of it because it is hard and real. Langland foreshadows this sentiment in the closing remarks of the Prologue:

Cokes and hire knaves cryden, "Hote pies, hote!
Goode gees and grys! Go we dyne, go we!"
Taverners until hem tolden the same:
"Whit wyn of Oseye and wyn of Gascoigne,
Of the Ryn and of the Rochel, the roost to defie!" (P.226–30)

To eat the pies when they are hot and to drink the wine when it is available are the ethic proposed for daily existence—it is the conception of beauty of the poem. It is fleeting, but it can be understood. In an experience of trying to find pleasure when it arises and being lost in the everyday quality of life, one might find that one "take[s] pleasure in being in the surroundings [one is] used to, and fulfilling [one's] normal routines. The aesthetics of everydayness is exactly in the 'hiding' of the extraordinary and disturbing, and feeling homey and in control" (Haapala 52). The essential quality of Langland's aesthetic lies in being a part of the world that allows one to recognize what can be transformative; in fact, "an aesthetics of everyday life need employ no particular or special way of seeing an environment that is out there and separate, but rather aspires to find a context for living that promotes speaking, acting, and imagining" (Principe 68). To be in the world of *Piers Plowman* is to be engaged in a world that requires those very activities; however, it is not enough to speak, act, and imagine in Langland's world. An added requirement of reflecting on whence beauty stems must be applied to the everyday.

Any real sense of beauty, be it within the everyday or within the Empyrean, must be understood to stem from God. Christ is the center of all things, and it is the search for Christ—depicted in rose windows and *Piers Plowman*—that should dominate life:

“By Crist!” quod Conscience tho, “I wole bicom a pilgrym,
And walken as wide as the world lasteth,
To seken Piers the Plowman, that Pryde myghte destruye,
And that freres hadde a fyndyng, that for nede flateren
And countrepledeh me, Conscience. Now Kynde me avenge,
And sende me hap and heele, til I have Piers the Plowman!”
(20.381–86)

But these ideas of fleeting beauty and depictions of Christ as physical means of holding together the church also emphasize the aesthetic need of grounding responses within a particular physical framework. These medieval theories of aesthetic responses must be grounded within the framework of Christ. For Langland, for the *Pearl* poet, for Abbot Suger, for St. Bernard even, these responses to various items—highly colored or woefully drab—cannot have any value or meaning without recognition of why or for what purpose they are beautiful. Medieval aesthetics might be viewed as naïve or backwards because of its insistence on tying beauty to the divine; however, one might also view its theories as making clear the relationship between aesthetics and morality. Such a relationship seems clear in *Piers Plowman*: the heart of the poem is the search for meaning within the world, a search that can only make sense if it is tied to the person of Christ. The entire poem depends on this search, on the stability it offers for the Christ figure: “The rose-window magnificently demonstrates that the mainspring of the medieval outlook was Christian doctrine, the focal point of thought, as it also became in the rose-window the focal point of the church façade” (Dow 297).

It is natural, perhaps, to view the world as a series of opportunities to engage in thought and reflection. It is also natural to believe that everyday existence allows the opportunity to mold and shape the world according to one’s own choices and experiences. The “everydayness” of existence must necessarily preclude the shaping and molding that one might assign to large concerns—be they societal, corporate, or institutional. But, in fact, worlds are being shaped by a series of deliberative moves and responses to them. According to Yuriko Saito, “we are less familiar with the power of the aesthetic

to affect and sometimes determine the state of the world and the quality of life in ways that do not result from a specific program by the government, society, or commercial enterprise" (57, emphasis added).

This is the world that Langland's poem attempts to demonstrate at each turn: there is a process that constantly informs the world and decisions made therein. For Saito, it is one's own appreciation of one's surroundings, through which one avoids seeing eyesores or chooses to support campaigns that promise to save panda bears; for Langland, the world is constantly engaging readers to think about what they value and how they approach their decisions. What his poem reminds readers of is that they must be attuned to the possibilities of how their responses to the beautiful, to the everyday, return them to the opening lines of the poem itself, to a world between the "tour" and the "dungeon." Each decision and each aesthetic response helps to determine the direction that the medieval Christian will eventually follow.

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Faustus and Mephistopheles
Title Page of Christopher Marlowe's
The Tragical Historie of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus (1624)

Marlowe's Psalm Adaptation in *Doctor Faustus* and the Rhetoric of Devilish Truth

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Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. (James 2:19)

Perhaps no literary work in the English language has excited more argument, in terms of its heresy or its Christian orthodoxy, than Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* (1604, 1616). That this work is not a theological treatise but a play, first performed in London in the late sixteenth century, only adds complexity to the debate: issues such as textual transmission, collaborative interpolations, commercial objectives of the acting companies, and audience reception add so many layers to the core discussion that it may be impossible to peel them away. Whether a reader views *Faustus* as a subversive or faith-affirming work, and whether the reader believes the playwright was guilty of the many accusations of atheism that were leveled against him, both during his life and after his early death, seem to depend greatly on that reader's opinion of Marlowe himself. An entry point into this discussion is a brief but striking conversation at the beginning of scene six in the 1604 edition of the play (corresponding to act two, scene

two in the 1616 edition) that has received scant critical attention. After the devil Mephistopheles has given Faustus a book full of incantations and secret knowledge in many fields of study, including astronomy, the following exchange takes place:

Fau: When I behold the heauens, then I repent,
And curse thee wicked *Mephastophilus*,
Because thou hast depriu'd me of those ioyes.

Me: Why Faustus,
Thinkst thou heauen is such a glorious thing?
I tel thee tis not halfe so faire as thou,
Or any man that breathes on earth.

Fau: How proouest thou that?

Me: It was made for man, therefore is man more excellent.

Fau: If it were made for man, twas made for me:

I will renounce this magicke, and repent. (628–38)

The opening phrase in the scene, “When I behold the heavens,” would have been instantly recognized by the playgoers, since it is part of a very well known section of the eighth Psalm:

When I consider thy heavens, the works of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. (vs. 3–5)

This moment in the play, one of many in which Faustus is caught between a desire to repent and resignation to his wicked fate, exposes the foolishness of his arrogant disdain for humanity by affirming the divine nature of man. Thus, Marlowe’s use of dramatic psalm adaptation in the play fits within the greater context of psalm translation in Renaissance England and represents a seeming refutation of his alleged atheism. Moreover, the fact that the core idea of the Psalm is taught not by the “hero” Faustus but by the devil Mephistopheles can be viewed as a conscious rhetorical strategy, situating Marlowe firmly

in a literary tradition of English Christianity in which Christian truth is taught by sorrowing, damned devils, a tradition that stretches backward to Old English biblical verse and forward to *Paradise Lost* (1667).

Marlowe's decision to insert a psalm adaptation into a commercial play is not surprising, at least from a literary point of view. Indeed, the importance of psalm translation to English Renaissance literature would be difficult to overstate, since during the period "the metrical Psalm rivaled the Petrarchan love poem as the popular lyric mode for English poets" (Hamlin et al. xii). As the only biblical book in which the writer directly addresses himself to God, the Psalms had a long tradition of being viewed as the basis of individual religious worship for Catholics and Protestants alike, providing both moral teaching and patterns for prayer (Zim 3). The fact that English Bible translations had only become widely available in the latter half of the sixteenth century meant that the Psalms, as English literature, were still entering the national consciousness when Marlowe was writing, and there was an intense interest in rendering them as beautifully in English verse as Petrarch and others had done in Italian and French. John Donne in particular lamented that the Psalms were "so well attired abroad, so ill at home" (Hamlin et al. 4). This interest in "attiring" the Psalms in the garb of English poetry was taken up with great energy and gusto, and not by a few, as Hannibal Hamlin notes:

Virtually every author of the period (Shakespeare, Spenser, Bunyan, Donne, Herbert, and Jonson) translated, paraphrased, or alluded to the Psalms in their major works. In fact, the translation, or "Englishing," of the biblical Psalms substantially shaped the culture of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, resulting in creative forms as diverse as singing psalters, metrical psalm paraphrases, sophisticated poetic adaptations, meditations, sermons, commentaries, and significant allusions in poems, plays, and literary prose. (1)

The *Faustus* scene in question should be seen as a psalm adaptation rather than an allusion because it contains not only an echo of

the first line of the psalm segment but also of its entire core doctrines, namely, the excellence of man in God's eyes and the subordinate position of the heavens, as the destined dwelling place of man, to man himself. Although there is no evidence that Marlowe ever created metrical psalm translations, as did many of the acclaimed poets of his age, his adaptation in *Doctor Faustus* represents his own creative experiment with this popular genre; indeed, since the literary phenomenon of psalm translation placed a premium on inventiveness in form, for a playwright of Marlowe's talents adapting a psalm to the flourishing environment of the London stage would have been as imaginative a method of "Englishing" the psalm as any of the other more conventional poetic forms then being practiced. The idea that a paraphrase of an original model represented a new creative work, in which imitators "tried to respect and elucidate the original author's meaning," even as they transformed it in inventive ways, was based directly on the works of classical thinkers admired in the Renaissance, such as Aristotle and Quintilian (Zim 15). Thus, the playgoers who recognized Marlowe's psalm adaptation would have enjoyed and even admired it for aesthetic as well as religious reasons.

When *Doctor Faustus* was written, Marlowe had already been largely responsible for the introduction of blank verse into English Renaissance drama, an innovation that Shakespeare and other contemporary playwrights would fully embrace. In fact, the flowing lines of iambic pentameter Marlowe produced were admiringly referred to by Ben Jonson as "Marlowe's mighty line" (qtd. in Hamlin 67). Since the time of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, a few decades earlier, lyric poets had been adapting classical meter for an English audience by using iambic pentameter, and metrical psalmists were no exception (108). Marlowe thus shared with the psalmists not only an appreciation for the content of the psalms as a lyric subject but also an affinity for the form in which they often rendered that content.

It can also be said that the eighth Psalm, in particular, serves as a microcosm of the complex philosophical and theological currents running through England in the latter half of the sixteenth century.

Renaissance thinkers were greatly influenced by Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486), which, among other things, argued that human beings are not constrained to any one order in the hierarchy of creation but are free to achieve any position in that hierarchy, from that of the lowest plants to the highest rank of angels and sons of God (117–20). This possible elevation of man in the cosmic order is seemingly affirmed by the translators of the Geneva Bible (1560), which was the primary Bible of sixteenth-century English Protestantism and the most likely version used by Marlowe; its rendition of Psalm 8:5 differs from that of other English translations in use during the Renaissance in its rendering of the Hebrew noun *elohim*. While other translations, including Coverdale's Bible (1535), Matthew's Bible (1537), the Bishop's Bible (1568), and the Douai-Rheims version (1582), were united in the notion that man was created a little lower than "the angels," the Geneva translators boldly chose the more literal interpretation that man was a little lower than God himself. The doctrine of man's excellence, cresting on the wave of the Reformation, was a primary source of the literary and spiritual energy of the Renaissance and helped make *Faustus* resonate with the playgoers of its time.

Regardless of the value of psalm adaptations within a larger literary context, a compelling question yet remains: why would Marlowe, the alleged atheist, *want* to use a psalm in his play in a way that so devastatingly undermines his supposed heretical agenda? It seems a curious choice for a nonbeliever to consciously insert into his work such a sublime expression of fervent personal worship as part of the eighth Psalm, even if one allows for the possibility that Marlowe was writing solely for his audience and that *Doctor Faustus* in no way reflects his own beliefs. The scene in question, in which Mephistopheles's teaching regarding the true nature of man seems to penetrate with blazing brightness into the dark abyss of Faustus's pride and contempt, leaving him dazed and humbled, is more powerful than many other scenes in the play in which Christian doctrine is expressed, such as the warnings of the Good Angel or the admonitions of the Old Man, because it is backed up by the empirical evidence of the majesty of the heavens that Faustus, the scientist, has just witnessed with his own eyes. If,

as some critics contend, Faustus represents Marlowe's Renaissance "superman," the tragic hero who breaks free from the shackles of oppressive religious tradition by the force of his mighty intellect and boundless thirst for knowledge, then it is ironic indeed that the hero is so speedily and completely overcome by a quick primer from a supernatural being on humanity's relation to the cosmos. Yet some readers persist in their utter damnation of Marlowe, the atheist, including no less a critic than Harold Bloom, who says,

The vanity of scholarship has few more curious monuments than this Christianized Marlowe. What the common reader finds in Marlowe is precisely what his contemporaries found: impiety, audacity, worship of power, ambiguous sexuality, occult aspirations, defiance of moral order, and above all else a sheer exaltation of the possibilities of rhetoric. (1)

While Bloom is correct concerning the energy and quality of Marlowe's rhetoric, one can certainly take issue with his point that Marlowe's plays advocate impiety, defiance of moral order, etc. Indeed, in the case of *Doctor Faustus* the rhetorical strategies employed, such as psalm adaptation, motivate spectators to increase their own spiritual devotion, even while they are horrified and mesmerized by Faustus's wicked rebellion. Joseph Westlund argues that *Doctor Faustus* is framed using explicitly Christian devices, such as the appearance of Angels and the Seven Deadly Sins (200–01), held over from the morality plays still common in Marlowe's youth. Moreover, the generally accepted notion of Marlowe's atheism, which buttresses arguments such as Bloom's and is based on written accusations by several people who knew Marlowe personally, such as Robert Greene, Thomas Kyd, and Richard Baines, has been severely called into question by recent scholarship that attributes ulterior motives to each of the accusers. Kyd, for example, penned his accusation against Marlowe while in prison and may have been attempting thereby to secure his own freedom (Davidson 129–30). Of course, no one could realistically claim that Marlowe was a strictly pious expounder of Christian doctrine or that he should be recognized as a notable Renaissance the-

ologian. Even so, the final verdict on *Doctor Faustus* should be that it argues for the existence of God, not against it; that it promotes Christianity, not subverts it, notwithstanding the Protestant-centric ridicule of the Catholic Church found in the play; and that at the end of each performance not a single playgoer wished to change places with the play's overreaching protagonist nor found his fate appealing.

Marlowe, however, achieves these literary ends through an unexpected vehicle. His devils, rather than his protagonist, are actually his most effective proponents of orthodox Christianity. Rather than arguing the merits of rebellion against God or enticing spectators to experiment with black magic, Mephistopheles sorrowfully laments his fallen state:

Thinkst thou that I who saw the face of God,
And tasted the eternal ioyes of heauen,
Am not tormented with ten thousand hels,
In being depriv'd of euerlasting blisse? (322–25)

Marlowe thus unsettles his audience with heroic protagonists who fight against God and devils who teach Christian doctrine: he seems to delight in inverting the moral structure the audience is expecting and “antagonizing [its] tender conscience,” leaving playgoers both repelled and fascinated (Anderson 81). The reluctant and pained admissions of the devils regarding both the divine nature of man and the tragic folly of their own expulsion from heaven are more rhetorically potent than if the same teachings had been presented by a religious authority figure, such as a priest; the devils' testimony is powerful because they are, in effect, “hostile witnesses,” and the words have to be wrung out of them.

Although the Bible is almost entirely silent on the theme of the “fall of the angels,” it occupied the minds of English theologians and writers well back to Anglo-Saxon times in homilies, biblical exegesis, and poetic biblical paraphrases. For instance, the abbot and prolific scholar Ælfric wrote in a tenth-century series of questions on Genesis, “Why was the sin of the angels passed over in silence in the book

of Genesis and [the sin] of man revealed? Because God intended that he would heal the sin of the man, but not [the sin] of the devil” (qtd. in Fox 181).¹ An anonymous poem from the Junius manuscript titled *Christ and Satan* (composed ca. 1000) depicts the lamentation of Satan, which seems like an early echo of Mephistopheles:

Where did the angelic majesty go
 Which we were supposed to possess in the heavens?

 Once I was a holy angel in the heavens,
 Dear to the Lord; I had happiness with God,
 Great rejoicing in the presence of the Creator, and this company
 likewise.
 Then I resolved in my heart
 That I would cast down heaven’s Light,
 God’s own Son, and have the entire mastery of the cities
 In my control—I and this wretched troop

¹The original text reads, “Hwi wæs þære engla syn forsuwod on þære bec Genesis, and þæs mannes wæs gesæd? Forþan þe God gemynte þæt he wolde þæs mannes synne gehælan, na þæs deofles.”

²The original text reads,

Hwær com engla ðrym,
 þe we on heofnum habban sceoldan?

 Ic wæs iu in heofnum halig ængel,
 dryhtene deore; hefde me dream mid gode,
 micelne for meotode, and ðeos menego swa some,
 þa ic in mode minum hogade
 þæt ic wolde towerpan wuldres leoman,
 bearn helendes, agan me burga gewald
 eall to æhte, and ðeos earne heap
 þe ic hebbe to helle ham geledde. (Krapp 136, 138)

The Modern English translation is my own. The Junius Manuscript (Bodleian MS Junius 11), one of the four major codices of Old English poetry, is named for Franciscus Junius, who first published its contents. His father, also called Franciscus Junius, collaborated on a Protestant Latin

Which I have led home to hell.²

By creating dialogue for Satan in which he laments his own fall, rather than telling his story with an external narrator, the poet transforms an apocryphal scriptural account into Christian dramatic tragedy, anticipating Marlowe, although it is virtually impossible that Marlowe knew the poem, since the manuscript that contained it was not translated or published until 1654 (Krapp ix).

This medieval literary tradition of devilish didacticism continued through succeeding centuries, arguably reaching its apex in the works of John Milton, who wrote some six or seven decades after Marlowe. Simply put, Milton's *Paradise Lost* contains the most famous and influential devilish rhetoric in the history of English literature. Many readers of Milton's epic, including some Romantic poets in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, felt that Satan was its true "hero" and admired the rhetorical and poetic excellence of his speeches. Yet eloquence in rhetoric, as defined by Renaissance humanists, required wisdom in addition to well-crafted arguments, and it is wisdom that, by design, Milton's Satan lacks (Pallister 152–53). As opposed to true eloquence, William Pallister notes, "it is clear that satanic eloquence is predicated on what were recognized as ethically debased phases of the intellectual virtues: the crooked wisdom that is craft, the crooked prudence that is cleverness, the crooked deliberation that machinates evil ends" (154). Satan attempts through his eloquent speeches to induce both his devilish disciples and Eve to rebellious action. But it is when Satan is alone, when there is no one near for him to persuade and his deeper feelings are given voice, that his speech rises to the eloquence of regretful wisdom, and Milton's rhetoric of devilish truth bears fruit. Satan first echoes the lament of Marlowe's devil: "O Sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams / That bring to my remembrance from what state / I fell, how glorious once above thy Sphere" (4.37–39). Then, when

Bible translation; Sir Philip Sidney mentions him in *A Defense of Poesie* (1595) as having called the Psalms part of "the Poeticall part of the scripture" (qtd. in Hamlin 85).

Satan sees Adam and Eve for the first time, Milton inserts his own adaptation of the eighth psalm, in which the Devil expounds on man's divine nature:

O Hell! what do mine eyes with grief behold,
 Into our room of bliss thus high advanc't
 Creatures of other mould, earth-born perhaps,
 Not Spirits, yet to heav'nly Spirits bright
 Little inferior; whom my thoughts pursue
 With wonder, and could love, so lively shines
 In them Divine resemblance, and such grace
 The hand that form'd them on their shape hath pour'd. (4.358–65)

This passage wonderfully illustrates the rhetorical effectiveness of devilish truth, as Satan, the sworn enemy of God, is compelled to acknowledge the beauty and divinity in man, much as Mephistopheles did; the anguish and pain present in Satan's words make the passage all the more powerful because the reader, as a human being, is implicitly drawn into the text as the object of praise and feels the wonder of the doctrine, as Faustus did.

Marlowe's psalm adaptation in *Doctor Faustus* serves many artistic ends: it provides Marlowe with an opportunity to "English" the psalm in a manner suited to his talents; it activates the audience's religious conscience through the familiar language of personal worship; it reveals the limits of Faustus's syllogistic reasoning, so that the audience will not trust his arguments; and, above all, it allows Mephistopheles's devilish rhetoric to be deployed to greatest effect. That the deeply religious Milton seems to have used *Doctor Faustus* as inspiration while conceiving his character of Satan should be seen as further refutation of Marlowe's supposed atheism; likewise, Marlowe's play, like *Paradise Lost*, employs crafty and clever faith-destroying arguments only so that they may be exposed, to the betterment of the audience. Centuries of English literature show that devils, after all, know the truth.

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William Shakespeare
National Portrait Gallery, London

“A World Ransomed”: Atonement, Community, and the Cosmos in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* and *The Winter’s Tale*

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More than once, Shakespeare refers explicitly to the Christian doctrine of atonement. Henry IV mentions Christ’s “blessed feet / Which fourteen hundred years ago were nail’d / For our advantage on the bitter cross” (*1H4* 1.1.25–27). In *The Merchant of Venice* (1600), Portia argues that our only hope of salvation is God’s mercy, for “in the course of justice, none of us / Should see salvation” (4.1.199–200). Isabel in *Measure for Measure* (1623) pleads for her brother’s life on the basis of the doctrine of atonement: “Why, all the souls that were were forfeit once, / And He that might the vantage best have took / Found out the remedy” (2.2.73–75)—basically, an assertion that the need for salvation is universal and that God has mercifully provided a means to bring it about. Beyond these brief references, the dramatic and thematic structures of these last two plays are deeply informed by the idea of redemption through grace and sacrifice.

Yet Shakespeare never uses the words *atone* or *atonement* in specific reference to the Christian doctrine. As Stephen Greenblatt points out, Shakespeare most often uses *atonement* in a social sense, the sense of bringing to oneness divided parties, or as Greenblatt,

thinking of divisions in the contemporary world, puts it, “a bringing together in shared dialogue of those who have been for too long opposed and apart” (347).¹ Shakespeare’s bias toward viewing reconciliation in human, and especially in social, terms may have something to do with the fact that he is writing plays, the interest of which depends on conflict and its resolution taking place among the plays’ human characters. At the same time Shakespeare regularly explores characters’ inner conflicts and occasionally conflicts taking place at a level transcending human action—at what might be called a cosmic level.

In *As You Like It* (1623) and *The Winter’s Tale* (1623) all three forms of conflict and atonement take place. Although the word *atone* appears memorably only once in one of the two plays, the idea of atonement, and particularly the Christian idea of atonement, is powerfully present in both. Its presence is most obvious in the changes that take place in characters and their relationships—that is, at the individual and social levels. In *As You Like It*, such changes are associated with the word *conversion*; in *The Winter’s Tale*, similar changes are associated with faith and penitence. Yet in both, there are also explicit references, especially as the plays near their conclusions, to atonement on a cosmic scale. These references and the theological weight they bring with them help frame and illuminate both concluding events and events that precede them. They also help endow these events with what is often called *transcendence*.

Though there are particular senses in which individual conversion and social reconciliation deserve to be called “transcendent” in their own right, one most often associates the word with something beyond ordinary human experience or perception. In these plays, as

¹In fact, Shakespeare almost always uses *atone*, *atonement*, or *atonements* in a social sense, for instance, in *Richard II* (1597) (1.1.202), *Othello* (1622) (4.1.233), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1623) (2.2.102), *Coriolanus* (1623) (4.6.73), and *Cymbeline* (1623) (1.4.39)—all with *atone*; *Richard III* (1597) (1.3.36) and *Henry IV, Part 2* (1600) (4.1.219)—*atonement*; and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1623) (1.1.33)—*atonements*. He uses *atone* in what might be called a “cosmic” sense in *As You Like It* (1623) (5.4.110) and in a sense hard to categorize (with reference to reconciling one person’s fears with another’s meaning) in *Timon of Athens* (1623) (5.4.58–59).

in others, Shakespeare focuses on human life in this world. Yet the language and events of the plays at the same time invite the audience, even if briefly or subtly, to connect atonement at the individual and social levels with events taking place at a cosmic level. These two plays thus heighten the impression that earthly matters are part of a larger scheme, that they contain a dimension of meaning that transcends ordinary powers of perception and understanding. This sense of something beyond what consciousness or other powers can grasp is, as has been recently argued, at the core of the religious impulse both in Shakespeare's time and today and has much to do with the recent "turn to religion" in the study of early modern literature and culture.²

As *You Like It* may seem an odd place to look for transcendence, especially if the play is thought of as a light-hearted comedic romp in the woods. But in fact, the play's action from beginning to end has serious and sometimes disturbing features that invite a religious reading. The two main conflicts in the play occur between brothers, and the fact that they lead to attempted murder should remind one of *Hamlet* (1604), where a brother's murder bears "the primal eldest curse" (3.3.37)—"primal" because Cain's slaying of Abel was the first human crime. In *As You Like It* the conflicts between brothers have riven the social fabric, tearing apart families and threatening an entire dukedom. The exile of several characters in the forest is an exile from human community, and though the exiles have formed their own kind of community in the forest, it is temporary and inadequate for meeting the full range of human hopes and needs. The resolution to the play's problems is presented through two conversions. Oliver, who had sought his brother's life but who is now another exile in the forest, has a change of heart. In response to Celia's question—"Was 't

²This sense of something "beyond" or "other" is an important theme for Ken Jackson and Arthur Marotti. For instance, citing Jacques Derrida, they assert that "our desire for the other may not be that distinguishable from the early modern world's desire for the 'other.' In other words, the turn to religion—in critical theory *and* in the hyper-historicizing of early modern literary studies—suggests that we may still be more 'religious' than we wish to be—even in our most secular and critical methodologies" (179).

you that did so oft contrive to kill him?" (that is, to kill his brother Orlando)—Oliver replies:

'Twas I; but 'tis not I. I do not shame
To tell you what I was, since my conversion
So sweetly tastes, being the thing I am. (4.3.134–37)

Duke Frederick, who drove his brother, the rightful duke, into exile, also undergoes a conversion—one the audience is not privileged to see but must accept on faith—but it, too, leads to a restoration of goodwill and social harmony, and it is unequivocally a religious conversion. Frederick had entered the forest with the aim of killing his brother, Duke Senior. But “meeting with an old religious man, / After some question with him,” Frederick “was converted” (5.4.160–61), decided to take up the religious life himself, and not only restored his brother to power but also returned to all the exiles their lands and positions. This sudden and mysterious conversion is clearly meant to parallel Oliver’s more credibly motivated change of heart. In both cases murderous enmity between brothers represents the darkest evil, one that must be removed before social harmony can be restored.

The Winter’s Tale has even more pervasively religious content. Yet one obstacle to viewing it in Christian terms is its decidedly pagan setting. As he does elsewhere, Shakespeare here uses a pagan setting in two different but complementary ways: he makes pagan religion a sort of stand-in for certain Christian ideas—providence, grace, and faith—while at the same time showing the limitations of paganism, which are most obvious in the resistance of some characters to the idea of resurrection. Paulina expresses disbelief that the king’s lost daughter, Perdita, could return: for her to do so would be “all as monstrous to our human reason / As my Antigonus to break his grave” (5.1.41–42). This assertion that resurrection is irrational echoes the ancient Greek resistance to the preaching of Christ’s death and resurrection, doctrines that, according to Paul, the Greeks considered “foolishness” (1 Cor. 1:23). Yet within fewer than a hundred lines, we witness Perdita’s return, as if to suggest that there are wonders that human reason is unable to account for.

At the same time that its limitations are revealed, the pagan setting is also associated with what Shakespeare's Christian audience would likely have found to be genuinely religious events. The oracle read at the trial clearly conveys truth, and the temple where it was received is associated with what appear to be genuine sanctity and divine power, suggested by the words "celestial," "reverence," "unearthly," and "gracious" (WT 3.1.4–7, 22). The word *grace*, as several critics note, "is the keynote of the play" (Tinkler 345),³ and though some of its meanings are nonreligious, the word is at times linked with its Christian meaning of divine power that saves or blesses. The word *faith* appears at a crucial moment in the closing scene: "It is requir'd / You do awake your faith" (WT 5.3.94–95). The idea of providence also runs through the play, most explicitly in Paulina's lines, "the gods / Will have fulfill'd their secret purposes" (5.1.35–36).⁴ Furthermore, despite the pagan setting, the play contains at least two unmistakable references to Christianity. One is the mention of the story of the prodigal son (4.3.97), a story of which the language—especially the phrase "for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:31)—is echoed in Perdita's return and in Hermione's apparent resurrection. The other is Polixenes's obscure reference to Judas and Christ when he expresses revulsion at having his name "yok'd with his that did betray the Best!" (WT 1.2.418–19).

Again, the primal sin in *The Winter's Tale* is familial, though in this case mainly between husband and wife, rather than between brothers. The primary sinner here is King Leontes, arguably the play's main character and one who both repels the audience and engages its sympathy. In other words, he is something like the audience itself: a flawed human being, self-centered, insecure, defensive, wanting to know he is loved. Besides the sin against his wife—mistrusting her

³See also M. M. Mahood (161) and Bruce W. Young.

⁴See also Hermione's trust in the heavens throughout, Leontes's belief that the "heavens" are responsible for the meeting of Perdita and Florizel (5.3.150), and the view that even the scoundrel Autolycus "was provided to do us good" (4.4.829–30).

fidelity, accusing her falsely, and putting her on trial—Leontes also sins against his infant daughter, shaming her with the label of bastardy, threatening to kill her, and finally sending her away to what would seem to have been certain death. Furthermore, as the play repeatedly indicates, he also sins against himself, his son, and his kingdom.⁵

Going beyond the threat of death seen in *As You Like It*, this later play shows death itself, demonstrating, to borrow Paul's phrase in Romans, that "the wages of sin is death" (6:23). After the death of Leontes's son, Mamillius, and the apparent death of his wife Hermione, Paulina, who has been trying all along to help the king see reason, refers to death as a kind of power that has been unleashed upon his family and his kingdom: "Look down / And see what death is doing" (WT 3.2.148–49). From this point on, the language of the play becomes insistently religious: Leontes is convinced "the heavens" are punishing him; he confesses his evil deeds and welcomes Paulina's brutal recital of his sins; he spends sixteen years repenting and clearly has undergone a change of heart. Yet he finds it difficult to forgive himself, and he cannot, by his mere repentance, bring back the family he has lost or undo the damage he has done to his kingdom.

The miracle with which the play ends brings about atonement on both a personal and a social level. Leontes is restored to happiness, reunited with his wife and daughter, and reconciled with his friend Polixenes. Two details in the final scene emphasize the religious dimension of all these changes. First, the restoration of hope and happiness cannot be achieved without faith, and the faith that Leontes is told he must "awake" is, among other things, a willingness to believe in events that may seem impossible (5.3.94–95). Also, the return of Hermione is presented as a resurrection. Though there is a

⁵See such lines as "in rebellion with himself" (WT 1.2.355); "for he / The sacred honor of himself, his queen's, / His hopeful son's, his babe's, betrays to slander" (2.3.82–86); and "The wrong I did myself; which was so much / That heirless it hath made my kingdom, and / Destroy'd the sweet'st companion that e'er man / Bred his hopes out of" (5.1.9–12).

good deal of evidence that she never, in fact, died,⁶ the use of the language of resurrection illuminates the degree to which something like a genuine death—a kind of spiritual, emotional, and social death—has taken place. Her resurrection involves return to a meaningful life in which her family, her dignity, and her place in the social world are restored. In a similar way, Leontes, after undergoing a kind of spiritual and social death, is restored to spiritual and social life.

It is worth noting how much redemption and return to life in this play are in fact a restoration of the social fabric of family, friendship, and community; that is, though the characters experience personal redemption that requires faith and repentance and involves a purging of sin and an overcoming of death and loss, atonement also takes place at a social level in the literal sense of restoring to oneness characters who have been divided by offenses. Not only is there a reunion of husband and wife and of child with parents, but Leontes is also reconciled with Polixenes, and he makes a point of inviting restored friendship between Polixenes and his wife and encouraging marriage between Paulina and Camillo.

Similarly, *As You Like It* ends not only with the conversion of murderous brothers but also with a restoration of familial and communal bonds. Rosalind is united with her father and a prospective husband: to both she says, “To you I give myself, for I am yours” (5.4.116–17). Brothers are reconciled, and Duke Senior and his men are restored to their place in the dukedom. The play ends with emphasis on the value and even the necessity of community. The characters will leave the forest not so much because of its physical

⁶It has been argued that the issue is undecidable: Paulina asserts that Hermione was dead; it appears she was buried along with Mamillius; Antigonus reports that she appeared to him as a spirit. Yet the audience is told that Paulina has for some reason been visiting a “remov’d house” “twice or thrice a day, ever since the death of Hermione” (WT 5.2.105–07), perhaps to be understood in retrospect as visits with the living Hermione. The strongest evidence that Hermione did not die are her words to Perdita when they are reunited: “I / Knowing by Paulina that the oracle / Gave hope thou wast in being, have preserv’d / Myself to see the issue” (5.3.125–28). For a discussion of the play’s supposed “undecidability,” see Catherine Belsey (83–84).

dangers and inconveniences as because of its lack of settled, communal life. When Orlando first encounters his future father-in-law, he is surprised to find hospitality in the forest, and the two join in contrasting “this desert inaccessible” with the “better days” they remember of life in a community, where “bells have knoll’d to church,” and where both feasts and compassion helped bind city dwellers together (2.7.109–26). As in *The Winter’s Tale*, conversion heals the social wounds that sin and enmity have produced.

The Christian understanding of atonement is obviously reflected in both plays’ references to faith, repentance, and conversion. Yet in the Christian understanding, such gestures on the human side are insufficient for redemption, which requires, along with human participation, not only divine favor but also the sacrificial death of Christ. Not surprisingly, then, both plays present something like an atoning sacrifice—or at least a gesture with sacrificial connotations—that helps bring about the conditions of conversion and reconciliation. Human characters in the plays, rather than Christ himself, offer such gestures of sacrifice, but in doing so they are in effect carrying out an *imitatio Christi* and thus giving life to the concept found in the New Testament and in later Christian tradition that human beings should seek to follow in Christ’s steps.⁷ Furthermore, some of the sacrificial gestures in *As You Like It* and *The Winter’s Tale* are involved in situations of literal rescue from death. In the plays, as in the Bible, rescue from death is analogous to—in some respects even part of—salvation, deliverance, and redemption in their broader senses.

The role of self-sacrifice and rescue is clearest in the case of Orlando’s influence on his brother. Oliver is threatened first by a snake, which leaves when Orlando approaches, and then by a lion to which Orlando gives battle but only after first having to abandon his own desire for revenge. Orlando thus saves his brother’s life at

⁷Note Paul’s frequent references to imitating Christ and even having “fellowship” with his “sufferings” (Philip. 3:10) and Peter’s assertion that Christ’s suffering leaves “an example, that ye should follow his step” (1 Pet. 2:21). In Christian tradition the idea of imitating Christ stretches from Augustine in the fourth century to Thomas à Kempis in the fifteenth and beyond.

the risk of his own, even shedding blood when he is injured by the lion, and at the same time helps bring about his brother's conversion through his example of compassion and ethical transcendence of self-concern. He plays a role comparable to that played by Christ in several theories of atonement: Christ the deliverer; Christ the victor over evil and death; and Christ the model of compassionate self-sacrifice.⁸ In taking on a Christlike role, Orlando has to offer himself, not only by risking his life to save someone else but even more significantly by purging himself of enmity. Atonement in two senses—Oliver's conversion and the reconciliation of the brothers—is accomplished through Orlando's offering of himself.

The idea of atonement through sacrificial offering is also present in *The Winter's Tale*. Though not deliberate self-offerings in the same way Christ's was, the deaths of Mamillius and Antigonus and the apparent death of Hermione nevertheless have a redemptive effect. Hearing of Mamillius's death and thinking he sees Hermione die, Leontes is immediately jolted out of his destructive fantasies and set on a path of repentance. Shakespeare has used this pattern elsewhere, notably in *Romeo and Juliet* (1599), where the deaths of the young lovers move the warring families to reconciliation. In that play, the lovers are called "poor sacrifices of our enmity" (5.3.304), as if nothing but their deaths could bring about atonement. These "sacrifices" both result from and bring an end to the families' enmity, not, significantly, because the families are both now satisfied by seeing each other punished, but because both now see the evil of their enmity and are moved to abandon it. In *The Winter's Tale* Antigonus, who is eaten by the bear that might otherwise have eaten Perdita, in a more direct way serves as a victim whose sacrifice brings about a rescue from death. He earlier offered to play such a role: "I'll pawn the little blood which I have left / To save the innocent" (WT 2.3.166–67). The word *pawn* also suggests that he is offering himself as a ransom to gain her release. Antigonus thus calls to mind the

⁸These and other models of atonement are described in a multitude of modern studies, including works by L. W. Grensted, Robert Mackintosh, Gustaf Aulén, and Michael J. Gorman.

long theological tradition concerning substitutionary sacrifice: the idea that Christ suffered and died in place of sinners and thereby saves them from the effects of sin and death. This tradition was linked to the related idea of ransom: the idea that humankind is in bondage to sin, death, and the devil and must be rescued through some kind of payment, the payment being the suffering and death—the self-offering—of Christ.

The Winter's Tale and *As You Like It* thus present moments of ransom or sacrifice—in other words, sacrificial love—in which a character performs something of a Christlike role that contributes both to personal conversion, what might be called a kind of individual salvation, and to an end of enmity that allows for the healing and restoration of social bonds, what might be called a kind of communal salvation.

Individual salvation has been the focus of most discussions of the atonement, through the Middle Ages and beyond. Yet it is clear that the social dimension has always been a crucial part of the redemption brought about through Christ's incarnation, suffering, death, and resurrection. Paul's constant pleading with early Christians to be at peace with one another is based not only on Christ's example of love but at times more specifically on His sacrificial death and resurrection: for instance, "destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died" (Rom. 14:15), and "walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour" (Eph. 5:2). Furthermore, one effect of Christ's atonement is the incorporation of his followers in his body—that is, the social body infused by the Holy Spirit—so that, though "many, [Christians] are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another" (Rom. 12:5).⁹ Michael J. Gorman argues for an understanding of atonement as participation in a "covenant of peace." By participating in Christ's suffering and death, humans are reconciled with each other and joined in a peace-filled community.¹⁰

⁹See also 1 Cor. (12:12–27) and Eph. (4:25; 5:30).

¹⁰Gorman uses the phrase "covenant of peace" and discusses its implications in chapters 5–8 of his study.

Shakespeare's use of the word *atonement* in a social sense thus turns out to have a transcendent dimension after all. The ordinary human conditions of enmity and violence are transcended through mercy and forgiveness, which in *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Tempest* (1623), and other plays are identified as having a heavenly origin.

Along with this social dimension, the cosmic dimension of Christ's atonement, though neglected through much of the medieval and modern periods, was an important part of the doctrine as developed in the Bible and by early Church Fathers. Margaret Barker finds evidence in biblical and extra-biblical texts that the purpose of atonement, such as was to be effected through temple sacrifices and, for Christians, through the death and resurrection of Christ, was to restore all of creation to unity and life. By breaking the eternal covenant linking them with God, humans and angelic beings as well brought corruption and fragmentation both to human society and the universe. Early Christians viewed Christ as the one who would restore harmony and fertility to the earth and unity to the cosmos. As Barker notes (27, 42), Paul describes Christ as the great unifier—"he is before all things, and by him all things consist" (Col. 1:17)—and he will redeem and renew not only fallen human beings but a fallen cosmos: "the creature," which has been groaning as if in labor, "waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God" and in time "shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Barker 47–48; Rom. 8:19, 21). Robert Murray describes the renewal of creation as a renewal of a covenant relationship, a "'marriage of heaven and earth,' which restores cosmic harmony and promises fertility on earth" (30). "We have to think of atonement," Barker says, "as the restoration of the covenant bonds which secured the created order and protected those within" (68–69). Thus, Christ, through an atoning process, brings about both cosmic and social atonement. As Barker puts it, "the response to the Atonement and renewal of the creation [is] the renewal of human society within the covenant bond" (70).

Gustaf Aulén argues that the cosmic view of atonement is the classic Christian idea, despite the fact that it was displaced in some measure by Anselm's satisfaction theory and Abelard's model of

moral influence. Aulén's description of the cosmic view overlaps with those of Barker and Murray but with some difference in emphasis, mainly in his focus on conflict and reconciliation. According to Aulén, the New Testament and the early Fathers "pictured" God

as in Christ carrying through a victorious conflict against powers of evil. . . . This constitutes Atonement, because the drama is a cosmic drama, and the victory over the hostile powers brings to pass a new relation, a relation of reconciliation, between God and the world. (5)

Atonement thus "is not regarded as affecting men primarily as individuals, but is set forth as a drama of a world's salvation" (6). Though Aulén emphasizes God's victory over the powers of sin, death, and the devil, he also offers evidence that atonement was understood in positive terms as a bestowal of life and a restoration of fellowship with God. Thus, atonement amounts to more than a forgiveness of sins; it also means a bestowal of immortality and even a partaking in divine nature. Christ's resurrection, both as a triumph over death and evil and as a promise of human transformation, is, therefore, an essential part of the atonement.

Does atonement in this cosmic sense play a role in *As You Like It* and *The Winter's Tale*? There is a good deal of evidence that it does, especially in *The Winter's Tale*. In asserting that "the gods / Will have fulfill'd their secret purposes" (WT 5.1.35–36), Paulina is only one of several characters who see the hand of the gods in the play's action. When he learns of his son's death, Leontes says, "The heavens themselves / Do strike at my injustice" (3.2.146–47), and the Mariner who accompanies Antigonus to Bohemia responds to the rough weather by saying, "The heavens with that we have in hand

¹¹See also "There's some ill planet reigns; / I must be patient, till the heavens look / With an aspect more favorable" (WT 2.1.105–07); "As heavens forefend!" (4.4.530); "For which the heavens, taking angry note, / Have left me issueless" (5.1.173–74).

are angry, / And frown upon 's" (3.3.5–6).¹¹ The play's redemptive events are also attributed to the gods. Death, presented as a destructive power, unleashed by mistrust, sin, and profanation of the oracle, is overcome not only through the characters' faith and repentance but also by the intervention of the gods. Hermione's apparent resurrection is presented as a miraculous conquest of death:

be stone no more; . . .
Strike all that look upon with marvel. Come;
I'll fill your grave up. Stir; nay, come away;
Bequeath to death your numbness; for from him
Dear life redeems you. (5.3.99–103)

Though humans certainly play a role in bringing about a happy conclusion, the gods play a role as well. It is true that Paulina seems to have orchestrated the closing scene, yet she did so only once the terms of the oracle—specifically, the return of Perdita—were fulfilled. Leontes attributes the precondition of that return—the union of Perdita and Florizel—to providential direction from the heavens (5.3.150–51). Furthermore, various characters appeal to the gods to extend life-giving, purifying, healing, or elevating power to bless the human and natural world. Leontes prays “[t]he blessed gods” to “[p]urge all infection from our air whilst you [meaning Florizel and Perdita] / Do climate here!” (5.1.168–70). In one of the peak moments of the final scene, Hermione gives Perdita a mother's blessing and prays the gods to “look down / And from your sacred vials pour your graces / Upon my daughter's head!” (5.3.121–23), pleading in effect for divine power to flow into the human world. The role of the gods in influencing humans individually and collectively and even in affecting the natural world is something like what Barker ascribes to God's atoning power: through divine power, a world “wounded and broken by the effects of human sin” is to be “healed” and brought back to harmony and life (64).

The frequent reminder of more than human powers at work—in the oracle, the storm, the unfolding of the plot, and the gods' influence on the natural and human world—makes the play's plot more

than a merely private or local story. It is, as Aulén describes the atonement, a “cosmic drama” involving a “victory over the hostile powers” of evil and death. Though the gods are silent (except when they speak through the oracle), they seem by the end to have entered into a different relation with the world of the play from the one they had earlier, something resembling what Aulén calls “a new relation, a relation of reconciliation” (6). The characters themselves use the language of atonement on a cosmic scale to describe the revelations and reunions that precede the final scene: even before the living Hermione is revealed, the other characters, in awe at what they are learning and experiencing, “look’d as they had heard of a world ransom’d, or one destroy’d” (*WT* 5.2.14–15). Though literally involving only two kingdoms and mainly two families, the restoration of life and fellowship witnessed seems like the redeeming of an entire world; the losses for which the characters still grieve also feel like losses on a cosmic scale—a perception that sets the stage for the wonder of Hermione’s return, which obviously parallels and has something of the redemptive effect of Christ’s resurrection.

Though less ambitious, the ending of *As You Like It* also combines individual and social redemption with atonement on a cosmic scale. Having affirmed the value of community and the desire to return to communal life, the characters witness the sudden arrival of Hymen, the god of marriage. Hymen’s role is to create and sustain the relationships that make life in a community possible:

’Tis Hymen peoples every town,
 High wedlock then be honored.
 Honor, high honor, and renown
 To Hymen, god of every town! (*AYL* 5.4.143–46)

Hymen also banishes confusion and invites reconciliation: “Peace ho! I bar confusion” (125). But in addition to this emphasis on harmonious social relationships, Hymen announces atonement on a cosmic scale:

Then is there mirth in heaven,
 When earthly things made even

Atone together. (108–10)

Here, of course, the word *atone* means literally to become one, or to agree or come into harmony or order. The emphasis is on harmonious earthly events. In fact, there have been earlier reminders that none of what has happened so far is due to magic (Rosalind will be delivered “human as she is” [5.2.67]). But Hymen’s presence, if taken literally, suggests that the heavenly world surrounds and in some respects pervades the earthly one. Furthermore, Hymen’s reference to “mirth in heaven” suggests that heavenly powers observe and respond to human affairs. In particular, they rejoice in earthly harmony, especially social harmony. In some measure, then, the atoning of earthly events—their being brought into order and harmony—also deepens the link between heaven and earth. What Hymen says here is echoed in a roughly contemporary use of the word *atone* by George Chapman in his 1614 translation of Homer’s *Odyssey*. Chapman describes how the tall pines making up the hall of the Cyclops in effect “attone”—that is, unite—“heaven and earth” (9.266).

It can be argued, of course, that, even at the end of *As You Like It* and throughout *The Winter’s Tale*, Shakespeare’s focus is firmly on his human characters and that all the references to heavenly powers are merely for symbolic or theatrical effect. But to focus on earthly affairs is not to assert that they exist in a vacuum. Shakespeare’s plays—not only these two but quite a number of others—portray a world where “there are more things in heaven and earth” than merely human players (*Ham.* 1.5.166). True, the focus is on imagined human beings and their earthly stories. Yet these stories take place within a larger context, a context within which atonement and the spiritual, communal, and cosmic harmony associated with it represent an ideal against which human actions, for good or ill, can be measured, as well as a condition that is sometimes attained or at least hoped for—a healing of hearts and relationships, a restoration to spiritual health, and at times an achievement of greater happiness and harmony than before. The allusions to atonement on a cosmic scale serve as a reminder that such a condition cannot be attained, if the plays themselves are an indication, by human effort alone. Human characters overcome ill will, repent of their evil deeds, exercise faith and compassion, even risk

their lives on behalf of others. But the miracle of conversion and the attainment of loving community remain mysteries that cannot be adequately accounted for by human effort.

Thus, one should take seriously the plays' references to divine powers that transcend, even as they work within, the human world. The plays discussed here are only two among many in which "wonder seem[s] familiar" (*Ado* 5.4.70), that is, in which transcendence is revealed through seemingly ordinary events. As Ewan Fernie notes, in Shakespeare, "The impossible assumes specific form and invades the reality of the poems and the plays time and again" (16). The word *atonement* has many meanings, and among them is this very mingling of the transcendent and the mundane. In *As You Like It* and *The Winter's Tale*, as in a good number of Shakespeare's other plays, such a mingling operates powerfully at the individual, social, and cosmic levels: in the transformation of individual characters, the creation of harmonious communities, and the vision of an earth surrounded by and connected with heaven.

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Line drawing of Saigyō
(Kikuchi Yōsai)

Beauty and Belief and Sadness: An Awareness in Japanese Literature

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One may, depending upon one's preferences, either denounce or applaud Victorian religio-aesthetic thinkers for their efforts to mend any fissures they may have perceived were straining the relationship between pious devotion and artistic appreciation in what was, perhaps, an attempt to preserve at least the option for artists to express their deepest personal values in their creative works. Had history and circumstance provided them access to traditional Japanese aesthetic tastes, they might have had additional tools to help them respond emotionally as well as intellectually to the uncoupling of belief from beauty. Perhaps then they, too, like the Japanese, would have been able to celebrate the sadness that comes from the admission that, in the words of Chinese-American poet Li-Young Lee, "Every wise boy is sad."¹

Standing as a sentinel at the convergence of beauty and belief in

¹Lee in a forum address titled "Infinite Inwardness," delivered at Brigham Young University on January 27, 2004, remarked that he had irritated his wife by changing the well-known mnemonic for remembering the notes on the lines of the treble clef ("Every good boy does fine") to "Every wise boy is sad."

the Japanese tradition is the Japanese notion of *aware*, an aesthetic concept that, despite typographical appearances, has no connection with the English word “aware.” It is a Japanese word, which is why the first five letters of the word *awareness* are italicized in the title of this essay. The term dates back to the earliest period of Japanese literary expression. Initially, it indicated a combination of exclamations of surprise and delight—*a!* and *hare!*—and signified nothing more profound than the pleasure derived when one turns a corner or summits a hill and a beautiful landscape suddenly comes into view. By the eighth century, however, the exclamations were combined into *aware!*, an audible evocation of the emotion one feels “on hearing the melancholy calls of birds or beasts” (deBary et al. 1:197–98). By the era of the ascendancy of the Heian court (794–1185)—the period that produced *The Tale of Genji*—*aware* had taken on the fragrance of melancholy. Donald Keene, the great modern scholar of Japanese literature, labels the fundamental aesthetic of the culture throughout time as a “gentle melancholy” (658). This is not the cathartic purging that results from stirring up the emotions of pity and fear in Aristotelian tragedy, nor is it the dark solemnity of Russian literature that often reminds one of Ira Gershwin’s splendid lyric: “With love to lead the way / I’ve found more clouds of gray / Than any Russian play / Could guarantee” (234).

The gentle melancholy expressed as *aware* is, rather, an invitation to enter into and become one with a fleeting experience of beauty, to simultaneously savor the short-lived flash of overpowering splendor and lament the inescapable fact that it will not linger; and the *simultaneity* of these seemingly contradictory feelings of celebration and desolation must be emphasized, because it is their intermingling that is the essence of the *aware* aesthetic. In the Heian court period, the ability to appreciate those subtle moments of superb sadness was considered the one unfailing mark of a truly sensitive man or woman of the court. In the early years of that era, sensitivity to the transient beauty of nature and the beautiful nature of transitory human experience became something of a religious faith to the point that Sir George Sansom observes that the ruling class made “religion into an art and art into a religion” (qtd. in Morris 205).²

But one must retreat to even earlier times, to a period before recorded history, when there seems to have developed among the Japanese people a marked understanding of and appreciation for the fleeting quality of human joys. Some have tried to ascribe this propensity to the advent of Buddhism in the middle of the sixth century, but Charles Shirō Inouye maintains that “[a]n awareness [or should I say an ‘awareness’?] of change . . . preceded Buddhism” (31). This primeval awareness was inevitable, given the reality that the Japanese archipelago is of volcanic origin with over one hundred volcanoes still active today; that over one thousand earthquakes shake the islands each year—of course of many varying magnitudes; that typhoons and sometimes catastrophic tsunamis ravage the region; and that death and destruction from fires have forever plagued the nation. With no guarantees for the Japanese that there would ever be a tomorrow, it is not particularly surprising that they—given the options of either utter despair at life’s fragility or enjoyment of the transient moment—opted for the latter. Shintō, Japan’s indigenous religion, may lack scripture or dogma, but it has never missed out on a chance to party. Purification rituals cleanse the celebrants from the pollutions of the mundane world, rendering them free to swallow a few cups of *sake* and enjoy “splendour in the grass” and “glory in the flower.” Shintō animism goes beyond a simple attribution of spiritual significance to the rocks and trees, the rivers and mountains; it invests them with divinity, at the same time erasing any distinction between natural and human realms. It is as though “sentient” and “insentient” are synonymous. On this point Konishi Jin’ichi writes,

in ancient Japan the spiritual aspect of humanity and the material

²⁴“The Cult of Beauty” is the title of Chapter VII in Ivan Morris’s *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (1964). T. S. Eliot disdainfully wrote in his critique of Walter Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) that “[r]eligion became morals, religion became art, religion became science or philosophy; various blundering attempts were made at alliances between various branches of thought” (7).

aspect of nature were not mutually separated but, rather, intimately fused. In the early songs, a pure love of nature prevails, and objective descriptions of nature are hard to find. In short, from the beginning, spirit and nature did not exist in opposition. (Qtd. in Inouye 25)

In the historical novel *The Samurai* (1980) by Japanese Catholic writer Endō Shūsaku, a European Catholic priest who has labored for thirty years to teach his beliefs to the Japanese of the early seventeenth century declares,

The Japanese basically lack a sensitivity to anything that is absolute, to anything that transcends the human level, to the existence of anything beyond the realm of Nature: what we would call the supernatural. I finally realized that after thirty years there as a missionary. It was a simple matter to teach them that this life is transitory. They have always been sensitive to that aspect of life. The frightening thing is that the Japanese also have a capacity to accept and even relish the evanescence of life. This capacity is so profound that they actually revel in that knowledge, and have written many verses inspired by that emotion. Yet the Japanese make no attempt to leap beyond that knowledge. They have no desire at all to progress beyond it. They abhor the idea of making clear distinctions between man and God. . . . Even Nature, which for us is something totally detached from man, to them is an entity which envelops mankind. . . . Their sensibilities are firmly grounded within the sphere of Nature and never take flight to a higher realm. Within the realm of Nature their sensibilities are remarkably delicate and subtle, but those sensibilities are unable to grasp anything on a higher plane. That is why the Japanese cannot conceive of our God, who dwells on a separate plane from man. (163)

Perhaps it will come as no surprise that there were few Japanese of the 1600s—or even today—who were eager to sever their direct bond with all of Nature and begin to worship a being “on a separate plane

from man.”

Thus, prior to the arrival of Buddhist preachers in about 552, the Japanese were effectively Wordsworthians as they splendoured in the grass and gloried in the flower. Even though with its advent Buddhism taught the Japanese to “grieve” when the hour of revelry had passed, they have clung tenaciously to the opportunity to enjoy to the fullest however many nanoseconds precede the demise of the manifestations of natural beauty that surround them. The result is a unique and captivating intermingling of joy and sorrow, of celebration and desolation. It is as though an almost blinding flash of illumination has produced simultaneous cries of “Wow!” and “Ow!” Those two exclamations together are perhaps an apt definition—of embodiment—of *aware*.

There would, reasonably enough, be no need for the complex emotional blend encapsulated in *aware* were there not a second vital concept in Japanese aesthetic sensibility, *mujō*. The word is Buddhist in origin and means quite literally “the non-existence of permanence.” In its religious sense, *mujō* is meant to teach the truism that all phenomena are in flux and that there is no constancy in this dreamlike world. Hence, it is the most deluded of all human delusions to imagine that enlightenment can come while one remains attached to *anything* or *anybody*, because all those things and all those bodies are but fleeting fantasies. Attachments to such illusions can only lead to suffering, and it is the pain that results from attachment to transient things that keeps one trapped in the cycle of karmic retribution and a sequence of rebirths that will continue until one can detach oneself from everything that binds one to mortality. Only when one finally embraces and fully lives the doctrine of evanescence can one be freed from selfish selfhood and become one with the essence of Nirvana.

It is at the juncture of this Buddhist concept of *mujō* and the pre-Buddhist Japanese impetus to cherish fleeting beauty that *aware* is fully experienced. It is in the act of merging with and becoming a joyful part of an evanescent event that the individual is extinguished. This oneness with beauty eliminates the distinction between subjective observer and observed object. This unification with the mutable is

both a sensual and a spiritual experience. It is no coincidence that the vast majority of classical Japanese poetry takes as its subject matter, first and foremost, the beauties of nature—meaning not merely the beauties of the bud and the blossom but also the beauties of the fallen, decaying flower—and, second, the beauties of human love, starting with the first meeting, escalating to the pinnacle of passion, and culminating in the inevitable separation.

It is well known that the most familiar—and revered—image used by Japanese authors to embody transience is the cherry blossom. It is such a universal symbol for the Japanese that every unmodified mention of “flower” or “blossom” in classical poetry refers by convention to the cherry blossom. This flower is, of course, an ideal representation of ephemerality: it is breathtakingly beautiful when fully opened, but it falls from the tree almost as soon as it has flourished.

The following poems are from the *Kokinshū*, the first imperially commissioned anthology of poetry, compiled around 905. The first two are anonymous; the third is by the courtier Fujiwara no Sekio:

harugasumi	On hills where mists of spring
tamabiku yama no	Trail, glowing faintly,
sakurabana	Do the flowers' fading
utsuwamu to ya	Colors foretell
iro kawariyuku	Their fall?

mate to iu ni	If saying “stay!”
chirade shi tomaru	Would stop their
mono naraba	Falling, could I hold
nani o sakura ni	These blossoms
omoimasamashi	More dear?

nokori naku	It's their falling without regret
chiru zo medetaki	I admire—
sakurabana	Cherry blossoms:
arite yo no naka	A world of sadness
hate no ukereba	If they'd stayed. (151–52)

The yearning to have the blossoms stay intermingles here with the

dread of what might transpire should they in fact manage to withstand the effects of time. Would the rapture of being present for that instant when the blossoms reach their peak wither into disappointment if the object of admiration were to stick around for a week or more of jubilation?

When the Japanese court society collapsed under the weight of its own impracticality toward the end of the twelfth century, the ensuing age of the warrior with its perpetual battles between rival warlords threatened to set all nature—whether man-made or co-equal with man—ablaze, and Buddhist clerics with Protestant propensities began teaching that the world had entered into a degenerate “latter-days” of the Buddhist law. As a consequence, the hues of the Japanese worldview changed from a brocade of colorful robes and pinkish blossoms to more restrained shades of gray—the monochromatic palette that characterizes so much of medieval Japanese art. Where once the flowers of the cherry tree evoked feelings of *aware* at the *mujō*-ness of the world, the common poetic conceit of the medieval age was an evocation of “nightfall in autumn” (*aki no yūgure*), which refers not just to the setting of the sun in the fall but also to autumn winding down in preparation for the coming of winter.

The literary *and* religious text that emblemizes the medieval attitude toward transience is the *Hōjōki* (An Account of a Ten-Foot-Square Hut), written in 1212 by the eremitic Buddhist monk, Kamo no Chōmei. Disappointed by his failure to attain promotion in the capital at a familial shrine, Chōmei took religious vows, retreated to a small hut he had built himself in the mountains overlooking the capital, and reflected in the *Hōjōki* on the multitude of natural calamities of his day that seemed to him a broad-scale reflection of his own shattered fortunes. Here is how this essay opens:

The current of the flowing river does not cease, and yet the water is not the same water as before. The foam that floats on stagnant pools, now vanishing, now forming, never stays the same for long. So, too, it is with the people and dwellings of the world. . . . [W]e are like the foam on the water. I know neither whence the newborn come nor whither go the dead. . . . In com-

peting for impermanence, dweller and dwelling are no different from the morning glory and the dew. Perhaps the dew will fall and the blossom linger. But even though it lingers, it will wither in the morning sun. Perhaps the blossom will wilt and the dew remain. But even though it remains, it will not wait for evening. (624)

For all his ruminations on the ephemerality of this life, Chōmei concludes his account by admitting,

The essence of the Buddha's teachings is that we should cling to nothing. Loving my grass hut is wrong. Attachment to my quiet, solitary way of life, too, must interfere with my enlightenment. Why then do I go on spending precious time relating useless pleasures? Pondering this truth on a tranquil morning, just before dawn, I ask my mind: one leaves the world and enters the forest to cultivate the mind and practice the Way of the Buddha. In your case, however, although your appearance is that of a monk, your mind is clouded with desire. . . . Is this because poverty, a karmic retribution, torments your mind, or is it that a deluded mind has deranged you? At that time, my mind had no reply. I simply set my tongue to work halfheartedly reciting the name of the compassionate Amida Buddha two or three times, and that is all. (634–35)

It seems so very Japanese—and so very human—to read account after account of those who are determined to sever all ties with the delights and fascinations of this sad world because they see such renunciation as the sole path to salvation, and who yet are constantly looking back over their shoulders at the tantalizing joys they are leaving behind—rather like Lot's wife, though one wonders what she found so attractive about an atomized Sodom and Gomorrah.

By any account, the author of Japan's medieval age who most typifies in his life and work the back-and-forth tug between the world of sensuality and the world of spirituality is Saigyō, an itinerant poet-monk. Each of the following poems illustrates the tension he seems to have felt constantly (or perhaps “rather un-ephemer-

ally”):

sutsu to naraba	If I've forsaken
ukiyo o itou	The world of sorrows
shirushi aramu	There must be proof I despise it—
ware ni wa kumore	Shroud yourself for me,
Aki no yo no tsuki	Autumn night moon. (576)

hana ni somu	Why should my heart
kokoro no ikade	Remain stained
nokorikemu	By blossoms,
sutehateteki to	When I thought
Omou waga mi ni	I had tossed all that away? (577)

This last one is one of the most beloved of all Japanese poems through the ages:

Kokoro naki	Even one
mi ni mo aware wa	With no heart cannot help
shirarekeri	But know this lovely sorrow:
shigi tatsu sawa no	A sandpiper takes flight in a marsh
aki no yūgure	This autumn evening (579) ³

Note here, in the space of a mere thirty-one syllables, the use of *both* the emotive *aware* and the descriptive *aki no yūgure*. Commentators often assert that the mention of a person “with no heart” is an intentional reference by Saigyō to the duty of an earnest disciple of the Buddha to cut all emotional ties to the mortal realm. At the same time, though, the poet suggests that the sight of a bird leaving the colorless marsh just as the sun sets would be moving to even the most heartless of individuals.

Besides *aware*, *mujō*, and *aki no yūgure*, two additional aesthetic terms are crucial to understanding the Japanese arts. The first is *sabi*,

³In the published translation Jack Stoneman translates, *shigi* as “snipe”; subsequently, he has indicated a preference for “sandpiper.”

which in earliest times meant “desolate” but by the medieval era had taken on the sense of “growing old” and even “growing rusty.” One might innocently consider it an expression of sorrow over some object or person ravaged by the passage of time; in actuality, however, by the thirteenth century *sabi* had come to refer to the pleasure one derives from things that are old or faded or lonely or imperfect (deBary et al. 367–68). Adornments, embellishments, even seamless repairs to a broken art object are less to be appreciated—and, perhaps, have less to teach about the illusory quality of human lives—than the bare, the unvarnished, or the irregularly shaped cup used in the tea ceremony, which flourished in the sixteenth century.

William Theodore deBary and his colleagues observe that “[*sabi* . . . differs from the gentle melancholy of *aware*: when moved by a deep sense of *sabi*, one does not lament the fallen blossoms, one loves them” (368). Perhaps the most palpable visual representation of the *sabi* ethos can be found in the distinctions the Japanese make between the glittering Golden Pavilion in Kyoto and what most foreign tourists consider its insipid stepchild, the Silver Pavilion. The Golden Pavilion, the Kinkakuji, was built in 1397 as a retirement villa for the shogun. Its appearance is striking, thanks to the brilliant gold leafing that covers the upper two stories of the building. A young novice monk suffering from schizophrenia burned the pavilion to the ground in 1950.⁴ When it was rebuilt five years later, foreign tourists were charmed by the “dazzlingly gilded walls reflected in the temple pond . . . but the people of Kyoto said, ‘Wait ten years, wait until it acquires some *sabi*’” (deBary et al. 369). It may well have acquired some of that essential patina as time passed, but the truer architectural embodiment of the *sabi* aesthetic is to be found in the Silver Pavilion, the Ginkakuji, built in 1490; the original architectural plan called for this close replica of the Golden Pavilion to be covered in silver foil, but that never happened. Consequently, the enlightened ones who go looking for the “real Japan” in Kyoto will

⁴This incident provided the impetus for Mishima Yukio to Haruo elucidate his own theories of the power of beauty in the novel *Kinkakuji*.

be found clustered at a silverless Silver Pavilion.

Another aesthetic concept that is the first cousin to *sabi* is *wabi* (and, yes, the Japanese are fond of chanting “*wabi/sabi*” to try to help non-Japanese understand that they will never understand the depths of their culture). The historian Haga Kōshirō has written that three interrelated qualities of beauty are subsumed in the term *wabi*: 1) “a simple, unpretentious beauty,” 2) “an imperfect, irregular beauty,” and 3) “an austere, stark beauty” (qtd. in deBary et al. 390). As a literary example of the simple, irregular, stark beauty of *wabi*-hood, the following verse by Fujiwara Teika is frequently cited:

miwataseba	Looking about
hana mo momiji mo	No flowers,
nakarikeri	No scarlet leaves.
ura no tomaya no	A bayside reed hovel
aki no yūgure	In the autumn dusk. (Haga 249)

There are barren *mountains* of verses from the medieval period that, in myriad ways, evoke these aesthetic preferences. One need look no further than the tea ceremony, perfected in the late sixteenth century by Sen no Rikyū, for the locus where the beautiful and the sad, seasoned with Zen Buddhist philosophy, come together to create a calm spiritual environment conducive to meditation and enlightenment. It is not too much of an exaggeration to suggest that virtually every form of artistic expression in Japan’s medieval age aimed at this fusion of seemingly contradictory experiences of beauty and sadness and sought to elevate them to a plane of spiritual insight thought available in almost no other way. The Japanese arts have for centuries demanded a high degree of viewer or reader participation, even collaboration, that can seem to those in the West very modern, possibly postmodern. Precious few works in the Japanese tradition are considered complete—if, indeed, completion is one of the goals of the creation—until the observer agrees to set aside individuality and enter into an unselfish spiritual dialogue with the author.

Through the act of abandoning the confining borders separating individual from individual—an act that is endlessly repeated in the

tea ceremony, for instance—all distinctions of class, heredity, and even artistic or spiritual attainment are, for at least a fleeting moment, erased. The semi-literate can become poets, the stodgy pedant can become a starry-eyed dreamer, the layperson can become an ecclesiastic. Nowhere is this obliteration of boundaries more evident than in the writings of the greatest of the haiku poets, Matsuo Bashō, who “did not become a Buddhist monk, although he dressed and, in some ways, acted like one. He likened himself to a bat, being ‘neither monk nor layman, bird nor bat, but something in between’” (deBary et al. 350).

Within the formal confines of a mere seventeen syllables, Bashō aims in his best haiku to create a tension between *fueki*—the eternal, never changing—and *ryūkō*—the flowing, ever changing aspects of human experience. Like *zazen*, the seated meditation exercises through which the Zen devotee seeks sharpened spiritual awareness, in the interstices between the constant and the fluid Bashō seeks to offer his readers a glimpse into the realm of the rarefied. Two of his most famous poems illustrate this:

kareeda ni	Crows resting
karasu no tomaritaru ya	On a withered branch—
aki no kure	Evening in autumn. (181)
furuike ya	An ancient pond ⁵ —
kawazu tobikomu	A frog leaps in,
mizu no oto	The sound of water. (183)

Note that the syllable count in the first haiku is 5–10–5, a total that exceeds the allowed seventeen syllables, and perhaps the absolutely monochrome visual quality of the verse obscures the fact that there is movement here: a more literal translation of the second line might be “crows are coming to rest,” the connotation being that one has caught this scene as the withered branch is finally moving to

⁵I have made one minor change to Haruo Shirane’s translation, rendering “An old pond” as “An ancient pond.”

stasis after having been bounced up and down as crows come in for a landing. Bashō also elongates that visual moment by drawing out the length of the line that describes this instance of flux. The poem, then, is a sublime example of the eternal repetition of autumn evenings brought into juxtaposition with a single animated instance in time.

As for the famous second haiku, one can easily imagine a narrator void of individual identity—a very common point of view in Japanese poetry—seated in calm contemplation while gazing at a body of water that has obviously been there for a very long time—certainly longer than the span of a human life. In that moment of meditation, perhaps on the brevity of mortal existence, the reverie is shattered by a frog's audacious wake-up call. But that audible summons back to everyday life is very much like the moment of *satori*—spiritual enlightenment—that is the goal of a Zen aspirant. That awakening, prompted by nothing more mystical than the noisy leap of a frog, is, of course, a realization of the vanity of all human attachments, even to the way one is drawn to the simple and profound beauty of a poem such as this.

There is, inevitably, a strong ambivalence about accepting with grace the truism that all sources of beauty and all objects of love must perish. Perhaps the most moving literary example of this ambivalence in the Japanese tradition comes from the writings of the early nineteenth-century haiku poet, Kobayashi Issa. It should come as no surprise at this point that he was also a lay Buddhist monk. Since the first child born to Issa and his wife lived only a few hours, they took great joy when their second daughter, Sato, was born. Sadly, Sato died after only fourteen months. Issa writes in his poetic journal,

At the height of our enjoyment comes anguish. This is indeed the way of this world of sorrow, but for this seedling . . . at the peak of her young laughter, to be possessed, unexpectedly as water in a sleeper's ear, by the savage god of pox! At the height of the eruption, she was like a budding first blossom that had no sooner bloomed than it was beaten down by muddy rains. . . . [F]inally, on the twenty-first day of the Sixth Month, together

with the morning glories, she faded from this world. Her mother clung to her . . . , sobbing and sobbing, and who could blame her? When things have reached this pass, one may put on a face of mature resignation, telling oneself that it does no good to wail, for “flowing water returns not to its source, nor the fallen blossom to the branch”—but hard indeed to sever are the bonds of love,

followed by this simple verse:

Tsuyu no yo wa	The world of dew
Tsuyu no yo nagara	Is, yes, a world of dew—
Sarinagara	And yet . . . and yet. . . (944–45)

In 1968, the Japanese writer Kawabata Yasunari became the first from his land to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. In his acceptance speech in Stockholm, which he titled “I Who am a Part of Beautiful Japan,”⁶ he cites the deathbed poem of an early nineteenth-century Buddhist priest named Ryōkan:

Katami tote	What shall I leave
nanika nokosamu	As my legacy?
haru wa hana	For spring, the cherry blossom
Yama hototogisu	And the cuckoo in the hills
Aki wa momijiba	For autumn, the crimson leaves.

Here is how Kawabata parses this verse:

In this poem . . . the commonest of figures and the commonest of words are strung together without hesitation . . . and so they

⁶In his English translation of this speech, Edward G. Seidensticker renders the Japanese title, *Utsukushii Nihon no watashi*, as *Japan, the Beautiful, and Myself* (1968). Though this may be the least clunky approximation of the Japanese title, in the original, “beautiful” modifies “Japan,” which in turn modifies “me,” and it may well be, given the vagaries of Japanese grammar, that “beautiful” might also be a modifier of “me.”

transmit the very essence of Japan. Ryōkan . . . lived in the spirit of [his poetry], a wanderer down country paths, a grass hut for shelter, rags for clothes, farmers to talk to. The profundity of religion and literature was not, for him, in the abstruse. He rather pursued literature and belief in the benign spirit summarized in the Buddhist phrase “a smiling face and gentle words.” In his last poem he offers nothing as a legacy. He but hoped that after his death, nature would remain beautiful. That could be his bequest. One feels in the poem the emotions of old Japan, and the heart of a religious faith as well. (67–69)

It is a very Western impulse to try to wrap up an essay such as this with a tidy conclusion. Far more in keeping with the Japanese literary tradition, however, would be to lapse into contemplative silence before any rational conclusions are reached. Students often complain bitterly that Japanese stories lack an ending, that novels simply trail off into ambiguity without any of the sort of resolution that they have come to expect in Western literature—especially the kind they read in high school. But when change is the only constant, and the only sane recourse for the individual is to merge with and savor the beauty of a transient instant in time, there really can be no such thing as an “ending,” a tidy wrapping up of events with “they lived happily ever after,” or “they lived sadly ever after,” or even “they all just died.” As Charles Shirō Inouye writes, “Constant change works against our desires to make reality comply with our need to rationalize and control its processes. Unless we know how to work harmoniously with that reality, our lives are nothing but disappointment and frustration” (26).

The Japanese, more than most ethnic groups, have learned how to work in harmony with the reality of constant change, and by focusing on the beauty that can invariably be found in the midst of transformation and corruption, they have been able to cope with, even revel in, that beauty, finding therein a form of faith in the power of beauty to bring peace to hearts pierced by sadness and loss. By somehow learning to link beauty and sadness, they have taught others that there is something worthy of belief in the elusive and

impermanent world.

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ جَاءُوا بِالْإِفْكِ عُصْبَةٌ مِّنكُمْ لَا تَحْسَبُوهُ شَرًّا لَّكُمْ بَلْ هُوَ خَيْرٌ
لَّكُمْ لِكُلِّ امْرِئٍ مِّنْهُمْ مَا أَكْتَسَبَ مِنَ الْإِثْمِ وَالَّذِي تَوَلَّى كِبْرَهُ
مِنْهُمْ لَهُ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

“The Affair of the Lie”
Surah An Nur, vs. 11, Quran

Victorian Poets and Islam

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In contrast to a political climate that allows some to imagine Muslims as the quintessential other who belong only somewhere else, several scholars celebrate junctures in literary history when non-Muslims enlisted Islam and its stories to reimagine ostensibly Western subjects.¹ An exploration of Islamic motifs in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" and Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "Guinevere" suggests that Browning's description of the veiled duchess was influenced by the historical beginnings of the hijab and that the "affair of the lie" was a source for Tennyson's "Guinevere." Both also continue the

¹For example, Jeffrey Einboden traces the influence of Islam on German and British Romanticism, drawing attention to overtly Oriental-themed texts, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey's unfinished "The Flight and Return of Mohammed," Southey's *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801), Lord Byron's *The Giaour* (1813), Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam* (1818), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and Washington Irving's *The Alhambra* (1832) and *Life of Mahomet* (1850), among other works. Other critics interested in like subjects include Mohammed Sharafuddin, Gal Manor, Rowena Fowler, Andrew Warren, Emily A. Haddad, Shahin Kuli Khan Khattak, and Samar Attar.

eighteenth-century trend of using “Islam as an oblique way of criticizing Christianity,” by transplanting Islamic history into a Western setting, thereby forcing readers to encounter Islamic motifs without the lens of alterity (Khattak 15).

Victorian Orientalism, like its Romantic counterpart,² has been mired in debate regarding the validity of Orientalism as an ideological discourse, and critics have long focused primarily on literary representations of the East.³ However, alongside analysis of standard Orientalist texts, critics are simultaneously attempting to expand the canon and reinvigorate Victorian Orientalism, highlighting previously unmentioned nuances and complexities and raising the question of where Victorian studies should go next.⁴ A logical next step for Victorian Orientalism is the transition already made by Romantic Orientalists, namely that Victorian Orientalism should be expanded to include overtly Western-themed texts with arguably Islamic sources, particularly those by authors with a known interest in the Orient.

²Warren and Attar are exceptions, as they also analyze overtly Western-themed poems.

³Khattak discusses overtly Eastern-themed texts such as Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” Thomas Moore’s “The Veiled Prophet of Kharasan,” Shelley’s *The Revolt of Islam*, Edward Fitzgerald’s *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (1859), and Browning’s “Rabbi Ben Ezra” and *Ferishtah’s Fancies* (1884) and argues that missionary schools used English literature as a tool of conversion during the Victorian period. Manor’s critique focuses on Browning’s *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842), *The Return of the Druses* (1843), *Luria* (1846), *Ferishtah’s Fancies*, *Dramatic Idyls* (1880), and *Jocoseria* (1883). Haddad analyzes overtly Eastern works including Matthew Arnold’s “The Sick King in Bokhara,” Tennyson’s “Written by an Exile of Bassorah, While Sailing Down the Euphrates” and “Recollections of the Arabian Nights,” and Oscar Wilde’s “Athanasia.” Said Zaidi also treats the same Tennyson and Arnold poems with the addition of Arnold’s “Sohrab and Rustum” and Browning’s “Mulýkeh.” Clinton Bennett deals primarily with non-fiction but also details Victorian representations of “Islamic” retribution in the works of Rudyard Kipling.

⁴Yeeyon Im attempts to add Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* (1893), and Shanyn Fiske argues that there is a “current shifting of focus in Victorian studies away from canonical, mainstream concerns towards the disenfranchised people” (214).

Browning's interest in the East is well established. Critics including Joseph Phelan, Dorothy Mermin, Rowena Fowler, and Gal Manor have noted both his fascination with all things Oriental and the critical neglect of Browning's Orientalism.⁵ Indeed, Browning's Oriental sympathies were such that early biographers, such as Mrs. Sutherland Orr and William DeVane, felt the need to deny that Browning was ethnically Jewish.⁶ With the question of origin settled, an alternate explanation was sought for Browning's esoteric knowledge of Eastern religions and "delight in rabbinical lore" (DeVane 3). Browning's Oriental interests are now believed to stem from his early access to his father's immense library.⁷ As DeVane notes, the "6,000 volumes of his library were made up of many of the substantial and important books of the world. They were in Greek, Hebrew, Latin, French, Italian and Spanish," as well as, of course, English (5). It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine what books exactly the library was composed of, as only a partial record of them was listed in "the 1913 catalogue of the sale of Browning's own library," which also included the Brownings' joint library and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's books (6).⁸ Despite the lack of a definitive catalogue and Browning's unfortunate failure to respond to his wife's "request for a record of his 'early tastes'" (7), it is arguable that among the six thousand volumes in Browning's father's library was George Sale's 1734 translation of the Koran with commentary (Attar 201; Einboden 133). Sale, "Britain's key scholar of Islam" (Einboden 134), viewed his subject with suspicion, introducing "the idea of Islam as a scourge to the Christian Church because its members did not live answerable to the religion they had received" (Khattak 15). The Koran was widely available, was considered largely responsi-

⁵Manor seeks to rectify this neglect by examining Browning's Orientalism throughout his career, dividing his treatment of Oriental themes into three periods, moving from binary to unconventional to hybridity.

⁶Orr observes that "[a] belief was current in Mr. Browning's lifetime that he had Jewish blood in his veins" (1). Also see DeVane's compilation.

⁷Manor notes that "Browning had access to the many Oriental and esoteric texts in his father's library, which consisted of approximately six thousand volumes" (66–67); on this point, also see Judith Berlin-Lieberman.

⁸John Woolford also provides information on Browning's reading.

ble for the increase of knowledge in England about Islam from the eighteenth century onward, and was often quoted and referred to by Romantic poets (Einboden 171). As Jeffrey Einboden notes, Byron once said to Shelley, “Sale[,] the translator of the Koran, was suspected of being an Islamite, but a very different one from you, Shiloh”—bridging Britain’s key scholar of Islam and Britain’s key Romantic poet (133–34).

Shelley’s “Islamite” inclinations may also have influenced Browning as Browning’s early years were notable for a marked fascination with Shelley, whose poetry and “millenarian socialist ideas” made the “profoundest impression” on Browning, inspiring his temporary vegetarianism and atheism (Ricks 36, 2).⁹ Orr states that on first encountering Shelley’s poetry, Browning so loved it that he begged his mother for copies of all of Shelley’s works, which, except for *The Cenci* (1819), she eventually managed to obtain (37–38), and Sarah Wood argues for Shelley’s lasting influence on Browning’s poetic style. As Byron’s sardonic remark indicates, Shelley’s interest in Islam was well known and an obvious feature of his poetry. Attar notes that Shelley’s *The Revolt of Islam* chronicles early Islamic history during the caliphate of Uthman, the third caliph or ruler of the Muslim empire, arguing that Aisha, the Prophet Mohammed’s youngest wife, is a model for Shelley’s Cythna and Uthman for his despot (129).

Irrespective of its source, the correspondence of Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning reveals an engagement with Islam and the Koran. In 1844, Benjamin Robert Haydon wrote to Elizabeth, “I enclose you the precious document—a leaf from the *real* Koran—I bring it myself for fear of Earth quakes—& will send for it to-morrow—Place it under lock & key” (Kelley and Lewis 9:229). Elizabeth herself mentions Islam and the Koran several times. She twice happily likened a letter from Browning to the Koran. In February 1846, she wrote to Browning, “When the knock came last night, I knew it was your letter, & not another’s. Just another little leaf of my Koran! How I thank you” (12:105), and in March 1846, she wrote, “just the little

⁹Woolford and Daniel Karlin also comment on the attraction Shelley’s work held for the young Browning.

shred of the Koran, to be gathered up reverently . . . (Inshallah!)” (12:193). In addition to these specific mentions, in 1841, she referred to Charles Forster’s *Mahometanism Unveiled* (1829) in a letter to Richard Hengist Horne (Kelley and Lewis 5:12).¹⁰ In 1844, she again mentioned Islam in a letter to Horne, stating, “He is a false prophet, from whose very successes & triumphs, may be deduced the falsity of his mission—a Mahomet (say!) whose sword, bloody to the hilt, disproves his Allah” (8:217), and, earlier in 1829, she wrote, “the chair of St Peter, —a relic sedulously preserved at Rome, —& upon which was discovered, a few years ago, the following inscription in Arabic characters, ‘There is no God but God, & Mahomet is his prophet’” (2:196). Though these references appear in Elizabeth’s letters, two of them were included in letters to Browning, indicating their shared and acknowledged interest in the Koran. As Browning’s letters were primarily “matters of business,” one must rely on his more verbose wife for documented insights concerning him (DeVane 1).

Although previous studies of Browning’s Orientalism have focused predominantly on his Jewish interests,¹¹ recent critics, such as Manor, draw attention to the proliferation of Islamic characters, themes, and history in his works. Most of these critics focus largely on Browning’s poems with Eastern characters, settings, and languages. Manor notes that Browning deliberately incorporates both Islamic and Jewish themes and details the sources of these Oriental features, stating that he uses the Talmud (74) *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*, and *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* and noting that *Luria* is the novel of a cabalistic philosopher whose ideas appear in Browning’s “Abt Vogler” (71). Manor also establishes Browning’s knowledge of Islamic history, arguing that his “Shah Abbas” “parallels the historical

¹⁰Charles Forster “saw Muhammed as Christ’s antagonist who would indirectly shape the course of things and revive Christianity by stimulating a fight against idolatry, Judaism, and Christian heresies” (Khattak 16).

¹¹Fowler, for example, examines the proliferation of Jewish characters throughout Browning’s oeuvre, concluding that his characters are “de-mythologized and inhabit specific milieux and historical moments” and that Browning “evoke[s] easy stereotypes only to challenge them” (262).

validity of Lord Ali, Mohammed's son-in-law, with New Testament accounts of the life of Jesus" (78).

"My Last Duchess" was originally published in *Dramatic Lyrics* relatively early in Browning's career, when he was still "in a Shelleyan muse," and during what Browning later implies was the height of his admiration for Shelley (qtd. in Woolford 2).¹² It is evident from Manor's analysis that "Browning's interest in Oriental themes expands in *Dramatic Lyrics* . . . with his first Arab and Jewish speakers emerging in 'Through the Metidja to Abd-el-Kadr' and 'Saul'" (68). Therefore, logically, other poems from this collection, although not overtly Eastern, could nevertheless have Arabic-Islamic features. However, the Western setting of "My Last Duchess," variously named as Italy or Ferrara, has obscured its Islamic themes.

The accepted source for "My Last Duchess," supported by its subtitles and Browning's known studies and comments, is the life of Alphonso II, the fifth Duke of Ferrara (Loucks and Stauffer 83, fn. 1). But there may also have been a thematic, rather than plot-based, model of influence: the "veiling" of the last duchess's painting may have been influenced by the beginnings of the hijab. Although the modern hijab is strongly associated with a headscarf, it actually originated as a type of curtain, screen, or veil used to segregate the Prophet's wives from other men's eyes (Stowasser 127–31). The revelation of Aya 53 of Surah Al-Ahzab is believed to have taken place after the Prophet's marriage to Zaynab bint Jahsh.¹³ The mandated seclusion "was achieved through the architectural means of 'a single curtain,' *sitr wahid*" (90–91).¹⁴ Historical examples abound of the

¹²In an 1885 letter, Browning declared, "For myself I painfully contrast my notions of Shelley the *man* and Shelley, well, even the *poet* with what they were sixty years ago" (qtd. in Woolford 3).

¹³The marriage of Prophet Muhammed and Zaynab "is identified in the majority of the Hadith and the *tafsir* accounts as the occasion for God's legislation of the *hijab* imposed by God to shield the Prophet's women from the eyes of visitors to his dwellings" (Stowasser 90).

¹⁴"Soon after the revelation of the hijab verse, self-protection of 'the Prophet's wives, his daughters, and the women of the believers' was enjoined in Qur'an 33:59–60 by way of God's command that Muslim women cover

Prophet's wives secluding themselves in this way, including one in which Aisha "hid behind the partition in the presence of a blind man" (116). A modern edition of the Koran translates this portion of Aya 53: "And when ye ask (his ladies) for anything ye want, ask them from before a screen" (*Holy* 1262), while Sale rendered it, "And when ye ask of the prophet's wives what ye may have occasion for, ask it of them from behind a curtain" (321). Sale's footnote elaborates on this injunction:

That is, let there be a curtain drawn between you, or let them be veiled while ye talk with them. As the design of the former precept was to prevent the impertinence of troublesome visitors, the design of this was to guard against too near an intercourse or familiarity between his wives and his followers; and was occasioned, it is said, by the hand of one of his companions accidentally touching that of Ayesha, which gave the prophet some uneasiness. (321, NB)

Thus, the version of Aya 53 Browning most likely encountered uses the exact word *curtain*, in both the footnote and the translation, to describe the veil imposed only on the Prophet's wives. The hijab in its original meaning therefore dovetails with the type of veil used in "My Last Duchess," as Browning's Duke specifically states, "since none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I" (9–10, cited by line number).

The last duchess's veiled domestic confinement also links her situation to an earlier verse in Surah Al-Ahzab. As Barbara Stowasser

themselves in their 'mantles,' or 'cloaks' (*jalabib*, singular: *jilbab*) when abroad 'so that they be known [as free women, not slaves] and not molested [in the streets] by the hypocrites, and those in whose hearts is a disease, and those who stir up sedition in the City [al-Madina].' This piece of legislation differed from the *hijab* of 33:53 in two ways: Firstly, it concerned individual female appearance when outside of the home, not seclusion within it; and secondly, it applied to all Muslim women, not just the Prophet's wives" (Stowasser 90).

states, the Prophet's wives were now the subject of a "Quranic command to . . . 'stay in your houses' (33.33)" (116). A modern translation renders this as "stay quietly in your houses" (*Holy* 1251), while Sale's translation is "sit still in your houses" (318). By all accounts these commands were obeyed most scrupulously with reports that "two women of the Prophet's household, Sawda bint Zam'a and Zaynab bint Jahsh, opted for complete confinement and immobility" (Stowasser 116). Browning's language echoes Aya 33 when the Duke states, "I gave commands; / then all smiles stopped together" (45–46). Although the fate of the duchess, imprisoned in a convent or put to death, is unknown,¹⁵ the Duke's commands are strongly associated with confinement, either in a convent or in the postmortem confinement of her portrait, veiled within the ducal residence. Browning thus perhaps draws parallels between the Duke's commands and the Koranic command given to the Prophet's wives.

Status also links the last duchess's veiling to the hijab. Browning's duke makes it clear that he was dissatisfied with the duchess for failing to appreciate his status, his "nine-hundred-years-old name" (33). Similarly, the original hijab, worn only by the Prophet's wives, marked "their elite status" (Stowasser 91). The minor nature of the events that lead to the duchess's death or incarceration echo the events that led to the institution of the hijab. The duchess's sins included a "heart . . . too soon made glad" (Browning 22) by "the bough of cherries some officious fool / Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule / she rode with round the terrace" (26–27), and smiling at both the Duke and everyone else who passed by her. For these sins the Duke "gave commands; / then all smiles stopped together" (45–46). These trifling offenses lead to the last duchess's confinement as a veiled painting. The events that lead to the hijab legislation are similarly mundane. Scholars attribute it to one of five events: 1) when the Prophet and Zaynab bint Jahsh's wedding guests stayed too late, 2) when the Prophet saw men "loitering" outside Zaynab's house

¹⁵"The sense is ambiguous. Much later Browning said, 'The commands were that she be put to death,' then added, 'or he might have had her shut up in a convent'" (qtd. in Loucks and Stauffer 84, fn. 3).

the following morning, 3) when one of the Prophet's wives touched a man's hand at a meal, 4) when Aisha's hand touched Umar ibn al-Khattab's at a meal, or 5) when Umar ibn al-Khattab advised the Prophet to "conceal and segregate" his wives (Stowasser 90).¹⁶ Whatever the cause, it is important to note the trivial scale of these events. Since Browning could have known the third possible cause, an accidental touching of hands, from Sale's footnote, he very likely mirrors it with the duchess's own calamitous petty offenses.

Given these similarities between Islamic and Italian veilings, Browning's well established interest in Eastern religions, his probable knowledge of Sale, and his poetic engagement with the Orient in *Dramatic Lyrics*, one can safely argue for the substantial influence of Islamic sources on "My Last Duchess." By transplanting the confinement and veiling of women to a Western, Christian setting, Browning abolishes Victorian readers' comfortable feelings of distance and superiority and raises disturbing questions about methods of confinement still practiced in the West. However, by setting his poem in Catholic Italy, he nevertheless enables the reader to draw some small comfort in remembering, in the words of Jane Austen's character Henry Tilney, "the country and age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians'" (136).

The approach taken here opens other Victorian texts, such as Tennyson's "Guinevere," to new interpretation. Tennyson's interest in the Orient is also well established, and, as with Browning, critics tend to view his oeuvre from a binary perspective, charting Arabic-Islamic influences on only his overtly Eastern poems.¹⁷ Yet much is to be gained from examining Tennyson's overtly Western poems for signs of Islamic influences, especially the "affair of the lie," an early

¹⁶Of the second event Stowasser writes, "On this occasion, the hijab 'came down' in a double sense: Firstly, it was literally, a 'curtain' the Prophet loosened while standing on the threshold to Zaynab's chamber, with one foot in the room and the other outside, in order to bar his servant Anas ibn Malik from entering" (90).

¹⁷Haddad treats "The Palace of Art," noting that "while the poem contains many references to the East, it is not orientalist as a whole," and as a result "critics have generally disregarded the understated orientalism" of it (187).

episode in Islamic history in which the Prophet's wife, Aisha, was accused of adultery, which seems to have influenced Tennyson's alterations to Arthurian legend in "Guinevere."

Tennyson makes substantial changes to traditional Arthurian legend in *Idylls of the King* (1859). His casting of Arthur as "ever virgin save for thee" places the blame for Camelot's collapse primarily at Guinevere's feet (554). As Alison Case notes, "vast structures of meaning seem to be founded upon the transparent purity—or impurity—of a single woman," and in Tennyson's *Idylls*, "one woman's adultery and deceit cause the collapse of an entire civilization" (218). The far-reaching effects of Guinevere's adultery do, of course, stem from early Arthurian texts; however, there are usually mitigating factors that distribute blame, but Tennyson's new, sinless Arthur adds an emphasis absent in earlier works: casting Arthur as a prophet-like figure, creating a new moral society, and the threat to his reformed kingdom stemming from Guinevere's adultery echo the establishment of the early Muslim community in Al-Madina and the threat posed by the "affair of the lie."

Sale refers to the "affair of the lie" and also mentions Al-Bokhari Hadith (266). It is quite likely, given Tennyson's interest in the Orient, that he, like Browning, was familiar with Sale's translation of the Koran, but, if not, he could have encountered this episode in many other sources. Sale's translation describes the "affair of the lie" dramatically:

Mohammed having undertaken an expedition against the tribe of Mostalak . . . took his wife Ayesha with him. . . . When they were not far from Medina . . . Ayesha . . . alighted from her camel, and stepped aside on a private occasion. . . . When she came back to the road, and saw her camel was gone, she sat down there . . . and in a little time she fell asleep. Early in the morning, Safwân Ebn al Moattel, who had stayed behind to rest himself, coming by, and perceiving somebody asleep, went to see who it was and knew her to be Ayesha. . . . Safwân set her on his own camel, and led her after the army, which they overtook by noon, as they were resting. (266)

Upon their return, Aisha is accused of adultery (Stowasser 94), which sparked a politically and personally hazardous situation, because “if the community believed the slander to be true, Muhammed would lose face and legitimacy, dishonoured by the alleged unfaithfulness of his wife” (Walker and Sells 64). As Ashley Manjarraz Walker and Michael A. Sells explain,

The problem was not that Muhammed refused to vindicate her, but that he could not vindicate her without reverting to the role of a tribal leader defending his honor. Indeed, as soon as he called for the punishment of ‘A’isha’s accusers, the Aws and Khazraj began to revert to the very tribal structures of feud that Islam was attempting to eliminate. Had Muhammed persisted, the young *umma* or Islamic community would have been endangered. (64)

About a month later, Aisha is vindicated by Sura Al-Nur. A modern translation reports, “Those who brought forward the lie are a body among yourselves” (*Holy* 898–99). Sale, however, translates this passage as “As to the party among you who have published the falsehood concerning Ayesha” and elaborates on it further in a footnote:

This accident had like to have ruined Ayesha, whose reputation was publicly called in question, as if she had been guilty of adultery with Safwân; and Mohammed himself knew not what to think, when he reflected on the circumstances of the affair, which were improved by some malicious people very much to Ayesha’s dishonour; and notwithstanding his wife’s protestations of her innocence, he could not get rid of his perplexity, nor stop the mouths of the censorious, till about a month after, when this passage was revealed, declaring the accusation to be unjust. (266)

Although the “affair of the lie” was resolved, before Aisha’s inno-

cence was declared, the Prophet called character witnesses, one of whom was his cousin, Ali. According to Stowasser, “Ali is reported to have remarked to the Prophet that ‘women are plentiful and you can easily change one for another’” (95). Aisha and Ali later fought on opposite sides in the Battle of the Camel, also known as the Battle of Bassorah. They later reconciled, but their enmity had far-reaching consequences and is still a point of contention between Shias and Sunnis today.

There are clear differences between the “affair of the lie” and Tennyson’s “Guinevere,” particularly Guinevere’s guilt; however, this famous episode in Islamic history amply demonstrates the idea that the success of a civilization may depend upon the purity of its leader’s wife. Tennyson’s depiction of Guinevere’s adultery ruining the purpose of Arthur’s life and his decision to “leave thee, woman, to thy shame” (508) echoes the threat to the Muslim community posed by the accusations against Aisha and the Prophet’s inability to defend her without undermining his own societal reforms. Additionally, Modred’s undermining of Arthur by attacking him through Guinevere mirrors the attack against the Prophet via Aisha and is “another example of the threat of hypocritical manipulation of community unity” (Stowasser 95), similar to Tennyson’s depiction of Modred’s undermining of Camelot: “he that like a subtle beast / lay couchant with his eyes upon the throne” (Tennyson 530). Although Tennyson’s work is unmistakably Christian in nature, given his fascination with the Orient and the extent to which Muhammed and Aisha interested Romantic and Victorian poets alike, the “affair of the lie” may have inspired aspects of his restructuring of Arthurian legend. By possibly utilizing Islamic history as a source for these alterations and paralleling the new moral King Arthur with the Prophet, Tennyson may be challenging the Western feeling of superiority towards the East by using a Muslim figure to improve the morality and fundamentally change the narrative of a quintessential British hero.

Thus, although the historical beginnings of the hijab and the “affair of the lie” are Islamic sources that augment, rather than supplant, their Western counterparts, their probable influence on overtly Western Christian texts indicates a greater complexity and diversity of

Victorian writers' attitudes towards the Orient than is typically acknowledged. Further studies of other canonical Victorian poets with a distinct interest in the Orient may help uncover other Islamic influences on overtly Western-themed poetry, illuminating new interpretative depths and future avenues of exploration, the fruits of what Einboden describes as "the catalyzing effect which Muslim sources have exercised on Western creativity" (5). This expanded approach, in turn, could greatly benefit the future of Romantic and Victorian Orientalism as a whole.

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“She prayed a good, good prayer, and I joined in it, poor me.”
(E. A. Abbey’s illustration for an 1876 edition of
Dickens’s *Christmas Stories* [276]).

Holy Dying: Victorian Deathbed Scenes

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Little Nell's death, in Charles Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), is generally considered one of the most famous in Victorian fiction. George H. Ford notes that readers, listeners, even the author himself record bursting into tears at her death and that critics such as Washington Irving praised the scene for its "moral sublimity" (56). Adding to the drama are illustrations by George Cattermole, Daniel Maclise, and Samuel Williams, all overseen by Dickens. To modern readers the scene and its illustrations often seem overwrought, to the point that they can "pose an obstacle to serious consideration of the novel as a work of art" (Georgas 35). Yet Dickens was not alone in his dramatic, sentimental portrayal of a young woman's death; a quick glance reveals strikingly similar scenes from writers as diverse as Anthony Trollope, the Brontës, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Young, Mrs. Henry Wood, and George Eliot. Indeed, given this diversity of authors, the similarity in depictions is noteworthy since the variety of authors also means a variety of subgenres—Romantic, Sensational, Realistic—with widely diverse audience expectations, yet the presentations are remarkably similar. A comparison of diverse works both illustrates the common characteristics of the deathbed

scene in Victorian literature and helps in tracing these characteristics back to a common source, seventeenth-century theologian Jeremy Taylor's *Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying* (1651). Taken together, these explorations do much to explain Victorian literary expectations concerning a "good" death and demonstrate that here, as with so much else, the Victorian Age was a time of transition.

In reality, most nineteenth-century deaths occurred at home with a circle of mourners listening for the last words of the dying that they might be stored forever in their memories. Books about dying were immensely popular: Fred Kaplan notes that William Dodd's *Reflections on Death* (1763) is "representative of hundreds of similar volumes whose depiction and evaluation of death Victorians read" (48). However, some critics, such as John R. Reed, tend to feel that deathbed scenes were "abused" literary devices rather than realistic portrayals, and that "very likely there were few of those staged deliveries of touching last words in reality" (156, 171). Reed cites Edward FitzGerald's record of his father's death in his letter to Alfred, Lord Tennyson, dated June 8, 1852, as evidence that the expectation of profundity was exaggerated: "He died in March, after an illness of three weeks, saying 'that engine works well' (meaning one of his Colliery steam engines) as he lay in the stupor of Death" (Cohen 82; Reed 158). Yet Margaret Holubetz, relying primarily on excerpts from Philippe Ariès's sociological study on death and dying, presents strong evidence that many of these descriptions were actually "fairly accurate sketches of the behavior at the time they were written" (16), a stance supported by biographies such as those of Edward Bickersteth (T. R. Birks's *Memoir of the Rev. Edward Bickersteth* [1851]) and Thomas Arnold (*Stanley's Life of Thomas Arnold, D.D.* [1901]). The Bickersteth biography tells not only of his repetition of specific scriptures but also of his thanks for the "pious children" at his "dying pillow." Birks also states that though in great pain, "no murmur ever escaped his lips," and that Bickersteth provided words "of counsel or of comfort" to those who attended him (2: 468). Arnold, too, is reported to have repeated scriptures, found things for which to be thankful, and admonished his family to give thanks for his illness (Stanley 657–60).

What would account for such diverse reactions, both Victorian and contemporary? It is probably primarily a matter of expectations: not only were Victorians accustomed to seeing people die—infant mortality, complications from childbirth, and a general inability to combat bacteria and infection ensured this—but also, given social and religious beliefs, they created an “ideal to which people on their deathbeds aspired” (Holubetz 16). Further, the expectations of mourners would also be affected: as expectations affect experience, mourners would often see, or interpret as seen, what they wanted to see. Given that people today generally live healthier and longer lives and that those who are dying are institutionalized rather than brought home, modern inexperience may account, in part, for lack of expectations and thus discomfort and lack of acceptance of Victorian deathbed scenes. According to Ariès, the twentieth century brought

a new sentiment characteristic of modernity: one must avoid—no longer for the sake of the dying person but for society’s sake, for the sake of those close to the dying person—the disturbance and the overly strong and unbearable emotion caused by the ugliness of dying and by the very presences of death in the midst of a happy life. (87)

Adding to such discomfort may also be the presentation itself: people feel bombarded by emotional appeals—words, images, even illustrations—all emphasizing a visceral reaction to the death. Holubetz cites Aldous Huxley’s objections to the tendency of Victorian writers to embrace sentimentality so thoroughly, seeing such appeals as “vulgar” and arguing that the “too much protesting” makes such scenes “positively ludicrous” (qtd. 26). Thus, for modern readers the reaction is less a question of realism than expectation; they tend to be repelled by the experience itself and reject seemingly excessive signs of grief as ludicrous excess. But such would not have been the Victorian experience.

Ariès ascribes the staging of death as an aesthetic event to be a nineteenth-century innovation (411). He argues that the “exaggeration of mourning” is significant because “it means that survivors accepted the death of another person with greater difficulty than in

the past. Henceforth, and this is a very important change, the death which is feared is no longer so much the death of the self as the death of another, *la mort de toi, thy death*" (67–68). The focus shifts from one's own mortality to the mortality of others and the loss of that person in one's life. For Victorians, the deathbed was what Stephen Greenblatt describes as "a shared code, a set of interlocking tropes and similitudes" by which people of that age identify themselves (86). Thus, many of the most popular deathbed scenes have some important commonalities: the dying character is often female or a child (or both); she has usually suffered some kind of hardship which has been overcome too late; she is unusually kind or gifted or moral; and she is beautiful. As Elisabeth Bronfen notes, "feminine death is the requirement for a preservation and reestablishment of the old, how it is used to depict a connection between confirmation and guarantee of the order that represents the homogeneous, ruling norm" ("Fatal" 248). Indeed, within the cultural coding of the Victorian novel, the death of these characters is usually given by the time the reader finishes reading the chapter in which they are introduced.

The presence of women and children as signifiers within the Victorian code is not surprising; both are often employed metonymically to represent other semantic areas such as innocence, purity, or class, often with the death of the beautiful young woman used as "a barometer of moral health in the society that created the work" (Schor 164). For Victorians, issues such as industrialization, treatment of the poor, and religious doubt presented opportunities for judgment, and linking the death of a child or a woman with these issues solidified the judgment. As Bronfen explains:

By making death representable in the dramatization of the deathbed scene, that state which is outside human knowledge becomes accessible to the experience of the surviving spectators. . . . The survivors read the death of the deceased as a moment of truth in meaning, as a transparency between signifier and signified, as a sublimation of the division between illusion and reality. Reading the corpse is meant to guarantee the possibility of true signification. (*Over* 84)

Further, making the character gifted or beautiful increases both pathos and a sense of sacrifice. That works as varied as Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*, George W.M. Reynolds's sensational serial polemic *The Seamstress* (1850), and Dinah Mulock Craik's moral self-help tale *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856) all present similar deathbed scenes featuring young women further illustrates the importance of the experience as well as the expectations surrounding it since they would have had differing audiences and different purposes.

Michael Wheeler suggests that the "cluster of key ideas and symbols associated with death and the future life provided writers with a shared vocabulary which can be described as characteristically Victorian" (25). In this instance, however, the Victorians were actually building on a long tradition: the *ars moriendi* tradition, primarily as it is presented in Taylor's *Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*. For example, Taylor presents a virtual blueprint for Victorians with a sinful life resulting in a painful, long death full of fear and remorse; "but when a good man dies," Taylor writes, "angels drive away the devils on his deathbed," and "joys break forth through the clouds of sickness," "untie the soul from its chain, and let it go forth, first into liberty, and then into glory" (307). That the deaths of characters as diverse as Little Nell, Reynolds's Virginia, and Muriel Halifax closely follow Taylor's treatise is not surprising, given that Taylor's text "remained a standard work on the English bookshelf for the next two hundred years and beyond" (Georgas 36);¹ thus Taylor both helped set expectations and provided a catalyst for change.

Deathbed scenes in the Victorian novel are inextricably linked to the era's religious crisis. Airès observes a desire in the late eighteenth century to return to an ease and familiarity with death and a tendency to blame religious institutions for creating a fear of it (410). It is not surprising, then, that while Victorian authors frequently remove their characters from the influence of clergy—as do Dickens, Craik, and Reynolds—the young women invariably demonstrate an inner goodness and a belief in God that assures them of a "good" death. Walter E. Houghton follows his assertion that

¹See also C. J. Stranks.

[w]hen the heart is so strongly moved, the skeptical intellect is silenced; and when feelings of profound love and pity are centered on a beautiful soul who is gone forever, the least religious affirmation, the slightest reference to heaven or angels, or to reunion with those who have gone before . . . was sufficient to invoke a powerful sense of reassurance, (277)

with a specific reference to Dickens's *Little Nell*. Houghton's response acknowledges both the commonality of the female figure and the use of imagery aligned with Taylor's work. Victorian authors, then, typically marked their dying women and children through descriptions of both character and appearance.

The Victorians' fascination with the deaths of children also indicates the influence of Taylor. For Taylor, children offer the most beneficial pattern of contemplation since they have "never heard the sayings of old men, nor have been taught the principles of severe philosophy, nor are assisted with the results of long experience," yet "by such aids as God is pleased to give them, [children] wade through the storm and murmur not" (314). He also stresses the brevity of life and the idea that maturity is determined by a "steady use of reason according to his proportion" rather than a person's age (350). Further, Taylor emphasizes a focus on a person's entire life as a preparation for death rather than on deathbed conversions. Dying well "is to be the work of our life, and not to be done at once; but as God gives us time, by succession, by parts and little periods" (371). Such propositions are given form in the characters of *Little Nell* and Craik's *Muriel*, both of whom suffer with prolonged illness and demonstrate a maturity beyond their years. And although neither child has any formal religious instruction, both are shown to be pious, to pray frequently, and to acknowledge the presence of God in the beauty of nature or through music.

One result of extenuated deaths in fiction, whether from the slow decline of consumption or from a series of illnesses and maladies, is attention to the physical appearance of the dying young woman, emphasizing her beauty and potentially eroticizing her. Indeed, the death of the beautiful young woman in Victorian literature tends to

center around a number of contradictions: not only is femininity associated with birth and thus life, but also, as Bronfen asserts, "On a conceptual level . . . the combination of beautiful and dead seems a contradiction in terms; either a denial of the Real of death, which is the decomposition of forms, the breaking of aesthetic unity, or a denial of beauty, which, as Lacan will have it, can be understood as an occultation of death, its antithesis" ("Fatal" 238). Further complicating the issue, illnesses such as consumption could be viewed as a contamination of the body, while the youth and beauty of the fictional character represent goodness and innocence. A strong pull upon the reader's emotions leads one to reject the idea that someone that innocent and beautiful could decay into nothingness. It is not surprising, then, that the portrayals of young women and of their deaths often contain contradictory elements.

On one level, young innocent women cannot survive and maintain their innocence. If they grow into mature women, the expectation is for them to marry and have children; thus, they must die in order to maintain iconic purity. But the death of a young, innocent woman also operates as a social critique. Women often figure as symbols of redemption, and their deaths appear "both exculpatory and at the same time edifying and soothing to the spectators who undertake a pilgrimage to the dying body. The potential for change is shifted away from oneself onto the signifier of the sacrificed body and can thus be transferred to the existing order without fundamentally changing it," according to Bronfen (*Over* 219). Thus, these deaths allow social change to be considered without seeming threatening to the reader. Within the Victorian novel, the death of an innocent young woman usually represents three things: a good death that demonstrates the borderlines among life, death, and the absolute; an innocence that cannot survive in the real world; and a sacrifice to the world that both disrupts and reinforces the symbolic, patriarchal order of society.

In *The Seamstress* George Reynolds builds the image of Virginia as a suffering victim, turning her into a martyr of a system established by the middle class in order to prey on working classes. As she succumbs to consumption, Virginia is described as increasingly saintly: from

presenting the “resigned meekness of a saint” (98) to displaying looks “full of the martyred sweetness and resignation of a saint” (100), and finally demonstrating, on her deathbed, “the mingled meekness of an angel and resignation of a martyr-saint” (129). Such descriptions are not unexpected since for Taylor, “Sickness is the proper scene for patience and resignation, for all the passive graces of a Christian, for faith and hope, and for some single acts of the love of God” (441). Adding to the image of Virginia as a saint, however, is her unflinching moral integrity. Reynolds makes it clear that such virtue is unusual:

And if our humble heroine remained pure and spotless in the midst of contamination—in the midst of temptation—in the midst of sorrow, suffering, and crushing toil,—she must be regarded only as an exception to the rule, and not as a type of her class in this respect. With pain and indignation do we record the fact that virtue in the poor seamstress is almost an impossibility. (93)

Virginia’s ability to withstand temptation and physical violence is what moves the novel into the realm of the sensational and her death into the realm of the symbolic. Virginia’s illness and death are notable for two reasons: in general they connote the cost greed and thoughtlessness can wreak upon the working poor, but, even more, they represent the cost of innocence. The literal innocence lost in Virginia’s death becomes the symbolic innocence of ignorance lost on the part of the reader. No longer can the reader claim to be uninformed about the hardships suffered by the working poor. The descriptions allow Reynolds to establish Virginia as a symbol, yet he stays within the expectations of readers.

Similar though perhaps not as socially moralistic is Dickens’s presentation of Little Nell. As Patrick J. McCarthy explains, from the opening passages with Master Humphrey’s nocturnal wanderings to the end of the novel, the descriptions of Nell as *sweet*, *soft*, *pretty*, *slight*, *small* contrast with those of virtually everyone else. Master Humphrey is *old*, *odd*, *musty*, *rusty*, *fantastic*, *distorted*, *curious*; Quilp is *elderly*, *sly*, *grasping*; Frederick is *brash*, *drunken*, and *profligate*; and Dick Swiveller is *dirty* and *careless*. These adjectives aggregate so that

by the end of the novel, Nell becomes an island of youth and innocence surrounded by decay and decrepitude. Within the context of the Victorian novel, this contrast alerts readers that Nell is doomed. No one that sweet and naive could survive.

Somewhat different is Craik's Muriel Halifax, who, although not unusual for her beauty or goodness in a family known for both, is unique because of her blindness and musical talent. While similar descriptors—*blessed*, *angelic*, *sweet*, *child of peace*—are attached to Muriel, it is the latter that inspires the strongest reaction. When she practices the organ in the abbey church, it may sound “like a tormented soul” or “exquisite” or even like a “thundercloud” (324). According to Phineas Fletcher, the narrator, “no tales I ever heard of young Wesley and the infant Mozart ever surpassed the wonderful playing of our blind child” (324). Both her illness and the accident that eventually brings her death come from the intemperate and thoughtless actions of others, particularly Lord Luxmore, the personification of the moral laxity that can result from wealth and luxury. In contrast to *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *The Seamstress*, which use innocent, young women to signify the toll industrialization exacts on family and society, *John Halifax, Gentleman*, is essentially a celebration of industrialization with Muriel serving as a victim of the corruption resulting from a worldliness and greed that are holdovers from past feudalism. Nevertheless, all three young women function similarly within their novels and follow Victorian expectations for a good death: all are marked as spiritual characters whose sufferings are the result of the sins and worldliness of others, and whose deaths, as well as lives, serve as inspiration for those who love them.

Both Nell and Muriel encounter the death of another child and seem to shape their expectations of death, and thus those of the reader, from it. In *The Old Curiosity Shop* Nell is preparing for a walk with the schoolmaster when a message arrives that his most gifted student is dying. When he immediately departs, Nell accompanies him and, when asked, holds the boy's hand as he dies. While more dramatic, Muriel's experience in *John Halifax* serves a similar function. Blind from birth, Muriel is fascinated by the idea that all human infirmities pass away in heaven, where she might see. When a young boy

dies of smallpox, she sneaks into his room at night to see “whether he had gone by himself [to heaven], or if some of the ‘angels,’ which held so large a place in Muriel’s thoughts and of which she was ever talking had come to fetch him and take care of him” (307). Although previously inoculated, Muriel suffers a life-threatening bout of smallpox and remains delicate the rest of her life. In both cases the visit with a dying or dead child sets up expectations both for the child and the reader. For the child, the visit answers some questions about the physicality of death, easing fears of illness and death, and for the reader the visit removes any doubts about the character’s future.

More important, however, with both Nell’s and Muriel’s deaths there are no actual deathbed scenes. In each case there has been a long decline during which many messages about life and dying are presented, but the actual death scene is either recounted through flashbacks (Nell) or occurs as everyone sleeps (Muriel). The prolonged illnesses of the characters align them with Taylor’s meditations: long illness provides the opportunity to contemplate one’s life and prepare for happy and holy dying: “Sent with purposes of abstraction and separation, with secret power and a proper efficacy to draw us off” from concerns of the world (360), sickness teaches patience through acceptance (358). Through protracted illnesses and offstage deaths these Victorian authors emphasize the impact of death upon the living: it is the loss of future interaction that is the tragedy, not the actual death.

Another common duality of young women in these works is that of innocence and sexuality. For example, not long before Muriel’s illness and death John Halifax twice tries to deny that his daughter is maturing. The first time, Muriel brings forth the possibility when trying to understand how far in the future European peace might occur:

“I should like to live to see it. Shall I be a woman, then, father?”

He started. Somehow, she seemed so unlike an ordinary child, that while all the boys’ future was merrily planned out—the mother often said, laughing, she knew exactly what sort of a young man Guy would be—none of us ever seemed to think of Muriel as a woman.

“Is Muriel anxious to be grown up? Is she not satisfied with being my little daughter always?” (293)

At the end of the chapter Muriel contracts smallpox and emerges weaker but more mature:

her small white face—white and unscarred. The disease had been kind to the blind child; she was, I think, more sweet-looking than ever. Older, perhaps; the round prettiness of childhood gone; but her whole appearance wore that inexpressible expression, in which, for want of a suitable word, we all embody our vague notions of the unknown world, and call “angelic.” (308)

Two chapters later, her father rejects the suggestion that Muriel is old enough for a young man to love:

Lord Ravenel was rather sad that night: he was going way from Luxmore for some time. [. . .] Bidding us good-bye, he said, mournfully, to his little pet: “I wish I were not leaving you. Will you remember me, Muriel?” . . .

“Yes; I shall remember you.”

“And love me?”

“And love you, Brother Anselmo.”

He kissed, not her cheek or mouth, but her little child hands, reverently, as if she had been the saint he worshiped, or, perhaps, the woman whom afterwards he would learn to adore. Then he went away.

“Truly,” said the mother, in an amused aside to me, as with a kind of motherly pride she watched him walk hastily down between those chestnut-trees, known of old—”truly, time flies fast. Things begin to look serious—eh, father? Five years hence we shall have that young man falling in love with Muriel.”

But John and I looked at the still soft face, half a child’s and half an angel’s.

“Hush!” he said, as if Ursula’s fancy were profanity; then eagerly snatched it up and laughed, confessing how angry he should be if anybody dared to “fall in love” with Muriel. (325–26)

These scenes simultaneously remind the reader of Muriel's youth and "angelic" nature and make her an object of desire.

Similarly, Dickens establishes a balance between eroticizing Nell and maintaining her innocence. Carol Hanbery MacKay proposes that Dickens diminishes the erotic elements of Nell's death "through a process of rhetorical or psychological dispersal, which separates and isolates the erotic elements" (124). She also notes the grandfather's "romantic rhetoric," which recalls a lover's denial of separation even by death: "you plot among you [. . .] too late to part us not" (124; Dickens, *Old* 652). She also acknowledges the contradictory elements in the way the characters seem to jealously compete with the grandfather in their attempts to extol Nell. Further, she observes the sexual elements in Dickens's instructions for the illustration of Nell's deathbed: "based on Dickens's explicit instructions, George Cattermole's illustration presents us with the pubescent 'bride' and her death-'bed': 'upon her breast, and pillow, and about her bed, there may be slips of holly, and berries, and such free green things'" (MacKay 125–26).

Finally, in Reynolds's *The Seamstress* Virginia's gradual decline from consumption fits a romantic stereotype by rendering her pale and delicate.² Virginia is also constantly fighting off unwanted sexual advances and then dies before she can marry her true love. As Susan K. Martin observes,

The dead body, Foucault implies, provides for the post-eighteenth century the illusion of a fixed identity, and ultimate knowableness. The dead virgin promises the ideal if unreal fixed subject—the knowable unknown body and mind, a body which may be explored without violation, a pure female figure defined by and yet transcending her biology. (33)

Thus, in death Virginia serves both as a sensationally Romantic figure and also a symbolic sacrifice. Readers know her to be pure, yet they also know the cost her morality demanded of her.

²See Pat Jalland for a further discussion of the contradictory nature of the Victorian eroticization of young women's deaths from consumption (234–35).

The avoidance of the potentially dramatic scene does not mean that the authors completely avoid pathos, however. Chapter 72 of *The Old Curiosity Shop* concludes with the responses of Nell's grandfather and the schoolmaster to her death, and the next chapter opens with a summary recounting of the death. In both cases Nell's beauty, her calm, her concern for others is stressed, as is the void left in others' lives. In Craik's *John Halifax, Gentleman*, the evening of Muriel's death is fairly routine: the family gathers in the evening, talks, sews, and reads from the Bible. Muriel holds her baby sister, Maud. The rest of the family goes to bed, but because Muriel, Maud, and their mother have fallen asleep by the fire, they remain. The next morning, Muriel's birthday, they find her dead: "John went early to the room upstairs. It was very still. Ursula lay calmly asleep, with baby Maud in her bosom: on her other side, with eyes wide open to the daylight, lay that which for more than ten years we had been used to call 'blind Muriel.' She saw now" (343). As Wheeler notes,

Muriel's [death] is described with intense emotion, and her passing from this world to the next is softened or blurred, through the use of a discourse that slips between literal and metaphorical usages: birthday, lay . . . asleep, eyes . . . saw, daylight, good night, dreams, rested . . . peacefully, sleeping. Phineas Fletcher, as a retrospective narrator, controls this ironic slippage from the beginning of the passage quoted, where the elided 'death-day' is antithetical to two senses of 'birthday', which are themselves mutually antithetical in a different plane. It is often through such misunderstandings and ambiguities that the pain of bereavement is accommodated in a consolatory discourse in Victorian writing. (42–43)

In fact, the true pathos occurs two pages later, at the close of the chapter, when Halifax visits his daughter's bedchamber following the visit of her close friend and admirer, Lord Ravenel:

John went to the door and locked it, almost with a sort of impatience; then came back and stood by his darling, alone. Me he never saw—no, nor anything in the world except that little

face, even in death so strangely like his own. The face which had been for eleven years the joy of his heart, the very apple of his eye.

For a long time he remained gazing in a stupor of silence; then sinking on his knees, he stretched out his arms across the bed with a bitter cry:

“Come back to me, my darling, my firstborn! Come back to me, Muriel, my little daughter—my own little daughter!”

But thou wert with the angels, Muriel—Muriel! (355–56)

The father’s grief and the simplicity of the girl’s life and death are brought to the forefront by the accompanying illustration (Figure 1). In it Halifax’s dark coat and pants create a strong diagonal line drawing the viewer’s eye directly to Muriel’s face, which is virtually centered in the woodcut. Indeed, Halifax’s outstretched arm and hand



Figure 1. “He stretched out his hands across the bed with a bitter cry.”

point directly to Muriel's sleeping cap, and the diagonal created isolates her face and emphasizes her peaceful repose. The simplicity and plainness of the furnishings and background provide little to distract from the two figures and the heavy darkness of Halifax's figure, balanced partially by the shadows above and to the side of the deathbed, emphasizing both the depth and simplicity of the father's grief.

As the example from *John Halifax* demonstrates, in studying the presentation of these scenes and the cathartic response intended, it is equally important to study the accompanying illustrations. For example, John R. Harvey sees the accompanying woodcuts in *The Old Curiosity Shop* as "distinct paragraphs" so that "the writing leads into the illustration, which then does certain work for the writing, before redirecting the reader back to the text," thus reinforcing thematic and stylistic features already expressed verbally (115). Sometimes, the illustration even surpasses the textual presentation, offering an interpretation not explicit within the text. When Thomas Hood reviewed the serial version of the novel for *Athenaeum*, he observed,

To turn from the old loves to the new, we do not know where we have met, in fiction with a more striking and picturesque combination of images than is presented by the simple, childish picture of little Nell, amidst a chaos of such obsolete, grotesque, old-world commodities as form the stock in trade of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Look at the Artist's picture of the Child, asleep in her little bed, surrounded, or rather mobbed, by ancient armour and arms, antique furniture, and relics sacred or profane, hideous or grotesque:—it is like an Allegory of the peace and innocence of Childhood in the midst of Violence, Superstition, and all the hateful or hurtful Passions of the world. How sweet and fresh the youthful figure! How much sweeter and fresher for the rusty, musty, fusty atmosphere of such accessories and their associations! How soothing the moral, that Gentleness, Purity, and Truth, sometimes dormant, but never death have survived, and will outlive, Fraud and Force, though backed by gold and encased in steel! (887)



Figure 2. Samuel Williams, "The Child in Her Gentle Slumber."

Hood seems to be referring more to Samuel Williams's woodcut, "The Child in Her Gentle Slumber," for installment number four (Figure 2) than to Dickens's text. In fact, Dickens himself seems to have been struck by Hood's review and the impression made by the woodcut. Not only did he write to Hood, thanking him for the review, but also in the first book edition of the novel he inserted four paragraphs immediately after the Williams engraving that highlight significant aspects of the illustration, much as Hood had done.³

In part of the added passage Dickens seems to prepare readers for the interplay of words and images within the novel when he tells them,

We are so much in the habit of allowing impressions to be made upon us by external objects, which should be produced by reflection alone, but which, without such visible aids, often escape us, that I am not sure I should have so thoroughly possessed by this

³See Harvey for a fuller discussion of the illustrations in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (114–25).

one subject, but for the heaps of fantastic things I had seen huddled together in the curiosity-dealer's warehouse. These, crowding on my mind, in connection with the child, and gathering round her, as it were, brought her condition palpably before me. [. . .] As it was, she seemed to exist in a kind of allegory; and having these shapes about her, claimed my interest so strongly, that (as I have already remarked) I could not dismiss her from my recollection, do what I would. (13)

Although Dickens is actually referring to the bits and pieces of sin in the curiosity shop, the placement of the description immediately following an illustration supports the secondary reading of text and image. The original text had implied a contrast between dark and dusty relics and the innocence and virtuosity that radiate from Nell, but Dickens's addition makes the contrast explicit and underscores the symbolic qualities by saying that the child seems to exist in "a kind of allegory." Thus, while the illustration shows Nell sleeping, the picture is one of the first views of the larger theme of life as preparation for death: Nell is asleep with her arms posed on her abdomen and her head turned, just slightly off the traditional positioning of the dead, and while the various masks, statues, and suits of armor seem to watch over her as she sleeps, their faces and the contrast of light and dark—Nell's pillow seems to be lit from above, throwing her surroundings into darkness—suggest tragedy more than peaceful slumber.⁴ Further, as Dawn P. Kelly notes, the surrounding objects form a frame around Nell, momentarily stopping the flow of the narrative (138). Readers are thus forced to pause before moving on with the text.

⁴Dickens's letter to Williams, dated March 31, 1840, asking him to redraw his original sketch, supports such a reading: "The object being to show the child in the midst of a crowd of uncongenial and ancient things, Mr. Dickens scarcely *feels* the very pretty drawing enclosed, as carrying out his idea: the room being to all appearance an exceedingly comfortable one pair, and the sleeper being in a very enviable condition. If the composition would admit of a few grim, ugly articles seen through a doorway beyond, for instance, and giving the notion of great gollom outside the little room and surrounding the chamber, it would be much better" (House and Storey 49).



Figure 3. George Cattermole, “At Rest.”

In contrast to the crowded, almost overpowering scene of the first illustration, in George Cattermole’s “At Rest” Nell’s bedchamber is virtually empty (Figure 3). Her death is overseen only by the Nativity scene carved in the bed’s headboard, and the room is evenly lit. In the window is an hourglass, suggesting the passage life, and on her pillow some “winter berries and green leaves” (Dickens, *Old* 539), suggesting eternal life. The book in her hand reminds the reader of both the schoolteacher, and thus of the earlier visit to the dying student, and of the Book of Life. Unlike her position in “Slumber” where she faces the reader and thus the world, in “At Rest” Nell faces heaven.⁵ Al-

⁵It is interesting to note, however, that where most illustrators follow the tradition of placing the head of the dead to the east (assuming the top of the illustration to be north), Cattermole and Williams reverse expectations with Nell’s head to the west (left) and the sleeping Nell to the east (right). Perhaps this is simply a matter of interpretation of the Medieval tradition that calls for the body to face the east.

though containing a number of symbols, the illustration is actually quite simple and visually de-emphasizes the deathbed scene much as did the flashbacks used to recount it. Although Nell's death is the climax of the novel, "At Rest" is not the final illustration, just as the recounting of her death is not the final word. Cattermole's "Waiting at the Grave," the penultimate illustration for the novel, shows Nell's grandfather sitting by her grave (Figure 4). The ornate Gothic nature of the chapel and the various sepulchral knights are reminiscent of the figures in Nell's bedchamber; but where the masks in Nell's room grimaced or leered, these figures seem peaceful and in repose. While the old man, framed by the arched Gothic entrance, is the first thing the viewer notices, the eye then travels to the right where a knight and his lady recline with arms crossed and heads elevated, similar to Nell's position on her deathbed. Further, there is not a strong contrast of light and dark. Thus, the illustration captures a sense of loss but emphasizes a peaceful contemplation of death.

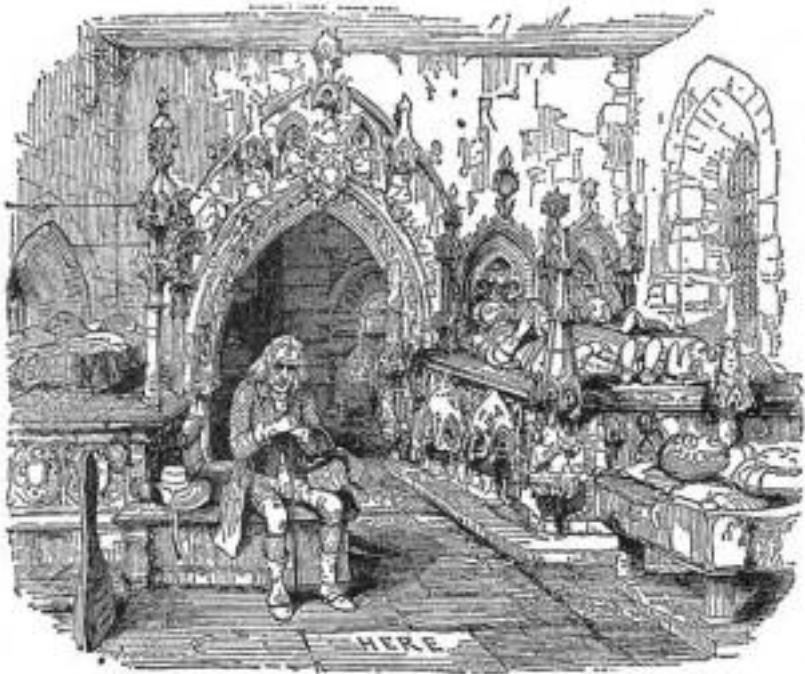


Figure 4. George Cattermole, "Waiting at the Grave."

The selection of Cattermole to illustrate Nell's death would not have been an obvious one to most, despite his friendship with Dickens, given that he was primarily an architectural and historical artist (Harvey 118). Dickens, however, grasped the impact attention to detail, especially in the rendering of the old Gothic church, could have upon readers. He assured Cattermole,

I cannot close this hasty note, my dear fellow, without saying that I have deeply felt your hearty and most invaluable co-operation in the beautiful illustrations you have made for the last story—that I look at them with a pleasure I cannot describe to you in words—and that it is impossible for me to say how sensible I am of your earnest and friendly aid. Believe me that this is *the very first time* any designs for what I have written have touched and moved me, and caused me to feel that they expressed the idea I had in my mind. (House and Storey 199)

It is important to note here that for Dickens the word “beauty” carried strong religious overtones. In “Old Lamps for New Ones” he characterizes the “idea of Beauty” as a “power of etherealising, and exalting to the very Heaven of Heavens, what was most sublime and lovely in the expression of the human face divine on Earth” (265). It comes as no surprise, then, that Nell ends her days in a church, and that the text clearly marks her death as not only a tragic event but also a sacred one: “It is not . . . on earth that Heaven’s justice ends. Think what it is compared with the World to which her young spirit has winged its early flight, and say, if one deliberate wish expressed in solemn terms above this bed could call her back to life, which of us would utter it!” (Dickens, *Old* 531). The ornate headboard of “At Rest” echoes the Gothic arch of the chapel in “Waiting at the Grave,” suggesting a shrine to mark her saintly character.

Finally, suggestive of Taylor’s image of “joy breaking forth through the clouds of sickness” and the soul’s breaking through “into glory,” the novel closes with an illustration of an unconscious Nell supported by a trio of angels (Figure 5), a sketch in response to Dickens’s request that Cattermole create “a little tail-piece . . . giving some notion of

the etherealized spirit of the child" (House and Storey 183–84). The building of the theme was recognized by many: John Forster, Dickens's biographer, noted that "from the image of Little Nell asleep amid the quaint grotesque figures of the curiosity warehouse, to the final sleep she takes among the grim forms and carvings of the old church aisle, the main purpose seems to be always present" (152).



Figure 5. Final illustration.

Although few authors worked as closely with their illustrators as Dickens, study of the illustrations accompanying Reynolds's and Craik's novels can be equally illuminating. Reynolds frequently engaged Henry Anelay, as he did for *The Seamstress*. Because they had

often worked together, Anelay's illustrations not only mirror Reynolds's descriptions, but they often build upon themes or emotions that Reynolds hoped to capture. Virginia's deathbed scene is the final illustration of Reynolds's novel (Figure 6). In it the pillows form a halo around her head as she grasps the hand of the young lover who has found her too late. In the illustration, she and the other three figures in the room—her long-lost parents and her suitor—form a triangle of which she is the apex, their focal point and the viewer's, as she pronounces a kind of benediction on them and on society:



Figure 6. "No. 15."

But when she cast her dewy eyes around and met the looks that were fixed in unutterable sadness and blank despair upon her, she experienced a sudden revival of the Christian spirit of resignation which had animated her soul ere the development of the varied and exciting scenes of the last hour. In the deep despondency which had seized upon her father and her mother and the frantic wildness of the affliction to which Charles had become prey, the poor girl beheld a motive for exercising her own moral

courage and arming herself with all the fortitude which she could possibly summon to her aid. In the silence her soul spoke for a few moments,—fervently she prayed, although her lips moved not;—and it seemed as if a responsive voice came whisperingly from the celestial spheres—a voice full of heaven’s own blessed melody and which she alone could hear,—breathing hope of eternal bliss in the angel state that was approaching!

And thus was it that with a smile of ineffable sweetness upon her lips,—a smile which was nevertheless mournfully compatible with the deep and touching pathos of the scene,—she said, “Weep not for me, dear parents—weep not on my account, beloved Charles: I am going to another and happier world!” (129)

In many ways Virginia is representative of sacrificial death, since even though “the invasion of death means complete stasis, a reduction to a selfless form” to her, “for the surviving family or community it means purification, fertility, a life-effecting transformation” (Bronfen “Fatal” 249–50). Anelay’s illustration underscores Reynolds’s presentation of Virginia as a secular saint whose death causes those who know her to look into their own lives, to admit past failings, and to try to rectify faults or problems, leaving them better able to cope with whatever befalls them.

According to Airès, in the nineteenth century “religion is certainly a factor, but the morbid fascination for death is a sublimation, a religious one it is true, of the erotico-macabre phantasms of the preceding period” (61). Beyond that, however, there are, as Wheeler notes,

important associations with the bed . . . as a place of rest, and of sleep from which we rise again each day to a new life. . . . Set firmly in a temporal context, but perceived within the larger horizon of the eternal, the deathbed scene was the perfect site for an investigation through language of the problems of interpretation associated with death and its two-fold aspect (33)

of end and beginning. Thus, for Victorian novelists the deathbed was ripe with possibilities for moral and social messages.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the deaths most frequently dramatized by Victorian writers are of women and children, given the Victorian concept of different spheres: only women and children, living within the protection of the private sphere, were free of the corruption of the public world; and, as Reynolds demonstrates, those who are truly pure cannot survive in the public sphere. Although not all authors worked with their illustrators as carefully as did Dickens, nevertheless, most believed that deathbed scenes represented a climactic moment deserving of special attention and emphasized that moment with carefully constructed illustrations. As Regina Barreca explains,

Satisfaction, in fact, is what a Victorian death scene can be counted on to provide: either the satisfaction of our righteous indignation or the satisfaction of the other-worldly recompense for an otherwise destitute and unthinkable existence. . . . Death scenes could offer full play for language and enlarge the possibilities for emotion and indulgence. (2–3)

The Victorian age was a time of transition in terms of religious beliefs and resulting expectations concerning an afterlife. As beliefs shifted the expectations of the dying, those mourning death also changed, as the fiction of the period demonstrates with the clear influence of Taylor upon the presentation of the dying combined with the newly acceptable emotional outpouring of grief by the living. The avoidance of an actual deathbed scene in Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* and Craik's *John Halifax, Gentleman*, followed by an outpouring of grief emphasizing the loss of a loved one in the future lives of those who mourn, is a shift toward more modern attitudes toward death and mourning. In contrast, Reynolds's portrayal of Virginia's death in *The Seamstress* follows more traditional expectations of final messages and stoicism on the part of both the dying and those left behind, emphasizing a focus on one's own mortality.

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Title Page of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853)

Beauty and Ugliness around Jo's Life and Death in *Bleak House*

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Of “[t]he pathetic parts of *Bleak House*,” writes John Forster, the “most affecting example, taking the lead of the rest,” is that of “the poor street-sweeper Jo; which has made perhaps as deep an impression as anything in Dickens” (563). Jo appears for the first time in chapter eleven at the Coroner’s inquest on Nemo. What people suddenly see before them is a “very muddy, very hoarse, very ragged” boy (Dickens, *Bleak* 162)—a very quick sketch, but quite intense and significant.¹ Dickens hints at what is considered *ugly* by many people, at least by those who have a tendency to judge others by their appearance alone. Now a paradox the novelist would like to show here is that behind Jo’s dirty/ugly exterior one finds a beautiful soul. But, first, the word *ugly* itself needs defining. The Old Norse origin of it (*ugglig*) denotes “fear.”² Thus, *ugly* initially means “frightful or horrible” (“Ugly” A1). This may not be Jo’s case. But *ugly* also means “offensive or repulsive to the eye” or “unpleasing in

¹No novel by Dickens seems to have been more studied than *Bleak House*, but a few articles devoted to Jo’s character are significant; see studies by Jonathan Rose, Trevor Blount, and Winnifred J. Pedersen.

²See “Ugly” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

appearance” (“Ugly,” A3a, emphasis added). This is probably the way the young witness appears to the Coroner and others. Yet in an abstract sense, *ugly* suggests immorality. For instance “sin,” to someone who believes in this concept, is something *ugly* (“Ugly” A3d). Even though the notion of “ugly,” like that of “evil,” is subjective, it refers to the “morally offensive or repulsive” (“Ugly” A4a). Whether they be religious, agnostic, or atheist, people use the adjective *ugly* to qualify something they consider unethical, although they do not always apply the term to the same phenomena. Almost always, however, there is a relationship between “appearance” and “being,” as the one existing between form and content.

To return to Jo’s portrait, first of all he is “*very muddy*.” One normally reads this word in the concrete sense, and the reason for the mud is quite obvious. The boy lives in a foul area of London. Figuratively speaking, this epithet may mean “sinful” or “corrupt” (“Muddy” A7). The same remarks can be made about “dirty,” which suggests corruption and defilement (“Dirty” I.1.a). Second, Jo is “*very hoarse*.” This refers to his voice, but its harshness must be, in the Coroner’s imagination at least, an outward expression of a coarse nature—lack of smoothness, as well as purity (“Hoarse” 1). Third, the new witness is “*very ragged*.” A ragged garment suggests poverty, a state considered almost a crime in the materialistic society criticized by Dickens. At any rate, “ragged” is also related to roughness (“Roughness” I.2), faultiness (“Faultiness” I.4), or depravity.

Whether the novelist thought about *all* these nuances, his sketchy portrait of Jo in three epithets, intensified by the repetition of the adverb *very*, still remains meaningful. The Coroner’s exclamation, “Caution. This boy must be put through a few preliminary paces,” expresses his negative opinion of the witness (Dickens, *Bleak* 162). Thus, the idea of nothingness or his worthlessness comes to mind, even before he speaks. Evidently, Dickens does not judge the boy in this way, but he intends to show and condemn through sarcasm the prejudices of the so-called right-minded. The Coroner, who has already judged Jo, thinks that he is wasting his time with a *worthless* individual, whose evidence would be unreliable. The telegraphic first sentence—“Name, Jo” (162)—and the subsequent incomplete, jerky

ones, mimicking the witness's ungrammatical English, imply nothingness and insignificance.³ Indeed, Jo is nothing to the Coroner because he is uneducated and poor: "Nothing else that he knows on. Don't know that everybody has two names. Never heard of such a think. Don't know that Jo is short for a longer name" (162), and "Never been to school" (162). Two other crimes are now added: his being an orphan and his loneliness: "No father, no mother, no friends" (162). Negation throughout this passage underscores the idea of nothingness. Finally, it is interesting to note that Jo's greatest lack in the officer's view concerns religion. It is the latter that constitutes a pretext for him not to listen to the boy's evidence. Here an important aspect of Dickens's conception of religion is revealed. Maybe Jo has and knows nothing, the author insinuates, but at least he "[k]nows a broom's a broom, and knows it's wicked to tell a lie." It is also significant that he "[d]on't recollect who told him about the broom, or about the lie, but knows both" (162).

Jo himself is not conscious of what his simple and innocent speech means, but Dickens implies much here. First, the boy understands that work, which consists for him of sweeping the street, is a *good* thing. He may not make any money out of it, but he still believes in its value; in other words, he is not a lazy person and does not want to be a parasite, as some people might suppose. Next, allegory is at work here. With his symbolic broom, Jo sweeps the dirty London streets. The cleaning should also be understood in a figurative, i.e., ethical/religious, sense. Also, the boy mentions the principle of truth-telling and his belief in honesty. He "knows it's *wicked* to tell a lie" (emphasis added). So Dickens is implicitly saying that, although the waif does not attend church and has never been to school, he knows more about God and morals than do many who claim to be religious or ethical, including the Coroner.⁴ One does not need to be told

³See in this regard Patrick Chappell's discussion (799–800); see also Jennifer Gribble's interesting analysis of Dickens's style in *Bleak House*.

⁴Pederson rightly notes, "Even though Jo unknowingly has good reason to reject religious affiliation, lack of opportunity to learn (rather than any choice on Jo's part) accounts for his lack of knowledge about religion. The Christians whom he has encountered have either been wretchedly bad

about goodness, Dickens suggests. Nor does one need a specific or privileged education in order to be good. One *is* or *is not* with God; that is all. Thus, Jo is *naturally* a good human being, i.e., unknowingly, with God.

Now at Court he must tell the truth and nothing but the truth. This should not be a problem at all for him, since he never lies, as he affirms with sincerity and innocence. He “[d]on’t recollect who told him about the broom, or about the lie, but knows both.” Furthermore—and this is another interesting point about his understanding of religion—he “[c]an’t exactly say what’ll be done to him arter he’s dead if he tells a lie to the gentlemen here, but believes it’ll be something wery bad to punish him, and serve him right—and so he’ll tell the truth” (162). Yet the Coroner still refuses to listen to him, seemingly because he confesses that he does not know “exactly” what would happen to him after he dies. Nobody knows this, of course, and Dickens is in fact being sarcastic because he wants to show how far the Coroner’s bad faith and hypocrisy go: “‘Out of the question,’ says the Coroner. ‘You have heard the boy. ‘Can’t exactly say’ won’t do, you know. We can’t take *that*, in a Court of Justice, gentlemen. It’s terrible depravity. Put the boy aside’” (162, emphasis added). The Coroner’s judgment is presented in such a way that it is impossible for the reader not to laugh, especially at the hyperbolic “terrible depravity.”⁵ Like Molière in *Tartuffe* (1664), Dickens means to entertain the reader, while denouncing false religion, hypocrisy, and bigotry through caricature. Dickens’s sarcasm continues: “Boy put aside; to the great *edification* of the audience;—especially of Little Swills, the Comic Vocalist” (162). “Edification” is particularly ironic here; the epithet “Comic” is also not without significance.

The “private audience,” given by Mr. Tulkinghorn and the Coroner to Jo, is also worth analyzing, for not only does the reader learn

examples or scarcely identifiable as members of the faith. He sees people going to the churches on Sundays and wonders why they carry books with them; but so far as he knows, whatever they are doing is confined to churches and books; their lives do not concern Jo” (166).

⁵See Malcolm Andrews who discusses humor in Dickens at length.

more about the boy but also about the dead man, Nemo, who had much in common with him:

That graceless creature only knows that the dead man (whom he recognised just now by his yellow face and black hair) was sometimes hooted and pursued about the streets. That one cold winter night, when he, the boy, was shivering in a doorway near his crossing, the man turned to look at him, and came back, and, having questioned him and found that he had not a friend in the world, said, 'Neither have I. Not one!' and gave him the price of a supper and a night's lodging. That the man had often spoken to him since; and asked him whether he slept sound at night, and how he bore cold and hunger, and whether he ever wished to die; and similar strange questions. That when the man had no money, he would say in passing, "I am as poor as you to-day, Jo;" but that when he had any, he had always (as the boy most heartily believes) been glad to give him some. (163)

Mrs. Piper, from whom the reader learns about Jo for the first time in the novel, had already indicated that Nemo was harassed by children. However, the way she talks about the deceased is very different. In her eyes the dead man's "air was feariocious, and not to be allowed to go about some children being timid" (161). So in her opinion, it was no doubt his fault that he was "wexed and worried by the children" (161). She herself, "On accounts of this and his dark looks[,] has often dreamed as she see him take a pickaxe from his pocket and split Johnny's head" (161). She also remembers that Nemo never talked to anyone, "excepting the boy that sweeps the crossing down the lane over the way round the corner" (161-162). She does not understand the reason, but the reader sees what the two outcasts had in common: like Jo, Nemo was an honest and good-hearted man. Besides, Lady Dedlock still loved him, as, feeling guilty, she suddenly decided to leave her house in that terrible cold night and went to his grave, where she died in a significant way.

In any case, it is with sadness that Jo, a "graceless creature," according to the Coroner, remembers that the deceased "was sometimes

hooted and pursued about the streets” (163). The young crossing sweeper also recalls with emotion

[t]hat one cold night, when he, the boy, was shivering in a doorway near his crossing” and “the man [Nemo] turned to look at him, and came back, and having questioned him and found that he had not a friend in the world, said, ‘Neither have I. Not one!’ and gave him the price of a supper and a night’s lodging. (163)

This is a very touching account, indeed, and far from Mrs. Piper’s testimony. What the reader sees here is Jo’s gratitude, reminiscent of Oliver Twist’s. At the same time the reader appreciates the charitable spirit of Nemo, all the more so since he was poor himself. From then on, adds the boy, Nemo “had often spoken to him” (163), for he sincerely cared about him. He was the only person who had ever shown any feeling toward him. Thus, he had once asked him “whether he slept sound at night, and how he bore cold and hunger, and whether he ever wished to die” (163). Jo found this last question rather odd, but other children in Dickens’s fiction, like Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), would have preferred dying over being tortured by Wackford Squeers. The sensitive Jo finally remembers with gratitude the days when Nemo himself had no money and would say to him, sorry not to be able to help, “I am as poor as you to-day, Jo” (163). In sum, the orphan considers Nemo a very kind and generous person.⁶ Dickens is not only praising both characters’ ethical sense, though they are individuals labeled worthless by “Society,”⁷ but also alludes to the fact that generosity and true charity are more common among the poor than the rich. Finally, the sweeper’s last word in “private audience” is also suggestive. Some readers may find Dickens

⁶According to Blount, “Nemo’s act of kindness betokens the kernel of Dickens’ doctrine of the benediction of giving without asking for any reward, which cements society together in a brotherhood of gratitude” (328).
⁷Nemo’s name, meaning “nobody” in Latin, is the ultimate expression of worthlessness and nothingness. As for the term “Society,” Mrs. Pardiggle uses the term earlier in the novel in praise of Mrs. Jellyby: “Mrs Jellyby is a benefactor to society” (Dickens, *Bleak* 114).

too melodramatic, but Jo's tears ("wiping his eyes with his wretched sleeve" [163]) are quite natural as he talks about Nemo's goodness.⁸ Mainly, beyond this genuine emotional scene, Dickens insists anew on the importance of gratitude, one of Jo's most endearing characteristics. His last word, mixed with sincere tears, is surely a very touching eulogy in honor of Nemo: "'Wen I see him a layin' so stritched out just now, I wished he could have heerd me tell him so. He wos wery good to me, he wos!'" (163).

In his biography of Dickens, Forster quotes from a letter by Edward Bannerman Ramsay:

"We have been reading *Bleak House* aloud," the good Dean Ramsay wrote to me very shortly before his death. "Surely it is one of his most powerful and successful! What a triumph is Jo! Uncultured nature is *there* indeed; the intimations of true heart-feeling, the glimmerings of higher feeling, all are there; but everything still consistent and in harmony. Wonderful is the genius that can show all this, yet keep it only and really part of the character itself, low or common as it may be, and use no morbid or fictitious colouring. To my mind, nothing in the field of fiction is to be found in English literature surpassing the death of Jo!" (563, emphasis added)

Dickens's religion has been the object of many studies. Consider how from a clearly Christian perspective he describes Jo's death as a poor, despised boy dying *beautifully* in a miserable and *ugly* place:

"Jo, can you say what I say?"
 "I'll say anythink as you say, sir, for I knows it's good."
 "OUR FATHER."
 "Our Father !—yes, that's wery good, sir."

⁸Stephen Gill rightly remarks that "[i]t was once considered sophisticated to sneer at Victorian lachrymosity, but a generation which has yielded so unreservedly to films such as *Love Story* or *Kramer vs. Kramer* may have re-discovered one unfailling source of Dickens's power" (xii).

“WHICH ART IN HEAVEN.”

“Art in Heaven—is the light a comin, sir?”

“It is close at hand. HALLOWED BE THY NAME!”

“Hallowed by—thy—”

The light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead!

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us, every day. (677)⁹

This is a plea for Christian charity as well as a scathing criticism of a cruel materialistic society. Indeed, the Lord’s Prayer that Allan Woodcourt asks the agonizing Jo to repeat reveals the author’s edifying purpose, but it is not a prayer like others. It is the one Jesus teaches to his disciples as a good model. It starts with an introduction, the address to God (“Our Father” [Matt. 6:9]), followed by six or seven petitions and a conclusion, which is the doxology (“For thine is the kingdom, and the power” [Matt. 6:13]). The reader realizes that it is very important to the charitable Dr. Woodcourt that Jo, before he dies, say this prayer. In the view of the doctor, a sincere Christian, the Lord’s Prayer must be the best prayer, the more so since it is at once short and complete. In these circumstances—Jo could die at any moment—even the first words of the prayer could be sufficient. Thus, although with difficulty, the boy is still able to repeat the address to the Father and the first petition. But this is really enough, for all the rest is somehow contained in the beginning. Indeed, if one believes in God and prays to Him for oneself as well as for others—the address to God denotes this faith, and the possessive “Our” includes everybody—by asking Father that all may keep His name holy, the essential has been asked, because if God’s name is “hallowed” by humans in general, they

⁹Garrett Stewart’s interpretation of this scene is original. Regarding the use of capitalization, for instance, he writes: “The shift in capitalization between text and response may suggest that Jo is in some way domesticating the prayer. The sound of ‘FATHER’ of course he likes, but ‘HEAVEN’ is too new an idea for any reaction but the ambiguous non sequitur about the awaited lamp—or unknown source of light” (92).

would live according to His will, and so His “kingdom” would come and the world would be at last a happy place. Obviously, the narrator does not offer any specific interpretation, but the reader can deduce from the sudden interruption of the prayer by Jo’s death that what he utters is theologically sufficient.

Earlier when Woodcourt realizes that Jo’s death is imminent, it is not his will, the title of chapter forty-seven (“Jo’s Will”), that is important to him but praying. In other words, God is the only thing that truly matters to the surgeon in this critical moment. Therefore,

After watching him closely a little while, Allan puts his mouth very near his ear, and says in a low, distinct voice:

“Jo! Did you ever know a prayer?”

“Never know’d nothink, sir.”

“Not so much as one *short* prayer?”

“No, sir. Nothink at all.” (Dickens, *Bleak* 676)

Woodcourt has of course the Lord’s Prayer in mind, which is why he would like for Jo, before he dies, to say it once. He must believe that the honest and good-hearted homeless will go to Heaven anyway, but it would be comforting for him to pray. Jo’s simplicity and goodness are once more shown in his response concerning his only experience with prayer. By the same token, Dickens implicitly criticizes false religion and imposture in this passage.¹⁰ At any rate, after having as usual repeated that he knows nothing about anything, the sweeper¹¹ recounts that

¹⁰Dickens’s double criticism here, as elsewhere in the novel, is clothed with irony and sarcasm. His first serious attack takes place in chapter three with the brilliant portrait of Esther’s aunt, the girl believed to be her god-mother: she “went to church three times every Sunday, and to morning prayers on Wednesdays and Fridays, and to lectures whenever there were lectures; and never missed. She was handsome; and if she had ever smiled, would have been (I used to think) like an angel—but she never smiled. She was always grave, and strict. She was so very good herself, I thought, that the badness of other people made her frown all her life” (24).

¹¹Gill notes that “Jo sweeps his crossing all day long. . . . He sums up his mental condition, when asked a question, by replaying that he ‘don’t know nothink.’ He knows that it’s hard to keep the mud off the crossing in dirty

“Mr Chadbands he was a prayin wunst at Mr Sangsby’s and I heerd him, but he sounded as if he was a speakin’ to his-self, and not to me. He prayed a lot, but I couldn’t make out nothink on it. Different times, there was other genlmen come down Tom-all-Alone’s a prayin, but they all mostly sed as the t’other wuns prayed wrong, and all mostly sounded to be a-talkin to theirselves, or a-passing blame on the t’others, and not a-talkin to us. *We* never knowd nothink. *I* never knowd what it was all about.” (676)

Jo used to live, if one could call it “living,” in the miserable Tom-all-Alone’s.¹² Here, hypocritical preachers, like Chadband, are implicitly satirized by Dickens. Jo, “poor in spirit,” could not understand a word of the prayer said by the Chadband at the Snagsbys’, but he remembers very well that “he sounded as if he was a speakin’ to his-self.” Obviously, Chadband does not care about others, since he is not a true religious man. What is also noteworthy is that Jo is intelligent enough to understand that Chadband’s prayer does not help him at all. He also notes that the Preacher “‘prayed a lot,’” which does not

weather, and harder still to live by doing it. Nobody taught him, even that much; he found it out” (n. 235 in Dickens, *Bleak* 927). As Linda Lewis puts it, “Jo sits on the steps of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, but no one has ever taught him the Lord’s Prayer. He sees people carrying their Bibles to church, but no one has taught him to read” (128).¹²As Gill observes, “Jo lives—that is to say, Jo has not yet died—in a ruinous place, known to the like of him by the name of Tom-all-Alone’s. It is a black, dilapidated street, avoided by all decent people; where the crazy houses were seized upon, when their decay was far advanced, by some bold vagrants, who after establishing their own possession, took to letting them out in lodgings. Now these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery. As, on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so, these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetchin and carryin fever, and sowing more evil in its every footprint than Lord Coodle, and Sir Thomas Doodle, and the Duke of Foodle, and all the fine gentlemen in office, down to Zoodle, shall set right in five hundred years—though born expressly to do it” (n. 235 in Dickens 927).

help either, for he “couldn’t make out nothink on it.” A prayer, whether long or short, is totally useless when it is not sincere, Dickens implies. As for the other individuals used to “edify” the poor dwellers of Tom-all-Alone’s, they were no better, thinks Jo. He thus recalls that “they all mostly sed as the t’other wuns prayed wrong, and all mostly sounded to be a-talking to theirselves, or a-passing blame on the t’others.” They were, as Jo was perfectly conscious of, not good people, for 1) they criticized and blamed their “religious” colleagues, and 2) they did not care more about the people they were supposed to edify (“all mostly sounded to be a-talking to theirselves”). Their prayers were so ineffectual that the boy “never knowd what it wos all about.” When Jo says, “*We* never knowd nothink,” it should not be taken as free indirect speech. Jo is too naïve and uneducated to mock those “preachers,” but Dickens uses irony here polyphonically. Nonetheless, Jo understood that those clergymen had told them that the people they were praying for knew *nothing*—that is, nothing about God—and so needed to be enlightened. This was precisely the way Chadband in front of the Snagsbys had once put the boy to shame by declaring, as if he were prosecuting him in court,

“I say this brother, present here among us, is devoid of parents, devoid of relations, devoid of flocks and herds, devoid of gold, of silver, and of precious stones, because he is devoid of *the light* that shines in upon some of us. What is that *light*? What is it? I ask you what is that *light*?” (378)

The reader concludes, then, that every time Jo says that he knows nothing, he is merely repeating an injurious idea false preachers, like Chadband, have inculcated in his mind.

The term *light* is also quite revealing. Without this passage, it would be hard to understand what the agonizing waif means by “light,” as he asks, “is the *light* a comin, sir?” The doctor’s conception of “light” is surely the very opposite of Chadband’s. They use the same word, of course, but to the fallacious reverend God means nothing, whereas to Woodcourt He is Jesus, the Savior. Jo understands

this “light” because he is innocent and pure. The Lord, or the “light,” as Woodcourt kindly assures him, “is close at hand.” The reader notes that Jo completely trusts the doctor, since he is willing to repeat with pleasure the short prayer (“I’ll say anythink as you say, sir, for I knows it’s good”). This reveals that he perfectly distinguishes right from wrong, or true from false religion. Furthermore, like a little child, he knows who really loves him and who does not. He has somehow kept the purity and innocence of tender age. He is, as already mentioned, not only poor in the material sense but also “poor in spirit” (Matt. 5: 3) and “pure in heart” (Matt. 5: 8). He is thus supposed to “see God,” or the “light” Woodcourt is thinking of,¹³ as he affirms, “It is close at hand.” This is not the light Chadband referred to.

Jo’s death closes this poignant scene: “The light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead!” The tone of the last word, “Dead!,” with its exclamation point evidently expresses Dickens’s indignation. The phrase, “dark benighted way,” is also expressive. First, it is definitely ironic, for in such terms Chadband, as well as others like him, talks about the poor; thus, such hypocrites are the truly ignorant ones, Dickens insinuates. Second, the adjective *dark* might also have a concrete meaning, the metaphoric and metonymic “way” referring to Tom-all-Alone’s and its dwellers. Third, the adjective *benighted*, however, is to be understood figuratively. Finally, the “way” itself has a religious connotation: Jesus, according to those who believe in Him, is the “way” to God, to truth and happiness. He is the “light” of the world. In sum, the message conveyed here is that, paradoxically, Jo sees the true “light” at last as he dies and is thus freed from the “dark benighted,” materialistic world in which he lives, but people like Chadband will never see it. Dickens puts forth this same idea at the beginning of the novel about Esther, a true Christian and a foil to her evil aunt, who lives and dies in the “dark,” never to see the Lord.

Emotion reaches its climax in the last part of this passage, which is also the chapter’s concluding paragraph: “Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Rev-

¹³“Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God” (Matt. 5: 8).

erends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us, every day.” The indignant “dead” of the previous paragraph is repeated at the beginning of each one of the four short sentences that follow. The first “Dead” of the previous paragraph shows that the narrator is disgusted but most of all deeply moved by Jo’s death. The second “Dead” is addressed to the Queen of England: “Dead, your Majesty.” How much does she really know about London’s poor people? How could she stand areas like Tom-all-Alone’s? The third “Dead” is directed to “my lords and gentlemen,” i.e., those who run the country, who have important administrative responsibilities, who are the rich and powerful. The narrator urges them to have mercy on the miserable and stop their inequities. The judiciary system, caricatured and satirized throughout the novel, is not the only problem in the wealthy British Empire. The fourth “Dead” is shouted at the clergy in general, the “Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order,” though this seems a little ambiguous, for why would Dickens address the “Wrong Reverends”? In fact, his tone is barely humorous, perhaps because he does not want to remain too dramatic nor seem revolutionary. Even so, he here addresses all those who are or are supposed to have important moral roles in his country. All lords, like all clergymen, are not honest. The Queen herself probably knows enough about poverty in her capital and so ought to do something about it rather than encouraging false missionaries and philanthropists, like Mrs. Jellyby, who do not even care about their own homes. All things considered, then, the sentence is not ambiguous but mainly used to alleviate the effect of a tragic situation with humor. The last exclamatory “Dead” is directed at every caring person in Britain: “Dead, men and women,

¹⁴Nicola Bradbury comments on this passage: “What Jo epitomizes is helplessness, and it is interesting that his death is the occasion of Dickens’s most celebrated rhetorical outburst of indignation, as if the text were compensating for its own evils and coming out strongly, unequivocally, on behalf of the oppressed and silent. While Jo falters in the privacy of prayer, the audience is addressed in formal public terms. The author abolishes the distance of fiction, takes up direct address, interrupts illusion with a kind of awkwardness that is itself an expression of outrage, emphatically insistent” (xxxiii).

born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts."¹⁴

Jo appears in chapter eleven and disappears in chapter forty-seven, but twenty more chapters of the novel still remain. Jo may be a secondary character, but he is a very important one.¹⁵ To conclude, in terms of social content,¹⁶ the reader realizes that Dickens was not a revolutionary, as Marx was, that is, a thinker who observed miserable scenes in London and criticized a cruel and unjust society but from a *materialist* and revolutionary viewpoint.¹⁷ Dickens, conversely, intended to make his readers more aware of social reality from a Christian perspective. His characters, like Mr. Jarndyce, Esther, and Dr. Woodcourt, represent his ethical values: Christian charity and a sincere faith in God, while the symbolic Jo lives all his short life in that cruel society and in the *ugliest* place possible, but his peaceful death, thanks to his natural faith in God, is considered *beautiful* by both Dickens and the reader, even though that beauty is not explicitly expressed. Thus, there may always be hope and beauty, whatever one's social condition.

¹⁵He is all the more important in that he belongs, as Harold Bloom contends, to "Dickens's most complex and memorable single achievement" (5).

¹⁶Jeremy Hawthorn is correct to underscore Jo's topicality and the universality of Dickens's message: "We may feel that there are few children in our society in the same condition as Jo (although perhaps we should not be too complacent about this), but we should know that there are millions of other Jos in the rest of the world, and Dickens's portrayal of Jo raises perennial questions regarding our moral responsibility towards children. Of course there is some sentimentality in the account of Jo's death, but much less, I think, than in some of the other, more notorious, child deaths in Dickens's works" (66).

¹⁷Terry Eagleton labels Dickens a kind of Utilitarian (xi). But Dickens often criticizes Utilitarianism, especially in *Hard Times* (1854), and openly defends Christian values and faith in his works.

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Ann Hasseltine Judson (1789–1826)

The Unspoken and the Unspeakable in Missionary Literature¹

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Generations of high schoolers have kvetched their way through *The Good Earth* (1931), a novel set in rural China, where Pearl S. Buck had served as a missionary wife. The novel's Pulitzer Prize made Buck a celebrity in America; by 1938, when she was named a Nobel Laureate, her fame had spread worldwide. Not since David Livingstone had anyone so successfully combined missionary and literary vocations. Buck's career thus provides a logical starting point for reflection on "missionary literature," namely, missionaries' writings, public and private, and missionary-themed literature

¹My research on women missionaries has been supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Louisville Institute, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the Burke Library Scholar-in-Residence Program of Union Seminary. I thank Brigham Young University's Department of English, Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature, and College of Humanities for inviting me to speak at the seventh *Literature and Belief* symposium, "Beauty and Belief," in October 2015, from which address this essay is derived. It has also benefited from comments by Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, Mark Chaves, Michael Lienesch, Nicholas Mason, John McGowan, and James Thompson.

by others. In particular, Buck's career invites an investigation of literature's most famous woman missionary, the hypothetical person Jane Eyre refuses to become, and of subsequent novels that supplement Charlotte Brontë by imagining Jane Eyre's "unled" life.²

The discrepancy between Buck's reputation then and now has been analyzed by Peter Conn, who observes that the Nobel Committee praised *The Exile* and *Fighting Angel* (both 1936) as her "finest works of art" (qtd. in Conn 212), works unknown to most present-day readers. These volumes profile Buck's parents, Carie and Absalom Sydenstricker, US Presbyterian participants in "the golden age of China missions," from 1902 to 1927 (Bays 92). Literature by missionaries enjoyed an even longer golden age at home; since 1810, missionaries had been Americans' "chief interpreters of remote cultures" (Hutchison 1). These facts suggest that Buck appealed to many 1930s readers, in part due to her insights into the pervasive mission-mindedness of their parents and grandparents.

Buck's public persona further illuminates the discrepancy. Touring America in 1933 to promote *The Good Earth*, Buck startled her co-religionists by publicly endorsing *Rethinking Missions* (1932), a recent, ecumenical Protestant report by William Ernest Hocking and others, exhorting missionaries to curtail proselytizing in favor of humanitarian service (Conn 148–51; Wacker 191–205; Hutchison 158–71). This report advanced mainline Protestantism's drift toward humanitarian service, hitherto largely under the radar, and newly critiqued the theology of Christian finality (i.e., its exclusive purchase on human salvation). Conversion-oriented fundamentalists, who had complained about this drift for some time, found the report infuriating (Marsden 167–68). By endorsing this divisive report, Buck moved from the book review section of contemporary newspapers to the headlines. The story unfolded there for three months in 1933, as Buck publicly questioned the doctrines of Christ's divinity and of Christian finality, and as Presbyterians' fundamentalist leader, J. Gresham Machen, demanded that this "outstanding advocate of modern unbelief" stand trial for heresy (qtd. in Hutchison 173). Three months of

²The term is Andrew Miller's.

headlines on Buck's impending ouster ended, with a whimper, when Buck resigned from her missionary post. Presbyterian leaders affirmed a centrist stance on missions, causing Machen and his followers to secede (Conn 154; Hutchison 174).

Buck's averted heresy trial deserves as much emphasis as previous scholars have accorded her endorsement of *Rethinking Missions*. The threat was real, even if the trial never occurred, and the role of persecuted iconoclast became integral to Buck's celebrity. While a heterodox Presbyterian mattered only to her co-religionists, a potential victim of censorship mattered to free speech-loving Americans, particularly those in arts and letters. Moreover, the threat of heresy charges highlighted gender inequalities. Heresy trials, a long disused sanction, were revived during the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the 1920s to discipline clergy (Marsden 180–84)—all of whom were men. Machen's threat of heresy charges against a laywoman particularly insulted Presbyterian seekers of ordination rights for women, the refusal of which had recently been sustained (Chaves 151–54). Machen's persecution implied that the denomination rejected women's leadership in any form. The misogynist threat against Buck acquired axiomatic status for missionary-themed novels, which usually cast female characters as missions' chief critics. Buck's friend James Michener rendered this version axiomatic in his 1959 novel *Hawaii*, which allocates Buck's objections against fundamentalism to Michener's heroine, Jerusha Hale, as she argues with a husband remarkably like Absalom Sydenstricker. It is worth noting that this popular literary convention defies the stubborn fact that women far outnumbered men as aspirants and donors to Protestant missionary work (Bendroth 88–89). Finally, the heresy charge distorted perceptions of Buck's apparently lightning-quick transition from conformist to heretic, as did public ignorance of her handicapped daughter, Carol. Buck had long remained in China, near her father, in an unsatisfying marriage, caring for Carol, until the need for Carol's institutionalization could not be ignored. Once it was accomplished, Buck could risk loosening the official ties to missions that her father and husband signified. But settling her internal conflicts was a more protracted task (Conn 154–55). Buck's secrecy

about Carol foreshortened the public timeline of her transformation to heretic, making the endorsement seem to be the premiere of a long internal conflict over missions. Machen increased the distortion. While Buck had indeed veered to a point left of center shared by many Presbyterians (Hutchison 157–58), to call her a heretic exaggerated her distance from orthodoxy. Her secrecy and Machen’s belligerence conspired to create the appearance that Buck had migrated further, and more quickly, than was actually the case.

As Carol’s full-time caregiver, Buck probably had little time or energy for self-examination. But a flood of events—institutionalizing Carol, debuting as an author, divorcing her missionary husband, and seeing her father disgraced and weakening (he died in 1936)—freed Buck to examine her own disillusion with missions. The public, not knowing of Carol’s existence nor of Buck’s ambivalence, saw the novelist as a longtime closet heretic. This was a strikingly new story about a woman missionary, a major departure from woman-missionary stories enshrined in Mary Prior Hack’s *Consecrated Women* (1880), Daniel C. Eddy’s *Daughters of the Cross, or Woman’s Mission* (1855), or Eddy’s *Christian Heroines, or Lives and Sufferings of Female Missionaries in Heathen Lands* (1881) (Booth 165–72). As a “closet heretic” Buck acquired the *frisson* of a double agent in the modernist war on fundamentalism, a precursor of what John Le Carré called a “mole.” To her public, then, Buck was the missionary who came in from the cold.

Thus saturated in intrigue, Buck claimed to bring new intelligence about the inner workings of the China missions that Americans had so long admired; “the real story of life in a mission station,” she claimed, “has never yet been told” (*Fighting* 76). Her parental biographies reveal “the real story” of her father—who mastered Chinese in six months and devoted himself to converting the Chinese people. His single-mindedness profoundly vexed the missionary marriage: he usually saw his wife and children as assistants or impediments to his own goals and never recognized them as centers of agency. Money management crystallized his attitude. Electing for his life’s work to translate the Bible into Chinese, Absalom siphoned much of the housekeeping money into his project. Buck later characterized it as “a giant, inexorable force which swallowed their toys, their

few pleasures, their small desires, into its being and left them very little for their own” (*Fighting* 185). When his daughter Pearl approached college age, Absalom begged a mission donor to pay her tuition because, he said, his daughter would succeed him. Buck, having no such intention, felt sold into slavery. For her part, Carie (as portrayed in *The Exile*) devoted herself to her children and to offering the Chinese rudimentary medical care as well as friendship. After three children died, she mocked her husband’s habit of ascribing his own will to God; she also threatened to return to America with her remaining children and without him, because “I have no more children to give to God now” (177).

Her alienation from Absalom and God continued to her death. When her husband came to her deathbed to assure himself of her salvation, Carie sent him away unsatisfied; and when her caregivers played Mendelssohn’s hymn, “O rest in the Lord; wait patiently for Him,” Carie asked them to turn off the Victrola, saying, “I have waited patiently for the Lord—and for nothing” (*Exile* 307). In almost every detail, as in these examples, the volumes corroborate Buck’s assertion that her parents always told “entirely different stories about the same incident” (*Fighting* 63).

Such raw material refused the confines of missionary literature. When missionary spouses were profiled, convention required a single-volume joint biography that usually emphasized the husband’s accomplishments over the wife’s. This convention organizes Rosalind Goforth’s *Goforth of China* (1937), published the year after Buck’s set. Thus, Buck’s decision to write each parent’s biography by “resolutely put[ting the other] aside” already defied missionary literature’s conventions. The Book-of-the-Month Club tried to soften Buck’s defiance by marketing the volumes as a boxed set (see fig. 1), the decorative box offsetting the stubbornly separate missionary lives.

Public records overwhelmingly support Buck’s claim to originality in exposing vexed missionary marriages. Since the Reformation, a married clergy had undergirded Protestant identity; the 1790s founders of the modern Protestant missionary movement reiterated that theme to differentiate their recruits from celibate Catholics, who, in the person of their Junípero Serra, had just claimed most of California (Elliott



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American literature be-
side THE GOOD EARTH"

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—N. Y. Sun

—and
**THE
EXILE**

"To the American reader of every age and class, it seems that no book could be more poignantly and vividly interesting than this. Merely as a story it is as absorbing as any novel. . . clear, incisive, gripping in its interest, written in a style of beauty and unerring rightness, this is an epic of our country."
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Figure 1. Advertisement for Pearl Buck's *Fighting Angel* and *The Exile*, *The New York Times*, December 14, 1936 (23).

72, 186–88). By stipulating that its recruits, all male, must be married, Protestant societies initiated a wholly “new period of missionary endeavor” (Cox 72). Colonial travel exposed Britons to disease (Bewell 1–65), but missionary brides were quite susceptible, since many became pregnant on the outgoing voyage and arrived close to term. Over a dozen American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) missionary wives died in this way during the 1820s and 1830s, provoking many mission supporters to an outrage later articulated by Charlotte Brontë. Hearing that Jane Eyre has received a proposal from St. John Rivers, an aspiring missionary, his sister Diana protests that Jane is “too good to be grilled alive in Calcutta” (Brontë 354). The veneration of Protestant marriage buffeted this public relations storm when Rufus Anderson, ABCFM secretary, pronounced that “the holy and blessed enterprise of protestant [sic] missions must not be spoiled by . . . the monastic principles of the Romish church” (x). (Anderson was also combating an extension of a loophole whereby celibate East India Company [EIC] chaplains could evangelize in their spare time.) Indeed, some may ask, if missionary societies required marriage, how did St. John ever get to India alone? The answer is that Brontë here follows closely the life of celibate Henry Martyn, who exercised this loophole by becoming an EIC chaplain, evangelizing non-Christians in his spare time. When Martyn’s mentor died in 1836, Anderson wanted to close the loophole. Anderson consolidated the position that marriage was a Protestant essential. In this context, to breathe a word of vexed missionary marriages was to betray oneself, one’s colleagues, and Protestantism itself. Vexed missionary marriages were universally unacknowledged—not in print, at least.

But private documents disclose the ample vexations of missionary spouses, documents such as a 1796 letter by missionary John Thomas, a colleague of William Carey, whom historians recognize as the pivotal figure in the theology and practice of the modern Protestant missionary movement. Dorothy Carey at first refused to accompany her husband to Serampore, India, but British Missionary Society (BMS) secretary Andrew Fuller beseeched her to go and shield the BMS from charges of homewrecking. A few years after the group’s arrival, Thomas reported, Dorothy

has taken it into her head that [her husband] is a great whore-monger; and her jealousy burns like fire unquenchable; . . . if he goes out of his door by day or night, she follows him; and declares in the most solemn manner that she has caught [sic] him with the servants, with his friends, with [my wife], and that he is guilty every day and every night. . . . She has uttered the most blasphemous and bitter imprecations against him, seizing him by the hair of his head, and one time at the breakfast table held up a knife and said "Curse you. I could cut your throat." She has even made some attempt on his life. (qtd. in Beck 109)

As his wife's mental illness worsened, Carey confined her at home, often using physical restraints to ensure his own safety. After her death, he and his sponsors confined word of the Careys' unhappiness to the BMS archives, except for a few pages in Eustace Carey's 1836 memoir of his uncle (126–28). Thomas's disturbing letter did not see the light of publication (by James R. Beck) until 1992, almost two hundred years after it was written. This letter anecdotally corroborates Alvyn Austin's assertion that, in at least one missionary society, unhappy marriages were the rule rather than the exception (233). The letter's suppression corroborates analyses of routine institutional censorship and self-censorship in missionary publications (Jeal 41, 175; Johnston 124–28).

The ensuing history of missionary-themed novels shows that Buck's iconoclastic persona faded during the postwar religious revival (best signaled, perhaps, by Billy Graham), only to emerge with a vengeance in response to the New Christian Right, which peaked between 1979 and 1988.³ John McGowan characterizes postmodern thought in general as "seek[ing] to discredit purity and autonomy as illusions by revealing that the heterogeneous elements (such as the feminine, the racial other, and the non-utilitarian) that are overtly disclaimed by foundational texts, 'selves', institutions, and societies, have in fact been only repressed" (20–21). Now buttressed with the intellectual

³On the New Christian Right, see Michael Lienesch and Susan Friend Harding.

traditions of post-colonialism and Michel Foucault's drive to discern hidden knowledges, the iconoclastic missionary persona was newly exemplified in Nettie, the long-lost sister of the narrator of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982). Walker traces Nettie's double consciousness as an African-American missionary sponsored by a white missionary society serving in Africa, circa 1917–1937. (Spielberg's film dates the story from 1909 to 1937.) Walker rightly decries the deeply embedded racism of Protestant missions—documented by Sylvia M. Jacobs, among others—in Nettie's growing suspicion of the racist institution in which she serves. Upon arrival in Africa, Nettie adorns her hut with sponsor-donated pictures of some white men. Feeling diminished rather than inspired, she ventures the counter-missionary thought that “even the picture of Christ which generally looks good anywhere looks peculiar here” (Walker 147). In other words, Nettie questions whether the Great Commission (Matt. 28: 16–20) is as universally desirable as the missionary movement has pretended. Walker positions Nettie as the first generation able to raise these doubts, in contrast to her husband's African-American aunts, who naïvely prize their commendations from King Leopold II of Belgium, who notoriously exploited the Congolese for the sake of their rubber.

The historical record should jaundice one's response to Walker's characterization that Nettie's is the first generation of black missionaries to protest their employers' racism. In 1850, African-American Nancy Prince's *Narrative of the Life and Travels of Nancy Prince* treated the abolitionist author's troubled missionary stint with white Baptist missionaries undertaking to educate recently freed Jamaican blacks. She minces no words, enumerating the color-based indignities inflicted by her white missionary colleagues, fuming particularly at their attempt to “manage” donations given into her keeping. Closer to the time and locale of *The Color Purple*, African-American missionary William L. Sheppard was inducted into Britain's Royal Geographical Society as its first African-American member and was received by three US presidents in recognition of his efforts to expose the atrocities committed in the Congo by Leopold and his successors. Sheppard's collaboration with white colleague William McCutchan Morrison was widely perceived as a milestone in correcting Presbyterians' previously

segregated missionary societies. Shortly after one atrocity, Sheppard, posing as African, visited the perpetrators and photographed their baskets of amputated hands. Morrison wrote the accompanying copy and directed the documentation to British reformer-journalist E. D. Morel to publish (Hochschild 152–58, 259–63). The rubber company involved, *Companie Kasai*, sued for libel. This case was considered so important that President McKinley sent a representative to Léopoldville (Kinshasa). Charges against Sheppard were dropped, and Morrison was acquitted. These globally known events occurred about a decade before Nettie's fictional service, deeply problematizing the impression Walker gives of black missionaries as Uncle Toms.

The coda to Sheppard's story further illustrates missionary societies' censorship. Although Sheppard was lionized for his role, when news leaked of his adultery with numerous indigenous women, his American Presbyterian employers did their best to erase his legacy, thus nearly erasing, as well, his substantive work against racism in missionary societies and in the international sphere.

Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) concerns Nathan Price, a traumatized veteran-turned-Baptist-missionary, who drags his reluctant family from Georgia to the Congo during the 1960s. Its narrators are Nathan's wife, Orleanna, and the couple's four daughters. Their arrival in the Congo coincides with the Belgian withdrawal and the election of its first nationalist leader, Patrice Lumumba, soon afterward assassinated by the CIA. The novel's premises invite a Buck-like iconoclasm against missions, Nathan personifying patriarchy (bullying and belittling his wife and daughters) and cultural arrogance (signified by his habitual mispronunciation of the Kikongo word for "beloved" so that it sounded like "poisonwood." Where Nathan intended to refer to "the beloved Jesus," the Kikongo heard "the poisonwood Jesus" [Kingsolver 70, 213]). The fictional Nathan appears complicit in the real-world imperialism that forms the novel's setting, particularly the 1961 assassination of Lumumba. But among these multiple targets, only white patriarchy's oppression of white women, readers agree, gains any traction. In contrast to Walker's (purported) recovery of black missionaries' unspoken truths, Kingsolver zeroes in on what she imagines are the

unspoken truths of white women missionaries. In Kingsolver's view, gender, not race, bifurcates the spoken from the unspoken. "For women like me, it seems, it's not ours to take charge of beginnings and endings," Orleanna muses; "let men write those stories. I can't" (383). Kingsolver stresses gender's primacy by her formal choice of an all-female (and all-white) cast of narrators, Orleanna and her daughters. Consequently, the reader experiences Nathan's enraged outbursts while standing in feminine narrators' shoes, cringing along with them at Nathan's biting misogyny. "Sending a girl to college is like pouring water in your shoes," he grouses; "it's hard to say which is worse, seeing it run out and waste the water, or seeing it hold in and wreck the shoes" (56). The culminating instance of an unspoken missionary truth demarcated entirely by gender is the death of Ruth May, the youngest Price daughter, for which Orleanna chiefly blames Nathan's obliviousness to his family's safety by moving them to the Congo in his single-minded commitment to proselytizing.

Ruth May's funeral is clearly the novel's climax. Kingsolver intensifies Orleanna's *Kindertotenlied* to operatic proportions. Dozens of African women accompany Orleanna in her lament, canonizing Ruth May as the representative of all mothers' children sacrificed to patriarchy, racism, and colonialism. In particular, Kingsolver imagines Ruth May's body placed on the Prices' kitchen table, pulled outside for the occasion. This table-altar likens Ruth May to a sacrificed Jesus, who, Christians believe, gave Himself as food in the Eucharist, a comparison implying that missionaries have not served Jesus but crucified Him. In this scene, particularly, Kingsolver poses as the novelist who rushes in to articulate what missionaries feared to say.

Kingsolver's portrayal of Nathan obviously draws from Buck's Absalom but with important differences. Buck's portrayal tempers her father's misogyny with qualities she admires: his fluency in Chinese and his Christian conviction. Kingsolver flattens these virtues by Nathan's bungled Kikongo and his pathology-distorted faith, a compensatory desire "personally to save more souls than had perished on the road to Bataan" (198). Buck's ambivalently portrayed Absalom degenerates, in Kingsolver's hands, to a straw man, a purely despicable missionary villain.

By flattening Nathan, Kingsolver makes room to speak the rage of bereaved missionary mothers, which is mostly unspoken in the Protestant missionary record. Child loss itself was common: in one heartbreaking instance, South African missionary Mathilda Smith buried twelve of her own children (Philip 152). Overwhelmingly, published accounts of missionary parents' bereavement mix their sadness with euphemisms for death and/or with expressions of resignation to God's will. To take just one example, Canadian doctor Susie Rijnhart, en route to Lhasa with her husband, Petrus, narrates the couple's response to their infant's sudden death:

we realized that we clasped in our arms only the casket which had held our precious jewel[, which] . . . had been taken for a brighter setting in a brighter world; the little flower blooming on the bleak and barren Dang La had been plucked and transplanted on the Mountains Delectable to bask and bloom forever in the sunshine of God's love. . . . But oh! What a void in our hearts! . . . We tried to think of it euphemistically, we lifted our hearts in prayer, we tried to be submissive, but it was all so real—the one fact stared us in the face; it was written on the rocks; it reverberated through the mountain silence: Little Charlie was dead. (248–49)

Rijnhart's account of her bereavement, more than that of most missionaries', discards euphemistic consolations as inadequate to the "the one fact [that] stared us in the face." But even the bold Rijnhart silences any railing against this apparent lapse in God's omnipotence. Yet once in a while, such railing does appear in the public record. As noted, Buck reports that her mother bitterly declared that she had no more children to give to her husband's Moloch-like God. A further instance arises from the death of the seven-month-old son of Adoniram and Ann Judson, two of the first four US missionaries sent abroad. Within four days of her son's death in May 1816, Judson wrote two epistolary accounts, one blaming herself and the other blaming God. "Behold us, solitary and alone, with this one source of recreation [i.e., their son]!" rages Judson; "yet this is denied us—this

must be removed, to show us that we need no other source of enjoyment but God himself” (qtd. in Montgomery 104–06). The phrase “must be removed” sarcastically suggests that God arbitrarily forced the Judsons to renounce their only son just to demonstrate their loyalty, as in Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. This God-blaming letter (admittedly surrounded by disclaimers like “Do not think . . . that I repine at Providence”) was, daringly, published by Judson herself. But after her death, her editor, James Knowles, replaced the God-blaming letter with the self-blaming one in what became the authoritative biographical source for the version of Ann Judson that American Baptists lionized (Judson qtd. in Knowles 122–23).

In this light, one can grant that Kingsolver does broach new ground in making a missionary child’s death the occasion of religious critique. Buck’s Carie Sydenstricker and Ann Judson compared their children’s deaths to Abraham’s (averted) sacrifice of Isaac. They thus allow their readers to maintain an adherence to Christianity, since that religion had superseded the dispensation under which Abraham operated. If one credits Kingsolver’s novel as a whole, however, such refuge is no longer tenable.

Vexed missionary marriages, mendacious missionary societies, and a deity who allows his servants’ children to die—these are some “unspoken” matters in the nineteenth-century missionary record, “unspoken” because, as noted above, missionaries at times acknowledged these difficulties in private documents but censored them from the public record.

But what of darker, “unspeakable” matters, those unrecorded in even in private documents? Scholars must, of course, treat lacunae cautiously, striving always to historicize and to control their own projections. With this stipulation, one may yet hazard that challenges to belief constitute “the unspeakable” for most missionary writers—challenges not only to belief but also to the matrix of viscerally felt religious identity in which belief lives and moves and has its being. As shown, loss of faith is spoken of only by ex-missionaries, such as Buck or late nineteenth-century doctor Jane Waterston, whose missionary stint “shatter[ed her] faith in God and humanity” (168). Consider as well a fictional instance by Walker’s Nettie and

her husband, who imagine penning a memoir titled *Twenty Years the Fool of the West*.

When looking for clues about loss of faith among those who remained missionaries, one may be particularly intrigued by ABCFM missionary Nathan Lord, who went to Ceylon in the 1850s to exercise his ordained ministry there. Weirdly, he soon returned home for medical school; upon graduation he returned to Ceylon, re-equipped. There is no explanation of this expensive midlife crisis in the Lord family papers. One wonders: why did Lord conclude that religion alone did not suffice? What preventable death or what unanswerable question from his Sri Lankan interlocutors prompted him to re-cast his missionary service so profoundly?

Christopher Herbert's classic work *Culture and Anomie* (1991) can help frame this area of unspeakability. Herbert contends that some early nineteenth-century missionary ethnographers were practitioners, *avant la lettre*, of twentieth-century anthropology's signature method, participant observation. Herbert argues that a few of these missionaries tried, for a time, fully to inhabit their interlocutors' cultural world. Herbert's characterization of missionaries diametrically opposes Bronislaw Malinowski's, i.e., that anthropologists' missionary predecessors were simply Victorian bigots. It is worth asking whether the contempt Malinowski expressed for missionaries in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) partook of the negative publicity surrounding fundamentalists in the run-up to the Scopes Trial. In any case, Charles Taylor's influential terms, "the porous self" and "the buffered self," make Herbert's innovation clearer: Malinowski's Victorian bigots personify selves maximally buffered, while Herbert's giddy, porous missionaries willingly subject themselves to the possibility of being changed. Herbert's chief evidence is the ambivalence that pervades every page of these missionaries' writings—a roller-coaster ride through revulsion and admiration of indigenous customs. Here the missionary experiences the *anomie* of culture shock, an *anomie* unlike the "unspoken" truths discussed above that were mostly relegated to private documents. Dissimilar to the "unspoken" matters previously noted, *anomie* disorients the missionary to a point where his language fails. *Anomie*, then, is unspeakable.

To understand the profundity of missionary culture shock, it is important to remember the difference between nineteenth-century missions and many current, time-limited missions, such as the two-year commitment of Latter-day Saint missionaries or the one- or two-week mission trips in which many students or medical professionals now participate. Nineteenth-century missionaries were lifers: departure from home was a kind of death, when missionaries bade farewell to friends and family for the rest of their mortal days. One sees this sense of irrevocable loss in records of Henrietta and J. Lewis Shuck, the first US Baptist missionaries to China. Her correspondence with her beloved father opens with his emphatic statement, "There is one thought I would here impress deeply upon your mind, and that is, that you have enlisted *for life* . . . you are NEVER TO RETURN TO AMERICA—NEVER" (36). Though Shuck at first reaffirms her consent, one senses her wavering a few years later, when her father's portrait arrives at their mission station. Upon unwrapping it, Henrietta, by her own report, exclaims, "'Tis not pa', no, 'tis not. Where is the expression of his countenance? Why, it is some old man.'" Only her husband's persuasion reveals to Henrietta "'a *resemblance* of [her] father's face, though time indeed has been at work on [him]" (214). This moment crystallizes Henrietta's shocked recognition that for some time she had been living what John Keats called a "posthumous existence" (qtd. in Forman 526). Indeed, such an altered sense of self is a logical concomitant to nineteenth-century terms of missionary commitment.

Louise Erdrich tracks this unspeakable territory in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001). The novel centers around Agnes Dewitt, a former nun, who escapes the pain of a recent bereavement when she by chance discovers the body of Fr. Damien Modeste, whom she had met a few days before, and who had just drowned; he had been assigned to serve the Ojibwa. Agnes exchanges clothes with the priest, buries him, and assumes his missionary assignment. Her decades of service are punctuated by pastoral crises, notably a tuberculosis outbreak; by a brief, passionate affair with a fellow priest; by a deepening friendship over chess with tribal elder Nanapush; and by several comic incidents, worthy of Shakespeare himself, when Agnes barely keeps the secret of her femaleness,

or so she thinks. Late in the novel, to distract his chess opponent, Nana-push asks, “‘Why . . . are you pretending to be a man priest?’” (Erdrich 231)—and proceeds to win the match. The jig, apparently, has been up for some time, but the most important revelation is that nobody cares about the priest’s sex. Agnes/Damien’s career, then, constitutes Erdrich’s alliance with opponents of Catholicism’s policy of an all-male priesthood⁴ and with Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity. If gender is a performance, as Butler opines, then so is priesthood.

But for the concerns expressed here, it is significant that Erdrich ventures more widely than “gender politics” or “church politics” into a primary missionary goal, conversion: Erdrich stipulated that she wanted *Last Report* “to be about a priest who is in many ways converted by those whom he/she has come to convert” (qtd. in Mudge). Invoking Taylor and Herbert, then, one can observe that Erdrich portrays a porous missionary, one open to being changed by the missionary encounter. Agnes’s missionary name foregrounds porousness in its allusion to Fr. Damien DeVeuster, missionary to the lepers at Molokai, whose assimilation to his parishioners’ condition caused his own death. When Erdrich counts the cost of her Damien’s porosity to others, the vocabulary of sex and gender prevails over that of religion. The passionate affair with her colleague Gregory ends with this impasse: he insists, “‘You are a woman,’” but she insists, “‘I am a priest’” (206). This impasse and Gregory’s rapid departure crystallize Agnes/Damien’s profound un-belonging, a gender *anomie* akin to the cultural *anomie* of Herbert’s missionary ethnographers. Over time, however, the missionary finds a new belonging based on porosity itself. In the daily prayers of her old age, “Agnes and Fr. Damien became that one person who addressed the unknown,” writes Erdrich; after praying for the reconciliation of hostile factions, “he prayed, uneasily, for the conversion of Nanapush, then prayed for his own enlightenment in case converting Nanapush was a mistake” (182). “In [his] turn, Fr. Damien had been converted by the good Nanapush,” concludes Erdrich; “he now practiced a mixture of faiths” (275–76). *Last Report’s*

⁴For a discussion of this policy, see Mary Jeremy Daigler.

protagonist thus instantiates what theologian Paul Knitter calls “double belonging,” or “religious bilingualism” (223–24). In Knitter’s view, doctrine is not so much a truth as it is a language for perceiving truth. Knitter thus theorizes the experience of Thomas Merton, whose “proficiency in his own Christian language” taught him that some things about the Divine “could only be said in other religious languages” (228).

Thus, missionaries, as noted, have long contended with their culture’s unspeakables, wrestling like Jacob with an adversary they cannot name. But the unspoken matters could easily receive more exposure, for censorship, whether exerted by missionaries themselves or by their sponsors, has greatly weakened mainline Protestantism’s credibility for non-believing readers. In the long run, then, the goal of evangelizing them might be better served by a policy of candor rather than leaving dirty laundry for novelists to air.

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WINNOWER'S YMMS.

I need Thee every hour.

MR. ANNE S. HAWES.

REV. ROBERT LOWRY,
From "Royal Edition" by per.

1. I need thee every hour. Most precious Lord, Notwith' my sin
 2. I need thee every hour. My God and King, Thy grace I can't
 3. I need thee every hour. In joy or pain, O'er all my
 4. I need thee every hour. Thank you for all, And thy love
 5. I need thee every hour. Most precious Lord, O'er all my sin.

Hymn.

How can I praise thee, Lord, I need thee, oh! I need thee (Every hour I
 see) When thou art with
 me, Oh life is vain
 as I see (to) it.
 Oh, Thou King of Kings.

most dear, O God our God, thy love and I need thee.

Nineteenth-Century Women's Hymns and American Spiritual Democracy

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During the first half of the nineteenth century, American democracy attained early fruition in a little-attended-to corner of American culture: psalmody or hymn-writing. By mid-century, the best known and most loved of America's indigenous hymn writers included as many women as men; the best women hymnists were, through their superficially quiescent texts, courageously broaching topics or doctrines that ministerial males carefully eschewed. Such women hymnists quite obviously democratized¹ the hymn-writing process by creating dominant roles for themselves within it.

But women hymnists also democratized hymn subject matter in two important ways. First, they articulated and encouraged a gendered understanding of Christian worship and duty by formalizing previously obscure doctrines especially meaningful to women, including women's spiritual potential, the importance of cementing religious sisterhood, and the right to instruct fellow male congregants in their duties. Second, they paradoxically employed language and forms of the

¹The term was originated by Nathan O. Hatch (3–5).

traditional militant hymn to domesticate and Christianize larger American politics and society to the end that, in many late nineteenth-century contexts, Christian faith and duty on the one hand and American patriotism and civic responsibility on the other acted as implicitly interchangeable paradigms of behavior and thought.

The emergence of influential American women hymn writers is prefigured in part by women's crucial role in the spiritual discontent characterizing the Second Great Awakening, a role that Harriet Beecher Stowe later celebrated in her novel *The Minister's Wooing* (1859). The emotional climax of Stowe's novel centers on condemnations of eighteenth-century New England Calvinists whose "views of human existence" were "gloomy enough to oppress any heart which did not rise above them by triumphant faith, or sink below them by brutish insensibility" (334–35). For those who inherited Jonathan Edwards's doctrines "as absolute truth, and as a basis of actual life," Calvinism had "the effect of a slow poison, producing life-habits of morbid action," its theology as different "from the New Testament as the living embrace of a friend [is] from his lifeless body" (339).

Despite the fact that Stowe's protagonist, Mary Scudder, endures life experiences redolent with grief, her belief in a loving and merciful Savior provides her comfort and direction and enables her to assist in transforming a small-town society "stiffened and enchained by glacial reasonings" into a community that is "creative and poetic," one "where spiritual intuitions are as necessary as wings to birds" (341, 342). Scudder thus becomes a type of the American Christian woman at the turn of the nineteenth century who, motivated by redundant bereavement and resultant hunger for spiritual consolation, began circumventing male ministers and harsh Calvinist doctrines to directly minister to other women. In preaching Christ as an impartial nurturer, a democratic deity who provides loving redemption to all, this informal women's ministry helped democratize not only God at its core but also the nature of Christian worship itself, together with the quality of the ideal Christian—or *Christian American*—life. In crucial ways the work of nineteenth-century women hymnists at mid-century is founded on women's informal ministrations at the century's beginning.

The new historicist analysis of Laura L. Becker and the careful folkloric investigations of Stephen Nissenbaum, Stephen A. Marini, Emily Laurance, and Martha Dennis Burns suggest four crucial stages of American psalmodic development between 1720 and 1850. The first was the emergence in the 1720s of the “New Way” of psalm singing through which Puritan ministers taught parishioners to read music, sing on pitch, and adhere to approved melodies (Becker 79–85). The second coincided with the Great Awakening, when George Whitefield introduced American Puritans to the lyrical psalm transcriptions and personal hymn texts of Isaac Watts (Nissenbaum 105–06, 111–12; Marini 119; Burns 143). The third stage was marked by Calvinist revivals and the emergence of indigenous American hymn texts and musical settings (Laurance 127–29, 132–36; Burns 140–43). Finally, during the Second Great Awakening came a similar blossoming of indigenous sacred music among Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Mormons, resulting in the first gospel music or “white spirituals” (Laurance 127–29; Burns 145–46) and a resurgence of “New Way” principles but emphasizing simple and singable melodies (Burns 146–49).

Collectively, these four stages suggest the increasingly democratic nature of religious music in the United States, beginning with the assumption that every Christian *should* sing—and (with appropriate training) *could* sing—praises to God.² These stages also underscore

²Lowell Mason, Protestant composer, pioneering choir director, and music reformer in early nineteenth-century America, is credited by Martha Dennis Burns with shaping the performance of American religious music as both aesthetic exercise and sacred rite. Burns asserts that “Mason’s deciding who qualified to sing in [a] choir” quite clearly emphasized “the character of the performer” above the “quality of the performance” (147). But Burns follows this assertion by quoting Mason’s admission of impatience with “‘the screaming and screeching’” characterizing many choirs and virtually all congregational singing (qtd. in 147). Emma Smith’s brief preface to her *A Collection of Sacred Hymns, for the Church of the Latter Day Saints* (1835) is more accommodating, given that it does not mention choirs or congregants, much less distinguish between them. She writes simply, “In order to sing by the Spirit, and with the understanding, it is necessary that the church of the Latter Day Saints should have a collection of ‘Sacred Hymns,’ adapted to their

the increasing prominence of women in the history of American hymnody. Women moved from background roles early on to directing choirs and shaping musical performance by the late eighteenth century and then by the mid-nineteenth century to writing influential hymn texts and composing still popular musical settings. During this century and a half, religious music was increasingly the means whereby women preached to or taught others. Indeed, in many cases women's hymns reached far more ears and hearts than did the preaching of their male peers.

An analysis of the hymnody of a single religious culture, that of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly known as the Mormon Church, helps demonstrate how women hymnists articulated and encouraged a gendered understanding of Christian worship because Mormon hymnody quite predictably shares strongly in the larger history of nineteenth-century Protestant hymnody, and the Mormon Church is an indigenous American religion, emerging and reaching its first flowering during the Second Great Awakening. It thus becomes an important measure, as a new religious body that bypassed the first three stages of American psalmody and grew up entirely during the fourth, of the relative pervasiveness of the democratized mindset in Protestant music and the role of women in formulating and nourishing that mindset. Indeed, one might argue that Mormon women surpassed their non-Mormon peers in the kinds of textual responsibilities they assumed within their faith and the subjects they broached in their hymns.

In July 1830, three months after The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized by Joseph Smith, his wife, Emma

their faith and belief in the gospel, and, as far as can be, holding forth the promises made to the fathers who died in the precious faith of a glorious resurrection, and a thousand years' reign on earth with the Son of Man in his glory. Notwithstanding the church, as it were, is still in its infancy, yet, as the song of the righteous is a prayer unto God, it is sincerely hoped that the following collection, selected with an eye single to his glory, may answer every purpose till more are composed, or till we are blessed with a copious variety of the songs of Zion" ([2]–[3]).

Hale Smith, received a divine mandate to “make a selection of sacred hymns, as it shall be given thee” (D&C 25:11); her selections were to be published for the use and edification of the full body of the church. At a time when most Protestant hymnals were edited by men, Emma’s assignment was undoubtedly a shock to certain of her colleagues. *A Collection of Sacred Hymns, for the Church of the Latter Day Saints* (1835) appeared just under five years later, and Emma’s brief introduction to the volume deftly established six fundamental principles of Mormon hymnody. First is the conviction that singing is to be governed by “understanding”—by skill and training—as well as by the “Spirit” ([2]). Second, “sacred hymns” must be preserved as links to believing progenitors in the faith ([2]). Third, Mormon hymnody must be centered on faith in a living Christ who affords both physical and spiritual redemption, and who promises to return to earth and rule his people. Fourth is the implicit promise that the church, despite its “infancy” ([3])—there were fewer than eight thousand members in 1835—would grow into a vigorous adulthood, fueled in part by its music. Fifth, music was a crucial, divinely accepted element of religious worship. Finally, a hymnal should change and grow along with the religious body giving rise to it.

Smith’s introduction appropriately anticipates the tone and spirit of the texts in her hymnal, revealing Latter-day Saint accord with the broadly defined religious fervor of New England, wherein a generalized faith in Christ’s redemptive powers has been overshadowed by a passionate, insistently personal, and implicitly democratic confidence in His grace, love, and blessing. Such passion is nowhere more evident than in the personal-prayer-as-hymn-text of emergent American Protestant psalmody, as in Elizabeth Prentiss’s “More Love to Thee, O Christ,” published in 1856, or, more especially, Annie Sherwood Hawks’s “I Need Thee Every Hour,” published in 1872, with its well known first-person pleadings: “I need thee, O I need thee; / Ev’ry hour I need thee! / O bless me now, my Savior!” (98).

Perhaps the most striking prayer-as-hymn-text by a Mormon woman poet is “O My Father,” written in 1845 by Eliza Roxey Snow. In this prayer poem, addressed to and focused on God the Father rather than on Christ the Son, the poet’s longing is for reunion rather

than comfort, a longing to escape the temporal “sphere” where she is a “stranger,” a longing for the restoration of a formerly intimate *familial* relationship between the separated poet-child and the nurturing Father God, a longing to “regain the Father’s presence,” to “behold his face,” to return to “his side” (1039). But this is only part of the prayer. In helping formalize a doctrine taught quietly by Joseph Smith, Snow declares that, in the face of a “thought” that “makes reason stare”—that of a *single* Parent-God—she is convinced that she has divine parents, a Heavenly Mother beside her Heavenly Father, and she prays that “with their mutual approbation” she may return to “dwell with them” (1039). Snow’s hymn continues to be loved by Latter-day Saints and is often sung in worship services and at funerals.

Like Snow, other Mormon women poets helped shape or formalize traditional belief. Somewhat predictably, nineteenth-century millennialism evoked much speculation regarding the second coming of Christ, including among Mormons. Given Emma Smith’s injunction to produce a “copious variety” of indigenous hymns ([3]), early Mormon poets often chose millennial themes, perhaps, in part, because of their attendant appeal and license. During the 1830s and ’40s, Latter-day Saint millennialism was particularly insistent on an imagined state of shared resources, blessings, and joy, a freedom from all persecution and betrayal, and a state of perfect equality and peace.

Mary Judd Page, an early Mormon poet and contemporary of Emma Smith, pushes a democratic brand of millennialism in her hymn “How great is the Lord in the city of Zion,” a text included in the 1841 hymnal edited and published by her husband, John E. Page.³ Here, she creates the millennial city as an equitable, cooperative space characterized by “the beauty of spring and perennial bloom,” a “home” where “children rejoice” and “sorrow and sighing” cease, where even those who were poor now have “plenteous provision” (52, 53, 54). A still more striking example of Page’s millennialism is “Man hath not heard nor understood.” Envisioning “Mount Zion” and

³In this particular hymnal, only two authors are credited for their work, fellow Mormon poet William W. Phelps (whose contributions are designated only by his initials “W.W.P.”) and Mary Judd Page, whose name is included.

Jerusalem as twin capitals of Christ's millennial kingdom, Page imagines in her fourth stanza a transcendent harmony among "Ephraim"—Latter-day Saints—and the rest of "Israel," presumably incorporating not only Jews but all peoples of the earth: "Ephraim and Israel now are one / All speaking a pure language" (48). In her fifth stanza, as Page's vision more insistently turns toward the self, her boldness borders on audacity:

Then we shall reign upon the earth
With kingly honor shining,
As priests and kings we will rejoice
While all the nations lift their voice
To praise the God of Zion. (48)

Page's millennialism evidently encompasses the striking conviction that when Christ returned to rule, a Mormon "we" would reign beneath Him over the world's nations, and despite its gendered language her signed hymn text clearly incorporates herself and other women among the "we" of its lines.

Not only did Mormon women help formalize early Mormon belief or doctrine through their hymns, but they were also daring enough to instruct their Mormon brothers in their own roles. For example, Page's "Ye who are called to labor and minister for God," another hymn still sung by Latter-day Saints today, cautions men who are "bless'd with the royal priesthood" and "called by [God's] word [as] preach[ers] among the nations" that they must not let "vain ambition, or worldly glory stain / Your minds" but instead must "rejoice in tribulation," "cease from all light speeches, light-mindedness and pride," "pray always without ceasing," and "in the truth abide" (54, 55). Suggesting that the central obligation of the priesthood is proselytizing—"while lifting up your voices, . . . say to the slumbering nations, Prepare to meet your God!" (54)—Page pleads with her brothers to "[ac]quit yourselves like men" (54).

Emily Hill Woodmansee wrote slightly later in the nineteenth century; her poet-mentor was Snow. In addition to her hymns, Woodmansee wrote a number of occasional poems with titles like

“Equal Rights” (sung to the tune of Philip Phile’s “Hail Columbia!”), “In Memory of General Thomas L. Kane,” and “’Tis Better to Hope than Despair.” Some of her poems were “occasioned” by interactions with her husband or with other men, and in these she is noticeably more blunt in her counsel to and criticism of men than is Page’s text, cited earlier.

Another of Woodmansee’s occasional poems, “A Woman,” an ironic and even embittered indictment of nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint male culture, provides a useful context for a discussion of her best known hymn text. The poem’s opening stanza implies the logic of the tired saying about “a woman’s work” never being done: the poet argues that this is so because in the end a woman’s work includes *all* that “must be done” (505)—indeed, woman is “the first and last to sorrow share, / Braving contagion, scorning care,” and inevitably the one “who tends the suffering everywhere” (505). Ensuing stanzas suggest not only that men conveniently define their own work much more narrowly than do women, but also that men permit absolutely no crossovers between gendered responsibilities as they themselves define them. The eighth stanza considers what might be called the “Scarlet Letter” paradox, i.e., the gendered inequity of moral indiscretion itself: “So quickly tarnished is her name, / Yet she alone must bear the shame, / And everyone is sure to blame / A Woman” (505).

The stanza immediately following is the emotional apex of the poem. Playing with Mormon cultural convictions about the physical and spiritual needs of men for women, Woodmansee employs an image of the eternal “lone man” to create a gendered punishment that is wryly humorous while also profoundly serious:

Some retribution there must be,
Some so-called men should never see
Throughout a long Eternity
A Woman. (505)

Yet the poet emphasizes that she does not “class” all men together; “good men are rare,” she says, “but they exist” (506). This fact apparently undergirds the democratic ideal that concludes her poem:

"'Tis Woman's right, with Man to share / Reward and rest, as well as care, / Not generous this, but just and fair / To Woman" (506).

Intriguingly, both the logic and the bite of "A Woman" are dependent on *male* definitions or perspectives of woman and her work. When one reads the poem carefully, one recognizes that Woodmansee is more concerned with the male-created ideologies pervading society than with men themselves. In some of her best work Woodmansee circumvents male ideologies altogether and from a woman's perspective writes to other women about women's themes. This is the case with her most beloved hymn text, originally titled "Song of the Sisters of the Female Relief Society,"⁴ but now known by its opening words, "As Sisters in Zion." Somewhat paradoxically, both "A Woman" and "Song of the Sisters" identify "a woman's work" similarly—the work of mothering, nurturing, healing, caring, comforting. But while in the male-defined world of "A Woman" such work comprises endless drudgery, it is celebrated in "Song of the Sisters" as the work of "angels" (405).

Woodmansee's original nine-stanza hymn text is ambitious in its scope and intent to establish a community of believing LDS women as a democratic and united spiritual body. The opening stanza presents an overview of her purpose—to encourage her sisters to "pull together" in their wide-ranging work as "sisters in Zion" (405). The next two stanzas focus on self-improvement through sisterhood's bonds of mutual support and encouragement, advocating a rejection of "follies" and "pride" and the distractions of vanity and "fashion" with a simultaneous embrace of "truth and meekness," wisdom, sensibility, and happiness (405). Creating her idealized sisterhood as the bonding of "children of Light," Woodmansee invokes the image of "scanning angels" to encourage selfless modesty and virtue and the

⁴Woodmansee indicated that she intended that her text be sung to the tune of "Hail to the Brightness of Zion's Glad Morning" (405), a popular tune at the time, composed by Mason in about 1830. While "As Sisters in Zion," as published in the 1985 LDS hymnal, has only three verses, the original was nine stanzas long; the current three-stanza text is comprised of variants of the first, eighth, and ninth of Woodmansee's original stanzas (309).

determination to “work with a will,” perhaps especially in fulfilling domestic responsibility (405).

The next two stanzas focus on a mother’s work as incumbent on a believing sisterhood. Joseph Smith’s famous pronouncement about correct principles and self-governance seems to underlie the wonderfully phrased fourth stanza,⁵ deftly portraying a mother’s work as “training to love and to do what is noble and right” and then trusting one’s children to mature into adults who will “bear off the Kingdom” and continue “the good fight” (405). The next stanzas extend maternal work beyond the home to “the aged, the feeble, and poor and afflicted” (405). The language here explicitly attaches to women many of the duties of Christian ministry. The eighth stanza underscores the Christ-centered origins of such work, defining it as “the office of Angels, conferred upon women” (405); and the “scanning angels” of the third stanza are no longer watchers but fellow ministers—allies and friends—in a divine cause. Indeed, women’s work is finally so “vast,” “wondrous,” and marvelous, it can only be fulfilled through the careful tuition of the Spirit, who implicitly stands ready to bless the efforts of a sisterhood united and equal in its love for and commitment to Christ.

Thus, as in many nineteenth-century American women’s novels, the Latter-day Saint hymn texts of Snow, Page, and Woodmansee emphasize community and encourage what might be termed democratic spirituality—cooperation, unity, equality, peace, and fellowship. Collectively, such hymns glorify the virtuous family of believing congregants as a democratic ideal, suggesting not merely that the world would be much happier if nuclear and communal families properly governed themselves, but that the loving home or community is the temporal equivalent of heaven.

The democratic ideal emerging from the religious family or community is problematized in the woman’s militant hymn, a provocative genre of post-Civil War American women’s psalmody, employing battle or military language or imagery to teach spiritual doctrine or

⁵“I teach them correct principles, and they govern themselves,” recorded by John Taylor (339).

encourage religious action or devotion. It may seem curious that so many late nineteenth-century women hymnists cast religious and social causes—missionary work, repentance, temperance, fidelity, suffrage, and so on—as “battles” or “wars” involving Christian soldiers metaphorically armed to the teeth. More curious still is that within women’s militant hymns Christian faith and duty on the one hand and American patriotism and civic responsibility on the other act as implicitly interchangeable democratic paradigms.

Scholars specializing in late nineteenth-century American women’s psalmody have largely overlooked the militant hymn. For example, Edith Blumhofer calls Julia Ward Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic” one of America’s finest “patriotic hymns” and associates its “millenarian language” and its themes of “cleansing,” “empowerment,” and “victory” with the Holiness Movement and “testimony songs” of the 1860s (980, 982). But Blumhofer does not otherwise engage the pervasive role of military imagery in hymns by American women. In contrast, Linda A. Moody asserts that the mythical qualities of Howe’s text create a kind of freedom manifesto for American slaves, while simultaneously softening or even undermining larger cultural constructions of war as “inevitable” or as God’s “preferred way.” Like Blumhofer, however, she does not consider other militant hymns before or after Howe. June Hadden Hobbs argues that women’s and men’s hymns of late nineteenth-century America exemplify “conflicting models of spirituality” (74) and suggests that while male poets employed the language of “ceremony, commerce, and war” to inscribe the manner and power of spiritual exchange, women created personal and intimate texts conducive to harmony and cooperation (75, 76). Susan Kermas says only that Howe inspired subsequent hymns conveying “social and moral purpose” (8).

Howe was by no means the first American woman to write a militant hymn text, but her penning of the words to “Battle Hymn” has become an iconic and even mythical national story, perhaps fed by her own autobiography, *Reminiscences* (1899), in which she recounts what was already in 1899 a familiar tale: how she, her husband, and a few others were invited by Abraham Lincoln to visit Washington, DC, in November 1861, and how, during their stay, they were escorted one

morning to a nearby Union encampment in Virginia. After “watching the manoeuvres” for a time (274), they were obliged to return to the city, and to pass time during the tedious journey they began to sing. After a round of “John Brown’s Body,” one of the group asked Howe why she did not “write some good words for that stirring tune” (275). Howe responded that she had “often wished to do so” (275). Early the following morning, she remembered awaking

in the gray of the morning twilight; and as I lay waiting for the dawn, to my astonishment [I] found that the wished-for lines were arranging themselves in my brain. Having thought out all the stanzas, I said to myself, “I must get up and write these verses down, lest I fall asleep again and forget them.” . . . I . . . found in the dimness an old stump of a pen which I remembered to have used the day before. I scrawled the verses almost without looking at the paper. (274–75)

Howe concludes, “At this time, having completed my writing, I returned to bed and fell asleep, but not without feeling that something of importance had happened to me” (“How” 41). Perhaps the most notable implication of Howe’s narrative is not simply her recollection that the hymn wrote itself, but that, like fellow Christian Harriet Beecher Stowe in writing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), she was acting as God’s amanuensis as she “scrawled” her hymn’s words. Furthermore, the still extant copy of her original draft shows very few corrections; subsequent printed versions of her poem show fewer changes still. The narrative thus mythologizes both the words and the writing of the text, effectually rendering the words of the hymn sacrosanct and whole.

But the mythic quality of the hymn goes much deeper than its aesthetic merit or even its allegedly divine legitimacy. A variety of popular historians, from Howe’s own daughter, Florence Howe Hall, to contemporary writers like Thomas P. Lowry and Paul N. Herbert, has cast Howe’s “Battle Hymn” as a force that helped change Northerners’ perspectives of themselves, the Civil War, and the American ideal. During the first long months of fighting after the

firing on Fort Sumter, Union troops were short on both patience and purpose. Lowry holds up Colonel James E. Kerrigan as representative of many Union commanders in late 1861 and his command, the 25th New York Volunteers, as typical of most Union troops of the time, given that it was better known for “unseemly disputes and brawls,” “disorderly language,” and “noisy disturbances” than for courage or military accomplishments (94). The 25th Volunteers’ “real sentiment,” says Herbert, was “just as much Confederate as Union” (140).

Through her “Battle Hymn” Howe is credited in American mythology not with *changing* the Union response to the war but with *creating* that response. Howe’s Christian-militant lyrics anticipated the tenor of Lincoln’s proclamation of a national day of fasting in late April 1863:

Insomuch as we know that, by His Divine law, nations, like individuals, are subjected to punishments and chastisements in this world, may we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment inflicted upon us for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole people? (1)

Howe’s lyrics predated Lincoln’s proclamation by nearly eighteen months, and largely because of her hymn Lincoln’s proclamation incorporated already familiar spiritual and psychological territory. That is, Howe’s text is the first widely circulated depiction of the Civil War, not as a social, economic, or geographic conflict, not as a patriotic obligation, not even as a moral imperative, but as a conflict willed and controlled by God, a punishment of both North and South, a call to national and personal repentance, and a commitment to securing freedom for all. Howe’s text thus comprises a realignment of individual and collective American responsibility as a Christian realignment bound to the example of Christ himself.

According to Herbert, who in turn quotes Howe’s daughter Florence Hall, Howe’s stanzas “had a magical effect. Tired and hungry soldiers had their spirits lifted by singing the Battle Hymn ‘as if a heavenly ally were descending with a song of succor, and thereafter

the wet, aching marchers thought less . . . of their wretched selves, thought more of their cause, their families, their country” (139). In her own history of her mother’s hymn Hall concludes, “In the words of the ‘Battle Hymn’ we hear not only the voice of the Union Army, but an echo of all the aspiring thoughts and noble deeds of the builders of our great Republic” (130). In her hymn Howe insistently democratizes Christianity through the average American narrator who speaks for all Americans, women and men; through an immediate Christ, “born of woman,” who is a “hero” commander fighting alongside His troops; and through a “transfiguring” religious/political order fully accessible to all who will follow the Trumpeter (“Battle” 145). But much more extravagantly, Howe also *Christianizes* democracy in its implicit argument that the fallen nation must be appropriated by Christian repentance and sacrifice if it is to be saved.

Many militant hymns by women focused on postwar reconstruction efforts, and the most significant of these were tied to suffrage and temperance. Mary A. Baker, best known for her hymn “Peace, Be Still,”⁶ authored the “Temperance Battle Hymn” in 1874, shortly after the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was formed. If nothing else, Baker’s hymn helps point up the fact that Howe’s was the most copied hymn text in nineteenth-century psalmody, the hymn equivalent of Clement C. Moore’s “The Night Before Christmas.” Despite its laughable choruses (“Oh! the weeping and the wailing! / Oh! the souls in terror quailing! / Oh! the brows with sorrow paling! / Aye, we go marching on” [452]), Baker’s is one of the best homages to Howe’s original.

In Baker’s text temperance is cast as a struggle of “a million hearts or more,” a seemingly *universal* struggle of women against the “monster fiend” who “has robbed of sons and brothers, . . . has robbed of clothes and bread” (452). More significantly, temperance is cast as a *military* struggle, a “new Civil War” against the suffering caused by alcohol—also virtually universal, given that by “almost ev’ry household” has alcoholism “been fed” (452). According to Baker, pleadings for relief have resulted only in God’s indictment of those perpetrating

⁶Also known by its first-line title, “Master, the Tempest Is Raging.”

the evil: "Ye are your brother's keepers, and his blood is on you all!" (452). Employing racist yet profound irony, the line effectually turns sinful white America, enslaved by drink ("the sin of sins"), into black Cain—now openly vulnerable to God's "own right arm of vengeance" (452). Baker's text is representative of militant hymns by women in its creation of a powerful and vengeful God fighting on the side of women against evils that would destroy both religion and democracy.

A more nearly universalist temperance hymn was written in 1879 by Eva F. Munson Smith.⁷ A few years after its founding, the WCTU adopted "Home Protection" as its motto, celebrating the fact through its new theme hymn by Smith, "Home Protection Is the Watchword." In her text, Smith mythologizes "Home Protection" as a universal cry rising from the mouths of citizens "of the land we love the best," "ringing o'er the vales and mountains," "sweeping grandly o'er the prairies," and "wafted by the balmy breeze" (479). The cry "sound[s] from East to West" and then, "echoed back by myriad voices," it "floats beyond the seas," enjoining those "who make the laws of state" to consider the "homes which rum has ruined" and to then "grant us Home Protection ere too late," "weav[ing] it in the nation's laws" (479).

An important element of Smith's poem is its imagery, which effectually creates an army of Christian Americans bound together by the American landscape fully as much as they are *across* it. The poem rather deftly makes Christian identity synonymous with American identity; both are simultaneously anchored to familial identity. Thus, Smith's romanticized American landscape anticipates that popularized sixteen years later in 1895 by Katharine Lee Bates in "America the Beautiful."

A much less topical and more politically ambiguous militant hymn is "To-day's Bugle Call," the only known surviving work by Lydia M. Dunham, written in 1884. A central image of the poem comes in the fourth stanza—"some from the roof-tree have wandered away"—where *roof-tree* means "ridgepole of a roof" (483)—or the

⁷Sometimes known by her husband's name, Mrs. George Clinton Smith.

roof's supporting central beam. The image thus refers to those who wander from the support or anchor of a secure Christian home, and it is toward these that the "bugle call" of the poem's title is directed. The hymn text is concerned with broadly defined domestic issues, both *personal* (implying children lost to sin, drink, or materialism) and *national* (with glances at immigration and urbanization). Thus, the "fight" or "battle" here is against the generic evils threatening freedom and well-being, whether spiritual or social.

Perhaps the most intriguing element of the poem is its subversion of military language through such phrases as "banner of love" and "unmarshalled hosts" (483). The deliberately "unmilitant" militarism of the text underscores its ironies: citizens and immigrants gathered to "Liberty's star" as slaves; cities "that sparkle like gems on the lea," nevertheless "reeking with guilt and with sin"; Christ, "in pity, ask[ing] room to come in"; and homes "with shadows alloy," thus impelling children to wander from the fundamental teachings received there (483). Death is omnipresent, and the dying cannot save themselves, let alone others. The "dying" must be "awakened" by Christ to Christian understanding and action and particularly to unselfish service, if they are to be saved (483). In this sense, Dunham posits, the nation's only true hope is a millennial one: that Christ "may rule our fair land" (483). "Oh!" Dunham pleads, "tell us of Jesus and home!" (483), therein positing a domestic paradise of equity and renewal.

Frances Jane (or Fanny J.) Crosby, sometimes called the "queen of Gospel music," was one of nineteenth-century America's most prolific hymnists. Blind from infancy—a traveling doctor applied mustard poultices to control discharges from six-week-old Crosby's eyes during a bad cold—she later wrote,

It seemed intended by the blessed Providence of God that I should be blind all my life; and I thank him for the dispensation. . . . If perfect earthly sight were offered me to-morrow I would not accept it. . . . I could not have written [my] hymns . . . if I had been hindered by the distractions of seeing all the interesting and beautiful objects that would have been presented to my notice. (*Fanny* 13–14)

Crosby's "The Joyful Song," published in 1894, embodies an entirely nonpolitical form of spiritual militancy, employing battle imagery only to illustrate the mortal Christian's conflict with evil. Crosby's metaphor is straightforward, centered on everyday "ranks of soldiers," paradoxically composing a "royal army" led into battle by their "commander" and "King" (3408). Despite the perpetual "strife and conflict" encountered on "life's great battlefield" and the fact that such conflict does not "cease" until death, the army sings a "joyful song" of victory and hope (3408). Taken together, these elements suggest, especially in light of the title, not simply the possibility of triumphing over mortal struggles through Christ's direction and grace but of experiencing joy in mortal conflict. "Victory" is, in very real ways, both an eternal promise and a temporal reality (3408). If one deliberately sets aside Crosby's overtly Christian language, one can understand her text as championing ongoing struggles against generic "foes" that hold back, thwart, or undermine the community or individual (3408). In this sense, the text broadly captures the Christian optimist's response to the American 1890s, a time of intense economic and social reevaluation. Like Pollyanna's "Glad Game" of the early 1900s (Porter 42–45), which apparently contested the same *fin-de-siècle* angst, carried over as new-century ennui, Crosby's "The Joyful Song" exudes a determined optimism that sharply contrasts with the anxiety and vengeance present in most contemporaneous militant hymns.

"The Joyful Song" inspired a variety of similar texts over the next decade and more, many of them written for Christian youth, including "Soldiers of the King" by Birdie Bell and "Called to Serve" by Elsie Duncan Yale. The latter exemplifies the children's militant hymn, often referred to as a "marching song." Like Crosby's text, "Called to Serve," written in about 1909, creates an army of a divine commander—in this case, "Sons of God, and children of a King" (in Yale's original words)—who are banded together in proselytizing commitment: "Far and wide, we'll tell our Savior's story; / Far and wide His love proclaim" (1). Yale uses mild martial language appropriate to children to underscore her straightforward message of missionary responsibility. Unlike Crosby, however, Yale insistently focuses on the

here and now, with both duty and reward linked to mortal experience.

Originally titled "To the Fight," Bell's text, written around 1897, insistently diverges from Crosby's in its larger democratic implications. Like Howe's and Dunham's militant texts, Crosby's allows for a potential convergence of the American republic with mainstream Christianity, that is, of a marriage of twin democracies. But Bell clearly separates the two. In "The Joyful Song," the King rules his people after their death; in "Soldiers of the King," the theocracy championed by Bell seems insistently attached to mortal experience. Indeed, Bell relies in part on an absent text, the Constitution, for her meaning, so that its power derives from contrasts between "we the people" and Bell's soldiers "of light," between "President" and "King," between the document "ordained and established" by men and that revealed by God ("His blessed word"), between democracy and theocracy (28). The spiritual implication of Bell's text—and its implications for Christian democracy—is that America has not reached its "millennial promise," as hoped by earlier Christian hymnists and activists, and, thus, that its Christian citizens will abandon rather than go down with the sinking ship of state.

While an enormously prolific author and editor during her lifetime, publishing several volumes of poetry, creating nearly a dozen children's books, and editing several Shakespeare plays and other classical texts, Katharine Lee Bates is known today for a single hymn text, "America, the Beautiful," first published in 1895. Building on the landscape imagery of texts like "Home Protection Is the Watchword" to establish what might be called a "militant harvest hymn," Bates employs fecund natural imagery, full and harvestable, to foreground a crucial absent presence: an American people prepared to harvest. Bates's ethereal, non-present protagonist comprises the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of American planters, generations that have matured with the country itself, enduring and rising above the war that might have ended the Union. Grounded in a secure hope, upheld by God's grace, and animated by an ever present past, this new-century people is prepared to guide a maturing American nation onto a world stage.

But as a representative hymn, "America, the Beautiful" marks a crucial change in militant texts by late nineteenth-century American women. While it is recognized by most Christians as a true hymn, and while each chorus refers to God, these are indirect rather than direct references. Each verse and chorus directly apostrophizes the United States—as "O Beautiful" and "America! America!"—and the militancy of the text is patriotic rather than spiritual. The hymn advocates for American founders and pioneers rather than for church or God; and it idealizes a potential secular rather than a religious "brotherhood." Despite its references to deity, in short, the text evinces a noticeable movement from a personal "Christ" to a generalized or universal "God"; it suggests an attendant secularization of the nation toward a canonization of pioneers and patriots as national saints and a kind of God-fearing patriotism as the national creed. Underscoring this shift is the fact that both prohibition and women's suffrage will become law within the decade following Bates's 1913 revision of the poem, but one will prove a disastrous failure, and both will have become largely secular endeavors by the time each becomes law. In comparison with Howe's very early militant hymn, "Battle Hymn of the Republic," which argues the necessity of national atonement for having withheld freedom and justice from enslaved Americans and the urgency of national reverence for and reliance on Christ, Bates elides darker history as she forwards a gospel of landscape and patriots.

Howe and Bates are important poles in the unfolding relationship between American state and church during the late nineteenth century and of attempts by American women to democratize the church and Christianize the state. Underscored by millennialist themes, their militant hymns marshalled religious attacks on what were finally social sins—drunkenness and abuse, political inequity, limited rights of women and children, poverty, immigration strictures, racism. Rationales for such attacks were often related to the health of both nuclear and communal families, and the idealism underscoring virtually all militant hymns before Bates seems dependent on the conviction that a convergence of American democracy and Christianity would invite Christ's millennial return and his subsequent rule as a loving, perfectly just, and equitable King of his people.

Of course, the democratizing of American Christianity is a process that began at least two decades before Howe. Representative early Mormon women hymnists show democratic impulses typical of American women's Christianity of the mid-nineteenth century: perceiving the ideal family as divine or heavenly; making room in religious doctrine—in church, in idealized millennial society, in mortal conceptions of heaven—for women and woman's activity; emphasizing a personal relationship with Christ, together with connections between Christ's and woman's work; and promulgating a democratic spirituality that lifts and blesses all. These early democratizing processes laid important foundations for the Christian liberalism of the mid- and late-nineteenth century and for post-Dickensian social reforms in religious structure and larger American culture.

In a sense, such reformation evinces the lapse or at least the postponement of millennialist idealism. To the end that Bates's poem embodies tentative movement toward respectful church/state separation, it marks a growing Christian awareness of the disharmony between spiritual and political democracy and, more especially, of the improbability of immediate millennialist solutions to American spiritual or political problems. Social reformation gradually ceases to be the inevitable companion of Christian belief and thus becomes an end in itself, one increasingly accomplished through secular means.

For the American believer, as Christianity is in measure freed from its overtly reformist and social democratic trappings, it is returned to the intimate, everyday lives of families and communities. Living the principles of unadorned Christianity is sufficiently hard and rewarding work. In her 1878 hymn espousing a focused life of Christlike service and love, "I Have Work Enough to Do," Josephine Pollard writes simply, "I have work enough to do / Ere the sun goes down" (64). By the turn of the century, most American Christians seem to recognize that responsible attendance to immediate familial and neighborhood crises leaves little time or energy for grandiose social causes.

Nevertheless, the imprint of nineteenth-century women hymnists on American Christianity is indelible. Believers still sing and cherish

the texts of nineteenth-century women hymnists, perhaps in part because American Christianity itself still holds its nineteenth-century shape—not excluding its flaws. Perhaps American Christians remain engaged in the process of creating doctrinal and social spaces for women, of refining men's ideal responsibilities or roles, of knowing and meaningfully imitating Christ, of becoming loyal members of the army of the Lord.

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Lynching of Robert Marshall
Price, UT, 1925

A 1925 Price, Utah, Lynching: When Violence Is Commodified as Art, Faith, and Community Celebration

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When the forms and language of religion are perverted to serve evil ends, the result can shake the faith of believers.

In the summer of 1925, Robert Marshall, an African American, was lynched by a mob on the outskirts of Price, Utah. The lynching was described in detail in a number of Utah newspapers, including the *Deseret Evening News*, *Salt Lake Tribune*, *Price Sun*, and *Park City Record*. Although the *Deseret Evening News* condemned the lynching as a violation of law and order, the other newspapers transformed that act of violence into an embodiment of law and order that was then conveniently commodified into three related cultural forms: a play, a religious service, and a county fair.

In its June 18 and 19 coverage of the murder, the *Deseret Evening News* defined the lynching as an act of violence that subverted the authority of the state by undermining the police, making a mockery of the law, and tainting the reputation of the state and its officials:

Gov. Geo. H. Dern . . . pronounced the lynching of Robert Marshall . . . a disgrace to the state and urged all proper measures be taken in investigating the crime.

The governor's message reads, "Lynching is a crime and a disgrace to the state. Use all proper measures." ("Dern" 1; see also "1000" 1)

In other accounts of the day's events, however, and in other newspapers, especially the *Price Sun* and the *Park City Record*, the significance of the lynching underwent a subtle, and not so subtle, transformation that redefined the lynching as an act of loyalty to community, state, and county. In its June 19 report of the story, for example, the *Sun* implied that the lynching actually supported—rather than subverted—the state. The *Sun* reached this conclusion by emphasizing two related aspects of the lynching. First, the lynched man had earlier shot and killed the town marshal of Castlegate, Utah. The lynching, in other words, was reinterpreted as a necessary defense of the community, a swift punishment for one who had challenged the law and its officers. Second, the group that hanged Marshall was no "mob" at all but, rather, the material embodiment of the reasoned will of the entire community, a will that was the *de facto* embodiment of the state itself:

Lynched by a mob! Reader, just what does that convey to your mind? "Lynch—to inflict punishment, especially death, as when a mob hangs a suspected person." That is the definition of Webster. But there is that word "mob." Again it is asked just what do you understand by a "mob?" Usually one associates this word with a crowd of strangers—disorderly, violent undesirables bent on committing acts from which the "decent" folks of the community withdraw and which are disparaged by all "reputable" citizens. But had one glanced over the assembly whose members took by force the negro slayer of Castlegate's city marshal[,] . . . you would have seen your neighbors, your friends, the tradespeople with whom you were wont to barter day by day, public employees, folks prominent in church and social circles, and your real conception of a "mob" might have undergone a radical turnover. ("Marshall" 1)

To the *Sun*, then, and to the *Park City Record*—which, in its June 19 editorial concluded that the lynching was “the result of a favorable sudden determination of enraged citizens to avenge the killing in cold blood of a . . . faithful officer” (“Park” 4)—the lynching was a clear affirmation of the will of the community, a will expressed directly by its leading citizens.

To the editors of the *Sun* and, to a lesser extent, those of the *Salt Lake Tribune*, however, the lynching was much more than the mere embodiment of the will of the community generally. In their accounts, the act of mob violence was reified as an amalgamation of three very desirable commodities: a play (for which tickets could be sold), a religious service (for which tithes could be offered), and a county fair (for which taxes could be collected).

In the June 19 number of the *Salt Lake Tribune*, for example, the lynching was described as though it were a spectacular melodrama, a real-time theatrical production from which one might derive aesthetic pleasure. In keeping with this motif of drama writ large, the account noted the quick pacing of the action, discussed the mob’s choice of setting, reported on the audience’s response to the main event, compared this lynching to previous “Neck Tie Parties” in Utah (the one in Salt Lake—a follow-up story suggested—was more exciting [“Action” 13]), and commented on the performances of the various participants, implying (for example) that Marshall was too “resigned” and “sullen” a character to engender much sympathy (“Negro” 1). The tone of this “review” of sorts is evident even in the lead-in:

Vengeance was claimed by a determined mob of men and youths shortly before noon today, when . . . Robert Marshall, negro, was twice hanged for the brutal murder of James Milton Burns, city marshall of Castlegate. The lynching . . . came with dramatic suddenness. . . .

“You are going to suffer a long, lingering death,” was shouted at the negro as preparations for the lynching were made. The doomed slayer was eased off the ground once or twice before being yanked thirty-five feet into the air, where he dangled for nine minutes and four seconds. Deputy sheriffs cut the negro

down and were unhindered in moving the limp body . . . to the car until Marshall showed signs of regaining consciousness.

“Lynch him [again], he ain’t dead, yet!” members of the mob cried . . . , and Marshall was rehanged. (1)

Like the *Tribune*, the *Sun* commodified the mob violence as a play: it described the lynching as melodrama, the subsequent arrest of the mob leaders as farce. When the grand jury failed to return a single indictment against the leaders of the mob, the *Sun*’s September 11 headline was an allusion to one of Shakespeare’s comedies: “ALL IS WELL THAT ENDS WELL, ’ THEY SAY” (“All” 1).

At the same time, the *Sun* framed melodrama and farce alike within the broader structure of religious belief. Like so much of the gallows literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (of which these newspaper accounts are a twentieth-century version), the *Sun* commodified the lynching as a morality play that was at the same time a religious ceremony. The leaders of the crowd, the paper was quick to assert, were “folks prominent in church” (“Marshall” 1). At the end of the “ceremony,” the city was said to be at peace, with the sun shining brightly upon the handiwork of the mob, sure evidence, the paper implied, of divine approval: “Remarkable quiet pervaded the city the rest of the day after the hanging. The sun shown down brightly—a typical June day— . . . the first since the rainy spell started in a couple of weeks ago” (1).

As one might expect, however, the newspaper was not yet quite done: like so many other gallows texts, the *Sun* now transformed this mixture of drama and worship into yet a third commodity, a county fair. The lynching was attended, the *Sun* informed readers proudly, by the whole of the community:

your neighbors, your friends, the tradespeople with whom you are wont to barter, . . . public employees, folks prominent in church and social circles, . . . quite a sprinkling of women—the wives and mothers of the good folks of the town. And [of course the] . . . children. (1)

Participation in the affair became a symbol of communal unity and an expression of personal pride:

No attempt at concealment was made by any member of the lynching party. In fact, participation in the affair seemed to be a matter of boasting. In the excitement of the moment some of the principals in the event were so carried away that they glorified themselves with such expressions as “it’s a proud day for me that I helped pull the rope.” (1)

The short time the leaders of the mob spent in jail became a mere extension of the original festivities, for “during their ‘incarceration’”—the newspaper put quotation marks around the word “incarceration” to show how far from the truth it was—

the courthouse lawn has looked, every evening, very much like a society party, the presence of visiting members of the prisoners’ families and of hosts of their friends lending a most un-jail like aspect to the place. (“Carbon” 1)

When the men were set free—thus ending the festivities and the festival—the community reached a fever pitch of unity and joy:

Alacrity, taken at its “dictionary” definition—“joyous activity, briskness, promptitude”—exactly expresses the action of a considerable coterie of citizens who advanced to sign up as security for the men, and within a very short time . . . all were out and free to go as they pleased. The community . . . is considerably relieved . . . [and pleased]. (1)

As is the case with so much gallows literature, the *Sun* then unified the white community by scapegoating a black man as the demonic other—in the newspaper articles he was called the “Bad Negro” (“Bad” and “Negro” being capitalized) (“J. M.” 1), and in other accounts of the lynching the issue of race was highlighted, with children being said to call out to Marshall, “Nigger, nigger—

pull the trigger" ("Last" A6), and with Marshall being said to have punctuated his shooting of J. M. Burns with the shout, "Take that—Whitie!" (A6), a claim that has never been substantiated.

There was, however, in the newspaper accounts of the lynching of Marshall, one description of commodified violence that went beyond the scope even of most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gallows literature, one last description of how to transform mob mentality and racial hatred into support for the local sheriff and joyful consumerism. This last, most pernicious form of commodification was neither metaphorical nor rhetorical but literal and capitalistic.

When Marshall was lynched, eager photographers took pictures of his corpse and went house to house, selling the photos for twenty-five cents each. Many of them were later used as Christmas cards (A6). One such card or a photo very like it was later discovered by the noted historian of Utah culture, Helen Papanikolas. Speaking of one of the houses in which she lived as a child, she recalls,

It was in this house that I saw boys running down the dusty road and across the tracks whooping, "A Nigger's gittin hanged!" Later, I saw the black man's picture as I idly turned the pages of a staple in Greek homes, the photograph album. . . . I scrutinized the pictures of weddings, baptisms . . . picnics with squatting men turning lambs on spits and dancing in rounds against the mountain pines, and on the last page a black man dangling from a tree and under him men, women, and children, arms crossed, smiling for the photographer. (38–39)

Almost a hundred years after it happened, Marshall's lynching still saddens most proud Utah natives and committed people of faith; the lynching itself bothers them, and the way the newspaper accounts justified that lynching by commodifying it as a play, a worship service, and a county fair bothers them as well. The fact that the *Deseret Evening News*—the quasi-official organ of the Mormon faith—condemned rather than celebrated the lynching is in some respects cold comfort at best.

What this means is that modern accounts of history are often as frightening—and as much an incitement—as even the most ambitious gallows texts of English and American literature. Thus, one should approach such accounts with a desire not merely to critique the past—and with its past and present histories of the past—but also, and more importantly, to change the present. As Larry Gerlach observes, regarding another lynching, this one of George Segal, in Ogden, Utah, in 1884,

The lynching of George Segal—and the execution of other Utahans by vigilantes—was truly a tragedy in that it constituted a dastardly deed perpetrated by people who not only could but should have behaved better. That such an event took place serves as a not-so-gentle reminder that it can happen here, that we as a people have often committed injustice in the order of justice, and that we have frequently engaged in lawless disorder in the pursuit of law and order. We are less of a people because of . . . [this] heritage of vigilantism and lynching; if there is solace . . . to be derived from an examination of this violent dimension of our past, it is that we have, hopefully, learned from history. After all, we profit from recalling historical tragedies only by pledging that they shall not happen again. (172)

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Brainard Cheney

Christian Ethos and the Southern Novels of Brainard Cheney

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One has but to look at a list of Southern writers who emerged in this period of time to be convinced that a renaissance did take place in the South from 1920 to 1950—Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, Thomas Wolfe, Richard Wright, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, William Faulkner, Caroline Gordon, James Agee, Carson McCullers, Walker Percy, Flannery O'Connor, William Styron, Robert Penn Warren, and Brainard Cheney. These writers were more than regionalists; their influence and significance spread far beyond the South, their works touching the universal in human nature. Yet much of their writing was distinctly Southern—from the South and about the South, its peoples, traditions, values, and ways of life. Cheney's strongest connection to this Southern Renaissance came through Warren, O'Connor, Welty, Tate, and, especially, Gordon from whom he learned the craft of fiction (Beatty et al. xvi–xxi).

As one reads Cheney's manuscripts and letters, one begins to see a pattern of development in his life and work. Cheney was reared in the Wiregrass and pine barren region of southern Georgia by a prominent family who owned over two thousand acres of timberland. His father, Brainard Bartwell Cheney, Sr., had served in the Civil

War, had read law in Dublin, Georgia, and had become a land speculator and lawyer in the region. Unfortunately, Cheney's father died before Cheney himself was eight years old, and his death left a consequent paternal vacuum in Cheney's life.

As a boy, Cheney often felt as if he had somehow failed his deceased father: "Whenever I would meet any of the men from town, they would always look down at me and say, 'This is Brainard's boy?' and I would feel so damn small. I didn't have a very high opinion of myself as his son" (Personal 5 Nov.). Besides trying to walk in the steps of this giant, Cheney also carried the heavy burden of fulfilling his father's dream of restoring the family's wealth and position to its pre-Civil War status. Finally, there was the moral stricture of his father's last words: "Always try to do what is right: it is the only thing that counts when you come to die" ("To Edwin").

Cheney's dream, however, was not his father's. Farming was not for him, and the land was more of a burden than a blessing. By his twenty-fifth birthday, he managed, through a series of mishandlings or lack of interest, to rid himself of the land and to escape the clutches of rural Georgia (Cheney, Personal 12 Dec.). As his papers, novels, and interviews suggest, Cheney struggled for forty years to find someone or something, a mentor or intellectual ideal, by which to guide his behavior and give meaning and significance to his life.

This search that began in his youth with the sudden death of his father continued into his student days at the Citadel and Vanderbilt University, his life as a reporter in the 1920s for the *Nashville Tennessean*, and his political life as a speechwriter for and consultant to Senator Tom Stewart and Governor Frank Clement. In all of Cheney's experiences as a reporter and political operative, he never found a person, an institution, or an ideal worthy of his trust and commitment. Becoming disillusioned in his search, he also became a political cynic and a religious agnostic (Price and Andrews). In the novels that he was writing during those years, *Lightwood* (1939), *River Rogue* (1942), *This Is Adam* (1958), and *Devil's Elbow* (1969), his main characters mirror his personal search for meaning and purpose, and all fall short of the task that he set for them, thereby becoming insufficient heroes.

One example of the insufficient hero can be found in Cheney's first novel *Lightwood*, which is set in the backwoods of south Georgia after the Civil War. The novel centers on the conflict between northern timber companies and the early settlers of the Georgian wilderness. Micajah Corn, an elderly patriarch, valiantly fights against the encroachment of the Coventry Lumber Company that seeks to claim through legal maneuvers his homestead for timber production. Though heroic, Micajah cannot win the battle because of his anger, hatred, and violence and in the end becomes a defeated man. In the last scene of the novel, while Micajah waits to learn the outcome of the Macon County Court's decision in the land disputes, an agent of Coventry Lumber Company approaches him in a café.

"You're Micajah Corn, ain't you?" he said; then, without awaiting a reply, looked at a slip of paper in his hand, "You been making a claim to lot 180?"

Micajah lowered his saucer and nodded slowly.

The man looked down at his paper. "Lots 180, 181, 145, and 146 in the Seventh District, and lot 47 in the Fifth?" He read the numbers briskly, following the line on the sheet with his finger. He raised his eyes and peered at Micajah and Civil through his thick lenses. "You're just the man I'm looking for, Mr. Corn. You make the eighty-ninth. I got four hundred of these to serve before I get through."

Micajah opened his mouth, but he did not speak.

The man handed Micajah the slip of paper. "Served eighty-eight of these summons in the last six days," he said. He stood a moment with his hands on his hips, rocking back on his heels. "The company's bundled the whole lot of land cases into one ejectment suit. They're going to try it in the Macon Court."

Micajah fumbled with the piece of paper in his hand. He lowered his gaze, but he did not look at the paper. He stared beyond the man, at the counter, at the cup that still sat there full of coffee.

"Macon?" he said. "Macon Court." (368–69)

In this grimly ironic ending, Cheney underscores the tragedy of the insufficient hero and the corresponding tragedy of the South—beaten in the carnage of the Civil War and defeated in the peace of Reconstruction. It is as if Cheney is saying that the best the South could produce, a native frontiersman like Micajah Corn with his heroic qualities of honor, pride, intelligence, and will, was not sufficient, because of personal failings, to stem the tide of history, to hold back the invading forces of northern industry.

It was not until Cheney's conversion to Christianity in 1953 that he found a perfect exemplar in the life of Jesus Christ, a heroic figure whom he could respect and admire, an ideal who could act as a mentor and guide to his life. His long search was, like those of the protagonists in his novels, heroic in its scope and magnitude.

Belief in God and redemption through Jesus Christ became the most fundamental ground of Cheney's mental and spiritual life, and it is little wonder that his fiction reflects those concerns. Yet in the expression of this Christian ethos, Cheney also recreates a vast range of Georgia history, preserving for the reader a people and a way of life on the great rivers of Georgia—the Ocmulgee, the Oconee and the Altamaha—that have long since vanished into the past. Cheney's novels stretch across Georgia history from 1874 to 1945, with a cast of characters ranging from squatters and raftsmen to timber barons, plantation owners, reporters, and politicians. Gordon, his old friend and literary mentor, says of his fiction, "He writes about the backwoodsmen of Southern Georgia because he knows and loves them and he tells us things about them—and mankind in general—that no other writer tells us" (330).

Even though his characters possess heroic qualities, they also have tragic flaws—pride, arrogance, ambition, and a need for revenge against their enemies—which make them insufficient to meet the challenges of life. All their successes are partial and transient. Life, meeting the insufficient hero, breaks him and washes away his brief victories in the waves of fate and time.

The fictional worlds that Cheney creates in his novels are moral battlefields. The characters with their armor of heroic, nearly superhuman qualities face life and do battle with it. Life asks—or, rather,

it demands—from these heroes that they be courageous, valiant, responsible, resourceful, and resilient. Life in Cheney's novels is, indeed, an awesome adversary.

The theme that runs through all of Cheney's novels, his statement about human nature and man's relation to life, is that all men, even the best of them, the most heroic of the species—the courageous Micajah in *Lightwood*, who fights for his land with a northern timber company; the powerful Ratliff in *River Rogue*, who works his way up the social ladder from a raftsman to a timber baron; the responsible Adam in *This Is Adam*, an African American who stands his ground against a group of crooked, white businessmen; and the emancipated Marcellus in *Devil's Elbow*, who finds redemption in coming to terms with the death of his best friend—all are insufficient to conquer life, and all are eventually broken. Cheney came to believe that neither courage, nor cunning, nor intellect, nor power could conquer life, for life is but the manifestation of the will of God. God works His awesome way through the histories of nations and the lives of men. God is the force behind nature—the creator and destroyer of life.

In a letter to a friend, Cheney wrote,

And so, this dimension of human life called direction, under Christianity, proposes to lead a man from ego obsession to the love of his fellow man for the love of God and by way of grace to self-transcendence and eventual union with God—that is, the Beatific Vision. And, it should be added, by this Way, transcendence of death, too—transcendence of time and space, in eternity. (“To Dick”)

In the resolving scenes of Cheney's novels, after a hero's will has been broken, he learns through his suffering and atonement that the proper attitude of man toward such a power is not pride and boastfulness but a Christlike humility and acquiescence to a higher power. In Cheney's fiction Christianity forms the underlying mythos with Christ as the last and only truly sufficient hero. The way “to be in the world,” Cheney implies in his novels, is to be like Christ, not

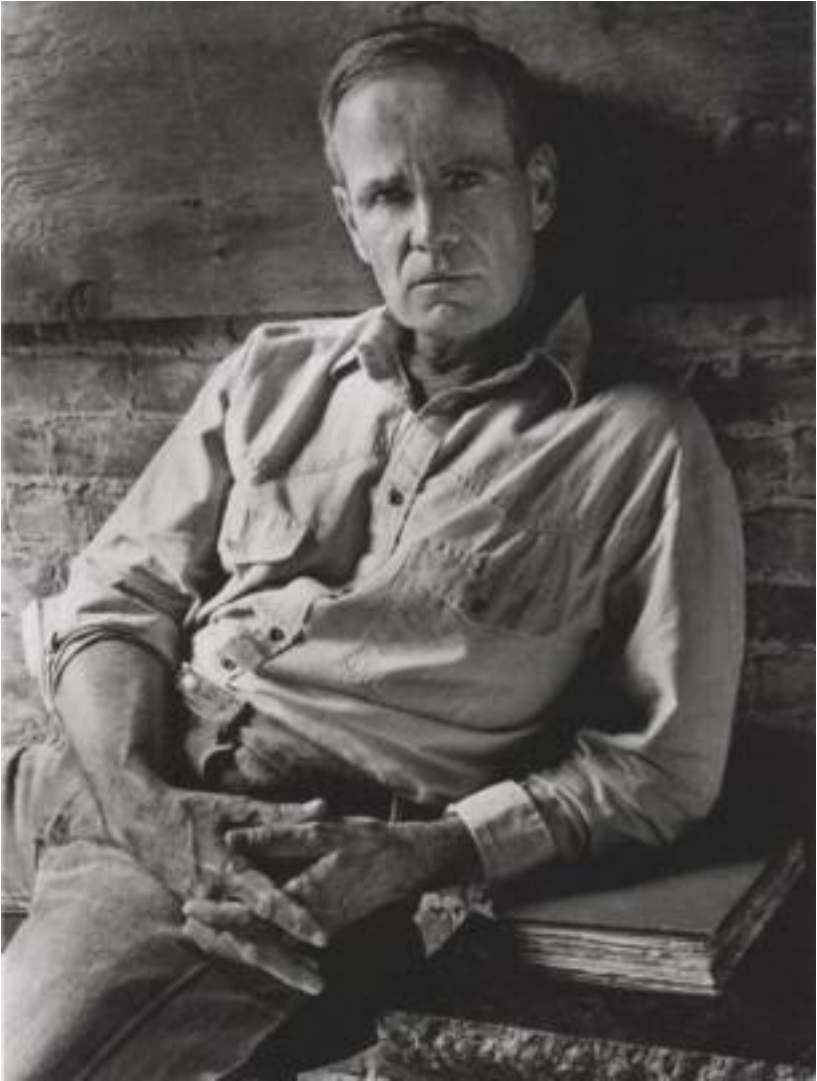
arrogant, not relying on one's own powers of intellect and will, but humble and compassionate, in harmony with one's fellow man and with the will of God.

In the last decade of Cheney's life from 1980 to 1989, he witnessed a resurgence of interest in his work. In 1982, Delmer Presley, a Georgia historian, created, under the auspices of Georgia Southern University, Project RAFT (Restoring Altamaha Folk Traditions) to celebrate the life of nineteenth-century Georgia rivermen, who cut timber from the pine barrens of south central Georgia, constructed 85-foot long rafts of pine and floated them 150 miles down the Altamaha River from Lumber City to the timber markets on the coast at Darian, Georgia. Because Cheney had written about those men in *River Rogue*, he was invited to attend the festival, join the reenactment, and deliver talks about the life of the rivermen on the Altamaha. Project Raft initiated a documentary, "The Last Raft," by Georgia Public Television and a re-publication of two of Cheney's historical novels about the region: *River Rogue* in 1982 and *Lightwood* in 1984. In the past five years, because of a renewed interest in the history of South Georgia and the efforts of Stephen Wingham, Director of the Ocmulgee Regional Library System, all of Cheney's novels have been republished.

Readers interested in the way Christian values and beliefs inform and are embodied in works of literature can find convincing examples in the study of Cheney's life and work. The inadequate heroes whom Cheney portrays in his novels remain alive in the reader's imagination, long after their stories have been told. Their fierce individualism, their heroic struggles, and their ultimate failures evoke strong sympathy among readers. When life humbles these insufficient heroes, readers also feel humbled and led, like the broken heroes themselves, toward an acceptance of a new vision. After finishing a Cheney novel, readers feel that, yes, it is a moral world, and yes, there is a power behind it greater than their own, a power with which each person like Micajah and Ratliff, Adam and Marcellus—must ultimately come to terms.

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Cormac McCarthy
(Marion Ettliger)

God in *The Road*

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In the ten years since its publication, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) has come to be recognized as one of the most important novels of the early twenty-first century; it is widely read, is frequently taught, and has created much interest among scholars of recent American fiction. As is often the case when academics develop an interest in a novel, their analyses sometimes appropriate the work and interpret it in such a way as to support various ideological stances. For example, Erik Wielenberg argues that "the views of morality and meaning found in *The Road* imply that morality does not depend upon God for its existence or justification" (1). Wielenberg is not merely concerned with the interpretation of McCarthy's novel, however; his argument serves to demonstrate a further point—namely, that "it is manifestly false to claim that if God does not exist, then it makes no difference how we live" (14). As for this latter claim, it may very well be the case that human beings do not need God in order to construct a moral code and abide by it. Of more literary interest is whether *The Road* offers some kind of explicit or implicit endorsement of this view. While Wielenberg offers some insightful and close reading of *The Road*, and while much of his argument is

cogent and thoughtful, in several places his analysis seems either flawed or begs the question, for *The Road* itself suggests that morality and meaning within the novel do, at least in part, depend upon belief in God for their existence or justification.

Wielenberg's foundational assertion, repeated throughout his essay, is that the novel never definitively answers the question of whether God exists, and this seems a reasonable enough assumption—no absolute proof of God's existence is offered in the story. But why does it matter whether the existence of God is absolutely determined? According to Wielenberg,

The fundamental ambiguity of God's existence remains unresolved in *The Road*. One of the lessons of the novel is that the answer to the question of whether God exists is not as important as it is often taken to be. In particular, the question is far less relevant to morality and meaning than many believe. (14)¹

Wielenberg appears to be saying that, if the question of the existence of God were as important as many people seem to think it is, it is something that McCarthy would disambiguate in the novel. What

¹John Clute offers a much different view: "The central riddle of *The Road* is God." Moreover, Clute sees the novel as being less fundamentally ambiguous: "It is a story I for one find it impossible to think of as being redeemed by a Christ. It is a story about the end of the world in which the world ends." Other critics see a different answer to the riddle, however. Allen Josephs, for example, writes, "The critics who say that the Parka-man is a deus ex machina are right, and that is precisely the point. His woman, who welcomes the boy, doesn't talk to him of civilization, she talks to him about God and tells him that 'the breath of God was his breath'" (27). While the fact that these critics disagree with each other may support Wielenberg's assertion about the novel's fundamental ambiguity, they seem to be united in the belief that, contrary to Wielenberg's view, the answer to the question of whether God exists in *The Road* does, in fact, matter. Of course, the discussion itself begs the question: if God exists in *The Road*, which God is he? Thomas H. Schaub sees in *The Road* an embodiment of the Emersonian notion of divinity: "It is God in you that responds to God without, or affirms his own words trembling on the lips of another" (qtd. in Schaub 161).

would this disambiguation look like? It would apparently involve “the hand of God reaching into the burned-out hellscape to protect the child” in such a way as could not merely be taken as a stroke of good fortune (1). It would, in other words, be a miracle, an instance of direct, divine intervention that is so extraordinary or supernatural that no naturalistic explanation could possibly be given for it. Because no such disambiguating event occurs in the novel, one can therefore conclude, according to Wielenberg, that, as far as morality goes, God’s existence does not matter.

There are a number of problems with this argument. First, it fails to recognize a fundamental difference between the world of fiction and the ostensibly “real” world that people inhabit. In the real world, miracles, wondrous and inexplicable events, might very well be taken as proof of the existence of God, but in the world of fiction, such events prove nothing at all. In the works of Gabriel García Márquez, for instance, and other writers working in the mode of “magical realism,” such events occur all the time, but they offer no more proof of the existence of God than do ordinary, fully explicable events. A paper butterfly that suddenly takes flight until it lands on a wall where it becomes a painted-on image, as it does in “Death Constant Beyond Love,” does not prove that God exists in the story or outside of the story. It should be noted here that the otherwise famously tight-lipped McCarthy has expressed open dislike for the use of such devices in fiction: “I’m not a fan of some of the Latin American writers’ magical realism. You know, it’s hard enough to get people to believe what you’re telling them without making it impossible. It has to be vaguely plausible” (qtd. in Grossman). In short, the presence of miracles does not, in fact, prove that God exists. But more importantly, the absence of miracles does not prove that His existence does not matter. It merely proves that McCarthy is attempting to write a vaguely plausible novel.

It is worth asking at this point whether there is some other means by which God could disambiguate Himself in the text. Perhaps His making an actual appearance as a character in the novel would do the trick. But here one would have the same problem as with miracles: the unambiguous presence of God in the novel would prove nothing about the existence of God outside the novel. It might even be used as

a way of arguing against the existence of God at all, as it is in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (2008). There God appears briefly as a decrepit, senescent creature whom the protagonists could and would kill, if He were even worth killing. But the presence of God in Pullman's work serves Pullman's point that God does not, in fact, exist.

There is a second problem with Wielenberg's assertion: even if one works from the very dubious assumptions that God's existence can be disambiguated in the novel through miracles and that it would be if God's existence mattered, one might expect that writers of faith, for whom the existence of God is clearly important, would use one or more of these devices as a matter of course in their fiction. And while certainly there are some writers of faith who do employ the miraculous and other devices for this very purpose, many of the most important leave the existence of God unresolved. Consider the works of Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, John Updike, Susan Howatch, and Marilynne Robinson, to name a few. Rarely do their works use miracles—or at least perfectly disambiguated miracles—to point definitively toward the existence of God. One reason for this might be that writers, particularly those working in the realist tradition, see it as their responsibility to depict human existence as it is, and to be human is to exist in a universe where, even if it matters more than anything else, God's existence is still something one cannot ultimately prove or disprove. Thus, the fundamental ambiguity of the novel on this question reflects the fundamental ambiguity of life. Just because the question is left unanswered does not lead to the conclusion—for these writers, at least, and perhaps also for McCarthy—that the question itself is unimportant in terms of morality or anything else.

But there is another reason that even a writer of faith might not want to resolve the question of God's existence, one that has less to do with aesthetics or artistic integrity and more to do with reaching the broadest possible audience. The Catholic novelist Walker Percy said of writing fiction,

If you get caught writing a *religious novel* about God, you are dead. You'll be read by a few people. As one of my characters says, Binx

Bolling in *The Moviegoer*, "Whenever anyone says God to me, a curtain goes down in my head." I have to be damn careful when I talk about grace. I have to be extremely allusive. (Short)

The point here is not that McCarthy is writing a religious novel or a novel of faith, but even if he were, the question of God's existence might be left unresolved, as it is for many writers, like Walker Percy, who are in fact writing religious novels about God but who do not want to get caught doing it. The problem with ambiguity is that, contrary to Wielenberg's claims, it proves very little, and it manifestly does not prove that unanswered questions do not matter. The flaw in this part of Wielenberg's argument lies in a particular understanding, or misunderstanding, about fiction—the belief that it teaches some kind of lesson and does so by resolving important ambiguities and leaving unresolved less important ones. The problem is that while such fiction does exist, few people, as Percy says, will read it, and the reason they will not is that it tends to be trite, simplistic, and manipulative.

But there are more important and, fortunately, more answerable questions: even if God's existence is indeterminate in *The Road*, do characters still believe in Him, and does such belief matter? The answer to this first question is, yes, characters do demonstrate that God figures, one way or another, into their conception of how the world works, even when, as is the case in *The Road*, the world has effectively ceased working. Not all of them do, and only a few characters express a viewpoint one way or another. Ely, the mysterious stranger whom the man and the boy encounter on the road, expresses with beautiful economy the belief that God does not exist, though people are still hardwired to believe in him: "There is no God and we are his prophets" (McCarthy 170). The wife might be seen as occupying a similar camp. Shortly before she commits suicide, she tells the man, "As for me my only hope is eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart" (57).

But the man and the boy clearly retain God as a part of the framework by which they make sense out of their experience and determine how to live. One of the key moments in the novel demonstrating this retention occurs when the man tells the boy,

“My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God” (77). For Wielenberg, this assertion is to be understood as one of the times that the man “tries to convince the child, and possibly himself, that God is still at work in the world” (2). But consider the context: the boy has just seen his father kill a man by shooting him in the head, and they have both narrowly escaped the man’s cannibalistic companions. The boy is so traumatized by this experience that he is barely able to speak, and the father has had to wash the man’s brains out of the boy’s hair. It is at this point that the father says to the boy, “My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you understand?” (77). It should be fairly evident, then, that in this passage the father is not trying to convince the boy that God exists and is at work in the world. In fact, he is clearly not trying to convince the boy of anything. Rather, the father is trying to help the boy understand why he has taken another human life and why that act was both necessary and right.

Why does the father express his commitment to the boy in these terms—as a matter of divine appointment? According to Wielenberg, the man invokes the divine on this occasion because there is a very fundamental level on which he feels that his struggle to keep the boy alive makes no sense:

Because it is in the nature of human beings to desire that the things they do make sense, he grasps for beliefs that will make his struggle make sense. Among these is the belief that he is on a divine mission. It is not that he wants to keep going because he believes he is on a divine mission. Rather, the desire comes first: because he wants to keep going, he believes—or tries to believe—that he is on a divine mission. (3)

For Wielenberg, however, the man’s struggle—both to survive and to be good—makes perfect sense without falling back on the idea of divine mission, and this brings him to the central point of his essay: that love and the need for meaningful connections serve as an adequate basis for morality. One seeks to be moral because morality is essential

to the formation of meaningful connections, which are inherently and intrinsically good and do not depend for their value on some kind of final or ultimate redemption. The man does not realize this, so he falls back on the idea of divine mission as a kind of ideological crutch, one that he can use in the absence of any real self-understanding or understanding about what gives life meaning and purpose.

True, the father does not commit himself to the care of the boy because he feels that it is a divine calling; the sense of divine calling seems retrofitted to the struggle. But the father's sense of divine mission is still a significant part of what he does. He adopts this stance, offers this explanation, not because he does not understand what motivates him but because under the circumstances these are the best words, the only words that adequately express the depth and sacred nature of his commitment. It is about something bigger and deeper than the connection he feels to the boy, however big and deep that connection is. This is the vocabulary that serves his purpose. In other words, what the father is doing does have something to do with God. While the novel may not offer some kind of explicit endorsement of the man's assertion—like a description of God vigorously nodding his head in affirmation—it also does nothing to suggest that the man is somehow misguided. In fact, in many ways the novel validates the man's claim, while not explicitly endorsing it. At least McCarthy seems not to debunk the man's assertion that he is on a mission from God.

Wielenberg also claims that the man's tendency to fall back on religious concepts and ideas has to do with the abject suffering he endures. Research shows that "the happiest nations of the world [namely Sweden and Denmark] are also the least religious," whereas "misery necessitates faith" (3). This point might go a long way toward explaining why the father seems to fall back on a religious framework, even when it seems that, for all intents and purposes, God is dead. The man is clearly completely and utterly miserable, and the sensible thing, in many ways, would be to end his own life and the boy's as well. His wife says as much just before she herself commits suicide. But here is another thing to consider: research also shows that the happy, religion-free Scandinavian countries also have the highest

suicide rates, rather than the deeply religious, unhappy countries (Szalavitz). Perhaps if one is to see the man's religious leanings as being the product of his misery, then one should also recognize that those misery-induced leanings are, in fact, part of what keeps him from the ultimate act of despair. Again, belief in God seems to be important in terms of the moral choices the character makes.

There are no happy, religion-free Swedes or Danes in *The Road*. Their kind seems to be extinct, and this fact leads to the central moral questions of *The Road*: when the human race is, as it has been in various places at various times throughout history, reduced to basic questions of survival, when man is, as King Lear imagines him, completely and thoroughly unaccommodated, what serves as the basis for taking moral action, and what gives hope? What prevents one from taking one's own life? When there is nothing left to eat, what is to keep one from dining on one's neighbor? What is the source of meaning and value? For Wielenberg, "the source of meaning and value is love" (11). The boy and the man in *The Road* demonstrate "that being moral enables us to have meaningful connections with other people, whereas moral transgressions tend to isolate us from each other" (13).

Certainly, there is much truth in this claim. But to draw from it the conclusion that belief in God does not factor significantly into how the two characters think and how they act is simply to ignore the complexity of the question, and it requires that Wielenberg either dismiss what the characters say as religious delusion or ignore what they say altogether. The latter strategy comes into play at the very end of his essay:

At one point Ely suggests that perhaps the child believes in God. The man replies that he does not know what the child believes in. . . . The answer to Ely's question is that the child believes in humanity. By struggling to be a good guy and keeping his big promise, the man manages to keep the child's faith in humanity alive. (14)

This would be an entirely acceptable answer if the text itself did not

point in another direction. When the man and the boy stumble upon a bunker filled with food, the unexpected blessing seems, to the boy, to warrant some kind of ritual expression of thanks; it seems wrong to merely help themselves to the provisions. The boy asks the man if they ought to thank the people who made the bunker and finally gives thanks himself: "Dear people," he says, "thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldn't eat it no matter how hungry we were and we're sorry that you didn't get to eat it" (McCarthy 146). Up to this point the prayer fully supports Wielenberg's assertion that the boy believes in humanity; he is offering a wholly secular prayer to his fellow human beings. But then he adds, "and we hope that you're safe in heaven with God" (146).

What the prayer tells the reader is that, yes, the boy does believe in humanity, but that this does not represent his beliefs in their entirety. He believes in his fellow human beings, their inherent worth and value, and he carries with him the hope of their salvation, a hope also expressed in the final pages by the woman in the family who takes the boy in after the man dies. She talks to the boy of God, but he prefers to talk to his dead father. "The woman," McCarthy writes, "said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time" (286). As these concluding words suggest, the claim that whether God exists does not matter—because only love matters—is as misguided as saying that if God's existence can be definitively proven, then love does not matter. Both matter, and they are connected in *The Road*.

It may be, in short, that on one level what Weilenberg says about God's existence in *The Road* is true: it remains a matter of some ambiguity, though this fact carries much less significance than Weilenberg assigns to it. But there is another sense in which God is ambiguously present in *The Road*, as He is in every novel, regardless of the author's or the characters' or even the reader's theological orientation. For in every novel there is someone who performs all the functions typically associated with God—creating a world, creating people who inhabit that world and guiding their actions, and shaping and influencing events toward a particular end. That someone is, of

course, the author.

Writers—novelists particularly—have historically compared their work to God’s work, both to express the unique power they exercise and the restrictions and limitations they work under. Gustave Flaubert believed that “[a]n author in his book must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere” (Steegmuller 173). In *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1915), Stephen Dedalus makes a point similar to Flaubert’s: “The artist,” he claims, “like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence” (Joyce 249). More recently, novelist Scott Spencer has also pointed out the sense in which novelists make themselves gods:

They say doctors play God, and they do to an extent because they’re always monkeying around or trying to change the body’s fate. But they’re dealing with what’s already there. We novelists take that God thing one step further. We create whole worlds and then we people them. And then we tell the people what to do: we make them fall in love or jump out of windows. (8)

Considered thus, then, the question to ask of the novel, of any novel, is not whether God exists, but, rather, what kind of a God is the novelist? Does he or she create a work that is ultimately coherent and structured and bears the impression of some overarching design? The answer to that question is, usually, yes—since coherence, structure, and design are usually considered inherent qualities of a novel. Sometimes, however, an author creates a world, somewhat paradoxically, in order to convey the impression that there is no such coherence, structure, or design, when in fact there is. One of the most effective ways of doing this is for a character to express some kind of faith in order and design. Then the author can use the plot as a device by which to show that faith as misguided. He or she can debunk the character’s faith with an ending that suggests a world that has no meaning, where all faith and hope seem delusional, where any journey of faith seems bound to end in disillusion, where there is only the absurdity of trying to find meaning in an absurd universe, or where the only meaning is

the one a reader chooses to create.

McCarthy's post-apocalyptic nightmare seems like a perfect setting for one of those conceivable outcomes, for the journey the man takes with the boy is, at least partly, a journey of faith. But where does it begin, and where does it lead to? Near the beginning of the novel, the man rises in the early morning, descends into a gryke, and prays, "Are you there. . . . Will I see you at last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God." (McCarthy 11–12). The prayer is as much an expression of doubt as it is of faith, and it is an indictment of a god who could let his creation come to such a pass as is depicted in the novel. What marks most of the man's journey is a deep ambivalence—there is, on the one hand, an ongoing tendency to believe in God as well as some level of His involvement in the workings of the world; on the other, there is a tendency to embrace what seems like a much more plausible assumption, that God could not possibly exist: "He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe" (130). The man's faith, in other words, seems a lot like McCarthy's, as described to Oprah Winfrey, when she asked him point blank if he believes in God. "It depends on what day you ask me," McCarthy replied (Winfrey).

But near the end of the story, there is a shift in the scales. In their last conversation before the man dies, the boy asks about another boy he had seen earlier. That boy had been the source of conflict between father and son, the latter wanting to take the boy with them, and the former insisting that they not do so. The boy continues to worry about this other little boy and asks his father, "But who will find him if he's lost? Who will find the little boy?" The father replies, "Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It always will" (McCarthy 281). On one level, the two characters are talking about the little boy the father chose to leave behind; on another they may be talking about the boy himself, whom the father is now also about to leave behind. Perhaps they are also referring to all the helpless, lost,

innocent souls who remain in the world, or who have ever lived. But however one chooses to read these last words of the father, they do express a belief in some kind of overarching, providential order. Alan Noble puts it more strongly: in choosing to live out his “absurd faith” by insisting that the boy carry on after the father’s own death, “the man displays a profound belief in the goodness of God” (108),² and the words he speaks carry the force and conviction of dying words.

“Not all dying words are true,” McCarthy tells the reader earlier in the novel (McCarthy 31). So what really matters is whether there is any kind of implicit affirmation of these words in the text, as there seems to be because goodness does indeed find the boy in the form of the family who takes him in. One could question, as does Wielenberg, whether this ending is “the hand of God reaching into the burned-out hellscape to protect the child” (1) or merely “random chance” (2). But the real answer is that nothing happens by random chance in a finely wrought novel, which is always the product of some kind of artistic design. What one has, instead, is an author acting as God, and in doing so McCarthy chooses to affirm the man’s belief in providential order by allowing goodness to find the boy, because it always has and it always will. That world may still be utterly broken, but there is no question as to whether a final blessing has been conferred, one that all the brokenness of the world cannot cancel. As McCarthy says of one other such brief blessing in the novel, when the father and son are enjoying cocoa by the fire and watching the snow fall, “the blessing is not less real for being shorn of its ground” (31).

Rather than pointing toward the conclusion that whether God exists is less important than some think it is, *The Road* depicts two characters whose tenuous faith is affirmed in the novel’s final pages, suggesting not only the importance of religious faith but also its va-

²Stressing the importance of faith to morality in the novel, Noble continues, “Through his characters McCarthy gives us a vision of absurd faith, and in so doing suggests that regardless of how horrific our situation might be, we can act in faith and resist the siren call of nihilistic suicide or cannibalism; we can choose to have hope in a good God, in goodness itself, although such a hope is irrational by ‘human calculation’” (108).

lidity. John Updike claims that

the reality of subjective sensations, desires, and may we even say illusions composes the basic substance of our existence, and religion alone, in its many forms, attempts to address, organize, and placate these. I believe, then, that religious faith will continue to be an *essential* part of being human, as it has been for me. (Emphasis added)

If what Updike says is true, then the existence of God—the central matter of religious faith—may matter more than Wielenberg thinks it does. At least it seems to matter more in *The Road*, where in a destroyed world religious faith still constitutes an essential part of what it means to be human.

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Raphael Speaking to Adam and Eve in the Garden

Finding Milton and Angels in the Downtown Eastside

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One day some years ago I came to the realization that I had bitten off a literary ambition bigger than I could comfortably chew.

While I was writing my young adult novel *Tom Finder* (2003), I did a tremendous amount of research on homeless children and young adults. The things I read haunted me and were not purged by writing the book. Even before I finished it, I knew this one book was not going to be enough. Random thoughts—such as what would a homeless teen do if he got a toothache—led to another book, *Heck Superhero* (2004). The whole time I was writing these two books, I knew that I would one day, that I must one day, write about a homeless girl. I also knew that to write this book honestly, it was unlikely I could avoid the topic of prostitution.

I had learned in my research that young girls are often lured into prostitution because the men they think are their boyfriends turn out to be pimps. Sometimes the men are the ones who introduce the girls to street drugs, or, once they are “turned out,” they take drugs to help them tolerate the lifestyle. They stay because they must feed their addiction, or because they know they will be beaten

or killed if they leave. I learned that in Calgary, Alberta, a city near where I live with a population of only one million, a runaway or throwaway girl coming to the streets for the first time, without intervention of some sort, lives an average of only five years.

A character for my story began to form in my mind. I impulsively named her Angel, at the time having no idea how this name would resonate with the story that eventually unfolded, or how her name would come to influence the story. But long after I had my character and her name, I still had not begun to write her story: I was overwhelmed by the task.

I was waiting for the perfect time to begin Angel's story, a time when I would feel completely strong and happy. I would need to be strong enough to wake up each morning, pick up my pen, and imaginatively crawl into the abused body of a young prostitute. I would need to be happy enough to bear working on the streets with her, feel what she felt, see what she saw, fear what she feared, and live in her unbeautiful world. I experience some seasonal affective depressive disorder, so of course I could not write Angel's book in the long, cold, dark Canadian winter. Nor, it seemed, could I write it in the long-lighted days of summer. Three summers went by after I had finished my previous book, and I was still thinking and researching and not writing.

I tried to write other things, but nothing became anything. I sensed eventually that Angel took up so much of my creative brain that nothing *would* become anything until Angel's story was down on paper. She was a secret that needed to be told, she was a voice in my head that needed to be heard, but the journey of telling her story loomed ahead darkly and airlessly, without any way to steer.

Nevertheless, one day I began, and then I began, and at last I began, and eventually I found my small stones, white and clear, even as transparent glass, to light my way. My stones were four: a love, a language, a Rosetta stone of sorts, and a kind of artlessness.

I began with love, which must be the true beginning of every artistic expression. My love grew out of a question: how did God bear knowing everything? He must look and not look away. He knows the heart and the nights of the young girl who must sell her

body to survive, who had few choices, if any, and who often was abused by the very people who should have been helping her. God had felt what she felt, seen what she saw, and lived in her unbeautiful world. He could not succor her nor save her without this intimate knowledge, and I felt I could not write her story without some mortal version of His kind of love.

So in my own limited way, I forced myself to look and not look away, and as disturbing and heartbreaking as it was, a most remarkable thing happened: I found a secret world of beauty and belief among these young women. I found it in the ugly and infamous world of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

The Downtown Eastside is the poorest postal code in Canada. It is notorious for its poverty, open drug use, and high rate of HIV infection—one of the highest per capita in the world. It was from this area that women, mostly sex-trade workers, had begun disappearing. Year after year more women disappeared from this area. Family and friends filed missing-persons reports, but nothing was done. Police told family members that because their loved one was a known prostitute, she may have gone to another city, or run away from her pimp, or checked herself into rehab. Loved ones said, no, she calls her little girl every day no matter what, and she has not called back. They said, no, I have her running-away money—if she had run away, she would have come for the money. The missing persons files piled up, and nothing, nothing at all, was done. A young detective just out of graduate school told his superiors the disappearances had all the markings of a serial killer, and he received a punitive demotion for his trouble.

Time went by, and at last the newspapers began to take notice. In response, the police issued a statement assuring the public that no serial killer was at large. That year nineteen more women went missing. Finally, the public had had enough, and the police became serious about their investigation. In 2002, a pig farmer named Robert Pickton was arrested. Investigators found on his farm the remains of thirty-two of the missing women, and he confessed to killing forty-nine altogether.

Following this, an investigation into police procedures and culture was launched, and, with the attendant publicity, intimate profiles of

the murdered women were released. In my efforts to look and not look away, I read about the lives of each of these women and learned of the families who had loved them and told their tragic life stories with tenderness. It was in the stories of these women that I found secret beauty.

Sereena Abotsway, for example, loved to go to church, believed in God, and was kind to everyone. One church gave out free hot dogs every Wednesday. When a man showed up smelling so bad that even the servers recoiled, Sereena helped him up from where he had fallen, gave him a hot dog, and told him he was among friends. Debra played the guitar and the piano, sang like Janis Joplin, and dreamed of going to Nashville; Dawn's father died with his head in her lap when she was five years old; Dianne was a nurses' aid who couldn't support all four of her children on her income; Janet was a member of a champion softball team; and Sarah deVries was a stunning black girl who wrote beautiful poetry and compulsively drew crying unicorns. All of them were prostitutes killed by Pickton.

In the middle of writing the book, I recalled a visit I had made to Vancouver before the plight of the missing women was making headlines. I had been there to give a reading, and afterward, having the whole evening before me, I went to a United Church in the Downtown Eastside to help cook dinner that the church provided for survival sex workers.

Afterward I sat down with the women to eat. To one side of me was a woman who was obviously one of the volunteers, but whom I had not noticed before. We chatted about nothing and everything. Halfway through our dinner, I learned that she was not one of the cooks at all but one of the prostitutes. She was no different from me, or, at least, our differences were a matter of circumstance and not a matter of the heart. I ate dinner with the women, watched television with them, laughed as they joked and put on donated makeup before they went out to work for the night. I had not thought of that experience for years. Undoubtedly, I suddenly realized, one or some of these women would surely have been among Pickton's victims. I did not have to try to be someone alien as I inhabited Angel's body. Inside *me* was all I needed to know about the souls of these women.

As I looked and did not look away, I began to see that when the most basic human needs are not met, when one has lost everything, including fundamental human dignity, one may turn to God with a humility, submission, and meekness that perhaps some will never experience. Understanding this, I could easily suppose that my protagonist could come to believe in angels, would ask, childlike, to see an angel, a sign that she was God's little girl. Angels come in time of need, and nobody needed an angel like my fictional character. At that point I decided that my book would have an angel, as real an angel as I could possibly conjure.

A prostitute and an angel—I wondered if I had found a way to offend almost everyone at once. I had already learned not to worry about losing the good opinion of my Latter-day Saint friends in my choice of subject matter. The genius of my people is that, though they walk in light, living clean, healthy, happy lives, they never seem to forget that at any given moment someone is in a dark place that will not allow the smallest flame, or that someone somewhere is pinned to her pillow in profound grief, coming to understand that a certain kind of happiness will never be hers again. Also, my people are most understanding and patient with writers and other neurotic types.

I *was* a bit anxious however, about the opinion of the rest of the world when people read that my character was going to get sober and stop swearing. She was going to make restitution for stolen shoes and keep God's ten commandments like jewels in a box. When she was scared, she was going to say the words, "Angel, angel." What would the world say about a book in which the main character wants to see an angel—and then does? People can write serious books about wizards and hobbits and vampires, but angels? Nevertheless, I had a shining love for Angel, and by the end of the book she was going to know she was God's little girl and was going to have an angel, if it killed me.

To tell the story of Angel, love had to come first: love for my characters but also love for my readers, which love prompted me to look for a language. Each book demands its own language, which may involve voice, diction, form, narrative distance, and so on. The right

words, as Riddley Walker observes, will “fetch” (Hoban 122), but each book has its own right words. As I began “Angel,” I found the right words, the language, immediately and instinctively, through poetry, but it took me a long time to recognize and honor that language.

I had thought at first that the poems I was writing about Angel were simply a pre-writing strategy, an entrance into her story. Often my stories begin with words on little pieces of paper that, if moved around, could sound like poetry. But with Angel’s story, the pages refused to stop being poetry or at least something like it. Eventually, I realized that I was writing a novel in verse. I resisted—I had heard unpleasant things about novels in verse, mostly that they rarely succeeded as either story or poetry. My own process was revealing why this was so.

When I was attentive to the language and played with form, the poetry pulled me out of the story. The poetic devices in turn became bent and flattened by the imposition of narrative structure. Poetic form stretched content beyond my intention. It had to be a whole story, yet every page had to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Every page had to have a pay-off, and yet it had to work as a whole. But the poetry was also helping me find a way to avoid being reductive, a way to evoke, a way to speak the truth, without having to rub a young reader’s nose in it.

Eventually, I began to appreciate that the line breaks and the poems existing whole on their own, one to a page in silos, reflected the fractured psyche of my character. My Angel did not think in a straight line, logically and linearly. She was erratic, mercurial, and in withdrawal. I liked the noticeable absence of punctuation; I liked that the line breaks served as big punctuation when I needed it. I wanted the lack of quotation marks to indicate airlessness, voicelessness, the lack of italicized titles to mean a rejection of convention, the lack of capitals to reflect a questioning of what is proper in a proper noun. The elevated form of poetry best reflected not only Angel’s beauty of soul but also the beauty of soul of the women I had read about. Thus, poetry became my language for this particular book.

Now I needed a Rosetta Stone, a way to help my reader decipher

the spiritual element of my story. Marilynne Robinson said in an interview,

A lot of people who actually believe in the sacredness of life, they write things that are horrible, desolating things, because, for some reason, this deeper belief doesn't turn the world. . . . It comes down to fear; the fear of making self-revelation of the seriousness of "I sense a sacredness in things." (Qtd. in Mason)

My personal feeling is that this deeper belief does "turn the world"—not the publishing world, perhaps, but the secret world of the human heart. I harbor a conviction that virtually everyone, however faintly, however without real hope, believes. All have some residual light, some vestigial spirituality, however atrophied or functionless it may have become with neglect. Atheists may just be people who are sad because God refuses to show up in Times Square.

Reading Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001), millions thrilled to the challenge when Francis Adirubasamy says, "I have a story that will make you believe in God" (x). Some readers may have felt at the end of the novel that the promise had not been kept, but they read every word, hoping it would be. I wanted in my book to make it clear that I sensed "a sacredness in things" in the lives of these young prostitutes. I had to believe in a world waiting to be turned, hoping, longing for poets to make readers feel the sacredness in things.

I began with the premise that my readers must have a language for spiritual things because, as I have said, I feel that all believe, at least somewhere in the corners of their souls. But how could I speak to them, translate for them, help them get past religion, which they may find suspect, help them overcome resistance and want an angel as much as Angel did? I had to find a way to speak about spiritual things in a manner that would not provoke, would not set their teeth on edge. Writers love not only their fictional characters but also the people who read their stories, do we not? Writers want to tell these people a story that will ease their way, delight and comfort them, bring them joy.

When I visited the Downtown Eastside a few years later during my research, I went into the old sandstone Carnegie Library that stands

precisely at the center of the community. It once was grand but now is more of a shelter from the elements or a place to score illicit drugs than a place to read. When I was there, a fight erupted over an exchange of money for drugs, ending with blood and teeth on the library steps. Still, the library retains some hints of its former glory. High on the south wall of the second floor are three stained-glass windows, each one a tribute to a grand master of literature. One of them is to John Milton, and it was in his *Paradise Lost* (1667) that I found my Rosetta Stone.

I gave Angel a regular customer whom I called John the john, and who was an English professor. He makes Angel read from book IX of *Paradise Lost* to him, a few passages of which make their way into my book. Angel both loves and challenges the text. My young readers would likely have had little if any exposure to it, although I hoped it would be an invitation to them to explore it more fully. The people who may have needed my Rosetta Stone the most were gatekeepers—teachers, librarians, reviewers, etc. Using Milton was a way of saying to them, “Hush now. It’s all right. It’s not scripture, not Genesis. It’s only *Paradise Lost*. We have this in common, yes?” And they would be comforted.

I was also borrowing some of the thematic weight of *Paradise Lost*. My research had made me wonder whether one of the reasons prostitution is allowed to persist, is tolerated and ignored and joked about, is that, generally, people overestimate women’s volition, that perhaps they believe that these women have some control over their lives, that they have options, that they can leave the life if they can only get their act together. If prostitutes themselves are not to blame for this blight, who is? Who is to blame, really? This became a central question in my story, and I do mean question: I did not start out with an answer. I went seeking one. I had to open my mind to any possibility. I think I begin every book with a big question for God, and every time, after work and study and pondering and more work, after a certain softening of my heart, He answers me, without judgment *and* with patience.

In my reading of *Paradise Lost*, Milton seems to be asking a similar question: who is to blame? Though he seems ostensibly to blame Eve,

my reading of the epic questions that notion. *Paradise Lost* became my Rosetta Stone, a way for my readers to connect the spiritual questions about the nature of the fall of man with the so-called fall of a young woman. *Paradise Lost* became a bridge between the literary and the spiritual.

I used a similar approach with my newest book, *Calvin* (2015). It is the story of a teenaged boy named Calvin who undergoes a schizophrenic episode in high school and wakes up in the hospital, hearing the voice of a tiger named Hobbes that nobody else can hear. Calvin comes to believe that comic artist Bill Watterson can cure him if he draws one more Calvin comic, only without Hobbes. He determines to go on a pilgrimage of sorts, as proof of his need and devotion, to persuade Watterson to draw that comic. He decides he is going to walk from his home in Leamington, Ontario, across frozen Lake Erie to Cleveland, where Watterson is reported to live. When he and his friend Susie run into trouble, he despairs and wonders why Watterson does not help him or come to his rescue.

I quote from the book:

Where were you, Bill? . . . Why all the secrecy? All the mystery?
Why don't you show yourself? Why don't you answer fan mail?
Would it hurt once in a while? Here's a news flash: you're famous!
Your creations inspire lifelong loyalty! . . . Why couldn't you have
cared enough to worry about us, to be there? (167–68)

In *Calvin* I am asking an age-old question about faith, and this time I am using comic art as my Rosetta Stone.

So for *Angel* I had a love, a language, and my Rosetta Stone. Finally, I needed a kind of artlessness. I do not wish to make it sound like writing *Angel*, once I got going, was oh, so lovely. It was not. Many times I would sit at one end of the kitchen table, staring long and malevolently at the stack of papers that was my manuscript on the other side of the table. Some days I was paralyzed by the dread of going back into *Angel's* sick and violated body. It was easier to be intellectual than it was to be *Angel*.

Some of my best poems were too proud of themselves. They

stopped the eye and thus the heart. I would write a sestina or a sonnet, which in re-reading would make me stop and say, “Oh, isn’t that so very clever.” But such poems had to go. I did not want my reader to stop and say, “What does that mean? Wait, I’ll read it again.” I did not want to draw the reader out of the fictive dream, to leave any doubt about what Angel meant. At some point the only thing that helped was to stop being self-consciously an artist and adopt an approach of artlessness. Metaphor may be the best way to reveal truth, but, used with pride, could it not also be a lie, a most subtle form of guile?

I had published a couple of books by the time I got my undergraduate degree later in life, so when I studied critical theory, I became a devoted groupie. Shamelessly, I fell in love with each successive theorist who seemed to be telling me the secrets of the word, revealing the soul of art. But when I learned about some forms of post-modernism, while fascinated and sensing some truth in them, I felt alarmed to learn from others that my stories had no meaning, that the author was dead, and that the center, including truth and God, did not exist. I resisted the idea that I was dead and felt that uncreating God went beyond the scope of the art theorist. Nobody likes to be cool and in style more than an artist, but in this as in many other matters I could not seem to embrace coolness.

As they say, however, if one lives long enough, one may come back into style. In *After Theory* (2003), Terry Eagleton says,

Cultural theory, has been shamefaced about morality and metaphysics, embarrassed about love, biology, religion and revolution, largely silent about evil, reticent about death and suffering, dogmatic about essences, universals and foundations, and superficial about truth, objectivity and disinterestedness. (101–02)

Eagleton believes that the era of theory is changing and it is time to focus on significant truths denied by postmodernism.

I was gratified to learn recently that “New Sincerity” is a term, among others, being used by some to describe the modern ethos in music, film criticism, poetry, literary criticism, and philosophy, which has fallen out of love with postmodernist irony or cynicism.

Apparently, it is now unironically cool to care about things like spirituality, patriotism, the environment, and family.

David Foster Wallace says,

The next real literary “rebels” in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of “anti-rebels,” born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic. Maybe that’ll be the point, why they’ll be the next real rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk things. Risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. The new rebels might be the ones willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the “How banal.” (151)

Perhaps I have come to it too late, as usual. I read somewhere that New Sincerity is failing to stick. I hope not. I like it very much. Sincerity was the only way to write *Angel*. She would and could have nothing less. I had to leave behind my fear of revealing that I sense a sacredness in things, and, in fact, I had to be bold about doing so. I was surprised when not a single reader or jaded reviewer seemed to bat an eye at artless passages in *Angel* such as this one:

I couldn't breathe in that room made for searching,
I couldn't share the air with that man.
I jumped up and grabbed my bag and ran to the door
and Daddy Dave grabbed me
and me fighting back
like I could kill him
never mind God's top ten,

scratching his hands that grabbed me
 scratching so I could feel his skin
 peeling into my fingernails
 and all his dirty words pouring out of his mouth
 and me saying, in vain!
 and, angel, angel—

and then
 there she was
 my angel.
 I thought she would be
 all floaty and filmy,
 all fragile ghost-bones that break,
 all dandelion-seed hair and weightless—
 but no.
 She was stone, fixed, forever . . .
 Her words dripped into my ear—
 each drop weighed a star.

She said, Angel,
 when God reads your book of life,
 boy, are some people ever gonna get it. (226–31)

A love, a language, a Rosetta Stone, and a little artlessness were what I needed in my attempt at both beauty and belief. Eventually, the story made me feel both strong and happy to discover that if one looks and does not look away, one finds God everywhere.

I have wondered whether pride is a sin of the imagination. If so, does it not seem fair to say that imagination is also at the beginnings of beauty and belief? Are not faith, hope, and charity all wilful acts of the imagination? Does that make storymaking a spiritual practice? Is it true that whenever one is imagining enough to love, whenever one is seeking the right language and is willing to translate for readers, willing to not shield oneself from them, one can speak both beauty and belief in the same breath? In some way must not they always be in the same breath, if for no other reason than that the maker of beauty must her-

self have a Maker? Surely it is through the imagination that one can comfort the hearts of those who long for, but cannot quite have, faith.

Readers long, it seems, for transcendence of every kind. They hunger for beauty and surely also belief. How, as an artist, might I play a part in giving both to them, if not to convert, then at least to console, to help them know, as Angel discovers:

when you start to write a poem
you don't know where it might go.
It's an act of faith to write a book of you,
to believe a poem
is something you could do.

When you write a poem
you get to be a baby god-girl
and in you is a tiny universe, a dollhouse universe
with planets the size of peas and suns like marbles

all inside you. (140)

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Abandoned Mormon Chapel in Montpelier, ID

The Last Taboo: Spirituality in Young Adult Literature

Patty Campbell

The last taboo.

Taboo is a word adapted from the Tongan language, meaning “a prohibition . . . excluding something from use or mention because of its sacred nature” (“Taboo”). That is exactly what is being described in *Spirituality in Young Adult Literature: The Last Taboo* (2015). But why should a sacred nature lead to a prohibition?

Young adult (YA) literature is an influential and important genre. Fiction written for teens outsells adult fiction in bookstores, and its quality has been acknowledged by the literary establishment. YA literature is characterized by its honest depiction of the difficulties of adolescence and its openness to risky subjects and language as they are appropriate to adolescent turmoil. For example, YA authors are free to write—and *have* written—graphic scenes of both homo- and heterosexual lovemaking and other risky topics but have drawn only occasional censorship attack. YA authors also enjoy nearly complete freedom to use language that is realistic for their settings and characters—unless they are aiming for the school market. Yet there is one subject that is carefully avoided by writers and publishers, a topic that is a last taboo. Faith, religion, belief, and trust in God almost

never appear in traditional form in novels for teens. But struggling with these issues and making one's own peace with them are an important part of becoming a mature adult. This lack of spirituality in mainstream adolescent literature can be interpreted by teens to mean that these matters are not important or not part of other young people's thought.

The appended list covers the entire span of the YA genre's existence, 1967 to the present. During this forty-eight-year period there were tens of thousands of YA novels published, yet these relatively few are the only ones found that deal with issues of faith. Furthermore, some of these books appear on the list only because of one character or one scene. Also, the list includes books featuring *negative* portrayals of God, clergy, or church.

Why are ideas about faith so scarce in YA literature? Why have so few YA authors had the gumption and the theological literacy to write about those spiritual questions that are so troubling and important to many teens? The answers to the questions are not to be found in blaming American culture for a rejection of religious faith. In 2011 a Gallup poll reported that 92% of Americans answer "Yes" to the straightforward question, "Do you believe in God?" ("More"). A 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Study found that 36% of Americans said that they attend church weekly, while an additional 33% claimed to do so at least monthly ("Attendance").

Yet so-called "realistic" YA fiction projects a world where both the personal and the communal practices of religion are absent, except for the worst aspects of cults or fundamentalist sects. The stories take place in a society where no one thinks about going to church on an ordinary Sunday, although occasionally a fictional family will make a ritual visit to a church on Christmas or Easter, but as if it were a performance rather than a worship service. Even in stories set in areas of the country where the presence of a church is pervasive, characters are not involved in any religious institution unless a fundamentalist villain is necessary to the plot. And beyond Sunday services, where in all YA fiction are church youth groups, Hebrew or confirmation classes, Bible study meetings, choir rehearsals, all so much a part of middle-class American life? Where, too, is mainstream Protestant or

Catholic practice and sensibility? Where are good clergy and church people acting out their faith in service and love? Parents in books of this church-negative type are usually either gullible fanatics or unbelievers who are obstacles to their child's religious interests.

It seldom occurs to teens in YA fiction to call on God for help when they are undergoing crises, such as a friend's death or their parents' divorce. When young adults in fiction *do* search for God with diligence, their quest often turns out badly with the loss of their faith, although this is sometimes presented by the author as a step toward maturity.

Religious doubts are part of the growing-up process. But how can teens be helped to confront and work through such doubts when the whole question of faith in God is unacknowledged in the books they trust to explain their world to them? Religious inquiry is certainly a preoccupation almost as important as sex for many young people, but it is by nature an extremely private matter, so they are not likely to share their spiritual questions with friends or—God forbid!—their parents.

Of course, many paperback fiction series published for teens by various religious presses address faith issues. Many of these publishing houses are affiliated with particular denominations. However, the didactic intent of these books puts them outside the scope of this study, which analyzes only the output of mainstream American publishers.

So what accounts for this overwhelming secularity in even fine YA novels? Four contributing factors can be isolated. First is the fear of transgressing the boundary between church and state, although certainly this is a misunderstanding of constitutional principles. Second, a more realistic fear underlies the reluctance of publishers and writers to risk cutting into potential markets by offending readers with differing beliefs. Third, librarians are a major part of the YA market, and they have, through bitter experience, come to associate religion with censorship attempts and thus find the whole subject—taboo. Also, library collections have long excluded literature that “proselytizes,” but how are librarians to decide whether a book fits that definition? *Proselytize* certainly does not apply to anything and

everything that mentions religion. Finally, the underlying problem, of course, is that very few writers are willing or able to talk to teenagers about God, even indirectly.

Even so, a few authors of current and past YA fiction have dealt with the spiritual search with honesty and integrity: Madeleine L'Engle, Chaim Potok, Sonia Levitin, and Robert Cormier come immediately to mind, and more recently Han Nolan, David Almond, Donna Freitas, Pete Hautman, Deborah Heiligman, and Francisco X. Stork. Besides these, the enormously popular John Green (*The Fault in Our Stars* [2012], *Looking for Alaska* [2005], etc.) has been articulate in speeches and online about his own personal religious background and beliefs. In a blog post that inspired hundreds of responses from his fans he wrote,

I don't talk about it very often, but I'm a religious person. In fact, before I became a writer, I wanted to be a minister. There is a certain branch of Christianity that has so effectively hijacked the word "Christian" that I feel uncomfortable sometimes using it to describe myself. But I *am* a Christian. ("Faith")

Still, a gap exists, one that begs to be filled. One genre that some teens seem to look toward to fill it is fantasy. Fantasy, or at least high fantasy, can quite easily be interpreted as a metaphor for the spiritual search. The movement of the plot is nearly always toward a showdown between good and evil. The hero encounters world-shaking happenings, vast landscapes, and unspeakable evil and conquers them, with the help of an impossibly old and wise counselor. Along the way the "Good Guys"—protagonists—struggle to prevail over obstacles and conflicts, trying to become worthy of being the standard-bearers of goodness in an inevitable final battle. This basic plot appears in settings as disparate as Middle Earth, Hogwarts School, or New York in the throes of dystopia.

The popularity of the genre with teens is no coincidence, indicating, perhaps, that teens are hungry for the ineffable. Perhaps, as well, religion, as it has been presented to them, seems too ordinary, too "daily." Could it be that what they are seeking, what they will respond

to, are the mystical dimensions of faith, of the otherworldly? Are they, like most people, yearning to move in thought beyond the confines of daily existence to that which is inexplicable, mind-stretching, more beautiful than earthly beauty, outside of time and space, and more real than what is called reality?

In addition to fantasy, topics such as the apocalypse and end times, mysticism, and the Divine Encounter have potentially high teen appeal and can lead young people to spiritual insights. But the reluctance of young adult writers and publishers to deal with specific matters of religious faith remains. Now it is time to ask what progress, if any, has been made in slaying this taboo.

Answering that question is the purpose of *Spirituality in Young Adult Literature*. It points out trends in depicting, or not depicting, the spiritual and highlights books considered not only fine examples of teen literature but also outstanding models of integrating spiritual ideas into their plot. While its first chapter presents books that mostly take a negative position toward church and clergy, overall, the book confines itself to twenty-first century YA fiction, with a few exceptions, and attempts to examine YA novels that focus on faiths in addition to Christianity, including Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

Consider, now, four examples of YA literature that have braved the last taboo, books that are daring, audacious, and a long way from the stuffy and pious flavor one might expect to find in something called a spiritual book for teens.

The first is a delightful road-trip novel by Stephanie Hemphill—*Long Gone Daddy* (2006). In it the reader meets a spectacularly awful but honest and devoted father and clergyman. Paps is the daddy of fifteen-year-old Harlan Quinton Stank and also pastor of the Sunnyside Savior Church in Bean's Creek, Texas. Paps is a dedicated Bible-thumping preacher, and every Sunday he tells his congregation that they are a sorry lot of sinners. He never gives praying a rest, addressing the Lord in a loud voice not only on ceremonial occasions and before meals but also at every turn of events, no matter how public.

He also uses prayer as a weapon to intimidate his son, and Harlan Q has had enough of it. So now he works and lives at the Hamilton-

Johnston Funeral Home, where nice Mr. Hamilton is teaching him the business, until the day the corpse of his long-gone granddaddy shows up in the prep room. This man had abandoned his son—Paps—and never came back. But now he has returned and one day later turns up dead at the Wayfarer Motel without contacting his son and grandson. The town sheriff informs Paps and Harlan that a fifty-thousand-dollar annuity has been left to them, but only if they fulfill Granddaddy's last wish—to be taken back to his home in Las Vegas and buried there.

At first Paps refuses to accept the inheritance. “That money,” he pontificates, “could be the direct result of gambling or drinking or drugs” (37). But then Harlan Q, who is dying to go to Las Vegas, has a brilliant idea. He plays it up big: “What if God's saying, ‘Harlan Q, Take that money and do good. Save souls and serve the Lord?’ . . . You need your own radio show, Paps. I think God wants you to . . . start your very own radio revival. . . . God's working through me, Paps! I feel it! I feel it!” (39). Paps loves this idea, so they fill Grandfather's now odoriferous corpse with more formaldehyde, put his coffin in a wooden crate, wedge it into the church's big station wagon, and off they go on the road to Vegas.

The first day out, they pick up a hitchhiker to help with the driving, a long-haired, tattooed, Zen hippie named Warrior. Now the fun begins. Warrior is, like Harlan Q, a preacher's kid on a rebellious spiritual journey to figure out what he believes. On the way he has picked up a smattering of exotic religious beliefs from pop culture sources like Zen Buddhism and Native American nature worship, and he is busy putting together a stew of spiritual concepts and practices that suit his quest. Paps takes on his salvation with gusto. But Warrior can hold his own. Back and forth they spar as the miles go by, Warrior with his dimly understood Buddhist sayings and Paps with his formulaic biblical quotations. Both are good-natured about the debate, but neither is willing to give an inch. Harlan Q listens from the back seat, trying to make some sense of the contrasting ideas that are slamming back and forth between the two zealots.

Miles later, Paps changes his angle of attack, directly asking Warrior what moved him away from God. Warrior's answer is crucial to both

Paps and Harlan in understanding their own tangled relationship, if only they had been listening. Warrior says, “I wanted to decide on my own about God and faith, but my father wouldn’t let me. . . . It was his way or the highway. And when he put it like that, the highway looked pretty good. . . . You know, you can’t bully someone into believing Reverend” (198–99). When they arrive in Vegas, the plot takes some surprising twists that lead to even more surprising conclusions. In this wise and funny story about spiritual search the reader aches and rejoices for Harlan, applauds Warrior, and forgives Paps, sometimes even liking him.

Next is *The Book of Genesis* (2009) by Robert Crumb, the legendary comics artist from the sixties. Crumb has produced an astonishing graphic novel based meticulously and with great verve on the first book of the Bible. The cover screams, “Nothing left out!” And that is true, for Crumb uses every word of Genesis, even the “begats.” He provides meanings for all Hebrew names in unobtrusive footnotes beneath the pictures in which they occur, and his concluding commentary summarizes each chapter’s story and suggests further interpretations by scholars.

But mostly, this is a powerful piece of storytelling for a visual age. The narrative emerges with clarity: the tale of the people God selects to carry His message through all history. This is one family’s story, a tale of God’s relationship with Adam and his descendants, bringing to vivid life all the drama, anguish, and joy that are sometimes muted and elusive in print-only versions of the Bible. Crumb’s genius stands up to the challenge of this iconic and sacred text. He provides coherence and structure to a rambling narrative and brings overriding themes into focus. Nowhere does he stoop to visual puns, nor is he ever impertinent with the text.

However, Crumb and his publishers are no fools. The cover carries an alarming disclaimer: “Adult supervision recommended for minors.” Crumb dares to illustrate in an appropriately direct style all the nudity and enthusiastic copulation that are such a vital part of this earthy biblical tale of humanity and God. Since all of this is already in the Bible, it would be dishonest and prudish for an illustrator to tiptoe around such scenes.

But what a problem the book could be for librarians, not to mention teachers, assuming there are any brave enough to teach young people about a basic literary work of world civilization. Also, what delicious irony a censorship attempt would be! Imagine possible headlines: “Bible declared ‘dirty book!’” “Bible is banned from X school library!” Fortunately, the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom reports no challenges in the years that Crumb’s book has been in print, which possibly reflects the probability that YA librarians are more likely to quietly reject the book, not because of its picture content, but because it is scripture.

David Almond, another YA author, has written a number of mysteriously spiritual novels. In *Skellig* (1998), he uses the symbol of a mysterious person to evoke the ineffable. Two children discover a strange white-faced man lying against the back wall of a tumble-down garage, who is covered with spider webs and dead flies, eats mice, and loves take-out Chinese. When they lift him up to move him to a safer hiding place, they discover that he has crumpled wings under his shabby jacket. Who is this being? A madman, an owl-creature, the angel of death? As they secretly befriend him over several days, he becomes stronger and more holy, at last lifting them up in a circle dance of light before he flies away on his great wings. This strange and luminous tale is firmly set in reality at the same time that it brilliantly conveys a sense of the sacred, the Other.

The last example is a short story that sheds a sudden brilliant flash of light on the adolescent search for God. Carol Matas, in “Wrestling with Angels,” uses as her metaphor the mysterious story in Genesis 32 in which Jacob wrestles all night long with a stranger—perhaps an angel, perhaps God himself. Although Jacob is wounded in the encounter, he prevails and demands the blessing that will give him his name, identity, and purpose. In Matas’s story, a young girl, Jaci, dreams that *she* is the one who struggles with the angel, waking confused and troubled. She carries the dream to Hebrew class and finds herself telling it to Isaac, a boy from the Orthodox tradition. Through his concern and an impassioned class discussion, she finally realizes that “my Judaism *could* mean something. Something practical. Something useful. A way to think about things. To make choices” (144).

The reader knows that a spiritual journey has begun. Although Jaci cannot yet say she believes in God, she knows the truth she has glimpsed inside herself is “maybe, for me . . . the essence of God. Mystery. And maybe this is the beginning of a very long wrestling match” (144).

“We are meant to argue with God,” (141) says Isaac, and this may be a new thought to teens who have assumed that faith means accepting ultimate answers without the struggle and experience that makes them personal. For the sake of young adults and for the sake of the integrity of their literature, it is time to call for the slaying of the last taboo.

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GODSEARCH: ISSUES OF FAITH IN YOUNG ADULT FICTION

Secular YA Fiction with Spiritual Themes, Characters, or Questions, 1967–2015

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